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*POPULAR AND OFFICIAL DEATH*

James L. Watson & Evelyn S. Rawski, eds. *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.

This collection of papers originally given at a conference on Chinese death ritual in 1985 is of immense importance as a pioneering effort by anthropologists and historians in fusing traditional elitist conceptions of death in written records with the contemporary concern for the behavior and values of ordinary people transmitted orally. One result of this interdisciplinary approach is that the long-held image in the west of a China without religion and 'superstition' can no longer be sustained.

The book—which is edited by James Watson, an anthropologist, and Evelyn Rawski, an historian—contains two methodological papers and ten specialized essays based on research in Hong Kong, Taiwan, northern and southern China. The methodological chapters posit two perspectives on how Chinese culture ought to be approached, understood or interpreted. On the one hand, anthropologists tend to support the little person, the inarticulate peasant whose testimony on death ritual they accept as gospel and around which they construct their China model. Historians, on the other hand, tend to see the elite class as a more authentic source on death ritual not because the discipline is anti-democratic but because elites leave behind written texts which are impressive in demonstrating official approval and wide territorial diffusion as well as antiquity and continuity. With this basic polarity between the two disciplines, it should come as no surprise that anthropologists argue "... it mattered little what one believed about death ... as long as the rites were performed properly" (p. 22). But historians, true to form, stress the belief and meaning behind the ritual. In other words, historians argue that "there are important shared cultural orientations, call them beliefs or ideologies, that bind Chinese together" (p. 26).

As a historian, I found the articles dealing with Chinese belief or symbolic signification most interesting. The *yin* (female) and *yang* (male) dualism, which is a very old Chinese belief about the cosmic order, "pervades Chinese culture at many different levels and helps shape the way in which people think about the world" (p. 24). Susan Naquin in her article on "Funerals in North China" refers to the consultants on death ritual known as yin-yang masters "who protected the family against harmful and inauspicious influences of an unburied body and calculated the auspicious times for key events" (encoffining, moving the coffin, burial, p. 39). In his essay on "Death, Food, and Fertility," Stuart Thompson discussed his informants' belief that a proper symbolic reembodyment of the deceased can bring benefits in the form of fertility. The source is the Chinese myth of creation in which the first man or Chinese Adam was "hatched" from the primordial chaos through the interaction of yin and yang. Then he died for the benefit of creation,

“animating the whole universe” (p. 99). Thus death is necessary for the generation of fertility. According to Watson, in the symbolic reembodyment the bones of the deceased become the male or yang factor, whereas the flesh and blood are transformed into the female or yin factor. This produces the desired “dialectical harmony” (p. 100).

Another common belief is what the Chinese call *feng-shui* and what we call in English ‘geomancy’ or the “pseudo-science of harnessing the topographical forces of nature for the benefit of man” (p. 25). It has long been held as a manual or guide for the siting of houses, graves and temples. Rubie Watson in her article on “Remembering the Dead: Graves and Politics in Southeastern China” associates the belief less with the supernatural and more with improving one’s lot in this world. According to her, geomancy in China is not religion but is “concerned with this world” (p. 214). In the Hong Kong area, it becomes “a language of political protest” (p. 214). Everywhere in China, she believes, the people use it to know “through divination, the laws of natural processes [and] where to place oneself in relation to them. . .” (p. 24).

If the death ritual has a central function, belief or aim, it seems to be to settle the soul after death and to transform the corpse into an ancestor. This is well developed in the final essays dealing with “The Imperial Way of Death: Ming and Ch’ing Emperors and Death Ritual” by Evelyn Rawksi and “Mao’s Remains” by Frederick Wakeman. Rawksi demonstrates how “death transformed fallible rulers into deified ancestors . . . and how emperors in their post-mortem aspect were integrated into state religion” (p. 253). Wakeman compares the mortuary observances of Mao, the Communist leader, with Chiang Kai-shek, the Nationalist leader, and discovers that both these men—who repudiated the monarchy in life—were hailed in death as virtual emperors and were buried with ceremonial rites that were remarkably similar to one another. Even the injunction of the Kuomintang leadership “to transform grief into strength” was “exactly the same formulaic language that appeared in the major propaganda media in the People’s Republic of China just after Mao’s death” (p. 267).

The volume ends with a chapter on “Death in the People’s Republic of China.” In it, Martin Whyte shows how the Communist government has tried to change traditional mortuary ritual as part of an “anti-superstition” campaign and to divert funeral expenses to more socially-useful activities. Indeed, the government has even encouraged the substitution of cremation over burial. As elsewhere in the Communist world, official atheism and anti-traditional deconstructionism are resisted by the people who maintain their belief in life after death and their “strong sense of the continuity between this world and the next” (p. 314).

*David Kopf*