



PROJECT MUSE®

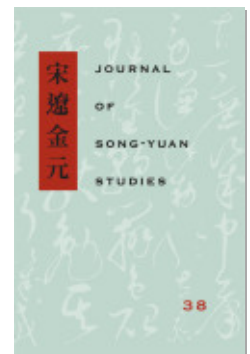
*The Writing of Weddings in Middle-Period China: Text and
Ritual Practice in the Eighth through Fourteenth Centuries*
(review)

Beverly Bossler

Journal of Song-Yuan Studies, Volume 38, 2008, pp. 268-271 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sys.2008.a380508>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/380508>

Christian de Pee. *The Writing of Weddings in Middle-Period China: Text and Ritual Practice in the Eighth through Fourteenth Centuries*. SUNY series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007. Pp. xiv + 365. \$75.00 (hardcover). ISBN 978-0-7914-7073-2. \$27.95 (paper). ISBN 978-0-7914-7074-9.

In this innovative and thought-provoking study, Christian de Pee explores a variety of writings about weddings from the eighth to fourteenth centuries, in search of “an engagement of the postmodern present with the living past” (249). As de Pee makes clear from the outset, he is not interested in trying to reconstruct or describe Middle-Period Chinese wedding practices, which (as he points out) are “irretrievably lost”; rather, he offers what he characterizes as a “fragmented description of segregated discourses” in hopes of contributing to “a cultural history that accommodates the particularities of Middle-Period practices of writing and transmission” (247, 249). His four main chapters are devoted to different genres of texts, each of which illuminates a different aspect of marriage ritual. While repeatedly stressing the incompleteness of his sources, their arbitrary biases and omissions, and the inability of any text to capture lived experience, de Pee nonetheless manages to provide us with substantial new insights into the practices of both writing and weddings in Middle Period China.

de Pee opens his discussion with an analysis of ritual manuals. Here he discovers a major transformation in interpretive approaches to ritual between the eighth and eleventh centuries. de Pee argues that Tang authors understood that returning to the past was impossible, and therefore did not hesitate to alter canonical ritual to incorporate recent practices and precedents. In the early Northern Song, however, the rage for collecting antique bronzes and the associated rediscovery of ancient texts changed scholars’ relationship with the ancient past: “The ancients who had seemed forbiddingly remote . . . in the eighth century, to eleventh-century scholars had become a visible, tangible presence” (23). Accordingly, men like Sima Guang and Cheng Yi composed ritual manuals designed to permit “the reader and performer to embody patterns ancient and timeless” (59). In this process, however, the marriage rituals developed by Sima Guang and Cheng Yi altered the symmetry inherent in the various steps of the Tang ritual. Both men added ceremonies that emphasized “the continuation of the ancestral cult and the reproduction of the family as a ritual unit,” and simultaneously decentered (and thus downplayed) the

actual consummation of the marriage (67). By the Southern Song, scholars like Zhu Xi were so confident in their grasp of the cosmic principles of the ancients that they had no compunction about incorporating contemporary practices that they felt fulfilled those principles. While brushing aside the complicated question of the authorship of the text that came to be known as Zhu Xi's *Family Rituals* (arguing that questions of provenance are irrelevant "to a text that came to be perceived as an objective embodiment of timeless truth" [75–76]), de Pee shows that Zhu Xi rescinded many of the changes made by Sima Guang and Cheng Yi and restored the symmetry of the ancient ritual, while also reintroducing ritual primogeniture (the descent-line heir system). He suggests that Zhu had intended his work to enjoy such canonical status and hoped thereby to recreate "a society in which every interaction, every movement accorded with ritual" (81).

In Chapter Two, de Pee analyzes extant engagement letters as well as manuals of letter writing, showing the importance of wedding correspondence as a form of cultural capital. His discussion here reveals the continued salience in Song social life of "four-six parallel prose," the elaborate and allusive genre that—according to our conventional picture of the Northern Song—had supposedly waned in popularity with the onset of the "Ancient Prose" (*gu wen*) movement. In a fascinating and entertaining disquisition, de Pee shows also how the engagement letter genre provided opportunities for displays of erudition and wit, and for exhibitions of social status couched in the rhetoric of excessive humility. He similarly argues that letter-writing manuals (which he persuasively suggests were meant for use by scribes, rather than for "popular" usage) "suspend[ed] the strict social boundaries of literary production only to reaffirm them." His highly amusing review of engagement letters meant for such matches as those between a boatman's son and a broker's daughter, or between "A dark-skinned man surnamed Huang [Yellow]" and "a spotty girl surnamed Zhu [Red]" (114), not only demonstrates his point that the manual in question "excludes commoners through inclusion" (108), but suggests that such texts may have been meant for literati entertainment as well as more practical uses. His exploration of wedding addresses and poems, genres largely ignored elsewhere, likewise shows that the displays of erudition called forth by weddings could encompass the jocular and even erotic. As de Pee observes, this literature gives lie to "a simple binary of elite culture and popular culture" that assumes "vulgar" or suggestive language must necessarily belong to "a monolithic popular practice" (134).

Chapter Three reveals yet another aspect of wedding discourse, as de Pee's analysis of calendars and almanacs, miracle tales, and medical texts shows weddings to have been fraught with "cosmic dangers" for participants and onlookers alike, reflecting, he suggests, the social ruptures that marriages entailed. A long, detailed discussion of the (often contradictory) methods of divination espoused by various calendars and almanacs demonstrates both the continuity over centuries of basic divinatory elements, and the "multiplicity of complex divinatory systems" (152) created to ward off the perils inherent in the liminal status of brides and grooms. Those same perils haunt miracle tales and medical texts, wherein the body of the bride, "suspended between households, between adolescence and womanhood, between virginity and defloration" (168), appears as both dangerous and endangered. de Pee here conjectures that the explanation for the bride's terrible power and vulnerability is "the horrid pollution of amassed virginal blood," soon to be spilt in the act of defloration.

The final chapter of the book looks at legal discourses on weddings and marriage, based on documents ranging from legal codes to "judgments" (*pan*) on individual cases by perspicacious judges. While here again de Pee stresses that the surviving documents represent only traces of unrecoverable practice, his analysis reveals both the state's hopeful attempt to impose "universal norms of law and scripture," and the frequent disparity between those norms and the local practices of disputants. He also exposes an important shift between the Tang and Song governments' efforts to use law to impose moral universals, and the Yuan government's attempts to legislate ethnic boundaries and reduce litigation.

In his Conclusion, de Pee turns temporarily away from the topic of wedding ritual to consider Middle Period tombs. He is concerned here in part with analysis of the tombs themselves (he finds that the joint tombs of married couples with children tend to be adorned with scenes of filial piety and brickwork designed to mimic wooden structures, where tombs of single burials tend not to be so adorned). But his purpose in this analysis is also to show that tombs as material artifacts permit "the convergence of incompatible discourses in ritual time and space" (224) in ways that written texts do not, and to make a plea for a "valid historical hermeneutics" that recognizes "the essential incompleteness, contingency, and coherence of texts" (228).

As is undoubtedly obvious by now, de Pee takes a very post-modernist approach to the study of Middle Period Chinese history. For the most part,

he makes his case for the value of such an approach with eloquence and elegance. In contrast to many post-modernist studies, this book is a great pleasure to read, for de Pee's prose is precise, lucid, and witty. That said, I did find tiresome the repetitive (and unnecessarily personal) harangues that conclude every chapter, attacking de Pee's benighted predecessors for believing that texts can tell us something about history. Although some of his critiques are useful, his effort to point out what he sees as irredeemable defects in the methods of social history leads him to caricature the current practice thereof. I can think of few scholars now working in the field who seek "to write an inferior past in the superior, objectivist terms of the modern present," or even who think it is possible to write "objective, real history" (248). Conversely, while de Pee is careful to argue that his work provides "a better understanding" of the "complex diversity...in the writing of Middle Period weddings" (247), and *not* a better understanding of the "past" *per se*, his work is ultimately not devoid of truth claims about the past: note his proposals that Song writers of rituals manuals had different goals from those of the Tang, or that Song literati sought to demonstrate their social superiority through their command of language and texts, to name but two examples. In other words, de Pee (like many post-modern historians) may protest that he is interested only in the discourse of the text, but he nonetheless creates narratives that, however covertly, (de)claim a privileged understanding of the past.

In de Pee's case this (perhaps inevitable) slippage is largely unproblematic: de Pee is a conscientious historian and his conclusions are based in careful analysis and broad acquaintance with secondary scholarship. But it does suggest that the differences between his own methodology and that of more conventional historians are less significant than de Pee repeatedly implies. He might be surprised to learn that even a die-hard social historian can agree with his conclusion that "in the end, it is not the historian who explains the sources, but the sources that illumine the historian" (249). And while de Pee may see what he does as "engagement" with the texts, rather than an effort to learn of the past from them, his work is important and interesting precisely because he succeeds in illuminating the traces—however partial, contingent, and distorted—of lived historical experience.

BEVERLY BOSSLER

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, DAVIS