

Book Reviews

Keywords in Chinese Culture. Edited by Wai-ye Li and Yuri Pines. Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2020. Pp. xlv + 420. \$55.00.

Let me get it off my chest: although this volume includes essays (very good essays) on Chinese keywords (e.g., harmony and filial piety) by some of the best Sinologists, many of my acquaintance, I know Raymond Williams's *Keywords* too well and like it too much to be satisfied with the volume's overall conception and organization.¹ My bias stems from the fact that Williams's little book taught us that nearly every word we use today to describe cultures or civilizations of centuries and millennia past is an early modern invention and, given the profound significance of Williams's work, the contents of this volume display too little engagement with Williams's findings. Engagement would cause us to rethink the words we use every day to describe premodern cultures. (Classics is more robust in this connection, with Daryn Lehoux's *What Did the Romans Know?* and Greg Anderson's *The Realness of Things Past* being two of the best responses to the obvious problem.)² If enough Sinologists come to take up the challenge, they will have to begin to think their inherited paradigms, seeing that "state" in imperial China is seldom, if ever, the right choice for *guo* 國, or "world" for *Tianxia* 天下; equally, one must not presume that *min* 民 always means "the people" (i.e., commoners), as Japanese scholarship has plainly shown. I worry, too, about any talk of "truth," given how various are the common meanings attributed to that word, not to mention the semantic baggage. "Honest assertion," "heartfelt experience," or "true condition"—all are wordier but clearer, because they do not conjure Platonic ideals or universal truths. And do flaws generally "confirm" a person's "true self" (*zhenji* 真己) (p. 351)? Is there such a thing? Are things so black-and-white? In the discipline of history, words like "authenticity," "genuineness," and even "cultural memory" have long been recognized as catchphrases with precise histories of their own, and I love reading classical Chinese precisely because so many of its thinkers found real-world behaviour (not the elusive mind) best to think with; Li Zhi 李贄 (1527–1602) sounds good to me (p. 341).

¹ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Helm, 1976).

² Daryn Lehoux, *What Did the Romans Know?: An Inquiry into Science and Worldmaking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Greg Anderson, *The Realness of Things Past: Ancient Greece and Ontological History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

It is thus striking how seldom the contributors depart from or refine the vocabulary that was in use several decades ago; also how seldom (except for Joachim Gentz) they refer to evidence from recent excavations, even when they know it well; and finally how narrow the book's structure is, adhering to modern academic fields instead of attempting to rethink the premodern disciplinary divides. Clearly, what is missing for me here is the historian's sense of critical semantic changes and shadings over time. For while the honoree, Andrew Plaks, is a foremost expert in the Chinese novel, even literary studies profit from a tad more reference to historical evidence, lest textual claims be treated as transparent maps of reality. Kudos to Chiung-yun Evelyn Liu 劉瓊云, then, for providing some information about the author of the fragments she presents. Still, she gives but cursory attention to the *Zhongjing* 忠經 itself, whose textual history is messy.

Moreover, these essays, even the best, are nearly all *time-bound*, restricted to a single era, as Li Wai-ye neatly acknowledges in her elegant Introduction, and so definitely not about the “evolution of words” (p. 123), more's the pity. That makes it even odder when a contributor fails to perform basic due diligence, thereby marring an otherwise insightful essay. For example, the *Guanzi* 管子 is known to be a compilation from disparate sources by Liu Xiang 劉向, c. 26 B.C.,³ and, thus, plainly cannot be a single-authored Warring States work. Yes, the logographic script deployed in classical Chinese makes it harder to track evolutions in word meaning, but plenty of recent work (that by Lydia H. Liu 劉禾, Wang Ermin 王爾敏, Arif Dirlik (1940–2017), Li Zehou 李澤厚, and, outside Chinese studies, Sheldon Pollock, to name a few) has alerted us to the pressing task we confront: to sort through the complexities of accreted or sedimented meanings (p. 382). (Resorting to an “original” meaning via linguistic archaeology or graphic analysis is but a resort to fond speculation, needless to say.) Scholars of the *Shuowen* 說文, such as Françoise Bottéro, know it is not a “dictionary,” but rather a very peculiar retrojection of imagined fancies onto a remote past.

It is manifestly unfair for a reviewer to demand a different book from the one under review. So I herewith take the liberty of focusing this review on the essays that strike me as most fully thought-out, in the knowledge that others' favourites may not match mine. Carine Defoort's essay is a revelation, overturning all her previous work that presumed, following A. C. Graham (1919–1991), a “language problem” in the third century B.C. I shall assign her work to my graduate students for their edification. It is the rare scholar who can take herself to task, and an exemplary one to do it in style. Gentz's essay is no less bracing, reminding us, ever so gently, that “harmony” does

³ Michael Loewe, ed., *Early Chinese Texts: A Bibliographical Guide* (Berkeley, CA: Society for the Study of Early China and Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 1993), p. 246.

not mean “conformity” (let alone slavish obedience) in early classical Chinese, *pace* our Dear Leaders.

Epstein’s treatment of filial piety certainly gets most of us further than individual studies of *xiao* 孝 at a given time period might do. Epstein is to be commended for trying to test literary claims against the evidence gleaned from history. That said, I kept hoping for an acknowledgement, for example, of how unimportant the role of *xiao* is in the *Analects* (it being but the “base” for the more developed virtues), or how contested and aggregated the affective and normative are with respect to Ruan Ji’s 阮籍 (210–263) style of mourning. As stated in Liu Zhiji’s 劉知幾 (661–721) discussion of the “historicity” of claims made for and against Ruan Ji (*Shitong* 史通, *juan* 20), the anecdote is hard to credit and its import awfully muddy. Delving into these issues might have alerted readers to another dimension: that quite possibly at no time is *xiao* anything but an empty signifier. Yet Epstein brilliantly portrays the “moral fanaticism” (p. 280) attached to the Buddhist-inflected version of *xiao*, a fanaticism deeply at odds, it seems to me, with pre-Buddhist notions (often dubbed “Confucian”). Indeed, competitive claims for virtue may be the main common thread linking the pre-Buddhist and Buddhist worlds, with Eastern Han steles styling mere children, dead long before their times, as the equals of Confucius himself.

Leaps backwards and forwards in time do not invariably convince, as with the essays by Yuri Pines and Chiung-yun Evelyn Liu, when the leaps are so sketchy as to preclude sufficient contextualization. Too often mind-to-mind and text-to-text transmission erupts in these pages. Why leap to Yan Zhitui 顏之推 (531–591) or Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613–1682) when you have got *Xunzi* 荀子 on the search for glory and merit, and abundant evidence from Western Zhou bronzes that “name comes from war,” reflecting the idea that war was the chief, if not the only source of accruing merit, *gong* 功 (p. 197)? The choices of example can seem arbitrary, particularly as Yan and Gu knew their *Xunzi* very well indeed. That said, Liu’s essay remains one of my personal favourites in the book, in that it faithfully sketches wildly different notions of loyalty pertaining in different eras. Had she travelled further backward in time, she would have found elaborate discussions in such Eastern Han sources as *Hanshu* 漢書 and *Baihu tong* 白虎通 on the proper timing and level of remonstrance at court, discussions surely in the minds of the later thinkers, which would then have allowed her to move beyond the direct-indirect remonstrance dichotomy to finer gradations than those posited by David Schaberg (p. 234); sadly, no one in Han studies think the *Zhongjing* was compiled by its putative author Ma Rong 馬融 (79–166), so far as I know. Observations in Liu’s essay nonetheless compel our interest, for instance, that outside the *Zuozhuan* 左傳, only Wang Fu 王符 (83–170), a reclusive critic “hidden” from the court, wants to discuss Yu Quan 鬻拳 (d. 675 B.C.), judging from the extant Han and pre-Han sources, leading us to ask (not for the first time perhaps): How central was the *Zuozhuan* to Eastern Han ways of thinking? How much,

too, did the cult of *qing* 情 in the late Ming require the lettered to revisit the topic of violent remonstrance? I kept thinking a sober comparative study of the early Tang *Qunshu zhiyao* 群書治要 (comp. c. 630?) and Yu Shao's 虞韶 *Riji gushi* 日記故事 (preface 1291) might prove instructive here, although the first was court-sponsored and the second, one of the "cultural productions designed for a wider audience." Indeed, how mass marketing may have changed the "Confucian" conversation, with "each direction pushed further," is part of the fascinating story threading through Liu's essay, as it is in Ying Zhang's striking *Confucian Image Politics*.⁴

Questions arise when reading this volume, heaps of them, including: Why include a slogan in the volume, when the two parts of the slogan ("rich" + *guo* 國) are deemed so very unproblematic? And, doubtless more to the point: Need a semantic change always signal the birth of a new concept? I love *Zhuangzi* 莊子 but I warrant we human beings like birds must cheep. Consequently, to the paltry degree that words matter and we cannot alter our human ways, we must do our damndest to avoid dragging anachronistic concepts into our research. My teachers (official and unofficial), Michael Loewe and Michèle Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens (1934–2018), spoke and speak of the sheer arduousness of research: Madame Pirazzoli told me to accumulate evidence very patiently; Michael Loewe, to assemble bricks and mortar slowly. And while I believe the bricks themselves to have inherent flaws, insofar as they frequently were fired in a court's own factories at its elites' direction, castles may not be constructed of less sturdy materials, surely.

Forgive. It is surely recent events on the world scene that have prompted this rant. When I am not fretting over the pervasiveness of misinformation, the future of history, and the disinclination of those in related disciplinary fields to climb out of their academic silos, I can calmly and with utter accuracy state the obvious: this is a book by accomplished scholars, a volume that holds a number of delights for both novices and specialists. I have learned a lot from its pages, for which I cannot but be grateful to the editors and contributors.

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⁴ Ying Zhang, *Confucian Image Politics: Masculine Morality in Seventeenth-Century China* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2017).