

Book Reviews

Performing Filial Piety in Northern Song China: Family, State, and Native Place.

By Cong Ellen Zhang. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2020. Pp. xiv + 226. \$80.00 hardcover, \$30.00 paperback.

Ever since their earliest engagements with Chinese and East Asian societies, writers from elsewhere reported on the importance of the ideal and practice of filiality or filial piety (*xiao* 孝) in the East Asian communities they observed. In the first translation of *The Classic of Filiality* 孝經 (Filialis Observantia, 1711) in a European language, François Noël set out the broader social and political significance of filiality. As Cong Zhang points out in the introduction to her study of the practice of filiality, there has been a long and ongoing tradition of scholarship on the political, religious, and ideological dimensions of the concept of filiality, both in its early articulations and in its imperial codifications. This work explicitly does not aim to prioritize normative articulations of filiality in philosophical texts, law codes, ritual manuals, or pictorial and other narratives. Instead, the author aims to retrieve the performance of filiality (or at least the commemoration thereof) in biographical writing. Based on a reading and an analysis of “over two thousand” funerary epitaphs (*muzhiming* 墓誌銘) covering the Northern Song dynasty (p. 121), Zhang describes how Northern Song literati reinterpreted filiality and how they sought to navigate the contradictions inherent in the expectations of the filial son in real life.

In Chapter One the author argues that a new filial ideal took shape in the eleventh century. In the context of the expansion of the civil examinations, supporting one's parents through official salary (*luyang* 祿養) was increasingly commemorated as the highest expression of filiality. Chapter Four shows that the emphasis on this new ideal in biographical texts can also be attributed to the fact that literati, particularly those in officialdom, actively sought out eminent peers to write funerary epitaphs for their biological and legal parents. In the process their efforts and struggles to perform filiality while in office received special attention. Zhang conveys the dilemmas of Northern Song individuals and families based on a wide range of individual stories; this strategy is particularly effective in Chapters Two and Three which highlight the practical decisions that had to be made about mourning and burial. Official and familial duties regularly conflicted. For example, the early Northern Song court did not grant the normative three-year mourning period for a parent. Mourning was, therefore, in many cases not explicitly mentioned in biographies and, when it was

mentioned, this served to signal unusual behaviour that could serve as a moral example to others. Since Song officials were highly mobile, caring for parents and laying them to rest also presented challenges. Many sought to resolve conflicting demands by delegating care duties to other family members, including wives, by bringing parents along to new homes, and by moving the remains of family members across great distances, sometimes after many years, and then not necessarily to their presumed native places. Overall, this study emphasizes the centrality of filiality in literati self-representation in the Northern Song. As the title suggests, filiality in the Song is here also closely connected to the state. Not only were office-holders upheld as the most filial in funerary epitaphs, but the demands of Song office-holding also reconfigured filial duties among family members and rendered filial ties to native place more malleable.

The focus on the representation of filiality in a well-defined corpus of biographical texts has led to significant insights into Song elite interpretations and practices of filiality. There are, however, some missed opportunities to connect this study of an impressive corpus of individual texts within it to broader questions relating to Song political culture and the role of ritual expertise in Song society. I shall offer a few observations from those two perspectives. First, several of the authors cited are known to have been involved in political debates about the emperor's filial obligations. The debate about Emperor Yingzong's 英宗 (r. 1063–1067) filial obligations to his biological father, for example, was a major event that left few late eleventh-century officials unmoved. How did the high-stake political representations of filiality in ritual debates at court shape the literati self-representation of filiality at home? Second, this study's conclusion aligns with Christian Meyer's work on ritual debates in the Northern Song.¹ Meyer has shown in detail that ritual expertise empowered scholars politically and that ritual expertise broadly defined was part of eleventh-century literati self-definition. This leaves open the question how the practice of filial rituals figured in the broader preoccupation with ritual and its political implications. Third, this work makes some inferences about long-term changes in the conceptualization and practice of filiality, differentiating Northern Song representations of filiality in epitaphs from those in Tang epitaphs, and linking the Northern Song representations to Southern Song neo-Confucian discourses on filiality. Given that we have extensive corpora of epitaphs for both late Tang and Southern Song, we can now look forward

¹ *Ritendiskussionen am Hof der nördlichen Song-Dynastie (1034–1093): Zwischen Ritengelehrsamkeit, Machtkampf und intellektuellen Bewegungen* (Sankt Augustin: Institute Monumenta Serica, 2008).

to a systematic and balanced comparison of the commemoration of filiality across the middle period. We are indebted to Cong Zhang for having paved the way for such a *longue-durée* social history of the practice of filiality.

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