

## Book Reviews

### CHINA AND INNER ASIA

*Death Rituals and Politics in Northern Song China*. By MIHWA CHOI. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. xi, 234 pp. ISBN: 9780190459765 (cloth, also available as e-book).  
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Mihwa Choi's *Death Rituals and Politics in Northern Song China* addresses a lacuna in the field. While historians have long acknowledged the central importance of the rituals of mourning and burial in Chinese political culture and elite identity, the subject has not received its share of attention. Recent years have seen the publication of works that have examined the classical rites of mourning in different periods of pre-modern Chinese history. Norman Kutcher published *Mourning in Late Imperial China* in 1999, a work that covered the Qing dynasty (1644–1911).<sup>1</sup> The author of this review published *The Politics of Mourning in Early China* in 2007, which explored mourning and commemorative practice in the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE).<sup>2</sup> Choi, in contrast, investigates the connections between state ideology and classical rites of mourning and burial during the long medieval period. She focuses on the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127) and, in particular, the eleventh century. Choi argues that the ritual controversies during the eleventh century “contributed to a revival of Confucianism” (p. 2), which in turn laid the groundwork for the emergence of the Learning of the Way (neo-Confucianism) in the twelfth century.

The first chapter, “The Adaptation of Ancestral Ritual to Serve the Ritual Imaginary,” sets the stage for the ritual controversies of the eleventh century. It focuses on the efforts of Emperor Renzong 仁宗 of Song (r. 1022–63) to ground his political authority in the myth of divine ancestry through compulsory civic rituals. According to Choi, such rituals were based on Daoist liturgical traditions and represented a departure from more secular Confucian conceptions of the emperor as the son of heaven.

Chapter 2, “How Does Heaven Come to Speak?,” examines critiques of the imperial ritual program, highlighting in particular the opposition of senior ministers like Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–86) and Ouyang Xiu 歐陽脩 (1007–72). As Choi shows, such figures “hewed to a more conservative line in seeking to prevent non-Confucian rituals from being frequently performed in the imperial court” (p. 48).

<sup>1</sup>Norman Kutcher, *Mourning in Late Imperial China: Filial Piety and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>2</sup>Miranda Brown, *The Politics of Mourning in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

Chapter 3, “Ordering Society through Confucian Rituals,” pays special attention to the ritual discourse of the emperor’s opponents. It carefully reconstructs the ritual assumptions and reasoning of figures such as Sima Guang and Ouyang Xiu, explaining their use of classical precedent in their construction of Confucian ritual orthopraxis.

Chapters 4 and 5, “Social Imaginaries and Politics” and “Burial,” move beyond the textual focus of the preceding chapters and look at the material record. They pay special attention to debates surrounding lavish burial (*houzang* 厚葬), highlighting the discrepancy between classical prescription and actual practice. As Choi points out, merchants and scholar-officials differed in their attitudes toward burial. Scholar-officials not only opposed the excessive expenditures favored by *nouveau riche* merchants, but also were ambivalent about efforts to influence the well-being of the deceased in the afterlife.

There is much to praise about this book. Not only does it treat a topic that has been neglected, but also it is a solid piece of scholarship. The book is meticulously documented, and the scholarly apparatus is impressive. In particular, Choi has a special talent for bringing to life court debates and polemics surrounding ritual. She succeeds in showing how the rites of mourning and burial reflect more than adherence to tradition, but also reveal how the disposal and commemoration of the dead remained a contested subject well into China’s middle period. The book also contains many very lucid and precise translations of difficult classical Chinese.

That said, this reviewer did have some quibbles. I was struck by the frequent opposition of “Confucian” and “non-Confucian” throughout the text, and I kept coming back to the question of what Choi means by “Confucian” ritual. After all, the classics did not present a systematic ritual program, being replete with contradictions and omissions. One of the things that I have been most struck by is the extent to which ritual performers in the Han dynasty had to improvise in their mourning—for example, when deciding what to wear while observing mourning for their patrons, friends, and former superiors in the bureaucracy. This point has also been treated skillfully by Michael Ing in *The Dysfunction of Ritual in Early Confucianism*.<sup>3</sup> I have also been surprised by the extent to which classical precedents did *not* shield Han-dynasty elites from charges of ritual impropriety. All this raises the question: to what extent was there actually a “Confucian” revival in the eleventh century as opposed to the creation of a more systematic ritual program, one based loosely on a body of classical texts and quotations?

Such quibbles do not detract from Choi’s contributions to the field. By bringing attention to the role of ritual in a critical period in Chinese history, Choi has paved the way for new attention to an important topic.

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<sup>3</sup>Michael Ing, *The Dysfunction of Ritual in Early Confucianism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).