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Selfless Offspring: Filial Children and Social Order in Medieval China by Keith Nathaniel Knapp (Review)

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Keith Nathaniel Knapp. *Selfless Offspring: Filial Children and Social Order in Medieval China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005. x, 300 pp. Hardcover \$52.00, ISBN 0-8248-2866-0.

Every child who grows up in a Confucian culture will inevitably, either in grandmother's lap at home or via a textbook in the classroom, be exposed to tales of filial piety in which children go to extremes to care for a parent. These stories, similar to Western fairy tales, do more than simply function as a way of stimulating the imagination; they are a manifestation of the paramount cultural value of *xiao* (filial piety). They embody the Confucian ideal and make it comprehensible and concrete so that others are able to follow it. More importantly, they reveal the vivid and complex landscape of social life, the "attitude toward authority, patterns of residence, conceptions of self, marriage practices, gender preferences, emotional life, religious worship and social relations" (p. 3). Keith Knapp's far-ranging, in-depth study of these tales is one of a kind, offering a compelling historical and conceptual context to further our understanding of Confucian culture, especially medieval Confucianism, in a fresh light.

Knapp introduces the subject through a brief discussion of how these tales have been misinterpreted, for example by the modern Chinese intellectual Lu Xun, by Christian missionaries, and by Western sinologists, and he explains why we should take these tales seriously:

[U]nderstanding their functions and messages will shed light on many aspects of early medieval China, such as how the educated elite defined merit and worth, how they envisioned ideal social relations both inside and outside the family, how they talked about and justified social class, how they understood the world as an interdependent moral cosmos, how they attached great importance to Confucian values and ritual, and how they gendered virtue. (p. 4)

The significance of this passage is demonstrated in a careful and multifaceted study of more than 330 original children's tales from three historical sources: "private collections of filial piety stories, the dynastic histories' collective biographies of extraordinary filial children and sections on filial piety from Tang (618-907) and Song (960-1279) encyclopedias" (p. 9). The contexts in which these tales originated are insightfully analyzed: "the aims of their creators, the circumstances under which they were written, the identity of their readers, the ideology that informed them and the historical trends that shaped their contents" (p. 6). Using an approach taken from European hagiographies and exempla, Knapp argues that filial-piety stories are propagandistic in nature because their transmitters circulated them to bring about specific ends (p. 6). Filial children are Confucian saints because "they practice an asceticism in which they deny themselves ordinary

pleasures, such as savory food, warm clothing, government posts, and legitimately earned wealth; and the divine world confirms their sanctity by favoring them with miracles” (p. 7).

After a useful introduction, Knapp develops his exploration in seven chapters. Chapter 1 deals with two important historical trends that contributed to the prominence of filial piety stories: “the growth of extended families among the elite and the gradual penetration of Confucianism into upper class values and rituals” (p. 13). From the Han dynasty on, the extended large family was a key component in ensuring a lineage’s financial health, physical security, and local power, and yet maintaining harmony in extended families was difficult and challenging. The heads of families were attracted to Confucianism as a mechanism for justifying and strengthening the hierarchical order within the family. An understanding of this historical background is important for fleshing out some deeper features of these tales.

In chapter 2, attention turns to the filial-piety stories themselves: their structure, historicity, origins, functions, and transmission. The majority of the tales are oral narratives that embody *Ru* (Confucian) virtues and rituals. Each tale consists of four parts: an introductory section; the narrative description of filial acts; the rewards received, from either natural or supernatural sources; and a moral or historical commentary.

In chapter 3, one particular text, *Accounts of Filial Offspring*, is used to make the case that elite literati “both admired filiality and were filial themselves” (p. 81).

In chapter 4, Knapp excavates the deeper conceptual themes underlying these tales. As textual embodiments of correlative Confucianism these stories convey the message that the human being is living in a vibrant universe in which the resonance between heaven, earth, and humanity is predestined. Thus, if people follow “the heavenly and earthly patterns inherent [in] them, they can stimulate (*gan*) the moral universe as a result, [and] heaven and earth respond (*ying*) to this stimulus with a miracle” (p. 83). The Confucian virtues unite human beings with the moral universe, which has the power to send down miracles to reward the virtuous and disasters to punish the wicked.

In chapters 5 and 6, the discussion concentrates on two specific aspects of filial piety—reverent caring and mourning and burial—providing cogent examples of what it means to be filial and how one can achieve this goal.

Knapp ends his meticulous study with a focus on the issue of gender. The last chapter deals with questions such as what type of behavior constituted female filial piety, and to what extent female filial piety differed from its male counterpart (p. 164), leading to the following conclusion: “Male and female expressions of filial piety were basically the same, except that women had to go to greater extremes to express their filial devotion” (p. 165). Another interesting aspect of this issue is that “filial piety was perceived as a male virtue that females performed in the absence of male relatives. . . . [F]ilial females were surrogate sons.”

This well-written and well-organized book explains the values and roles of Confucianism in a particular historical period. It has undertaken something far more than a simple narrative description of a historical text or event; it analyzes the original texts to discover the underlying meaning of the themes of these texts. Knapp makes use of the term “correlative Confucianism,” “which designates the strand of Confucianism emphasizing that heaven, earth, and people were mutually interlinked and dependent on each other” (p. 226). The relation between heaven, earth, and human beings provides a practical justification for one’s normative obligation to learn from and imitate these exemplars. Filial children are shown to conduct themselves in accordance with the principles of heaven; by following these filial models one will be rewarded by heaven. This is a perfect rationale for cherishing these tales, which give historical flesh to the theoretical bones of Confucian teaching.

This book is a delight to read and belongs on the shelf of anyone engaged in the study of Confucianism and the Chinese intellectual tradition.

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Reginald Yin-Wang Kwok, editor. *Globalizing Taipei: The Political Economy of Spatial Development*. New York and London: Routledge, 2005. xiv, 258 pp. Hardcover \$105.00, ISBN 0-415-35451-X.

This volume is based on the well-founded premise that Taipei is a relatively understudied East Asian city (compared to, say, Seoul, Hong Kong, or Singapore). It proposes to analyze “the current political economy of Taipei’s development from a globalization perspective,” including “key aspects of Taipei’s development process toward a global city” (p. 1). As a comparative sociologist who studies global cities and is particularly interested in East Asian political economy (but who knows relatively little about Taipei), my intellectual appetite was whetted. I also appreciated the volume’s attempt to provide an insider’s perspective on Taipei; with the exception of the editor and one other chapter author (both at the University of Hawai‘i), all of the contributors are based in Taiwan. An edited collection grounded in conceptual issues of “globalization” and “global cities” written by scholars with detailed local knowledge offers great promise.