

religious and superstitious cultural practices, administered by enlightened bureaucrats who applied modern, secular, rational psychology to control and rule the masses. Both the law and the military were means by which officials and officers eliminated polluting activity and maintained pure order, ensuring the harmonization of the human realm with the patterns and rhythms of the cosmos. The Chinese organized their units, camps, and formations according to the patterns of the stars and the constellations in the sky. They emblazoned their flags and pennons with the signs of the constellations, the images of the astral deities, and the Eight Trigrams of the *Book of Changes*. . .” (p. 43).

This is a very important point. An even more concrete sense of the superstitious element prevalent in Chinese military culture, at least at the popular level, is provided by Ralph D. Sawyer’s absorbing chapter on Martial Prognostication, and the various aspects of the *qi* 氣, which it seems one could visually inspect, and their implications.

To sum up, these fine essays demonstrate collectively that when we look for what constitutes Chinese military culture, we regularly find, at base, not something distinct to civil culture, nor something to be known through the esoteric texts of the *bingjia* 兵家, but rather an extension, at least at the mass level, of the often opaque interpretative structures based on fundamental Chinese notions about the universe and its relationship to human events, interactively linked to their civilian counterparts. Nor are such currents missing in China thinking even today.

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Women’s Ritual in China: Jiezhū (Receiving Buddhist Prayer Beads) Performed by Menopausal Women in Ninghua, Western Fujian. By Neki Tak-ching Cheung. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008. Pp. v + 320. \$119.95.

Neki Tak-ching Cheung’s book, *Jiezhū (Receiving Buddhist Prayer Beads) Performed by Menopausal Women in Ninghua, Western Fujian*, the fruit of her doctoral research at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, contributes to providing a firsthand primary source for a ritual practised by the Ninghua Hakka women in their menopausal age, specifically the rite of “Receiving Buddhist Prayer Beads” (*jiezhū* 接珠). This is a subject generally considered as embarrassing, a censored subject that is usually hardly mentioned by its name. One speaks of advancing age, of old age as a stage in life, but not of the threshold where a woman’s status changes because she cannot conceive children any more. It is the moment when having performed her role within the lineage by giving sons to her husband, her sexuality which is not oriented any more toward conception and is the object of an increased control as attested by the myth of origin of the *jiezhū* ritual retold here by the

author. This moment is where everything tips and where, according to the tradition, a woman's life should be devoted to self-cultivation. Cheung shows how *jiezhu* would provide a therapeutic healing during this trying stage of a woman's life: end of her reproductive cycle and transition from giver of life to facing the afterlife. One wonders what happens to sterile women reaching this age: do they perform the *jiezhu* ritual too?

Jiezhu is performed mainly at home, or at the incense lineage hall, *xianghuo ting* 香火廳, where the dead bodies are usually kept before burial or cremation, but not in the *ci tang* 祠堂, where ancestors tablets are kept. It takes place after midnight, at least for the main rite, the "passing of *mālā*," in late autumn and winter seasons. Two main ritual specialists are required: a master who delivers the *mālā* (*chuan zhu fashi* 傳珠法師, also called *daoshi* 道士) and a veteran woman who has ample experience in running *jiezhu*, the *dai fo mama* 帶佛媽媽. They will be helped by a group of women having *jiezhu* themselves, the Buddhist friends (*foyou* 佛友, also called *nian fo mama* 念佛媽媽). The ritual will be followed every year by an annual *nian fo* 念佛 ritual called *hui fo* 回佛.

The book has seven chapters. In chapter 1, the author introduces her methodology and sources and the field of women's ritual. Little has been written on religious practices that are performed on a small scale or are not performed in public, not to say about those rituals done mainly by women, at least in China, she says. Looking back at what she calls a general consensus in the West that "women have set out their mission to choose, modify, remake, or invent meaningful rituals self-consciously in order to create their own sacred space and time" (p. 5), she wonders acutely whether "all this awakening in the West is useful in [her] understanding and appreciation of *jiezhu* as a women's ritual common in the western part of Fujian, China" (p. 5). Then she presents her fieldwork in Ninghua, Fujian, where she has observed four *jiezhu* and several annual *nian fo*, one *dian fo* 點佛 and some other local rituals. She wonders: "Why are [women] willing to spend more than one year's income to do *jiezhu*? Why do they feel inferior without doing *jiezhu*? How does *jiezhu* work to allay fears and guilt?" (p. 2) Bewildered by the life of the Ninghua women among whom she did four years of research, she asks five questions: "What is *jiezhu* about? How did it come about? Why is it the way it is? What does it mean to the performers? How do I make sense of it?" (p. 12) Overall, the aim of her research is to examine the implications and significance of what she considers as "gift-giving" in this woman's ritual. It is also a systematic investigation of a peculiar rite of passage. According to Cheung, *jiezhu* not fully appears to conform to the tripartite structure of van Gennep's model of rites of passage: women are not reincorporated into communal life, they are transformed into members of a new community of lay Buddhist worshippers, increasing their status in the eyes of their peers. The bestowing of a Buddhist name in the course of these rites represents a new form of identity within the sisterhood society.

Chapter 2 gives a description of Ninghua's social and religious background, including a report on Buddhism in Ninghua, major temples and nunneries, Daoism, Christianity, local deities and religious practices. In chapter 3, the author explores the historical background of *jiezhu* with a discussion of the relationship between *jiezhu* and

Amitufo recitation, *nianfo*. She analyses the origins of Amitabha cult and the relation between Amitabha's Pure Land and the concept of *nianfo* in China. Then she presents the narrative of Amitabha Buddha in *jiezhu* community. Finally she retells the legend of the origin of *jiezhu* and analyses its relations with widow chastity as a commodity in Chinese society. Chapter 4 gives us a precious, thorough textual analysis of the ritual preparation and of the ritual process. The author carefully explains the details of the ritual preparation (date choosing, ritual hours), and of the ritual space. She describes the ritual process, the follow up rituals and also the participation of men in great details. This is certainly a great contribution to the field of religious studies concerning women and ritual. Chapter 5 is a religious analysis of "women and *jiezhu*" taboos associated with *jiezhu*, negative beliefs connecting female sexuality and ritual, the power of ritual and, over all, the analysis of this ritual as being more than a rite of passage which is, she says, a re-enactment of the past, a rehearsal of funeral. Chapter 6 is a social analysis of this women's ritual. It presents *jiezhu* ritual as contributing to the accumulation of the women's symbolic capital, a concept that she borrows from Pierre Bourdieu, while increasing their status and power. *Jiezhu* juxtaposes girlhood, and womanhood, it re-enacts a woman's wedding and rehearses her future funeral. It contains metaphors of death and rebirth, imprisonment in the underworld that Cheung considers as a form of atonement for the loss of reproductive function, or as a "confessional modality." The ritual also confirms the importance of the uterine family, a concept that Margery Wolf has described through her fieldwork data in Taiwan, as the relation between a woman and her children. And actually, it is the duty of the daughters to sponsor *jiezhu* rites on behalf of their mothers, a relationship that could have been analysed further. Finally, following David Glen Mick,¹ Cheung considers *jiezhu* as a "self-gift," a once in a life gift that a woman offers herself in her passage in the postmenopausal stage of life. Chapter 7 is the conclusion where she emphasizes the notion of purity as a part of women's preparation for her future journey down the path of self-cultivation. The link between purity and identity is presented here as essential to understand the meaning of this ritual.

This *jiezhu* ritual is not performed by all Hakka women in their menopausal age. Each of them has the choice to celebrate or not the expensive *jiezhu*, if she can find a year with the auspicious *an* 案 and *dao* 道 that corresponds to her astrological life. But the pressure is great as the ritual stake is to gain merits and earn a happy, comfortable life after death, in the Pure Land of the Buddha through the psalmody of the sutras (*Mituo jing* 彌陀經, Heart sutra 心經, *Dabei zhou* 大悲咒 etc.) and of Amitufo's name, *nianfo*. The recitation of Amitufo's name is fruitless to the women who do not go through

¹ David Glen Mick, "Self-Gifts," in *Gift Giving: A Research Anthology*, ed. Cele Otnes and Richard F. Beltramini (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1996), pp. 99–129.

jiezhū. It is useless also to the women who, having performed *jiezhū*, happen to conceive a child. The myth of origin of *jiezhū* is very explicit on that point. The ritual has been invented by a magistrate who was afraid that her widowed mother should remarry. He had a dull costume in blue and black material tailored for her to wear (the very costume of *jiezhū* women), so that everybody would know both about her renouncement and her sterility. Françoise Hérítier has evoked the situation of what the Piegan Indians of Canada call the “manly-hearted women.”² If the women who perform *jiezhū* have to remain chaste and never remarry if their husband dies, the menopausal “manly-hearted women” of Piegan Indians *must* remarry with young men and act in public like men. In both cases—Chinese or Canadian—there is a confusion between the capacity of women to conceive children and their sexuality controlled and feared by men, all the most when it is not meant anymore to produce a child. As Hérítier puts it on page 294 of her article: “In the Middle Ages in the West, according to Michel Rouche (1985) the elderly widowed woman is ‘at the turning point of sex toward death.’ Her libido is dangerous. If she keeps her dowry, she becomes a powerful and dominating personality. But she also stands for the feared and hated model of the witch, the blood-sucking vampire and cannibal.” This is a point that Cheung could have raised by taking a distance with the informant point of view. Many women who perform *jiezhū* are not widowed nor yet menopausal. She describes the important role taken by the husband of the woman performing *jiezhū*, as if re-enacting the woman’s wedding. He is actually the one who gives her the *mālā*. What is their new relationship after *jiezhū*, while according to the author the cessation of sexuality seems to be even more important than menopause (p. 170)?

Cheung shows that *jiezhū* does not fit the classical rite of passage because the third part: reintegration of the person within the community, cannot be observed here. The woman, indeed, do not reintegrate the village community. She gets a new identity through her new Buddhist name (*foming* 佛名). And indeed, the third part of *jiezhū* takes place not here, in the village, nor even in the sisterhood group, but in the underworld, in the Pure Land of Amitufo where all the paraphernalia offerings have been sent yet. Maybe the analysis of the rites of passage proposed by Maurice Bloch and his concept of “Rebounding Violence” could have fit better here than Turner’s classical model.³ Other Chinese popular myths show how mirages of the paradise are set by demons to catch innocent old people who believe they rush toward Pure Land while they get in the mouth of death. *Jiezhū* seen under such a light could hardly be understood as a “self-gift.” If it is

² Françoise Hérítier, “Older Women, Stout-Hearted Women, Women of Substance,” in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, ed. Michel Feher with Ramona Naddaff and Nadia Tazi (New York: Zone, 1989), pp. 281–99.

³ Maurice Bloch, *Prey into Hunter: The Politics of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

the expression of the symbolic capital of a whole life resumed at this crucial period of passage, it is available only after death to the women who perform it by renouncing their libido. Some men curiously want to perform *jiezhu* as do women. Cheung gives the example of one of them who did it, pressured by his wife who wanted him to renounce having mistresses and she says that he felt ashamed of his senectitude. Anyway men who perform *jiezhu* and enter the Buddhist door do not receive a Buddhist name and do not change their identity. They do not lose their merits of *nianfo* if they conceive a child after *jiezhu*.

A very interesting point discussed by the author is the relation with matrikin, uterine lineage, and sisterhood rehearsed by *jiezhu*. The *jiezhu* ritual emphasizes the relationship between the woman and her mother (“Repaying mother’s kindness” versus transmitting the condition of menopausal woman through the gift of the “kneeling mat,” *putuan* 蒲團), and between the woman and her married daughters who sponsor the ritual and present many colourful gifts (shoes, *mālā* bags, handkerchief used during the *nianfo*), marking the distance between the classes of ages, while the *jiezhu* woman herself buys the black costume that will be her funeral dressing. The woman is then “embedded” again within her uterine lineage that transgresses the patriline boundaries. This shows the red thread running between the house of her mother that she has left to marry, her own house that is her husband’s house where she has conceived her children, and the house of her married daughters. She is also greeted by her *jiezhu* sisters who present “golden flowers” to her, welcoming her as a new member of the sisterhood group. This constitutes a capital of merits as one flower represents the recitation of Amitufo three thousand and three hundred times! These flowers kept in the *mālā* bag will be burned in the initiate’s funeral, so that there is actually a women’s society that the *jiezhu* woman integrates fully by performing the ritual. But this integration has a price: renouncement and preparation to death. Another ritual performed for women could have been compared with the *jiezhu*: the Daoist ritual of Cultivating Flowers (*zaihua* 栽花). In this kind of ritual, women also share flowers but, in *zaihua*, they represent their capacity to conceive. There is a kind of female rhizome-like structure that all women share and that produces “flowers,” that is children. In *jiezhu*, the Golden Flowers given by the “sisters” are not the children to be conceived, but the merits to be gained through the recitation of the Amitufo sutra, *nianfo*, when women cannot conceive anymore. *Jiezhu* is actually a death ritual, with funerary services and paraphernalia (*zhima* 紙馬, *baosan* 寶傘, jewelry boxes, and the Buddhist mansion, *jnlou* 金樓 or *folou* 佛樓). It also evokes the ritual of reimbursement of the debt, a point that might have been raised.

Of course it is impossible to mention here all the fascinating data presented by the author’s study of the *jiezhu* ritual. This book greatly contributes to our understanding of lay Buddhism and local religion. It gives a precious and rare detailed description of a private ritual performed at home for women reaching the period of their life where they cannot give children any more to the lineage. It shows how, urged to embrace chastity, they revive their belonging to the uterine lineage and to the Buddhist sisterhood group, to

share their self cultivation activities and to prepare for their death, with the hope to enter the Pure Land paradise of Amitabha. This point of view of the Chinese Buddhist Hakka society has certainly to be questioned keeping “the view from afar.”

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