

*Selfless Offspring: Filial Children and Social Order in Medieval China.* By Keith Nathaniel Knapp. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005. Pp. x + 300. \$52.00.

In early medieval China, tales of extreme filial piety were repeatedly collected and circulated in texts spanning several centuries. These narratives, so strange to modern eyes, have usually been dismissed as an excessive form of children's literature. In this thoughtful and well-researched book, Keith Knapp offers a much-needed new reading of these texts, one that restores them to their historical situation and takes them seriously as vehicles of moral suasion and religious thought.

Chapter 1 shows that two social trends constitute the main context for the popularity of medieval filial piety tales: the growth of extended families among the élite, and "the gradual penetration of Confucianism into upper-class values and rituals" (p. 13), which, Knapp convincingly argues, occurred only during the Eastern Han, not before. Chapter 2 addresses the question of how these tales came to be formed, and by whom. Knapp paints a plausible picture of the social processes by which largely élite families told tales about their members' virtuous deeds, tales that were later disseminated to ever wider circles of readers by inclusion in various kinds of texts, from epitaphs and government-service dossiers to separate biographies and family histories to regional and geographical works and, finally, to transregional collections solely dedicated to the theme of filial piety. Tales of family members' filial deeds were told and recorded to enhance the prestige of the family, as well as to argue that the family's current status owed in part to the store of hidden merit established by their virtuous ancestors. This chapter is an important look at the ways in which stories were formed and circulated and the interests shaping these activities.

Chapter 3 proceeds to clear the ground of two long-standing assumptions about collections of filial piety tales: that their genre was begun by Liu Xiang (77–6 B.C.) and that they were meant for an audience of young children. Knapp here argues again that the genre of filial piety tales originated in the Eastern Han; in doing so he relates the tales to visual evidence recovered from such archaeological sites as the Wu Liang shrine. He then traces the various early medieval works devoted to tales of filial offspring; his own analysis focuses on three such accounts, one a collection of 186 tales definitely written during the Six Dynasties (220–589) and somewhat dubiously attributed to Tao Yuanming (36–427), the other two surviving in manuscript form in Japan, one dating to the Six Dynasties, the other to the Tang. Knapp also argues here that archaeological evidence shows that, during the Han, wealthy provincial families commissioned visual scenes of filial piety in order to demonstrate their commitment to Confucian values, whereas during the Northern and Southern Dynasties it was the élite of the capital who were decorating their tombs and grave goods with these stories.

Each of the next four chapters focuses on a thematic aspect of the tales. Chapter 4 addresses the tales' miraculous elements; of the 186 stories in the collection Knapp concentrates most closely on, 80 contain miraculous responses to acts of filiality. Knapp links this element to the Han apocrypha and more broadly to correlative Confucianism, which, he shows, continued to be ideologically important long past the Han, even if it was no longer intellectually *au courant*.

Chapter 5 opens by noting that, in Warring States texts, *xiao* or filial piety consisted of

much more than simply nurturing parents with food or physical care, acts which were taken for granted; what counted was acts that either pleased or honoured parents (*a locus classicus* for this idea is *Analects* 2.7). In early medieval accounts, on the other hand, nurturing is by far the most common expression of *xiao* in tales of filiality. How to explain this? Knapp argues that early medieval authors defined *xiao* in terms of nurturing because, “in a period when governmental authority was weak and individual families assumed unprecedented power and influence, it was precisely this concrete and archaic aspect of filial piety that most benefited the solidarity of extended families, by simultaneously expressing love, creating obligation, and signaling hierarchy” (p. 113); or, in other words, seeing filiality as the provision of reverent, nurturing care (*gongyang*) “conveyed a message that patriarchs of influential families wanted the junior members of their families to absorb: that adult sons and daughters (in-law) should subordinate their own wishes to those of their parents” (p. 136).

Chapter 6 focuses on another particular aspect of how early medieval tales portrayed offspring caring for their elders in exemplary ways: in this case, their performance of mourning and burial. The dominant theme here was that filial children, when mourning their parents, do so in ways that surpass the requirements of ritual; they “exceed the rites” (*guoli*). Now, Western Han texts had advocated mourning “according to the rites” and castigated those who exceed them. Why the change in Eastern Han and later times? Knapp argues that “the motif of ‘exceeding the rites’ became popular because it encouraged people to practice the Ru mourning rites with sincerity, thereby combating apathy” (p. 139)—an apathy that had come about because the performance of three-year mourning had, by the second half of the Eastern Han, become unavoidable, and hence at times overly formalized and conventionalized, among the élite; “tales with the theme of exceeding the rites reaffirm the importance of performing . . . mourning . . . with genuine feeling” (*ibid.*).

The explanations offered in chapters 5 and 6 are ingenious and provocative, and they may well be correct; the problem is that offering social explanations for religious changes is always a risky enterprise. Knapp’s arguments here may be viewed as useful, plausible, ultimately unproven hypotheses. One thing Chapter 6 helpfully documents, however, is the extent to which the three-year rites of mourning triumphed as the norm—for the first time—in the Eastern Han.

Finally, Chapter 7 is a welcome look at gendered aspects of filial piety. Knapp shows that women were not shown in the tales as differently filial than men, except that they had to go to greater extremes to show their filial devotion. Filiality was a male virtue that women performed in the absence of male relatives. In short, “filial females were surrogate sons” (p. 165).

This is a welcome revisionist treatment of a long-maligned body of texts, a study that is not content to describe literature’s formalistic aspects but goes deeper to treat it as a vehicle for social discourse and religious argumentation. The book includes helpful illustrations, a glossary of Chinese names and terms, and an index.

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