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Governing Death, Making Persons: The New Chinese Way of Death.

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Influenced by American anthropology in a broad sense and corresponding to anthropological research on contemporary China more precisely, Huwy-min Lucia Liu initially expected that the trend of funeral rituals in China after reform and opening up would be individualisation and religious revival. However, after observing dozens of funerals in Shanghai around 2010, Liu found that wasn't the case. With memorial meetings as the main component of the rituals, contemporary Chinese funerals still had strong traces of state influence, maintaining a subtle continuation with the Mao era. On the other hand, although there was almost no tendency towards individualisation under the current ritual framework, emotional and religious elements had firmly settled in it. Liu's *Governing Death, Making Persons: The New Chinese Way of Death* is an ethnography that tells how such changes have occurred. Based on detailed and in-depth ethnographic descriptions, this book challenges the academic imagination of contemporary Chinese death rituals and explores the subjects these death rituals have created in contemporary China.

This book is organised into two parts, each corresponding to different "subjects": practitioners in the funeral industry in the first part, and consumers, i.e., bereaved families, in the second. The first part is further divided into three chapters. Chapter One uses a lot of material from the Library of the Chinese Funeral and Interment Profession in Shanghai. It describes the so-called civil governance of funerals adopted by the Chinese government after 1949. As Liu tells it, the state nationalised existing funeral institutions and introduced several funeral reforms – including the promotion of cremation, which reached its peak during the Cultural Revolution – with the aim of eliminating horizontal relationships such as family, interpersonal, and religious ties, and creating civil subjects linked to the state directly and vertically.

Chapter Two proceeds from the historical archives to Liu's ethnographic timeline, discussing the transformation of funeral parlours into profit-oriented service institutions after reform and opening up. What seems most ironic to Liu is that the

market-oriented reforms created a huge income disparity within the funeral parlour workforce, allowing the grassroots to protest by using pre-reform methods such as "big character posters" (*dazibao* 大字報), which Liu argues formed the working-class subjectivity.

The protagonists in the next chapter are the ones who best fit the expected image of self-managed market subjects, i.e., the private funeral brokers outside the funeral parlours. They are mainly rural migrants in a transient form of employment with semilegal status. Navigating between state policies, funeral parlours, and bereaved families, they operate under fragile conditions fraught with risk. Perhaps precisely because of this precarious situation, they are driven to become self-managed market subjects, carving out emotional and religious spaces for contemporary Shanghai funerals within official ceremonies. Liu's binary distinction between precariousness (an economic concept with political consequences) and fragility (a political concept with economic consequences) is noteworthy, deepening our understanding of disadvantage groups in different contexts.

The second part turns to the form and process of the funeral ritual itself and is divided into four chapters. Chapter Four mainly refutes the inference that market-oriented reforms will encourage bereaved families to become market subjects pursuing individualised funerals. Chapter Five finally delves into the ethnographic description of the process of death ritual. The memorial meeting, which is thought to be an invention of the Chinese Communist Party during the revolutionary era, was used for postmortem rehabilitation after the Cultural Revolution. Once discouraged by the state, it has become a common template for death ceremonies for Shanghai citizens. Following Liu's meticulous, objective (and somewhat defamiliarised) documentation, we get a sense of presence about the memorial meeting and the whole ceremony. Through the speech-acts of work-unit representatives and participants in the ceremony, the deceased is constructed as a model socialist citizen at the memorial meeting. However, Liu cautions us that this idealised socialist discourse clashes with the ongoing process of marketisation. Liu believes that these moments of dissonance offer an opportunity for those present to reflect on the coexistence of socialist ideals and market economy realities, thus shaping contemporary subjects.

Chapter Six continues this ethnographic tone and further describes the religious practices beyond the standardised memorial meetings. Liu refers to these practices as "additions," encompassing the "folk customs" (*fengsu xiguan* 風俗習慣) that are favoured by most citizens and more formal Buddhist practices. Significantly, through affect, banquets, and flower baskets, Liu argues that participants form relational subjects divergent from the socialist subjects.

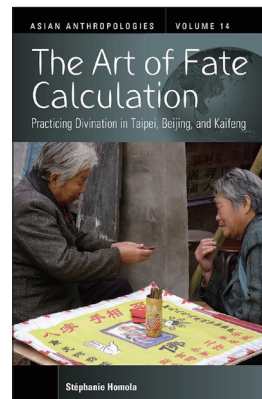
Drawing upon this ethnographic material, Liu engages in a theoretical dialogue, particularly with Joel Robbins's theory of value pluralism. Robbins maintains that a ritual can maximise the realisation of a specific value without negating others. Liu argues, however, that such a theory of value pluralism implicitly assumes a hierarchy of values. Contrary to this, the funerals she observed in Shanghai exhibit a different pattern. Here, diverse values such as socialism, Confucian relationalism, and Buddhism coexist tacitly and non-interferingly, fostering pluralistic subjectivity. This argument resonates with Gregory Bateson's discussion of ritual (1955) cited in the introduction to Liu's book, where he asserts that "ritual is a type

of cognitive framing that provides ‘a spatial and temporal bonding of a set of interactive messages’” (p. 10). In Chapter Seven, Liu introduces the funeral of a Protestant, where the promotion of “true self” disrupts the pluralistic framework of the ritual and the pluralistic subjectivity participating in it. Protestant rituals, in fact, mirror the singular-value ideals of socialism.

In this solid ethnography, Liu provides valuable material on how contemporary Chinese death rituals are conducted, significantly enriching our understanding of contemporary Chinese society. However, I think the book may also have some limitations. Firstly, Liu seems overly preoccupied by the cognitive framing (borrowing Bateson’s terminology) of mainstream American anthropology – such as the binary opposition between state-vertical and social-relational, individualisation, marketisation and neoliberalism, religious revival, plural values, etc. Problematisation based on her rich ethnographic material might lead to a more complex and nuanced understanding of contemporary China. For instance, the transformation of the funeral industry may reflect how the state is imagined by diverse social actors and infiltrates their daily lives, rather than being a top-down monolithic entity. Secondly, although the book title mentions “making persons” and Liu repeatedly discusses the construction of subjects, the examination of rituals often occurs in isolation. The inclusion of longitudinal case studies that would delve into the ordinary lives of families around death might have deepened our understanding of how the citizens of contemporary Shanghai – a city that boasts of being the most civilised and modernised in China – forge their understanding of life and subjectivity through death. This book is recommended for readers interested in social changes in China, particularly how death rituals are shaped by state governance and marketisation.

References

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HOMOLA, Stéphanie. 2023.
The Art of Fate Calculation: Practicing Divination in Taipei, Beijing, and Kaifeng.
 New York: Berghahn Books.

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Divination is a classical topic in anthropological research. In contemporary China, as well as in many other societies, divination remains highly popular: it has not been thoroughly marginalised but is instead a very common and everyday behaviour. In this light, several ethnographic works in recent years have focused on the practices of divination in contemporary China (Li 2019; Matthews 2021). Homola’s book is the third in this vein to be published by Berghahn Books.

This book presents a comprehensive ethnographic study of the resurgence of divinatory customs, examining the practice of divination as a societal institution and an intellectual endeavour. The author puts together various elements that are typically examined in isolation: the role of divination experts, the behaviours of clients, the methods of divination, and the intellectual and political history of these practices. Homola’s ethnographic research, spanning 2007-2011, is presented through three field investigations in Taipei, Beijing, and Kaifeng, each revealing different aspects of divination: technological history, legal status of practitioners, and knowledge dissemination, respectively.

This review will focus on three key highlights of Homola’s work: the role of scepticism in divination, the dissemination of divinatory knowledge, and the social relationships reflected in divinatory practices.

First, a great part of the book consists in the demonstration of scepticism in divination. This scepticism may come from the customers towards the diviners, or from the diviners towards their peers. Homola reveals that the concepts of fate and confidence in divinatory practices are not prerequisites for engagement but rather outcomes of an ongoing reflective process. Citing Severi (2015), she takes belief as a link formed between a representation and the believer: she shows how the belief in fate derives from the manner in which fate-related information circulates in Taiwanese society, either in social conversations or in discussions with diviners. Through their experiences with divination, Homola’s informants communicated