



THE
Writing of Weddings
in Middle-Period China

Text and Ritual Practice in the
Eighth through Fourteenth Centuries

CHRISTIAN DE PEE

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SUNY series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture
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Eighth through Fourteenth Centuries

Christian de Pee

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To Lara

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Contents

Illustrations	ix
Preface	xi
Introduction. The Practice of the Text	1
The Practice of the Classical Text: The Writing of Weddings in the Middle Period	2
The Practice of the Academic Text: The Writing of Weddings in Modern and Postmodern History	14
Chapter One. Ritual Manuals: Exegetical Hermeneutics and the Re-Embodiment of Antiquity	21
Canonical Weddings: Fragments and Hermeneutics	27
<i>Rites of the Kaiyuan Period</i> : The Merging of Canon and Precedent	34
Manuals of Letters and Ceremonies: The Hermeneutics of Practice and the Preservation of Ritual	39
The Hermeneutical Shift in the Northern Song: Epigraphy, Archaeology, and the Identity of Past and Present	45
Ritual Manuals of the Northern Song: The Hermeneutics of Text and the Embodiment of Antiquity	50
Toward a New Ritual Scripture: Zhu Xi's <i>Family Rituals</i>	72
Conclusion	81
Chapter Two. Wedding Correspondence and Nuptial Songs: Writing as Cultural Capital and Text as Ritual Object	89
Cultural Capital and the Inscription of Ritual Time in Wedding Correspondence	93
Social Boundaries and Symbolic Capital in Writing Manuals	104

Ritual Time and Sexual Metaphors in Wedding Addresses, Poems, and Jokes	116
Conclusion	131
Chapter Three. Calendars, Almanacs, Miracle Tales, and Medical Texts: Cosmic Cycles and the Liminal Affairs of Man	137
Patterns of Auspicious and Inauspicious Time in Calendars	147
The Calculation of Cosmic Blessings and Dangers in Almanacs	152
The Blessings and Dangers of Weddings in Miracle Tales	164
The Vulnerable and Dangerous Body of the Bride in Miracle Tales and Medical Texts	168
Conclusion	174
Chapter Four. Legal Codes, Verdicts, and Contracts: Universal Order and Local Practice	179
Marriage and the Universal Order: <i>The Annotated Tang Code</i> and the <i>Song Penal Code</i>	187
Universal Law and Local Practice: <i>A Collection of Pure and Lucid Verdicts</i>	191
Interference with Ritual Practice: <i>Imperial Canon of Sacred Governance</i> and <i>Comprehensive Institutions</i>	201
Conclusion	212
Conclusion. Texts and Tombs, Ritual and History	221
The Practice of the Tomb: Material Traces of Ritual	228
The Practice of the Text: Written Traces of Ritual	242
The Practice of History: Toward a Cultural History of the Middle Period	246
Glossary	251
Notes	257
Bibliography	317
Index	357

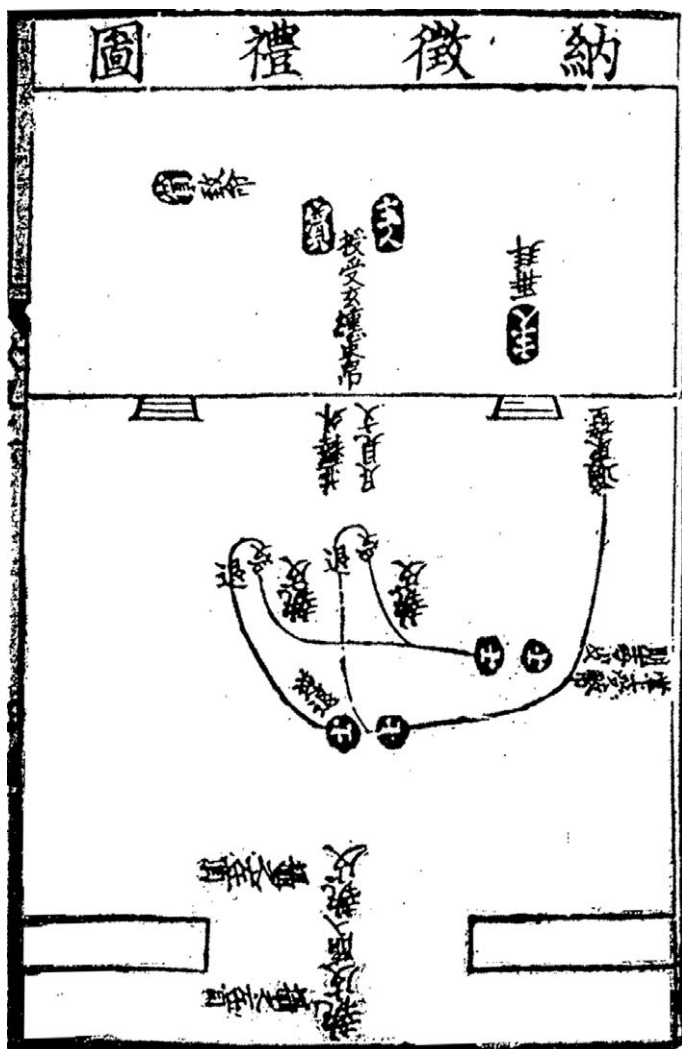
Illustrations

FIGURES

1.1	Schema of Wedding Ritual according to <i>Ceremonies and Rites</i>	28
1.2	Schema of Imperial Weddings according to <i>Rites of the Kaiyuan Period</i>	37
1.3	Schema of Wedding Ritual according to <i>Newly Compiled Letters and Ceremonies for Auspicious and Inauspicious Occasions</i>	43
1.4	Schema of Wedding Ritual according to Sima Guang's <i>Letters and Ceremonies</i>	56
1.5	Schema of Wedding Ritual according to Zhu Xi's <i>Family Rituals</i>	78
3.1	The Non-Infringement System	149
3.2.1	The <i>liuren</i> Cycle	156
3.2.2	The Gate of the Husband's Family Harms the Wife's Date of Birth	158
3.3	Weddings according to the Round Hall	162

TABLES

3.1	The Celestial Dog	162
5.1	Correlations between Filiality Scenes, Mimicry of Timber-Frame Structures, and Joint Burial	232



“Ritual choreography of Submission of the Betrothal Gifts,” from Yang Fu’s *Ceremonies and Rites Illustrated* (*Yili tu*, 1228). Yuan-dynasty edition. Courtesy of the National Central Library, Taipei.

Preface

This book attempts to preserve the fragile traces of the practice of weddings during the Middle Period, from the late Tang (618–907) through the Yuan dynasty (1272–1368). The ephemeral configurations of grooms and brides and wedding guests, the unique sounds and sights and fragrances of Middle-Period weddings, have by nature ever defied the limitations of the written page. But where writing was a ritual practice, and where the text was a ritual object, texts do yet preserve, amid their configurations of written signs, traces of the practice of Middle-Period weddings. The detailed choreographies of ritual manuals allow the reader, now as then, to merge through symmetrical, centered time and space with the perfect ceremonies of legendary antiquity. The lavish display of wit and erudition in engagement letters creates linear hierarchies of literary production and linear successions of literary fashions that are replicated in the linear time and space of their ritual narratives. The recondite cosmological calculations of calendars and almanacs assume a cyclical time and space in which the revolutions of noxious dangers and bright opportunities determine auspicious and inauspicious dates, hours, and locations for weddings. Legal verdicts reconfigure local wedding ceremonies according to the universal categories of imperial law, in the ritual time and space of imperial government, yet in the process of that translation, in the margins of those judgments, become dimly, briefly visible unwritten cultures of colloquial practice. These incompatible notions of time, space, and bodies, configured in incommensurable wedding ceremonies, converge in tombs in which deceased spouses have been buried together. The material ambiguity of the tomb allows a juxtaposition of discourses that the determinate conventions of the Middle-Period text prohibit. The Middle-Period text, in other words, has preserved configurations of time, space, bodies, and writing, without indicating how these might be refigured in the ritual practice of weddings.

This is a book about the practice of the text. It examines the intersections between the practice of writing and the practice of weddings during the Middle Period, and in the process reassesses the relationship between the Middle-Period text and the practice of the historian. The particularities of writing as a cultural practice during the Middle Period, and the particularities of the transmission of texts during late imperial times, have created a textual legacy that differs markedly from the textual legacies of the European and the American past. It stands to reason, therefore, that the received narratives and idioms of European and American historiography are not always suitable to render the history of the Middle Period, and that the historian should consider metaphors and modes of emplotment that accommodate the particularities of Middle-Period texts. This book attempts a description of fragmented discourses, in a style that allows an active, dialectical engagement with the extant texts. With every chapter, each shorter than the previous, the distance between the practice of the text and the practice of ritual widens, as also the transmitted texts become fewer and more fragmentary. Each chapter, moreover, spans a different stretch of time, from the origins of a genre to its demise, or from one founding text to another. The designation "Middle Period" is broad enough to encompass these different spans of time, while being specific enough to suggest the era of a growing market economy, an increasing population, the spread of printing, the new prominence of the imperial examinations, the changing nature of the elite, and the re-evaluation of the classical tradition—all factors that shaped the narratives of the discourses that are the subject of the chapters of this book.

The research and the composition of this book, begun as a dissertation, have in the course of time been subvented by the Center for Chinese Studies in Taipei; the American Council for Learned Societies/Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation Fellowship Selection Committee, with funds provided by the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation; the Mrs. Giles Whiting Foundation; the Fang-Tu Teaching Fellowship in East Asian Studies, Heyman Center, Columbia University; and a postdoctoral fellowship at the Center for Chinese Studies, University of California at Berkeley. The research for this book has also benefited much from a yearlong affiliation granted by the Institute of History and Philology at Academia Sinica, in Taiwan. I am grateful to all these institutions for their support.

I am also pleased to acknowledge the help I have received over the years from librarians in Taiwan, Mainland China, and the United

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A number of passages in this book have previously been published in "The Ritual and Sexual Bodies of the Groom and the Bride in Ritual Manuals of the Sung Dynasty (11th through 13th Centuries)," in *Chinese Women in the Imperial Past: New Perspectives*, ed. Harriet T. Zurndorfer (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1999); "Premodern Chinese Weddings and the Divorce of Past and Present," *positions: east asia cultures critique* 9:3 (winter 2001); "Material Ambiguity and the Hermetic Text: Cities, Tombs, and Middle-Period History," *Journal of Song-Yuan Studies* 34 (2004); and "Till Death Do Us Unite: Texts, Tombs, and the Cultural History of Weddings in Middle-Period China (Eighth through Fourteenth Centuries)," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 65:4 (November 2006). Those passages are reprinted here with the kind permission of Koninklijke Brill, *positions: east asia cultures critique*, the *Journal of Song-Yuan Studies*, and the Association for Asian Studies.

Robert Hymes offered incisive criticism during the important early stages of my dissertation. In later years, my work on the book was helped by the comments and encouragements of many, among them Alain Arrault, Robert Ashmore, Bettine Birge, Peter Bol, Miranda Brown, Lucille Chia, Astrid de Pee, Hilde de Weerd, William Hanks, Ton Hengeveld, Lionel Jensen, David Lurie, Jennifer Purtle, Sarah Schneewind, Anna Shields, Patricia Thornton, Walter van de Leur, Lothar von Falkenhausen, Stephen West, and the two anonymous readers for the State University of New York Press. I am grateful also for the suggestions and criticisms offered by audiences at the workshop on the History of Chinese Women at Leiden University; the 1998 and 2000 annual meetings of the Association for Asian Studies; the Traditional China Seminar and the Society of Fellows in the Humanities at Columbia University; the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago; the Center for Chinese Studies at the University of California at Berkeley; and the seminar on New Approaches to Chinese Studies at the University of California at Los Angeles. Nancy Ellegate and Judith Block of the State University

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The greater part of this book was written, eventually, on a remote mountain plateau in southern Yunnan, at a pleasant yellow table with a view of a steep cliff and a prefectural hotel. In the memory of that happy time, I dedicate this book to Lara Kusnetzky, for reasons both obvious and ineffable.

Introduction

The Practice of the Text

He who does not understand words cannot understand others.
—*The Analects* XX.3¹

To understand oneself is to understand oneself in front of the text.
—Paul Ricoeur (1975)²

The practice of wedding ritual is irretrievably lost; the practice of wedding ritual survives to the present hour. The classical written language and the well-defined genres of the eighth through fourteenth centuries could not accommodate the individual, colloquial practice of contemporary wedding ceremonies. Yet where writing was itself a ritual act and where the text was itself a ritual object, the written page has preserved into the present a living trace of Middle-Period weddings, as vigorous as when the author put his brush to paper, as distinct as when the printer carved his blocks. On the solemn pages of ritual manuals, in the impeccable meter of engagement letters and wedding poems, in the esoteric calculations of calendars and almanacs, and in the stately diction of legal codes and verdicts stand immutably inscribed the time and space into which authors placed their scripted grooms and brides and wedding gifts. If in these fragments the practice of the text coincides with the practice of ritual, however, the practice of ritual extended across and beyond the determinate limits of the classical text. The material remains of joint burial—the unification of the ritualized bodies of deceased spouses in the ritualized time and space of a tomb—suggest how the ambiguous simultaneity of mute objects and ritual choreography allowed a juxtaposition of incommensurable notions of time, space, bodies, and text that remain strictly segregated in writing. A reflexive, dialectical hermeneutics reveals the temporal and spatial multiplicity that informs the wedding narratives in Middle-Period texts, and exposes the violent imposition of a universalist, linear temporality and spatiality on these texts by modern historians. But the

embodied “sense of ritual” that coordinated this multiplicity of time, space, bodies, and text in individual wedding ceremonies is irretrievably lost.³

THE PRACTICE OF THE CLASSICAL TEXT: THE WRITING OF WEDDINGS IN THE MIDDLE PERIOD

Authors of ritual manuals (chapter 1) reinscribed the wedding rites of remote, sacred antiquity to enable the reincorporation of these rites in the present. The compilers of imperial protocol and manuals of letters and ceremonies (*shuyi*) during the Tang (618–907), Five Dynasties (907–960), and early Song (960–1279) deemed that ritual changed with the times, and attempted to rewrite the untried precedents and novel practices of their day in accordance with the ritual scriptures of antiquity, thus contributing to the long series of careful adjustments that connected living practice to the distant past. In the eleventh century, the study of ancient bronze vessels and stone inscriptions convinced canonical scholars that it was possible to “bow, yield, and turn among the ancients” and that true, immutable ritual established, not an extended organic connection, but an immediate identity between the present and antiquity. Sima Guang (1019–1086), Zhang Zai (1020–1077), Lü Dajun (1031–1082), Cheng Yi (1033–1107), and others therefore rewrote the fragmented wedding ceremonies of the ritual scriptures into complete, seamless ritual narratives that appeared alien and dangerous to their bewildered contemporaries. Although the compilers of ritual manuals, both in the Tang and in the Song, reinscribed the scriptures of antiquity in hopes of restoring its incorporated practice to living ritual, theirs was an eminently textual discourse. Their detailed choreographies script an embodied exegesis that merges text and performance, the reading eye and the performing body, past and present. In this text/performance of ritual manuals, the groom and the bride move through interlocking systems of symmetrical ceremonies and through a ritual grammar of walls, thresholds, and stairs to become husband and wife at the spatial and temporal center of the narrative.⁴ The time of the ritual, both symmetrical and porous, is the time of the text, and ancient ritual definitively merges with Middle-Period text when Zhu Xi’s (1130–1200) *Family Rituals* gains recognition as a new scripture by a contemporary sage, first among his disciples,

then at the imperial courts of the Yuan (1272–1368) and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties.

In wedding correspondence (chapter 2), the family of the groom and the family of the bride exchanged ceremonial letters whose erudition and elegance confirmed the education of the sender and, therefore, the prestige of the match. Sometime in the eleventh century, letters in exuberant parallel prose composed in the public formats of official communications began to replace the staid, private engagement letters of earlier ages. This compulsory display of cultural capital made writing a ritual act, producing the ritual object that was the calligraphed letter in its elaborate box or tube. In these letters, and in the wedding poems contributed by friends and relatives, the written bodies of grooms and brides (mere traces of the author's educated hand) move through written time and space toward a metaphoric rite of public consummation. The linearity of this parallel, anterior, written time and space is the linearity of literary fashions, whose passing tastes abandoned the practice of social correspondence in parallel prose during the fourteenth century.

Calendars and almanacs (chapter 3) chart safe paths through liminal space and time for the vulnerable and dangerous bodies of the groom and the bride. Their calculations transcribe the cyclical movements of baleful stars and deities that loom above wells and thresholds, inflicting illness and death on careless revelers and on the virgin bride. Extant almanacs and calendars (and medical texts and miracle tales) preserve a mere fraction of an expansive culture of practice in which writing served but as an aid in calculation and in which the printed page provided only one site of competition between astrologers and geomancers, doctors and diviners. Transmission has favored the most academic of cosmological systems, recorded in lasting tomes by imperial bureaus and literati dilettantes. The chance survival of illicit calendars and cheap pamphlets in the caves of Dunhuang and the sands of Turfan, however, supplements those scholarly works to suggest the myriad calculatory systems generated by a limited number of cosmological principles, shared by vying experts from the lofty halls of the imperial court to the market stall by the village well. The dark, grinding cycles that in their timeless revolution determined the blessings and dangers of weddings also determined the fate of the texts that transcribed them, obliterating thousands of almanacs with the birth of new stars and deities, and tens of thousands of calendars with each passing year.

The laws and legal codes promulgated under the Tang, Song, and Yuan dynasties (chapter 4) formulated a hierarchical structure in which official rank, degree of kinship, age, and (under the Yuan) ethnicity determined the rights and obligations of each imperial subject. Marriage laws served to contain the complications wrought in this transparent structure by the transfer of persons and property during betrothals and weddings. Marriage introduced the bride and, to a lesser extent, the groom into new mourning circles, and this change of ritual status bore with it new rights and obligations: rights to property, to the use of violence, to mourning, burial, and sacrifice, and obligations to the continuity of the ancestral line. In verdicts, this universalist imperial order confronts the local practice of weddings and marriage. Within the safe confines of the written page, the local official translates colloquial language and vernacular practice into the written discourse of imperial law, and redistributes persons and property according to legal stipulations often unknown to plaintiffs and defendants. In the margins of verdicts become briefly, dimly visible unwritten ceremonies, at the blurred distance that always already separates the universalist practice of the legal text from the local practice of wedding ceremonies. In legal discourse, writing is a ritual act in the ritual performance of imperial government, and the verdict is a ritual object, posted for public instruction or offered to superiors with all due formulas and stamps. Its space is the imperial space of county courts and prefectural capitals, its bodies are the imperial bodies of circumscribed subjects, and its time is the imperial time of mourning obligations, assizes, amnesties, and dynastic change. Each new dynasty destroyed the legal archives of its predecessor, preserving for the present an incomplete, incommensurable miscellany of edicts, codes, verdicts of literary merit, and precedents that impedes an understanding of the local practice of imperial law—let alone the local practice of weddings.

With every chapter of this book (each shorter than the previous) the surviving texts become less representative of the culture of writing and printing that produced them, while at the same time an increasing remove separates the practice of the text from the practice of ritual. The tightly scripted time, space, and bodies of ritual manuals and imperial protocol have been carefully, respectfully transmitted across the centuries. Literary merit and lasting reputations have saved from oblivion the anthologies and collected works that contain wedding letters and nuptial poems—their calligraphy and ceremonial trappings erased from the uniform printed text, but the cultural capital of their

wit and allusions intact. The limited, instrumental function of text and writing in mantic practice left its cosmology imperfectly inscribed and barred its thousands of short, fleeting pamphlets from inclusion in enduring collections. The few scattered formulas and diagrams for the calculation of auspicious matches, propitious hours, and unthreatened spaces assume nuptial practices that are now forgotten. The sparse verdicts and precedents to survive from the Song and Yuan uphold the universalist order of imperial law against the perverse intrusion of local customs, and reduce disorderly vernacular practice to the transparent categories of written law. Where writing is a ritual act and where the text is a ritual object—in the meticulous choreographies of ritual manuals, in the elegant erudition of wedding correspondence, in the divinatory diagrams of cosmological calculation—the time, space, and bodies of the text are the time, space, and bodies of wedding ritual. In legal codes and verdicts, text and writing are ritual technologies of imperial rule whose hierarchies of time, space, and bodies bear no necessary relationship to the local practice of weddings. When the distance between the practice of the text and the practice of ritual increases further, in the writing of “local customs” (and in fiction), weddings become a mere function of the text.⁵

Because this book is concerned with inscribed traces of ritual practice, its chapters exclude the writing of local customs (*fengsu*). A brief exposition on this discourse, however, may provide the reader with an illustration of the relationship between the practice of the text and the practice of ritual, alleviating the summary abstraction of the above paragraphs with a measure of concrete detail.

Local gazetteers, travel diaries, and notebooks (*biji*) constitute the imperial center through a negative discourse on regional difference.⁶ Each of these genres places the imperial capital at the center of the world, on the level ground of the present. The traveler who leaves the civilized Central Plain ascends into time, from the imperial present of the capital through the simple, recent past of the undulating countryside to the prehistory of steep borderlands. The towering cliffs, torrential rivers, and intemperate climes through which the traveler passes have detracted their hoary inhabitants from the civilizing transformation of the imperial court. Wedding practices, in this cultural geography, serve as one index of local character and relative civilization. The practice of the text, in other words, reduces unfamiliar wedding ceremonies to negative signs of difference, performed in alien time and space by crude, foreign bodies.⁷

Notebooks collect everything that lacks a place in other genres and thereby become an instantiation of this landscape: a marginal genre that writes the uncentered, whether geographic, political, literary, moral, or metaphorical—forgotten poems, oral traditions, humor, violence, miracle tales, strange foods, lost texts, scabrous anecdotes, exotic products, puns, writing on walls, gossip, local customs. As Zhuang Chuo (fl. 1090–1150) writes in the preface to his notebook *Collected Chicken Ribs* (*Jilei bian*, 1133):

After Cao Mengde [i.e., Cao Cao, 155–220 CE] had pacified Hanzhong [in the Northwest] he wanted to conquer Shu [in the Southwest], but was unable to advance, while at the same time he realized that the region, if conquered, would be difficult to defend. When he stepped out to instruct his officers, he merely said, “Chicken ribs!” Nobody understood what he meant, except Yang Xiu who explained, “One does not derive any satisfaction from eating chicken ribs, yet throwing them out is a regrettable waste. Our lord has retreated for further deliberation.” One will search the records in vain for Aman’s [i.e., Cao Cao’s] achievements, but this idle phrase of his was belatedly written down, much like some dry bit of chicken ribs. If one chances upon it, sitting hungry at home after gathering turnips and water chestnuts, it may not be quite as good as a rabbit shoulder, but it is better than a stark ox bone. Since this book of mine rather resembles this state of affairs, I have entitled it *Chicken Ribs*.⁸

Among the riddles and palindromes, monks and diviners, unknown plants and local technologies, and other odds and ends saved from the crevices of classical writing, Zhuang Chuo also includes local customs and regional character:

Generally speaking, human nature takes after the surrounding landscape. The Northwest is mountainous, and its people are therefore dignified, sincere, and simple. The Jing and Yang regions [present Jiangsu, Anhui, Hubei, and Hunan] are rich in water, and its people are likewise bright, scintillating, and versatile, with an unfortunate tendency toward superficiality and shallowness. A man’s character can be read from his face. Only the sagely and wise are able to resist the destabilizing force of local customs.⁹

Into this written geographical space (where the plain northern landscape with its slow rivers merges with the smooth surface of the page), Zhuang Chuo places certain dislodged wedding practices of his day:

Never before have rites and ceremonies been as deficient as they have been in recent times. The unevenness of wedding and mourning practices is especially pronounced. Even imperial princes who take a wife follow customary rites such as Bowing to the Spirits of the Ancestors and Joining the Topknot. When [the *History of the Han* writes that] Li Guang “waged war on the Xiongnu after tying up his hair,” it means to convey that he was still young, having barely reached the age of the capping ceremony.¹⁰ Therefore Du Fu’s [712–770] “Departure of a Young Bride” says, “After I tied up my hair I became your wife.”¹¹ Later generations, however, have at weddings combed the hair of the groom and the bride together into one topknot and have called this “Tying up the Hair.” This is ridiculous. One cannot begin to explain how uncanonical it is.¹²

The customs of the South are even more bizarre than the old practices of the Central Plain. After the Emperor moved the capital to Yue a few years ago [to present Hangzhou, in 1127], for example, there was at some point a wedding in the family of an official from Wu [present Jiangsu province], conducted according to the manner of this official’s hometown. He had several hundred envelopes of red paper filled with a mixture of lime and crushed clam shells, and instructed the bride to begin tossing these into the roadway as soon as she ascended the carriage. This was called “Powder to Protect the Mother-in-law.” When the bride reached the gate of the groom’s house, the official began summoning spirits, then sacrificed wine and food, and ordered a shaman to burn paper money and to recite exorcist spells, in order to drive away the bride’s ancestors. As the bride descended from her carriage, her male and female relatives were told to carry her to the bedstead. After the parents of the groom had drunk three cups with the assembled guests, their son left the banquet to pay his respects at the bridal seat. Someone spread a mat for him next to the bride.¹³ They drank three cups, and then proceeded to conduct Joining the Topknot and all other such ceremonies, with numerous outrageous elements.

Commoner brides are not elaborately covered, and all kinds of strangers will stare at them. A virgin will sit on the dais; a bride who has been married before will sit in front of it. If onlookers praise her, and even if men fondle her, she will be pleased and not deem it improper.¹⁴

In this passage, contemporary wedding practices afford Zhuang Chuo an occasion for political criticism. The unified, timeless ritual of the ancient sages, preserved in canonical texts and at the imperial court, is threatened by the meaningless diversity of vulgar, changeable customs that have begun to affect the nuptial rites of metropolitan officials and imperial princes. The practice of the text excludes the practice of ritual: its deviation from the canon invalidates unwritten vernacular custom (the false etymology of Tying up the Hair only adds to its absurdity), and the cultural geography of the text reduces the inscribed practices to a disjointed series of incomprehensible ceremonies. Just as the absence of the author from these passages makes it impossible to locate him in the ritual narratives (Was he present at the wedding in Hangzhou? Did he witness the ceremonies in the bedroom?), so the distance between the practice of the text and the practice of ritual prohibits any knowledge or understanding of the adumbrated ceremonies.¹⁵

The strange, exciting detail of travel diaries is conceived in similar contrast with a civilized center. In the preface to his *Xuanhe Embassy's Illustrated Gazetteer of Koryo* (*Xuanhe fengshi Gaoli tujing*, 1124), for example, Xu Jing (1091–1153) explains that in writing his account of the 1122 mission to the kingdom of Koryo (in present Korea) he has “made broad selections from the many stories, based on what I have perceived with my own eyes and ears, abridging or omitting all that is similar to our Middle Kingdom and choosing instead what is different. . . . In this illustrated gazetteer my hand has laid out what my eyes have seen, beginning with the most remote corners and the strangest regions.”¹⁶ Xu Jing’s rudimentary observations about weddings in Koryo hold its betrothal gifts and marital practices against the universalist standard of ancient ritual and Song civilization: “Cappings, weddings, mourning, and sacrifice are seldom restrained by ritual. . . . When aristocrats and officials marry, they use betrothal gifts of a sort, but commoners exchange only wine and rice. Wealthy men, moreover, take up to three or four wives and divorce them at the slightest disagreement.”¹⁷

Particularly lewd, violent, or otherwise beguiling practices receive lengthier treatment, such as the wedding ceremonies of the Liao in *By*

Way of Answer to Queries about the Land beyond the Mountains (Lingwai daida, 1178), by Zhou Qufei (1163 *jīnshǐ*):

Entering the Cabin

The inhabitants of the creeks and caves of Yongzhou [present Guilin, Guangxi province] all intermarry. Since many of the indigenous officials are surnamed Huang, their intermarriage unites families of the same surname. In their wedding ceremonies they place the highest value on crude ostentation and physical violence. The rites and ceremonies that attend the bestowal of betrothal gifts often involve as many as a thousand people. Although the gifts never include gold, silver, or money, they comprise prodigious amounts of wine and dried fish, so that the expense may rightly be called extravagant. When the groom comes to fetch the bride, the bride's family builds more than a hundred straw huts some two miles from their home, where the groom and the bride may live. This is called "Entering the Cabin." The groom's family accompanies the groom to the cabin with drums and music, and the bride's family likewise conveys the bride to the cabin with musicians. The bride's maids and concubines number over a hundred, and the groom brings several hundred servants. On the wedding night, the families of the groom and the bride cover themselves with weapons, and at the slightest disagreement they cross blades. After the wedding, the groom always carries a dagger in his sleeve. If one of his wife's maids displeases him in any way, he kills her on the spot. This is called "Manifestation of the Brave." Only half a year after entering the cabin is the bride taken to the groom's house. The bride's party will fear the groom only if he kills several dozen maids upon entering the cabin. If he fails to do so, he will be considered a weakling.¹⁸

This passage forces Liao wedding practices into a narrative that reduces them to perversions of universalist, civilized ritual. The Liao do not observe the law that prohibits marriage between people of the same surname, they disregard elegance and moderation, they do not use money or precious metals, they play music at weddings, and the bride does not enter the groom's family until half a year after the nuptials. The straw huts and the incomprehensible violence function as ultimate signs of difference, epitomized in the unfamiliar, exotic phrases Entering

the Cabin and Manifestation of the Brave. The author stands at the same remove from the ceremonies as does the reader, and imparts to him a pleasurable combination of amusement and horror that confirms a shared confidence in their superior civilization.

But even when authors write about their hometown, the emphasis on unique local character and peculiar, colorful customs forestalls, by its implication of deviance from a grounding center, the independent creation of meaning in local practice. Fan Chengda (1126–1193), for example, compiled his *Gazetteer of Wu Prefecture* (*Wujun zhi*, 1192) in a deliberate effort to record the particularities of his native region, during a formative period in the history of the local gazetteer when compilers negotiated this very relationship between center and periphery.¹⁹ In the section on local customs, he embeds a mention of marital practices in the cultural geography familiar from notebooks and travel diaries:

Wuzhong [present Wu county, Jiangsu province] has long been famous for its abundance. Cultivated fields line valley and hillside, and there is not a plot of barren soil anywhere in the outskirts of the town. Since all have their own property, there are no great discrepancies in wealth. The region's customs are therefore extravagant rather than frugal. The locals vie for seasonal products, and they like to go on outings and to entertain. At the beginning of the year, they gather at the Buddhist temple. This is called "the Yearly Confession." The temple grounds throng with men and women, leaving barely space to walk. Friends and relatives who have not seen one another all year often meet on this occasion, some with congratulations, some with condolences. There is also much fevered negotiation of marriage and scrutiny of prospective grooms and brides, and often final arrangements are made on this occasion.²⁰

And even in the *Record of Dreaming of Hua in the Eastern Capital* (*Dongjing meng Hua lu*, 1147), a nostalgic memoir of life in Kaifeng "that, for an instant, breaks the traditional grasp that hierarchical ordering holds on textual representations of space," wedding practices function as a sign of difference.²¹ In his preface, the pseudonymous Meng Yuanlao explains that he has attempted to preserve in writing the sights and sounds and smells of his Arcadian youth before his fading memories dissolve into the false recollections of his wistful relatives:

I have arranged my adumbrated notes into this volume in hopes that the reader who opens its pages may see the splendor of that time. The ancients sometimes dreamt that they roamed in the land of Hua Xu, where joy was boundless. Whenever I think back to those days, I return to the present in sorrow, as though awakening from a dream of Hua Xu. Therefore I have named this book *A Dream of Hua*.²²

On the pages of *A Dream of Hua* unfolds, indeed, a dreamscape of detached bliss, devoid of poverty and crime, in which people work only to sustain the pleasures of others. A bright haze of prosperity and peace envelops the bustling streets and the crowded shops, creating a space that strongly resembles the transcendental Kaifeng of the famous scroll painting "Upstream during the Third Moon" (*Qingming shang he tu*).²³ Through these ephemeral alleys winds a generic wedding sequence of prodigious gifts, decorated carriages, and colorful ceremonies:

When the bride descended from the carriage, there would be a yinyang expert with a basket full of grains, beans, coins, fruits, herbs, and shoots, which he would toss toward the gate while reciting spells, and small children would scramble for them. This was called "Scattering Grains and Beans." It was commonly said to exorcise the Black Goat and other such baleful deities. When the bride alighted from her carriage or sedan chair, she had to step onto a strip of cloth or a mat. She could not tread the ground. Someone would walk backward holding up a mirror, leading the bride to the place where she had to step over a saddle, across herbs, and over a balance. Then she would enter a room in whose center a curtain was suspended. This was called "Sitting under the Empty Curtain." Or she would immediately be led into the bedroom and be seated on the bed. This was also known as "Sitting on Wealth and Nobility." The women and girls who had accompanied her would retire after three quick cups of wine. This was called "the Running Send-off."²⁴

As innocent bits of folklore, evil deities are powerless to affect the oblivious, brilliant ceremonies of enchanted memory. The picturesque series of named acts illuminate briefly the streets and buildings of a

lost city, as do the names of gates, avenues, shops, dishes, and entertainers in other sections of *A Dream of Hua*.²⁵ Like those other sections, the wedding sequence is “stunning for its extremely specific detail and for its lack of comprehensiveness.”²⁶ Although it accommodates small variations (differences in expenditure, a carriage or a sedan chair, a strip of cotton or a mat), it makes no mention of the pertinence of social distinctions or the tremendous regional variety of the transient official population. The time, space, and bodies of these generic ceremonies are the carefree youth, the prosperous capital, and the nameless grooms and brides of the author’s blurred, nostalgic memory.

The cultural geography of generic convention allows regional difference to be written only as a negative sign.²⁷ The learned brush and the lettered page place author and reader at the center of imperial civilization whence local customs must always appear marginal and incomprehensible. Even *A Dream of Hua*, an unconventional text by an unskilled author, does not attempt a comprehensive description of the practical space and time of Kaifeng. Instead, it recollects unique and irreplaceable aspects of a remote city, in implied contrast with the present of the new capital at Hangzhou. The scholarly, cumulative nature of the writing of local customs, moreover, further increases the distance between the written center and the vernacular margins. Notebooks, local gazetteers, and even travel diaries often comprise unidentified layers of older texts on whose authority the writer silently relies. In his entry on Liao wedding practices, for example, Zhou Qufei merely inserts a few phrases into a passage copied from Fan Chengda’s *Records of a Forester at Guibai* (*Guibai yuheng zhi*, 1175), a work that was itself largely the product of “Schreibtischarbeit.”²⁸ The writing of local customs, in other words, reduces wedding ritual to a function of the universalist practice of the text. The historian must stand with the author in the ordered landscape of classical prose. The passages translated above outline the dim, receding contours of the limits of historical knowledge, beyond which stretch unknown, unknowable cultures of local practice.

Local practice cannot be written, since the standardized genres and universalist discourses that inform classical writing can accommodate neither its locality nor its practicality.²⁹ Only when a written narrative accords with the universalist notions of time, space, bodies, and text of the genre and the discourse in which it is inscribed, does it point toward an historical performance, namely the refiguring performance in reading or in ritual of those prefigured universalist notions, mediated

by the inscribed configuration of the ritual narrative.³⁰ Ritual manuals, engagement letters and wedding poems, calendars and almanacs, and legal codes and verdicts all place their grooms and brides within the time, space, and text of encompassing discursive formations: the symmetrical, centered, porous time and space of exegetical discourse, where the groom and the bride merge with sacred antiquity; the linear time and space of literary discourse, where the written bodies of the groom and the bride proceed through an anterior, metaphorical time and space; the cyclical time and space of cosmological discourse, in which calculations and diagrams chart a safe path for the liminal groom and bride through liminal time and space; and the imperial time and space of legal discourse, in which codes and verdicts carefully inscribe the groom and the bride into a transparent hierarchy of imperial subjects.³¹ Only when writing is a ritual act or when the text is a ritual object—in ritual manuals, in wedding correspondence, and in cosmological calculation—is the text part of the refiguration of time, space, and bodies through the performance (in body or in mind) of wedding ritual, and is the text therefore an historical trace of the ritual practice of weddings. Legal codes and verdicts are traces of the ritual practice of imperial government, whose order the inscription of weddings aims to perpetuate. In the geographical discourse of local customs, writing disperses ritual practice into a series of meaningless, incomprehensible vignettes.

The text, however, cannot determine the refiguration of time, space, bodies, and writing in the reading or performance of inscribed ritual narratives. The simultaneity and material polysemy of ritual practice, moreover, allows a convergence of discursive formations in ritual time and space that remain strictly segregated in the time and space of classical writing.³² In the material remains of joint burial (conclusion), sometimes traces of archaic ritual, literary display, and cosmological calculation converge under the shared motifs of filial devotion, reproduction, and immortality. The reunification of the gendered, ritualized bodies of deceased spouses in the ritualized time and space of the tomb bears explicit parallels to wedding ritual. It is therefore possible that archaic ceremonies, literary display, and cosmological calculation converged in the ritual practice of weddings as they do in the material remains of joint burial. But the sense of ritual that coordinated these incommensurable notions of time, space, bodies, and writing in satisfactory, individual wedding rites has been irretrievably lost.

THE PRACTICE OF THE ACADEMIC TEXT:
THE WRITING OF WEDDINGS IN MODERN
AND POSTMODERN HISTORY

Historical studies published in Mainland China, Taiwan, and the United States disregard the multiplicity of time, space, bodies, and writing in ritual narratives of the Middle Period, and instead inscribe Middle-Period weddings and marriage in the linear time and space of modernity. As heirs to eighteenth-century Enlightenment rationalism and nineteenth-century historicism, these studies assume a discontinuity between the modern present and the unenlightened past, between the discerning eye of the knowing scholar and the performing body of the unconscious native. Since only the modern scholar is cognizant of the universal truths that underlay the events of the past (whether it be the truth of historical materialism, of psychoanalysis, of medical science, or of structuralist anthropology), Middle-Period texts dissolve into a mass of lifeless, unresisting data, to be gathered by the thick-soled historian across the craggy generic boundaries and rough discursive formations of expansive centuries, then to be labeled at the learned desk according to their true, enduring scientific categories.³³ The untenable assumptions about text and ritual that inform the resulting studies of Middle-Period weddings and marriage have passed unnoticed only because their historical and ritual narratives conform to widely shared modern notions of time, space, bodies, and text. The common sense of the historian produces a history that the reader recognizes as lively and real. In fact, the native's unconscious is the historian's own, and the obliviousness to the practice of the historical text rehearses the historian's obliviousness to the practice of academic writing.³⁴ The severance of the present from the past forecloses the unrealized "potentialities of the present" opened up by the historical text, and condemns the historian to solipsist homologies that are both invalid and uninteresting.³⁵

Few books and articles published in Mainland China and Taiwan are dedicated in their entirety to Middle-Period wedding ritual.³⁶ Most discussions of Middle-Period weddings are embedded in more encompassing studies of the history of *hunyin*, a binome whose meaning scholars in the early twentieth century expanded from its classical denotation of wedding ritual to marriage in the broadest sense: marriage patterns, wedding practices, and marital relations, with connotations of family organization, concubinage, chastity, and divorce.

Historical monographs published during the 1920s and 1930s provided the Republic of China, the young nation-state, with a past that befit its modern present, inscribed in newly acquired subject positions such as women, family, nation, and China, and in an unfamiliar academic discourse of shifting neologisms.³⁷ Lewis Henry Morgan's (1818–1881) *Ancient Society* (1877) afforded Republican historians a universal, scientific narrative of the linear development of marital practices by which they could measure the historical progress of China toward its recent enlightenment—from the promiscuous matriliney during the stage of savagery, through the patrilineal monogamy that defines the stage of civilization, to the hygienic, scientific practices of romantic love in the blissful present.³⁸ After this first configuration of the Chinese past and its sources according to Morgan's insights, his narrative (and its summary rewrite by Friedrich Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, 1884) has continued to shape studies of *hunyin* in the People's Republic of China and in Taiwan.³⁹

The universal, linear narrative of *hunyin* creates a predetermined history that can be read through the transparent sources:

When we uncoil the long scroll that depicts Chinese marriage customs through history, all kinds of marriage patterns appear in their manifold curious and wondrous shapes. Different concepts of marriage assert themselves in their multifariousness, and all manner of wedding customs display their radiant splendor and endless variations. If we direct our penetrating gaze to see through the historical ideas behind marriage customs and to reveal their deepest layers of meaning and their profound mysteries, then we may realize that traditional Chinese marriage customs are like a prism, refracting the motley rainbow of traditional Chinese culture and providing us with a profound historical enlightenment.⁴⁰

The historical text has no real existence. Under the historian's gaze it disintegrates into a collection of data (*cailiao*, *ziliao*) that are held together only by the historian's preconceived framework, which also gives them meaning. The historian recognizes neither wedding rites nor the sources nor his own writing as works of discourse. Texts preserve data of wedding ceremonies that reflect (*fanying*) objective, universal developments, and these the historian dutifully transcribes in objective, universal categories.

Just as objectivist linear history collapses writing and ritual performance with the society they refract, it collapses historical time and geographic space. Within the discrete periods defined by universal, objective transitions (social, political, technological), only insignificant regional variations can exist in marital practices.⁴¹ Histories of *hunyin* published in Mainland China and Taiwan therefore either uphold one or two privileged texts as representative of the wedding ceremonies of a particular period, or they invent a generic, composite sequence that merges a number of disparate sources. The privileged texts for the Middle Period are usually Zhu Xi's *Family Rituals* and Meng Yuanlao's *Dream of Hua*. To those historians who hold *Family Rituals* to be representative of the age, the adoption of this text by the Yuan and Ming imperial courts does not mark the acceptance of Zhu Xi's exegetical authority and his claims to sagehood, but the acknowledgment of his abridgment of canonical ritual as a timely means for the perpetuation of feudal oppression.⁴² *A Dream of Hua* appears to derive its historical authority from the rare detail and the illusory realism of its wedding sequence.⁴³ Some historians, misrecognizing discursive difference as social difference, identify, the wedding ceremonies in *Family Rituals* as the ritual practices of the elite, and the wedding ceremonies in *A Dream of Hua* as popular practice.⁴⁴

Where the selection of a privileged text reduces the ritual practice of several centuries to the misconstrued ritual time and space of one or two texts, composite narratives devise sequences of ceremonies entirely divorced from historical time and space, as well as from inscribed ritual time and space. In such sequences, faceless grooms and anonymous brides float through a nondescript landscape of selfsame centuries, performing disjointed, incomplete, repetitive ceremonies (painted with bright, false colors). The generic, composite bride may thus be submitted to Scattering the Curtain in the bedroom before having entered the groom's compound (due to the careless historian's equation of Scattering the Curtain [*sa zhang*] with Scattering Grains and Beans [*sa gudou*]) or pay her first visit to the groom's ancestral temple both during and after the wedding (maintaining the incompatible ceremonies of Bowing to the Spirits of the Ancestors [*bai xianling*, or *bai tang*] and Visit to the Temple [*miao jian*]). The sole meaning of such composite sequences lies in their instantiation of certain social or political conditions that the historian has designated as defining of the age.⁴⁵

American historians of the Middle Period have been critical of the shortcomings of Chinese scholarship on their subject, but they have

often failed to notice that these shortcomings derive from structuralist assumptions not very different from their own. Although social history generally lacks the overt teleology of historical materialism, its notion of the social is conceived in similarly objectivist terms. In the early pages of their articles and monographs, social historians of the Middle Period consistently introduce universalist concepts (women, education, social mobility, bureaucracy, and so forth) to create a three-dimensional past that operates according to contemporary notions of psychology and social behavior, and that precedes the sources. Middle-Period texts are reduced to a reflection of this preconceived past. Between the modern present and its universalist past, the texts are prevented from creating meanings and histories of their own.

In one important American monograph on Song-dynasty marriage, for example, it is not the universal progress of technological development that abolishes historical discourse, but certain timeless patterns of structuralist anthropology. Its aggregate wedding ceremony, staged as a rite of passage, combines fragments from eleventh- and twelfth-century ritual manuals, the twelfth-century *Dream of Hua*, fourteenth-century writing manuals, and a Ming-dynasty short story set in Song times, and other texts, in a sequence that disregards the ritual narrative of each of its sources.⁴⁶ The silent, solemn bride of *Family Rituals* transforms into the fiery, fictional heroine of a fifteenth-century tale, who then finds herself carried in a sedan chair through nameless streets in Northern Song Kaifeng, to change at the groom's gate into a nervous young woman who finds "opportunities to express reluctance and resistance" in a fourteenth-century song cycle of which she is in fact a lifeless, two-dimensional creation.⁴⁷ Although the monograph is partial to the linear time and space of literary discourse, it eliminates the compelling sexual drive of the narrative of public consummation by sending the groom to fetch the bride at her house (in the manner of *Family Rituals*) and by placing him next to the bride at the family altar upon her arrival at his house (combining Sima Guang's *Letters and Ceremonies* with *A Dream of Hua* and a Yuan-dynasty writing manual), instead of allowing them to meet for the first time in the bedroom. The removal of the ceremonies from the ritual time and space of the text severs them from historical time and space, and yields an exercise in timeless structuralism, masked by the beguiling realism of colorful data.⁴⁸

The prefigured linearity of modernity, whether of the historical materialism of Chinese scholars or the structuralist social history of

American historians, precludes the multiplicity of time, space, bodies, and text configured in Middle-Period ritual narratives. The presumption of universalist, objectivist truth renders both text and ritual transparent, and places the modern scholar's own writing outside history. This denial of discourse in both the past and the present deceives modern scholars into accepting any text that appears to converge with their preconceptions as literal truth, and to dismiss any unfitting text as corrupt, contrived, or irrelevant. They misrecognize the polemic distinction between ritual (*li*) and custom (*su*) as a real, social difference between elite and popular practice; inflate with ghoulish life the surface narratives of nuptial songs and *A Dream of Hua*; and in general neglect real traces of ritual practice, such as wedding correspondence and cosmological calculations, for the benefit of those texts in which the writer stands (or, rather, is believed to stand) at a descriptive remove from ritual practice. Because the cultural geography of local customs coincides perfectly with nineteenth-century notions of time, space, bodies, and writing, the historical materialist and the social historian accept its uneven, polemic observations as fact. Much like the writer of local customs, the modern scholar assumes that the advanced present and the modern world are separated from backward regions and periods in both space and time, and that this remove affords the modern the right to inscribe the inferior bodies that populate those remote spaces and times into their linear narratives of progress.⁴⁹ Like the writer of local customs, the modern scholar presses foreign ceremonies into an ill-fitting, preconceived ritual narrative that reduces them to exotic, amusing, meaningless signs of difference.

The recognition of writing as a ritual practice and of text as a ritual object re-establishes the organic connection between ritual and history, and between the past and the present. The configuration of prefigured time, space, bodies, and text in ritual narratives has created an enduring trace of discursive practice that ever allows the reader to refigure its living contents in the present. It is as such a living trace of historical practice that the text discloses the past. The historian may follow this trace, from a modern typeset edition or a facsimile reprint or a manuscript, through the shifting corpora created by transmission, to the brush and the hand that wrote the text, in a distinct historical time and space, in a determinate genre and discourse.⁵⁰ The refiguration of the "world of the text" requires a critical, dialectical, reflexive hermeneutics in which the coherence of the trace, not the presumption of the reader, guides explanation and interpretation. Only thus does the reader

allow the unfolding of the “worlds in front of the text” and the unrealized “potentialities of the present.”⁵¹ This results, not in a more truthful rendition of Middle-Period wedding ceremonies, but in a narrative description of fragmented discourses, in which authors and texts (not grooms and brides) create ritual time, space, and bodies that have been preserved, misread, edited, and obliterated by later generations.⁵² The preservation of this multiplicity of narratives and discourses in a historical monograph of course befits the postmodern mood, with its rejection of the modern confidence in linear progress and singular truth. But this postmodern reading is founded on a solid hermeneutics and validated by an effective heuristics, as historical materialism and social history are not.⁵³

The material remains of joint burial are merely a different kind of trace of historical practice.⁵⁴ The incomplete evidence of burial practices, the fragmented context of the landscape, and the selective destruction of tombs by natural decay, grave robbers, and archaeologists require a critical, reflexive, dialectical hermeneutics not essentially different from that of the historian, who places incomplete texts in fragmented discursive formations that have been diminished by selective transmission.⁵⁵ Yet the “simpler but more ambiguous language” of material culture distinguishes artifacts from documents.⁵⁶ The mute simultaneity and the silent ambiguity of architecture, stone carvings, murals, grave goods, and human remains allow a juxtaposition of incompatible notions of time, space, bodies, and writing that the determinate text precludes. This convergence of incommensurable discourses in the ritual time and space of the tomb opens up the conceptual possibility of a similar convergence of discourses in the ritual time and space of weddings—but only as prefigured discourses, not as configured texts. The convergence of discourses in the tomb marks the practical limitations of the classical text; it does not legitimate the conjecture of composite ritual narratives.⁵⁷ The material remains of joint burial and the inscribed narratives of transmitted texts represent different kinds of historical fragments of ritual practice: the configuration of time, space, bodies, and writing in tombs is individual and ambiguous but incomplete, and in the end only similar, not identical, to wedding ritual; the configuration of time, space, bodies, and writing in texts is fuller and more explicit, but also determinate and generic. Together, these material and written traces, fragmented and incomplete, allude to individual configurations of prefigured time, space, bodies, and text in the ritual practice of Middle-Period weddings,

informed by a sense of ritual that was embodied, unwritten, unwritable, and irretrievably lost.⁵⁸

This book presents an attempt to write Middle-Period weddings in American academic prose without rupturing the organic connection between the present and the past. Each chapter places wedding ritual within a distinct discursive formation and describes the writing of weddings within that discursive formation as it developed across the centuries, from its origins through its disintegration, or from one founding text to another. The narrative, the ritual theory, the language, and even the metaphors of each chapter accord as much as possible with the sources as written, printed, and transmitted. This is a history of the writing of weddings: a history of writing as cultural practice, of conventional genres and encompassing discourses, of the obliteration of manuscripts by generic printed texts, of the transforming corpora created by the process of transmission, and of the joyful retrieval of living traces of the past in the present. Perhaps more elegant literary forms exist that could preserve the discourses of the past, but the disjointed chapters of this book, with their disjointed times and spaces, in a pleasing way point to another disjunction, namely the remove between Middle-Period texts and the Western historiographical tradition. The organic connection that exists between Western historiography and its sources—the cumulative canon of Herodotus and Livy, Gregory of Tours and Bede, Voltaire and Gibbon, Tocqueville and Carlyle, extending across the spatial and temporal, religious and philosophical rifts between kingdoms and calendars—does not exist between Western historiography and Middle-Period texts.⁵⁹ This divide between the received narratives of Western history and literature and the uncompliant discourses of Middle-Period texts requires a reconsideration of modes of emplotment, and that is what this book attempts.⁶⁰

Texts connect the present to the past, their words enduring traces of historical practice. He who “understands words” may hope to understand the “others” who wrote those words—“as though meeting face to face” across the centuries, as Li Jike (fl. 1158) imagines in his reading of that final phrase of *The Analects* (*Lunyu*).⁶¹ Yet in the end it is not the reader who explains the text, but the text that illumines the reader, as it unfolds in front of the page the proposed worlds of the text and the unrealized potentialities of the present.

Chapter One

Ritual Manuals

Exegetical Hermeneutics and the Re-Embodiment of Antiquity

Often I bewail the difficulty of *Ceremonies and Rites* [*Yili*]. And but few are those who practice its injunctions today. Transmissions of ancient practice have grown apart, so that one cannot investigate how the rituals of antiquity might be restored. Today, truly, we lack all means to put *Ceremonies and Rites* to use. Yet it contains in crude form the structures laid down by King Wen and the Duke of Zhou. . . . How regrettable! that I did not live to see those times, advancing and retreating, bowing and yielding in their midst. Alas! Such boundless sorrow!

—Han Yu (768–824 CE)¹

For half my life, I studied in different places, reading *Ceremonies and Rites* till late at night. After so many years of immersion, I suddenly experienced a feeling of discovery. Now, every time I open a section, it is as if in my heart-mind, inside my eyes, I can actually see the ancients, across more than a thousand years, and it is as if I bow, yield, and turn in their midst. Many a time I must have waved my arms and stamped my feet in joy without knowing it.

—Ao Jigong (1301)²

In 726, four years after Emperor Xuanzong (r. 712–756) of the Tang dynasty had ordered the compilation of a new ritual code, Secretarial Receptionist Wang Yan proposed to edit the *Record of Ritual* (*Liji*) into a contemporary protocol in which current precedent would replace arcane passages. Zhang Yue (667–730), Right Aide at the Academy of Scholarly Worthies, protested this proposal: “The *Record of Ritual* was compiled during the Han dynasty and has been transmitted across the centuries as an unassailable scripture. Today we stand far removed from

the sages of antiquity, and I am afraid that it will be impossible to inflict such alterations.” Instead, Zhang Yue proposed to return to *Rites of the Zhenguan Period* (*Zhenguan li* or *Da Tang yili*, 637) and *Rites of the Xianqing Period* (*Xianqing li*, 658), and to reopen based on those protocols the debate about the relationship between current precedent and ancient ritual. The emperor endorsed Zhang Yue’s proposal.³

Rites of the Kaiyuan Period of the Great Tang (*Da Tang Kaiyuan li*), completed in 732, merged imperial precedent with canonical ritual in seamless ritual narratives. The new ceremonies designed by the Academy of Scholarly Worthies overlay the palace grounds and imperial bodies with the spaces and choreographies of ancient ritual scripture, thus combining the authority of the canon with the detailed protocol of the imperial court. Although subsequent generations of ritual specialists emended parts of *Rites of the Kaiyuan Period*, they honored its hermeneutical principles. The ritual codes compiled in the tenth and eleventh centuries at the Song imperial court still bore a significant resemblance to the Kaiyuan code.⁴

But in 1078, Chen Xiang (1017–1080) completed a revision of imperial sacrificial rites in which he denounced his predecessors’ attempts at merging canon and precedent:

Your humble servant Chen and his fellow compilers of *Detailed Investigations into the Rites and Texts of the Imperial Altars and Temples* [*Xiangding jiaomiao liwen*] observe: The ceremonies of the seasonal offerings to the illustrious spirits at the Altar of Heaven and the sacrifices to the imperial ancestors at court in outline all follow Tang ritual. Even the placement of spirit tablets on the altar, the imperial conveyances, and the trappings of the ceremonial guard are devised according to a combination of precedents from different eras. When one compares these ceremonies to the rituals of the ancient kings, the differences are immediately apparent. Moreover, the insistence on the combination of precedents from different eras has resulted in countless conflicts, both in the words used and in the emotions conveyed. For a long time, ritual specialists have transmitted protocol with only minor, insubstantial changes, and those who insisted on reform relied entirely on the practices of their own day.⁵

Chen Xiang wrote his denunciation of ritual precedent in a time when scholars were gaining confidence in their ability to recover ancient

ritual. The ancients who had seemed forbiddingly remote to Zhang Yue and Han Yu in the eighth century, to eleventh-century scholars had become a visible, tangible presence. Since the canon had been first committed to print in 953, its texts had become available to a growing community of scholars.⁶ This community gathered not only in bookshops, libraries, and academies, but it existed in the written and printed space of letters and books. Into this printed space Ouyang Xiu (1007–1072) introduced in 1063 his *Record of Collecting Antiquities* (*Jigu lu*), an annotated collection of stone inscriptions he had gathered over several decades. A few years later, Ouyang Xiu's friend Liu Chang (1019–1068) ordered the contours of eleven ancient bronze vessels engraved in stone and circulated rubbings from these engravings under the title *Record of Pre-Qin Vessels* (*Xian-Qin guqi ji*).⁷

The works of Ouyang Xiu and Liu Chang inspired an enthusiastic following among their contemporaries, who began collecting and reproducing inscriptions and vessels with abandon. The reproductions made private collections accessible to remote scholars. In this space of paper and ink, a community of epigraphists and archaeologists assisted one another in deciphering inscriptions and classifying vessels, comparing items from different collections, and corroborating their surmises with canonical citations. Within a few decades, Song scholars identified the names and ritual functions of all types of ancient bronze vessels and acquired a proficiency in reading and writing ancient script forms.

The cauldrons and beakers created a connection between Song literati and the ancients that was both historical and timeless. The patinated vessels found on riverbanks and in ancient burial grounds had stood in distant times on royal altars and in noble temples. But the vessels also held a universal truth, an understanding of cosmic patterns that had informed the ritual, music, institutions, and social structure of antiquity and that could not be expressed in words. As Fan Zhen (1008–1088) memorialized in 1037, in a debate about musical reform, “Music is harmonic *qi*. Harmonic *qi* is conveyed by sound, and sound originates in formlessness. Therefore the ancients transmitted the system of sound by means of concrete objects, that men in later times might study them.”⁸

Ancient bronze vessels and musical instruments instantiated a cosmic order that the ancients embodied in ritual performance. Ritual allowed man to conform to the natural order and to attain his proper place in society and the cosmos. Culture had thus merged with nature

in ancient civilization, in a perfect, lasting order. But whereas vessels had survived intact across the millennia to convey timeless truths through their enduring proportions, ritual had been imperfectly inscribed, in texts that subsequently had suffered fragmentation, neglect, and corruption at the hands of careless scholars. In his preface to the monograph on ritual and music in the *New History of the Tang*, published around the same time as his *Record of Collecting Antiquities*, Ouyang Xiu sets forth this degeneration of ritual from a pervasive, inherent order to a bounded, meaningless practice:

Until the Three Dynasties, order issued from one source, and ritual and music pervaded the realm. But since the Three Dynasties, order has derived from two sources, and ritual and music have become mere words.

In antiquity, halls and carriages served as dwellings, robes and caps as clothes, ewers and beakers as vessels, and metal bells, stone drums, silk strings, and bamboo flutes as musical instruments. With these, the ancients approached their altars and temples, surveyed the court, and served the spirits, and thus instilled order among the people. . . . Every single act of the common people issued from ritual. The instillment in the people of filiality and compassion, friendship and brotherliness, loyalty and trust, and humaneness and duty could therefore simply proceed through their dwellings, actions, clothing, and food. Ritual inhered in their every action, morning and night. This is what I mean when I write "order issued from one source, and ritual and music pervaded the realm." . . .

After the Three Dynasties had come to naught, the Qin dynasty perverted the legacy of antiquity, and all those who possessed the realm since referred to the Qin, whether in the matter of emperor and officials, nomenclature and rank, imperial institutions, or the structure of palaces, carriages, clothing, and vessels. . . . The ritual and music of the Three Dynasties, their names and implements, were carefully stored away by officials, to be produced periodically for use at the altars and temples and at court, and one would say, "This is ritual. Here-with we instruct the people." This is what I mean by "order derives from two sources, and ritual and music are mere words."⁹

In order to retrieve the incorporated knowledge of the ancients, to recreate the permanently ritualized bodies of antiquity, to realign