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1500-1700*

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A Review of *Sanctity and Self-Inflicted Violence in Chinese Religions, 1500-1700*

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Sanctity and Self-Inflicted Violence in Chinese Religions, 1500-1700. By Jimmy Yu. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, xiv + 272 pages, ISBN 978-0-19-984490 (paperback), \$29.95.

This grew out of Jimmy Yu's Ph.D. dissertation titled, "Bodies and Self-Inflicted Violence in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century China," which was completed under the supervision of Stephen Teiser in the Department of Religion at Princeton University in 2008. The book discusses a wide range of practices of sanctioned violence towards the self in late imperial China. Although focusing on the late Ming and early Qing eras, thus highlighting one of the most vital periods in Chinese intellectual and cultural life, this well-researched and finely argued treatise does not confine itself to that age, but provides a rich and nuanced contextualization of the entire history of practices discussed. One of the outstanding features of the book, is that it does not confine itself either to a specific religious tradition or to a sole practice of violence directed towards the self. Rather, it investigates a wide array of culturally sanctioned practices by applying the new category of "self-

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inflicted violence,” and it tries to highlight how and why actors engaged in them. The discussion brings together for the first time diverse practices such as the writing of texts with one's own blood; cutting flesh from one's body to feed one's ailing parents; female chastity suicide; and exposing of the body to the sun, or burning oneself in order to pray for rain. It is this wide and limit-breaking approach beyond boundaries of religious affiliation or intellectual tradition which provides important material on religious, cultural, political, and moral life in late imperial China, as well offering refreshing insights into the understanding of the “body” and its power to forcefully negotiate cultural values.

The book is comprised of six chapters, which are well written and intelligible for specialists and casual readers alike. In the introduction, Jimmy Yu provides an outline of the topics of his study, discusses their significance, and reflects upon methodological issues such as questions of performance, action, and the body or “self.” Although the various practices discussed in this book have been studied independently by previous scholars, Yu is the first to provide a unified, comparative study of them by applying the category of “self-inflicted violence” (9f.). This theory-driven approach is one of the strengths of the book because it enables us to see various forms of violence directed to the self as one phenomenon, without limiting oneself to the narrow boundaries of the religious or intellectual traditions emphasized in previous scholarship.

The power of self-inflicted violence as a symbolic tool and a performative act lies in its acceptance by the people as a concrete assertion of sanctity (13). According to the logic of the pre-modern Chinese concept of a “moral and sympathetic universe,” heaven and the gods are expected to respond to sincere and moral actions. Therefore, acts of self-inflicted violence, carried out from sincere moral convictions, were understood to be more than merely symbolic acts; they were performative acts as well. “Sanctity,” the second important theoretical concept in Yu's study, is understood as a state of subordinating oneself to cultural values through “embodying” these

values in one's act (11ff.). Those who performed self-inflicted violence did so to demonstrate cultural and moral values to their utmost, to and thereby negotiate their own social and moral statuses. It is important to keep in mind that the practices discussed in this book were not at all marginal, insignificant, or aberrant phenomena in their times. Rather, these practices were located at the center of society, publicly visible, and because of their demonstration of culturally shared values, were also highly intelligible to those who witnessed them. The state in which one successfully demonstrates these values is labeled “sanctity” by Yu. In his discussion of the linguistic markers of sanctity used in various primary sources—sagehood (*sheng*), numinous efficacy (*ling*), and effective power (*de*)—Yu offers a refreshing look at emic concepts that usually have been portrayed as opposite pairs similar to “official” vs. “popular” or “state” vs. “local” in modern scholarship (12f., 117).

Speaking theoretically, self-inflicted violence was a means to literally “embody” certain values. This idea, which I find highly plausible, is essential for understanding the workings of actual religious practice. Furthermore, it helps us understand why and how certain prescriptive norms within a given religious or intellectual tradition are disobeyed in order to pursue certain other values of the same tradition. Why did Buddhist masters burn themselves despite the fact that it had been proscribed by the *Vinaya* and other monastic codes? Why did filial sons slice flesh from their body in order to feed their ailing parents although the body was considered a gift from their parents, which, according to the Confucian classics, should not be harmed under any circumstances? Yu provides interesting and intriguing insights into these and similar questions, and shows once more how the overemphasis on prescriptive norms evident in previous scholarship has biased our understanding of Chinese society in the pre-modern period.

Chapter one (23-36) provides background on the period under discussion (i.e., the late Ming and early Qing eras), and tells why this era witnessed so many examples of self-inflicted violence. Although these

practices were not invented in this era, it was during this time of unprecedented social and economic transformations that self-inflicted violence became a part of mainstream culture. Chapter two (37-61) is dedicated to “blood-writing,” which refers to the practice of writing texts (primarily Buddhist texts) with one's own blood. Whereas previous scholarship has located this practice solely within the Buddhist tradition, Yu persuasively argues that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries blood-writing was not confined to Buddhist monastics. On the contrary, all kinds of actors made use of this practice for various reasons. For example, blood-writing served as “a graphic way to demonstrate filial piety, sincerity, and loyalty,” especially in the political field (60).

In chapter three (62-88), Jimmy Yu shows how and why filial sons sliced flesh from their body to use as medicine to feed their ailing parents. The phenomenon of “anthropophagy” is particularly insightful because it helps to do away with the perceived “official” Confucian axiom of the body as a gift from one's parents that should not be harmed. Chapter four (89-114) discusses female self-mutilation and suicide done in the name of chastity in order to resist rape and remarriage. Yu argues that these practices may have been the only way for widows and young women to negotiate their social position in times of threat. As extreme examples, such “chastity suicides” can be understood as a last resort that transforms one into an unforgiving revenant who would avenge herself on those who wronged her. The last main chapter (115-139) is dedicated to the practice of exposing oneself to the blazing sun or burning oneself in order to pray for rain. The origin of these practices is traced back to the strategies of female shamans and the sage kings of antiquity. By emulating their altruistic examples of self-immolation, later performers became objects of sanctity and were thereby regarded as “thaumaturgists”—people who could affect both the visible and the invisible worlds with their actions (117f.). Yu demonstrates that these people were not located at the margins of society, but in the very mainstream of it—as it is exemplified by the

various kings, officials, and female shamans who engaged in these practices in the late imperial era.

Despite the impressive and persuasive character of this book, I have two minor reservations about it, which concern methodological issues. First, one might wonder why the term “asceticism” is not used throughout the book, as the practices described suggest to one that they be perceived by that term. Yu argues that this word carries too much connection to “Western” religious traditions, which is why he does not employ it. Furthermore, Yu thinks of renunciation of the world as the most striking feature of “Western” asceticism, but he perceives this to be absent in China (9ff.). As a compromise, Yu suggests use of the term “painful austerities” to refer to some of the practices discussed in the book (50f.). Unfortunately, Yu does not take into account Max Weber's famous discussion of “inner-worldly asceticism” as a form of asceticism practiced in this world and in everyday life that does not require “moving to the desert” (10). One could also theorize about ascetic practices not only in terms of “spatial” aims (another world or sphere of reality)—as Yu does—but also in terms of “temporal” goals—deprivations underwent now in order to gain something in the future. I do not mean to replace Yu's terminology here, but I am convinced that a discussion of “asceticism” could turn out to be fruitful for his study. Secondly, Yu's concept of “sanctity” as a socially constructed category in which certain powers and abilities are attributed to someone also resembles another Weberian concept—“charisma.” In very much the same manner, the study could have benefited from taking this concept into account.

The book provides Chinese characters in their first appearance in the text but also has a character glossary, which makes it easy for readers of Chinese to identify and understand the *termini technici* as well as names and book titles. Together, the six chapters, introduction, and conclusion come to only 144 pages, which may appear rather short for a monograph. But this perceived shortness might be due to the use of

endnotes instead of footnotes, and these run to sixty-one pages. Regardless of its length, this book successfully deals with a wide array of topics. Besides the minor methodological issues discussed above, Jimmy Yu's book is recommended without any reservation to both specialists in the field and for casual readers interested in the working of actual religious practice.