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Remodeling Confucian Wedding Rituals to Address  
China's Youth Culture Today: A Case of Using the  
Classics to Respond to Recalcitrant Problems  
**儒家婚禮之重構與現今中國青年文化：  
援引經典以回應棘手問題的案例<sup>§</sup>**

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## Abstract

In response to social and cultural problems in the wake of corrosive influences arising from the Cultural Revolution and Western individualism, two intellectuals in China have offered different versions of wedding rituals based upon the Confucian Classics in order to restore ritual as a powerful tool for individual, family, social and national renewal. Zhu Jieren 朱杰人, former director and current CEO of East China Normal University Press, planned a "modern version" of the wedding ceremony from *Zhu Xi's Family Rituals* (朱子家禮) for his son's ceremony in Shanghai on December 5, 2009. Zhang Xianglong 張祥龍, a philosophy professor at Peking University in Beijing, orchestrated a more antique Confucian wedding for his son in Beijing on June 20, 2010. Both made some accommodations to modern realities and used the same core quotations from the ancient ritual classics; moreover, both public intellectuals are pursuing reform from the grassroots of society and thus differ significantly from the state's approaches to reviving tradition and strengthening the Chinese family. In addition to explaining why each intellectual undertook his Confucian wedding project, we will explore why conservative proponents of "restoring antiquity" have criticized the Zhu wedding and lauded the Zhang wedding. Our interviews with participants reveal how profoundly moved the young couples were by the traditional ceremonies; thus, both Zhu and Zhang succeeded in giving new life to classical rites and leading participants to reconnect to traditional aesthetics and values.

## 摘要

鑑於文化大革命與西方個人主義的負面影響，為回應社會及文化問題，兩位中國知識分子分別根據儒家經典以設計結婚儀式，意欲藉由恢復古禮，達成個人、家庭、社會、國家的更新。華東師範大學出版社的社長朱杰人，其子於二〇〇九年十二月五日在上海完婚，儀式仿《朱子家禮》而予以「現代化」。北京大學哲學系教授張祥龍則在二〇一〇年六月二十日，為其子舉辦了一場更加復古的儒家式婚禮。為適應現況而做出調整的同時，兩人均援引相同的經典段落作為儀式依據，更有甚者，這兩位公共知識分子乃是於社會基層追求改革，與國家式的恢復傳統和強化家庭組織的宣傳大異其趣。除了解釋兩人為何採用儒家式的婚禮之外，本文進而探討為何復古派中的保守分子，對朱家婚禮持批判態度，對張家卻讚賞有加。透過和與會者的訪談，我們瞭解到新人們如何深為傳統儀式感動；因此，朱、張二位都成功地賦予古禮以新生命，並讓參加者領略到傳統美學和價值。

Responding to the conference's invitation to discuss the relevance of the Classics to seemingly recalcitrant problems in contemporary society, we would like to relate some of our research on efforts to revive the ritual classics, particularly the wedding ceremony. Many Chinese intellectuals see a crisis arising from both the twentieth-century cultural revolutions against Confucian values and the impact of Western customs on contemporary Chinese society. In response, several Confucian intellectuals in recent years have adjusted classical wedding rituals to contemporary society in an effort to attract Chinese youth back to Confucianism and thus to traditional rites and values. Of course, moralists in both China and the West perennially promote traditional weddings, not only to restrain what they perceived as socially and sexually deviant behavior, but also to direct youth into publically and legally recognized relationships. For instance, while serving as a local official, Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200) petitioned his superiors to enforce the marriage ceremony and issued proclamations exhorting cohabiting couples to formally marry.<sup>1</sup> In the guidebook, *Zhu Xi's Family Rituals* (*Zhuzi jiali* 朱子家禮), which is customarily (but not universally) ascribed to Zhu Xi, he revised and updated ancient rites to make them more practical and effective in an effort to strengthen the vitality of Confucianism through the institution of the family. Following his ancestor's example, Zhu Jieren 朱杰人 now seeks to further adapt Confucian family rituals to today's society in an attempt to rebuild the Confucian foundation of the family. Zhu Jieren is the leading public intellectual within the World Chu (Zhu) Family Association (*Shijie Zhushi lianhehui* 世界朱氏聯合會) and the one most dedicated to this cultural reform project. As a specialist on ancient texts and the director of East China Normal University Press, Zhu Jieren is particularly mindful of the disjuncture between ancient classics and modern society in Shanghai. His current project, providing a "modern version" (*xiandai ban* 現代版) of rituals from *Zhu Xi's Family Rituals*, arises from his articulated conviction that not only Confucianism,

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1 See Ron-guey Chu, "Chu Hsi and Public Instruction," in Wm. Theodore de Bary and John W. Chaffee (eds.), *Neo-Confucian Education: The Formative Stage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 256-257, 264-266.

but also more importantly, China's youth and the Chinese family are in crisis today. We will explore these issues through a summary of some of our findings from Zhu's wedding ceremony for his son in Shanghai on December 5, 2009, and also Peking University philosophy professor Zhang Xianglong's 張祥龍 more antique Confucian wedding for his son in Beijing on June 20, 2010.

Before reporting on these two classical weddings, we would like briefly to offer some context for the effort to revive wedding rituals, because they are being used as a means to redress some problems in contemporary Chinese society. Westerners, especially in the United States, champion using law to affect social change and redress social injustice. Western scholars, following Max Weber (1864-1920), identify the use of ritual, rather than law, as one of the signs of backwardness in the non-West. Drawing in part on such assumptions, many twentieth-century Chinese radically attacked the ritualized society of old, "feudalistic" China. After the iconoclasm of the May Fourth era and the Cultural Revolution, contemporary Confucians are employing a new strategy to bring back ritual as a powerful instrument. In fact, both Zhu Jieren's and Zhang Xianglong's Confucian wedding rituals are part of their larger efforts to reverse the social and cultural damage wrought by the Cultural Revolution.

But it is not just the Cultural Revolution propelling contemporary interest in ancient ritual. At least for Zhu Jieren, gender problems plague contemporary Chinese society—the same problems accompanying late modern capitalism in the United States: prevalent divorce, premarital cohabitation, declining rates of marriage, and couples remaining childless to maximize their independence and career opportunities. After marriage, some Chinese couples "hide" their marital status, in part, to avoid negatively impacting their careers because they may be concerned about lack of support for dual career couples in post-reform Chinese society. Young people are also finding it difficult to find suitable partners, especially as young women delay marriage to pursue education and careers, thus becoming less marriageable, and young men in an increasingly competitive labor

market vie for urban housing, a prerequisite for consideration as an eligible bachelor. "Marriage markets" have arisen in urban public parks, where parents post and survey advertisements in their search for spouses for their adult children. Nonetheless, despite the radical iconoclasm of the twentieth century, and the social instability of market reforms, the family remains an important fixture in the Chinese state's idealized conception of its values; thus, contemporary efforts to reinvigorate the family structure through ancient wedding rites coincide with the Chinese state's legal measures to buttress the family, for example, through recent laws to ensure that adult children visit their aged parents. Such measures may form a part of a larger drive to reinforce the stability of the Chinese state.

In the West, some commentators are inclined to discount the work of New Confucians and *fugu* (復古, restoration of antiquity) proponents. For such critics, cultural revivals merely buttress the (unstable) Chinese state, like the Chinese Nationalist Party's New Life Movement—a floundering, top-down propaganda campaign in the 1930s to bring back Confucian state authority in a modern setting, an effort that can at best be considered "traditionalistic" rather than truly traditional. We counter that there are bottom-up efforts by private individuals to enact ancient tradition through the popularization of Confucian ritual; hence, although the two Confucian weddings under review were designed by urban intellectuals, they envision a wider spectrum of society adopting and adapting their models. As centered on family ritual practice, the Zhu and Zhang weddings strive for a mass audience. Furthermore, we believe the diversity illustrated in the two wedding models is a healthy sign of Confucian potential for regaining its vitality as a lived practice and vital tradition. *Fugu* proponents have criticized the Zhu wedding in Shanghai and praised the Zhang wedding in Beijing, largely because of textual, symbolic, and aesthetic choices that reinforce "traditional" patriarchy in the Zhang wedding or go too far to reinvent it in the Zhu wedding.

## The Zhu and Zhang Weddings

Zhu Jieren champions traditional Chinese family values and explicitly contrasts them to what he perceives as the social ills of the modern West. In his eighteen-minute speech (in lieu of a wedding toast), he criticized Western society for the prevalence of divorce and proclaimed the Zhu family rites as a model of mutual responsibility to encourage enduring affection and respect. Because the Zhu ritual emphasizes families in addition to individuals, Zhu Jieren claimed that it is distinctive from Western weddings. He commented that Western marriages celebrate the sacred union between one man and one woman as individuals, beyond the bounds of outside criticism or policing. He complains that due to this individual freedom, Western couples "can cohabit extramaritally, remain childless, or divorce casually." Zhu Jieren champions Confucian traditions for preserving the family, by—he explicitly states—defending against those "Western ills and the ills of modernization."<sup>2</sup> He thus critiques not only the West, but also those Chinese whom he perceives as following the West without considering what he regards as the larger moral authority of family and society.

By emphasizing Confucian traditional family morals, Zhu Jieren critiques many contemporary trends allowing young urban professionals to hide their marital status in the contemporary workplace. For example, one trend is *luohun* 裸婚, i.e., civil registration without wedding attire or formal ceremony. Because the government's marriage registry is now open on weekends, some couples do not have to excuse themselves from work in order to marry. Another trend is *yinhun* 陰婚, or "hidden marriage," not publically announced to bosses

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2 Zhu Jieren, "Zai erzi Liu Qi hunli de jianghua [Speech at My Son Liu Qi's Wedding] 在兒子朱祁婚禮上的講話," *Zhuzi wenhua* [Master Zhu Culture] 朱子文化, 23 (Jan., 2010), p. 17 and p. 18. In his essay responding to our draft, Zhu Jieren further elaborated on his purposes for producing his modernized version of Zhu Xi's wedding rituals. See his "Zhuji jiali: Cong wenben dao shiyan—yi hunli weilie [Zhu Xi's Family Rituals: From Text to Experiment—Taking the Wedding Ceremony as An Example] 《朱子家禮》：從文本到實驗——以婚禮為例," in Chen Lai 陳來 and Zhu Jieren (eds.), *Renwen yu jiazhi* [Humanities and Values] 人文與價值 (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2011), pp. 211-224.

and colleagues. In a late modern capitalist environment, such couples may feel pressure to remain single in order to advance at work. In contrast, Zhu Jieren wants to promote the social value of marriage by publically celebrating weddings. He emphasizes public celebrations as venues for uniting families, as well as individuals, in marriage; moreover, quoting the *Mencius*, 4A:26, Zhu Jieren highlights the traditional notion that the most unfilial act is not to produce descendants. Thus, he criticizes Chinese young urban elites, who are often portrayed by older generations as wanting to remain childless in order to maintain affluent lifestyles.

Although Zhu Jieren, like many other Chinese, frames such marital trends as a part of the moral decay of contemporary Chinese society, there are also political, institutional and economic factors involved in contributing to these trends. Zhu Jieren admits that Zhu Xi's *zong* 宗 family system (centered on the descent line of the eldest main-line son) has become irrelevant in a country in which most families have at most only one son. Indeed, we might add that young couples may define "family" in terms of their small, three-person households rather than their extended families; thus, the tendency to register for a marriage license, accompanied only by parents, may in fact reflect China's current family structure, in which nuclear families constitute narrow branches that are increasingly dispersed. "Hidden weddings" might largely be a manifestation of this atomization. In addition, social conservatives complain about the pressure some brides' families put on the groom to adopt their surname for the child of the union. However, this practice is rooted in the traditional custom of "the groom marrying in" (*ru zhui* 入贅) and is invigorated by the one-child policy, which has left many families with no other way to fulfill the filial admonition to pass down their surname. Moreover, because of the injunction to bare only one child, there also may be fewer perceived advantages to marrying early, before the completion of one's education or the accumulation of capital. Furthermore, the economic costs of weddings and marriages may encourage some couples to experiment



with new relationship structures. Thus, it may be frugality, rather than opulence, that contributes to some forms of non-traditional relationships in China today.

Within the Zhu family tradition, the wedding ritual offers a means for cultivating personal virtue, filial duty, and civic responsibility and patriotic sentiment. Because Zhu Jieren emphasizes marriage as a union of two families, he defines his family traditions as unique vis-à-vis not only the West, but also contemporary Chinese culture. He cites Zhu Xi's essentially direct quotation from the ancient ritual classics: "Marriage is for the good relations of two surnames that are joined. Above, it allows one to serve the ancestral temple; below, it provides for the continuation of descendants."<sup>3</sup> Extending from this passage, Zhu Jieren asserts that a wedding is an affair of the parents, the extended family, the society, and ultimately the whole country. In his view, weddings teach people that they have a responsibility, not only to their own parents, but also to the larger family, the entire society, and to Nature; thus, the couple report to their ancestors, bow to their parents, and pay their respects to Heaven and Earth (*tiandi* 天地). Much like the steps of the *Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學), there are thus connections between the individual couple, the family, the society and the world. This parallelism (from individuals to family to ancestors to society and on to the Chinese world) is also reinforced through the mirrored organizational structure of the first part of Zhu Jieren's wedding speech about marriage and the second part about his family legacy. As in the *Great Learning*, Zhu Jieren tries to accomplish many goals by integrating the steps from individual to society. Not only does he want to conjoin families, but he also wants to unite the past with the present, and to tie the individual couple with the national society.

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3 Zhu Jieren, "Zai erzi Liu Qi hunli de jianghua," p. 17; see Patricia Buckley Ebrey (trans. and annotated), *Chu Hsi's Family Rituals: A Twelfth-century Chinese Manual for the Performance of Cappings, Weddings, Funerals, and Ancestral Rites* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 55, using James Legge, *The Chinese Classics* (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong Press, 1961, reprint of Oxford, 1865-1995), vol. 2, p. 428.

Given the instability of social expectations about the public nature of marriage in contemporary China, Zhu Jieren aims for nothing less than rebuilding the Confucian foundation for the creation of a civil society in China. In short, Zhu Jieren's ambition here is no less than the one expressed in the Preface to *Zhu Xi's Family Rituals*. There, Zhu Xi expressed the hope of putting the rituals into practice, so that "we might possibly again see the way the ancients 'cultivated themselves and regulated their families,'" and thus the ritual manual might "make a small contribution to the state's effort to transform and lead the people."<sup>4</sup> Along similar lines, Zhu Jieren's speech at the wedding banquet offers a thoughtful statement on the meaning of marriage as the bedrock for the relationships that connect an individual couple to the clan, the ancestors, society and the nation through a complex set of filial and civic duties.

Both the aesthetics and the liturgy, however, stress the specifically Chinese nature of the Zhu wedding ceremony. Zhu Jieren says that he is profoundly worried about the popularity of Western wedding ceremonies that he complains have "cut off tradition and have changed and disordered China's family rules (*jiafa* 家法)," and thus have "led our people to be unaware that our country has its own tradition of wedding rites, with elegant rituals and profound meaning."<sup>5</sup> Zhu Jieren notes that one of the few places in which he adapted "Western elements" into the Chinese rite was the inclusion of bridesmaids and groomsmen.<sup>6</sup> He included the bridesmaids in consideration for the bride, and his most important modern revisions include people who previously would have been excluded. While these changes may appear minor, this inclusivity has

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4 Zhu Xi, *Zhuzi quanshu* [Complete Works of Zhu Xi] 朱子全書, Zhu Jieren, Yan Zuozhi 嚴佐之, Liu Yongxiang 劉永翔 (eds.) (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe 上海古籍出版社, and Hefei: Anhui jiaoyu chubanshe 安徽教育出版社, 2003), vol. 7, "Preface," p. 873; Zhu Jieren, "Zai erzi Liu Qi hunli de jianghua," p. 20; see Patricia Buckley Ebrey (trans. and annotated), *Chu Hsi's Family Rituals: A Twelfth-century Chinese Manual for the Performance of Cappings, Weddings, Funerals, and Ancestral Rites*, p. 4. Of course, the quote about cultivating themselves and regulating their families is from the *Great Learning*.

5 Zhu Jieren, "Zai erzi Liu Qi hunli de jianghua," p. 18.

6 Ibid., p. 20, n. 2.

important ramifications for the structure of authority inherent in the wedding ceremony.

Most significantly, Zhu Jieren's ceremony departs from Zhu Xi's system by redefining who may serve as the "head of household," when representing the family by performing such rites as giving the bride away. Zhu Xi's ritual system focused heavily on "ritual primogeniture," i.e., the status of the *zong* descent line of the eldest main-line sons, so the male in the senior line of descent must preside over ceremonies, in which he "pledges" the young by offering them wine and instruction.<sup>7</sup> Rather than restricting the presiding man to senior descent lines that may come from distant and lateral branch families, Qiu Jun 丘濬 (1421-1495) had also loosened the focus on the *zong* descent line by allowing natal fathers to preside over capping, pinnings and weddings.<sup>8</sup> However, no one had altered the gendered aspect of the presiding man; for example, one nineteenth-century guidebook stresses the important point that "neither women nor the groom himself serve as presiding man."<sup>9</sup> Under those regulations, the bride in the Zhu wedding should be given away by one of her father's male relatives. However, Zhu Jieren allows the bride's widowed mother to serve as the "presiding man," despite her gender. Thus, Zhu Jieren further sets aside the tradition of the *zong*, which had forcefully combined both gender and generational hierarchy. Zhu Xi's emphasis on the *zong* had enhanced the authoritarian penchant within the Confucian tradition (and made it a major target of early twentieth-century radical critiques). Although the Chinese government's childbirth policies are actually

7 Patricia Buckley Ebrey, "Introduction," in *Chu Hsi's Family Rituals: A Twelfth-century Chinese Manual for the Performance of Cappings, Weddings, Funerals, and Ancestral Rites*, p. xxvii. We borrow the term "ritual primogeniture" from Christian de Pee, *The Writings of Weddings in Middle-Period China: Text and Ritual Practice in the Eighth through the Fourteenth Centuries* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 77.

8 Qiu Jun, *Jiali yijie* 家禮儀節; see *Ibid*.

9 Li Yuanchun 李元春, *Sili biansu* [Four Rites Differentiating Popular Customs] 《四禮辨俗》; see discussion in Patricia Buckley Ebrey (trans. and annotated), *Chu Hsi's Family Rituals: A Twelfth-century Chinese Manual for the Performance of Cappings, Weddings, Funerals, and Ancestral Rites*, p. 50, n. 4.

much more complex than simply a "one-child policy,"<sup>10</sup> Zhu Jieren acknowledges that restrictions in family size have now rendered this idea of the *zong* essentially irrelevant because male siblings no longer compete for status. Thus, his wedding ceremony not only makes considerable effort to fit with modern times, but it also indicates a willingness to move in a more egalitarian direction.

Zhu Jieren's adaptations of classical rituals to accommodate the modern world have been sharply criticized by those who advocate "restoring ancient institutions" (*hui fu gu li* 恢復古禮), or among the most ardent ones, "the restoration of antiquity" (*f u g u* 復古). The most famous of these model antique Confucian weddings is certainly the one that Peking University philosophy professor Zhang Xianglong held for his son in Beijing on June 20, 2010. First, both creators of wedding ceremonies are adherents of traditional values, but each allows innovation at different points—symbolic choreography in the Zhang wedding, and gender equitability and the couple's aesthetic choices in the Zhu wedding. Even the Zhang wedding modifies tradition. For example, at the beginning of the wedding video, Zhang Xianglong explains that he "takes Confucianism as the source" for ritual; he "preserves the basis of ancient Confucian rituals, but makes necessary adjustments in response to modern situations." Second, the Zhang wedding focuses on Confucius as the sage-king and first teacher, whereas the Zhu wedding promotes Zhu Xi. Although Zhu Jieren focused on *Zhu Xi's Family Rituals* from the medieval period, Zhang Xianglong seeks what he regards as a more pure performance of ancient ritual classics.

Whereas Zhu Jieren highlights the core liturgy from classical texts, Zhang more closely adheres to ceremonial symbols and gestures as the markers of their

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10 For example, rural farming families can give birth to a second child if the first one is a girl; however, if the second is also a girl, they should not have a third one. Moreover, according to current regulations in all provinces except Henan, if both husband and wife in urban areas are the only children of their parents, the urban couple may have two children. In 2013, the state has further relaxed rules for having a second child.

adherence to classical precedents. For example, the parents in the Zhu wedding read the classical wedding pronouncements from large scrolls and provide guests with a colloquial translation to follow; although the Zhang wedding uses the same central classical passages, Zhang had memorized his lines, but the bride's father had to rely on a small sheet of paper for his lines. Zhang had provided his Master of Ceremonies with a five-page, single-spaced text with scholarly notes and explanations, so the Master of Ceremonies provided colloquial narrative that contextualized the classical passages and enabled the guests to understand the classical pronouncements. Third, Zhu replaces full kowtows with a reduced number of knelling bows, allowed the young couple to select unconventional light yellow robes and the bride to expose her face; however, Zhang strictly follows late imperial customary practices of performing formal kowtows and dressing the bride in a red gown and having her veiled throughout most of the ceremony. As a specialist on Song-era texts, Zhu researched how couples during the Song performed the "exchange of cups" ceremony.

Zhang Xianglong, as a philosopher with expertise on Daoism with its special sense of time and space, was most proud of his innovative solution to the problem of symbolically representing the bride's long journey in a cart from her home in Shenyang to the groom's home in Beijing. Bringing the bride home, the groom enacts the symbolism by walking backwards with his steps representing turns of the horse cart's wheels. Nine steps backward are by figurative reduction taken to represent a distant journey. By holding the bride's hands and leading her, while the opaque veil obstructs her vision, also serves to represent her trust and reliance upon her husband's leading role. These traditional gender roles have elicited praise from *fugu* proponents, who also criticize Zhu's moves to accommodate a larger measure of gender equality.

Yet, most important to some Chinese with whom we discussed the weddings was the different authoritative order explicit in these two wedding ceremonies. The Zhu wedding began with bowing and reporting to the ancestors and ended

with a bow to the parents and then to Heaven and Earth. The Zhang ceremony began with kowtows to Heaven and Earth and then to parents and finally to Confucius. The Zhu ceremony's center was an ancestral altar above which hung "Zhu Xi's Family Instructions" (*Zhuzi jiaxun* 朱子家訓); moreover, the authority in the Zhu ceremony passed down from ancestors to parents who authorize the marriage. Such a strong focus on the ancestors has drawn sharp rebuke from those in China who regard Heaven and Earth as the foundation of Confucian beliefs. Such *fugu* adherents applaud the Zhang wedding for beginning with formal kowtows to Heaven and Earth. The backdrop for Zhang ceremony was a red curtain on which the wedding symbol of "double happiness" was centered between a couplet invoking the blessings of Heaven and Earth, parents, teacher (i.e., Confucius), and spiritual forces in Nature. The couplet read: "Heaven & Earth, Parents, and Sage-king Teacher; Yin & Yang, Sun & Moon, and Stars."

Professor Zhang's written commentary asserts that the two characters for ruler (*jun* 君) and teacher (*shi* 師) should be read as referring to Confucius as the sage-king of culture and principal teacher in China. As Zhang's wedding instructions also made clear:

Paying homage to Heaven and Earth and paying respect to Confucius (as teacher) should be in the direction of this couplet [...]. First, face the couplet, "Heaven and Earth, Parents and Sage-king Teacher," and performing a kowtow, pay reverence *twice* to Heaven and Earth, and then turn facing north and performing a kowtow, pay deference to parents *once* (emphasis ours).

Here, the order for the ritual flows down from the primary authority of Heaven and Earth, which takes priority over the family. Moreover, this privileging of Heaven and Earth would be reinforced at three crucial points in the liturgy for the Zhang wedding as the bride and groom first separately and then together

kowtowed to Heaven and the Earth. As shown in the wedding video, the couple further kowtowed to Heaven and Earth upon arriving at the wedding venue, before going to their dressing rooms. Such expressions of homage to Heaven and Earth are lauded by *fugu* proponents as grounding ritual ceremonies in proper perspective.

Such *fugu* proponents have likewise lauded the Zhang wedding for giving prominence to a leading Confucian public intellectual and including several "officials" recognized for championing the revival of Confucianism in contemporary China; moreover, these *fugu* adherents have condemned the Zhu wedding for ignoring such public emissaries of Confucian revivalism. Zhang Xianglong invited Feng Zhe 馮哲 to be the Master of Ceremonies. Feng is a notable advocate of reviving traditional Chinese culture and the founder of the Four Seas Confucius Academy 四海孔子書院 in Beijing.<sup>11</sup> Before Feng Zhe began reading the liturgy, he recognized the families of the groom and bride, but did not call out the individual names of the immediate family members. Instead, he announced the name and title of each of his ten invited "dignitaries from various areas of society" who sat at a table in the middle of the assembled guests.<sup>12</sup> Even

11 For Feng Zhe's activism and academy, see:

<http://kongzishuyuan.i.sohu.com/blog/view/177258164.htm>;  
[http://www.wenming.cn/gxt\\_pd/gxdt/201104/t20110411\\_145478.shtml](http://www.wenming.cn/gxt_pd/gxdt/201104/t20110411_145478.shtml);  
<http://tech.sina.com.cn/chuangye/2010-07-22/21234460373.shtml>.

12 These dignitaries included: Professor Wang Dong 王東 of Peking University 北京大學; Yu Tao 于濤, a teacher at the Peking Normal University Elementary School 北師大附小; Dr. Zhu Xiangfei 朱翔非, assistant to the principal at Beijing's Number 4 Middle School 北京四中校; Xu Zhiyuan 徐志遠, deputy chairman for Cultural History of the National People's Congress' Standing Committee on Instruction 全國人大常委會教科委員; Dr. Xu Guobao 徐國寶, researcher and professor at the Changchun Chinese Academy of Sciences Institute of Applied Chemistry 中國科學院長春應用化學研究所; Ms. Chen Yingwei 陳迎輝, chief editor of Society's Pioneering Families 社會創業家, a magazine of the Shanghai Pudong Center for the Development of Non-Profit Organizations 上海浦東非營利組織發展中心; Ms. Yang Xuejian 楊雪劍, executive president of the Contemporary MOMA Four Seas Confucius Academy 四海孔子書院; Sheng Shiyi, documentary film director for International Public Welfare and the Humanities; Mr. Li Wenming 李文明, founder and CEO of the Huaben Real Estate Club 華本地產俱樂部; and Wang Yuan, general chief of Human and Natural Resources in China's Patent and Information Office at the National Bureau of Intellectual Property Rights 國家知識產權局中國專利信息中心.

though these dignitaries were notable persons from realms of education, government and business, a couple of senior participants in our discussion at Renmin University referred approvingly of this group as representative "officials" or leaders of the Confucian revival whose presence bestowed a kind of formal public approval of the rites. Two of these dignitaries were indeed central government officials: Xu Zhiyuan 徐志遠, deputy chairman for Cultural History of the National People's Congress' Standing Committee on Instruction 全國人大常委會教科委員; and Wang Yuan, general chief of Human and Natural Resources in China's Patent and Information Office at the National Bureau of Intellectual Property Rights 國家知識產權局中國專利信息中心. As shown in the wedding video, some of these guests proposed toasts at the banquet to congratulate the newlyweds on their preservation of Chinese traditions in the face of the onslaught of Western values.

As articulated by Feng Zhe, the presence of these officials and cultural elites augmented the significance of the Zhang wedding ceremony. This arrangement underlined the importance of the officials and public intellectuals whose presence was suggested by Feng Zhe, "as a way to enhance the public influence of the ceremony, so the wedding ceremony would have greater cultural significance."<sup>13</sup> As such language makes clear, the ceremony was not only a family wedding, but also part of an Enlightenment project to transform people's thinking and customs.

Zhang Xianglong's immediate purpose focused on enhancing his son's appreciation of Confucian values in family life. At his wedding banquet speech, he publically professed that he had become a *ru* 儒者 (the term conventionally glossed as "Confucian") and "a person who believes in *ru*xue 儒學" (i.e., Confucianism). He then rhetorically posed the question for his audience: How could he, as an "ordinary intellectual" in modern China, become a Confucian? Contextually, he pointed out that he had lived through so many changes in modern China's tumultuous history that led to transformations of his thinking:

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13 Our translation of an elaboration from Professor Zhang's email communication, June 2012.



In my youth, I had faith in Marxism and Mao's thought, but when my inquiries conflicted with those in power and thus encountered suppression, I lost this faith and even for a time believed in (Western) individualism. When I became a university student, I read the *Laozi* 老子 and the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 and also became interested in ecology and environmental issues, and thus turned toward Daoism. What changed my perspective the most was having a child. I was profoundly touched by how my wife and even I myself were so affectionate to our son. Such expressions of the natural love of parents demonstrated human feelings and human relations that transcended the individual and were the essential core of Confucianism. Being Confucian means utilizing ritual and music, as chief of the "Six Arts," to expand the love for one's son to tenderheartedness in looking after the young and caring for the elderly.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, Zhang researched the sources and designed this Confucian wedding so that his son and daughter-in-law would take this Confucian orientation as the foundation of their marital relationship and their family life. In the future when they have children of their own, he asserted, they would develop a greater appreciation for Confucianism as a guide in their family life. In our interview, the son revealed his hesitancy about the wedding because he was anxious about how his Manchu parents-in-law would feel about an ancient Han ceremony; however, when they agreed, the couple accepted the wedding. Furthermore, he commented: "I was very happy to have such a wedding, but if it were not for my father, we would not have organized and orchestrated a traditional wedding." Given this context, we were surprised at the son's response to our inquiry about his own personal religious beliefs: he said that his beliefs came closest to modern-day Confucianism. Thus, Zhang Xianglong's purpose and design were successful:

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14 Language quoted and translated from Zhang Xianglong's Chinese elaborations and responses to our draft essay; email communication, June 2012.

through participation in Confucian ritual, his son acquired an enhanced appreciation and commitment to Confucian values.

Somewhat similarly, the experience of a Confucian wedding ritual also made a significant impression on the young couple in the Zhu wedding. Zhu Jieren's conditions for giving his blessings for the marriage were that the future daughter-in-law would agree to cultivate her personhood by following Zhu Xi's Family Instructions and to be married with his modernized version of Zhu Xi's wedding ritual. In his wedding speech, Zhu Jieren praised the bride for embracing these conditions so enthusiastically. The bride was the most articulate about the power of ritual during our interview with the couple in Shanghai on April 20, 2010. Referring to the moment in the Zhu wedding when the liturgy directed the mother to adjust the bride's clothing and join her hand with her husband's, she intimated that moment was for her the most touching part of the ceremony, almost moving her to tears. In comparison, she did not feel as moved when her mother gave her away in the subsequent Western portion of the wedding—even though her mother hugged her at this point in the Western ceremony. During the interview, she also explained how a child could create through ritual a sense of having a special invisible friend to gain inner strength to go to a new school or to face some other difficult situation. These examples indicate ways in which even brief ritual gestures can be profoundly meaningful. Despite the fact that both of the newlyweds testified that their Confucian wedding ceremony was much more special and meaningful to them than the abbreviated version of a Western ceremony with the exchange of vows and rings, they said that most Chinese young urbanites would opt for the Chinese secularized version of a Western wedding because most preferred the Western aesthetics. Even though the Zhu couple appreciated the aesthetics and commitment inherent in the Confucian ceremony, they added the Western ceremony of exchanging vows and rings in order to express their romantic love. Although Zhu Jieren had encouraged the couple to include the symbolic kiss in the Confucian ceremony, the couple refused and saved that romantic gesture for the Western

ceremony. On this point, we might say that the young couple had an even clearer grasp of the difference between the Confucian and Western ceremonies than Zhu Jieren did.

Yet, Zhu Jieren did not recognize such a gap between aesthetics and commitment, on one side, and romantic love, on the other side, because he proclaims compatibility of Zhu Xi's Confucian principles with good aspects of modern society and the contributions of his "Family Instructions" to universal values. Zhu Jieren strives to solve the problem of combining the ancient with the modern by preserving the liturgical text, but extending flexibility to other, additional elements. For Zhu Jieren, it is the liturgical text that is the source of integrity, handed down through the centuries; when contemporary people speak these words and enact these commands, they embody traditional principles and values. Despite the liturgical similarities between the Zhu and the Zhang ceremonies, they differed aesthetically and structurally. As long as the element of liturgical text remains at the center of the Confucian ritual, Zhu Jieren could compromise on other items, like the color of wedding vestments, which is so crucial to Zhang and most traditionalists. The style of wedding vestments is, all around the world, historically contingent,<sup>15</sup> and Zhu's flexibility is in part a reflection of his awareness of these historical changes; as he noted, his son and daughter-in-law could choose from among the styles of any dynasty they wished.

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15 For instance, John Gillis argues that many of our cultural assumptions, such as the association of pink with girls, are the result of Victorian or post-Victorian history; see *A World of Their Own Making: Myth, Ritual, and the Quest for Family Values* (New York: Basic books, 1996). While arguing for the historical contingency of cultural meaning, an audience drawn mostly from the Philosophy Department of the Renmin University of China argued that we, and Zhu Jieren, simply failed to understand the proper language of folk customs. Helpfully, they pointed to the work of Wang Zuoxin 王作新. Although Wang sometimes offers temporal or geographic specificity for the historical practices that he surveys, he offers "dictionaries" of these customs, which anchors meaning to specific words, rather than delineating the ways in which these practices have varied over time: see Wang Zuoxin, *Yuyan minsu* [Language of Customs] 語言民俗 (Wuhan: Hubei jiaoyu chubanshe 湖北教育出版社, 2001), and his *Sanxia xiaokou fangyan cihui yu minsu* [Dialect Vocabulary and Folk Custom in the Entrance Districts of the Three Gorges] 三峽峽口方言詞匯與民俗 (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press 社會科學文獻出版社, 2009).

It was only when Zhu Jieren believed that he had *rediscovered* an ancient choreography in Song texts, i.e., in the exchange of the cups, that he particularly reduplicated it. Beyond such textually based transmissions, Zhu was not particularly wedded to any set of symbols, and could be free to allow his children to "add" to the core of these traditions in any way that they wanted, even adding a Westernized ceremony.

## Conclusion

Although Zhu Jieren's and Zhang Xianglong's explicit and implicit criticisms of contemporary society are based on widely noted problems, each employs particular means of addressing the issue of individual alienation from the traditional Chinese family and society. Government officials and other individuals often comment on the threat of "Western ills" to modern Chinese society, but they have tended to combat "spiritual pollution" through political campaigns and censorship. Not only is the Zhu Family Association a non-governmental, grass-roots organization, but Zhu Jieren's main tools for strengthening social civility also require a shared vocabulary of mutually intelligible etiquette and decorum. He thus promotes the "public" nature of weddings and marriages in a social environment in which financial pressures tend to alienate or separate individuals from the traditional wedding customs and the relationship between the individual couple and the larger society. Ultimately, Zhu Jieren does not only want to campaign against the "spiritual pollution" of "Western ills," but he wants even more to reconnect younger generations with their ancestors and their society through hierarchical respect. Even though Zhang Xianglong welcomed central government officials and cultural elites recognized for their advocacy of restoring ancient Confucian rituals in China today in order to enhance the social significance of his model ceremony, he is also essentially an individual Confucian intellectual doing what he can for his family and society.

Such efforts to reform social customs through reviving family rituals have been subject to considerable criticism in society and academia; instead of offering our own evaluation, this short article presents the cultural agenda of these grassroots reformers as distinct and unique. Zhang Xianglong is critical of Zhu Jieren's modernizations, especially because Zhu allows his son to supplement the Confucian wedding with a simplified Chinese version of Western exchanges of vows and rings—even though Zhang's son and daughter-in-law wore their wedding rings (a Westernized symbol of marriage) during their Confucian wedding. Zhang does acknowledge some adjustments to make the classical wedding practical today; nonetheless, he upholds conventional assumptions (such as the color of the bride's dress and veil) of what is classical and pure. In turn, Zhu is critical of Zhang's clinging to traditionalistic details, such as covering the bride's face, that counter the goal of reaching out to young people by accepting their appreciation of a greater degree of gender equality in modern society.

One of the anonymous referees of the manuscript of this article rightly pointed out that if children were raised properly, whether with Confucian or some other ethics, they would naturally develop worthwhile interpersonal relations and stable marriages without having to resort to such conspicuous expenditures on outdated ceremonies. The ability to marry is a sign of the sons' functional adulthood and success at interpersonal relationships, but as we have shown, the fathers wanted to articulate public significance of those relationships. Furthermore, we would add that, as Confucius observed (*Analects*, 2:4) in his own development, learning and cultivation do not end with adulthood, but continue as a lifelong process.

When reading Korean website materials or watching a video like "Our Korean Wedding,"<sup>16</sup> it is easy for us (like the anonymous referee's reaction to the

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16 Gavin Hudson, "Our Korean Wedding," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QbswLn20Ofg>, (with bride Youngmin on May 12, 2011), accessed June 20, 2013. See also websites and news,

Chinese Confucian weddings) also to regard such public events as simply driven by traditionalistic impulses to assert social status, cultural tradition, or national identity. Nevertheless, when we consider scholarly literature on the adaptation of Zhu Xi's *Family Rituals* in Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910) Korea and the twentieth-century modernistic reactions against, and traditionalistic revivals of, Korean Confucian weddings,<sup>17</sup> we get a far more nuanced understanding not only of Zhu Xi's influence on Korea but also of divergences in the course of evolving Korean culture, society and politics. Such scholarly accounts provide background for us to see that efforts to revive Confucian weddings in China in recent years do have considerable parallels with Korea "rising" and its turn in the mid-1980s to promote Korean Confucian weddings and against what was perceived as the excessive Americanization of South Korea. However, one major difference is that the (also still limited) turn to Confucian weddings in South Korea has been far more driven by the government and by economic considerations than is the case the two recent Confucian weddings in China. Thus, reflections on Korean parallels suggest the grassroots significance of the contemporary China turn; although Zhu Jieren and Zhang Xianglong, as Confucians and as public figures in the PRC, are mindful of the importance of state endorsement of ritual practice, the initiative and focus are not primarily driven by governmental or economic considerations. Nonetheless, the study of the model weddings, which were set forth by Zhu Jieren and Zhang Xianglong, provide a particularly significant source for understanding a case of grassroots activism in the Chinese cultural

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also accessed on June 20, 2013: [http://visitkorea.or.kr/enu/SI/SI\\_EN\\_3\\_6.jsp?cid=255750;](http://visitkorea.or.kr/enu/SI/SI_EN_3_6.jsp?cid=255750;)  
[http://www.koreaherald.com/common\\_prog/newsprint.php?ud=20130503000714&dt=2](http://www.koreaherald.com/common_prog/newsprint.php?ud=20130503000714&dt=2)).

- 17 Martina Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A Study of Society and Ideology* (Cambridge: Council of East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1992), especially, pp. 231-303; Laurel Kendall, *Getting Married in Korea: Of Gender, Morality, and Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Donald N. Clark, *Culture and Customs of Korea* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 2000), pp. 157-177; and the theme issue on Korean traditional weddings with essays from several Korean scholars in the Korea Foundation's quarterly, *Koreana*, 17, 1 (Spring, 2003), on website: <http://koreana.kf.or.kr/main.asp?volumn=17&no=1&lang>, accessed June 20, 2013. Professors Hyaeweol Choi and Sookja Cho suggested these sources on Korean weddings.

scene since these two intellectuals are quite articulate and open about their higher purposes and goals.

Despite their differences over specific details and approaches, both creators of model Confucian weddings used the Classics to promote Confucianism as the proper foundation of the Chinese family and also take for granted that the fate of the family as an institution and its role in society is directly tied to the fate of Confucian practices of self-cultivation. If Confucian rituals become meaningful again (according to this line of thinking), then they will no longer be moribund, and they will breathe new life into the institution of the traditional Confucian family, which would again serve as a bridge between individual and society. As Zhu Jieren's daughter-in-law and Zhang Xianglong's son revealed in their post-wedding interview comments, ritual practice, however special and exceptional, is a form of living practice that allows participants to reconnect on an emotional level to traditional aesthetics, and so the classical rites become "alive" again. These traditional aesthetics, ritual gestures, and physical movements offer a venue for expressing and extending textual liturgy into social practice, and therefore actually molding the hearts and behaviors of people as they interact with one another. Both Zhu Jieren and Zhang Xianglong are providing concrete examples or models for how classical rites might, at least for some people, resolve recalcitrant problems of ethics and cultural identity in Chinese society.<sup>♦</sup>

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♦ Responsible editor: Yung-hsiang Yuan (袁永祥)

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