

On Wedding in Chinese Ancient Literary Works

—A Book Review of *Ancient Chinese Etiquette Civilization*

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1. Abstract

Ancient Chinese Etiquette Civilization is a highly readable work authored by Peng Lin. The book can be taken as a "Library of Chinese Historical and Cultural Knowledge". Professor Peng Lin specializes in studying and teaching Pre-Qin history, historical literature, and the history of ancient Chinese academic thought. He has a particular interest in Confucian classics and pays close attention to the study of *Zhou Li* (Rites of Zhou), *Yi Li* (Ceremony and Ritual), *Li Ji* (Book of Rites), as well as ancient Chinese ritual and music culture. This book originated from Professor Peng's elective course on ancient Chinese etiquette and civilization, which was widely enjoyed by students, spurring him to commit to this project. His primary aim was to make the complex culture of ancient Chinese etiquette more accessible to a broader audience. Professor Peng painstakingly curated content from a vast array of materials with the intent of presenting the intricate ancient rites in a manner easy for readers to digest, aiding their basic understanding of ancient Chinese etioriquette.

2. Introduction to *Ancient Chinese Etiquette Civilization* by Peng Lin

The historical classic *Zuo Zhuan - The Eighteenth Year of Duke Wen* records that "Zhou Gong (Duke of Zhou) created the rituals for the Zhou dynasty." The Duke of Zhou not only created these rituals and music but also set forth a program for governance through etiquette, which after generations of refinement and evolution became a significant hallmark of Eastern civilization. China is a nation with a millennia-old tradition of etiquette. Understanding Chinese traditional culture necessitates an understanding of its etiquette. Many scenarios involving etiquette knowledge can be found in ancient Chinese literature. Some of the rituals have undergone innovations and still resonate with us today. This report is based on Chapter 10, "Wedding Rituals" of *Ancient Chinese Etiquette Civilization*.

3. Content Overview

3.1 The First Part of the Book

The first part of the book *Ancient Chinese Etiquette Civilization* provides a basic explanation of ritual, including what ritual is, why it is made, the classification of ritual, the elements of ritual, and the relationship between ritual and music.

Mr. Qian Mu believes that ritual is the core of traditional Chinese culture. In his conversation with American scholar Jerry Dennerline, he explained, "The reason why Chinese people become a nation is because 'ritual' has established social norms for the entire Chinese people. When practice is different from 'ritual', it is attributed to the local customs or economies, which are the objects of change." In the first part of the book, 'ritual' is considered a symbol of human beings, different from animals. It is the difference between civilization and barbarism. It is an important embodiment of natural laws in human society, a rule of order and national norms. It is a way of interpersonal communication with extremely rich connotations.

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Professor Peng Lin's discussion on the origin of etiquette focuses on a brief that "etiquette originates from customs". It is a lifestyle. Rites should cultivate a person's healthy emotions and be appropriated without causing harm to others. Therefore, it is said that "sages make rituals according to customs, and rituals follow principles." Ancient Chinese etiquette can be divided into five categories: auspicious rituals, inauspicious rituals, military rituals, guest rituals, and praise rituals. sacrificial rites refers to the ritual of offering sacrifices, and the objects of worship in ancient times were divided into three types: human ghosts, heavenly gods, and earthly beings; The inauspicious ceremony refers to the etiquette of rescuing and dividing disasters, including two major parts: the wasteland ceremony and the funeral ceremony. In details, there are funeral ceremony, wasteland ceremony, hanging ceremony, exceeding ceremony, and mourning ceremony. The funeral ceremony is one of the most important ancient etiquette, and its core is to express respect and love for the deceased through the handling of their bodies; Military etiquette is related to warfare, including five types: the etiquette of masters, the etiquette of Dajun(average), the etiquette of Datian(farmland), the etiquette of Dajie(victory), the etiquette of Dayi(warfare)and the etiquette of Dafeng(eneffment); guest rituals refers to the etiquette used by the emperor and feudal lords to receive guests, which is divided into court ceremony, meeting ceremony, and the ceremony of the Tibetan king coming to court. Praise rituals is a general term for the rituals of diet, wedding crowns, guest archery, feasting, and dining, with a wide range, including celebration ceremonies, patrol ceremonies, enthronement and succession ceremonies, and so on.

The types of rituals are diverse and complex, and their forms vary greatly. However, these rituals all contain certain basic elements, which can be divided into several aspects such as ritual law, ritual righteousness, ritual vessels, rhetorical language, ritual appearance, etc. The so-called "ritual law" refers to the rules and procedures of performing rituals, which are the "outer shell" of rituals, while ritual righteousness is the core of rituals. The information of ritual and righteousness is conveyed through the use of different ceremonial vessels. Ritual vessels refer to the objects used to perform rituals, and rituals must be carried out with the help of these objects. Meanwhile, as etiquette is a ritual for interpersonal communication or communication between people and gods, language is also essential. The importance of propriety and righteousness lies in sincerity and respect. The basic elements of etiquette are reflected in various types of etiquette.

Rites and music are inseparable. In the Confucian etiquette culture system, rites and music complement each other, specifically reflected as "music inside and ritual outside". Music is a virtuous sound, and only those in certain social position can have the qualification to make music and perform rituals. Confucianism believes that "the sound of virtue is called music", and the music advocated by Confucianism is the work of the ancient Emperor of Shengde (Emperor with traditional virtue), who must have great music. At the same time, in Confucianism, music and politics are interconnected, and music can serve as a criterion for judging political gains and losses. It is also popular among the people and can serve as a source of education.

In the first part of the book, we can have a basic understanding of the basic knowledge of etiquette, which lays the foundation for further the understanding of various etiquette of China.

3.2 The Second Part of the Book

The second part mainly introduces the classic works related to ancient Chinese civilization and etiquette.

In the section of classic works, it introduces a sketch of an ideal country that follows the principles of human beings, law and heaven-*Zhou Li*. Another classic work *Yi Li* is about the life etiquette that connects life and death. The third classic work *Li Ji* is about the collection of witty sayings that elucidate the meaning of etiquette. These three classics are collectively known as the "Three Rites". When studying Chinese etiquette culture, it is impossible not to mention the "Three Rites". These three works related to ancient Chinese etiquette provide the most authoritative records and explanations of ritual and music, influencing the development of ritual systems throughout history, and are the theoretical form of ancient ritual and music culture.

The most extensive part of the entire book is the introduction to various ancient etiquette. In this section, we can learn about various etiquette such as coronation ceremony, wedding ceremony, scholar meeting ceremony, rural drinking ceremony, archery ceremony, dowry ceremony, scholar funeral ceremony, late night ceremony, scholar Yu ceremony, memorial ceremony, family ceremony, and so on. Through Professor Peng Lin's analysis and illustrated explanations, we can roughly understand the basic knowledge of ancient Chinese etiquette. Wedding ceremony is chosen to be analyzed as an example in this article.

The Book of Rites states: "Wedding etiquette will consider the combination of two surnames, with the highest priority being to serve the ancestral temple and the lowest priority being to inherit future generations. Therefore, gentlemen attach great importance to it. Wedding was of great significance in ancient society and was the foundation of etiquette, and Confucianism also attached great importance to it.". From an ethical and philosophical perspective, weddings can distinguish between men and women, and couples are the foundation of human relationships. In ancient times, in order to prevent the backward behavior of promiscuous marriage, it was stipulated that only men and women who have experienced a wedding can become each other's spouses. From the perspective of stabilizing a country, men and women are the two poles of *yin* and *yang*. In ancient times, it was generally believed that the harmony of *yin* and *yang* was the foundation of a peaceful and prosperous era. Emperors and empresses in ancient times were representatives of the two poles of *yin* and *yang*, so it is often believed that the gains and losses of emperors in politics are closely related to whether their spouses are virtuous. From this, it can be seen that weddings are related to whether the marriage of both men and women will develop steadily, whether the clan will prosper, and even whether the country will have a peaceful atmosphere.

In ancient China, there were six rituals for weddings, which together constitute the basic process of weddings. These six rituals are: accepting gifts, asking for names, receiving blessings, accepting gifts, selecting wedding date, and welcoming the bride, also known as the "Six Rites". The first five rituals are relatively simple. The core is to negotiate marriage. Secondly, these five ceremonies are held at the mother's ancestral temple, which not only reflects the intention of obeying orders in the ancestral temple, but also reflects the ancient people's respect for marriage, a major event that has been passed down from generation to generation. Thirdly, except for the ceremony of accepting gifts, the other etiquette is that the male party brings wild geese to the female party's house as the meeting gift. This custom may have been passed down for a long time.

Etiquette "Nacai" refers to the proposal of marriage in later generations. The man invited a matchmaker to propose marriage at the woman's house, and after receiving the promise, he sent an envoy to deliver a speech at the woman's house and presented a goose as a gift. If the woman agrees to the marriage proposal, accept the gift. After "Nacai", it is "asking for name", which means asking for the surname of the mother of the woman. The envoy left the temple gate and later entered the woman's house to ask for her name. This etiquette strictly follows the ancient marriage law of "not marrying with the same surname". After asking for the name, the man's family needs to perform divination again. If they receive an auspicious sign, they will send an envoy to the woman's family to report it. The woman's family also needs to receive the blessings, which is called "Naji". After the divination, the engagement can be made. The man sends five pieces of black and white silk, as well as two pieces of deer skin, as a dowry gift. This confirms the marriage relationship between the two parties, which is known as the "acceptance of conscription" or the engagement in later generations. The final etiquette of the marriage proposal is "wedding date selection". The man determines the marriage date through divination to show respect, and then sends an envoy to the woman's house to ask the other party to specify the marriage date. The bride's family should show humility and then ask her husband's family to make a decision. Then, the envoy will inform the bride's family of the previously agreed marriage date. At this point, the process of negotiating marriage has come to an end.

The core of the entire wedding ceremony lies in the sixth ritual, "Welcoming the bride", which preserves the custom of getting married at dusk in the clan society. Therefore, "Welcoming the bride" is also carried out by the groom personally going to the bride's house at dusk. This ceremony also reflects the important significance of ancient weddings - choosing a gentle and upright inner master for the family to inherit the ancestral temple, that is, the bride. Before the groom sets off, he must first listen to his father's teachings before taking the painted cart to the bride's house. The accompanying passengers are divided into two auxiliary vehicles, and the attendants hold candles to light their way. The bride's family also needs to make preparations. Firstly, a banquet should be set up for the gods in the father's temple. The bride faces south in the room to wait for the groom, with the bride's babysitter standing to the right and the dowry maid standing behind. The bride's father will go out to welcome the groom. After ascending the hall, the father of the bride stands facing west on the steps, the mother of the bride stands facing south outside the room, and the groom stands facing north in front of the east room, bowing to the father of the bride again. The bride leaves the room and goes down the western steps with the groom. At this time, the groom goes out, while the bride listens to the teachings of her father and mother. After going out, the bride boarded the welcoming cart, and the groom put on a dust cover for her. The groom drove the cart until the wheels turned three times, and then the driver took over. The groom first took the painted cart home to wait for the bride.

In addition, during the wedding ceremony, there is also the etiquette of "drinking and eating together" that reflects the unity of the couple. At the end of the wedding, there is also a ceremony of paying respects to uncles that involves the transfer of family management power.

At the end of the "Wedding" section, Professor Peng Lin listed some characteristics of ancient weddings. For example, the bride did not have a veil initially, and the veil was only a temporary method in special circumstance. Later, in the Tang Dynasty, the bride used a fan to cover her face in the ceremony. It was not until the Song Dynasty that the current veil appeared. The ceremony of lifting the veil has also changed from the groom lifting the veil with a scale or spinning shuttle to the bride lifting the veil herself.

The Six Rites of Wedding continued until the Tang Dynasty, and after the Song Dynasty, they were simplified into accepting gifts, receiving blessings, and welcoming the bride, which continued until the Qing Dynasty. With the time went on, the etiquette became more and more simplified.

3. Extensive Discussion

In the short drama work *Saving a Prostitute* by Guan Hanqing of the Yuan Dynasty, we can see the importance of wedding etiquette. *Saving a Prostitute* tells the story of the prostitute sisters Zhao Pan'er and Song Yinzhang. Song Yinzhang and the scholar An Xiushi fell in love and swore to marry. Later, they met a rich guy Zhou She. Under his rhetoric, Yinzhang married Zhou She regardless of Zhao Pan'er's dissuasion. However, after marriage, Zhou She often scolded and abused Yin Zhang. At Yin Zhang's request for help, Zhao Pan'er used her savings to buy a dowry and lured Zhou She to abandon Song Yin Zhang. Zhou She and Zhao Pan'er went to the county government to file a lawsuit. As there was no wedding, the marriage between Zhou and Zhao was not established, and Zhou She's divorce certificate had already been received, so the marriage between Zhou and Song was dissolved. At this time, Zhao Pan'er claimed that Song and An Xiushi had a marriage agreement and convicted Zhou She of forcibly taking it. In the entire work, the female protagonist Zhao Pan'er used eight strategies to trap the antagonist Zhou She, and one of the most important methods was to "buy a dowry". In the third chapter, Zhou She planned to leave Yinzhang and marry Zhao Pan'er, so she planned to buy "wine, sheep, and red (red silk)", which were all necessary items for the dowry. Zhao Pan'er tricked Zhou She by saying, "Don't buy wine, I have ten bottles of wine in my cart." "Don't buy sheep, I have a cooked sheep in my cart." "Don't buy red silk, I have plenty of red silk in my box." She also said, "Mine is yours." This made Zhou She dispel the idea of buying the dowry. At the final moment of confrontation, Zhao Pan'er changed her tone. She easily denied that she had a marital relationship with Zhou She and that these things were all "her own."

From this, it can be seen that Zhao Pan'er's marriage with Zhou cannot be considered as a negotiated marriage because of the failure to follow the etiquette of "accepting gifts". In contrast, Zhou She was ultimately convicted of robbery because An Xiushi and Song Yinzhang had performed some wedding rituals. At the end of the fourth chapter, there is a saying that goes, "I live in the same village again and have received the property of the hairpin ring. I am clearly a virtuous woman." Here, the "hairpin ring" is the fixed gift set in the etiquette of "accepting and collecting". Later, Zhao Pan'er identified herself as a matchmaker, who acted as a guarantor for this marriage relationship. It was recognized as "a testament to the protection of the family". Among the six rituals of wedding etiquette, the matchmaker or envoy runs through the entire process and is also the key to ensuring that both men and women follow the rules and regulations without any negligence in wedding etiquette. Various ancient literary works that mention wedding etiquette have highlighted the significance of ancient weddings. The etiquette helps to shape classic characters and promote the development of the plot. In *Saving a Prostitute*, wedding etiquette is like a hidden thread that runs through the entire strategy. Without the existence of these rituals, justice cannot be achieved. The female protagonist Zhao Pan'er cleverly utilized these wedding rituals to trap villains, which showcased her character of being clever, resourceful, brave, and quick witted.

4. Conclusion

Professor Peng Lin had a deep understanding and careful explanation of ancient Chinese etiquette. His book *Ancient Chinese Etiquette Civilization* helps the readers learn ancient Chinese etiquette rules, and further understand the tradition of Chinese culture. Take wedding ritual as an example. Through the analysis of the wedding etiquette in these ancient Chinese literary works, we find that many wedding ceremonies play an important role in the development of plot and character shaping. *Saving a Prostitute* is a typical example.

Without common sense of ancient Chinese etiquette rules, our understanding of Chinese literary works will become relatively shallow and vague. For Chinese ancient writers, these ancient rituals were instilled as behavioral norms from a young age. They may not have been deliberately reflected in their works, but rather unconsciously integrated into the stories and characters they created. These unintentional outputs help us learn the core position of etiquette rules in traditional Chinese culture.

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