Festivals, Feasts, and Gender Relations in Ancient China and Greece

Ancient China and Greece are two classical civilizations that have exerted far-reaching influence in numerous areas of human experience and are often invoked as the paradigms in East–West comparison. This book examines gender relations in the two ancient societies as reflected in convivial contexts such as family banquets, public festivals, and religious feasts. Two distinct patterns of interpersonal affinity and conflict emerge from the Chinese and Greek sources that show men and women organizing themselves and interacting with each other in social occasions intended for the collective pursuit of pleasure. Through an analysis of these patterns, Yiqun Zhou illuminates the different sociopolitical mechanisms, value systems, and fabrics of human bonds in the two classical traditions. Her book will be an important resource for readers who are interested in the comparative study of societies, gender studies, women’s history, and the legacy of civilizations.

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Preface

This book is a study of interpersonal relationships and structures of sentiment, with a special focus on their reflection in various sociable contexts and on the gender dimension, in ancient China and Greece (ca. 10th–4th centuries BCE). By examining a wide range of sources (mainly literary and historical) that show men and women engaging in the collective pursuit of pleasure on such occasions as family banquets, public festivals, and religious feasts, the study aims to illuminate the different sociopolitical mechanisms, value systems, and human bonds in the two classical civilizations that have exerted far-reaching influences in numerous areas of human experience.

My inquiry steps outside the predominant subjects of study in the fast-growing field of China–Greece comparative research, namely, science, medicine, philosophy, and historiography.1 By focusing on human
interaction in convivial settings, I seek to create a portrayal of the two ancient civilizations that has both structure and texture and that is both more dynamic and more concrete than earlier studies.

My study explores important topics in gender studies and family and women’s history, including the relationship between the public and domestic domains, the dynamics of sexual rivalry and cooperation, the implications that homosocial bonding and gender relations have for each other, the role of religion and ritual in women’s lives, and the relationship between female subjectivity and male imagination. As gender relations and the relationship between the family and the larger sociopolitical order continue to emerge as among the most protean and intensely contested aspects of human experience across cultures, my study will help provide a comparative understanding of some of the major historical paradigms in human organization whose legacies are still influential today.

Finally, I hope my inquiry will add to those studies that take sociable activities as their entry point for understanding social organization, value systems, and human relationships. This approach has already enriched our understanding of ancient Greek society, as exemplified in works by scholars such as Oswyn Murray and Pauline Schmitt-Pantel.\textsuperscript{2} The awareness of the need to enlarge the scope of inquiry to gain both more valid generalizations and deeper understandings of individual cases has already led classicists to study convivial practices in the neighboring cultures of Egypt and the Middle East.\textsuperscript{3} Findings from China, another major ancient civilization, will not only contribute an important case study but also enhance the theoretical interest of sociability studies.\textsuperscript{4}

**Texts, Translations, Citations, and Reading Approach**

All the Chinese and Greek primary texts, major commentaries, and translations consulted for this study are listed at the beginning of the bibliography. Unless otherwise indicated, all Greek texts and translations are from the Loeb Classical Library (with occasional modifications).

\textsuperscript{2} See these two scholars’ works in the bibliography.


\textsuperscript{4} Murray (2000) calls for including China among the “ancient societies” in future studies of sociability.
Chinese texts come from various editions. For the Book of Odes, the most important Chinese text for my study, I use Arthur Waley’s translation and make modifications when necessary. The pinyin system is used for the romanization of Chinese throughout the book. For the transcription of Greek names and epithets, I have generally adopted the Greek form (e.g., Alkaios instead of Alcaeus, Ktesios instead of Ctesius) but in some cases have used the familiar Latinized form (e.g., Socrates instead of Sokrates, Achilles instead of Akhilleus).

Though literary texts form the mainstay of the primary materials in this study, I have analyzed them primarily for the insights that they offer into the ideas and practices in social relations in ancient China and Greece. Thus readers sensitive to the fine points in the aesthetic and rhetorical aspects of literary texts may find much wanting in the following pages. I believe, however, that the richness and intensity of the sentiments expressed in the literary texts will still assert themselves and that the texts provide an indispensable source for an investigation of ancient convivial life.

The staggering amount of scholarship behind almost any aspect of the issues touched on in this study makes it impossible to be exhaustive in my references to the secondary literature. I hope, however, that I have managed to cite those works that are most relevant to the topics under discussion, that represent influential positions on the issues, and that contain the most up-to-date research and can guide the reader to earlier studies.

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I have come a long way since the summer of 2006, when I picked up my dissertation again and began to revise it. In the revision process, I
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