
Anne E. McLaren’s book Performing Grief: Bridal Laments in Rural China provides an excellent example of how to use Chinese women’s oral folk genres to study illiterate women’s lives and marriage customs in rural China. This pioneering work on female grievance in China studies bridal laments of the Pudong-Nanhui area outside Shanghai, and investigates the history and ritual of lament performance in pre-modern China. The author finds that in learning bridal laments, a bride acquired knowledge systems and a poetic repertoire specific to women of her region; and in performing those songs, she openly demonstrated her literary talent, conveyed her personal grievance, and enacted a transformation of her identity from daughter to wife.

The first four chapters focus on Nanhui bridal laments. Chapter 1 explores how the bride created a sense of “my place” by referring to Nanhu topography, architecture, and objects of material culture. The bride used images of poverty for her own family (niangjia), and gave hyperbolic depiction of the assumed wealth and status of her husband’s family (pojia), to show her anxieties and win sympathy from the audience. By studying the bride’s depictions of the dwellings, landscape, food, utensils, and the cotton products of women’s labor, the author finds that the bride “validates the heroic toil of the sands people” (pojia) “in line with her understanding of the power of the elite and officialdom in imperial times” (p. 31).

In Chapter 2, the author investigates the history of the Nanhui region with an emphasis on the market value of the laboring wives in the migratory sands communities—women worked in the fields and made cotton cloth for cash income. The author explores how the bride enacted the kinship hierarchy through lament performance, and finds that maternal relatives such as her mother’s oldest brother (niangjiu) and the bride’s older brother (age) played important protective roles for the bride. A properly arranged marriage with bride-price and dowry gave a girl status as the primary wife, and “sororate marriage” (a practice that a man married his deceased wife’s sister) and “seizing the bride” (a practice that a man kidnapped a woman to be his wife) were practiced among the poorest because of the shortage of marriageable women (p. 47). The author argues that since infanticide was common in Nanhui, the bride knew that her family had cherished her and tried to induce their sentiment of sorrow at her departure by performing bridal laments.
In Chapter 3, the author explores the connections between women’s roles in household cotton production and the poetic repertoire of bridal laments. Imagery of textile production was common in Nanhui bridal laments, and women had ambiguous feelings about their unbound feet—which limited their social mobility but strengthened their roles in the local economy. The author maintains that women displayed their talent and skills and developed a sense of self-worth in textile production. Cotton production was the context in which bridal laments were learned, and bridal laments transmitted the repertoire of cotton production. The author finds that the metaphor of cotton yarn and cloth in bridal laments represent the bride’s inner essence as a woman—like a spool she felt hollow because she could not fulfill the demands of filial piety.

In Chapter 4, the author studies bridal laments of the 1920s, analyzes the stages of the lament cycle, and finds that the bride “rhetorically negotiated her own market ‘value’ within the marriage transaction” (p. 63). Nanhui bridal laments reflect the poetic and linguistic attributes of the folk songs of the Wu area. The lament cycle began three days before the wedding with a verbal duel between the mother and the daughter: the mother tried to arm her daughter with strategies and moral strength to withstand adversity, and the daughter constructed herself as a victim and created bonds of obligation on her natal family to protect her from possible abuse at the hands of her in-laws. The author notices that the bride was acutely interested in the negotiation of the bride price and dowry, which decided her value and status in her new family. She argues that bridal laments not only reflected Nanhui marriage practices, but also constructed a notion of marriage “somewhat at odds with the canonical Confucian idea of wifely submission” (p. 66).

In the last two chapters, the author places the bridal laments of Nanhui within the history of wailed performances, and explores the lament traditions in other parts of China. In Chapter 5, she argues that in weeping and wailing performance, women were “able to exert a quasi-magical power denied them in mainstream ritual culture” (p. 83). She finds that since ancient times women’s weeping and wailing performance has been perceived as having ritual power. Bridal laments were first recorded in the twelfth century as a practice of non-Chinese people living in Guangxi, Guilin, Hunan, Guangdong. Late Ming literature started mentioning bridal laments in the Lower Yangtze Delta. The author notices the variation in poetic imagery and song type across regions, and finds that while bridal lamenting was part of a process of purifying the bridal dowry in some regions, in others it was a protest against patriarchal kinship. The author probes
into scholarship on bridal laments in the Pearl River Delta. It was the existence of girls’ houses that made it possible for girls to memorize highly literary and abstruse songs, whose performance gave brides a kind of “social capital” by associating them with the prestigious written culture. She argues that bridal laments were “a rite of passage” for the young woman as she transformed herself from a daughter into a daughter-in-law (p. 102); the lamentation offered her a rare chance to speak freely, to demonstrate her talent and eloquence, and to consolidate her ties with her kin.

The author explores the ritual power of bridal laments in Chapter 6. She finds that “the performance attributes, aesthetic quality, serious intent, symbolic meaning, and supernatural efficacy” of the bridal lament all combine to make it part of ritual culture (p. 107). Fear of wedding pollution and exorcistic practices are interwoven in bridal laments, and legends about the origin of bridal laments refer to its exorcistic power of expelling evil forces. She compares funeral and bridal laments in Nanhui and finds that both forms of lament shared a similar verbal repertoire and sought to achieve a ritual efficacy.

The transcription and translation of Nanhui bridal laments in the appendix gives the original flavor of the bridal songs. A larger font and a few illustrations would have made the book more enjoyable to read.

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