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Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 2004, 320 p.

David Palmer

Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/561>

DOI : 10.4000/chinaperspectives.561

ISSN : 1996-4617

Éditeur

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 1 décembre 2005

ISSN : 2070-3449

Référence électronique

David Palmer, « Erika E. S. Evasdottir, *Obedient Autonomy : Chinese Intellectuals and the Achievement of Orderly Life* », *China Perspectives* [En ligne], 62 | november - december 2005, mis en ligne le 20 décembre 2006, consulté le 24 septembre 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/561> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.561>

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- 1 The central importance of the strategic management of interpersonal relations, known as *guanxi*, is well known to all students of Chinese society, and has been the subject of several studies, notably Mayfair Yang's *Gifts, Favours, and Banquets* (Cornell University Press, 1994). In this ethnography of Chinese archaeologists conducted for her Harvard Ph.D., Erika Evasdottir provides us not only with a rich description of the world of Chinese archaeology, but also a new approach to conceptualising the dynamics of social relations among intellectuals in the Chinese *danwei* system, using the case of archaeologists to formulate a model of "obedient autonomy" which contrasts with Western notions of freedom from norms and obligations. The author analyses how actors build order in their lives and careers by creatively drawing on the possibilities offered by a bewildering web of roles, hierarchies, regulations and reciprocal obligations as they interact with teachers, students, colleagues, bureaucrats and with peasant-workers. The title "obedient autonomy" is deliberately chosen to undermine commonly-held assumptions which see obedience as antithetical to the pursuit of individual autonomy. On the contrary, Evasdottir argues, it is obedience to the system of relations which gives Chinese intellectuals the resources and the power to control their lives, thereby explaining why they do not attempt to question or change the restrictions and inequalities which the system maintains.
- 2 Evasdottir first defines the Chinese system as characterised by *orthopraxy* : "the express formulation of *action* to conform to commonly held standards" (p. 14). In orthopraxy, the audience of one's actions is the final judge of one's moral character and success. This can be contrasted to orthodoxy, which is based on the attempt to align external practices with internal beliefs, and in which the final arbiter of one's character and satisfaction is one's own self. In orthopraxy, the chief concern is to understand one's

“audience that matters”, i.e., the audience which, in a given situation, can pass a judgement that may affect the future opportunities of the actor, and to adjust audience expectations as well as one’s own behaviour such that one’s reputation is enhanced. In such a context, autonomy can be understood as the “active intervention in the process of judgement undertaken by the audience” (p. 21), by creatively combining roles, scripts, and incentives in order to influence the audience. The use of such tactics requires that the structures, rules, categories and norms that will be manipulated, be commonly shared and understood by all within a stable order.

- 3 Evasdottir criticises the use of the term *guanxi* as a catchall for social interactions in China, a term that she claims has lost its analytic usefulness. Instead, she proposes a set of related analytical concepts, beginning with *hierarchy*, which in orthopraxy is not a zero-sum game in which power in the hands of one person means powerlessness, and thus lack of agency, for another. “Rather, it is something bartered between junior and senior, a gift in constant exchange ; at times, the junior is in charge, and at other times the senior takes control” (p. 26). In unequal hierarchical relations, both parties need to assess whether the other is worth the investment of time, face and resources to maintain or strengthen the relationship. Two elements come into play in such an assessment : *trustworthiness*—whether or not the person will act according to reciprocal (not absolute) values—and is the basis of judgements on moral character—and *compatibility*—an assessment of what he can bring to the relationship. These judgements are made in the context of evaluating the person’s *authority*—“the command, or the appearance of command, over the redistribution of resources.” (p. 27).
- 4 After presenting her model in the first chapter, Evasdottir describes how obedient autonomy is achieved by Chinese archaeologists, who, she argues, are an excellent case for understanding Chinese intellectuals in general—as guardians of China’s ancient heritage, their self-image perpetuates classical notions of the Chinese scholar ; the use of archaeology for ideological construction and political legitimation draws them into a privileged but ambiguous relationship with the state ; while their fieldwork places them in a position of constant negotiation over roles, identities and resources with the traditional foil of the Chinese intellectual: the peasant labourer. In chapters provocatively named after key elements of Western political theory, she discusses how one joins the social group of archaeologists and adheres to its attendant norms of social relations (“The Social Contract”, Ch. 2) ; the rules of reciprocity and of manipulation of hierarchical relations (“The Rule of Law”, Ch. 3) ; the three bureaucratic structures (*xitong*) that Chinese archaeologists work in : culture, education and academy, and the different strategies of obedient autonomy that are used within the specific contexts of each (“Separation of Powers”, Ch. 4) ; the use of stereotypes of class, schooling and regional background to establish similarity and to legitimate differences between actors (“Majority Rule”, Ch. 5) ; the agonistic relationship between urban archaeologists and rural peasants (“Interest Groups”, Ch. 6) ; the power of a minority of senior male scholars (“oligarchs”) over publication opportunities, research topics, excavation permits and foreign contacts, in contrast with the marginalization of women (“Minority Rights”, Ch. 7) ; and, finally, the inherent conservatism of the system of obedient autonomy, which almost everyone has a vested interest in perpetuating (“The Pursuit of Happiness”, Ch. 8).
- 5 *Obedient Autonomy* is a masterpiece of ethnography in the classical sense of the term : it elegantly draws an orderly and comprehensible picture out of a bewildering system of

social relations. But the drawback of such a brilliant synthesis is that it appears too perfect. What of those who are not good at manipulating this system? Evasdottir does not deal with widespread critical discourses among Chinese intellectuals who lament the Chinese system of *guanxi*, its complexity and alleged corruption, and see the Western model as an alternative trope of authentic, simple human relations based on pure merit. Indeed, her rather schematic contrasting of Chinese “orthopraxy” with Western “orthodoxy” almost reproduces such stereotypes, whereas another approach might see the interpenetration of both types of discourse and practice in China and the West.

- 6 Finally, while the author’s model of obedient autonomy can explain the marginal status of women within archaeological circles, her treatment of gender raises questions about the other side of the coin—the extent to which, through the strategic performance of the roles of daughter, mother, wife and lover, Chinese women exercise “obedient autonomy” through kinship, family and sexual relations. But this, of course, would be the subject of another study.