



Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Living Tree: The Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today*. by Tu Wei-Ming

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Source: *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Mar., 1997), pp. 205-206

Published by: Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3034421>

Accessed: 14-05-2019 01:42 UTC

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erski and Schuchat both give discursive accounts of the construction of memories out of local places and common experiences; in a second essay Climo describes how American Jews born after the Holocaust learn to accept the 'collective responsibility of remembering'. Not all the contributors heed Conrad's admonition that, 'In plucking the fruit of memory one runs the risk of spoiling its bloom'.

Donna Kerner contributes a detailed and imaginative ethnographic account of the revival of the *mregho* stick, and the performances associated with it, among the Chagga of Kilimanjaro. The inscribed stick served elders, in their roles as instructors in and upholders of morality, as a mnemonic, a sign of legitimacy and 'a schematic map that preserved the memory of how experience was to be interpreted and understood'. It had fallen into disuse but attempts are being made to 'remember' it again, and to recontextualize it for use in these present AIDS-threatened and morally disordered times. The other essays are mostly concerned with the ways in which individual and communal memories of past violence and oppression shape consciousness in the present and draw on data from Kenya (Swiderski), Guatemala (Fabri), Nova Scotia (Molyneaux), location camps for Japanese Americans during the second world war (Ishino) and, poignantly, Poles in exile (Teski). Andrea Smith contributes an elegant history of the 'Collective forgetting' by generations of Germans of the exploitation of cheap foreign guest workers. She relates the current outbursts of anti-foreigner violence, and the continuing harshness of German naturalization laws, to the unresolved conflict between national economic goals and the persistent myth of a unitary German nation, which itself depends on not remembering history.

In sum, there are plenty of excellent data here, but they do not all quite come together to make a thematic volume.

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WEI-MING, TU (ed.). *The living tree: the changing meaning of being Chinese today*. xviii, 295 pp., tables. Stanford: Univ. Press; Cambridge: Univ. Press, distributors, 1995. £25.00 (cloth), £9.95 (paper)

Earlier published as a special issue of *Daedalus* (Spring 1991) with two additional articles, this book caters for, yet manages to transcend, the current American preoccupation with China that is a curious mixture of admiration, aspiration, fear, orientalism and traditional missionary zeal. *The living tree* challenges students of China and the overseas Chinese to take a break from their research and contemplate afresh some of the old questions of Western sinology: what – if anything – makes Chinese culture unique; what are its competitive advantages and

disadvantages compared with Western cultures; who, and for what purpose, defines Chinese culture; and, especially, what is the future of Chinese culture and society?

The contributors to this volume are leading scholars in fields as wide apart as philosophy, literature, history, anthropology, sociology and ethnic studies; unsurprisingly, issues, methods and answers are often very different. Yet this is a sign of strength rather than weakness. The individual articles provide often excellent examples of the many approaches to China that are possible; the book as a whole makes a powerful argument for more interaction between China scholars working in often very different intellectual traditions. Unfortunately, there is not enough space to discuss all eleven articles in the book, and I will limit myself to some comments on the introductory essay of the editor that deals with the main issues most explicitly and controversially.

In 'Cultural China: the periphery as the center' editor Tu Wei-ming makes a bold attempt to map the Chinese world. According to Tu, cultural China consists of three 'cultural universes'. The first universe, the centre, is where the Chinese are in the majority, i.e. Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore. The second universe consists of the overseas Chinese communities, or diaspora as it is now often called. The third universe is made up of Chinese and non-Chinese intellectuals, writers and businesspersons whose ideas about China play a significant role in the understanding of China abroad. Cultural iconoclasm and political suppression since the May Fourth Movement have made the centre's role in defining Chineseness increasingly problematic. As a result, the periphery, that is the second and especially the third universes, will take the lead in making Chinese culture relevant to a rapidly modernizing world. Although Tu's article contains many acute observations about the social and political construction of Chineseness, this reader wondered whether Tu does not assign an unduly great role to intellectuals abroad in helping China get back on its feet again. Several thousand individuals living outside of China will and, I believe, ought not decide the future of more than one thousand million people. Similarly, Tu seems to belittle the contributions of 'iconoclastic' intellectuals in China itself who make what in his eyes is the fatal mistake of totally rejecting Chinese traditional culture.

Despite the variety of approaches represented in this book, most authors seem to agree on at least one point. The stereotypical image, still held by many Westerners and Chinese alike, that equates Chinese culture with a supposedly unchanging tradition untouched by non-Chinese, is grossly inadequate. Chinese culture can best be understood as the ever-changing answer of the state, Confucians, local elites, peasants, emigrants, students, merchants and

revolutionaries to a variety of challenges posed by the world beyond China: non-Chinese ethnic groups, foreign religions and, most importantly, Western military, economic and cultural imperialism. To this we may add the obvious point – which the book strangely enough seems very reluctant to make – that in this respect Chinese culture is indeed not different from

other cultures. A political, social or economic resource (or, sometimes, a liability) in the hands of fallible individuals and groups, culture is either negotiated or assumed, challenged or revered, rejected or carefully guarded against alien contamination.

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