



The Stranger and the Chinese Moral Imagination

Haiyan Lee

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In the last two decades, China has become a dramatically more urban society and hundreds of millions of people have changed residence in the process. Family and communal bonds have been broken in a country once known as "a society of kith and kin." There has been a pervasive sense of moral crisis in contemporary China, and the new market economy doesn't seem to offer any solutions.

This book investigates how the Chinese have coped with the condition of modernity in which strangers are routinely thrust together. Haiyan Lee dismisses the easy answers claiming that this "moral crisis" is merely smoke and mirrors conjured up by paternalistic, overwrought leaders and scholars, or that it can be simply chalked up to the topsy-turvy of a market economy on steroids. Rather, Lee argues that the perception of crisis is itself symptomatic of a deeper problem that has roots in both the Confucian tradition of kinship and the modern state management of stranger sociality.

This ambitious work is the first to investigate the figure of the stranger—foreigner, peasant migrant, bourgeois intellectual, class enemy, unattached woman, animal—across literature, film, television, and museum culture. Lee's aim is to show that hope lies with a robust civil society in which literature and the arts play a key role in sharpening the moral faculties and apprenticing readers in the art of living with strangers. In so doing, she makes a historical, comparative, and theoretically informed contribution to the on-going conversation on China's "(un)civil society."

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