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Lillian M. Li

Swarthmore College, lli1@swarthmore.edu

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Review

Reviewed Work(s): No Feast Lasts Forever by Wellington Koo and Isabella Taves

Review by: Lillian M. Li

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portance of having sons, discusses the question of multiple wives, and goes fairly quickly through the festivals of the year.

The second part of the work is devoted to communal customs: the festivals for the diverse deities and the cult of Confucius as well as Buddhist cults, the celebrations performed when a member of the community receives a literary degree, the election of village elders, traditional formal education, and other village institutions.

A reader who is familiar with similar works in Chinese and with Chinese customs often thinks that he is reading about Chinese customs. Indeed, the translator in many instances quotes classical Chinese texts which are the basis for Vietnamese customs as described in the book. In other places in the book, the reader gets the impression that what is described as a Vietnamese custom in reality may also be a Chinese custom, although not one practiced by all Chinese but one restricted to some parts of South China. Perhaps a later scholar may adduce contemporary Chinese source materials, especially from South China for comparison with the customs described in the book. Such a study could establish which of the customs are typical of Vietnam and have no counterpart in China. There are some, of course, especially in the field of village institutions. On the other hand, we should keep in mind that the learned author, thoroughly trained in classical Chinese literature and tradition, obviously has stressed what to him seemed to be "good." Therefore a person who wants to know all about Vietnamese customs should look into those studies which are based upon fieldwork in Vietnamese villages. We find the same in China: the classical scholars who wrote the sections on customs in the gazetteers or works in similar style tended to stress the Confucian traditions, while modern Chinese folklorists prefer to describe actual village customs.

The book, however, has still another aspect. After a description of a Vietnamese custom, the author often adds some evaluation: he discusses a similar European (French) custom and, not rarely, comes to the conclusion that the traditional Vietnamese custom is obsolete or backward, and the Western custom is better; here he exhibits a pragmatic attitude and the influence of French culture upon the Vietnam of his time. Again, this attitude has its parallel in China at about the same time, with the only difference being that the Western influence came mainly from the Anglo-Saxon world.

The translator has often added the Chinese characters to words in Sino-Vietnamese (in two appendices and in the text). The list is, unfortunately, not truly complete; there are also other terms which may not be Sino-Vietnamese but which clearly refer to a Chinese custom. The reader would have been made aware of such parallels if,

even in these cases, Chinese characters had been added. In the very extensive and valuable notes the author adduces an impressive array of French and Vietnamese studies to explain the text and to give additional material which greatly enhances the value of this study.

WOLFRAM EBERHARD
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

No Feast Lasts Forever. By MADAME WELLINGTON KOO, with ISABELLA TAVES. Pp. 313. New York: QUADRANGLE/THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK Co. 1975. \$12.50.

This is in many ways a silly, self-serving, and tedious book, but it is not without some redeeming features. It fulfills one's worst expectations about the super-rich while at the same time permitting one to indulge a certain curiosity about their profligate way of life. In its own way it is a social document, providing evidence about the position of women in wealthy Chinese families of the last generation, and indirectly enhancing our appreciation of the causes of the Chinese revolution. None of these results, however, was necessarily intended by the author.

She is anxious to impress upon her readers how as Oei Hui-lan, she was the daughter of "the richest and most powerful man in Southeast Asia," and as Madame Wellington Koo, she was the wife of China's leading statesman and "virtually number one lady of China." As the favorite daughter of the "Sugar-King" of Java, Oei Hui-lan led an enchanted fairy-tale childhood, indulged by both Mamma and Papa, who bought and discarded houses, jewels, and later, cars, as most people would tissue paper. Later, as the second wife of Wellington Koo, she accompanied him during his important and eventful diplomatic career in London, Peking, Paris, Washington, and points in between. She continued to buy houses, jewels, and Rolls-Royces, while meeting the rich, the titled, and the powerful. By her own account, she charmed them all.

All was not Camelot, however, as from a very early date her marriage showed signs of strain, and she and Wellington Koo spent long periods apart, often living on separate continents. In the 1950's he left her for another woman, whom the author to this day does not acknowledge to be her legitimate successor. It is this shrill and self-righteous twenty-year vendetta against her ex-husband and his new wife that dominates the second half of the book and makes it particularly unpleasant to read. Yet one cannot help feeling some genuine sympathy for Madame Koo's situation. Despite enormous wealth and privilege, her plight was that of all Chinese women of her generation. Her self-identity was found first through her father's wealth and then

through her husband's position. This riches-to-riches retrospective is thus a rather pathetic attempt to recapture an identity now lost. From the adventures of her father, who had eighteen concubines and forty-two acknowledged children, to the alleged infidelities of her husband, Madame Koo's life-history helps us to see how the "dragon-lady" model of Chinese females evolved out of necessity.

If all Chinese women of the last generation suffered under varying degrees of male tyranny, nevertheless it must be admitted that the rich suffered much more comfortably. Madame Koo's life presents an extreme example of the alienated and Westernized elite of China's treaty ports. In her case both wealth and geography separated her from the mainstream of Chinese life. While China suffered warlord and Japanese devastation in the 1930's, Madame Koo's main concerns were collecting jade and raising pure-bred Pekingese dogs. Later, in occupied France, her major trauma was the temporary loss of a trunk full of furs. No feast lasts forever, as the title aptly says, and no delusions should either.

LILLIAN M. LI
SWARTHMORE COLLEGE

The Quest for Meaning of Svāmī Vivekānanda: A Study of Religious Change. By GEORGE M. WILLIAMS. Pp. x + 148. Chico, California: NEW HORIZONS PRESS, 1974. \$7.95 cloth; \$3.95 paper.

This new study of Svāmī Vivekānanda's religious life and beliefs, in all their many stages, is a very useful addition to the books about him. Earlier biographies, and shorter articles on his religion, tend to present him in laudatory terms, or they give the orthodox Ramakrishna Movement views. This study is interested in him as an historical figure; it is both sympathetic and scholarly. It takes seriously the differences between sources, as for instance when Vivekānanda's own memories of his earlier beliefs contradict the contemporary report of the trustworthy *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. The book includes a chronological list of Vivekānanda's writings—a convenience for any historical study, since the *Collected Works* are grouped topically, with complete disregard for dates. Unfortunately, much in the *Collected Works* is undated, but the present list is a help.

The subtitle, "A Study of Religious Change," suggests the intention of the work, but presents certain difficulties to the reader. The early period seems less like a series of clearcut commitments, which the author would have us see, than a long agony of indecision, when the young Narendranath, as a member of the westernized Brahmo Samaj, was drawn to the orthodox Ramakrishna without being able to accept him as guru. Nevertheless the

study shows how many intellectual influences bore on Vivekānanda's developing religion, and makes it clear why he was slow in reaching even relative certainty.

One very important aspect of Vivekānanda's later religious life is strangely suppressed in the study: his devotion to the goddess Kali. Sister Nivedita, quoting Vivekānanda, again and again presents this worship as central in Vivekānanda's life, and in the *Collected Works* there is ample evidence of it. Williams acknowledges this in a long footnote, but tries to reduce its importance as merely "actual" in contrast to the "ideal" pattern of Vivekānanda's religion, which is Advaita. It seems doubtful that such a spontaneous part of his life can be so ignored, even if it presents an inconveniently dualistic view in an otherwise monistic structure.

The final, and perhaps the most interesting, part of the book presents Vivekānanda's Advaita. Materials for this section are spread throughout the *Collected Works*, and to have them brought into focus is most useful. The principles of the *Sanatana Dharma* present the thrust towards unity in epistemology, psychology, cosmology (where the unknowable nature of the Absolute is discussed), and eschatology. The points at which Vivekānanda differs from Śankara are noted. Williams finds the most original part of Vivekānanda's thought in his development of the ground for "Practical Vedanta." This calls for the justification of meaningful work in a world which, from the standpoint of the Absolute, was unreal. Vivekānanda's position takes unity, which can never be truly known in this world, as the norm by which all work of service to others must be judged. To most westerners this position may seem too paradoxical to be the basis for an ethic, but it is important for us to understand what has been so influential in India.

VIRGINIA CORWIN
HAMILTON, N. Y.

Essays in Idleness: The Tsurezuregusa of Kenko. Translated by DONALD KEENE. Pp. xxii + 213. New York and London: COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS. 1967. \$2.95, paper.

A paperback reprint of the 1967 hardcover edition.
DAVID R. KNECHTGES
UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

A Syllabus of Japanese Civilization. By H. PAUL VARLEY. Pp. ix + 98. New York and London: COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS. 1968, 1972. \$3.00.

Second edition of the syllabus, with some updating of the bibliography.

DAVID R. KNECHTGES
UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON