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Review Of "No Feast Lasts Forever" By W. Koo And I. Taves

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Review
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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 celebra-
tions performed when a member of the community
receives a literary degree, the election of village elders,
traditional formal education, and other village institu-
tions.

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that the traditional Vietnamese custom is obsolete or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 at-
titude 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-Viet-
namese 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.

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No Feast Lasts Forever. By Madame Wellington Koo,
$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 Wel-
lington 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 power-
ful. 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
shrift 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 un-
pleasant 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

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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
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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 Rama-

krishna 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 memo-
ries 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 Sanatkata 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.

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David R. Knechtges
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Second edition of the syllabus, with some updating of the bibliography.

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