

#### 4 “Kowtowing”



The Chinese word *ketou*, usually translated as “kowitz,” means literally “to knock one’s head” and refers to a bodily gesture in which one performs a kneeling bow and (at least in Qing dynasty court ritual) touches one’s head to the ground.<sup>1</sup> The sycophantic connotations of the English usage reflect Western misunderstandings of the *ketou* in imperial Chinese practice. James Hevia (1994:118) demonstrates the grip of this misinterpretation when he quotes a 1988 review of Bertolucci’s *The Last Emperor* in which even so preeminent a sinologist as the late John K. Fairbank describes the “full kowitz” performed in the opening scene as a “ritual of abject servitude.” Hevia traces Fairbank’s interpretation to misunderstandings of the *ketou* by eighteenth-century English diplomats and merchants.

Carma Hinton’s documentary, *Small Happiness*, filmed in another North China village during the 1980s, likewise presents the *ketou* in a less than positive light.<sup>2</sup> In the wedding scene a relative of the groom reads a list of the groom’s ancestors’ names aloud. The bride and groom, standing side by side, kneel on a mat after each name is read. The groom kneels without assistance. In contrast the bride, though seemingly willing to kneel on her own, is pushed down repeatedly. A rowdy crowd of the groom’s relatives, friends, and neighbors watches, talks, and laughs. At the conclusion of the scene, Hinton cuts to a series of interviews with young local women. They assert that there is little choice but to *ketou* in one’s wedding ceremony. If one didn’t *ketou* voluntarily and quickly, one would be pushed.

The scene is ambiguous. However, as part of a movie about the difficulties of rural Chinese women, Westerners might easily read these *ketou* as forced displays of servility. Indeed, in classes where I presented the film many students did just that. Certainly the violence of such forced *ketou* served patriarchy by usurping the bride’s initiative. However, I would argue that the “abject servitude” interpretation of *ketou*

is inappropriate even in this case. While not advocating forced *ketou* at weddings nor diminishing the difficulties of Chinese rural women, I would like to suggest that this widespread judgment of the *ketou* properly explains neither why modern northern Chinese villagers, both male and female, perform *ketou* on many occasions, nor why brides are averse to performing *ketou* at their weddings.

This chapter presents the *ketou* of 1988–90 Fengjia as a type of *guanxi*-producing practice that enables villagers to structure and restructure subjectivities. I suggest that the *ketou* is an act of social creativity rather than self-destruction, that its performance empowers the one who performs it rather than displaying his or her abject servitude, and that it is more often performed by socially confident individuals than the weak.

Let me begin by reiterating the terminology of Sun Lung-kee (1987), described in the introduction. For Sun, the *xin* or heart/mind and locus of individual motivation is always defined socially through the *ganqing* of *guanxi*. In addition to constituting individual heart/minds, *guanxi* also generate the boundaries (ever shifting) of the group of people whose “magnetic field of human feeling” (*renqingde cilichang*) constitute individual heart/minds. In short, *guanxi* generate both the individual and the social; it is through the managing of *guanxi* that *ketou* subjectify.

#### *Ketou* in Fengjia

In 1989, Fengjia residents distinguished two types of bodily decorum: a bow (*jugong*) and *ketou*. A bow involved bending from the waist while standing. A *ketou* was a bow of the head while kneeling on one or both knees. Though any kneeling bow counted as a *ketou*, on at least two occasions I saw elder villagers do a fuller *ketou*, which included three bows in each of three directions. When asked why younger villagers didn’t do this style of *ketou*, one old man responded “because they never learned how,” an explanation that can be accepted literally as far as it goes.

Before 1949 there were no bows in Fengjia, only *ketou*. When the CCP came to power they wanted to end arranged marriages in the countryside. As part of this effort, they encouraged changes in the wedding ceremony itself, including the substitution of bows for *ketou*. In the (re)invention of ritual life that occurred after the restrictions of the Cultural Revolution ended, villagers continued the use of bows in wedding ceremonies. Though it no longer demanded the substitution of bows for

*ketou*, the post-Mao state still pronounced arranged marriages illegal. Thus, parents still needed to claim the degree to which they controlled their children's spouse selection was not "arranging" a marriage.<sup>3</sup> By asserting that the marriage was a matter of "free choice," bows by the bride and groom (as opposed to *ketou*) helped make this claim.

Other than the claim that bows make about "free marriage," I view post-1978 bows and *ketou* as similar. Both constructed *guanxi* in a similar manner, and both were seen by local nonpeasants as "feudal" practices. Both count as a type of *bai*, a verb I translate as "to embody respect for." In a wedding the bride and groom *bai* various groups of people by bowing; on other occasions people *bai* by performing *ketou*.

In Fengjia, I observed *ketou* or bows on four occasions: ancestral offerings, funerals, weddings, and the Chinese New Year (aka spring festival, *chunjie*). I also observed *ketou* in regional Buddhist temples located outside of Fengjia. Each temple had statues of its own combination of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and arhats. Those wanting to create a *guanxi* with a specific Buddha, bodhisattva, or arhat usually approached the image of that being, knelt down on a pad provided for the purpose of performing *ketou*, performed a full *ketou*, and placed some money in a nearby donation box. In brief, in Buddhist temples people combined *ketou* with gift giving in a ritual practice specific to the production of *guanxi* with Buddhist beings. As Ahern (1981) describes in her discussion of Taiwanese religion, humans manage relationships with "gods, ghosts and ancestors" through the same methods that they manage *guanxi* with each other.

In the ancestral offerings performed in 1988–90 Fengjia,<sup>4</sup> one or more adult members of a family, sometimes accompanied by a male child, walked out to a point near the site of that family's ancestral grave. They usually brought a basket containing yellow paper and some food (cooked noodles or dumplings) and liquor, drew a circle with a cross in the middle, wrapped some of the food in the paper and lit it, knelt down and performed *ketou* while saying the relational kinship names of those ancestors who were on their minds. After the paper was burnt, they got up, poured out some liquor, and scattered some of the remaining food on the crossed circle, and left.

Funerals were long and complicated. Here it is enough to note that in 1988–90 Fengjia most funerals had a time for male friends and relatives to *ketou* in family groupings in front of a memorial image of the deceased, and a time to *ketou* collectively at the place where the ashes were buried. In addition, the morning after the funeral the immediate

family of the deceased (men and women) usually went door to door through the entire village performing a *ketou* to whoever happened to be at home at each house. This latter occasion was the only time I heard of elders presenting a *ketou* to youth. Close relatives usually visited the grave again and performed *ketou* three weeks, five weeks, one hundred days, and one year after the funeral.

In marriage ceremonies there could be both bows and *ketou*. During most 1988–90 Fengjia wedding ceremonies, an offering table was set up in the courtyard of the groom's family's home. Usually the father of the groom (or some other elder male relative if the father were dead) first performed *ketou* before the table. Then the text of the wedding ceremony was read: "Embody respect for heaven and earth, embody respect for your ancestors, embody respect for your father and mother, embody respect for your friends and relatives, embody respect for each other" (*bai tiandi, bai zuxian, bai dieniang, bai qinqi pengyou, huxiang bai*). In descriptions of modern wedding ceremonies by older men and women, after each "embody respect for" the bride and groom should bow before the offering table. However, in the eight ceremonies I saw, the bride never bowed before the offering table, while some of the grooms bowed and others did not.

In Fengjia no one forced either the groom or bride to bow. After the ceremony was read, firecrackers were lit and the couple was considered married, *ketou* or not. In general there was no fuss over the issue. However, in one ceremony there appeared to be considerable tension. In this case the groom's aged paternal grandmother was still alive. Out of respect to her, throughout the day the family included in the wedding every custom and symbolic display the old woman could remember. Other guests constantly commented how they had never seen such and such before and had no idea what it meant. When the time for the ceremony came, the old woman first burned some paper and then did a full *ketou*; her son, the groom's father, then also did a full *ketou* (figure 14). However, as the ceremony was read, the bride not only did not bow but, by wearing sunglasses and folding her arms, managed to look defiant rather than embarrassed as most brides do. The groom also just stood there, but in contrast appeared mortified, constantly glancing back and forth between his bride and father. Perhaps in this wedding, because they were so consciously inventing tradition, the family elders especially hoped the young couple would bow.

The final *ketou* discussed here are the *bainian* (embodying respect on Chinese New Year, aka spring festival). On spring festival in 1989 most



Figure 14 Groom's father performing ketou at wedding.

families got up before dawn. Upon rising, the younger family members performed *ketou* to members of the older generation in the family. Then, at most houses, *jiaozi* (dumplings) were cooked, firecrackers set off, some paper with *jiaozi* in it was burnt for the ancestors, and breakfast was eaten. After breakfast, people walked around the village to *bainian* (i.e., perform *ketou*) to anyone in the village who was older by both years and generations. People went around the village both singly and in groups. Except for mothers with small or infant male children, these groups were segregated by sex. Unmarried women and girls (who were expected to marry out of the village) did not participate.

I spent the Chinese New Year in the house of an elderly woman who, whether one calculated by age or generations, was one of the oldest people in the village. Hundreds of people came to *ketou* that morning. The activity ranged from ceremonious to rushed and superficial. One old man, almost as old as this woman in years but a generation younger, came over and talked for almost an hour (visitors who came during this interval also performed *ketou* to him) before performing an elaborate *ketou*. On the other extreme was a group of about twenty high school boys. The leaders rushed in and said "we've come to *bainian*," knelt down, and quickly left. The rest, unable to fit in the room, milled about the courtyard and in some cases even failed to *ketou*.

Although most of the villagers came over to *bainian*, some did not. One man who failed to appear was a township official who, though he

held a "peasant" household registration (*hukou*), didn't consider himself a peasant. Significantly, when his own sons married, this man did not include those parts of the ceremony that he considered "feudal," including the parts where bowing or *ketou* would take place. In this instance, the official was refusing to participate in a peasant subculture (discussed in chapter 9) of which he considered the *ketou* a part.

During the several days after spring festival most Fengjia residents went to other villages to *bainian* their elder affinal relatives. They brought food gifts, performed a *ketou*, and were treated to a banquet. In all of these spring festival *ketou*, almost as soon as the performer touched his or her knee to the ground, the person to whom the *ketou* was directed urged the performer to get up quickly (*kuai qilai*).

### *Ketou* as *Guanxi*-Producing Ritual

Of the *ketou* in the ancestral offering, Teacher Feng said, "Before it was a superstition, now it generates a meaning/feeling" (*Guoqu shi mixin, xianzai biaooshi yige yisi*). This statement, though apparently simple, says much about what *ketou* and ritual were in 1988–90 Fengjia. In earlier times, ancestor worship was efficacious because of the agency of dead ancestors. In the late 1980s, when most dismissed (at least to me) the agency of dead people, the *ketou* of the past was called a superstition. The *ketou* of the 1980s' ancestral offering may have copied earlier forms, but its significance was new.

The second part of the statement is more complex. The term, "to generate a meaning/feeling" was also used to describe what one did when giving a gift. What gift giving, the *ketou*, and ritual all had in common was that they were all types of *li* (gift as *liwu*, *ketou* and ritual as forms of *lijie*) and were all ways of working on (creating, maintaining, and improving) *guanxi*. Since *guanxi* were matters of both *ganqing* and social and material obligation, the translation "meaning/feeling" is necessary. The meaning/feeling generated both the idea of what the material obligation involved in the relationship was or should have been, and the *ganqing* of the relationship.

Others described the *ketou* as an embodiment of *jingyi*, a word commonly translated as "respect." However, this translation is accurate only if one emphasizes that this respect is not abstract admiration, but rather a *ganqing* that accompanies the social and material obligation extant within a concrete relationship. During the Cultural Revolution, those with class labels of rich peasant or landlord were prohibited from per-

forming *ketou* at the funerals of poor and middle peasants. If *jingyi* meant only an abstract sort of admiration, as we often take respect to mean, then during the Cultural Revolution landlords might well have been forced to *ketou* at poor peasants' funerals. However, this respect implied a concrete relationship, and the embodiment of it in a *ketou* helped to constitute that relationship. The CCP's ban of landlord *ketou* at poor peasant funerals was an attempt to prevent the formation of (and deny the existence of) cross-class relationships.

The *ketou*'s meaning/feeling or respect constituted relationships and hence, following Sun Lung-kee, both individual heart/minds and "magnetic fields of human feeling." As such, performing a *ketou* could be a powerful act, and in Fengjia it was more likely an assertion of social initiative than an expression of "abject servitude." In fact, several villagers described both the prohibition of landlord *ketou* during the Cultural Revolution and the "tradition" of allowing only men to *ketou* at funerals as restrictions on privileges of the relatively powerless.

Understanding the *ketou* as a type of *li* that worked on *guanxi* and thus on both individual and collective subjects allows us to consider exactly how *ketou* constituted the social world. I submit that *ketou* formed *guanxi* between people by declaring them to be members of the same (hierarchical) group. Recall that *ketou* during spring festival were divided into separate periods for immediate family, village, and affinal relatives. This partition allowed the separate formation of each group. Unmarried women did not perform *ketou* at the village level because it was not clear what village they would belong to after marriage. Performing a *ketou* to one's dead ancestors (in the 1980s deprived of extrawordly agency), though clearly also a form of mourning and an expression of filial piety (*xiao*), was an affirmation of the relationship of the one performing *ketou* to all living members of the family (i.e., the descendants). Likewise, performing a *ketou* to the recently deceased at a funeral was both mourning, filiality, and a reconstitution of the relationships among all of those who performed *ketou* at the same funeral.

At weddings, brides moved from one family to another. Though women usually maintained strong ties with their natal families, at her wedding a bride's primary *guanxi* began shifting from her parents' family to her husband's. At weddings the bride theoretically should have bowed with her husband five times (to heaven and earth, to the ancestors, to mother and father, to friends and relatives, and to each other). If carried out, these five bows would have constituted the bride's relationship to her husband in five ways,<sup>5</sup> announcing them both to be mem-

bers of the same five subgroups: the entire social world (*tiandi*), the husband's patrilineal family extended indefinitely in time both toward the past and future (*zuxian*), the immediate family of the husband and his father and mother (*dieniang*), the living extended family of the husband projected outward in space by affinal ties and friendships (*qinqi pengyou*), and the immediate family to be constituted by the new bride and groom (*huxiang bai*). The groom's father's *ketou* before the offering table likewise reconstituted his relationships within the patrilineal family.

The hesitancy of brides to *ketou* at their weddings was a very ambiguous act. Even within the context of a single wedding, multiple interpretations are possible. Most said that brides didn't bow at weddings because they were embarrassed (*buhaoyisi*). Some said this embarrassment itself was a "traditional" disposition for brides to assume at weddings. Chapter 9 addresses this sort of emphasis on tradition. Here consider the only woman I met who, by self-assuredly bowing at her wedding, "violated" this "tradition." The young woman in question was well educated (a high school graduate), a hard and able worker, handsome, and outgoing. She said in a boastful but jocular manner, "If you have no shortcomings, you're not afraid to bow even if they [i.e., your new family and friends] are all strangers." Her interpretation again portrays the *ketou* as more of a social initiative than a burden. Only the self-confident dared to boldly assert new relationships with people they didn't know well.

However, other interpretations of wedding bows (or lack thereof) are possible. The timing of the husband's father's *ketou* and resultant reconstitution of the extended patrilineal family was important. By performing a *ketou* just before the ceremony proper, the father focused attention on the bride's changing of membership in patrilineal units. In another interpretation, the wedding bows could then be seen as asserting that the bride was related to her original family only as an affine and not as a member of the same patrilineal unit. A bride's refusing to bow could be seen as resisting this assertion.

Recall that the day before a daughter was to be married, her family usually sponsored a dowry party in which the friends and relatives of the bride's family came over and gave presents both to the bride's family and for the bride's dowry. Because they were about to "lose" a daughter, this event was generally a very sad time for the bride's parents.<sup>6</sup> Immediately after spending a day with parents expressing their sadness at "losing" their daughter, a bride may not have been up to generating the

meaning/feeling that would reconstitute her family membership. To do so would have been a slap in the face to her parents.

Here, again, Judd's (1989) discussion of the competing claims that a woman's natal and marital families make on her are relevant. A new bride's heart/mind is almost structurally guaranteed to be troubled by this contradiction. Stockard (1989:22) likewise explores this tension in the Canton Delta, while Blake (1978, personal communication) suggests that in southern China the bride's acting embarrassed, singing marriage laments, and refusing to *ketou* were standard parts of the wedding ceremony that ritually expressed her ambivalence toward leaving her natal family.

In any case, whether one interprets a specific case of reluctance to bow at a wedding as the embodiment of a "traditional" disposition, as a hesitancy to assert one's new relationships, or as a resistance to the negation of one's natal (*niangjia*) relationships, the refusal to bow was only temporary. After a period of time that allowed for a reconstruction of their heart/minds, new brides began to participate in rituals that required performing *ketou* before their husbands' families' — now also their own families' — ancestors.

Every Fengjia resident participated in particular (though openly defined) social groups, particular "magnetic fields of human feeling." Contradictions among these groups could manifest themselves in a hesitancy to *ketou*. The organization of spring festival *ketou* (different times for constituting relationships with different groups), the five separate bows during the wedding ceremony, and the refusal of brides to *ketou* at their weddings all point to these distinct positions.

So far, I have described the *ketou* as a form of *li* that worked by re-creating the membership of social groups, thus acting upon both the group as a whole and the relationships among members of groups. However, performing a *ketou* to live people (as opposed to ancestors and the recently deceased), added another dimension. Here, Bourdieu's concepts of timing and disposition clarify (1977:5-15). When, during the village-level spring festival *ketou*, an old man spent an hour talking with an old woman and then performed a full *ketou*, he not only affirmed a *guanxi* as a fellow villager like any other fellow villager but also worked on his personal *guanxi* with her. Likewise, when members of the younger generation of an immediate family performed *ketou* to their elders, and the elders urged them to quickly rise, individual *guanxi* were mended. Hence, the following statement made to me by a township-level official at a spring festival banquet: "When a daughter-

in-law performs *ketou* to her mother-in-law over spring festival, and the mother-in-law tells her to quickly rise, all of the year's contradictions can be resolved in one minute, the family can reunite and resume production." With proper timing, the dispositions that *ketou* revealed could be artfully employed to regenerate *guanxi*. In the book *Shandong Folk Customs (Shandong Minsu)*, local ethnologists offer a similar explanation for the continued practice of *bainian* in rural Shandong: "the reason the activity of *bainian* continues is that it is able to deepen *ganqing*, eliminate estrangement, and adjust interpersonal *guanxi*" (Fang et al. 1988:6). As in other practices of *guanxi* production, the generation of good *ganqing* re-created specific interpersonal *guanxi*.