

## **Psyching a Paragon: A Sinitic Excursion in Practical Ethics**

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### Abstract

*This essay discusses ethical issues in biographical historiography through the case of Huang Chunyao (1605–1645). Addressed in particular are the aversion of disciplinary history to psychological interpretation, and the questioning of selfhood and empathy in postmodern humanistic discourse. Suggestions for dealing responsibly with such issues are drawn from post-Freudian psychology, cognitive neuroscience, and ethical philosophy.*

**Keywords:** *Huang Chunyao, biography, ethics, psychohistory, selfhood, self psychology, historical empathy, Ricoeur*

On August 24, 1645, forces aiding the Manchu-Qing conquest of the Lower Yangzi region of China breached the eastern wall of Jiading City, which was being defended by local people loyal to the crumbling Ming dynasty (1368–1644). One figure, Huang Chunyao (1605–1645), who had emerged from seclusion to take charge of holding the Western Gate, realized that the cause was lost. Moreover, he was devastated by (mistaken) news that his father had been killed in the fighting. Huang's companions encouraged him to escape, but he staunchly refused to do so and, reinforced by his much younger brother, Huang Yuanyao (1624–1645), made his way to a Buddhist abbey with the clear intent of committing suicide. The resident monk and a bevy of associates who had followed Huang there failed to dissuade him. Yuanyao helped his elder brother bolt the door against the wailing crowd, and Huang the senior set about composing his final statement, which acknowledged his irrepressible heart-and-mind but lamented his inability to serve the court or make adequate

progress in personal conduct, scholarship, or moral-ethical learning. Having finished writing, he bowed to the north (the direction of the Ming capital) and forthwith hanged himself from a roof beam. The younger brother, seeing that the elder's cap had fallen off, placed it back properly on his head and then hanged himself at his brother's side. In the chaotic conditions of the Qing massacre of Jiading, during which at least half of the Huang brothers' cohort also perished, Chunyao's body could not be recovered for seven days. But, unlike the remains of his dead comrades, which had disintegrated into maggot-ridden piles of bloody flesh, Huang's face remained natural and his body uncorrupted. Blood from the two brothers' throats, however, had penetrated the proximate wall of their death chamber to a depth of about one inch and was visible there for a long time afterward (Hou Xuanhong, 1891; Chen Shude, 1879; Dennerline, 1981: chaps. 8–10).

Such was the prime stuff of biographies of Confucian martyrs in imperial China: loyalty to, and self-sacrifice for, one's state and society; paternal and fraternal filiality; single-minded, unwavering commitment to the righteous course; appropriate modesty in self-assessment; death by means that did minimal violence to the body (a gift from one's parents); touches of hagiographical postmortem detail. The Buddhist location is mentioned incidentally, as the only 'clean place' Huang could find nearby; the nameless monk, acknowledged to be an acquaintance, is nevertheless deployed as someone Huang can berate for not understanding correct principles. All the necessary ingredients are here for elevating to paragon status a man who in life had been well known as an essayist, poet, scholar and calligrapher, but especially as a stringent Confucian ethicist, unsparingly critical of himself and others in matters of morality and conscience. This well cultivated man, the accounts of Huang's last days imply, embraced righteous death as naturally as a thirsty man seeks water.

After Huang Chunyao's dramatic suicide, no one who had known him personally would write about him in such a way as to detract from his apotheosized image. And as the Qing period (1644–1911) went on, the encomiums grew ever more fulsome—encouraged by an eighteenth-century imperial ploy to desensitize Ming martyrdom by transvaluing righteous death for one's dynasty—*any* past dynasty and especially the current one, the Qing (Struve, 1998: chap. 3). Although several editions of Huang's collected writings were published during the Qing period, not until the last ones, of 1881 and

1891, were even a few items included that offer glimpses of his initial reluctance to actively resist the Manchus. Left unpublished except in carefully excised snippets was Huang's last surviving diary, from two and one-half months in the spring of 1644, which would have revealed the painful withdrawal, aporia, self-doubt and depression that he experienced, as well as the degree to which he sought spiritual solutions in Chan (Zen) Buddhism.

Specialists today are beginning to show the extent and nature of literati involvement with Buddhism in the late Ming. But such involvement did not escape charges of heterodoxy in Huang's day, and during the subsequent Qing period it was predominantly disparaged as symptomatic of decay in Ming elite culture. Thus, when the surviving text of the diary was published in 1925 under the title *Huang Zhongjie gong jia shen riji* (Diary of 1644 by the Loyal and Principled Sir Huang), the editor-publisher, like his Qing predecessors, commended Huang in a Confucian tone for the strenuousness of his self-cultivation without mentioning what the diary makes obvious: the importance of Chan mind-control techniques in Huang's desperate search for equanimity in distressing times.

My study of Huang Chunyaoyao's diary, initially out of interest in seventeenth-century Chinese 'dream culture' because of its occasional dream reports, eventually resulted in two publications, one on Huang's struggles with his times and himself (Struve, 2009), and one on the dynamics of cultural memory as manifested in biographies of Huang and the vagaries of his diary's transmission during the Qing period (Struve, 2013). These writings, however, were not produced without certain ethical and methodological trepidations on my part, which the remainder of this essay attempts to share, along with some philosophical ideas that I have found useful in dealing with those issues.<sup>1</sup>

### **Cause for Pause**

For a professional, academic historian of late-imperial China, Huang's diary is an irresistible source. The daily entries not only reveal Huang's deeply subjective self-reflections, memories and dreams in direct relation to his textual studies, social interactions, and correspondence with other literati,

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<sup>1</sup> Much of my thinking in this vein was motivated by participation in an interdisciplinary faculty seminar at the Poynter Center for the Study of Ethics and American Institutions, Indiana University, Bloomington, in 2006–2007. I am grateful to the Center for that opportunity and to the other seminar fellows for our challenging and stimulating discussions.

they also cumulatively exhibit a gradual shift of Huang's principal spiritual identification away from Neo-Confucianism toward Chan. More so through the diary than through his posthumously edited *wenji* (collected writings), one can purport to show *how things really were* with an important personage and, moreover, partake of the modern joy in dismantling icons. Why, then, might one hesitate to proceed with such a 'project exposé'?

After all, Huang has been dead for a very long time, and there is no family trust to contend with. Why eschew the handy advantage of the remote historical biographer who does not need to worry about invasively affronting a live subject or doing injury to the living memories of heirs? Most people, anyway, think that real Confucianism, which Huang's life and death are taken to represent, itself expired in the early twentieth century along with the imperial-dynastic political system with which it was bound up. Moreover, a modern biographer might find little personal affinity with the rather cold, self-absorbed Huang Chunyao and thus feel no compulsion to treat him deferentially. But such underlying negativity can lead to interpretive errors. For example, I long suspected rigid Confucian social bias in favour of the legal wife's sons as the reason why Huang often recorded edifying exchanges with his full, 'same-womb' brother, Yuanyao—nineteen years his junior but recently 'capped' as an adult gentleman—while never mentioning his two half-brothers, born to his father by a concubine. That is, until I ran across evidence that the half-brothers were still quite young boys (Hou Kaiguo, 1891: 1a). Therefore they fell under 'household affairs', which generally were not considered appropriate subjects for a scholar's self-cultivation diary. In such ways as this, Huang Chunyao initiated me into the issues of empathy and the lack thereof in addressing a biographical subject.

Another deterrent to proceeding with 'project exposé' for a twenty-first-century Western historian might be the diary's intensity of introspection, redoubled by Huang's reflections on his dreams. This would render inescapable a serious attempt at the most invasive approach of all, psychological interpretation, when so-called 'psychohistory' has long been 'in a grand canyon of intellectual disrepute' and the discipline of history has for even longer been anti-psychological (Hunt, 2002: 338–47, quote 339). The following diary entry, representing key themes, may serve to briefly convey the flavor of the source:

At night I dreamed that an animal resembling a human was before me. I queried [the creature] and it said, 'I am a *xingxing*'. [Though it] could speak, this did not distinguish it from the birds and beasts. If [a man] is like this, he cannot accomplish great things; muddling through the days, how does he differ from a *xingxing*? This was a warning from the spiritual light in me. (Huang, 1925: 34a)

To the sinologist, this dream obviously recalls a passage in one of the Confucian Five Classics that Huang recently had been consulting, the *Liji* (Ritual record), in which a type of large ape, traditionally thought to have limited speech abilities like a parrot, is used to distinguish people who just 'ape' being human from people who really fulfill their human potential by embodying ritual wholeness ('Quli' sec., pt. 1). Not from the *Liji* but from Huang's own psyche comes the concern about muddling along and wasting the time one has in life (Huang having just reached the age of forty) to attain the goal of perfectly integrating the mind-and-heart (*xin*) with the Ultimate (whether conceived in Confucian or Buddhist terms). Short of this, he would not fulfill Heaven's intent in giving him life.

As the Ming political fabric had become frayed by corruption and factionalism, Huang had felt more acutely than many of his peers the contradiction between one Confucian injunction: to serve the state (thereby bringing honour to one's family and social cohort), and another Confucian injunction: to withdraw from public affairs when times were too compromising (thereby preserving the purity of one's heart and mind for other good purposes and for a better day). He was not unaware that a powerful force of ego persistently sharpened the conflict he felt—one that reached critical proportions in the winter of 1643–1644 when, having finally fulfilled the decades-long expectations of family members and patrons, he passed the metropolitan examinations at a high level but, because of endemic political dysfunction, he was not given an official post. The diary, thus, represents a period in Huang's life of determination to belatedly forge an independent spiritual identity coupled with painful anxieties of self-doubt.

Two matters—the achievement of calming yet action-liberating spiritual unity, and keeping up with the life-course expectations of learned

gentlemen<sup>2</sup>—are pursued so repetitively and unself-forgivingly in the diary as to indicate genuine mental crisis in a man of a compulsive psychological profile. In a typical entry, for instance, Huang likens his lack of progress to punting a boat upstream against a rushing current: one inch forward, one foot back. Still finding his wrong points many and right points few, he concludes: ‘Truly my mind is sick’ (Huang, 1925: 11a–b). Even in a period especially marked by writings of self-stricture (Wu, 1979), Huang’s diary evinces unusual degrees of mental suffering and frustration, beyond what one would expect from reading later accounts of his life which refer only in generalities to his arduous self-demands. Could this be adequately explored for a modern readership without misapplying modern psychological assumptions, without impugning a culture that lauded moral-ethical introspection, and without portraying a scrupulous man as deranged?

For most historians, the revelation of complexities in the past is an absolute virtue in the service of an axiomatic cause that overrides other considerations. But how does this self-assigned mission to reveal the past differ from the contemporary journalist’s often questionable claim to serve the public’s ‘right to know’? Or the literary biographer’s right to exercise imaginative, artistic license with the documentable facts of someone’s life? To be ethically cogent, the questions should be posed in terms of goods, not rights. What might come from scholarly exposure of Huang’s inner struggles and his affair with heterodoxy, apart from sustaining the academic publishing enterprise? Not everyone readily accedes to the views of Anne Sexton’s biographer: that it is meaningless to ask what the preferences of dead people might be about biographical disclosures; and that ‘all records left by the dead, whether intentionally or unintentionally, are a legacy with absolute value...[as] ‘cultural property’’ (Middlebrook, 1996: 127–28). The property of *whose* culture, one might ask? Moreover, Huang Chunyao was no Anne Sexton.

But then, was it not Huang himself who wrote the diary, and Huang himself who shared the diary with his gentlemen friends in a mutual-support group, the Straight Talk Club (Zhiyan she), which he himself helped to initiate? Nobody of his social class or literary stature would show any piece of writing to

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<sup>2</sup> For a representative lecture on the decade-by-decade prescriptions for personal progress in cultivated gentlemen, based on Confucius’s review of his own life’s progression in the *Analects*, by a somewhat younger contemporary of Huang Chunyao, see Wei Xiangshu, 1996: 642–43.

any peer except in awareness that it might be published some day. What's more, Huang prided himself on setting his moral-ethical learning and self-explorations before others, implicitly challenging them to best him on the harrowing path toward sagehood.<sup>3</sup> Was not the diary just another form of this quasi-public performance?

Two problems arise here: Huang surely had some idea of how contemporaries and his *conceivable posterity* would respond to his experiences and confessions, but he could hardly anticipate an *inconceivable posterity* in twenty-first century Euro-America. In other words, he was not performing *for us*. Second, there is evidence that Huang actually was quite chary of showing his personal writings to others, even his close disciples, and that he routinely discarded many of his notes and compositions. By 1644 he had been a dedicated diarist for ten years, yet he never had shown any of his earlier diaries to anyone, and even the second half of the last, extant diary does not seem to have been shared with Club members. Despite—or perhaps because of—his public self-promotion as a stringent ethicist, Huang was, as we would say, a very private person. Close associates knew this, and those who survived him debated about what to include in the first edition of his collected works. The diary, clearly known to them, was set aside (Struve, 2013: 16–17). Perhaps they sensed that the dead as well as the living can be 'vulnerable subjects' (Couser, 2004) and that when they die in frenetic, turbulent circumstances without any chance to edit or cull their writings, their vulnerability is increased. Woe truly betides the ghosts of those whose lexical traces reach the eyes of unsympathetic biographers.

But we don't really believe in ghosts anymore. So what or who gets hurt? Should we care that the venerable tradition of Confucian exemplars gets hurt? Actually, I argue, we should. For one thing, Confucianism is far from being a dead creed. Twentieth-century 'New Confucianism' has constituted an impressive philosophical movement, and various East Asian governments have been touting Confucian values to shore up social order. While such an identification may seem superficial compared to that in the past, many people in the 'Greater China' culturesphere are quite proud nowadays of their Confucian heritage. Moreover, we should not disparage people's need for

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<sup>3</sup> Huang's best-known works of this nature, the *Wushi lu* (Record of learning from others) and *Zijian lu* (Record of self-monitoring), are available in most editions of his collected writings, a list of which can be found in Struve, 2009: Appendix B.

heroes, saints and other inspiring models—for ‘biography as a brassière’ (White, 1995: 220; Barnes, 1984: 136). Only when such figures are portrayed simplistically or unidimensionally, without their full-bodied humanity, do the means fail to serve the best ends.

A particular difficulty arises, however, when psychological dissection seems needed to capture that full-bodied humanity, especially the inner sources of doubt-ridden but sustained religious quests. Adherents of various belief systems often prefer to think that what they believe in has its own power to compel extraordinary conduct in aspirants who really grasp it. The suggestion that people are attracted to certain creeds, and partake of them in certain ways, because of idiosyncratic psychological dispositions undermines cherished assumptions about the universality of spiritual forces. Not only might the subject be reduced to ‘nothing but’ a psychopathology, his or her religion, as well, might be reduced to nothing but a set of psycho-prostheses. Skirting these pitfalls, presenting Huang, through his struggles, as *more than* either his neuroses or his creeds, required, in addition to historical knowledge of Huang’s milieu, an appreciation of the moral-ethical and religious ideas on which he fixated, as well as some insights from personality psychology that proved both appropriate to Huang and compatible with the discourse of his era (Struve, 2009: 357). The latter, however, encountered resistance from reviewers.

### **The Inferior Interior Complex**

Unfortunately, in my view, the past half-century in Western historiography has, on one hand, ignored, evaded, or denied the possibility of knowing about individual interiority, or, on the other, has tackled it with catastrophic psychoanalytical overreach and dogmatism. During the early postwar years the discipline of sociology valorized the empirical, especially quantitative, study of sociopolitical groups rather than individuals. In Chinese studies this gave rise to the first systematic analysis of late-imperial elite social mobility using records of the all-important civil service examinations (Ho, 1962), in which certain facts about Huang Chunyao—his patrimony and patrons, his eventual success, after decades of self-subjection to the examination cells, the devastating denial to him of an official appointment—could only be ciphers. With growth in enthusiasm for the ‘history of mentalities’, concern eventually was expressed over people’s ‘lived experience’, but primarily its crystallization in social, cultural and political institutions. And a thematic approach called



‘emotionology’ or ‘emotions history’ was proposed to study the attitudes or standards that social groups maintain toward emotions and their expression (Stearns & Stearns, 1985, 1988). As cultural history, inspired by anthropological paradigms, gained ascendance, the ‘history of sensibilities’ succeeded to purview over people’s feelings as they are expressed through imagistic and symbolic patterns in the target culture and period, taking evidence like Huang Chunyao’s diary as linguistic documents, not as direct records of experience (Wickberg, 2007: 661–62, 675). In other words, there has been a shift in historiographical style from social-historical scholarship that simply did not find the study of individuals productive, to cultural-historical scholarship that attends to individuals as vectors of culture but thinks that any aspiration to probe an informant’s inner being should be checked at the seminar door.

Underlying this shift, of course, has been the poststructural ‘turn’. Fundamentally questioning the pretence of one mind to peer into another mind—indeed, questioning the very idea of minds as entities, squadrons of structuralists-cum-poststructuralists have exposed the idea of a pristine, first-person, core consciousness as a peculiarly Western fiction. With this postmodern exposure of the ultimate non-reality of essential human-being, the ‘modern self’ of individual autonomy, agency, creativity and self-actualization became a period-piece, an artifact of a by-going age, amenable to being queried about its wherefores and guises from a new, higher platform of awareness.<sup>4</sup> The intent was to show that the stories we tell about the past, the causalities we impute, are forms and lineaments dexterously imposed on discontinuous, scattered, ‘archaeologically’ discovered shards in a manner not really distinguishable from the writing of historical fiction (Kramer, 1989). Thus, the pretence of biography to capture another person narratologically is simply the grand-narrative compulsion exercised on the microlevel; a life story, too, is an artful construction of the metaphorical imagination.

Thus, if I were to do the usual work of a biographer, picking through the shards of Huang’s *wenji*, selecting a letter here, an essay there, and matching those with expressions in his diary, his monographic reflections on self-cultivation, and his guide to reading the *Yijing* (Book of Changes; Huang, 1901), thereby to construct a continuous identity named Huang Chunyao, it would be

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<sup>4</sup> The advent of the postmodern historicization of individuality and selfhood can roughly be placed in the 1970s, signaled, for instance, by Weintraub, 1978.

an illusory exercise. Further, it would naively assume a transparency, through the medium of seventeenth-century high-register Chinese prose, between that identity and the constructing identity, my own. Some may feel that poststructuralist exposure of biographical constructedness has liberated writers to narrate past lives more frankly out of their own informed subjectivity (see, for instance, Mann, 2007), thus promoting the celebration rather than concealment of history as storytelling. But this felt license to imagine others' thoughts and feelings is countermanded by a fundamental questioning of the existence of purportedly communing selves, which ironically places postmodernism at intersection with evidentiary positivism: people's interiors are to be, or can only be, objects of imagination, not investigation.

In essence, the postmodern self has been conceived only spatially, as a continually changing position in relation to various 'others', as a site at which multiple, contingent social and cultural forces intersect, as a field where semiotic systems such as languages play. Texts that traditionally had been read as intentional communications from another self-presenting human mind now are seen as culturally generated structures the meanings of which float free of the incidentalized writer. In such a hermeneutic as this, the fascinating responses on Huang's part to the appearance in a dream of images from the *Yijing* (Struve, 2009: 377–79) would be reduced to the movement of visual associations according to culturally-supplied rules of interpretation, thus avoiding any implication that Huang recorded that dream and his response in order to convey his state of anxiety.

The humanistic idea (certainly *not* solely a Western one) that persons can know and respect one another by extrapolating from direct knowledge of a commonly shared inner makeup has been trumped by a cultural-political Self that only exists in parasitic relation to Others. It is an imperialistic Self that necessarily subordinates the Other to supplying its own maintenance needs. The implication is that any knowing of another entails an arrogant condescension toward the latter, the activation of a 'will to power' that belittles the known (Tridgell, 2004 chap. 7; Jopling, 1992). Though I do not believe this to be *necessarily* so, the point recalls my initial urge to make something of Huang Chunyao by exposing his historical image as at least somewhat fraudulent.

Human 'experience' as a bedrock of reference also has cracked under accusations that it is a bad-modern 'foundational' concept, a stealthy attempt ahistorically to re-essentialize humanity or reify truth as subjective witness.<sup>5</sup> The strong position here has been that individual experience should be recognized as a post-linguistic cultural construct with no self-ground. Historians who want to write about people's inner lives, thus, find it hard to skirt the postmodern iteration of a recurrent twentieth-century tendency, 'the paradoxical positing of experience without a subject' (Jay, 2005: chap. 9; quote 156). Thus, evidence in Huang's diary of chronic struggles to integrate Neo-Confucian dyads such as activity and quiescence (*dong jing*), interior and exterior (*nei wai*), and the minds of humankind and the Way (*renxin Daoxin*), of failures to find a unitary equanimity within these (Struve, 2009: 374), become linguistic performances unrelatable to any entity that seems to be in mental pain.

And then there is the still resounding 'memory boom', which has been vastly consequential for how human consciousness is viewed. Attention to memory functions has been very productive in illuminating the dynamics of identity-formation and how the remembered past guides expectations (and thus self-orientations) toward the future. Moreover, it is now well recognized that memory functions are central to dream reportage (and to the generation of dreams in the first place). Yet on balance, close scrutiny of memory has confirmed suspicion of its 'sins' (Schacter, 2001), including psychological lapses and self-trickery. In Huang's diary, for instance, the transience of recall about his good conduct and spiritual progress contrasts so markedly with the perdurance of memories about regrets and shortfalls, it exceeds the norm of monitoring one's flaws and avoiding self-congratulation. What credence, then, can we accord his memory and reporting of ephemerality in his *non*-waking consciousness? Dream contents, like 'limit-events', in defying rational construal invite either silence or fabrication. Did Huang *really* dream of talking with a *xingxing*? Did what he wrote correspond with what he dreamed? Or was the recorded encounter a conscious or nonconscious construction from cultural materials that suited Huang's rhetoric of self-criticism?

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<sup>5</sup> The poster-work for this viewpoint is Scott, 1991. For a critique of Scott on this score, see Zammito, 2000.

猩猩圖



In Huang Chunyao's day, the species of red orangutan called *xingxing* was no longer native to China, so what sort of creature did Huang Chunyao confront in his dream, prompted by a passage in the *Liji*? That such a question is unanswerable adds to the deterrents against probing the historical subconscious. Yet we can derive some sense of possibilities by investigating a given subject's visual environment. In this case, Huang's experience of speaking oneirically to a *xingxing* seems more plausible in view of this highly anthropomorphic drawing of a *xingxing* in a source that Huang might well have seen, the *Sancai tuhui* (Illustrated [encyclopedia] of the heavens, earth, and humankind; *niaoshou* sec.), widely published since 1607.

Whether of waking or nonwaking experience, memory is credited with constituting 'who we are'. But its patent mercuriality casts doubt on the rememberer as an enduring entity, thus reinforcing the postmodern conception of selfhood as vertical, not horizontal, transactional space. However noble may be the ultimate aims of thinkers such as Foucault and

Derrida to free human subjectivity from (de)limitation and from subjection to the (de)finite, no small number have been troubled to find no *there* there in the space of the postmodern self (Haines, 1997; Siegel, 1999).

If any discipline has made its business the establishment of place in the space of the (conscious or nonconscious self), it is psychoanalysis, which had a colourful career in postwar historiography. As is well known, a historical subfield called 'psychohistory' emerged in the 1970s and flourished in the 1980s, only to be hit by a tsunami of criticism in which it eventually drowned. Lynn Hunt has incorporated this story in an astute survey of the uncomfortable or absent relations between psychology and history in the past century. Among her several broad points are: that historians interested in poststructuralist approaches have favoured either social-constructionism or the view that human subjects are shaped by culture and language, not by inner drives; and that psychoanalysis has been weakened by a barrage of attacks on Freud himself, internal dissension and the hiving off of disparate schools, and the growing influence of biochemistry, cognitive studies and neuroscience on the field of psychiatry (Hunt, 2002: 338–47).

In such a climate, clearly I should not interpret Huang Chunyao's dream encounter with the *xingxing* as a symbol of the repressed animalistic sexual and aggressive drives of Huang's id, drives which had to be defended against by his ego (especially given the tremendous weight of a superego inculcated with values that disdained physical desires and abhorred disharmonious behaviour). The recurrent theme in Huang's oeuvre of struggle to control anger, insolence and arrogance must be discussed in other—perhaps socio-ideological—terms. But does his diary constitute only a site of intersection among ambient cultural forces? By what recourse but the psyche can we explain why this individual felt certain cultural injunctions so acutely and responded to them in such extreme ways?

Fred Weinstein, in the 1970s an enthusiastic proponent of joining psychology with history, in 1995 wrote in discouragement not of history's rejection of psychoanalysis but of psychohistory as an instructive case in a general 'crisis of heterogeneity' in the social sciences. He faulted not Freud himself but the application of his ideas in tune with a common assumption in all the disciplines, 'the underlying unity of motive of historical actors'. Psychoanalysis, according to Weinstein, has been complicit in an across-the-board failure to account for 'how diverse individuals and populations are connected',

‘how...social events and subjective responses [are] related’, and how the stubborn idiosyncrasy, unexpectedness and discontinuity of individual social life are to be explained. He and Lynn Hunt have looked toward newer forms of psychoanalysis as means not only of opening what historians have regarded as the ‘black box of the psyche’ but also of ‘link[ing] the “inner” world of wishes, fantasies, relationships, and expectations to an “external” social world’ of ideologies and institutions (Weinstein, 1995: quotations 302, 314; Hunt, 2002: 347).

### **Working through the Complex**

We might well take two main lessons from surveying the ‘inferior interior complex’ in historiography. First, in working closely on any individual, but especially one who aspired to such acute self-awareness and marshalled such immense force of will as Huang Chunyao, we must come to terms with postmodern issues surrounding ‘the self’. Here, the recurrent spectacle of highly self-assertive scholars vigorously denying the reality of selfhood is intimidating enough to send one in desperation to the opinions of people who specialize in studying the indisputable *sine qua non* of even illusory selfhood: the human brain. Second, we sense the folly—and hubris—of trying to understand or explain too much about other people, especially ones who are long dead. To expect a certain line of psychological analysis to yield the whole, or the core, truth about someone is to sanctimoniously pursue a holy grail. Most professionals today in clinical psychology, psychoanalysis and psychiatry are pragmatically eclectic, using what works for them and the patient under given circumstances. For biographical historians who sense that ideas from psychology might be useful, not in curing, but in more deeply exploring their subjects, the corollary of this is to use what feels comfortable in oneself, what squares with the material from and about the subject, and what helps to situate the latter in his or her mental world. Both of these lessons have ethical dimensions, particularly in dealing with figures who have inspired many others.

From the psychological angle, Huang Chunyao offers a prime case of the difficulty historians have encountered in applying Freudian analytical concepts. There survives no direct evidence about his childhood or his relationship with his mother, who was long-deceased by the time of the diary in question. And precisely because of Huang’s Confucian principles (as well as his Buddhist inclination), sexual matters receive only infrequent, opaque mention in his

writings. Seemingly tense relations with his father and his wife could not be frankly disclosed, the former because of the cardinal value of filial piety, the latter because of the cardinal rule to keep male ('outer', public) and female ('inner', domestic) affairs separate. Not only would an attempt at classical Freudian analysis have to be wildly speculative, it would be inappropriate for me to emphasize 'the unconscious' while relying principally on a source, the diary, that shows the keenest consciousness by a man of his own mind's dynamics that I have ever read. The problem is not that Freudianism, or any other modern psychiatric method, is 'anachronistic' when applied to premodern figures; the issue is whether it is truly *applicable*. Any modern concept, used in reference to remote history, must pass this test.

Unfortunately, few scholars in the humanities, and fewer still among historians, have explored post-Freudian trends in psychology or psychiatry in search of more usable concepts. Let me offer by way of illustration one school of psychoanalysis that began with high hopes of relevance to history, but which in the long run has been little used among historians:<sup>6</sup> self psychology. The founder of the postwar self-psychology movement, Heinz Kohut (1913–1981) of the 'Chicago School', placed a holistic concept of a growth-prone but homeostasis-seeking 'self' at the centre of psychoanalytical inquiry. He came to see normal selfhood—relatively cohesive and stable or loose and friable—as gaining in distinctiveness from infancy onward as people internalize ('transmute') certain qualities or attributes of 'objects' in their environments. Once fully internalized, those object-attributes become part of individuals' self-experience as 'selfobjects', conditioning their subsequent degree of comfort with themselves and their relations with society. In original Kohutian analysis there were three prime, functional selfobject qualities:

- (1) discipline (the 'mirroring' function): the perceived ability to contain and modulate affect, to smoothly (rather than forcibly) exert control over things, circumstances, others and oneself, which, transmuted as a selfobject, enables self-confidence and supports ambitions;
- (2) admirability (the 'idealizing' function): such qualities as steadfastness, competence and caring sensitivity toward others, which grounds the developing ability to esteem both others and oneself and to form abstract ideals;

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<sup>6</sup> To my knowledge, the most serious application of self psychology in historiography has been Demos, 2004, esp. Part Two.

(3) alikeness (the 'twins' function): the perception of self-similarity, sharable interests and fellow-feeling which underlies a sense of acceptance by others as a valuable individual (Lee & Martin, 1991; Teicholz, 1999; Mollon, 2001).

In the very young, intimate other persons are the sources of selfobject formation, but as people's capacities for abstraction mature, the attributes that are needed for selfobject adjustment and maintenance are increasingly found in objects of the cultural, social, institutional and ideological environment. The perspective of self psychology, thus, brings more attention to psychic challenges and responsive creativity in adulthood, and it places more confidence in people's own ability to effect self-adjustment than does classical psychoanalysis.

In self psychology, dreams, for instance, are not regarded as disguises but rather as fairly straightforward reflections of the patient's current concerns over the cohesiveness and workability of his or her sense of self. Though it is recognized that dream imagery often is metaphorical in ways that require co-exploration by analyst and analysand, suppression of conflict and defensive operations are not assumed, and the distinction between manifest and latent content thus becomes less important. Dreams are seen as representing the dreamer's current organization of self-experience, his or her relative satisfaction or dissatisfaction with that organization, and any ongoing changes therein. Selfobject problems from childhood naturally are of interest, but dreams are looked to for situations, feelings and images that disclose the subject's present self-structure.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, historians cannot 'psychoanalyze' figures in the past; we cannot relate to our subjects as a psychologist or psychiatrist relates to a patient or client. But the idea that mutable individuals seek to fulfil a wide variety of selfobject needs and thus enhance personal agency (which might be exercised in group action) by relating transferentially to objects, broadly construed, in their changing external worlds—persons, ideals, institutions, events, figurations—offers historians a useful interpretive framework. It provides the sort of dynamic connection, so elusive to Fred Weinstein, between ultimately unpredictable, subjectively motivated individuals and the unanticipatable

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<sup>7</sup> For comparisons between Freudian and self-psychological dream interpretation, see Aron, 1989; Alperin, 2004; or Gabel, 1991. See also articles by Fosshage, Fiss and Greenberg in Goldberg (ed.), 1989.



course of wider affairs. It helps to explain, for instance, why Huang Chunyao could not just walk away, psychologically, from the dreamed ape before him, but equally could not shake off the 'monkey on his back': the civil service examination system.

In the history of late-imperial China, a lot has been written about the tremendous psychological pressures (not to mention financial and physical hardships) to which highly educated boys and men were subjected by this extraordinary institution (Miyazaki, 1981; Elman, 2000). By late-Ming times when Huang Chunyao lived, the competition was intense on all levels; the stakes of participation, in terms of investment and reputation, were very high; the system was fraught with cheating, bribery and patron-client favouritism; and the prescribed canonical interpretations and stylistic requirements of the exams were off-putting to many talented intellectuals. The exams were not compulsory. Why did men like Huang continue to enter this race and spur themselves onward so obsessively? Explanations have largely been mounted in terms of sociopolitical self-interest: the power, prestige and privilege gained by even low-level affiliation with the imperial state, which restrained the growth of non-state sectors that might compete with it for the allegiance of monied and educated elites.

The self-psychology perspective, on the other hand, is useful in identifying the enduring psychological needs that were served by the examinations, as well as in understanding the acute fear of self-dissolution that men like Huang expressed when the edifice of which the exam system was a mainstay shuddered, cracked, crumbled and fell. Simply put, the system presented all selfobject essentials in one: The *discipline* it required was an extension of the controlling attributes of the imperial state, which as a whole was *admired* for its employment of soft-power principles (i.e., the Confucian ideals inculcated through the exam curriculum) to contain juvenile impulses and foster mature harmony in society. And the *camaraderie* that the system engendered among men who competed so intently against one another was a distinct upper-class adhesive, especially among those who succeeded but also among those who did not. Thus, we find Huang Chunyao, having rejected the culture of the exams and officialdom, staggering in a slough of despondency. He chastises himself over a reverie of socializing with examiners and fellow candidates in the capital, and he finds confirmation of his decision to leave the bureaucratic scene in a dream of standing in filth while officiating in a mandarin robe

(Huang, 1925: 26b)—all the while complaining about depression, aporia and the lack of unity in his mind-and-heart.

Focusing on Huang's inner struggles, self psychology provides a particularly apt framework for understanding in more than just cultural terms his chronic sense of disunited consciousness, which led him to so sanguinely undertake Chan meditation on non-duality. It allows me to confidently use Huang's diary as a valid source on his psyche, taking its contents as self-state testimonies to his object-needs. Employing again just Kohut's three classic kinds of such needs: (1) It is clear that Huang had great difficulty *modulating discipline*. His relentless dissatisfaction with his already highly self-disciplined habits and skills (such as examination essay-writing) propelled him to extremes—in the end to the extreme of a performatively self-controlled suicide. (2) Huang's capacity for intellectual *idealization* is hyper-developed: he subscribes absolutely, for instance, to the Classics on which the exams were based. But he finds little *admirability* in his fellow exam candidates or in other people around him. Thus, he is inclined to rather dogmatically chart his own course. (3) Chunyao's need for an object of *aliveness* is focused singularly on the spiritual precocity of his much younger full brother, to such a degree that the latter is compelled, on that fateful day, to be Chunyao's 'twin' in death.

Acceptance of self psychology, however, demands that one work through postmodern objections to the reification of selfhood, especially since the school has been typically Anglo-American in conceiving a highly *present* self, one of fulfilment and realization (Socor, 1997: Pt. 1, chap. 4). So adherents have been at pains to argue that in self psychology 'the structure of the self' means the structure of a person's *experience* of selfhood, of his or her phenomenologically observable cognitive-affective schemata, not an internal scaffold, and that selfobjects are *processes* of auto-orientation in the world, not entities in the mind (e.g., Trop et al., 2002: 141). One value of studying Huang's diary, for instance, lies in being able to observe the homologies by which a gradual shift occurred in the objects that provided strength to Huang's sense of self-integrity: ironically, from the concepts and behavioural models of selflessness in his Confucian heritage to the ideal of no-self as achieved by great masters in the history of Chan.

Yet rehabilitation of the usage of 'self' among historians, I aver, requires more work of the kind done by William Reddy (2001), who draws insights from

cognitive psychology, cultural anthropology and literary criticism in order to treat more adequately the attentive, agentive, interpretive dispositions of individual minds. Indeed, a batch of books and articles that neuroscientists have published for laypeople in recent years has opened a comfort zone in conceiving human selfhood, a zone which, in my view, accommodates self psychology well.

Most important to any up-to-date view of selfhood has been the gradual discovery of the simultaneous presence in every human brain of multiple modules and multiple neural networks, generating mental representations while keeping us alive with multiple nonconscious monitors. This accounts, most basically, for the *state of reflexivity* that we call 'self awareness'. Both the evolutionary and structural approaches to understanding this modular multiplicity and connectivity offer insights to humanists into conceiving individual selves. Representing the evolutionary approach is Joseph LeDoux, who points out that connectivity among the cognitive, emotional and motivational systems of neurons is not yet perfect, allowing differences between what is encoded implicitly (such as the dubious aspects of late-Ming official culture) and what is focused on explicitly (such as the norms enshrined in the Five Classics). This imperfection explains how the 'synaptic self', for all its wonder, is breakable and why the strong intellectual acumen of someone like Huang Chunyao is no buffer against psychosis (LeDoux, 2002: 322–23; Edelman, 2004).

Antonio Damasio, for his part, takes a structural approach to human consciousness and sense of self. Drawing attention to the work of the brain in mapping and monitoring the homeodynamic (including emotional) state of the whole organism, he begins with the entirely nonconscious but highly sophisticated 'proto-self' which imprints awareness that we are alive and awake and of the extent of our physical being—what is of-our-body and not-of-our-body. The most basic level of consciousness, on which we are wordlessly cognizant of internal and external things and are aware of being aware, Damasio calls 'the (transient) core self'. Beyond this are 'extended consciousness' and its accompaniment, the 'autobiographical self', which depends for its development on the aggregation of long-term memory. This self, which prominently involves verbal concepts and narration, enabling complex civilisational activity, is enlarged and refashioned throughout a lifetime (Damasio, 1999: Pts. II–III).

The autobiographical self is usually the only kind of self considered in humanistic and social scientific discussions of selfhood, and this limited purview is the source of endless malassertions—for instance of the fictionality of our sense of agentive selfhood, or of the totally cultural or linguistic constructedness of self, which equate changeability with nonexistence and mistake the multiplicity of reflexive *faculties* for the unity of being that those faculties support. Thinking back to Huang Chunyao's dream of confronting a *xingxing*: The view that this constitutes only a cultural-textual representation of selfhood in a man who was someone only by dint of moulding by a certain environment—in his case particularly by the normative thrust of the *Liji*—is to ignore the somatic dimension of Huang's dream experience. By this I mean the essential involvement of what Damasio would call Huang's proto- and core selves in the *feeling* of facing and interlocuting with a verbal primate. Attending only to the way in which Huang's autobiographical self construed the dream is to lose touch with the physiological and sensorial underpinnings of consciousness and—worse for the biographer—to fail in realizing the full effect of the dream on the subject's self-awareness.

The Kohutian belief in 'vicarious introspection', that is, the ability of a skilled analyst to enter deeply and empathetically into the experiences of analysands, also has received support from cognitive-neuroscientific research on people's remarkably strong responsiveness and fine attunement to the feelings of others. The mechanisms of interpersonal affect, the 'mirror neural systems' of the brain, it is found, actually 'replay' in us the observable expressions or conditions of others. This is why one might find it genuinely painful to read Huang Chunyao's diary. From the neuroscience point of view, this is 'empathy', distinguishable from 'sympathy' in the presence of experience-matching in addition to rational understanding (Rizolatti et al., 2001; Adolphs, 2003: 172; Casebeer, 2003: 843–44; Hauser, 2006: 224–25). Of course, no one claims that we can 'get inside other people's skin', but science is providing some push-back against strident insistence that only intersubjective relations are possible, that is, interactions between mutually non-interpenetrating subjectivities. In literary and historical studies, vicariously introspective immersion in a subject's mental state usually must be attempted face-to-typeface with texts, not with living people.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, I am encouraged that an empathetic

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<sup>9</sup> On lessons from self psychology for dealing with poststructuralist conundrums in reading literary texts, see Bouson, 1989.

exercise in historical inquiry—as called for in the ethical treatment of paragons—can be well founded not only in evidence but also in the mirror-function of the skilled historian’s brain.

### **The Empathy Issue**

The rise of intersubjectivity as a canonical principle across the disciplines has spawned debates about whether historians who advocate empathy really mean sympathy, and about what the real point of such affective involvement with sources might be. Samuel Moyn, in a review essay, has raised the relevant issues provocatively, posing three main questions: Can empathy really be distinguished from sympathy? *With what* are we supposed to empathize? And *for what* moral reason? After arguing that empathy and sympathy are mutually inextricable, Moyn gives examples of how the exercise of fellow feeling with historical subjects can either exhaust one’s compassionate resources (as in my case with Huang Chunyao) or end up simplistically valorizing the subjects’ struggles and ‘sending them symbolically to heaven’ (as with Huang’s Qing-period biographers). Then Moyn asks, with *what* in people’s complex responses to suffering is the historian supposed to validly empathize? After all, many victims in history have claimed to learn that the lesson of their experience is triumph, including in the aftermath of the Holocaust. What if a victim insists on redemption, whether personal or theological or revolutionary or nationalist? What if a victim feels her ability to survive

illustrates her capacity to sustain horror with resolve, or concludes that her story vindicates the premise of God’s benevolent providence? What if another takes it to illustrate the sempiternity of his people or the need for socialist revolution? What if it illustrates the ability to put the past, for all its scarring, behind for good? What, indeed, if some victims wanted to be sent to heaven? How can an ‘empathetic’ approach cut through the plurality of possible and actual responses to pain...in order to insist on the viability of one alone? What kind of empathy turns out to be the vehicle of a contested set of values, one only a few victims have preferred? (Moyn, 2006: 404–05)

If the answer to Moyn’s question is that we should generally empathize with people’s ‘humanity’, then how are we to deal with the bankrupting of humanity as an object, its removal as a ground of knowing, by

poststructuralism? Moyn asks, can we reconcile poststructuralist influence with a 'belief in humanity as a moral ground, as a justifiable and indeed obligatory activity?' The only recourse that he offers is to concede the arduousness of true empathy without giving up on it (Moyn, 2006: 404, 422–14, quote 412).

A way out of this quandary, somewhat curiously, lies in the moral hermeneutics of one of the most seminal figures in postmodern thought, Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005). His last two monographic works, *Oneself as Another* (*Soi-même comme un autre*, 1990) and *The Just* (*Le juste*, 1995), are especially useful here because Ricoeur's view of the self and of how we can know about it is highly compatible with both the neuroscientific and self-psychological perspectives sketched above.<sup>10</sup> His thought also is compelling because it guides a historiographical ethic that deals 'responsibly' with individuals, upholding the ego's obligation and humility when 'faced' by an irreplaceable other person, as enjoined in the supra-ontological ethics of Emmanuel Levinas (Critchley, 1992: 4–9; Ciaramelli, 1991).

For Ricoeur, the self is a multi-dimensional activity that displays structure through speech and action. It is grounded in a sense of sameness, the 'I' or *idem*, which is posited in moment-to-moment statements or acts that presume an agent. Beyond that, what Ricoeur calls the *ipse* resides in our sense of continuity over time, in the capacity to narrate identity. People cannot know other selves positively or even know their own selves absolutely, but the reality of selves can be 'attested' through what they strive for and produce. Ricoeur defines 'ethical intention' as '*aiming at the "good life" with and for others in just institutions*' (Ricoeur, 1992: 172, orig. italics). Truth in attestation does not come easily, since the self subjects its attestatory inclinations to 'suspicion'. Unchallenged by suspicion of illusion, attestation is naïve; checked by suspicion it is rendered fragile, but only thereby can it gain strength.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> For my realization of the relevance of Ricoeur to self psychology I am indebted to Salter, 2002.

<sup>11</sup> The focus on evaluating 'languages of the good' in the auto/biographical ethics advocated in Parker, 2007, is eminently compatible with Ricoeur's argument. However, in laudably trying to illustrate the universality of his approach with a non-Western autobiography, that of Wang Shimin (1592–1680), Parker, a non-sinologist, inadvertently shows that Ricoeur's 'suspicion', if not exercised by the subject, is best supplied by specialists in the subject's culture and period. For he does not 'suspect' that Wang's attestation to himself as a four-square Confucian may

I suggest that we can proceed as historians by exercising the attestatory faculties of our selves, affirming the selfhood of persons whom we study in the past by inferring judiciously from what is recorded of their words and actions. We should take attestation as the fundament of both our own quest for the good of finding truths about the past *and* as the fundament of efforts by the people we study to find 'the good life' under their various sociocultural and institutional conditions. Transcending temperament, attestation can serve broadly as a basis for empathy with historical figures, regardless of whether they were victims of others or themselves, or whether we would invite them to dinner.

Let me conclude by bringing Moyn and Ricoeur to bear on Huang Chunyao's death. As explained above, Huang and his brother are renowned as martyrs in traditional Chinese historiography because they hanged themselves rather than submit to Manchu-Qing troops who were seizing their home city, Jiading. The prominence of those two fastidious gentlemen among leaders of the resistance and as prestigious literati dictated that they would be run down and manhandled by coarse soldiers. Then they would be killed on the spot or pressured mercilessly, under threat of execution, to serve the Qing side. What considerations were uppermost in Huang's mind as he decided to take part in the resistance and eventually to end his life in a noose? Even with better documentation, it would be impossible to pin this down. But here are some possibilities, given Huang's class culture, personal background, and specific situation:

- He adhered stalwartly to the Neo-Confucian principle of dying in loyalty to the state that had 'nurtured' him (the Ming).
- He chose hanging as the quickest practical way to fulfil the Confucian injunction to keep the body whole, even in death (rather than, say, cut his own throat or be hacked to pieces or beheaded by others).
- Taking very seriously the Confucian obligation of elder brother to instruct younger brother, he was implicitly goaded by the presence of Huang Yuanyao to set a sterling example, even though it ended both of their lives.

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be driven by a need to overcome the reputation of his politically and religiously controversial grandfather, Wang Xijue (1534–1611), the *bête noire* of reformist Donglin partisans and subscriber to the heterodox cult of his visionary daughter, Wang Daozhen (a.k.a. Tanyangzi). See Parker, 2007: 19–24.

- A prideful man, he preferred to submit to his own will rather than to the will of others.
- As someone who was supercilious toward ‘vulgar’ people, he preferred death to being mauled by common soldiers, much less by ‘barbarian’ Manchus.
- Through Chan Buddhist meditation, he had transcended in purity the dualism of life and death and simply put his body in the same state as his mind—beyond being.

With *which* of these possibilities, Moyn would ask, should I empathize? To choose one from the plurality would be simplistic; any choice would invite a subconscious transference of my own values to Huang; and my life, in any case, offers almost no firsthand experiences to match up with his.

I can attest, however, from careful reading of Huang’s oeuvre that there was much more than self-abasing Confucian platitude in his final statement, which otherwise might be read merely as pro forma. Each phrase distills a life-issue that Huang seized by the horns, demanding to know what was right by Heaven: public service versus principled withdrawal; scholastics versus spirituality; ardor versus peace of mind. I can attest that until his last breath Huang Chunyao excruciatingly pursued attestation—through harrowing self-suspensions—to the good in himself and the universe, to the absolute good of self-integrity as a necessary foundation for effective action on behalf of one’s family, society and state. With this I can empathize, without necessarily endorsing his self-punishing manner or specific values. I could never have been an acquaintance, much less a friend, of Huang Chunyao, if only for the reason that he would never have agreed to even correspond with me, a woman not of his close kin. But who wants to befriend paragons, anyway? We want, rather, to ‘hand it to them’, *it* being acknowledgment that they make big what most of us keep small in ourselves—willing the good.



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