

# Chinese Feelings: Notes on a Ritual Theory of Emotion

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## ABSTRACT

Be true to yourself. So urges the ancient maxim. In contemporary Western societies, this usually translates into the imperative of being in touch with your feelings. But sincerity and emotional authenticity have not always been first principles, and East Asian societies have traditionally subordinated emotion to ritual propriety. In this article, I propose a ritual theory of emotion that acknowledges the importance of codified rules of conduct, stylized modes of expression, and a shared subjunctive world as constitutive of a ritual social order that nonetheless admits of emotional plenitude.

Beginning with a recent film about the renowned Peking Opera performer Mei Lanfang, I argue that we moderns have lost the art of presentation epitomized by classical theater and that the representational aesthetic, exemplified by film, has become hegemonic in modern life, from the intimate sphere of the family to the public arena of civic and political engagement. I draw on an emerging body of interdisciplinary scholarship on emotion and cognition as well as the continued, albeit misrecognized, role of ritual and its dialectic with sincerity. I then turn to a 19th-century memoir, *Six Records of a Floating Life* by Shen Fu, to sketch the outlines of an experimental aesthetic and lifestyle poised precariously yet playfully between presentation and representation, ritual and sincerity.

**KEYWORDS:** emotion, presentation, representation, ritual, sincerity

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Be true to yourself. So urges the ancient maxim. In contemporary Western societies, this usually translates into the imperative of being in touch with your feelings. Moreover, love has long been enthroned as the epitome of affective life and the central ingredient of happiness. If reason reigns supreme in Western philosophy, it is the heart that preoccupies expressive culture. As large segments of the Sinosphere adopt the consumer capitalist lifestyle, happiness is also increasingly hitched to the heart and its vicissitudes. Like their Western counterparts, urban Chinese<sup>1</sup> have become obsessed with feelings and are devoting great amounts of time, money, and energy to the charting of their psychic terrain, the calibration of their “emotional intelligence,” and the chronicling of the myriad complications of the marriage market.

However, love or feeling has not always occupied such a paramount place in the Chinese conception of the good life. Anthropologists and historians have shown that the traditional social order was not grounded in individual emotions and that the life of the heart, though colorful and robust, was not regarded as having formal social consequences. In other words, emotions could not create, sustain, or destroy social relationships (e.g., love alone could not bring about a marriage, nor could cessation of love dissolve one). Social life was conducted instead on the basis of ritual and etiquette. The primacy of ritual (*li* 禮) also extended to the political and aesthetic domains. Political legitimacy was continuously and scrupulously enacted in ceremonial evocations of the Mandate of Heaven. Traditional poetry, painting, fiction, and theater, likewise, privileged stylized modes of expression over psychological realism. In sum, there was very little reference to individual subjective well-being or the inner emotive state in either formal or expressive culture, so much so that modernity began as a protest, in the May Fourth period, against the ceremonial nature of Chinese society, now seen as insufferably hypocritical and intolerably oppressive. For the iconoclasts, the Confucian valorization of proper conduct and government by moral example were the very source of injustice and misery for the broad masses, especially women and youth.

In this article, I contrast the premodern *presentational* mode of expressing emotion to the modern *representational* mode and the epistemic shift that underlies the change. Beginning with an episode from a

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<sup>1</sup> In most cases, “Chinese” is used in this article in the cultural sense.

contemporary film about the renowned Peking Opera performer Mei Lanfang (梅蘭芳) (1894-1961), I demonstrate how we moderns have lost the art of presentation epitomized by classical theater, and how the representational aesthetic, exemplified by film, has become hegemonic in modern life, from the intimate sphere of the family to the public arena of civic and political engagement. This shift parallels the triumph of sincerity over ritual as a privileged style of affective and social communication. My point of departure is the cognitive theory of emotion, which treats the emotions not as brute or blind physiological eruptions, but as evaluative judgments of what is important to one's flourishing. I also draw on an emerging body of interdisciplinary scholarship on the continued, albeit misrecognized, importance of ritual and the limits of "sincerity." Lastly, I revisit a celebrated 19<sup>th</sup>-century memoir, *Six Records of a Floating Life* (《浮生六記》) by Shen Fu (沈復), to sketch the outlines of an experimental style of aesthetic and life poised precariously yet playfully between presentation and representation, ritual and sincerity.

## I. From Presentation to Representation

In 2008, veteran Chinese director Chen Kaige (陳凱歌) released a lavishly produced biopic called *Forever Enthralled* (《梅蘭芳》), a cinematic recreation of the life and career of the legendary Peking Opera performer Mei Lanfang. Mei was China's biggest star in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, revered domestically and abroad as the maestro of a refined art form and an icon of national culture. In the film, Chen Kaige made the interesting choice of threading the narrative around Mei's brief but tumultuous extramarital affair with a female performer named Meng Xiaodong (孟小東). Mei was most celebrated for his portrayals of elegant, graceful, and often ill-fated female *dan* (旦) characters on stage, whereas Meng, a shining star in her own right, specialized in the doughty male *sheng* (生) role. For a while, Mei and Meng performed as a cross-dressed pair on stage with phenomenal success. In one scene, the camera takes us to a packed playhouse where the two are acting out a flirtatious encounter, while Mei's wife and two close friends look on from a private box. Film audiences are well aware from the previous buildup that the actors are romantically attracted to each other in real life, as are the three in the box, though they maintain a tacit silence about the affair. At one point, carried away by surging

enthusiasm, Mei's bosom friend, mentor, playwright, and drama theorist Qi Rushan (齊如山) exclaims, "There's real feeling between them!" (「他們是越演越真了！」). Although the remark was ostensibly addressed to the other friend, Mei's wife frowns and gets up and sullenly walks out of the box.

On the surface, the scene is hardly remarkable, registering as it does the emotional fallout of a romantic triangle. But precisely because of its routine familiarity, it offers a revealing window on the momentous though poorly understood transition in the mode of affective expression from the presentational to the representational, the former being typically associated with traditional music-theater while the latter is associated with film (as well as spoken drama and modern literature). In training his movie camera lovingly on Peking opera's moment of metamorphosis into a national cultural emblem, Chen Kaige gives us an eloquent and yet symptomatic illustration of how we moderns have lost the art of presentation. As is commonly noted by drama theorists, in non-illusionist theatrical traditions, emotion is presented through a conventionalized repertoire of masks, costumes, arias, gestures, poses, movements, chorus, and music, with little reference to the actor's inner state. Classical Indian theater, for example, centrally turns on the art of dhavani or suggestiveness practiced by skilled performers to elicit audience emotions (*rasa*) (Cognitive Science 156-57; *The Mind and Its Stories* Ch. 2). In traditional Chinese theater too, connoisseurs dwell on a performer's ability to move people as well as heaven and earth with deep feelings. Yet as Haiping Yan points out, the mechanism of "moving" is different from the principle of empathy in Western illusionist theater. She writes, "Rather than striving for naturalized representation, Chinese music-drama is premised upon an aesthetic notion that might be translated into English as 'suppositionality' (虛擬性): it actualizes itself through acting that is suppositional in its overall mode of signification and extraordinarily stylized in its specific executions" (66-67; characters added). A most telling feature of this suppositionality is the near absence of stage sets and props. Instead, both the natural and built environments are conjured by the actor's vivid mime (see Goldstein; Mackerras). Such a stylized dramaturgy also means that emotion is communicated sartorially, gesturally, and vocally according to prescribed and shared codes, and the performance is judged by how skillfully the actor animates these codes to reach the audience affectively. Acting is not understood as the exteriorization of the actor's psychological or emotional state as in the representational mode (we will return to this shortly).

The delinking of affective expression from an ontological foundation makes it possible in traditional theater to utilize cross-gender casting to circumvent the constraints of gender segregation. Indeed, Mei Lanfang was one of the four most feted Peking Opera singers since its emergence as a translocal music-drama genre in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, all of whom were cross-dressing *dan* actors. No true opera aficionado would ever question these men's bona fides to portray women on stage on any other grounds than aesthetic. As Joshua Goldstein notes, the "highly visual embodiments of femininity" with which Mei Lanfang graced the stage in spite of his biological sex were emphatically illusory and thus "immune to the social and moral misgivings that would disrupt his performance were he 'really' a woman" (250). On stage, Goldstein ventriloquizes, "the only good woman is a man" (subtitle of Chapter 7). What a man like Mei Lanfang had that a mere "natural" woman did not was of course his mastery of Peking Opera's art of *dhavani*, wrought over long years of training and self-perfection. He was able to act out femininity in an exquisite and evocative way that was unthinkable in the case of an untrained female. Emotion, in short, was unmoored from anatomy in the presentationist aesthetic.

The electronic medium of film, however, irreversibly hastened the fall of the presentational mode of emotional communication and consigned it to niche domains. To be sure, film was only the most palpable and far-reaching vehicle of the modern episteme that swept across the globe and left the theatrical aesthetic by the wayside. This is especially true with the triumph of the Method school of acting originating with Constantin Stanislavsky (1863-1938) and systematized by Lee Strasberg (1901-82), which places a high premium on psychological realism and emotional authenticity. Aspiring Method actors, whether they are headed for the illusionist stage or the silver screen, are trained to draw upon their own emotions and memories and to identify with their characters in order to create "lifelike," i.e., natural, spontaneous, and sincere performances, in counter-distinction to the putatively exaggerated, unnatural, and affected style of the classical theater as well as early film when it had not decisively jettisoned the theatrical crutches. Film audiences are no longer socialized to respond to the visual, vocal, and gestural cues of traditional theater. At best, they find the latter quaintly exotic and alluring, and, at worst, baffling and off-putting. It is no wonder that avant-garde dramatists like Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) should turn to Peking Opera

in search of “the alienation effect” with which to jolt their audiences out of empathetic complacency (see Sun; Tian; Yan). And even more significantly, cross-gender casting has been irrevocably abandoned (except for ironic or comic effects), not only because most of the social constraints that necessitated its adoption have largely dissipated, but also because it can no longer be tolerated ontologically and epistemologically speaking. In other words, under the imperatives of realism and authenticity, there are no longer legitimate grounds on which a man can claim to be better equipped to play a female role than can a woman (and vice versa). Femininity and masculinity are now believed to flow naturally and imperiously from sexed bodies. The best actors are ones who are most at ease with their selves and their bodies, and their roles are believed to be judiciously matched with their personalities (see Chang).

The ascendancy of the representational mode poses a problem for a film that seeks to document the glory of traditional theater and somehow recapture its lost allure. How indeed to make sense of the ecstatic adulations heaped upon Mei Lanfang and his confreres by contemporary theater audiences? How to help film viewers relate to their theater counterparts of an aesthetically and epistemologically distant era? It is my contention that for opera stage snippets like the one recounted above to resonate for film viewers, it is necessary to sandwich them in a gripping romance that anchors the workings of empathy. Qi Rushan’s utterance—“There is real feeling between them!” (inaudible to those sitting in the main audience hall down below)—is clearly intended for film viewers, serving to strip away the stylized layers of the opera form and allay our anxiety over the reversal of gender roles. It reassures us—by invoking the offstage romance which has engrossed us thus far—that the actors are truly in love in real life and that they are here acting out their passion in a playfully gender-bending manner but still safely in the representational mode. Their stylized banters and gestures are thus not hollow, unnatural affectations but slightly mediated expressions of deep feelings, made all the more piquant by the need to wind through an obstacle course of opera conventions.

It is for the sake of the same representational effect that the film has Meng Xiaodong slowly remove her bearded mask and gaze upon Mei Lanfang rapturously at the end of their performance. For film viewers, a moment like this is probably far more emotionally pregnant than all the

singing and gesticulating that comes before (in cognitive literary studies, this is called “embodied transparency”—more later). Since such a gesture is decidedly taboo in traditional acting, it is again intended for the benefit of film audiences, who are surely glad for this irrefutable confirmation that Meng loves Mei as a woman loves a man, on and off stage. While the two of them stand motionless as if bewitched by their overpowering passion, Mei’s wife, who has been applauding with the rest of the audience in a standing ovation, pauses for a few seconds, her hands seemingly frozen in midair. Then she contorts her face into a smile and claps even more rigorously, apparently taking cover under a spectator’s appreciation for the dazzling artistry of the performers, which presumably is what the rest of the audience are clapping about. Goldstein suggests that the Mei-Meng romance may have been engineered in part as a publicity stunt—“what could be better than Peking Opera’s most acclaimed male *dan* marrying its most talented female *sheng*?” (242)—yet in theory the discerning theater-goer’s enjoyment of the aesthetic of performative femininity and masculinity should not require the epistemological supplement of the offstage romance.

Meng’s removal of the mask in blatant violation of stage conventions has an antecedent in the film that is equally cavalier about the theatrical artifice that sustains the presentationist aesthetic. In this scene, Mei and Meng, dressed a la mode of the Republican-era cultural elite, are urged by friends to sing an impromptu duet at a private gathering. After only a few lines, however, Meng breaks out of character with a self-conscious chuckle and says to Mei jocosely: “how come you just don’t look like a woman to me?” Mei returns the compliment and, amid general mirth, they resume the duet. In a way, Meng gives voice to the film audience’s resistance to being captivated by this strange spectacle: a tall, broad-shouldered man in a white linen suit squeezing out a high-pitched female voice keyed to the delicate movement of his “orchid flower fingers” (a way of holding the hand that is becoming of a well-bred young lady), and a small-framed, wispy young woman in a form-fitting *qipao* dress belting out a stentorian aria to the accompaniment of swaggering arms. Insofar as everyday clothes and the plain face are supposed to index one’s “natural” gender, singing a cross-gender duet without costumes and makeup/masks makes a travesty of opera’s presentationist aesthetic, which is all about art overcoming and elevating raw nature. As such the scene merely strikes us as comical, as it does the actors themselves on our behalf. It is also a

reminder of the extent to which we have lost the ability to respond to the emotional suggestiveness of traditional theater. Instead, we have come to rely on the representational mode to package the former as a curiosity or deflect its alienating effect through either psychological hermeneutics (“There is real feeling between them”) or gentle caricature (“how come you just don’t look like a woman to me?”).

The medium of film *per se* cannot be held responsible for this loss. For deeper causes, we need to look into the broader epistemic shift that has, since the Reformation and the Enlightenment, solidified the centrality of emotion in modern life and sanctified representation as the sole legitimate mode of expressing our all-important inner world. In a study of the social construction of emotion in village China, American anthropologist Sulamith Potter first turns her gaze back on her own society and ponders the improbable but incontrovertible fact that the social order is validated at the level of individual feeling.<sup>2</sup> As she explains, emotion in modern Western societies is the legitimizing basis of all social relationships, including not only contractual ones such as marriage, but also ascriptive ones like the parent-child relations (182). It is an article of modern faith that marriage should be grounded in love as its culmination and institutional sanctification, and that it should be dissolved once love is no longer, otherwise it amounts to legalized prostitution. Between parents and children, too, love takes precedence over duty and obligation, so that generational estrangement or abuse-induced enmity is often enough to undermine the claims of blood ties. Moreover, within the domestic sphere, intimate gestures of affection are considered essential in sustaining and legitimizing familial relationships. Kisses, hugs, cards, gifts, and constant protestations of love create the illusion that it is affect, not blood or contract, that holds the family unit together and fortifies it into an emotional refuge from the cruel, cold world outside. These gestures also serve to democratize entrenched hierarchical relations by closing age, generation, and gender gaps, thereby transforming the family from a social and economic institution to a sentimental *communitas*. Lastly, the centrality of emotion extends even to the workplace, the canonical space of social contract and disinterestedness. Potter cites Arlie Hochschild’s classic work, *The Managed Heart*, about the aviation industry’s effort to train its employees to work the subtle arts of affect in order

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<sup>2</sup> Potter’s work also informed my book on literary representations and social discourses of love in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century China (see Lee, *Revolution of the Heart*).



to provide an experience of sincere, personalized service to passengers (at least in the pre-deregulation era). Eva Illouz terms this kind of reciprocity of affect and economics “emotional capitalism.” Pace Max Weber’s master metaphor of the iron cage, she argues that modernity has spawned a therapeutic culture in which professional competence is increasingly defined as the capacity to be a good listener and communicator who stands ready to acknowledge and empathize with others, thereby occluding power relations and class struggles (Illouz 17, 22).

Potter concludes her reflections by highlighting the sheer “obsession” with feelings in the modern West, evidenced by the great expenditure of resources for the sake of continuous and pervasive attention to individual psychological processes and affective states (183-84). Illouz too speaks of “an emotional ontology” that is the hypostatizing effect of the compulsive inward gaze and endless verbalization in television talk shows and autobiographical narratives, as if the emotions are both entrapped in the “deep self of their bearer” (33) and detachable from the self for public clarification and management (36). In place of a politically active civil society, therapy gives us “micro public spheres, that is, domains of action submitted to a public gaze, regulated by procedures of speech, and by values of equality and fairness” (Illouz 37). As such, the therapeutic culture taps into the modern democratic sensibility that valorizes individual autonomy and agency as well as universal parity, hence proving irresistible to such emancipatory causes as feminism.

The cottage industry of advice books and treatises on happiness is undoubtedly a major symptom of this imbrication of intimacy and market capitalism. Social critics have long rued the steadily expanding pathologization of everyday life, signposted by each new edition of the DSM (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, published by the American Psychiatric Association). Psychology, along with cognate fields, is now concerned with not only severe mental disorders, but also a bewildering array of neurosis, anxieties, and personality quirks. Ours is a social world that is perpetually looking inward, seeking to capture the truth about ourselves by listening in on the murmurs of the heart or tracing the neural waves of the brains. The ramifications of this inward turn have been with us for almost as long as mass-mediated popular culture has ruled our desires and fantasies. In some ways, the cinematic recreation of the affair between Mei Lanfang and Meng Xiaodong in *Forever Enthralled* echoes the early Hollywood studio

practice of cultivating images of romantic actor couples, e.g., Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, to name a few well-known pairs. Savvy managers and publicists seemed to sense intuitively that early film audiences, barely weaned off theater, took comfort in the knowledge that the romantic pair on screen, apparently being themselves with minimum makeup and in casual clothes, were only acting out their true feelings for each other. The shedding of theatrical artifice then necessitated a continuity between onscreen representation and offscreen reality, lending credence to film's pretension of capturing a slice of life *in medias res*. Although such a practice has long been abandoned with the dissolution of the studio system, film audiences have continued to indulge in the illusion of unmediated truth in the frequent romantic liaisons chronicled with predatory attention and voyeuristic relish in the tabloid press.

The public's seemingly morbid fascination with the private (read romantic/sexual) lives of celebrities extends well beyond the entertainment arena. Tell-all memoirs by politicians, spymasters, diplomats, and business tycoons continuously roll off the printing press, feeding off what David Shields calls "reality hunger" (*Reality Hunger*). Every so often, the mass media go into overdrive over what might be called "moments of truth," as when some public personage lets slip a gaffe, chokes up, or has an outright meltdown under the glare of the limelight. Somehow these inadvertent moments are considered far more revealing of a person's true self than his or her many on-script public statements or rigorously scrubbed publications. Underlying the truth status of slip-ups is an uncompromising dichotomy of truth and falsehood and categorical intolerance of lies. Consider the archetypal tale of George Washington and the cherry tree. What the father allegedly said to boy George—"My son, that you should not be afraid to tell the truth is more to me than a thousand trees! Yes—though they were blossomed with silver and had leaves of the purest gold!"—has been mythologically distilled into the quintessence of the American spirit: Be honest, confess your sin, and you will be saved or pardoned. Even liars, imposters, and plagiarists can be forgiven once they have made a clean breast of their mischiefs and convinced the public of the sincerity of their remorse.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For example, in the James Frey affair, Frey was first steered by his agent to publish his autobiographical novel as a memoir in hopes of better sales. He was subsequently disgraced for

Last but not least, our criminal justice system routinely entertains pleas of temporary insanity, continuing a long tradition of granting emotion exculpatory function in cases involving so-called “crimes of passion.”

In short, the “emotional style” (Illouz’s term) that has become our habitus makes us more at home with the kind of “red-meat emotionalism” (Woolfe) that Hollywood doles out (though we are fond of impugning it) than with a man playing a woman straight as in Peking Opera. Potter and Illouz are among the many thinkers and critics who, rather than simply celebrating modernity as an emancipation of repressed emotions and individuality, regard the modern revolution of the heart with ambivalence. They include Lila Abu-Lughod in *Veiled Sentiments*, Arjun Appadurai in “Topographies of the Self,” Steven Feld in “Wept Thoughts,” Catherine Lutz in “Emotion, Thought, and Estrangement” and *Unnatural Emotions*, Martha Nussbaum in *Upheavals of Thought*, Jay Magill in *Sincerity*, Richard Sennett in *The Fall of Public Man*, and Lionel Trilling in *Sincerity and Authenticity*. But few have systematically explored the larger implications—for politics, society, art, and the psyche—of the hegemony of sincerity and representationalism as have the four co-authors of *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity*: Adam Seligman, Robert Weller, Michael Puett, and Bennett Simon.

## II. From Ritual to Sincerity

Eschewing disciplinary structures and conventional patterns of comparison, Seligman et al. brought their respective expertise in Jewish and Chinese studies together to rethink ritual and its relevance in the contemporary world. They identify ritual and sincerity as two divergent ways of framing our action and our engagement with the world that are perpetually in tension with each other. Against the interpretative and individualist approach common in anthropology and religious studies, they take ritual primarily to be an orientation to action that was dominant across civilizations and societies until the eve of modernity. Ritual creates a subjunctive or “as if” realm that undergirds our shared social world in which we act out our roles and negotiate our differences. It is most pronounced in religious practices but is also prevalent in many supposedly secular domains of human activity, from

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having fabricated and embellished events, and was then reembraced by the public after a bout of contrite soul-searching on the Oprah Winfrey show.

public performances, sports, art and entertainment, to everyday enactments of civility. Through formalism, repetition, and constraint, ritual offers its own capacities for human realization and fulfillment (Seligman et al. 7). A classic example is the Confucian notion of *li*, or rules of conduct. In the Confucian formulation, moral self-cultivation is not merely introspective self-scrutiny; rather, it entails submitting to the rules and protocols of proper behavior in relation to socially significant others. Like a novice learning to play a musical instrument, one learns first by conscientious imitation and assiduous practice in order to attain a level of mastery that will enable one to embody effortlessly the virtue of *ren* (仁, concern for others in recognition of human relatedness). A gentleman or a sage is “simply someone who acts properly in any given situation—whether or not there is a ritual precedent to guide his action” (Seligman et al. 36; see also Fingarette 36; Lai). Crucially, *ren* is not understood as an inner quality that is externalized through *li* with more or less perfection, but something that is achieved in and coterminous with the enactment of *li*: “We detect [*ren*] in the performance; we do not have to look into the psyche or personality of the performer. It is all ‘there,’ public” (Fingarette 53). In other words, moral development is a matter of outward comportment, not an inward psychic transformation.

This runs directly counter to the modern psychological approach to morality that privileges the antithesis of ritual: sincerity. Seligman et al. write:

[The tropes of sincerity] project an “as is” vision of what often becomes a totalistic, unambiguous vision of reality “as it *really* is.” [They] are pervasively with us, in both our personal and our shared social world. They appear in the arrogance of what are termed fundamentalist religious beliefs. They are present in our overwhelming concern with “authenticity,” with individual choice, with the belief that if we can only get at the core, the fount, the unalterable heart of what we “really” feel, or “really” think, then all will be well. (9)

Throughout history, the sincere mode arose as a reactive force against the dominant and, in its vision, rigid and deadening ritual mode, although in time it too tended to become ritualized and in turn challenged by newer, more strident criteria of sincerity. “The sincere mode of behavior seeks to replace the ‘mere convention’ of ritual with a genuine and thoughtful state of internal

conviction. Rather than becoming what we do in action through ritual, we do according to what we have become through self-examination” (Seligman et al. 103). It is owing to the modern ascendancy of sincerity that we have largely lost the art of presentation, which Elizabeth Burns calls “theatricality”: “The moral value placed on spontaneity and sincerity in personal relations has produced a dichotomy between ‘natural’ and ‘theatrical’ behavior” (14). The theatrical is now synonymous with the hypocritical. Hypocrisy, which for ancient Greeks was simply “playacting,” is now the “vice of vices” (Arendt 103).

Major examples of the sincerity revolt against what it deems the hypocrisy of ritualism include Buddhism (against Hinduism), Mohism (against Confucianism), Protestant Christianity (against Catholicism), and today’s garden variety fundamentalisms (most notably Evangelicalism and Wahhabism). While the scholars mentioned earlier have attempted to understand the inner workings of the sincerity regime, Seligman et al., building on the pioneering work of Erving Goffman (*The Presentation of Self*), are more concerned with the attendant distrust, disparagement, and diminishment of ritual as well as the ways in which ritual still proves vital to social life. In their view, sincerity, taken to its extreme, can dangerously undermine our capacity for imaginatively negotiating the inescapable boundaries of our social existence and lead us on a utopian quest for purity, wholeness, and unity, whereby boundaries (and social differences) are either hardened so as to be impermeable or willfully denied out of existence. The sincere mode grounds social relationships in “a never-ending production of new signs of sincerity” (Seligman et al. 105), precisely because without any external referents or anchors, one can never finally prove one’s sincerity—“It is sincerity all the way down” (104-05).<sup>4</sup>

To understand why sincerity should acquire an epistemological status as the guarantor of truth, we need to take a detour through the cognitive theory of emotion. The burgeoning field of emotion studies has more or less arrived at a consensus regarding the intelligibility of emotion. It rubs against the grain

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<sup>4</sup> This alludes to a familiar anecdote associated with Bertrand Russell, who, as the story goes, was taken to task at a public lecture by a female audience member that he had neglected to comment on the fact that the entire world stands on the back of a turtle. Russell allegedly asked upon what the turtle then stands and was told that “it’s turtles all the way down.” Clifford Geertz believes that this exchange actually took place between an English sahib and an Indian native and involved an elephant as well (Geertz 28-29). Whatever is the case, the phrase is now proverbially used to illustrate the problem of infinite regress.

of the folk theory that regards the emotions as purely physiological, kinetic, or neuro-chemical phenomena by insisting that they are rather embodied value judgments (Nussbaum; Solomon, *A Passion for Justice; The Passions*).<sup>5</sup> In Martha Nussbaum's words, emotions are "forms of evaluative judgment that ascribe to certain things and persons outside a person's own control great importance for the person's own flourishing" (22). They must therefore be distinguished from bodily appetites such as hunger and lust as well as from objectless moods. For a kinetic experience to be emotion proper, it must have an intentional object (i.e., it is about somebody or something) and the object must be freighted with value and importance and have implications for one's own projects and purposes. In other words, emotion is inherently "eudaimonistic," concerned with one's own flourishing (31), which explains why we have strong emotions for those close to us and are part of who we are but are mostly indifferent to strangers. Equally significant is the recognition that the objects of our emotions are more often than not beyond our control—we may lose a loved one to a freak accident, or s/he may betray us. Our emotions enable us to live together as social animals, but they are also "our hostages to fortune": "In emotion we recognize our own passivity before the ungoverned events of life" and experience our neediness and vulnerability (78). Hence the perennial attempt to overcome our emotions in many philosophical and religious traditions, via either reason or asceticism, as a way of transcending the human condition. And this is also why modernity conceives of itself as a project to emancipate emotion from such "repression."

But if emotions are value judgments, how is it that we either mistrust them as blind and crude or celebrate them as natural and spontaneous? For Daniel Kahneman, emotion is a particular kind of cognitive process belonging to what he calls "System 1" of our consciousness, which is typically experienced as spontaneous and intuitive. System 1 is mostly sound and reliable as it is reinforced by sensory experience and molded by social environment, but can also be error-prone and biased. It is subject to revision and control by "System 2," which unfortunately abides by the principle of least effort and is more or less passive. In other words, in our daily comings and goings, we largely operate on autopilot and think, as it were, with our

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<sup>5</sup> See Prinz for a critique of a *pure* cognitive theory of emotion. It seems that the stress on embodiment in Nussbaum and others makes their cognitive approach defensible, though I do believe that it needs to be updated with the latest findings from neuroscience, experimental psychology, and evolutionary psychology.

body (51). In our unreflective and spontaneous state, in fact, we are falling back on sedimented patterns of behavior, or what Pierre Bourdieu calls “habitus,” shaped in part by our genetic composition and in part by our upbringing, personal life trajectories, and cultural and social milieu. Kahneman’s dual-system theory reinforces the idea that emotions are judgments of value, but emphasizes that much of the evaluation takes place at the unconscious level—hence the spontaneous, unbidden feel of our emotions. System 2 also processes emotions, albeit often on a meta-level as when we reflect on, recalibrate, or reject the value judgments embedded therein. We commonly speak of this as cold reason taking control of boiling passions, though psychologists have sided with David Hume in acknowledging that it is the passions that are truly in charge, with reason merely providing post hoc rationalization or modification (Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis* 188).

Consider, for example, the seemingly universal feeling of disgust and the associated behavior of recoiling from certain substances or entities. In Jonathan Haidt’s account, disgust is at one level biologically evolved to guard our mouths from rotten food sources; at another level it is also used to guard a particular culture’s conception of the social order, which is why disgust is predominantly associated with such bodily activities as ingestion, defecation, intercourse, and childbirth as well as behaviors and groups that symbolically transgress the boundaries of the body social (homosexuality, miscegenation; Jews, Gypsies, the Untouchables) (*The Happiness Hypothesis* 185-87). Not so long ago, many in anti-Semitic Europe and Jim Crow America could swear honestly to God that the bodies of Jews and blacks exuded a distinct and offensive odor, which justified their exclusion and persecution. And yet decades of political struggles and consciousness raising seem to have sufficiently reeducated System 2 and reprogrammed System 1. Fewer and fewer among today’s youth, as Haidt points out, find gay sex “repugnant,” just as white Americans no longer find sharing a water fountain with blacks objectionable as they once did in the pre-Civil Rights era (188).

Subjectively, we rarely doubt the reliability of our gut feelings and are unlikely to mobilize System 2 to check for the errors and biases of System 1. If anything, our faith in the infallibility of System 1 and our energy conservation instinct mitigate against such cognitively taxing self-scrutiny and self-revision. As a consequence we come to experience emotion as independent from our conscious will. Habitually analogized with forces of

nature like a tempest or flood, emotion claims the kind of self-evident irreproachability and moral authority that have long been accorded to Nature since the Romantic age. At the very least, it is regarded as an amoral wellspring of vitality akin to Freud's id, unduly repressed by the ego or superego acting on behalf of society and civilization. The post-Enlightenment Western episteme is grounded in a series of binary oppositions that invariably privileges the first terms: nature/culture, body/mind, emotion/reason, sincerity/ritual, modernity/tradition, and individual/society. Hence the high premium placed on the unmediated expression of emotion and the attendant imagery of a vast interiority dammed in by social conventions and rituals. This is how sincerity, replacing God or reason, becomes the guarantor of personal truth.

One may also map the opposition of constitutional democracy and autocratic monarchy along the same line, in spite of both systems' decisive departure from the state of nature. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the grand architect of the cult of nature and sincerity, proposes the social contract to reconcile concentrated power to the ideal of individual sovereignty and authenticity. For him, a social order is legitimate insofar as it is premised on the affirmation and validation from each individual. In a large polity in which direct democracy is not possible, we express our consent to the political arrangement in which the majority are governed by a minority by selecting *representatives* who vow to represent, *sincerely and faithfully*, our wishes and preferences. In so doing, we symbolically close the gap between our subjective selves and the objective social order. When we pull the levers in the voting booth, it is *as if* each of us is sending a little piece of our hearts to the political center to be melded into the general will. It is a piece of political theater—conjuring the subjunctive world of popular sovereignty—sustained by ritual repetition and yet seldom acknowledged as such. Instead, it is regarded as the ultimate enactment of sincerity.

The point is that there is nothing natural about the hegemony of sincerity and representation. Rather, it is a legacy of the Enlightenment and the Romantic Movement. This is precisely what drives Potter's effort to understand the social construction of emotion in rural China and use it to critique Western preoccupations. She characterizes Chinese village life as a ritualistic order in which emotion is not granted any formal social role and therefore has no formal social consequences. In other words, emotional



experiences, however intense or devastating, cannot create, maintain, injure, or destroy social relationships (Potter 185-86). Emotional outbursts may be unpleasant or unwelcome, but they are rarely consequential, nor are they accorded truth status. For this reason emotion is often allowed a wide latitude. Childhood tantrums, for example, are routinely ignored instead of raising alarm or being met with solicitous efforts at mollification (187-88). Adults too are permitted to vent their anger or grief openly until these fits of passion have run their course. Instead, “attention is directed away from the psychological processes of individuals, especially their feelings, and toward the appropriate expression of shared intersubjective agreement about moral values and the social world” (190-91). The exception that proves the rule is the amorous feeling of love. Because of its implications for marriage and family, love is permissible only when it is expressed in a ritualistic, non-individual-directed manner. A young man wishing to woo a young woman would do well to put in a day’s (and more) hard work hoeing her family’s plot or fetching water for their kitchen tank instead of asking her out for a date.

What this means is that the social order, at least in the context of village life relatively untouched by modern media (Potter conducted her fieldwork in the early 1980s), is not predicated on individual consent or perceived to be an aggregation of individual will or desire. Each person is under no obligation to align his or her internal feeling state with external exigencies or risk the charge of hypocrisy. Citing Richard Solomon, Potter contextualizes the non-alignment of social action and inner feeling underlying “the Chinese definition of sincerity [which] does not exist in reference to inner feeling, but requires only the enactment of civility” (194). Still, in the eyes of Westerners committed to a psychological, expressivist notion of sincerity, the Chinese can be maddeningly inscrutable. Arthur Smith, that self-appointed diagnostician of Chinese maladies at the turn of the last century, accuses the Chinese language, among other things, of the supreme sin of hypocrisy: “the ordinary speech of the Chinese is so full of insincerity, which yet does not rise to the dignity of falsehood, that it is very difficult to learn the truth in almost any case” (271). Yet if the hypocrite is only a playactor pretending to virtue, playacting cannot be a vice as long as the “rotten core” is never permitted to poke through the subterfuge. Indeed, in the ritual mode of framing action and experience, playacting is what counts. The more skillfully one enacts the social script, the stronger the shared social world. Emotion is by no means

absent in playacting, but it is socialized by ritual. To adapt Fingarette's formulation quoted earlier, emotion is *in* the performance; one does not have to peer into the psyche of the performer. "It is all 'there,' public." Such is the basic point made by a number of scholars who have examined non-Western traditions of performance and sociability, such as Arjun Appadurai on the theory of *rasa* in Hindi theater, Richard Schechner on Japanese Noh theater, and Edward Slingerland ("Of What Use Are the Odes?"; *Trying Not to Try*) on the Mencian approach to moral cultivation. In sum, the traditional social order is not independent of individual experience and judgment, but rather socializes and harmonizes them through a ritualized affective style. Emotions are not something to be released or liberated from social constraints, but rather embodied judgments of value that come into their own in the very act of presentation.

When ritual is the dominant mode of social engagement, empathy, trust, and solidarity are cultivated in the space of the shared subjunctive. Rhythmic, repetitive, and participatory forms of social activity such as music, theater, poetry recitation, and storytelling are the anvils on which the sentiments, desires, and values of System 1 are slowly and imperceptibly hammered into shape. It is an education of the senses par excellence, whose ideal endpoint is best articulated by Confucius: "When I reached 70, I could follow my heart's desires without transgressing rules of propriety" (「七十從心所欲不逾矩」) Research in social psychology reveals that ritual, insofar as it necessarily involves the body and entails action, helps achieve "cross-level coherence" between the physical, psychological, and sociocultural levels of experience (Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis* 226). The values of a culture and society are thus directly inscribed in System 1, at the level of affect and intuition. Certain rituals are also conducive to bringing about a mystical state or a state of flow that subjunctively dissolves the borders of the self and enables it to experience transcendence, or what Freud calls the "oceanic feeling." According to neuro-scientist Andrew Newberg, there are two patches of cortex in the rear portion of the brain's parietal lobes called "orientation association areas." The left patch keeps track of our physical edges, while the right patch maintains a map of the space around us so that we can locate ourselves in space. The mystical state is achieved when the two areas are cut off from other parts of our brains, so that we experience an expansion of the self out into space, yet with no fixed location (Haidt, *The Happiness*

*Hypothesis* 236-37). Rituals that involve synchronized repetitive movement and chanting in unison create “resonance patterns” in the brains of the participants that make the mystical state, or what Seligman et al. call “synesthetic fun” (97), likely to happen.

Confucius intuitively understood this mechanism when he spoke of ritual and music as if they inherently went together. Rather than an autonomous domain of art, music was intrinsic to ritual, making it first and foremost a performing event akin to and continuous with theater.<sup>6</sup> Barbara Ward memorably called actors of traditional Chinese theater “not merely players” in recognition of the overlap between theater and ritual. In point of fact, commercial theater did not emerge until the 18<sup>th</sup> century in China; even after that, plays were typically staged at religious and communal festivals—as much for the enjoyment of the gods on high as for the pleasure of the thronging crowds. Actors often assumed priestly roles, blessing little children and officiating at rites to repel evil spirits.<sup>7</sup> Emotion could run high on such occasions, but it was emotion roused and buoyed by shared codes and communal outlets. Similarly, narrative fiction showed little interest in psychological realism or cared much for the kind of introspective plumbing of psychic depths, exploration of the vagaries of the human heart, or dramatization of inner conflict typical of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century European novel. Instead, narrative attention is chiefly absorbed by what Erving Goffman calls “interaction ritual” engaged in by presentational selves (*Interaction Ritual*). The aesthetic of presentation is also the reason why the Chinese detective story reads so differently from its Western counterpart. Invariably, the perpetrator is fully identified upfront and his or her crime—almost always motivated by greed or lust—depicted matter-of-factly. Suspense lies not in the unraveling of a mystery but rather in the magistrate’s pursuit of the criminal and execution of justice by hook or by crook.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> On early Chinese theory of music, see Brindley. For a general discussion on the relationship between emotion and music, see (Nussbaum ch. 5). Citing Confucius and Xunzi on the moral benefits of music, Daniel Bell goes so far as to argue that the ritualized foreplay of group singing, drinking, and bantering in karaoke clubs frequented by male business associates or friends (which may or may not segue to sexual services) has the effect of cementing the bond among the men and blunting the iniquities associated with sex work. In other words, the hostesses are not always treated purely as sex objects. This explains why there is less stigma attached to married men, in groups, openly carousing at karaoke parlors in China and other East Asian countries than in the West.

<sup>7</sup> As depicted, for example, in the opera film *Woman, Demon, Human* directed by Huang Shuqin (see Lee, “Woman, Demon, Human”).

<sup>8</sup> I used to assign Jonathan Spence’s *Death of Woman Wang* in a course on Chinese civilization. As part of the final take-home examination, I asked the students to write a review of the book. Despite

By contrast, in the sincere mode, the social order is experienced as having no inherent basis for continuity since it must be continuously reinvented and reaffirmed from within myriads of individuals. As Potter points out, “If emotions must be expressed sincerely, and the lack of sincere feeling invalidates relationship, then the individual is required to produce a continuous stream of emotional expression that is simultaneously sincere *and appropriate*; if this does not occur, the social order is endangered” (183), or at least the relationship in question is in peril. Note the dual requirement of sincerity and propriety, for no society actually tolerates raw and tactless sincerity tout court, rhetoric notwithstanding. It clearly recognizes the absurdity of founding the social order on something as dicey as the human heart, and implicitly admits the necessity of the shared subjunctive. The resilience of religion in what is supposedly an inexorably secular age can be understood in this light—as fulfilling a largely unacknowledged need for a shared social world founded on the *as if* instead of the *as is*, and coping with the cognitive strain in a lifeworld that makes a pretense of dispensing with all ritualized routines. Most of us are vulnerable to commercial exploitation that hides ritualization behind a façade of spontaneity and personalized attention. The entire gift industry—from Hallmark cards to cut flowers—thrives on this misrecognition.<sup>9</sup>

### III. Playing with Feelings

The dialectic between presentation and representation, between ritual and sincerity also underlies the convergence of literary cultures across the East-West divide. Cognitive literary theorists believe that people the world over spend most of their leisure hours (and sometimes working hours as well) lost in fictional worlds not merely for hedonic or escapist reasons, but because it

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my repeated heads-ups about the book not being a murder mystery or whodunit novel, I never succeeded in forestalling such questions as “can we reveal the ending?” or “should we have a spoiler alert?”

<sup>9</sup> The primacy of ritual is probably behind the Chinese custom of not opening a gift in front of the gift-giver, as the ritual gesture outweighs the substance. Even if one actually cares greatly about the substance, the deferred unwrapping allows one to keep such indecorous thoughts under wraps, so to speak. By the same token, re-gifting is widely practiced and accepted. In the West, in contrast, gift-giving is largely governed by the principle of sincerity despite the saying that “it’s the thought that counts.” Typically, a present is opened immediately and the recipient is expected to acknowledge the appropriateness of the present and the thought and effort that went into picking out just the right item perfectly tailored to the recipient’s personal needs, idiosyncratic desires, and fleeting fancies. Needless to say, re-gifting is frowned upon and, when practiced, must be covered up with (white) lies.

satisfies their urge to read minds and gain direct access to other people's emotions. Zunshine employs the cognitive psychological concept "theory of mind" to explain the appeal of fictional narratives (*Why We Read Fiction; Getting Inside Your Head*). Theory of mind is our evolutionarily adaptive propensity to infer mental states from observable behavior and speech in other people (and animals and sometimes animated objects). It is a vital skill for the highly social animals that we are to function well in socially complex situations. According to Zunshine, psychologically realistic fiction provides abundant opportunities for mind-reading, whereas in real life such opportunities are hard to come by. Verbal narratives slake our mind-reading thirst most commonly by means of an omniscient narrator who shuttles freely in and out of characters' heads. Non-verbal forms of storytelling such as movies, reality TV, and musicals deal with the challenge of revealing unspoken thoughts and feelings by recourse to the strategy of "embodied transparency," whereby a gesture or expression gives away a character's inner state and renders him/her transparent, as it were. But for this strategy to work, it must follow three rules:

The first rule is *contrasts*: an author has to build up a context in which the character's transparency stands out sharply against the relative lack of transparency of other characters or of the same character a moment ago or a moment after. The second rule is *transience*: to be believable, instances of transparency must be brief. The third rule is *restraint*: more often than not, characters struggle to conceal their feelings and by doing so become transparent. (Zunshine, *Getting Inside Your Head* 30)

These rules are necessary to ensure that the emotion or intention we glimpse in a character in an unguarded moment is a genuine revelation. Even so, we are constantly on guard for manipulative performances, leading to "an arms race" akin to the "sincerity all the way down" conundrum: "To the extent to which our mind-reading adaptations make us see bodies as providing 'foolproof' cues to thoughts and feelings, we remain vulnerable to convincingly faked body language" (15); again, "there is a constant arms race going on between cultural institutions trying to claim some aspects of the body as essential, unfakeable, and intentionality-free and individuals finding ways to *perform* even those seemingly unperformable aspects of the body"

(16). From tears, blushes, and screams to orgasmic groans, as soon as one body language is thought to be a telltale cue, it is subject to fakery and hence cynical doubt. Method actors know well such an arms race, and some of them resort to more and more extreme measures to dispel the impression that “it’s only an act.” To the extent to which embodied transparency demands sincerity, it is in perennial danger of ritualization.

This arms race, however, is only plausible in the representational mode whereby the body is ideally an expressivist vehicle for inner thoughts and feelings. Zunshine believes that embodied transparency is universally valued across genres and cultures, though in all it must deal with the creeping encroachment of ritualization. In operas and musicals, for example, the revelatory moment usually comes when a character sings her heart out for an extended period of time while no one else onstage can hear her. Audiences have little trouble catching on that the aria is intended for them and provides a direct access to the character’s innermost feelings. She acknowledges that in classical Chinese theater, *qu* (曲) songs are full of literary allusions and the body language of actors is highly stylized. Nonetheless, she believes that the spontaneous emotions of characters can still “shine through the formulaic gestures and abundant literary and historical quotes” through “an emotional display” that audiences find delectable (Zunshine, *Getting Inside Your Head* 139). In my view, the delectable emotional display in Chinese theater does not require an inner state to break through layers of stylization in order to reach the audience. To suppose so is to view a presentational style of emotional communication through the tinted lens of representationalism which ultimately rests on a Cartesian division of mind and body. In the presentational mode, actors communicate powerful emotions and enact intense lyricism not *in spite of* all those gestures and quotes, but *by virtue of* an elaborate repertoire of ritualized expressions. The actor’s body is the locus of emotion, not merely a medium for a hidden mind or soul. It is the artistry of suggestiveness (*dhavani*), not transparency, that is the Holy Grail. Ritual enables, not obstructs, the communication of emotion, as Confucius already intuited two millennia ago.

Once the presentationist aesthetic was rendered alien by modernity, embodied transparency did become a privileged style of affective communication in China. We have witnessed a paradigmatic instance in the episode recounted at the beginning of this article. When Meng Xiaodong pulls

down her fake beard and turns to gaze upon Mei Lanfang with her naked face, the film viewers are instantly catapulted, aided by a close-up, to the familiar zone of emotional transparency—after sitting through a long segment of operatic duet that has given us few recognizable cues and has confounded us with its gender inversion. It is a moment of sincerity that “shines through” all the dramaturgical obfuscation and is captivating precisely because it obeys the rules of contrasts, transience, and restraint. Likewise, the brief pause in Mei Lanfang’s wife’s applauding hands affords us instant access to her inner anguish. That Chinese audiences can be so quickly schooled in the representational mode perhaps speaks to a persistent, subterranean hunger for mind-reading, embodied transparency, and psychological realism that the formalistic tradition failed to satisfy. Early 20<sup>th</sup>-century reformers astutely recognized this hunger and sought to psychologize traditional art forms with representational techniques borrowed from the West. Qi Rushan, for example, became the visionary architect of Peking Opera’s ascension to a national art by introducing a dash of psychological realism into a genre whose formal aestheticism was in his view its greatest asset, in part in response to May Fourth critics’ charge that its conventionalized techniques provided no outlet for character interiority (Goldstein 193). Mei Lanfang’s sensational and enduring popularity in an era increasingly dominated by film also owed a large measure to his innovative effort, at Qi’s urgings, to accentuate his characters’ inner emotional life within the bounds of formalism (188). “The valorization of individual expressiveness was central to the contemporary discourse of drama as high art, and Peking Opera could not vie for recognition as a national art without proving itself on these grounds” (194). The line uttered by Qi about “real feeling” in the playhouse scene is thus quite in character.

Yet the representational mode or the valorization of sincerity was not entirely unknown within the Chinese tradition prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Much has been written about the “cult of *qing* (情) (sentiment)” movement in the late Ming (16th and 17th centuries). Given impetus by Wang Yangming’s (王陽明) philosophy of innate moral knowledge (*liangzhi* 良知), the movement sought to inject an element of sincerity into the Confucian ritual order by extolling the supreme power of sentiment and love. Despite the resurgence of Confucian orthodoxy after the Manchu conquest, the movement reached its apogee in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century classic *Dream of the Red Chamber* (《紅樓夢》)

(a.k.a *The Story of the Stone*)<sup>10</sup>. Not coincidentally, to prove fiction's near universal affinity with theory of mind, Zunshine pointedly trains her analytical attention on this novel, which she argues exhibits a consummate command of "sociocognitive complexity," or nested mental states. When a narrative reports mental activity, it usually stays at the first or second level, as in "she *feels hurt* by his remarks" and "he *feels bad* that she *was hurt* by his remarks." Sophisticated literary novels, however, routinely reach the third level of sociocognitive complexity: "she *does not want* him to *be troubled* by the knowledge that she *was hurt* by his remarks." Moreover, these novels tend to imbricate the mental states of the narrator, implied author, and implied reader with those of its characters in an implicit manner, without using metacognitive terms such as think, feel, know, guess, and so on.

Zooming in on several scenes taking place in the Grandview Garden and centrally involving the good-natured Jia Baoyu (賈寶玉) and his cousin and love interest Lin Daiyu (林黛玉), Zunshine unspools the nested mental states that effortlessly reach the third or fourth level of complexity. For instance, when the supersensitive Daiyu first lays eyes on her romantic rival Xue Baochai (薛寶釵), the omniscient narrator opines: "And now suddenly this Xue Baochai had appeared on the scene—a young lady who, though very little older than Daiyu, possessed a grown-up beauty and aplomb in which all agreed Daiyu was her inferior" (qtd. in "From the Social to the Literary" 177); Zunshine identifies at least four recursively nested mental states: "the narrator *wants* his readers to *realize* that Daiyu *feels distressed* because she *is certain* that everyone around her *considers* her inferior to Baochai" (177). These mutually embedded minds plunge us deep into the overlapping interior worlds of the characters, narrator, implied author, and implied reader, and the satisfaction we get from the rigorous exercise of mind-reading and the immersive experience of sharing a kaleidoscope of intricate emotions account to a large extent for the novel's apparent modernity. No other texts from the Chinese tradition can match *Dream* in sociocognitive complexity, hence its posthumous canonization in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and iconic status in the pantheon of world literature.

*Dream* was also the first Chinese novel to ground its *raison d'être* in sincerity and representational realism rather than didacticism or the

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<sup>10</sup> See Huang, Ko, Lee's *Revolution of the Heart*, Li, Santangelo and Guida, Santangelo and Middendorf, Ropp, Wang, and Yu.



transmission of Dao. As is well known, Cao Xueqin (曹雪芹) modeled Baoyu on himself and wove much of his own social world into the novel's chronicle of the rise and fall of four aristocratic families. In doing so, it self-consciously broke a deep-rooted pattern. Throughout China's imperial age, narrative fiction was a marginal genre subordinated to philosophy, history, and poetry. Known as "small talk" (小說), it was thought to be the idle chats of commoners gathered and compiled by minor officials as a kind of sociological report, useful to the rulers in gauging the popular mood. Storytellers invariably sought to dignify fiction by dressing it up as unofficial history, relying on historiographical conventions for characters, formal structures, and rhetorical devices. Authors were wont to style themselves as amateur historians, even when what they wrote was of a patently fabulous nature. For example, Pu Songling (蒲松齡), the compiler and author of a famed anthology of fantastical tales, calls himself "historian of the strange." And history in China, as Anthony Yu puts it, "assumes the authority of a kind of realized eschatology" (40). As history *manqué*, fiction is freighted with the mission of transmitting the Dao and must at least pay lip service to this moral purpose. Cao Xueqin, by contrast, gives his largely realistic portrayal a mythological frame that flaunts the amoral nature of his tale. In the frame narrative, a magical stone (Baoyu's mythical self) tries to convince a Buddhist monk to copy out the story inscribed on its surface for the pleasure and diversion of the multitudes. In response to the latter's reservations about its lack of the authentication of a dynastic period, of examples of moral grandeur, of statesmanship or social message, and the fact that much of the plot revolves around a number of females "conspicuous, if at all, only for their passion or folly or for some trifling talent or insignificant virtue," the stone replies that his story is told "exactly as it occurred" (Cao 49), unembellished and entirely truthful. The monk then sees it for what it is—a story of love and "a true record of real events" (51)—and obliges the stone. The claim of sincerity thus constitutes a radical break from the cosmic-moral framework that has governed writing for millennia. It also heralded a new mode of memoir writing that stakes its claim to readerly interest entirely on experiential authenticity and representational fealty, thereby departing from the formulaic and impersonal biographical and hagiographical tradition.

Although sincerity did not achieve mainstream status, it continued to be embraced by the marginal or countercultural set among the literati. At the turn

of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a 40-ish man named Shen Fu composed a six-part account (of which only the first four are extant) of his life so far, giving particular weight to his marriage to a cousin, his network of friends, his beloved leisure pursuits, his travels, and his liaisons with courtesans. A well-educated scholar who failed repeatedly at the civil service examinations, Shen tried to eke out a living working in government *yamen* (衙門) as a private secretary. It was an unstable occupation with meager pay and little prestige. Shen frequently found himself unemployed and had to rely on family and friends to tide him over. He also tried petty commerce but did not have much talent or enthusiasm for it. He did manage, intermittently, to scrape some income from painting and seal carving, though not as much as his wife was able to with her needlework. While they never quite starved, life was precarious and his wife died young from a protracted illness that they could ill afford to treat properly.

From the foregoing summary, we can see that Shen Fu's life is hardly suitable material for hagiographical commemoration or apotheosis. That he took the trouble to record his life betrayed a post-*Dream* confidence that the life experience of an ordinary person was of interest to others simply because it was truthfully told, with no pretensions to offer moral instruction or allocate praise and blame. The memoir has been a perennial favorite of generations of modern readers drawn to its lyrical depictions of conjugal bliss, convivial gatherings of friends, and the small pleasures of everyday life. As with *Dream*, it is the impression that we are being treated to events "recorded exactly as they happened" (Cao 50) that makes it irresistible. And yet as I aim to show in the remainder of this article, the book does not succumb to the arms race of sincerity. Rather, it tacks between the ritual and sincere modes of framing experience and action and partakes of both presentational and representational aesthetics.

The most distinctive feature of *Six Records* is its non-linearity. Ann Waltner points out that neither Shen's life nor the way he tells it follows a linear line. Readers accustomed to the modern genre of autobiography may well find the narrative structure puzzling. In Chapter One entitled "The Joys of the Wedding Chamber," Shen Fu presents a charming account of how the puppy love between him and his girl cousin Chen Yun (陳芸) was graciously accommodated by their parents in an arranged marriage, how Yun's independent spirit caused a rift between the conjugal couple and her father-in-law, and how she formed a liaison with a courtesan and tried unsuccessfully to

bring about a *ménage à trois*. Then in the next chapter, “The Pleasures of Leisure,” he leaves all this off and gives us a rambling disquisition on the arts of flower arrangement, bonsai cultivation, and gardening. In a similar pattern, after devoting Chapter Three, “The Sorrows of Misfortune,” to the subjects of poverty, illness, and familial friction, he casts his gaze outward in Chapter Four, “The Delights of Roaming Afar,” to the many places, near and far, he has traveled to because of work or for the sake of friendship and companionship, though chronologically it covers much of the same ground as do the previous chapters. Chapters Two and Four are evocative of the ritual art of repetition and ornamentation that does not so much interrupt the narration as frame it in the pattern of a “floating life” that has ebbs and flows, stasis and movement, iteration and transformation. It is a life without a telos but is nonetheless lived to the full.

In both the more straightforwardly narrative chapters and the more contemplative chapters, there are few introspective moments. That is to say, with few exceptions, the narrative voice does not function as an anxious curator of the emotional artifacts of the past. Instead, Shen prefers to give us the external perspective on his experience. For example, he relates a childhood episode in which his private parts were bitten by a poisonous earthworm, apparently while he was indulging in masturbation in the family garden. Instead of dwelling on the sensations of pain and embarrassment, he recounts the comical sequence that ensued: his testicles became so swollen that he could not pass water; so the maidservants dangled a duck over his groin based on the folk belief that a duck’s saliva can neutralize the earthworm’s poison (the duck being the natural predator of the earthworm). When the duck was accidentally let go, it “stretched out its neck as if to bite me there, and I screamed with fright. This became a family joke” (56). In Kahneman’s terminology, the “experiencing self” went through much pain and terror, but the “remembering self” adopts the perspective of the kin group and looks upon the incident with detached bemusement and shares in the laughter that evidently became ritualized through repeated telling and teasing. Being the butt of a family joke seems to have afforded as much pleasure to his remembering self as to his family at large, not least the servants who could take advantage of the ritually subjunctive moments of jesting to temporarily level the hierarchy of class.

In a similar vein, the memoirist recreates many episodes of play, or the ritualistic conjuring of a subjunctive world that brought much enjoyment to all participants. Shen tells us that ever since boyhood, he had always been fond of losing himself in an improvised fantasy world:

During the summer, whenever I heard the sound of mosquitoes swarming, I would pretend they were a flock of cranes dancing across the open sky, and in my imagination they actually would become hundreds of cranes. I would look at them so long my neck became stiff. At night I would let mosquitoes inside my mosquito netting, blow smoke at them, and imagine that what I saw were white cranes soaring through blue clouds. It really did look like cranes flying among the clouds, and it was a sight that delighted me. (55)

His fondness for the pretend would later find an absorbing outlet in the art of bonsai, which, as he explains, is all about “pruning miniature potted trees to make them look like real ones” (56). Chapter Two is chockfull of advice and tips for the reader: “While adding some detail in the pot with flowers or stones, try to create small scenes as lovely as pictures, or grand vistas of enchantment. These can be the delight of your study if you can lose yourself in contemplation of them when sitting with a cup of fine tea” (59). In his wife Yun, Shen finds a zestful and ingenious accomplice. As Stephen Owen notes appreciatively, “the two lovers were always writing idylls into their lives, organizing small spaces for themselves, building illusions and miniature mountains” (102-03). Once Shen brought home some pretty patterned pebbles. At the suggestion of Yun, they ground and mixed the pebbles with putty and used the mixture to add a finishing touch to the rock formation of a miniature garden after the fashion of a favorite landscape painting of theirs. After much fussing and tinkering over the course of several months, husband and wife pictured themselves as inhabitants of the *as if* world of their own creation:

We put the pot out under the eaves and discussed it in great detail: here we should build a pavilion on the water, there a thatched arbour; here we should inscribe a stone with the characters ‘Where flowers drop and waters flow’. We could live

here, we could fish there, from this other place we could gaze off into the distance. We were as excited about it as if we were actually going to move to those imaginary hills and vales. But one night some miserable cats fighting over something to eat fell from the eaves, smashing the pot in an instant. I sighed, and said, 'Even this little project has incurred the jealousy of heaven!' Neither of us could keep from shedding tears. (62)

The sense that the small pleasures of life are fragile and contingent runs throughout the book. Catastrophe invariably follows upon bliss, and tears always drown out laughter. At one level, the couple were unconventionally headstrong and willful to the dismay of Shen's father; at another level, they lived with a deep sense of foreboding that "happiness carried to an extreme turns into sadness" (35). Writing in the wake of the intellectual and literary effervescence of the cult of *qing*, Shen Fu was also living out the legacy of this late imperial sincerity movement, being able to marry the woman he was actually in love with and thus winning institutional recognition and endorsement of a sincere existence. That he should begin his memoir with "the joys of the wedding chamber" bespeaks the importance attached to the life of the heart. His deep and enduring devotion to Yun put considerable distance between the young couple and the extended family. Acting contrary to the codes of filial piety, he stood by his wife when his father ordered her expulsion; years later, he failed to arrive home in time to bid farewell to his dying father. He tells us that when he finally reached home, he beat his head on the ground until it bled in grief and remorse: "Alas! My father had a hard life, always working away from home, and giving birth to an unfilial son like me who seldom gave him happiness and who failed to care for him on his deathbed. How can I avoid punishment for my unfilial crimes?" (92). We have no reason to doubt the genuineness of this outburst; nonetheless it is also ritually appropriate and no further emotive demonstration is mentioned.

In a marital life that was probably the envy of many who chafed under the straightjacket of arranged marriages, the couple strengthened their bond on a negotiated balance of ritual and sincerity. Shen informs us that he was "by nature candid and unconstrained, but Yun was scrupulous and meticulous" (32). Once he gently reproached her for her constant "I beg your pardon" by proclaiming that "deceit hides behind too much courtesy" and "true respect comes from the heart, not from empty words." Yun retorted,

“there is no one closer to us than our parents. But how could we merely respect them in our hearts while being rude in our treatment of them?” (32). If the cult of *qing* strove to bring the formal, hierarchical parent-child relation into closer alignment with the intimate, egalitarian conjugal relation, then Yun’s remarks reminded Shen the self-styled romantic that even passionate love must lean on a measure of ritualization, that is, by taking a page from the book of filial devotion. “From then on, the polite phrases ‘How dare I?’ and ‘I beg your pardon’ became staples in our vocabulary.<sup>11</sup> We lived together with the greatest mutual respect for three and twenty years, and as the years passed we grew ever closer” (33, translation modified). The longevity of conjugal love seemed ensured by a playful choreography of ritual and sincerity, aided by the prop of “empty words” deliberately and decorously enunciated.

For all her attention to decorum, Yun was remarkably adept at play. In a particularly memorable episode, Yun dressed up as a man in order to go to a temple fair with Shen Fu. She put on Shen’s clothes and pranced about the house to practice the male gait, deriving endless amusement from the effort. The disguise worked quite well until she accidentally placed her hand on a woman’s shoulder while listening in on a gaggle of chattering women (who were family members of one of the festival organizers and may, as Waltner suggests, have belonged to a lower social stratum). To mollify the incensed woman, Yun took off her hat and kicked up her bound foot to reveal her gender and fell in with the group in boisterous merriment (44-45). Laughter essentially ritualizes a transgressive act by nullifying its real life consequences and reframing it as play, suggesting that “spatial decorum is something that is contingent, that is always being negotiated” (Waltner 82). There were other occasions in which Yun flouted social conventions and joined Shen on his outings, causing rumors to fly and further displeasing her in-laws. On her deathbed, Yun expressed gratitude for his love and sympathy. Although the conventional indices of happiness had largely eluded her—rank and riches, a large family with many offspring, and longevity—she deemed her life a happy one on more subjective criteria: a loving and companionate husband, several opportunities to travel and see “the world,” and a home that afforded her a measure of privacy and a space for her creativity. And yet, this personal

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<sup>11</sup> The Chinese original of the modified sentence is “自此豈敢，得罪竟成語助詞矣。” The translators betray their bias against ritualism by rendering 語助詞 (“pet phrases, verbal auxiliaries, locutionary crutches”) as “mere expressions,” thus missing the change of attitude in Shen Fu who stopped regarding these expressions as a nuisance, as mere “empty words” (虛文).

definition of happiness seemed beclouded by anxiety and foreboding that their pursuit of happiness—in their own idiosyncratic fashion—may indeed have violated some cosmic law for which they must pay a price: she with her life and he with bereavement at middle-age. In her last will and testament, she told Shen Fu to make amends with his family and find a good woman to look after their two children (whose births are omitted in the memoir and who make their first appearance as teenagers rather casually in Chapter Three). It is as if Yun wanted Shen to atone for the offense of their project of sincerity (which as we have noted was not without its own ritual dimensions) by reintegrating himself into the ritual order of the family as a filial son and a dutiful father, thereby putting behind his self-experiment as a uxorious husband and a bohemian (lumpen) literatus.

Yet, in Chapter Four, Shen Fu gives us an exhaustive account of his travels across south China, including an amorous episode with a sing-song girl named Xi'er (Hsi-erh) in a floating bordello on the Pearl River.

In four months there I spent only a little over a hundred golds and moreover was able to eat lychee and other fresh fruits. It was the happiest time I had ever spent in my life. Later, the madam wanted to sell me Hsi-erh for five hundred golds, but I did not like her pestering me and so made plans to return home. Hsiu-feng [a close friend and fellow patron] had fallen in love, however, so I encouraged him to buy the girl. . . . (126)

The Chinese original for “the happiest time in my life” is “平生快事” (Shen 114), which carries less weighty connotation than the English phrase. Shen makes it clear that, unlike his friend Xiufeng (Hsiu-feng), he did not fall in love with Xi'er; hence his ready resolve to leave her behind, which he informs us broke her heart. Elsewhere, I have discussed at length the problem of falling in love in the demimonde (Lee, *The Stranger* 121-27). Suffice it to say that the game of the courtesan house is *playing at* love, a game that sustains the space of heterosociability, erotic frisson, and freedom not found anywhere else in traditional society, with the rare exception of companionate marriages and bohemian friendship circles. The best player in this floating world is the detached player who is a master of good manners and courtship rituals and yet can take it or leave it. *Falling in* love, however, upsets the ritual equilibrium, spells the endgame of playacting, and closes off the space

of freedom. As soon as a man installs a courtesan in his household as a wife or concubine, the freewheeling egalitarian dynamics can be difficult to sustain under the weight of duty and necessity. Perhaps Shen Fu did not trust his ability to resurrect the lost conjugal paradise he and Chen Yun had constructed, out of the recognition that it can be so much harder to keep afloat an isolated kingdom of love and sincerity within the ritual space of kinship than to enter the pleasure quarters for a taste of the life of the heart in the subjunctive mode and in the company of kindred spirits. The Xi'er affair is sandwiched between lengthy descriptive passages relating his visits to many historically and literarily resonant sites during his voluntary and involuntary wanderings. The affair thus becomes more or less a ritualized component of a literatus's encounter with the culturally inscribed landscape of China.

In the end, Shen Fu's life and memoir are both precariously and playfully poised between two affective styles: ritual and sincerity, presentation and representation. His personality shines through brilliantly in lyrical passages of love and attachment as well as in detached descriptions of travel and leisure. Modern readers who are wont to skip over the latter out of impatience with the presentationist or ritual mode are like film audiences who can only appreciate the theatrical aesthetic when it is served up in bite size and wrapped in the representational mode. In return they are caught in the arms race of embodied transparency, forever hungry for the moment of truth and yet forever suspicious of the sincerity of emotion on display.



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