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Introduction

This book traces the evolution of pleasure theories in early China over the course of a millennium and a half, from the fourth century BCE to the eleventh century CE. To signify acts of pleasure-seeking, pleasure-taking, and imparting pleasure, a wide range of thinkers during that time deployed the single graph, *le* 樂, freely borrowing from one another, sometimes to differing ends, but often with the same goal of arriving at the most versatile model of the human condition.¹ Undergirding their rhetoric was always the dual presumption that pleasure matters a great deal to most people, and how people seek, take, and give pleasure is the truest test of their character.

Why take pleasure as my chosen subject? At first, it was simply because Sinologists for so long sidestepped the topic,² and more recently, because serious consideration of pleasure in academia has reentered the realm of ethical and aesthetic theory, also the histories of early modern Europe.³ Chiefly, however, it is because the steady contemplation of pleasure — not short-term delight or kindred concepts — invites attention to distinctive aspects of Chinese culture, as well as to notions common to Chinese and non-Chinese traditions. Consider the cultural relativity of our division and conceptualization of what we deem the inner states. In German, for example, there are many words approaching “pleasure” (*die Freude, die Lust, das Vergnügen, das Behagen*, and so on),⁴ yet none capture the valences of the classical Chinese term *le*. Equally curious and no less significant is the Chinese opposition of pleasure to insecurity, rather than to pain, its classic antonym within mainstream Western traditions.

The verbal use of *le* (“to take or derive pleasure in”) in the classical literature in Chinese takes but a very few objects, almost always those that promise deeper satisfactions in return for steady,

long-term commitments.⁵ You can take pleasure in intimate friends (*le you* 樂友), in music (*le yue* 樂樂), in a vocation and legacy (*le ye* 樂業), in sharing (*le yu* 樂與),⁶ in being alive and vital (*le sheng* 樂生), in doing your duty (*le yi* 樂義), in learning and emulating (*le xue* 樂學) others of the requisite worth (*le ren* 樂人), in Heaven or the cosmic operations (*le tian* 樂天), and in your true home (*le jia* 樂家). With those thoroughly relational pleasures in mind, this book offers seven chapters to conjure antique scenes for taking and giving pleasure.

Chapter 1, “Coming Attractions,” has but two aims: first, to sketch in a preliminary way the key vocabulary items and concept clusters at work in the early pleasure talk in order to prepare the ground for the chapters that follow; second, to distinguish the pleasure theories in China from their much better-known counterparts in classical Greece and Rome and in modern philosophy. I will have recourse to the relevant medical and cosmological theories of the early empires positing the physiology of pleasure in order to elucidate the rationales underlying the Chinese claims.

Chapter 2, “Good Vibrations: The Allied Pleasures of Music and Friendship in the Masters,” discusses the metaphors employed for both music and intimate friendship in light of early resonance theories, for all early passages on music and friendship presuppose the existence of unseen sympathies weaving the cosmic and social worlds together — sympathies capable of greatly and indelibly stamping the characters, attitudes, actions, and even the life spans of well-tempered people. Ideally, both music and close friendships illustrate the inherent value of the process of relating, rather than any predetermined end or goal, because what passes for perfection in music and friendship depends upon continual readjustments or “attunements” of temper. To situate these principles better, the chapter contrasts mere sociability with intimate friendships. Then, turning to the enormous “leave-taking” literature in classical Chinese, the chapter reviews the typical pretexts and approved methods for partings.

Chapter 3, “Mencius 孟子 on Our Common Share of Pleasure,” focuses on one of the best-known Confucians, the fourth-century BCE persuader whose teachings have too often been reduced to the slogan “Human nature is good.” By placing this slogan within the larger context provided by the first chapter of the writings ascribed to Master Meng, whose single focus is, precisely, pleasure, we find the main thread of Mencius’s argument to various princes: that all

goods in life, material and psychological, are most likely to gravitate to the ruler who shares his pleasures with others, imagining them to be very like himself, with the same desires for pleasure and need for security.⁷ Not surprisingly, the chapter ends with a series of contrasts between Mencius and Xunzi, the later Confucian master whom I will review next, partly to give each thinker his due and partly to suggest the degree to which Mencius relies on exciting his leader's pleasurable intuitions.

Chapter 4, "Xunzi 荀子 on Patterns of Brilliance," claims that Xunzi's application of the pleasure calculus to his theories about human nature and court administration — the body and the body politic — are so sophisticated that they became the touchstone for pleasure rhetoric throughout the early imperial period, up to the fourth century CE and beyond. But Xunzi is still more compelling, perhaps, for his daring to pose the question, "What happens if you would teach and advise courts, offering them the best possible advice and remonstrance, but they do not wish to hear you?" Xunzi responds by describing the exquisite pleasures to be had from crafting artful lives of integrity, even when one is ignored by the powers that be. He thereby contributes to the creation of the aesthetic potential for living an unofficial life of beauty, dignity, and worth.

Chapter 5, "Vital Matters: The Pleasures of Clear Vision in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子," seeks to explain why the much-beloved *Zhuangzi* compilation resists all post-facto attempts to cast it either as a set of injunctions to model oneself on the spontaneously generating cosmos or as an extended exhortation to "embrace freedom" (aside from freedom from disquietude) or "go with the flow." Starting from the *Zhuangzi*'s "Supreme Pleasure" chapter, Chapter 5 shows *Zhuangzi* urging readers to conserve their energies so that they may more fully live out the days they have been allotted, rather than vainly wishing for a yet more perfect life. Three of the chief strategic insights fostering *Zhuangzi*'s "fully present" way of life are knowing that no creature, great or small, can attain sufficient understanding of the unfolding situation, so no one can be sure that he or she is ever right (which realization constitutes the only "clear vision" of the world that is available), and recognizing that death must be confronted in small, homeopathic doses if lives are not to be eaten up by needless worry.

Chapter 6, "Yang Xiong 揚雄 on the Allure of Words Well Chosen," considers the monumental figure of Yang (53 BCE–18 CE), the

Han philosopher and court poet. Yang delighted in Mencius, Xunzi, and Zhuangzi, but for Yang, as for the poet Callimachus (d. ca. 240 BCE) halfway round the world, the deepest and most inviolate forms of pleasure come from immersing oneself in the great writers of remote antiquity, not from sharing with others, say, or from crafting an artful life, or from being fully present in the moment. “Books are as alluring as women,” he opined. Since Yang playfully presented his own work through autocommentaries, new genres and styles of writing, not to mention carefully wrought defenses of his writings, there are excellent reasons to deem him one of the first fully self-conscious authors in Chinese history. This chapter surveys his remarkable output once he had gained entrance to the imperial library, including his etymological dictionary, conceived as an entryway into the archaic period.

Chapter 7: “Semidetached Lodgings: The Pleasures of Returning Home in Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 and Su Shi 蘇軾,” turns to two of the most famous poets in Chinese history. Tao Yuanming (365?-427) is admired for his poem cycles celebrating his return home and his concomitant refusal to serve another day in office. Su Shi (1037-1101), the polymath who relished court service as his second home, nonetheless used Tao’s poetry as a psychic refuge during three increasingly uncongenial exiles from the capital during the last decades of his life. In the end, Su “matched” all but four of Tao’s poems through a rigorous use of identical end graphs in couplets, creating a revisionist Tao in his own image. While Su’s portrait of Tao is wildly anachronistic, Su clearly thought long immersion in Tao’s poetry might help him to resign himself to the reclusion that Tao reveled in. The larger question broached in this chapter is this, then: Do the consolations of emulating an earlier author ever suffice to make up for personal isolation? Judging from Su Shi’s case, we would have to say “no.”

When I was a graduate student, Wolfgang Bauer came out with his lengthy tome entitled *China and the Search for Happiness: Recurring Themes*.⁸ My own search, though in some ways indebted to his, has followed the traces of *le* wherever they led. My analysis rests on retranslations of a wide array of relevant sources, received and excavated, in a studied refusal to play it safe. My reading of the *Zhuangzi*, for example, moves outside the familiar territory of the so-called “Inner Chapters” to take stock of the entire thirty-three chapter compilation, and my research into Su Shi’s matching poems complicates the

romantic portrait of a transcendent Su favored in most secondary literature today.

To give readers a brief taste of some early pleasure theories this book chooses for its subject, let me quote passages from two long speeches ascribed to the supremely effective prime minister Zichan 子產 of Zheng (act. 542–522 BCE), which touch upon the main themes of many discussions in early China about pleasure-taking. In the first, Zichan explains to an envoy from the more powerful state of Jin how diplomacy was better managed in the glorious days of yore:

Nowadays, our humble domain is small and placed among great domains that make insatiable demands on no set schedule. For this reason, we [in Zheng's leadership] dare not take our ease, but instead must try to muster all our meager resources for meetings and court visits. . . . I have heard, when Lord Wen of Jin was covenant chief, his palaces were small and low, devoid of terraces and towers affording fine prospects. . . . Hosts and guests shared their cares and pleasures. When something came up, Lord Wen attended to it, instructing guests in those matters of which they were ignorant and taking care of whatever they lacked. The guests, upon arrival, felt as if they were coming home. How could there be any troubles or calamities? . . . Now your Tongti Palace extends for several miles, while even princes are lodged in abodes fit only for servants.⁹

In the second, Zichan expands upon the theme: "It is very hard, in truth, to be entirely without desires. Let all get what they desire, so they can focus on their assigned tasks and concentrate on completing them."¹⁰

As Zichan's view gradually unfolds, it becomes clear that his policies of governance are predicated upon calculations of pleasure. All people are bundles of desires, he says, though the type and force of the desires that drive a particular individual are functions of that person's character and inclinations. To thwart people's desires does no one any good at all. Far better, then, to learn how best to accommodate each person's desires in such a way that, at a minimum, they are productive members of society doing the least harm to others in the community. In that way, a widespread sense of satisfaction will unobtrusively reinforce communal ties. Meanwhile, inculcating a desire to emulate worthy models can alter undirected and unbridled impulses and produce more constructive dispositions and inclinations.¹¹ Zichan's speeches make it clear that refining the desires of

power holders and commoners alike, far from being an inconsequential matter best left to the discretion of individual ministers and rulers, is their fundamental business.

Every student of early and middle-period China recalls similar passages detailing pleasure's efficacy. The excavated and transmitted literature — whether the standard histories, medical treatises, “philosophical texts,” or bawdy poems — abounds in talk about pleasure, relating the physiological processes entailed in pleasure-giving and pleasure-taking to patterns in the larger realm or cosmos. To the modern reader, the sheer pervasiveness of the pleasure discourse in early writings is startling on first reading, for Zichan is but the tip of the iceberg. Further reflection leads us to see the prevalence of this discourse as great good sense, for nearly every piece of extant writing reflects the preoccupations of the governing elite, who saw that “if power is pleasure, then the way pleasure is managed has direct consequences on the nature of power itself.”¹² This book represents a first attempt to build upon recent scholarly insights regarding pleasure, vitality, commemoration, cultivation, insight, and spectacle in order to open new avenues for research. To aid in that exploration, I provide a historical narrative, part of it necessarily speculative, proposing reasons why the pleasure theme arose in classical Chinese at a specific time to address a particular set of problems.

Historical Background

Already in the Zhanguo era (475–222 BCE), treatises by would-be advisors to thrones advocated several ways to increase one's security in pleasure-taking, none of which was particularly easy to follow. The main directives for instilling a greater single-mindedness of purpose were: reduce both the number of one's desires and one's degree of dependence upon others for their satisfaction¹³ and thereby decrease the chance of being harmed by a profusion of seductions and allurements;¹⁴ refine and so redirect one's desires to the “higher” (and fewer) sorts of pleasures derived from connoisseurship, even if such refinement does not automatically preclude dependence upon others to achieve one's heart's desire, as in career advancement; and secure one's pleasures by sharing them with others in the belief that pleasures taken in common mitigate envy and resentment.¹⁵ Simply by sharing pleasure with their underlings, those in power might forge stronger bonds within their communities, allowing power holders

to savor their pleasures in far greater security. Tighter bonds, in turn, might prompt still more community members to conceive and confer pleasures on behalf of the group — through cooperative ventures or the provision of communal festivals, performances, and spectacles, for instance. This last rationale, whether expressed or tacit, underpinned a great many political calculations.

Why the apparently sudden emphasis on careful or delayed pleasure-taking during the centuries before the common era? I suspect that the vast scale and unprecedented scope of sociopolitical and economic changes during that time elicited two questions: What form of equitable distribution of resources best guarantees a state's stability, and what methods of rule best enable the expanding states to integrate newly conquered populations?

On the question of equitable distribution, admittedly, the available sources consist mainly of recorded pieties. Yet the early texts would have readers believe that before the decline of the Zhou political order in the eighth century BCE, the sumptuous sacrifices offered to the royal ancestors, followed by the division of the sacrificial meats among the descendants, had distributed goods and prerogatives in ways that were generally conceded at the time to be equitable — at least by members of the governing elite. With each member of that elite partaking of the numinous life force contained within the sacrificial meats, each sacrifice served as an outward sign of the inner commitments binding the partakers to their same clan or body politic, notwithstanding their potentially disparate interests.¹⁶ But in the wake of the demise or usurpation of many noble houses, the associated sacrificial orders no longer sufficed to confirm the basic laws of hierarchy, reciprocity, and equitable exchange so vital to any cohesive community. Political elites had to devise entirely new, reliable modes of fair distribution if they hoped to attract the necessary men and materiel to their service. Gradually, the local communal feast, offering a different model of sociability and rewards, came to rival or transcend in importance the blood sacrifices made by ruling lines during ancestor worship, the feast having the signal advantage of being far less likely to entail huge losses of life, including human as well as animal sacrifice.¹⁷ Meanwhile, loyalty to a single superior or group of superiors within the noble lineage (promoted through ancestor worship) yielded to ideals requiring service to a larger community or even to the known world “under Heaven.”

Would-be and actual unifiers wanted to instill allegiance and enforce control within vast new populations not persuaded by hereditary ties or local custom to uphold the relatively small kin, surrogate-kin, and cult groups associated with the court. The formal *ming* 命, charge or writ, recorded on Western Zhou bronzes had once certified the obligations due the ruling house by a few allied families.¹⁸ Later, the Chunqiu blood covenants (*meng* 盟) bound far greater numbers of aristocrats and their dependents in temporary agreements. But by the dawn of the fifth century BCE, in Zhanguo times, any state determined upon conquest had to sponsor and direct much larger (even overlapping) networks of loyalty in the social, political, military, and economic spheres, networks that would be capable of mobilizing assorted talents to devote their best efforts and those of their men to the conquerors. The conquerors' usual rationale for this was disarmingly simple: the stability enjoyed by the principal unifier best guaranteed the stability of all other social units, public or domestic, in his realm and nearby. For without stability, no pleasures could ever be secure for any resident, high or low.

In the end, the ruler's force majeure could go only so far in stabilizing the state. The anxieties, insecurities, and disaffection experienced in the sociopolitical order could be laid to rest only if the antidotes spoke to the strong desires felt by all members of the ruling elite, at every level, to preserve and maximize their prerogatives, perquisites, and pleasures while addressing the precarious living conditions of some of their subjects. As one celebrated master put it, "in peaceful times, one may not overlook dangers, nor in secure times forget perils."¹⁹ Effective persuasion pieces had to allay their fears and insecurities in an era of rapid social change and ideally assuage the deep sense of unease that beset many of the most successful in middle age.²⁰ The idea of converting the consuming pleasures into sustaining ones succeeded so brilliantly at courts all across the central states of the North China Plain, I wager, because it precisely suited the ruling elites' own experiences and hopes.

Throughout their disquisitions on pleasure, the court persuaders made much of a seemingly self-evident truth that contained more than a bit of paradox: most of our present delights merely taunt us by their brevity; even as we indulge ourselves, we suffer from the anticipation of their loss. Additionally, the craving for pleasurable stimuli inevitably generates competition, and the sense of unceasing

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competition grows more arduous and more frustrating with age. For those who have worked hardest to build constructive orders commonly expect to bask in the results of their achievements, but sadly, as the self-aware ruefully observe, continually fending off all rivals in the bloody contests over territory or material goods requires the stamina of youth. Adding insult to injury, no one can possibly attain as much as they desire before they die.²¹ Only those who have managed somehow over the years to reduce or refine or stabilize their pleasures can hope to retain a measure of self-regard. For good reasons, then, the cautious use of pleasure as a way to preclude disorder in the realm and in the individual promised to offset the strange melancholy that pervades the prime of life, especially in those who possess a surfeit of material goods or power. In that respect, the court persuaders' disquisitions on pleasure did far more than provide simplistic answers to two of the first questions most frequently asked: "What pleasure is there in being a prince, unless one can say whatever one chooses, with no one daring to disagree?" and "How can a person in power not only be happy, but happier than other people?"²²

In this setting at court, talk about pleasure was liable to be pragmatic, geared to the here and now.²³ Only a few assertions about human nature and motivation commonly preceded a persuader's advice to a patron or student about the wisdom of present or intended social engineering policies or the benefits of present and ongoing personal and social cultivation. Nearly all extant accounts omitted systematic treatment of, say, the origins or qualities of pleasure, though our persuaders most probably considered these, if only to equip themselves with defenses against their opponents' rhetorical jabs. Doubtless, those with the luxury of time on their hands asked whether the sensation of pleasure inheres more in an object, in the activity itself, or in the capacity for pleasure developed by the owner or actor.²⁴ Some surely noticed that the experience of pleasure, no less than of physical pain, is fundamentally inexpressible and therefore potentially isolating. But persuaders were obliged to forgo overspecificity in outlining propositions about pleasure, lest bored or inattentive court power holders start to quibble over minor points or lose the thread of an argument. Accordingly, the surviving passages on pleasure seek to nudge powerful members of the governing elite toward improving their policies and personal modes of

behavior, thereby promoting greater contentment and insight among the governed, which in turn would likely preserve their persons and properties from harm at the hands of a disaffected populace.

In proposing the best possible course of action, most of the persuasions ascribed to the late Zhanguo, Han, and immediately post-Han thinkers kept well within a few accepted “talking points.” It sufficed for the persuaders to allege that the probable sources of pleasure are easily recognized; the preponderance of human activity consists of the pursuit of pleasure; each person hopes to maximize his or her own opportunities for pleasure-taking, although their objectives may differ; so when humans act “recklessly,” it is usually because, having mistaken the nature and hence the effect of their own actions, they have miscalculated the odds that their actions will conduce to pleasure.²⁵ By such reasoning, they concluded that if the body and the body politic are to continue to flourish, it is crucial for those in charge to distinguish sustaining from consuming pleasures. Naturally, they emphasized that long-term, “sustaining” relations nearly always yield appreciably more satisfaction over the years than impulsive, immediate consumption. So although in their writings no abstract theories assign a fixed, quasi-numerical value to each type of enjoyment experienced by every person, the pleasure discourse figures significantly in the priorities the persuaders allotted to different policies and commitments. In this regard, they took into account the duration and intensity of specific pleasures, as well as the different pleasures aroused by anticipation, by experience, or by memory.

By postulating a generalized “human nature” or “human condition” shared by the ruler and his subjects, persuaders could posit methods whereby the elite might induce a sense of community among their social equals and inferiors in hopes of forestalling all manner of destructive behavior. Analyzing human nature, in other words, was but the prelude to determining effective motivation. “For just as the body had its interests, so did the realm have what spurred it on, and discernment in these things meant just estimates about relative importance.”²⁶ Since the crudest of those at the apex of power were often at a loss to figure out what ratio of carrots to sticks would best motivate underlings and mobilize resources, the Classics and masterworks dealt extensively with that question, at least since the time of Mozi 墨子 (ca. 470 – ca. 390 BCE) and his followers. Certainly, the later Mohists and a host of Zhanguo masters (*zhuzi* 諸子) saw the

focus on pleasure and desire as fundamental to every human being, even if few in society had the luxury to choose freely among rival “goods” and courses of action. For those masters, “to act on account of something is to take into account all one knows and judge that something [as in a scale] by one’s desires.”²⁷

In the classical political rhetoric of pleasure-taking, power holders planning to unify the realm or to maintain their standing at court were to supplement the old aristocratic forms of excellence (prowess in warfare, filial conduct toward the ancestors, and practical shrewdness) with the new virtues of fair dealing and self-restraint. One basis for good rule lay in assessing and dispensing the proper shares of access to pleasure through ritual according to the contributions made to the general welfare. The ruler’s own model of self-restraint validated the allocation of favors, so the wise ruler would not let inborn inclinations to delight, pleasure, worry, and sorrow move him (*dong zhi* 動之), except “by rule” (*yi ze* 以則). Such rituals tended to confirm the status quo among the elites, whether hereditary or not. But no abstract ideas in support of the ruler’s or ruling elite’s control could have been imposed on “those below” unless they struck them as admirably suiting prevailing conditions. As I see it, throughout the classical period, in order to feel secure, people at every level of society sought as best they could to place themselves firmly within webs of mutual obligations (*do ut des*), signified and cemented by regular formalized exchanges in the forms of gift, tribute, and sacrifice.²⁸ Such exchanges, rendered highly visible at intervals by specific changes in the form of the rituals, demonstrated to potential friends and allies, no less than to oneself, the reliable nature of the protection afforded those within a web of obligation.²⁹ For at the very same time that the person of high status reaffirmed his protected status through public or semipublic acts, those outside the web were put on notice that it would be foolhardy to harm anyone who could call upon the collective strength of the communal network. Obviously, no small store of wealth was needed for the frequent outlays in ritual, but status and safety were secured less through force or sheer spending than through the periodic public manifestations of loyalty by family members, allies, and subordinates. Hence the continual reiteration in the treatises of the period that other people constitute one’s own chief security. At the same time, when honor and glory (*rong* 榮) are in the gift of the people before whom they are paraded, then honor and

glory can be withdrawn by those same people swiftly and absolutely, as many biographies in Sima Qian's 司馬遷 *Shiji* 史記 and the "Xici" 繫辭 tradition to the *Changes* (*Yijing*) classic so poignantly attest.³⁰

It would be hard to overestimate the pervasiveness of the webs of trust formed within and beyond polite society through public display, webs that bound the living and the dead and also — what is infinitely more difficult — people of quite different status. From the court on down, provision was made for nearly all levels of society to experience, directly or indirectly, some of the pleasures of public exchange and display. The extant writings of the period show the royal courts' quite intentional deployment of visual display to render palpable the protective bonds ordering society. And the archaeological record leaves no doubt about the sumptuousness of court extravaganzas, orchestral performances, royal progresses, massive building projects, and spectacles. In illustration, I cite just one anecdote dating from the first years of the Han empire: shortly before 200 BCE, the new chancellor, Xiao He 蕭何, set about building palaces, arsenals, storehouses, and gate towers on a lavish scale while war still raged outside the capital. Xiao defended his priorities on the grounds that "if the true Son of Heaven does not dwell in magnificent quarters, he will have no way to display his authority or establish a base for his heirs to build upon."³¹ Perhaps the most striking change documented by classical archaeology, then, is the shift from highly circumscribed rituals conducted for very limited audiences to increasingly splendid displays intended for ever larger groups of onlookers,³² wherein suasive authority was said to be lodged in four ceremonial aspects: the insignia (badges, seals, tablets, and weapons); the dress (clothing, caps, and coiffure); the demeanor (gestures indicating the degree of poise); and the rhetoric (forms of address and discourse).

Until about 140 CE or so, the capacity of this social display culture to conflate the rewards for public service with the pursuit of domestic pleasures and personal interest seemed one of the best means of insuring stable dynastic rule.³³ But somehow, by the mid to late Eastern Han (roughly by 140 CE), through social processes still not fully understood by historians of the period, elites turned inward. No longer trusting to the expansive webs of relations to protect them and their families from harm, they took to rearming themselves. The signs of collapse were everywhere. Professional and private estate armies replaced conscript armies in the interior.³⁴ In the absence

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of adequate cadastral surveys by the imperial court, taxes were no longer gathered fairly. As peasants fled wars and the tax men, they sought protection from local strongmen, becoming tenant farmers on large estates and swelling the ranks of their armies. With the growth of large, virtually independent estates, the court, protected at one point by a mere four thousand guards, lost secure access to the best men in service at court, because they competed with the estates. Less supervision over local governors and their administrations and breakdowns in the court recommendation procedures ensued, so much so that at one point, the court complained that the provinces were sending men who could not read or write to stock the ranks of its bureaucracy.³⁵ The ordinary business of the court foundered, with failures of water control a symptom of the court's dual inability to organize labor details and to extract the necessary funds from the provinces. Invasions on the borders multiplied as soon as local warlords ignored a central command. Even before 184 CE, when a massive peasant rebellion rocked the empire, the inadequacies of the court to meet the challenges became abundantly clear to all. As Étienne Balazs pointed out decades ago in his essay "Political Philosophy and Social Crisis at the End of the Han," the hundred years from 150 to 250 CE "exerted on China's future development an influence no less important than that of the third century BC."³⁶ Both periods saw disorder, injustice, and monstrous disparities of wealth, an increasing articulation of the sense of crisis, and a great diversity of proposals for rectifying the defects and reversing the degeneration of state and society. But whereas thinkers in the Zhanguo period had anticipated unification and planned well for the new *pax Sinica*, by the end of the Eastern Han, the most acute thinkers, having lost their serene trust in the ability of civil mechanisms to order society, turned their attention to devising tighter controls.³⁷

In hindsight, we see that the practical problems associated with the application of the pleasure theories and display culture had made a mockery of their theoretical elegance. For one thing, the spiraling costs of competitive displays, each more dazzling than the last, led elites to extract ever greater sums from their social inferiors, in this way undermining any potential the display mechanisms had to unify different segments of society by offering many levels of satisfaction. The gap between "names" (titles, assignments, reputations, social roles) and "actualities" widened, in consequence, whence the Eastern

Han complaint that “it is difficult to get names and actualities to correspond” (*ming shi nan fu* 名實難副).³⁸ The extravagant rhetoric fashioning the emperor as supreme model for all the virtues seemed ludicrous when countered by a string of underage, incompetent, or disinterested rulers. And from the standpoint of the ruling house, it was regrettable that regional powers and local cults, in a refeudalizing era, could so easily appropriate the display mechanisms once emanating principally from the center, to the detriment of the singular authority of king and capital. Meanwhile, the vast estates of the Eastern Han magnates, enclaves of mock-courtly life in a sea of worsening impoverishment, exacerbated perceptions of sociopolitical injustice and fomented rebellions on an empire-wide scale. The formation — not coincidentally — at that point of Daoist religious organizations, which stepped in to fill the vacuum left by the court’s withdrawal from the provinces, further divided loyalties and complicated the entwined notions of security and pleasure, even as they made for unprecedented modes of local spectacular display.³⁹ The widespread interest in Buddhism evinced after the fall of the North China Plain in 316 CE accelerated such trends by calling into question the very reality and consequences of pleasure-taking.

But it was not a case of “Après ça, le déluge.” In lives once again nasty, brutish, and short, pleasures seemed more fragile, more fraught, and more difficult to secure, but all the more valuable, for some. Thus the post-Eastern Han Periods of Disunion, with their succession of dynasties that looked to the Western and Eastern Han for models and institutions, hardly prevented those enjoying high cultural literacy from waxing eloquent on the subject of pleasure they found so arrestingly laid out in the early Classics, masterworks, and histories. The survival and application of the pleasure rhetoric of the Zhanguo, Qin, and Han masters were then assured in latter-day situations.

So despite some shifts in the basic presumptions of the cultural elites from the Zhanguo era through the Northern Song, the main threads of sympathetic response theories did not fray badly for well over a thousand years. Readers continued to imagine official and unofficial, public and domestic exchanges, including encounters between fine writer and ardent reader, as embodied fields of relations contributing to the continual process of construction of the cultivated person⁴⁰ while confirming the beauty of the densely patterned cosmic fabric within which people lived their lives.⁴¹

But nearly everything about the discourse of pleasure would have to change once Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) and his True Way Learning came to dominate Chinese tradition, for Zhu felt compelled to condemn or erase any older traditions that might impede his ascendancy.⁴² So whereas earlier thinkers and writers looked to empathetic reading of the right sort to afford glimpses of the unfolding, unremitting transformations, Zhu Xi and his disciples deplored fond musings on wondrous particulars. (That may explain why Zhu favored his Four Books, to divert attention from the historical *Annals* and *Documents* classics supplying abundant evidence for the wide range of human propensities to messy worldly engagement.)⁴³ Asserting that the perfectly resonant nature of a sage like himself, pure in mind and body, allowed immediate, unmediated, and comprehensive knowledge of the entire universe, past and present, Zhu demanded that his followers direct their gaze as much as possible to the ineffable grand totality, rather than luxuriating in manifold specificities. As Zhu wrote in the late 1160s, “Let me propose that all under Heaven is just Heaven’s Pivot giving life to things (*tianji huowu* 天機活物). . . . Now how could there be a particular, within time and space, that can be distinctly named,” apart from and outside this single flow?⁴⁴ Reverence for abstract and unseen principles was to replace pleasure in the near to hand and palpable; by Zhu’s theory, pleasure was too subversive, anyway, for lesser men left to their own devices to cultivate.⁴⁵ The search for pleasure went underground, in consequence, becoming more transgressive in the process. And so my story, which will, in essence, bear witness to the sustained and sustaining benefits secured through constructing pleasurable relations with people and things in all their distinctive charms, ends necessarily before Zhu and his adherents came to dominate mainstream thinking in China.

Larger Implications

A tired series of dichotomies has occupied far too much of the Sino-logical community’s attention, including inner versus outer, subjective versus objective, pragmatic versus ethical, truth versus rhetoric, nature versus culture, emotion versus reason, and mind versus body. What blessedly seems to have run its course among astute readers is the simplistic impact-response model or a variation thereon, the sender-medium / percept-receiver model. (Unfortunately, Orientalists and self-Orientalists still cling to the gratifying notion of

the Western impact on a passive, receptive China, one instance of Jack Goody's "theft of history.")⁴⁶ If this book breaks new ground, it charts unfamiliar terrain via more nuanced translations of both familiar and seldom-read texts that imply the deep interpenetration of fact and value, objectivity and affect. The wisdom of consulting the Ancients should be evident in our more distracted contemporary age of anxiety.⁴⁷ But I do not wish to contend for "relevance." As a historian, I aspire mainly to acquire fuller evidence, in the firm belief that the historian's task is to "reveal the unpredictable contours of this polygon" that we call "human experience" and "to restore their original silhouettes" to events and ideas that have been "concealed under borrowed garments."⁴⁸ If some portion of the litanies celebrating categorical alterity and the "clash of civilizations" is jettisoned, so much the better.

That said, the payoffs from attending to the early Chinese sources seem huge. For example, the stipulation of the precise circumstances for pleasure-giving and pleasure-taking neatly obviates the knotty Anglo-American philosophical problem of how to get from "is" to "ought,"⁴⁹ for the sources are at once highly contextualized and praxis-guiding, commonsensical (designed to mirror the world that is), and regulative of human practice. And insofar as they did not hazard a host of unprovable assertions about social units or the cosmos, the early advice comes to today's readers without theoretical superfluity and entanglements. As some have argued, the Ancients were in appreciably better shape than we moderns, if only because they did not cordon off moral from practical considerations when deliberating. So it seems high time, past time really, to recall the unique potentials invested in the word "pleasure" itself.⁵⁰

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