

Review Article:

Affective Betrayal: Mind, Music, and Embodied Action in Late Qing China

Jean Tsui, *Affective Betrayal: Mind, Music, and Embodied Action in Late Qing China*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2024. 330 pp. \$93.37 (hardcover). ISBN 9781438498782.

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This book displays vast erudition, moves nimbly across a number of disciplines, and presents complex, interlocking arguments aimed at showing how Liang Qichao (1873-1929) presented modern political knowledge in musical and visual terms that were designed to stimulate his readers' bodily senses and motivate them to become committed to and act on behalf of the views he advocated. By expanding the reception of textual knowledge from "reading" to "listening" and "visualizing," Liang was attempting to generate an epistemic shift to propel China's modern political reform, a shift that he thought was necessary in order to achieve its ends. Given its primary concerns, *Affective Betrayal* will prove immensely valuable to those interested in the role of affect (*qing* 情) during the late Qing period, as well as those interested in the introduction of democratic ideas and their reception by Chinese intellectuals of this period. As the author declares, the skepticism Liang expressed about the efficacy of language, "... challenges the social constructivist framework, as well as the normative rational presumptions recent scholarship has relied on to make sense of Chinese modernity."¹ This book also has a great deal to contribute to those interested in the interplay between the major streams of neo-Confucian philosophy from the Song through the Qing and their

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¹ *Affective Betrayal*, p. 2.

effects on Chinese intellectual, social, and political life. In addition, and of more general interest, the work explores a range of ideas that intersect with and offer rich historical examples and analyses of the interplay between emotion, cognition, and ethical and political belief and practice. I lack the expertise to attempt an adequate treatment of many of the arguments Professor Tsui makes in the course of her work concerning literary and post-modern theory and will instead focus on those that are primarily concerned with Confucian philosophy, moral and political philosophy more generally, and the role that emotions can and should play in regard to ethics and politics.

One theme that is deftly woven into and appears throughout this work is Liang's account of the central cause of the failure of political reform in the late Qing. While the failure of Western ideas about democracy to take hold and foment change within China is familiar to many, Professor Tsui argues that Liang presented a unique diagnosis of the source of the problem, claiming that it lies not in a clash of competing "discourses" but in the results of entrenched and widely understood features of traditional Chinese intellectual belief and practice. In particular, the characteristic beliefs and practices of orthodox Confucians purportedly prevented them from truly appreciating and embracing, in a robust and emotionally enlivening way, the core concepts needed for genuine political reform. Because of their approach to learning, which for the most part consisted of the intellectual mastery of concepts, principles, and texts, late Qing intellectuals failed to develop the appropriate affects that animate and propel a democratic way of life. They grasped the letter but missed the spirit of what was for them a new form of political life. Moreover, Liang's prescription to remedy this malady was also drawn from the Confucian tradition; he argued that what Chinese intellectuals needed to fill out, enhance, and invigorate their understanding and thereby motivate them to engage in substantial political action were the teachings of Wang Yangming. The general story that Professor Tsui crafts about Liang's understanding of and contributions to the course of political reform in the late Qing is brilliant and enlightening and carries important implications for contemporary political thought and practice as well. I will do my best to trace and connect the central lines of her argument.

While we understand not only Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming but also Kant quite differently, I will not dwell on these differences because they would only deflect attention from and appreciation of what I take to be her central claims. These claims—as will become clear—I think she gets absolutely and importantly right. I will, though, on occasion and in passing, discuss some of these differences when they help to illuminate her argument or the overall issues at play.

There is a well-known and memorable Chinese adage that describes someone pointing to the moon and encouraging another to behold and be moved by its luminous, heavenly glory. Instead of following the finger and turning his gaze upward, however, the learner focuses solely on the finger and remains earthbound, uninformed, and uninspired—wholly lacking in the appropriate appreciation and corresponding affects. Liang believed that late Qing intellectuals made a similar mistake with even worse results when it came to the basic concepts of democratic life; they focused on the textual translations introduced to China, which described the principles and theories of democracy, but they utterly failed to *feel their way into* this new and unfamiliar form of life. Moreover, they became more interested in “manipulating their mastery of modern political knowledge as a form of cultural capital to advance their own benefit”² than seeking to implement this knowledge for the good of society. Consequently, what began as a commitment to learn and implement a beneficial political theory became the source of self-centered benefit and interpersonal competition. Liang saw this errant approach to understanding as a contemporary manifestation of a long-standing malady—one that had infected and distressed Chinese moral and political thinking since the ascendance of the Cheng-Zhu school of neo-Confucianism in the Song. The Cheng-Zhu school taught that in order to understand the Way, one must curb and disregard one’s feelings, and instead engage in the investigation of things (*gewu* 格物) in order to discern and comprehend the Pattern (*li* 理) that can be found in the things and affairs of world but most clearly and completely in the Confucian classics. Their approach begins with the idea that one must *correct* the heart-mind—protect it from the corrupting effects of

²Affective Betrayal, p. 47.

personal feelings and align it with Pattern—and puts a premium on more abstract, generalized knowledge of “that by which” (*suoyi* 所以) things are the way they are. Our efforts are not to be aimed at gaining greater awareness of innate feelings of oneness with or care for the people, creatures, and things of the world; our reactive attitudes and emotional responses to the world are not reliable because they are not themselves moral Pattern; the *feeling* of alarm and concern that Mengzi claims all normal human beings experience when seeing a child about to fall into a well or the psychological act of “sympathetic concern” (*shu* 恕) that Kongzi described as part of what unified his Way must not be confused with humaneness (*ren* 仁) itself. These emotional responses to the feelings of others are “hints” or “clues” (*xu* 緒) that indicate the existence of the underlying Pattern of humaneness, but being parts of the physical world and therefore intimately connected with *qi* and particular, physical selves, they are not and cannot be humaneness itself.

In contrast to this approach, Wang Yangming and his followers advocated a different conception of learning, which can be traced back to Cheng Yi’s elder brother, Cheng Hao. This alternative approach emphasized searching for and cultivating the lived, embodied experience of humaneness in every aspect of one’s life. Cheng Hao insisted that this feeling, an appreciation of the irrepressible spirit of life and fecundity that runs throughout and unifies the universe and inspires feelings of care and concern, is readily available, for example, when feeling another person’s pulse or watching little chicks at play. Experiencing this warm and vital feeling is the only way to attain real knowledge (*zhenzhi* 真知); orthodox forms of learning, like those advocated by what became the Cheng-Zhu School, only give ordinary knowledge (*changzhi* 常知), roughly knowledge *about* morality, whether as token, type, or grand form of life but lacking in the robust affective dimensions that are part of real knowledge. Cheng Hao and later Wang Yangming urged us to look for and savor our natural and spontaneous moral feelings, confident that this will lead us to understand and appreciate the underlying oneness of the universe. And so, according to this alternative approach to learning, from the very start, authentic understanding was grounded in and arose out of proper affect. Liang

argued that the Cheng-Zhu School's mistaken approach to learning was the original source of the failure of late Qing intellectuals to appreciate, in a lively and emotionally vivid way, the core principles and features of democratic life. But, there was more to the story, for this initial mistaken emphasis on intellectual aspects of knowledge was greatly exacerbated in the early Qing turn to another approach called evidential learning (*kaozhengxue* 考證學). Evidential learning scholars criticized earlier neo-Confucians for developing grand metaphysical theories concerning things like Pattern and offering these as the basis for Confucian ethical and political thought. They argued that many of the basic elements of these speculations were in fact uncritically taken from Daoist and Buddhist philosophy and that this speculative metaphysical turn had fundamentally corrupted and distorted the core beliefs and overall tenor of Confucian thought and practice. However, Liang argued that evidential learning itself further dislodged the Confucian tradition from its true foundation and inspiration in basic human emotions. According to Liang, evidential scholars focused on words, theories, and texts and neglected or completely ignored emotions, but innate human emotions—proper affect—were the true basis and justification for the Confucian way of life.³

At this point, Liang might have acknowledged at least the critical part of the evidential learning project and looked back to early Confucian sources to make his case on behalf of affect. He would have found ample material there to make his case. But he did not, and Professor Tsui provides a rich and textured account of his historical and philosophical context, which is critical for understanding why he did not. For in his age and throughout his life, Liang was immersed in and felt at home with many characteristically Buddhist ideas, and these played an essential role in the development of his ethical

³ Liang began a short volume on Dai Zhen's thought entitled *Dai Dongyuan's Philosophy* (*Dai Dongyuan zhexue* 戴東原哲學), which is included in his collected works, but he never finished it. Like Hu Shi's work of similar title, he was mostly concerned to establish that Dai's method was more scientific and empirical than Zhu Xi's. (Thanks to Justin Tiwald for pointing this out to me.) Whatever the overall merits of Liang's criticisms of evidential learning as a movement, the charge of ignoring the role of emotions is not particularly compelling when directed at Dai Zhen.

and political theory. Perhaps no idea was more important in this regard than the Huayan Buddhist belief in the original oneness of the universe. This metaphysical belief in oneness explained and justified the comprehensive moral concern that is characteristic of this and most forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism, and it was this idea that profoundly influenced so many neo-Confucians and none more than Wang Yangming. Wang took up this idea, first expressed by Cheng Hao as the idea that all things in the universe are one body (*yiti* 一體), in what became one of his signature teachings: that heaven, earth, and the myriad things are one body (*tiandi wanwu wei yiti* 天地萬物為一體). This fundamental ontological claim was the basis for Cheng Hao's and later Wang's conception of Confucian humaneness; we are to, and in some deep sense always do, care for all people, creatures, and things in the world in the same way that we care for all the different parts of our own bodies, for at the most fundamental level, we are all one body. Furthermore, Wang adopted the related Buddhist idea that human beings are innately fully enlightened; their heart-minds, in fact, were the conscious, knowing aspects of the universal Pattern of the world. This led him to argue that there was no need to study the things and events of the world or the classics of Confucianism in order to gain an understanding of Pattern; what we needed to do was to be ever aware and pay constant attention to the original and pure features of the natural, practical functioning of our own consciousness, what, borrowing from Mengzi, he called our pure knowing (*liangzhi* 良知), for this faculty and this alone could guide us to all and only morally good action. Moreover, not only *could* it guide us, it necessarily *would* guide us if only we do not corrupt or inhibit its spontaneous and natural operation. And so, he further concluded that there is an unassailable unity of knowing and acting (*zhixing heyi* 知行合一).

Liang bundled all of these ideas about neo-Confucian learning together with more recently arrived ideas from the West in his quest to describe a new approach to inculcating democratic ideals, values, and practices among his contemporaries that would replace the sterile, overly-intellectualized approach that failed to bring forth the enlivening emotional commitment needed for appropriate action. Among the most important components of this mixture were his

understandings of Kant's moral philosophy and of course democracy. Kant played an important role that Professor Tsui describes with care and in detail. I will focus on two features of Kant's view that Liang highlighted and deployed in powerful and original ways. Like many Chinese admirers of Kant, including some today, Liang either did not grasp or simply ignored Kant's insistence that the justification of morality does not in any way depend upon emotional dispositions or circumstances. Morality was not a feeling or a sentiment but a deliverance of pure practical reason, which has the ability to act without being influenced by desires or incentives connected with our corporeal nature. And so, in some ways, morality for Kant was more like the Cheng-Zhu notion of Pattern than Wang Yangming's pure knowing, which is based upon the awareness and feeling of being one body with other people, creatures, and things and so always brings with it the proper affective sensation.⁴ Kant has nothing comparable to Wang's metaphysical belief in the underlying oneness of the world, Pattern, or innate moral wisdom. But Liang was absolutely right in seeing that both Wang and Kant believed that moral agents have the innate ability to see and follow the moral law and, what is more, that it is *only* when one acts according to this innate ability (pure knowing and pure practical reasoning respectively) that one's actions will have true moral worth. The independence of moral agents is a genuine point of similarity and one of monumental significance.⁵ Among other things, it made clear that people have within them the innate ability

⁴ For example, Wang explains Mengzi's claim that anyone seeing a child about to fall into a well would feel alarm and concern by saying that this is because "their benevolence forms one body with the child." Moreover, this is not something they have to think about or strive to achieve; it is not the result of any kind of conventional cognitive activity but is instead the embodied experience of the ontological oneness of the world, "the benevolence of their heart-minds is originally like this" See Philip J. Ivanhoe, trans., *Readings from the Lu-Wang School of Neo-Confucianism* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2009): 160-62.

⁵ Here too, it pays not to overstate the case. Wang and Liang both believed in the independent power of moral agents to see and act morally, but Kant put forth a distinctive notion of moral autonomy. Wang depended on robust metaphysical claims about Pattern, the human heart-mind, and the underlying oneness of self and world while Kant's view was grounded in a particular conception of pure practical reason, which was not in any principled way connected with human nature or restricted to the heart-mind.

to understand and act morally. But that is not where the similarity ends. Liang also saw that Kant's notion of a kingdom of ends resonated with and had important correlates in aspects of traditional Confucian thought. Professor Tsui astutely connects Kant's idea of a kingdom of ends to the traditional Confucian aspiration for an age of Great Unity (*da tong* 大同), and her description of Liang's version of this ideal as a "metaphysical republic"⁶ makes clear that unlike Kant, Liang's utopian vision was founded on an underlying belief that heaven, earth, and the myriad things all form one body. Moreover, Wang and Kant believed that their respective ideal societies would be brought into being only when each and every person realized who they truly are. But for Kant this entailed realizing that we are creatures of pure reason capable of fashioning universal moral maxims and legislating them upon ourselves and our compatriots, while for Wang this required us to recognize, have faith in, and bring into full play our pure knowing, which would lead us to see and feel our inextricable connection with all people, creatures, and things and respond to them with the appropriate level of humaneness.

In order to avoid the pitfalls of Cheng-Zhu and evidential learning, Liang described an alternative, therapeutic form of learning designed to produce real political knowledge. Instead of teaching the semantics and theory of democracy, he sought to stimulate his readers' bodily senses by presenting a new type of fiction designed to awaken in them an appropriate range of emotional reactions and dispositions. As he put it, "Fiction . . . is capable of rendering modern political concepts *virtually present*."⁷ Through the use of a new form of fiction, "Liang strived to transform China's political future into a vivid cinematic landscape."⁸ Liang used musical features of his new prose and visual images he conveyed through it to elicit and direct affect in support of political aims; through these methods he sought to generate a sense

⁶ For example, "[Liang saw] his contemporaries as equal cosmic members of the metaphysical republic, Liang envisioned the hope of having people live as one organic cosmic, moral, and political body in a republican government." (*Affective Betrayal*, 145; cf. 195, 223).

⁷ *Affective Betrayal*, 33.

⁸ *Affective Betrayal*, 148.

of oneness and motivate people to act morally and politically. There is considerable merit to this strategy. As Chinese philosophers have noted since ancient times, music enters into people directly and swiftly and can transform them in the moment and shape them over time. When people share a musical experience, they are often drawn together into a shared emotional space. Similarly, when we contemplate an image together or share a vision, the very act establishes a connection and works to build a bond among us. Moreover, music and vivid visualization also tend to elicit a response; we hear a beat and tap our feet or sway in time to the rhythm, or we contemplate an image or scene that attracts or repels us and elicits feelings of joy or anger. Unlike more prosaic forms of language, the messages music and visualization convey rely on non-discursive insights⁹ and often manifest a unity of knowing and acting.¹⁰

Such was Liang's vision and aspiration, but over time, in light of the unfolding of history, he came to doubt his original optimistic assessment of human nature and its potential and grew quite pessimistic about the possibility of realizing democratic reform in his time or even in the near future. Professor Tsui astutely identifies the source of his skepticism and corresponding cynicism: "While Liang's utopian attempt opened us to the finest possible ways our world can be, it prompts one to wonder whether a metaphysical hypothesis necessarily informs and corresponds to human reality."¹¹ In other words, it raises the question of whether one can build a plausible and stable political culture on the metaphysical foundations of Wang Yangming's philosophy. If the world is not really one body and people are not inherently enlightened and endowed with innate moral wisdom—pure knowing—how can one expect them to be receptive to even the most well-designed therapy? What Liang saw in events like

⁹ For example, Professor Tsui claims, "Liang asserted that the significance of his fictional creation rested in transmitting the formless 'truth' through nondiscursive means." *Affective Betrayal*, 166.

¹⁰ One might and indeed should consider the ways in which the solidarity and commitment such activities and experiences often generate can be used to serve nefarious as well as laudable aims.

¹¹ *Affective Betrayal*, 223.

the French Revolution and the unfolding of political and social events in his own place and time was that people's emotional nature is by no means inherently moral; quite to the contrary, the release of affect regularly resulted in some of the greatest cruelty and pain. In light of such observations, what is to be done?

In the concluding section of her work,¹² Professor Tsui notes that toward the end of his life, "spirit and spark gradually returned to Liang's writing."¹³ They returned not because he abandoned his earlier insights into the role of affect, but because he came to see their implications more clearly, and this is one of several places where the issues and ideas that occupied, inspired, and at times frustrated Liang have important things to teach us today. Liang retained the belief that "The root of democracy . . . was ingrained in deep cryptic sites of people's daily habits";¹⁴ he was correct to hold on to this hard-won insight, and this is something that should inspire careful and thorough reflection today as well. Democracy as a form of life most certainly does not consist simply or primarily in knowledge about democratic principles or a mastery of democratic theory; it lies in and is sustained by deeply ingrained habits of the heart. Like all habits, an affective commitment to democratic forms of life does not reside in an inborn faculty like pure knowing, in the innate Pattern of the heart-mind, or in any abstract discourse; rather, such habits are mostly acquired and must be inculcated and internalized as one matures and is enculturated in a well-ordered civil society. They are learned through a shared form of life that includes practices like standing in line and waiting one's turn, a commitment to fair play in sports and other human activities, and the social rituals and norms that support these and other human endeavors. Liang came to see this and, in the waning years of life, devoted himself to educating not only the mind but also the emotions of his fellow citizens; in so doing, we can understand him as returning to a conception of the nature and role of affect more characteristic of the classical period of Confucian philosophy that remains relevant for democratically minded people today.

¹² See for example "Democracy as Human's Becoming," *Affective Betrayal*, 230-32.

¹³ *Affective Betrayal*, 231.

¹⁴ *Affective Betrayal*, 231.