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An Attempt at a History of Mentality in Late Imperial China

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Abstract Some elements of Puritanism in Chinese tradition are obviously different from the well-known intellectual phenomenon in the West; in the Neo-Confucian ambit the key question concerns “order–disorder,” “harmony–disharmony” in society and inside one’s personality, rather than “sin” and “purity” in personal morality. Yet we also find that chastity is involved in the contrast between the two concepts of purity and pollution and the idea of “obscene” (meaning “inauspicious,” “ill-omened,” “profane”) allows us to uncover a darker side to sexual representation. Death seems another source of active or passive pollution: this effect occurs after contaminational contact with human or animal remains. Thus death is the source of “desecration,” or of “contamination,” especially when it is the consequence of violence. This means that in Chinese culture, a sense of impurity seems to be driven by the horror of death and the fear of being overwhelmed by the passion of love; respectively, thanatos and eros. Other topics may also be associated, such as mental insanity referring to what is different, abnormal, strange, and socially subversive. The clean–unclean distinction originally responded to a basic visceral feeling—horror and repulsion/disgust—that is typically associated with hygienic worries and matter that is perceived as repugnant and inedible. But these basic ideas seem to have been symbolically extended to cope with the subconscious and metaphysical spheres: the horror of death and the fear of being overwhelmed by passion, the mysteries which lie behind these emotions, and the attempt to sublimate such fears into an impulse to transcend the red dust of our limited existence.
Keywords anthropological history, mental structure, purity-pollution, cleanness-filthiness, eros and thanatos

Historical works have different approaches and aims, and may focus on the events of long, middle or short periods of time relating to society, ideas, economy, etc. The aim that this historian is extremely interested in is the reconstruction of the representation of reality, especially the inner reality of society in a certain historical age. This is what is roughly referred to as “mentality.” This enquiry concentrates on the period from the 17th to the 18th century: it is a very significant period in Chinese history, as it corresponds to the maturity of imperial culture, and also occurs just at the beginning of the massive impact of Western influences, as well as the beginning of global history.

Owing to the demands of specific research, most of the selected sources are literary, as they are the richest sources for the representation of reality and imagery. Ordinary historical documentation, whose contents and aims are consciously written, throws relatively little light on psychological aspects; therefore it is necessary to search behind these sources in order to grasp the apparent “silence of what we call the collective mentality.” \(^1\) In fact, this approach offers new interpretative patterns in the re-reading of documents that have already been studied, and also allows the use of materials that have until now been regarded as the territory of other disciplines—symbols and myths, iconography, songs, tales—to be considered historical sources.

In other words, the “history of mentality” does not ignore political and economic events, or social and institutional organization; it takes into account what is conscious and voluntary, ideological systems, and pre-eminent and recessive values. However, the object of an investigation into a history of mentality—in my opinion—is especially extended to also include the more or less unconscious sphere, the “currents of the deep” which govern the imagery of the members of a society without their awareness, collective sensitivity or conventional categories and definitions, i.e., the collective complex conscious-unconscious.\(^2\) This field of observation covers feeling and reaction,

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\(^1\) Dupront, 1969, 44–45.

\(^2\) I avoid the use of the terms “collective consciousness” and “collective unconscious,” because they remind us respectively of É. Durkheim’s concept of the shared beliefs and moral attitudes which operate as a unifying force within society by shaping beliefs and attitudes, and C. Jung’s notion of the collective memory of humanity, which consists of pre-existent forms, the archetypes, beyond the memory of experiences by particular persons in the past. The former stresses the role of the common consciousness in relation to the solidarity between the members of a society and the latter the inherited and archetypal. Other concepts are