CHAPTER 19

Anger and Rage in Traditional Chinese Culture

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This study presents some of the anthropological characteristics connected to the notion of “anger” and its correspondents in late imperial China, i.e., during the two last imperial Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, in which China underwent great changes even before it had contact with the Western powers. The imperial culture reached its highest levels during the Ming dynasty. A great economic development took place in China, especially in the eastern part of the empire, thanks also to the international flux of silver, and Chinese products started to flow to Europe. New ideas were elaborated especially among the intellectual circles of Jiangnan, and literature and theatre developed both in the south and the north. This development continued in the subsequent Qing dynasty, after the collapse of the Ming and the Manchu conquest of China. Economic and intellectual development continued until the eighteenth century, although political authority strengthened control and supported the orthodox tradition. The economic and political crisis started soon thereafter, because of the excessive demographic explosion and under the increasing pressure of the Western powers.

This essay, with textual analysis of significant literary sources that reflect the everyday life of the period, is mainly concerned with the usage of the main corresponding terms. In the second half of this article I summarize how the emotion of anger is represented by providing an overview of its main characteristics, both with literary and historical descriptions.1

Wierzbicka has demonstrated that there is no exact correspondence between the semantic value of a word denoting emotion in one language and its so-called equivalent in another. Therefore I first introduce the terms in Chinese that have a similar meaning to the English word “anger”, then match the situations corresponding to the concept in English, presenting some typical cases of their use. I synthetically present which terms in traditional Chinese

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1 This essay is part of my international project on the representation of emotions and states of mind in late imperial China. I am grateful to Carmen Casadio for her diligent polishing of my English that is now clearer and easier to read. The Chinese characters are supplied. Their romanisation (pinyin) with the corresponding tone is given only for the main cases.
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Although anger, which is often accompanied by rage, is a subjective and “lived experience” (Erlebnis), we must follow the traces of its representation in literary and historical sources to understand its characterisation. The scope of anger-related emotions is very broad as it mainly concerns the more aggressive and destructive side of human beings, as well as their fight against injustice and the abuse of power. This double aspect and its contrasting effects on society are reflected in the written tradition. Moreover, in every language terms relating to anger can emphasise various aspects, such as the intensity of the feeling, or the difficulty of self-control, or its motivation and its various forms of manifestation.

In Chinese, as the next paragraph explains, the most common term for anger-like emotion in its broadest definition is nù 怒, which can apply to anger, irritation, rage, exasperation and also indignation. Very frequent too is qì 氣, which may have different meanings, from anger to aggressiveness and indignation. These can be followed by 怨/憤 (indignation) and its compounds, which can largely be rendered as “indignation” or “motivated anger” (because of a wrong suffered, jealousy or shame) in English. Nonetheless, it is not always easy to draw the boundary between the above-mentioned terms and hèn 恨 (hate, resentment, grudge, rancour, regret), yuàn 怨 (hatred-resentment), yàn 脩 (aversion, repulsion or contempt), nǎo 惱 (irritation-worry), huì 惕 (rage), chēn 嗤 (anger-displeasure) and bù píng 不平, 氣甚不平 (indignation-discontent). Multifarious expressions denoting their manifestation and general effect are no less important than these terms purely referring to anger-like feelings, however.

These manifestations show how such emotion is expressed and characterised in the Chinese context, and also demonstrate that, traditionally, Chinese

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2 Also, respectively: 大怒, 怒發, 發怒, 赫怒, 震怒, and 患怒, 恨怒, 彆怒.
3 For instance, “to suppress anger and not say a word” 忍氣不言, “throat and chest choked with anger” 氣填吭臆, “in a fit of pique” 負氣.
4 Respectively 怨, 氣忿, 洩忿, 怨忿, 怨怒, 怨然, 憤憤, 憤, 積憤, 氣忿, 憤惋, 愧忿, 愧, 怨忿 and 怨, 怨忿, 怨然, 憤忿, 憤志, 憤恨, 憤激, 憤烈, 冤憤, 哀憤欲死, 幽憤.
5 A broader analysis of several Ming and Qing sources revealed that amidst 3,753 entries broadly relating to anger (including any occurrences of its manifestations, dispositions, symbolic descriptions, etc. pertaining to the 1,293 emotion words) the most frequent character was nù 怒 and the compounds 大怒, 憤怒, 怒, 震怒 (448), followed by qì 氣 and its compounds (422), then by fèn 怨/憤 and its compounds (133), which can mostly be rendered into English as “indignation” or justified-motivated anger (because of a suffered wrong, or caused by jealousy or shame).