



[Compte-rendu] Paolo Santagelo, Materials for an Anatomy of Personality in Late Imperial China

Luca Gabbiani

► To cite this version:

Luca Gabbiani. [Compte-rendu] Paolo Santagelo, Materials for an Anatomy of Personality in Late Imperial China. Bulletin de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient, 2017, pp.490-495. halshs-03134555

HAL Id: halshs-03134555

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03134555v1>

Submitted on 3 Mar 2022

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Paolo Santangelo, *Materials for an Anatomy of Personality in Late Imperial China*, Leiden– Boston, Brill, 2010,

Luca Gabbiani

Citer ce document / Cite this document :

Gabbiani Luca. Paolo Santangelo, *Materials for an Anatomy of Personality in Late Imperial China*, Leiden– Boston, Brill, 2010,. In: Bulletin de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient. Tome 102, 2016. pp. 490-495;

https://www.persee.fr/doc/befeo_0336-1519_2016_num_102_1_6244_t13_0490_0000_2

Fichier pdf généré le 08/11/2019

the mid-18th-century Bantenese scholar ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abd al-Qahhār to a third-generation successor of al-Qūshāshī in Medina, Muḥammad b. ‘Alī al-Ṭabarī. ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abd al-Qahhār was the most prominent scholar at the Banten court in his day, and his name also occurs in several *silsilah* of another Sufi order, the Naqshbandīyah. Interestingly, ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abd al-Qahhār also constitutes the link with Medina in one of the *silsilah* from Mindanao (this *silsilah* occurs in two manuscripts). For a brief period in the 18th century, Banten thus appears to have been a regional centre of propagation of the Shaṭṭārīyah, not only to nearby Cirebon but also to distant Mindanao. The other two *silsilah* from Mindanao reflect two independent incursions of the order there, as local men took *ijāzah* directly from descendants of Ibrāhīm al-Kurānī in Medina, his great-grandson Muḥammad [Sa‘īd] Ṭāhir and Muḥammad As‘ad, respectively. As already noted, most Acehnese *silsilah* also indicate that people preferably sought initiation with members of the al-Kurānī family in Medina, including these two. The last-named, Muḥammad As‘ad, incidentally, also gave an *ijāzah* to the prolific scholar Daud Patani (Dā‘ūd al-Faṭānī), due to whom the Shaṭṭārīyah gained some influence in the Malay Peninsula in the early 19th century.

Oman Fathurahman’s new book, as I hope the above has shown, is a useful contribution to the study of Sufi orders in Southeast Asia and the complex trans-local relations and cultural flows involved. It will also have its uses as a work of reference due to the useful index of names (which unfortunately is incomplete).

Martin VAN BRUINESSEN (Utrecht University)

Paolo SANTANGELO, *Materials for an Anatomy of Personality in Late Imperial China*, Leiden–Boston, Brill, 2010, xvi + 525 pages – ISBN 9789004177536, 196€

Devoted to a topic only seldom taken into consideration, this book is a welcome addition to the fast growing body of scholarly works on late imperial China. The more so when one knows that it is actually the first volume in a series titled “Emotions and States of Mind in East Asia,” co-edited by Paolo Santangelo, the author of the present work, and Professor Cheuk Yin Lee, of National University of Singapore, a series which has already seen the publication of four other titles (for a total of seven volumes, all published by Brill). In the field of Chinese cultural history, where research has been very lively in the last decades, the approach spurred by the overseers of the series opens interesting and innovative perspectives. Judging from the contents of the present volume and from the presentations of the other titles already published, it seems that the general aim of this endeavour is not only to provide readers with detailed textual studies based on a wide array of literary sources, but also to delineate, through a careful historical contextualisation of the results of these textual studies, what could be termed

as a grammar of emotions and sensitivities in China's late imperial period. It can only be hoped that such efforts will be encouraged and pursued in the future, for they will provide the scholarly community with a finer and more wide ranging sense of what "Chineseness" might have meant in the Ming and Qing periods, if only from the standpoint of the literati. Needless to say that such knowledge will offer an opportunity to shed yet more light on the ostensible gap between the pre-modern and modern – not to mention the post-modern – representations and understandings of such categories as "man," "woman," "individual" and "personality" in the Chinese context. But it should also help China specialists and specialists of other cultural traditions connect their respective fields of expertise, in an effort to better assess the similarities and differences between the various situations. One example that comes to mind here is the sub-field christened in French as "*histoire du sensible*," which has developed rapidly in the last ten to twenty years in the wake of the works of such European historians as Alain Corbin.

But let us get back to the volume under review. In its pages, the author, Paolo Santangelo, seeks to shed light on the various dimensions of "personality," which permeate the literary production of the Ming and Qing dynasties. Professor Santangelo is no newcomer to this topic, as he has been working on emotions and representations in the Chinese historical context for more than two decades now. His grasp of the major literary sources of the times and his in-depth understanding of their inner arrangements and semantic polyphony, all drawn from his long acquaintance with these sources, provide him with firm grounds upon which to lead the reader through the four chapters which make up the core of the book.

At the heart of the first chapter lies the question of the actual mode of description of specific personality types. Drawing on a wide array of contemporary works on psychology, the author first tries to present how the notion of "self" and its descriptions in China have long been considered as embedded in the network of social relations – first and foremost family relations – of which the individual was part. He then turns to the more practical issue of how authors of the late imperial period chose to describe the physicality of the characters staged in their works, as well as the main features of their inner nature. Among other things, the author proposes a review of the main criteria defining beauty – feminine as well masculine –, stressing the lack of tension around male effeminacy in China's late imperial context. Santangelo then ventures into an arduous argument, seeking to link personality characteristics as devised in his sources and the social context in which the authors stage their characters. The aim here, which is in the end only painstakingly achieved, is to shed light on the idea that the literary works he deals with tend to present personality as a complex build-up linked to the biological dimension of the individual and to the social environment he or she evolves in. This long first chapter (approximately 80 pages) also presents a detailed digression on the vocabulary used to describe various types of personalities, with useful explanations on the semantic implications of the terms. Two further aspects also dealt with here should be mentioned: first, the host of examples provided by Santangelo to shed light on the way

the various types of personalities presented in literary works of the Ming and Qing dynasties not only reflect the specific values of the fictional characters themselves but also those of the society of the times; and second, the subtle way through which Santangelo – always backing his arguments by numerous examples – exposes the subjective dimension inherent in such descriptive efforts. If the words used in the descriptions of the characters and the contexts in which the latter are made to perform do reflect the moral and social values of the times, they also bespeak those of the authors themselves as well as their literary and intellectual agenda.

A bit shorter, chapter two elaborates further on the theme of personality as a mirror of values and morality through the specific lens of neo-Confucian thought. Santangelo first evokes how these aspects were treated in early Chinese philosophy, pointing to the existence of model personalities or natures in such works as the *Huangdi neijing* (黃帝內經) or the *Renwuzhi* (人物志). He then discusses some of the related notions linked to traditional Confucian thought, amongst which the importance of education and self-cultivation as well as the Mencian idea of man as originally good-natured. Turning to the Song period, the author first stresses that it saw a flourishing of texts devoted to human nature, before elaborating on the various conceptions developed in time by such major thinkers as Zhou Dunyi, the Cheng brothers and of course Zhu Xi, to name but a few. Santangelo here considers the metaphysical dimension in which these men approached the question of human nature as a testimony of the influence of Buddhism on their thought. Influential in this respect was the view expounded by most of them about the dual form of man's personality, or nature, with on the one side the "original and moral nature" (*benxing* 本性), and on the other the "psychophysical nature," as the author chooses to translate the expression *qizhi zhi xing* 氣質之性 (p. 126). It is not the place here to delve in detail into the reflections on this duality developed by the first generations of neo-Confucian thinkers. Suffice it to say that the original and moral side of human nature was construed as a gift from "heaven" to all individuals, and as such was considered as originally good. On the other hand psychophysical nature, or the "nature of energy and dispositions" – another translation provided by the author – was that part of human nature contingent on the characteristics each individual was endowed with through the activation of primordial energy (*qi* 氣). This dualistic approach to human nature was an elegant way to remain loyal to the Mencian conception of human nature as originally good, as mentioned above, whilst coming to terms with the contrast – if not the contradiction – stemming from the observation of actual human conduct.

The contents of the chapter then turn to the evolution of the debates during the Ming and Qing dynasties. An obvious point that Santangelo tackles here is the strong anti-dualistic stance in reference to human nature adopted by the proponents of the School of the Mind (*xinxue* 心學) in the early Ming, among which one can mention Wang Tingxiang (王廷相, 1474–1544) and Wang Yangming (王陽明, 1472–1529). To summarize these complex intellectual debates, which have been taken up over and over again in scholarly

literature, one can certainly consider that these men favoured the unity of human nature just like they propounded that of energy and principle (*qi* 氣, *li* 理), thus parting from the way followed by their illustrious Song predecessors. With regard to human nature, if only a handful of these early Ming thinkers chose to call into question the notion of its original goodness, most if not all agreed on the idea that humankind was unique in its ability to preserve the integrity and goodness of its nature, or to restore it, through education and learning. Santangelo then follows this line of thought in the writings of later scholars such as Li Zhi (李贄, 1537–1602), Lü Kun (呂坤, 1536–1618), and into the Qing with Wang Fuzhi (王夫之, 1619–1692) and Dai Zhen (戴震, 1724–1777), among others, in an effort to show how human nature, and thus various personality- and character-types, progressively came to be construed as depending as much on the social environment of an individual's life experience as on his or her innate qualities and dispositions, if not more. In an effort to bridge the gap between the past and the present, Santangelo then turns to modern psycho-sociological and anthropological discourses on such notions as reproduction, habitus, custom and imitation, in order to show the affinities they have with the above-mentioned considerations of China's late imperial thinkers.

Turning back to more literary and practical issues, in chapter three, again 80 pages long, Santangelo seeks to tackle the important question of what he terms as the stereotypes and prototypes used by the authors of his sources in the description of the personalities and characters of the fictional figures they stage in their works. The idea is to analyse the different categories, which permeate these works, in order to provide a sense of the general cultural framework they unveil. The author in turn presents such figures as the political and intellectual elites, treated either from a positive or a negative point of view, the heroes and the rebels, the archetypal representative of the wealthy and powerful family, the figures of the poor. The characteristics of individuals hailing from different regions of the empire are also mentioned, as well as those of foreigners and barbarians, in this last case most notably the ethnic groups of the north-western frontier lands. Another characteristic profile studied here is that of the last sovereign of a falling dynasty, generally depicted as wicked, cruel and morally depraved. The exception (possibly) confirming the rule is that of the last Ming ruler, to whom Santangelo devotes some interesting pages. The chapter concludes on the classic question of gender roles and age, a special emphasis being put on how some specific characteristics were depicted, physical as well as moral – among others beauty, jealousy, wickedness, but also the figures of the courtesan. Female representations are the leading thread here, yet the author provides valuable comparisons drawn from the descriptions of similar male attributes.

What all this boils down to is the fact that late imperial fiction conveys the feeling of a society marked by a relatively high degree of social fluidity, especially perceptible in the dimension of gendered roles and relations. In contrast to female chastity, a moral virtue on the rise during the period, which was highly regarded by traditional literati, as quite a few historians have

already argued, the corpus of sources Santangelo analyses also comprises important works of erotic fiction, which tend to purvey a sense of the far more complex reality of male-female relations: unquestionably mainly written by men and most probably targeting a male readership, as Santangelo notes, some of these works nevertheless tend to go beyond the cliché of women as objects of male desires, and to stage women as actual subjects of their own desires. The contrast between moralistic, if not puritanical, ideals and sexually explicit fictional content, which can sometimes be found within the œuvre of a single author, does shed light, on the one hand, on the anxieties experienced by the male literati classes of those times, confronted with changing societal conditions and to an ever-higher degree of social fluidity, and on the other hand, on their simultaneous perception of the growing inadequacy of traditional Confucian values as operative tools to frame the workings of society and to provide an intelligible representation of everyday social realities.

The final chapter of the volume, also the longest with no less than 190 pages, is the result of Paolo Santangelo's effort to provide the reader with a detailed reconstruction of individual personality traits as presented in the wide array of sources he has resorted to, and this from a taxonomic *cum* semantic point of view. It would far exceed the scope of the present review to delve in detail into the numerous categories and examples presented. Suffice it to say that the chapter is divided into three main parts, each dealing with specific personality characteristics, ranging from intellectual and cognitive abilities – such as acuteness and talent, sociability, ambition and modesty, fear and courage, arrogance, pride and stubbornness, etc. –, to cognitive inabilities, moral inadequacy and insanity – foolishness and its innumerable semantic variations, unconventional traits and strange personalities, etc. –, and finally to the great vices as well as what the author calls forbidden obsessions – alcohol, lust, greed, etc. The chapter ends with a 67-item list of specific categories of personality traits – physical, moral and behavioural – for which Santangelo provides the most prevalent expressions found in the sources. An appendix then follows, in which Santangelo turns to discussing themes that seemingly lie outside of the primary scope of the volume, such as the question of the private and the public in self-representation, that of spontaneity, or the distinction between the inner and the outer as reflected in the literary sources he has put to use.

As can be surmised, the above description does not entirely do justice to the multifarious and very rich content of a volume which, as I mentioned at the outset, is a valuable contribution to our historical knowledge of China's late imperial period, and as such should attract the attention of students and specialists alike. This being said let me conclude with two remarks.

The first goes to the author: it is my opinion that Prof. Santangelo, notwithstanding his remarkable control of the sources and his wide-ranging erudition – or possibly because of such qualities – has partly lost track of the actual purposes of his work while composing it. In fact, the reader is at times overwhelmed by the amount of data and examples provided, which often end up blurring the general image and the analytical discourse, rather than clarifying them. This may possibly be linked to the construction of the large

database the author says he has worked with. Modern computing techniques do allow us to do so, but in the process, one should not lose sight of the critical problem of how to put to use the vast amount of materials that may end up accumulated in them. No doubt, historians are resource dependent, but equally important in the process of proposing a comprehensive narrative on a specific topic is the ability to draw up a distinct analytical framework in order to clearly orientate the reader towards the interpretative goal to be attained. Unfortunately, the volume under review partly suffers from a lack of clear analytical orientations, for which the enormous amount of examples and materials presented cannot not entirely compensate.

The second remark is addressed to the publisher. It is inconceivable to me how such a sum of knowledge as that presented here by Prof. Santangelo might have been allowed to appear in print with such a number of remaining typos, not to mention entire passages written in very dubious English. Considering the scholarly reputation of the author of this volume, it is unfortunate that his work should have been presented to the public in such a state. Considering the prices at which Brill's books are presently sold on the market – in the present case 241 US\$, according to the publisher's website –, one cannot but regret that no proper copy editing service was provided by the publisher.

Luca GABBIANI (EFEO)

Roberta TONTINI, *Muslim Sanzijing: Shifts and Continuities in the Definition of Islam in China*, Leiden–Boston, Brill, 2016, x + 238 pages – ISBN 978-90-04-31924-0, 125\$

A brief review cannot do justice to the complexity of arguments raised by Tontini in her brilliant account on the history of China's acquaintance with Islam and its jurisprudence. This highly informative and insightful monograph addresses a largely neglected theme in the field of Chinese Muslim studies: that of the development of Islamic law during China's political transition from empire to republic and communist state. It offers interesting new interpretations of the Islamic legal tradition through an in-depth analysis of previously almost unexplored sources which together constitute the so-called *Tianfang Sanzijing* (天方三字經, *Three-character Classic of Islam*) genre.¹

1. Although for its vocabulary choices, metrical structure, topical arrangements and basic rhyme patterns the genre clearly resembles the homonym novel tercets whose creation is usually attributed to Wang Yinglin 王應麟 (1223–1296), the Muslim *sanzijing* (hereinafter simply referred to as *sanzijing*) must not to be confused with the Confucian tenet of the Southern Song (1127–1279). The author does not devote a special section to exemplifying the differences between the two formats, but still provides the reader with a sufficient number of valuable excerpts from various versions of the Muslim one to capture all its nuances and peculiarities, especially with regard to its intended audience, educational function and socio-political implications.