

"Body and Self in tales of the strange of Medieval China"

Introduction

Let me perhaps start with explaining my choice of topic for today's talk.

1. For some years I taught an advanced Chinese reading course for Year 3 (Level 6) students entitled "Chinese Stories of the Supernatural". In this module I tried to read, translate and discuss with my students a range of narrative texts from the period of Division into North and South (Nanbeichao; 420-589) and the Tang (618-907) dynasty. There is a lot in these stories that requires an explanation, at least for non-Chinese readers, and that is what makes them worthwhile to read and understand for me. My fascination with the richness of these stories as a source for cultural history of China is the reason behind the tales of the strange in the title of my lecture.
2. Also, I teach a module at MA level called "Chinese conceptions of the Self" which required me to look deeper into the problem of how the 'self' is being understood by Confucian thinkers in different periods of Chinese history and how that understanding is different from Western conceptions of 'self'. Just as a side remark: the way Chinese thinkers conceptualise the 'self' has a direct bearing on ethical questions such as the applicability of the Western concept of human rights, bioethics (e.g. cloning), the death penalty and so forth.

3. Finally, because in Lampeter we do no longer have academic departments or schools, as we used to call them, I have increasingly been exposed in recent years to influences from archaeologists and anthropologist particularly in the areas of material culture and the agency of things, food and the body. As a result of this influence, I feel that it is important to introduce material aspects of Chinese civilisation into the Chinese Studies curriculum more than this is usually done in our text-centred discipline (I, myself, am a 'text person'); for I believe that, as the anthropologist Tim Ingold has stated, that "processes of thinking, perceiving, remembering and learning have to be studied within the ecological contexts of people's interrelations with their environment" (p. 171). For example, as Ingold continues to explain, landscapes are not (merely) constructed by imposing an externally conceived cultural framework, a worked-out plan onto the world (example of architecture; grid of a map superimposed onto the surface → distance between observer and the environment; humans as masters over the environment); rather, when constructing meaning about our environment we seem to be working from the inside out; we create our life-worlds and what they mean to us through constant pragmatic engagement with the constituents of the environment we inhabit (p.154), in other words, by being in it rather than by looking at it from the outside.

I think this shift in perspective towards *being* in the world is relevant because it puts the body into greater focus as the place or space where pragmatic engagement with the environment happens. For our bodies constitute a physical boundary between ourselves as persons and the environment. How we construe this boundary, how we position ourselves vis-à-vis some other has a direct bearing on how we think about the ‘self’. Therefore, one question I would like to ask is in what ways self-construction in medieval China (and in other periods) is linked to bodily processes as opposed to a predominantly psychological construction of the ‘self’.

In his dictionary *Interpretation of Words* (Shuowen jiezi), the lexicographer Xu Shen (AD 30-124) explains the characters denoting the “self” as follows:

Wo 我 I/me/myself, refers to one’s body as one’s self

Zi 自, self, means nose, and resembles the shape of the nose

Wu, I, is used to refer to [one’s] self, [signified by] the pictographic radical, *kou* (mouth)

Ji, self, means the centre of [the body] and resembles a human belly.

Shen, I, means the spine [of the human body].

The choice of body-related pronouns to denote the ‘self’ suggests, as Qian Nanxiu has argued, that “genuine ‘selfhood’ could only emerge through personal association with others – through intense contact and close

communion that involved the entire range of human emotions and other mental activities" (Qian 2001, p. 368-69). In my talk I will try to unpick this statement. A good starting point to do so is to start from a text that is rightly considered to be the starting point for a systematic literary construction of the self. The text is entitled *Shishuo xinyu* which translates into English as *A New Account of Tales of the World*. *Tales of the World* is the first book in a long series of works of *character writing*, whose main concern is to categorise human personality types based on the characterizations of real historical people. The anecdotes in this collection, today we would perhaps say the gossip, are all about the daily life of people and range from state affairs to poetic gatherings, from public encounters between individuals to domestic relationships between husband and wife. The focus is not so much on documenting the events as such as to capture the emotional and personal characteristics of the people involved. An example will give you a taste of the material:

When Huan Wen was young, he and Yin Hao were of equal reputation, and they constantly felt a spirit of mutual rivalry. Huan once asked Yin, "How do you compare with me [wo]?" Yin replied, "I [wo] have been keeping company with myself [wo] a long time; I [wo] would rather just be me [wo]. ("Ranking with refined words"; 9/35)

The following points are worthy of note:

- Number of 'I's in the anecdote

- Two different kinds of self-understandings; Huan Wen, the social superior, has a hierarchical, collective and standardisable view of selfhood; Yin, by contrast, stresses his independence and incomparability. He doesn't want to enter into the game Huan Wen is trying to impose on him.
- The reader is left with attaching concrete character traits to the protagonists: Huan comes across as aggressive, haughty, yet insecure of his superiority; while Yin seems proud, anxious, keen to ascertain his individuality etc.
- Rivalry is mentioned: rivalry is a common pattern in the anecdotes, suggesting the idea that the true self of a person reveals itself above all in a situation where two (or more) people are literally facing each other. In such dramatic moments the protagonists were believed to be under less self-scrutiny – we would say they let their guard down – and thus more likely to reveal authentic character traits. One key idea that underpins ideas of the self in early medieval China is that genuine 'selfhood' can only emerge through direct contact with others. Fully realized selfhood demands that the self is observed by others. Qian Nanxiu believes that this notion of self can be traced back to the practice of character evaluation in the 3rd and 4th century, when an "evaluator discerned each individual self through observing its performance in relation to others, and the evaluate exposed his or her genuine self

through a spontaneous and natural response to the worlds” (Qian 2001, p. 369).

The following anecdote may help to elucidate this point: Zhong Hui, a leading scholar in his time (3rd century) visited Xi Kang, another luminary and member of the Seven Masters of the Bamboo Grove. Xi Kang, engrossed in doing some metal work under a tree, ignores his visitor until the latter rises to leave. At this moment, Xi Kang said, “What had you heard that made you come, and what have you seen that now makes you leave?” Zhong Hui replied, “I came after hearing what I heard, and I'm leaving after seeing what I've seen.”

The use of the verb “to see” is significant. Zhong Hui uses almost exactly the same words as Xi Kang to make up his mind and get assurance about his own selfhood vis-à-vis the other. One gets the impression that Zhong Hui looks at Xi Kang almost as a mirror of his own personality and behaviour. He sees something in the other that triggers a process within himself, that reflects back on himself. The mirror metaphor is frequently used in character writing. The second emperor of the Tang dynasty, Tang Taizong (r. 626 to 649), is quoted as having said:

“We use bronze as a mirror to straighten our clothes and cap, the past as a mirror to understand [the causes] of the rise and fall of states, and a person as a mirror to recognize our merits and faults. I have always

maintained these three mirrors to prevent myself from making mistakes.” (Qian 2001, p. 369-70)

The mirror metaphor, especially in the form of a “water mirror”, features frequently in *Tales of the World*. “The water mirror reflects every detail of an object but never causes resentment because it has nothing to hide.” (I guess because you can see through the mirror) To act as a ‘water mirror’ to their contemporaries was the ideal for eminent literati of the time (there is a book entitled “Mirror to the Son of Heaven”; referring to Wei Zheng, the trusted advisor of Tang Taizong).

One problem which intrigued early medieval Chinese literati was how it is possible to characterise a person with words when you are not directly involved in a direct personal encounter with another individual? How is it possible to close the gap between a living person and his/her narrative characterization? Following the philosopher Zhuangzi, Wei Jin thinkers knew that “words could not fully express the meaning” (*yan bu jin yi*). So again, how is it possible to bridge that gap between a person’s internality and its expression in words. The formula Wei-Jin thinkers used was *yi xing xie shen* 以形寫神, “to use the body to depict the spirit”. 形 *xing*, the character that is translated as ‘body’, actually means ‘form’ and can denote a human body or any kind of natural object. The other key term here is obviously *shen* which is

another interesting word. *Shen* is used to refer to 'spirits' in the sense of deities or the spirits of the ancestors, but also to denote the totality of a person's personality, that what makes this person the person she is. The aim of character appraisal was to "transmit the spirit" (*chuan shen*) of a person. That 'spirit', which was thought to reside in the heart organ (*xin*), was not conceived as something static, but rather as something that needs to be observed in action. For example, in a specific situation or through interaction between people. Stephen Owen explains *shen* as follows:

神: "Spirit" or "divinity." Originally this term applied to the "gods," but it was early transferred to the incorporeal aspect of the human, the "spirit." Acts of imagination were generally understood as the movement of *shen*; a rich or fantastic "imagination" loosely corresponds to *shen* "moving to remote distances." In later poetics *shen* is used to describe a magical domain in aesthetic experience that eludes analytic comprehension.

The relationship between body and spirit was seen as analogous to that between word (*yan*) and meaning (*yi*). Words are insufficient to fully express meaning. Zhuangzi therefore advised to "forget the words once you got the meaning". In the same way, *form* (*xing*) was seen as a pointer towards the spirit of a person.

In another 3rd century work, *The Study of Human Character* (*Renwu zhi* 人物志) the author Liu Shao (186?-245?) explains the interrelation between body, spirit and human nature:

A person is born with a body (*xing*), and the body embraces the spirit (*shen*). If we [the observers] can grasp this person's spirit, we can investigate the principle and completely understand this person's nature (*xing* 性).

Xi Kang: "The relation of the spirit to the body is like that of the ruler to the state. When the spirit is disturbed on the inside, the body wastes away on the outside, just as when the ruler is confused above, the state is chaotic below."

Ge Hong (284-363): "In judging and evaluating a personality, observe the body and then get to the spirit."

I give you two examples how human spirit is presented in *Tales of the World*:

On the eve of Xi Kang's execution in the Eastern Marketplace of Luoyang (in 262), his spirit and bearing showed no change (*shenqi bu bian* 神氣不變). (6/2)

Wang Hui once went to visit Wang Xizhi's widow, Chi Xuan, and asked, "Haven't your eyes and ears suffered any impairment yet?" She

replied, "Hair turning white and teeth falling out belong in the category of the physical body. But when it comes to eyes and ears, they are related to the spirit and intelligence. How could I let myself be cut off from other people. (19/31)

The famous painter Gu Kaizhi (345-406) would sometimes not dot the pupils of the eyes in a portrait. When asked for the reason, he replied: "The beauty or ugliness of the four limbs basically bears no relation to the most subtle part of the painting. What transmits the spirit and portrays the likeness lies precisely in these dots." (Qian 2001, p. 158). Gu hesitated because before painting the eyes he needed to decide what or whom the person in the portrait was "facing". Without this connection between the observer and the observed the portrait would remain lifeless.

Tales of the World uses the depiction of a person's demeanour, posture, physique and so forth to convey a vast array of emotions, states of mind and dispositions. A description like "The color of her skin was like the luster of jade" could, depending on the context, express nobility and poise, determination, calmness, strength of character and so forth.

Shigehisa Kuriyama writes about the xue - literally the 'holes' or 'caverns' of the skin in Chinese medical thought; 'Of the myriad orifices puncturing the skin - medieval texts would count 84,000 pores - none were more intensely investigated than the points of acupuncture. Underlying the term xue,' he writes; 'was a conception of the body in which winds streamed

in and out of strategic orifices in the skin, just as winds streamed in and out of the hollows and caverns of the earth'.¹⁰ So here is a different analogy to that of the house – the body as the earth itself, the skin as the earth's surface.

Tales of the World showcases an amazing array of character traits and human personalities. However, the anecdotes stay safely with the familiar sphere of human interactions. They don't really engage the boundaries to the truly strange, unfamiliar and non-human. By contrast, contemporaneous and slightly later 'tales of the strange', or *zhiguai* or *chuanqi* as they are called in Chinese, are rich in representations of anomalous bodies, replete with examples of people changing from one state of being into another, for instance from young woman into fox spirit or from a dull student who keeps failing the imperial exams for aspiring public servants to an official with a brilliant career. (Footnote: I put aside the generic differences between *zhiguai* and *chuanqi* here because this would distract from the focus of my talk) In many, if not in an overwhelming number of cases a change in a person's fortune goes together with some sort of observable physical transformation or change within the protagonist, an alteration in his or alternation in his or her state of being through which the boundaries between a protagonist and the environment are re-drawn, highlighted, downplayed and so forth. Often this change is induced by a catalyst in form of a drug. A key theme of the strange tales genre is the classification of humans, animals and the world of things

according to their presumed natural relationships and how such taxonomies and the boundaries they created can become permeable, unstable or even collapse.

Obviously, strange tale *collections* – most of the stories that we have were not transmitted independently but as part of collections of similar material – are not simply representations or detached records of how people thought about their selves in relation to others. Collecting strange tales involves a process of selection, categorisation, ordering and display in a finished book. As Lydia Chiang observed in her book *Collecting the Self: Body and Identity in Strange Tales Collections of Late Imperial China* (Ming and Qing dynasty), collected pieces, not just of literature but of any kind of objects, “express the collector’s selfhood” (p. 6). I would go even further and suggest that collecting and sharing strange tales is an important building block in the *formation* of a medieval Chinese literatus’s self-construction. This is what Chiang also suggests when she says that “collection may be used to construct the subject’s gender and class identity within specific cultural contexts” (p. 6, e.g. collecting guns is different from collecting fans). “[A strange tale] is a textual artifice of the collector’s self, whose main concern lies in the centrality and validity of his own subjectivity” (p. 7).

The subterranean magic fungus

Texts such as the *The Study of Human Character* (*Renwu zhi*) or *New Account of Tales of the World* (*Shishuo xinyu*) aimed to define and pin-point a person's true or authentic self by observing a person's speech, demeanour and physical appearance. The idea was that it was possible to get to a person's real inner self by means of what is observable externally. Perhaps one can compare the approach of these books with that of a modern recruitment expert or profiler, someone who tries to find out what a person is really like by peeling away the different layers that make up a complex personality. We can also detect a certain mistrust, an awareness that appearances might be deceptive and hide a quite different self underneath the exterior. Such a mindset would perfectly suit a bureaucracy and its need to find suitable candidates for office by trying to find out the true self of a person in an effort to separate the genuine gentleman from the poser. And that is exactly what these books tried to do. In the more rigid aristocratic system of the Six Dynasties the emphasis shifted somewhat from finding true talent to maintaining the established hierarchical family system.

The emphasis in the *Subterranean Magic Fungus* lies somewhere else. It lies on the unrealised potential of the main protagonist and the tensions he is subjected to as an ambitious member of the emerging scholar-official class at the end of the medieval period. The story starts by mentioning that the recluse Xiao once had failed the metropolitan examination. Examination failure is a very common theme in tales of the strange as it thematises one of the key

anxieties of literati males of the time. Frustrated in his pursuit of a prestigious career as a Confucian official in the imperial bureaucracy, Xiao chose the path of pursuing the religious ideal of transcendence or immortality instead.

Climbing up the ladder of the cosmic religious hierarch was seen as a possible alternative to entering officialdom. But again, Xiao's ambitions are being thwarted. In his own words: "I have given up fame and wealth; I have hidden in the wilderness, stopped eating grain and practiced breathing techniques, hoping to achieve longevity." After his religious search has equally failed, he finally succeeds in the less prestigious career of a merchant, thereby becoming a rich man. His wealth subsequently allows him to pursue, at least partially, the lifestyle of a true gentleman scholar. He builds a garden with several outbuildings. When doing the groundwork for one of these buildings, he "dug out an object from the earth that resembled a human hand. It was fleshy and moist with a reddish, skin-like colour. After some hesitation, he cooks the fleshy object and eats it.

"From this moment his hearing and sight became clear; his physical strength increased, his appearance became juvenile, and where his hair had become incomplete/bald it completely grew again like the hair of a young girl. Also, where his teeth had fallen out, new teeth grew in an even row."

At first, Xiao does not realise what had happened. However, when he later meets a Daoist master, this master tells him that he must have eaten a 'magic fungus', adding the advice: "Sir, your life can be as long as that of tortoises and cranes. This being so, you should not live in the world of dust, you should retire to the mountains and forests and abandon all human affairs. [Then] you can reach the state of a divine transcendent."

The story plays on some of the tensions experienced by literati at the end of the medieval period. One is the competitiveness of the emerging examination system, which provided a new and increasingly important path into officialdom. For those who failed, reclusion or the pursuit of otherworldly ideals (e.g. immortality, transcendence) provided an alternative goal as well as consolation. A less preferred option was the career of a merchant. Yet, it is precisely the detour via this less prestigious career, the career of a merchant, that offers Xiao the means and the opportunity to ultimately reach one of his higher ambitions: transcendence.

The reason why I introduce this story is that it shows an important shift in how medieval Chinese literati thought about themselves as persons and as a community of scholars in the late medieval period, the post-rebellion Tang dynasty (AD 755 onwards). While the early medieval self was bound up in a search for personal authenticity and true inner nature, selfhood towards the end of the medieval period has become more dynamic. Faced with various

alternatives, the individual was forced to negotiate between them. It had to test out boundaries, transgressing and re-establishing them. The most important tension in this story is that between taking office and reclusion; between the ideal of becoming a scholar-official and the pursuit of the lofty ideal of disengagement and transcendence. In the spatial dimension, the two alternatives correspond to living in the metropolis on one hand, or in the wilderness on the other hand. Initially, Xiao is left in between these two states, being neither here nor there, condemned to leading a marginal life. The marginality of his existence translates into physical decay as he witnesses his body declining rapidly. He ultimately breaks out of this marginality by sheer necessity, which leads him to cross a social boundary and pursue a career in trade. It is a second boundary crossing that brings a new transformation: The eating of the subterranean magic fungus. The thing cannot conclusively be identified as edible or non-edible, like Xiao himself it is in a state of in-between. It is highly significant that the fungus is described as “*resembling a human hand*”. The fungus in the story is symbolic of objects that belong to two different categories: it belongs to the natural world in the sense that it is found in the ground and that it is an excretion, an outgrowth of a natural living organism, a plant perhaps or some sort of organic matter. On the other hand, its texture and colour is like that of a human body part. Precisely because it does not belong to one class of things only – natural object or human body part – in other words because it straddles the boundaries

between two classes of things, it has the power to engender transformation. It turns the dull and decrepit failed examination candidate into a young, vigorous and perceptive person.

The solution to Xiao's dilemma materializes after he is willing to take his chances and cross the boundary into another realm with clear attributes of being strange and from another world. In most cases such a transformation involves some kind of spatial and/or physical change. The protagonist relocates into the wilderness, an old abandoned temple, a mountain or another place that is located on the boundary between two different spheres.

Obviously, the transformation does not present a satisfying solution to Xiao's dilemma. Ingesting the fungus has given him the attributes that would eventually make him a successful examination candidate: youthfulness, physical vigour and intelligence. However, the taste he had of an alternative to the official career, the pursuit of transcendence, has undermined the Confucian ideal of becoming a scholar-official. The story ends with the protagonist foregoing a second chance to engage in the rat-race of the examinations system and disappearing nobody knows where to. Xiao might have chosen otherwise, giving Xiao the illusion of free choice and empowerment, even if this decision does not really resolve the initial conflict between holding office and reclusion.

From the point of view of the self, I think it is important to highlight the embeddedness of the self in a continuum that includes a spatial, temporal and

cosmic dimension. The late medieval self is defined by a need for mobility and the need to negotiate between different alternatives or lifestyles. The purpose of tales of the supernatural was to give the literati the tools to “define themselves as active agents who could celebrate, rationalize, challenge or transcend their embeddedness, rather than as passive victims of historical vicissitudes” (Luo 2015, p. 174).

The medieval self is extended outward. By that I mean that authors of strange stories explored unfamiliar territories, both in a spatial and temporal sense, and states of being. Rather than focusing on an interiorized, divided self, medieval authors sought to overcome the inside-outside dichotomy and situate the self within an extended network of social relations, a plurality of aesthetic and emotional experiences. One example is the sphere of the afterlife. Medieval strange tale authors expressed a fascination with the boundary between the living and the dead and in what ways it could be crossed from either side (hence the return-from-death stories and ghost stories) (Campany 1991, p. 17). In doing so, they often redrew these boundaries. For example: The accepted attitude towards sacrifices in the classical period had been that the “spirits do not enjoy offerings from those who are not of their kind, and the people do not sacrifice to those who are not of their kin” (*shen bu xin fei lei min bu si fei zu*) (*Zuozhuan* 1.75; Lewis 2006, p. 356; Campany 1991, p. 17-18). By contrast, the afterlife of people from outside of one’s own family commanded great interest, as is evidenced by the

numerous return-from-death narratives and ghost stories. As Robert Campany has argued: “[N]ew kinds of moral, social, ritual, and emotional ties were being forged across both the boundary separating life from death and that separating kin from stranger.” (Campany 1991, p. 18).

One of the most profound explorations of the interrelationship between the self and its environment can be found in a poetological text entitled *Wenxin diaolong*. The title is “commonly understood to express the complementary relation, or balance, of the spirit and the craft of literature” (Antje Richter, *Early Medieval Texts*, p. 389). Despite its title, however, the text is part of “an extended meditation on the nature of man’s relationship to the cosmos, and on the human possibility of achieving meaning and order” (Virag 2004, p. 15). How to conceptualise and mediate the gap between self and other, self and world, was one of the key questions Liu Xie addressed in his work. Do we derive meaning and values from being integrated and one with other things in the world, or are they inherent in the self? “Do emotions take us away from our true self, or do they bring us closer to it?” (Virag 2004, p. 16).

A single leaf might usher in a disposition/intention (*yi*) and the mere sound of chirping insects can be enough to evoke something in the heart. How much more so when a refreshing breeze and a bright moon

appear on the same night, or when we experience radiant sun and a spring forest in the same morning?"

The ancient poets were praised because they were able to "drift (*liuyun*) in the realm of the myriad images and immersed themselves in the particulars of what they saw and heard" (Virag 2004, p. 18), and be able to convey the spirit of things as well as their emotions through patterned language. "The barrier between self and the external world was not to be broken by an act of will that would transform the world, but by letting the boundaries of the self dissolve so that the outer world could dwell in us, and we could, in turn, venture out beyond the confines our own selves." (Ibid.) This openness was not merely grounded in external things affecting the self. There was an internal side to this insofar as that humans are "endowed with the seven feelings, and these are stirred in response to things" (Ibid, p. 19). This means that from birth the self has the capacity to mirror the complexity of the world by way of a multiplicity of emotions. Inner and outer can mirror each other without one side being passive. In other words, through our constitution, through the way we are set up as human beings, we have the ability to embody diverse states of being, and resonate with a world that is diverse and varied. Because we can experience the world through our emotions we can also apprehend the multiplicity of things in the phenomenal world. This is a

two-way process. The direction is both inward – the self is stirred by external things – and outward – the self’s basic natural disposition compels it to “spit out” its emotions. Thus, the literary imagination possesses the “god-like capacity to roam in-between the inner and outer worlds, and ‘traverse great distances of envisioned space’” (Virag 2004, p. 20). Producing literature was both a natural emanation of the human internal and subjective self and part of objective external processes.

Climbing a mountain, one’s feelings are filled with the mountain. And gazing out at the sea, one’s conceptions (*yi*) overflow with the sea.

Depending on how much talent one possesses, one might fly off with the wind and clouds. (Virag 2004, p. 35).

The imagination is able to overcome the barrier between self and things, inner and outer worlds. “The senses were a gateway to the world, through which the self was filled with the presence of things” (p. 36). What Liu Xie tries to achieve is to suspend the opposition between the concept of literature as an expression of private feeling on the one hand, and the notion that writing reflected the true state of the external world back onto the individual. Instead Liu Xie conceived of the self’s interaction with the world as a state of heightened awareness, of deep engagement between thought and emotions, spirit/mind and matter. Liu Xie described this engagement as the movement of *shen* 神 – *shen* meaning marvellous, spiritual, divine.

"The force behind the genre of anomaly accounts, if I [E.Y. Wang] understand Campany correctly, is to lay bare the limitations and insufficiency of our cognitive stock; in other words, the genre undermines the received cosmographic map structured by the old interpretive frameworks-Confucian or otherwise-and argues for alternative ways of perceiving and configuring the order of things." (Wang EMC 4 (1998), p. 162).

Conclusion

You will have noticed that I avoided using terms such as ‘individualism’, ‘holism’ or other isms in my talk. I also didn’t try to say what the ‘medieval Chinese self’ *is*. The reason for this is that I don’t think that a definition of self is possible without recourse to reified concepts or dichotomies, such as the one between an epistemology that opposes subject and object, and “extreme holism” that seeks to transcend or ignore such distinctions such as ‘body’ and ‘spirit’, ‘mind’ and ‘matter’ or ‘individual’ and ‘environment’. As Curie Virag has argued, “[t]he very complexity of the phenomena and issues involved makes the appeal of such extreme conceptions understandable, but the pervasiveness of the post-modern critique of Cartesian metaphysics has led to the construction of an East/West opposition that tends to limit, rather than expand, the possibilities for understanding.” I think that the usual dichotomy between ‘individualism’ (West) and ‘holism’ (East) – referring to the idea that the individual in China is inextricably and inescapably bound up in an organic whole--is indeed misleading. My own position is that Chinese

conceptions of the self are situated on a spectrum of possibilities that ranges from the self being dissolved into a holistically conceived cosmos, of being connected to everything else within the cosmos to a position where a 'self' asserts its own uniqueness, distinction and separation from other persons and society (Brindley, *Individualism in Classical Chinese Thought*). This is certainly not the dominant position in Chinese thinking about the self. The self as we encounter it in medieval tales challenges and transgresses the boundaries between itself and its environment at the same time that it tries to reconstitute them.

What I have tried to do is to give you some examples of some of the mechanisms/modes and themes that keep recurring in Chinese deliberations about selfhood. The thematic richness and volume of the narrative material on human selfhood, some of which I have presented here, is important because it adds another dimension to the usual binary oppositions. And that is the element of communication. Communication among people through stories, tales, gossip, anecdotes and so forth breaks up the dualism between 'body' and 'mind', or between 'individual' and 'society' and adds a third dimension. I think that the sheer amount of communication that goes on with regard to the construction of selfhood is a real factor in how people in the past (and the present) construct their own selves. It needs to be given more weight in our conceptualisations of selfhood because it will help us to move beyond

dualistic conceptions of the world. That is one reason why I like to use literature, because it adds this communicative dimension.

