The crisscrossed agency of a toast: Personhood, individuation and de-individuation in Luzhou, China

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This article addresses debates over individuation in China through consideration of guanxi-relational feasting in Luzhou, Sichuan. I draw on Ortner’s theorisation of subjectivity and agency to probe the often taken-for-granted question of cultural personhood which informs social action. Although the social imaginary in Luzhou is increasingly colonised by symbolic individualism, I propose that dominant local notions of personhood and agency, operating within feast practice, continue to define this process. By attending to three aspects of Yan’s ‘individualisation thesis’, I demonstrate how local models of person and agency are indispensible to a fuller understanding of social life. Considering the important role ritual speech habits (largely trained in de-individuating feasting) continue to play in socialising actors to economic institutions and power relationships more generally, individuation in China today remains a largely nominal and aspirational, if symbolically potent and potentially transformative, project.

Keywords: Individuation, agency, urban China, cultural personhood, ritual feasting

During a late-night feast in a humble eatery in Luzhou, Sichuan, bank driver Yang playfully bullied bank computer systems operator Luo and me. Although Yang was lower in status, he subjugated us with his superior drinking capacity and aggressive style. Yang declared his friendship for us at one moment, and belittled us (with terms like ‘landlord’) the next. At one point Yang saw me not eating, and claimed that if I did not eat he would not eat either. Yang argued with Luo for five minutes over how much the latter would have to drink to properly match Yang’s own drink. Shaking hands at the end of the night, he grinned and nearly crushed my hand.

Yang had invited us; he was the host. Therefore, he vigilantly monitored our signs of solidarity. He used shame-inducing moral force to synchronise the group ritual play, demanding that we follow his example in sacrificing our own comfort for the sake of our emotional bond. He interpreted holding back in any way as directly harming him. He felt that I observed him and Luo in too detached a manner, and asked, ‘What, are you waiting for a beautiful woman?’ Seeing me take notes, he told me to put down my pen. His joke about my waiting for a woman associated my too-reserved demeanour with the calculated behaviour covering secret intentions typical of status-conscious urbanites. Individual freedom, the theme of so much marketing and youth
discourse in Luzhou, was present—but only as a tabooed behaviour to be overcome by ethical ritual coercion. Ethnographically, I argue that the ‘ritual complex’ of feasting events, habitus, models of selfhood, and institutional functions, limits and frames Luzhou’s individuating tendencies. Analytically, I propose that the concept of agency can help clarify practices of personhood and individuation in culturally specific ways.

INTRODUCTION: INDIVIDUALISM AND AGENCY

The extent and nature of China’s social change has in recent years received significant attention in the social sciences, with some scholars arguing that individualising processes are fundamentally changing the nature of social life (Davis 2000; Yan 2009; Yan 2010), and with others emphasising the dominance of new forms of social relationality and control (Kipnis 2012; Ong and Zhang 2008). My position in this paper is that social personhood, a moral construct which frames and legitimises social agency, is often overshadowed ethnographically by the larger processes described (individuation, guanxi networking, etc.), making social life seem mechanistic and thin. A recent ethnography describes how ‘doing away with protocol’ in entertaining is meant to create sentimental attachments between participants (Osburg 2013: 56–7). ‘Early toasts over dinner tend to reflect hierarchy. Juniors usually initiate toasting with seniors by deferentially holding their glass lower … by the end of the evening, toasting is likely to be freer flowing’. The author—accurately—analyses such ritual action as essentially instrumental ‘modes of exchange’ within informal networks. But by not sufficiently attending to their personhood, or the ritual logic informing it, the author inadvertently treats actors as de facto individuals, effectively rendering the feast in procedural terms but leaving mysterious the affective, moral, and discursive logics which give the actions meaning.

Social persons may be built in relation to multiple models of agency. I take agency to mean the culturally-defined sources and ends of human action. Individualism, one model of agency which emerged only with modernity (see Taylor 2004), posits the self as the source and goal of action. Before modernity persons could act on their own initiative, but not as individuals, culturally defined: their persons were culturally and normatively framed as inhabited by sources of agency—gods, kings, lineage forefathers, tribal totems—that lay beyond the single body. In Luzhou, the influential ritual model of agency, which shapes social life in families and networks, normatively posits social person A’s action as animated by the agency of social person B (whose action in turn is animated by person A). My conceptualisation here attempts to further Mayfair Yang’s theorisation of the ‘relational subject’ and the cultural logic of its ‘manufactured’ indebtedness (Yang 1994: 85).

In short, acts by social persons in Luzhou, in the context of ritual, are not culturally constructed as originating in the self, but rather in another. The self ideally becomes a medium. Driver Yang, theatrically refusing to eat when he saw me not eating, was invoking just this agentively ‘intersubjective’ personhood. While he was using this ritual stance to score a point against me in the feast’s competitive context, he was
not doing so as an individual but as a person inhabited—and so inhibited from eating—by me. We scholars may brush past such constructions as polite fictions hiding a deeper structural reality—which is not to say the instrumental aims served by ritually-produced networks are not crucial. But to brush past in this way risks losing sight of personhood and agency as locally understood and reinforcing our default view of social life as (merely) exchange between separate selves, or groups. Drinking a toast involves not only a person making a gesture of respect in the hope of gaining some return from another person. This person is also acting ethically by dislocating agency from his or her body/self and relocating it into the person targeted by the ritual act (who should, ideally, get the message and give up his or her own agency).

Responding in part to Yan’s thesis that Chinese society is essentially individualised, Andrew Kipnis (2012), researching education in China and drawing on Durkheim, Marx, Foucault, and others (Ong and Zhang 2008), emphasises the dialectical way in which individuating trends meet new forms of de-individuation which arise to control and socialise subjects. While Yan’s Private Life under Socialism (2003) was motivated by discomfort with instrumentalist, exchange-oriented perspectives then prevalent, I believe Yan’s recent thesis under-analyses the interaction of various forms of social personhood and agency in Chinese society. A businessman wining and dining an official may be seen as an individual seeking gain, or more accurately as a person constructed out of multiple agencies: first, in an immediate ritual context, by the official, and second, in the long term, by the household of which he is a part.

Individuation in Luzhou is central yet ungrounded, symbolically hegemonic yet politically marginal. I interpret individuation there (and potentially in other Chinese cities) as a gradual colonisation of the social imaginary from two directions. Politically peripheral sectors of the population imagine doing what they want without being judged, expressing unique selves and being acknowledged for it. These longings, generated out of tensions in the local political economy, which ritually suppresses ‘selfish’ agency, take off from and overlap with mass-mediated visions and discourses of individual freedom spread by corporate advertisers and echoed in state media. I regard this ‘symbolic individuation’ as hegemonic because these institutions have helped create and sustain an association between modernity and the individual subject widely accepted by national elites, a process which can be regarded as part of contemporary China’s nation-building (Kipnis 2012: 11–13).

An iconic moment in Luzhou’s individuation in 2005 was the televised performance, extensively imitated locally, of the song ‘If you want to sing, just sing’, by Supergirl contestant Zhang Han Yun. The slight young woman emerged alone into the spotlight and sang to an audience in the darkness beyond. The song’s lyrics depict a subject’s self-love and self-expression which eventually draw approval: ‘love gives me strength/dreams are a miraculous nourishment/pushing me to open myself/sing if you want to, sing out brightly/even if no one is applauding/at least I have the courage to admire myself (ziwo xinshang) … /someday I’ll be able to see those waving sticks of light’.
Analysing this performance using Ortner’s concepts, I refine the definition of individualism further, to a vision of agency in which the self sets and pursues its own goals without interference from powerful others. In Zhang’s performance, the individual’s ‘project’ of self-admiration and expression is ultimately vindicated by the acknowledgment of an alternate, emergent ‘power’, the audience. The ideological nature of this vision of individualism lies in the way power is depicted as the prize, rather than the competitive means, of individuality. She stands alone in the spotlight, but the thousands of rivals Zhang had to defeat to stand there are invisible; the millions of others who dream of being in her place are barely glimpsed by the camera. In Luzhou, however, an agency of individual projects is widely understood not as circumventing or disavowing power relations but as solely contingent on successfully mastering them. In short, the ability to freely carry out ‘projects’ is widely regarded as a privilege of power competitively obtained, another reason I consider this individuality a ‘dream’.

Heeding Kipnis’ (2012: 13) contention that ‘individuation is a problematic rather than an absolute social fact’, I use elements of Yan’s argument as occasion to explore the benefits of an analytic emphasis on social subjectivity and agency in addressing the question of individualism in China’s cities. Feasting is, in the urban context, the central socialising arena of political and economic power. While individual persons use feasting to amass power to themselves, feasting’s internal ethic, if you will, is of a ‘group project’ in which separate agencies are artfully routed through others. I use the term ‘intersubjective’ to refer to feasting’s model of agency. Roughly put, the ‘individual’ in Luzhou is a powerful dream, in part because of the great structural difficulty of achieving it. The intersubjective agency exemplified in feasting continues to define cities’ political economies, mediating economic production, welfare distribution, domestic provisioning, and public identities.

The broad stylistic-symbolic shift toward individualism (in consumer culture, rights activism, etc.) refracts differently through the political-economic prism, segmenting Luzhou’s urban population roughly into three. Middle-aged and older urban residents, including both ordinary residents socialised into pre-1992 norms of governmentality and residents currently positioned in the state-led political economy, continue to display self-denying intersubjective ritual disposition. Established members of this group have achieved a substantive, individual ‘agency of power’, but as ritual constitutes their main node of socialisation into the power structure, their ‘projects’, to use Ortner’s terminology, are carried out in an intersubjective idiom.

On the contrary, younger urban residents and many middle-aged women, as well as rural migrant wage workers and vendors, display great interest in ‘gexing’ (unique, different) markers of individualised disposition. Implicit in this interest is a de-emphasis of coercive hierarchical relations (enacted in feasting) and their cultural habitus as impediments to individual expression. Small business people among them are forced to engage in guanxi network-building, while wage workers embrace—of necessity—their ‘disposable’, temporary employment status. Their inclination to individual agency is conditioned by their weak position in the relations of production. Small business operators, however, are forced to ‘re-embed’ in guanxi relations to secure
their businesses, leaving only wage workers relatively distant from binding, hierarchical relations and intersubjective agency, and hence able to make some performative claim (mostly through consumption habits) to individual agency.

The growing gap between the individualising national and international imaginary and the anti-individualistic local power structure haunts many city dwellers. Younger people with aspirations to this structure must negotiate the contradiction between their generational interest in personal expression and their institutional imperative to cultivate the intersubjective skills without which success is not possible. In Luzhou, cultural imaginary and style have begun to shift without either a change in economic structure itself or a shift in this structure’s ‘gatekeeping’ intersubjective habitus, leaving a segmented political economy whose flashpoint—and means of advancement—remains ritual feasting.

I propose a modification to Yan’s formulation of disembedding and re-embedding: social mobility is indispensable to the recognition of claims to individual agency. Due to the state’s continued domination of the economy, however, and the state’s personalistic institutional culture, the need to submit to ritual discipline is an inescapable part of urban social mobility. Therefore, many aspirants to individuality find themselves participating, willy-nilly, in de-individuating ritual feasting. The following sections address three of Yan’s features mentioned above, with special attention to feasting’s role in each field: potential individuals’ need to ‘re-embed’, the uncivil individual, and social mobility’s priority in individualisation. But first, I will briefly define feasting and its ritual cultural habitus.

WHAT IS FEASTING?

I regard feasting as both a social event where relationships are made and kept up, and as a socialising model and habitus for negotiating power relationships that builds on and amplifies other socialising processes (most notably, familial linguistic socialisation) and which ramifies very broadly across society.

Put most simply, feasting is the practice of inviting others to eat and drink. Etiquette and morality are merged in feasts; proper ritual procedures (etiquette, or lǐ) express and create moral sentiments of generosity and harmony which themselves serve as a basis for relationships. Skilled feasters read the context and find just the right words to engage other participants, ‘getting the atmosphere going’ (daidong qifen) and enlivening participants’ emotional engagement. Each action by the host—such as making the invitation, seating the guest, etc.—and counter-action by the guest, express in some measure an agonistic element that is relatively muted in formal, hierarchical feasts and emphasised in informal, egalitarian feasts. Playful struggle points up the radical criss-crossing of agency central to feasting.

Dramatic acts of self-sacrifice for others, especially offering to drink strong spirits, function as moral examples meant to shame one’s partner into matching one’s action. Effective performance of such acts enhances a person’s social power. This person ritually ‘taps into’ an agency not originating in the individual self, however, but in others.
These acts’ agency is constructed as originating from and oriented back toward the other: I harm myself bodily because your excellence (of feeling, virtue, behaviour, speech, etc), acting involuntarily on my moral feelings, compels me to drink. My acts derive from you; your acts ought to derive from me. These actors accrue social power to their persons—but not as ‘individuals’.

The dispositional skills trained in the ritual complex—pose, prosody, word choice, topic, affective mood—occupy a central place in public culture at large, even beyond the broad scope of feasting itself. Therefore, I consider feasting’s speech habitus a well-defined register, a ‘linguistic repertoire … associated with particular social practices and with persons who engage in such practices’, which socialises urbanites into the conduct of power relationships (Agha 2006: 24). I would add that the feast register is also associated with a complex, historically rooted form of agency.

Using the agency concept, I analyse the competitive dynamic of feasting (with driver Yang, above, as an example) as simultaneously self-aggrandising and de-individuating. In other words, successful feasters raise their profiles, amass social capital, and bend others to their will, but only by radically ‘cross-circuiting’ subjective agency: I am only doing this because you did that—I have subjected myself to your will—and you ought to have the courage to follow my selfless example. Driver Yang refusing to eat when he noticed me not eating—and staging (ethical) self-denial to coerce me to eat—is a small example of this ritually constructed, intersubjective agency.

From the perspective of society more broadly, feasting is an institution that mediates power, with initiative always shifting competitively from person to person, but culturally each initiative is circuited through others, and materially each person is susceptible to others’ demands. With the ritual complex in mind, the relevant question becomes not ‘Is urban Chinese society individualising?’ but ‘What are the contours of individualisation where urban power structures are still dominated by relational self-hood and intersubjective agency?’

**RE-EMBEDDING IN LUZHOU’S POLITICAL ECONOMY**

Yan argues that with the removal of the socialist safety net, and the lack of state structures guaranteeing livelihoods or rights, socially disembedded individuals are quickly forced to ‘re-embed’, falling back on ‘the family and personal network or guanxi, the same point where disembedding begins’ (Yan 2009: 288). For many Luzhou residents, individual agency is an aspiration impinged by a stark reality: for those whose incomes derive directly or indirectly from the state and who hope for advancement, socialisation into ritual speech habitus is mandatory. For the majority unable to live off the state, business earnings are tied directly to one’s ability to cultivate guanxi relationships in which the line between instrumental and affective components is deliberately blurred. Therefore, would-be individuals of either sector find themselves consigned (to varying degrees) to the discipline of feasting, whose normative ethic forcibly locates agency outside the self, and whose economic function is to facilitate production.
Xiao Yu was a disabled woman in her mid-thirties who owned and operated a small bar. She showed interest in individual identity creation (in poetry and travel). But with credit restricted to large state enterprises, she was unable to expand the business enough to hire a manager. She had a ready smile and a quick wit, but her skill in social interaction had become a burden. Her profit margins were so thin she admitted she could not take off even one night a week. During the daytime she hosted a telephone chat room. She did so, she said with a grin, ‘to try to get more customers for the bar’. Chronically fatigued, she dreamed of going to Tibet and spending a long time there. She focused on Tibet specifically because she believed Tibetans to be purer than Luzhou people. Called ‘Free Space’, her bar’s interior was decorated with rough-hewn wood planks and segmented into semi-private booths.

She was not free, no matter how painfully aware she was of her own inclinations and desires. On one hand, the dual economy ensured that she could not access credit to grow her business; unlikely to marry, she relied on her family for support. On the other hand, part of the ‘escape’ she offered customers was personal recognition and cheer. Her charm functioned productively, infusing her economically useful relationships—guanxi—with the personalistic, affective dynamic exemplified in ritual feasting. She also constructed the bar’s space using ritual mechanisms, particularly greetings. ‘Pretty woman!’ she would call out to a middle-aged customer. ‘Where are all your girlfriends today?’ she would ask a young man.

These skills of flattery, joking, and calibration of utterances’ emotional tone to the nature of the relationship, are explicitly played upon in feasting. The main goal of feasting, as Ms Liu, a skilledfeaster and accountant for a state company divulged, is to make the other party admire (xinshang) one. Specifically, the aim is ethical: to appear not to care about calculating one’s own wins and losses under the influence of the other, described in the dialect term genzhi. Xiao Yu’s genzhi persona partly structured Free Space with an intersubjective agency. She played the role of host to her customer-guests, working to make them feel welcome, paying close attention to their needs, calling an assistant to bring fresh tea or peanuts, or introducing one customer to another. The intersubjective agency enacted by her behaviour constructed her as either virtuously submitting to the wills of others (politeness) or as feelingly impelled to do so (friendship). In Ortner’s terms, engagement in the ‘power’ agency of ritual relationality squeezed out any room for self-generated ‘projects’. Hence remote Tibet, far from the ethical performances required for her business, beckoned as a space of individual existence.

Jasmine, an English teacher at a public high school and a decade older than Xiao Yu, had been socialised as a schoolgirl to revolutionary devotion to others; the old propaganda songs still gave her nostalgic pleasure, even as she acknowledged their anachronistic messages. Unlike Xiao Yu, whose ritual force over guests/customers grew out of a laborious performance of charming service, Jasmine’s place in the distributory educational bureaucracy automatically indebted parents and students to her, making her a magnet for ‘return’ feast invitations. While she longed for relief from
never-ending requests for help, these ritualised exchanges also fueled her sense of relational, rather than individual, agency.

As a Master Teacher, parents begged her to guide their children with the love of a surrogate parent. Many students clamoured to be named her ‘godchildren’ (ganzi or gannu), a ritual relationship requested by parents wishing to ensure better fortune for their children. Some students poured out private troubles to their ‘mama’. She embraced her gatekeeper role energetically. Fending off as many ritual invitations as she could only confirmed her honest reputation and redoubled ritual efforts to oblige her. Word of her selflessness, channeled through feast events and broadcast socially by the acclaim of colleagues and parents, gained her promotion.

Her excellent bodily and linguistic enactments of intersubjective agency made her a skilled feaster. In toasting, she would return any praise with interest, eagerly seeking out people she knew or had been introduced to and toasting them with effusive, complimentary words. When a television producer raised a glass to her at a feast given by an opera lovers’ association, she straightened her back, raising her glass to his as he declaimed on the great pleasure in meeting her and observing her obvious talents. Her rigid posture graphically embodied the ritual claim that she was ‘captured’, ethically and affectively, by the producer’s words. She was under the sway of his goodness (and he, in turn, posed his toasts as compelled by her goodness—ritual acts form a chain, each one traced back to some previous agency outside the self). Hardly had he finished than she was pouring out a complimentary torrent in return: ‘Actually, it is my great, great honor to meet you; clearly your knowledge and your ability with people make you indispensable to your work unit, and I do hope that we have occasion to work together, as friends, in the future’. As she spoke, they continued to hold their glasses close together.

Face radiant with smiling engagement, Jasmine saw feasts as a privileged space-time for displaying agency by making relationships. She embodied China scholarship’s ‘relational subject’ (Yang 1994: 85), whose sense of selfhood grows not out of distinction from other egos, but out of ongoing interplay with them. While ‘subject’ implies a stable, coherent existence, however, I prefer to think of intersubjective (or relational) agency as produced episodically.

If Jasmine celebrated ritually-produced agency and subjectivity, Mr Feng represented a stubborn individualism. Running a small karaoke hall with his wife, he was a reflective man whose honest refusal to ritually exchange with people he did not truly like, isolated him in business and society. He eschewed all the varieties of ritualised exchange, from long-term cycles of mutual presents between families on large life occasions (renqing), to playful-agonistic feasting as with Yang, or calculated guanxi construction. He strongly believed in the ability of true, moral individuals to interact outside of etiquette’s coercion. Living out his principles, Feng was almost entirely isolated, existing in the alternate intellectual world of newspapers and books, which filled his many idle hours.

As China modernises, a measure of space has opened up between urban residents and the institutions—work unit, family, school—which formerly defined them. But
the lack of state guarantees for personal rights and welfare means that most people re-embed with the very institutions from which they are formally emancipated. However, this renewed dependence is subtly changed, accomplished as it is through formally voluntary guanxi relationships. The rarity of people such as Feng is out of all proportion to their symbolic importance in seeming to prove these obligatory relationships’ ‘voluntary’ nature—as well as the harsh consequences of choosing incorrectly.

Another twist to re-embedding is the fact that many guanxi relationships are created with people—most notably, business clients and partners—previously outside older institutional parameters (Yan 1996).

FEASTING AND THE ‘UNCIVIL INDIVIDUAL’

Yan regards the individualism introduced into China in the late twentieth century to be understood as narrowly egotistical. I would argue that, in Luzhou, individualism is overlaid atop traits of historically stigmatised femaleness. There are several reasons for the tenacity of de-individuating tendencies in Luzhou. One is feasting culture’s functional articulation with the economic structure. As a gatekeeping institution and cultural style, feasting works to socialise aspirants to the power structure’s normative out-of-self agency. Socialisation is a process of training initiates into socially proper ways of talking and behaving (Ochs and Schieffelin 2009). Another reason for relational agency’s tenacity lies in feasting culture’s overlap with childhood socialisation patterns, in which children learn to submit to, but also to obligate others to submit to, exemplary morality. Finally individualism, in its egotistical form, is a central symbol in the moral imaginary of feast socialisation itself. Yan’s thesis inadequately addresses this negative ‘counter-symbolisation’ of individualism, which acts as fuel to resistance of the new social imaginary.

This ‘ugly’ individualism is to be pedagogically, coercively trained out of one in ritual play, as driver Yang did to Luo and me. Egotistical individualism anchors a duality whose other, positive end, is made up of other-oriented values such as genzhi loyalty (see Xiao Yu, above), feeling (ganqing), and others. The symbolic moral imaginary of feasting operates on two levels: that of participant action during the feast, and that of society as a whole, in which cities represent a cultural loss of solidarity to atomising marketisation. The gathering wave of stylistically individualistic consumerism is interpreted at feasts in line with a feaster’s own ritual socialisation: liberatory yes, but of crassly narcissistic, accumulative ways. And the careful, self-centred imagemaking of young consumers—a way of being echoing stigmatised conceptions of femaleness—acts as a foil for resident’s own re-imagination of maleness in arenas such as feasting.

In mid-2005 a group of male friends who frequently ate and drank together welcomed me to their group. Xiao Hong, a restaurateur in his late thirties from a county seat elsewhere in Sichuan, was the group’s charismatic centre. He and a good friend, Zheng, were both sons of devoted Communist Party cadres. These Luzhou locals and outsiders met at Xiao Hong’s restaurant most afternoons and evenings. These lower
strata elite men—either lower-level officials, or businessmen with cadres as parents—had only known each other for several months. Xiao Hong and his friends nonetheless mimicked playful feasting, which I believe popularly indexes long-term intimacy among working-class men. I did my best to keep up with the fast-moving banter, but was hindered from contributing by my incomplete understanding of Sichuan dialect and my cautious personality. Mostly I quietly observed.

Peng was part of this group. Since I stayed close to Xiao Hong, who had welcomed me into the group, I did not know Peng. Over several meetings, Peng began giving me a hard time about not opening up (fang bu kai) and being real friends (gemenr) with them. He asked why I said little, and why I replied so politely to questions. My propriety and restraint was not the way real friends should behave, he seemed to be saying. He was implicitly accusing me of lacking genzhi.

Such feast value-concepts operate doubly: as the means to pedagogically shame participants into drinking or otherwise harming themselves, and as the end of ritual action itself, a state of affective communitas. Genzhi refers to one’s character or disposition. Such a person does not calculate what impact their words will have on others. Rather, this sort of person speaks and acts directly from feeling. Because a genzhi person does not keep track of winning and losing with friends, he or she is apt to take losses for them. The person lacking genzhi is envisioned as unable to loosen up among friends and as unable or unwilling to engage in social interaction. Like other cultural values utilised ritually, genzhi indexes behaviour in sharp contrast to individually maximising market calculation, referencing emotional authenticity with consequences for one’s health, finances, and image. A genzhi person’s words issue directly from feelings; there is no careful self operating beneath a mask. One is therefore vulnerable to agentic contagion from others.

Peng was accusing me of just such detached, self-contained caution, and tried several times to resocialise me. One night drinking beer at a stand on the Binjiang Road promenade he challenged me to take off my shirt; another night in a karaoke hall he dared me to mock a group of college students for their weak singing. ‘Ha!’ he crowed when I refused, ‘He can’t make fun of them!’

Even if the ritual challenge, often a toast, is itself a calculated move in competitive play, one so challenged who does not respond nimbly can be outmanoeuvred into appearing to resist the other person’s ethical ‘gift’ of self-sacrifice. One therefore shows a selfish intent to hold on to one’s sober, socially correct demeanour at the cost of group feeling, such as when bank employee Luo was outmanoeuvred by driver Yang’s ritual toasts, which were presented as ‘shows of respect’. Luo found himself in the untenable position of fighting against cultural ideals of manly sacrifice for one’s ‘brothers’. Drinking therefore signifies entering meaningful, committed social interaction. Challenging someone who holds back is therefore, I argue, a game that involves masochistically, dramatically surrendering ‘selfish’ control over one’s agency.

Analysing genzhi through the lens of agency, Peng’s and driver Yang’s ritual actions make more sense. My caution in both cases indicated a calculation and self-preservation that made me an unattractive ritual partner. By not committing violence
against myself—my body, my controlled persona—I was unable to prove that I was ethically and feelingly compelled by other’s agency. As a result, nor were my actions able to ritually compel others. Ritual attacks therefore stigmatise behaviour typical of the broader city space where self-oriented ‘individuals’ jockey for position. Feasting, so crucial to post-reform urban economies, paradoxically and strategically associates Reform-propelled competition with selfish individualism.

Feast-practiced men (and some women) are in demand as ritual experts. Their skill lies in boldly sacrificing their bodies to the dangerous power of alcohol, whose limits they have learned with much practice. They have gained renown for being so deeply socialised that, like Jasmine, they perform subjugation to others’ wills as a joyful experience. This joyousness and boldness infuses their entire ritual demeanour with an impression of authority and willingness to meet any challenge or fulfil any request. Their boldness is not unique or individual or personal; it is a formalised aura of dignity. Desire and attraction within feasting are constructed not as the longing of separate selves for disclosure, but rather as a competition over whose acts of symbolic self-sacrifice magnetically attract imitative self-sacrifice by others. I encountered such an expert in Bai, a party head in a large state company, whom Jasmine’s husband had asked to help host me one night.

Bai took charge of the toasting, tutoring me in feasting agency with phrases such as ‘Better to harm the body than to harm feeling (ganqing)’, and ‘Feelings deep, down in one gulp’, as well as mention of the feast’s international character. These positive teachings, modeled with heroic toasts (such as drinking one glass for each person present), were mixed in with veiled warnings against leaving the group action. When I resisted drinking once, he said, ‘We have already given you leeway’ (liu yudi), implying that their patience with my low level of commitment was a kind of moral gift which I ought to recognise as such and reciprocate by drinking more.

He used ganqing (feelings) as a moral value with which to contrast intersubjective China and individualised America. When used in ritual, ganqing often indexes values counterpoised to market rationality, and so by contrasting China with America, Bai was constructing America as ‘modern’ but nonetheless lacking. Ganqing also indexed a de-individuated masculine agency from which he drew. With ganqing, he said, all it takes is ‘one call’ any time of day or night for assistance from a friend and one is compelled to respond immediately—whereas in America the self’s rationally considered needs take primacy. He was defining ganqing, within and beyond the feast, as a socially coercive sentimental force greater than the rational duties of modern citizenship.

Near the end, when I tried jokingly to exaggerate my drunkenness by bobbing my head as he tried to light my cigarette, he sternly said, ‘You cannot play-act’ (yan xi). With that phrase, Bai indicated expressive feasting’s core prohibition against any gap between etiquette’s (intersubjective) form and one’s (personal) intention: to be effective, ritual acts must seamlessly embody one’s susceptibility to the force of the other. And in order not to upset the ritual effectiveness of this agency-making, the performance may not make reference to and so reveal its own performative nature. Irony

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must not intrude. In more playful feasting among friends, this careful masking of seams incites a game in which participants seek out and morally punish ‘slip-ups’. In Luzhou, I see feasting as a cultural site in which unselfish ‘character’—typified in concepts like *genzhi* and *ganqing*—remains important by claiming superiority over disparate traits associated with individuality’s ‘selfish’ agency. By equating stigmatised behaviours at the feast table with egotistical individualism in society at large, and then symbolically ‘vanquishing’ them through ethical action, feasting in Luzhou constructs an imaginary dividing persons and regions and promising renewed interconnection.

The agency concept, by delineating how culture variously attributes the source of social action, can help us understand how urbanites may gain prestige and power, and push around others in ritual play, while still not being ‘individuals’. While Yan is correct that the ‘uncivil individual’ plays an important role in China’s cultural life, his thesis needs to take further account of how individual agency is, in fact, a symbolic part of local imaginaries, and how these imaginaries define intersubjective agency in relation to it. The opposite is true as well: ritual de-individuation is also central to the definition of individualism.

**INDIVIDUALISM AS STATUS PRIVILEGE?**

Without strong legal or welfare structures, improving one’s living standards becomes the only road to securing individual agency, thus ‘quantifying’ individualism as a prize attainable only by some. But one does not simply get rich on one’s own. Economic security and social status are intensively mediated by linguistic-ritual virtuosities trained in feasting. Feasting serves as an important springboard for aspiring urbanites, whether in applying speech skills broadly in daily life, or in making the formal and informal connections necessary for financial success. Therefore, while I partly agree with Yan that social mobility takes precedence in China’s individualisation, I also argue that the process by which mobility occurs in cities acts to ‘encase’ the status privilege of individualism within an intersubjective ritual habitus.11

Two contradictions lie at the heart of much forceful ritual play: the calculated deployment of symbols which themselves valorise lack of calculated self-interest, as well as the mimicry of aggressive individualism (such as that of driver Yang) to bring about de-individuation. The difficulty in negotiating these paradoxical tactics well points to one class requirement for success in Luzhou: only frequent ritual practice leads to convincing performances of ideal behaviour. And the people who feast most are those with official positions, those able to tap state funding indirectly, and both groups’ ritual pursuers.

I observed a selective performance of individualistic agency within feasting among Luzhou’s privileged classes. Latitude for individual action—what Ortner terms an ‘agency of projects’—is a status privilege accorded to the powerful in Luzhou. I would suggest, though, that the carrying out of these projects is indelibly marked by the intersubjective terms of the rise to power. With closeness to the state so necessary to business success, urbanites tend to be cynical about successful people and their iconic...
but easily faked ritual utterances of gaoxing (happy), ganqing (feeling), and the like. While embodying other-agency in ritual, they are seen to do so instrumentally for gain.

Individualistic feasters like Mr Du, who sells Amway, seek to distinguish themselves from such un-modern, artificial shows, even as they continue to display their generous ritual personas. In short, such men innovatively graft a ‘relaxed’ performative style onto their traditionalist claims of polite, ethical manhood.

Mr Du liked to speak ironically during feasts about his multiple girlfriends and his earlier career in the Party structure. One August day he gathered for lunch his two girlfriends and me—who furnished most of his comic material—as well as Jasmine and a married couple, Wang and Li, who were medical students from Henan Province. These latter two people I took to be his main Amway recruiting targets, with Jasmine invited both as a potential salesperson and for her ritual skill. His main girlfriend’s teenage daughter from a previous marriage was also there.

His opening toasts were fluid and seemingly spontaneous. One toast, to medical student Wang, reworked a classical Tang Dynasty poem to celebrate their meeting. While Du leaned back, lounging in his chair, Wang stood up, glass held correctly in both hands to utter a formal reply to Du’s toast. Between these dyadic toasts, Du kept up a rapid stream of witty, irreverent comments—mostly about me and his girlfriends—telling me who I should toast, like a father to a son (‘begin with the “beautiful women” here’), discussing my and the tennis instructor girlfriend’s ‘common problem’ (i.e., single status) and how to ‘solve’ it, and comparing the two girlfriends’ more classical beauty with the daughter’s more modern, casual look.

As the round feasting table was gradually cross-cut by separate interactions, Du still managed to cut in with witty and attention-grabbing utterances. One time he began singing the socialist hymn the Internationale. Several times he made suggestive reference to the tennis instructor’s figure. She said she had seen people protesting at the city hall the night before. His main girlfriend, Ma, offered the opinion that the early stages of capitalist development inevitably entail many ugly occurrences, and Du stared with mock amazement and admiration because a woman was making such a sophisticated analysis.

What did Du’s irreverent style as host accomplish? Certainly he painted himself as an independent thinker, a bold innovator conversant both in socialist theory and American business methods. He also appeared far more comfortable with himself than his two medical student guests. Wang, the husband, responded with extremely decorous gestures, creating a great contrast with Du’s casual posture. Li, the wife, was even less able to match his careless speech and stance, appearing quite uncomfortable with Du’s innuendo about male/female attraction. She sat and tried to smile, but could not keep up with Du’s masterful performance of a generous man unbound by convention. The two of them were left thoroughly behind. Du possessed the rare combination of social, economic, and ritual resources to attain the privilege of individual difference. He so outweighed us in ritual skill and general ‘excellence’ that he only needed to go through the motions of being moved by us. He possessed the agency to define the
feast, to us an arena of power, as his own project (of fun and sales), but I believe it not coincidental that his individuality was best displayed in—and was still reliant on—the intersubjective space and symbolism of the feast. Like Kipnis, I believe that ‘processes of indi\v{v}iduation are … always framed by new patterns of social interdependence’ (Kipnis 2012: 201), themselves historically rooted.

Graduate student Astrid’s birthday party, finally, will serve to exhibit how tightly intertwined is China’s indi\v{v}idualization with de-indi\v{v}iduating tendencies. A party member and daughter of local-level cadres who taught undergraduate physics, she viewed cynically the speechifying required of professionally-inclined party members like herself. For her birthday party, she decided to experiment with what she viewed as a Western-style ‘party’, in her small apartment, rather than a feast held around a restaurant’s round table, which centres and stages ritual attention. Food and drink were laid out on a side table for self-service, removing the need for coercive performance of self-sacrifice by the host. In a sense, she sought to remove unequal ‘power’ so that spontaneous ‘projects’ could emerge. Lacking the focus and hierarchical order usual to toasting and aware that they were trying something new, however, guests sat dispersed around the room, uneasily attempting to ‘relax’ while nonetheless covertly looking to Astrid for ritual cues.

Astrid sought a spontaneous, high-spirited occasion at which individuals could perform. This goal required direction, however. There were toasts, with photos taken commemorating the smiling faces and raised glasses; speeches of well-wishing; and games such as couples’ charades, and a relay race in which teams carried dried soybeans with chopsticks. As we ate, she laughingly pointed to a corner of the room where ‘you men’ could drink high-proof baijiu if we so desired, thereby stereotyping and delimiting masculinist feast practice.

As innovative as it was, the birthday party revealed the extent to which indi\v{v}idualism in Luzhou is not only a dream of individual freedom caught within the terms of dominant intersubjectivity, but is also a dream of individual equality at odds with the reality of unequal resources needed to attain it. In short, she would not have had the self-importance to attempt such an innovative event without already possessing unusually high confidence derived from her versatile ritual speech skills gained institutionally (in party meetings), socially (academic guanxi relationality), domestically (through her parents), and through personal interests (acting and public speaking). And while she reviled the falsity of dominant ritualised speech, her ‘indi\v{v}idualised’ ritual aims reveal continuity—in high spirits spontaneously and cooperatively performed in self-debasing play and ritual poses, for example—with the ritual complex that had socialised her.

CONCLUSION

Why does ritual’s intersubjective model of agency matter to Yan’s thesis or ethnographic writing on China more generally? This cultural concept calls into question whether persons engaged in self-oriented action in fact consider themselves, and are
seen by others, as individuals. In Luzhou’s urban context, the ‘ritual complex’ of
which feasting (and its linguistic register) is a part, and the cultural personhood and
model of agency atop which this complex rests, significantly shape social life—including
who gets to ‘be’ an individual and what sort of ‘individual’ these lucky few end up
enacting.

First, feasting is necessary for mediating economic livelihoods, in both the state
and private sector (with wage work a partial exception), both of which require inter-
subjective agency skills derived from and displayed in feasting. Aspiring individuals
ignore this other-mediated ethical etiquette at their peril. Second, feasting as a mode
of socialisation incorporates a negative depiction of feminine, calculating individuali-
sation, against which self-denying romantic ‘feeling’ and ‘loyalty’ hold out. Third,
those fortunate few who attain the financial security to be individuals in a substantive
sense are marked by their socialisation into feasting.

Those young people who, unlike Astrid, lack resources (speech skills, confidence,
guanxi practice, positioning within the state structure) to gain substantive life auton-
omy, attempt a purely stylistic pastiche of individuality by manipulating consumer
symbols. Considering the evidence, I propose that Yan’s conclusions regarding Chi-
na’s individualisation process require substantial modification to include not only
‘structural’ factors but mediating micro-institutions such as feasting, which play a
decisive role in culturally defining institutional dominance; the dispositions of persons
shaped by the ritual complex; as well as the individualism taking shape in China. For
example, the central concept of ‘gandong’ (emotionally moved) in media discourse
and public life serves, I believe, as a ‘bridge concept’ with roots in intersubjectivity but
increasingly used to describe the ways ‘individuals’ are impacted ethically, through the
emotions, by others.

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NOTES

1 Luzhou is a second-tier (erji) city of about 400,000 located on the upper Yangtze River in Sichu-
an Province. Its chief claim to fame in 2005 was its repeated listings on the central government’s
‘National Hygienic Cities’ register.

2 Sherry Ortner (2006: 110) writes that agency ‘takes shape within a matrix of subjectivity—of
(culturally constituted) feelings, thoughts, and meanings’. Furthermore, she relates an agency of
‘projects’ or self-defined and pursued intentions, to an agency of ‘power’, whether to dominate
or resist, often ultimately in pursuit of projects.
A social imaginary includes ‘the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others’ … expectations … and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie [them]’ (Taylor 2004: 23).

Zhang’s relationship to this anonymous audience reflects, I think, a shift underway in social imaginary away from ‘network’ to ‘categorical’ identities (see Calhoun 1993: 230).

While gender is integral to Luzhou’s individuating imaginary and the ritual complex, I lack space to address it fully (see Mason 2013).

Both ‘guke’, the normal translation for ‘customer’, and ‘keren’, for ‘guest’, share the ‘ke’ (客) character.

The ideal leader treats underlings as parent to child, an ideal originating in Song Dynasty neo-Confucian political theory (Bray 1997).

It is gradually borrowing from the ethical selfhood of the (categorically male) ‘ritual complex’—see Supergirl winner Li Yuchun’s masculine ‘shuaiqi’ (dashing, sharp) disposition and style, and construction as one ‘moved by’ others.

Much consumerism pushes individualism in interactional structure (self-service purchase, for example) and in commodity symbolism (autonomy as marketing message).

Informants agreed that genzhi consistently and fully followed would create an image of a virtuous fool and make one vulnerable to the unscrupulous.

Besides feasting, urban elites’ pursuit of educational opportunities as mutually indebted family members also deepens intersubjective agency.

REFERENCES


