Culture and Personality in Early China

The Swedish Collegium of Advanced Study is pursuing an interdisciplinary comparative project entitled “The Arts of Imperial Portraiture and the Cultural Construal of the Self,” which looks at visual as well as literary portraits of emperors in the Greco-Roman and Chinese traditions. A key sentence in the successful project proposal places its main focus on “the extent to which ‘life came to be imitating art’ so that self-construal came to involve an aestheticizing desire of persons to live up to their own anticipated portraits.” As an invited participant in an international colloquium in Uppsala in May 2014, at which this issue is to be discussed in a comparative perspective, I have begun to reflect upon its possible relevance in understanding Early Chinese (pre-Qin through early Han) material culture.

From the perspective of evolutionary biology, individualization is what distinguishes the higher primates from other animals. Being human, in other words, involves having one’s own, specific trajectory on the path toward distinctive personhood. As societies developed, power differences among groups and individuals arguably came to entail the imposition of limits—more or less strict, depending on a person’s status within a social system—on the extent to which individuals were allowed or able to develop their individuality, as well as on the extent to which the memory of their distinctiveness would be passed down through visual and literary representations. In this light, the Collegium’s choice of rulers’ portraits as its main concern is well-advised—despite well-rehearsed limiting factors, such as the constraints on royal self-expression caused by kingship as an institution, one would expect a maximal degree of individualization at the top level of society.

The lack of visual representations of important individuals—as well as, related to this, the lack of anthropomorphic representations of deities—in pre-Imperial China is often emphasized, and it immediately stands out as a huge cultural contrast vis-à-vis representation practices in other parts of the ancient world (including areas of East Asia that were not under the control of the Shang and Zhou states, such as Sanxingdui in Sichuan). I have reflected about this in a previous article (“From Action to Image in Early Chinese Art,” Cahiers d’Extrême-Asie 17 [2010]: 51-91), where I advanced the hypothesis that the apparent
almost-complete taboo on anthropomorphic imagery under the Shang and Western Zhou is systemically linked to the institutionalization of writing as the nearly exclusive medium for the representation of all things human. Stretching that argument to its logical limits might tempt one to reduce the problématique for the Uppsala colloquium, at least inasmuch as Early China is concerned, to a purely textual matter; it would then be entirely up to the philologists to determine how cultural agents in Shang and Zhou China constructed the self and framed the personalities of ruling personalities.

Fortunately, however, the situation for the student of material culture is not quite so dire. Martin Powers, in Pattern and Person: Ornament, Society, and Self in Classical China (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), has masterfully sketched out a panoply of approaches that enable one to approach concepts of selfhood and personality through the visual record of early China. But an attentive reader of Powers (and of other attempts to grasp individuality in early Chinese artworks) will come away with the overall impression that both personhood and its visual expression were strongly normative; an individual’s status seems to have mattered more than his/her character, and personality can often be reduced to social position. Unless this view of early China turns out to be an artifact of (orientalizing or self-orientalizing) reification—a possibility I cannot presently exclude, but for which, on the other hand, I cannot find any obvious positive indications so far—the contrast vis-à-vis the Near East and the Mediterranean world just will not go away.

If there is any sense in which “life” could become an imitation of “art” under such a paradigm, it would lie in individuals’ succumbing to pressure to deemphasize personal traits and to reduce themselves to stock figures—typical occupants of whatever their positions in life happened to be. In other words, if one knows the “system” (legal, ritual, institutional), one will know everything that is essential about the biography of every person that forms part of it. This leaves one with a natural-historical perspective on human behavior, which becomes as predictable as that of animals that are, evolutionarily speaking, below the threshold at which individualization becomes a possibility.

At the sub-imperial level, Michael Loewe has grappled with this predicament in his historical novel Bing: From Farmer’s Son to Magistrate in Han China (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2011), his attempt at imagining the career of one specific individual during the Western Han period, based on what a comprehensive consideration of all available historical and literary sources allows one to know today. While the administrative context in which someone like Bing
would have lived his life is drawn out in respectable
detail, it is entirely up to Loewe himself to fill in the
personal aspects, and in order to keep the focus on what is
historically verifiable, there is no room for anything but
predictable stock emotions. Does this limited perception
merely mirror the limitation of the historical sources, or
did individuals like Bing actively accommodate their own way
of being to the kinds of records that were being kept about
them? Might they have tried to manipulate those records for
posterity’s sake?

In keeping with the topic of the Uppsala colloquium, I
shall focus my discussion in this still-ongoing study on
objects associated with Shang-, Zhou-, and Qin-period
rulers, on the premise that such objects can, in some sense,
speak for their erstwhile owners. The goal is to frame the
evidence in a way that makes it useable in the cross-
cultural comparisons central to the colloquium. Whether
this can be done convincingly remains to be seen, and I
shall be grateful for input from participants in the NYU
China seminar.