Chinese notion of *Ganlei*

The Painted Dragons in Affective Science:

Can the Chinese notion of *Ganlei* add a Transformative Detail?

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Abstract

I propose for emotion research a dynamic approach to truth, in which folk theories, no matter how much infested with magical thinking and peculiar beliefs, can function as potential competitors and valued interlocutors on the platform of theory construction. For demonstration, I present the ancient Chinese notion of *ganlei* as a counterpoint to Western metaphysics. Potential contributions of this indigenous belief system to theory and research on emotions include bringing greater clarity to existing concepts of empathy and mind reading, and participating meaningfully in the current debates on emotions. More important, *ganlei* suggests a shift of focus in emotion research from epistemological to ontological categories, and from mental representations to intermental transactions.
Slife and Reber (in press) have written an incisive critique of the implicit bias of mainstream psychology against theistic traditions, to which I have nothing substantial to add, except to extend their insight to a broader context. The implicit bias against theism can be extended to magical thinking and “peculiar beliefs” in general, which are considered examples of “errors in thinking that result in judgments, decisions, and beliefs that are not entirely rational and logical” (Berenbaum, Boden, & Baker, 2009, p. 198). As Slife and Reber (in press) point out, this bias has been glossed over by compatibility assumptions, a pivotal condition of which is the “add on assumptions” (p. 7). It seems to me that the add on assumptions rest squarely upon the epistemology of two-levels of truth, which differentiates between the core, basic facts—such as biology and neuro mechanisms—and the fringe, secondary phenomena, such as theology, culture, and folk psychology in general. This epistemology helps to neutralize potential challenges to science by relegating the disconfirming data to the add on status. For instance, basic emotions theory claims that facial expressions are universal—disconfirming data can be explained by the difference in display rules across cultures (Ekman, 1973). There are two problems with this two-levels of truth approach in emotion research: a. The holy grail of the basic building blocks or emotional alphabet have not been found—even the most empirically buttressed “basic emotions” claim has been called into question (Russell, 2003); b. relegating potential challenges to the secondary status renders science not falsifiable.

As a counterpoint to the two-levels of truth, I propose for emotion research a dynamic approach to truth more in keeping with the evolutionary model of competition and fitness. On this view, the devil lies in the detail for two reasons: a. not being
Chinese notion of *Ganlei* protected by the two levels of truth, theory becomes vulnerable to perturbation-- any deviance has the potential to become a transformative, rather than an add on, detail; b. it is in investigating cultures in their grainy details, above and beyond the overall compatibility with conventional theories such as individualism versus collectivism, that psychology, in its aspiration to become a global science, can hope to attain a comprehensive understanding of the mental life (Teo & Febbraro, 2003). For demonstration, I present, as a competing paradigm of emotion, magical thinking and peculiar beliefs that fall under the ancient Chinese notion of *ganlei*. Potential contributions of this indigenous belief system to theory and research on emotions will be explored.

In the An Le temple of Jing Ling, there were [painted on the walls] four white dragons with eyes left unpainted. The painter [Seng Yao of the 6th Century] used to say that dotting the eye and the dragon would fly away. Not convinced by this seemingly tall tale, people insisted that the eyes of the dragons be painted. The instant the painter obliged, thunder and lightening struck the walls and two dragons, leaping upon the clouds, flew away straight to the sky. The other two dragons with eyes unpainted remain to this day.

(Zhang Yan Yuan, 9th Century, 1992, Vol. 7, pp. 231-232)

In order to understand this folktale, we need to immerse ourselves in a sympathetic universe, or responsive order, known as *ganlei*.

The Responsive Order of *Ganlei*
Gan is a verb, meaning affecting, stimulating, or responding. Lei literally means category. Together, the compound ganlei means “responding according to categorical correlations” (Goldberg, 1998, p. 35), or in plain English, responsiveness to one’s kind. In psychological terms, lei may be understood as setting the boundary condition for responsiveness (gan). Reference to ganlei is ubiquitous in classical Chinese texts. It is said in the I-Ching: “Things that accord in tone vibrate together. Things that have affinity in their inmost natures seek one another. Water flows to what is wet, fire turns to what is dry. . .” (Munakata, 1983, p.106). Another ancient text Lieh nü chuan puts it this way: “When an ox lows and a horse makes no response, it is not because the horse does not hear the noise; it is because it belongs to another species” (cited in Henry, 1987, p. 27). An extension of this claim to the humans is a mirror neuron study by Buccino, Lui, Canessa, et al. (2004), in which participants were shown a video, without sound, in which different species (man, monkey, dog) performed ingestive (biting) or communicative (talking, lip smacking, barking) acts. Response from the human mirror neuron system was found during observation of all the actions, except for barking. That humans’ mirror neuron system failed to respond to the communicative intent in dog’s barking suggests that responsiveness (gan) is constrained by lei (things of the same category). In the words of Rizzolatti and Sinigalia (2008): “Barking just does not belong to the human vocabulary of motor acts” (p. 135).

Responsiveness between things of the same kind is governed by the law of attraction. Baudrillard (1988) claims that in the ancient Chinese cosmogony, the elements of water, earth, fire, and air were “attracting elements, seducing one another: Water seduced by fire, fire seducing water” (p. 59). To further explicate this responsive
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order, a running contrast and comparison between Western metaphysics and ganlei can be made. From the outset, it may be said that the two worldviews seem to fall along the divide between two orientations of human cognition-- mind to world/matter versus mind to mind.

*Ontological Continuity versus Discontinuity*

Ontological discontinuity looms large in the mind to world framework, which is characteristic of Western metaphysics. Perception has the subject and object poles; so is thinking, as the Kantian dictum has it: “We are subjects thinking about objects” (Freeman, 2000, p. 117). One of the epistemological consequences of this is objectification, in which everything the subject thinks—including one’s own mind or emotions-- becomes an object for knowledge representation. This framework privileges objective truth, which is of vital concern to the mind if it is to gain mastery and control in the world.

By contrast, ontological continuity is characteristic of the responsive order (ganlei), in which everything, even a seemingly inert stone, is endowed with mind or spirit (Rowley, 1959). This perspective is well articulated by the landscape painter Tsung Ping (375-443): “Spirits (shen) are in essence eternal and they dwell (temporally) in forms and respond sympathetically (kan) [gan] to the [similar] kinds (lei) [such as the purified mind of the painter]” (cited in Munakata, 1983, p. 123). It is in this sympathetic universe that the painted dragons took off at the drop of an ink, and that the Tang poet Li Po wrote about his mutual gazing with nature:

Never tired of looking at each other —

Only the Ching-t’ing Mountain and me. (cited in Liu & Lo, 1975, p. 110)
A Relation of Parity versus Disparity

One of the most commonly used relational terms in psychology is “interaction,” which is rather uninformative concerning the parity or lei question — is the relation between the interacting parties symmetrical or unsymmetrical? By contrast, the terms associated with ganlei specify clearly symmetrical relations. The Chinese have used two explanations for the sympathetic interactions between the kinds (ganlei), one is mechanistic, the other social. Both models are found in the explanations for portentous occurrences in the Han era: The mechanistic theory, well articulated by Frazer’s sympathetic magic, posits that like produces like, and effect resembling cause. In the words of the eminent Han scholar Tung Chung-shu: “Good calls forth goodness, evil calls forth evil, this arising from like fulfilling like” (Fung, 1962, p. 124). The social model posits Heaven as a person, as Tung Chung-shu put it, “Heaven is man’s grandfather, so that man is in the same class of being as Heaven” (Fung, 1962, p. 125). In this context, portentous occurrences are perceived as resulting from Heaven’s pleasure or displeasure in response to humans’ deeds. Both models reinforce a relation of parity that governs the interaction between matter and matter in the mechanistic explanation, or mind and mind according to the social explanation. What is conspicuously absent in the ganlei context is the relation of disparity such as that between mind and (mindless, or dead) matter, a relation that is pivotal to Western metaphysics. The dualistic notion of matter and mind as discontinuous in being, with the latter conferring meaning on an otherwise chaos is not supported by the ganlei perspective.

A variant of the parity theme is Merleau-Ponty’s reversibility hypothesis (Dillon, 1983), which states that there is a chiasmatic crossing over between self and other; mind
Chinese notion of Ganlei and matter. According to Merleau-Ponty: “The communication or comprehension of gestures comes about through the reciprocity of my intentions and the gestures of others, of my gestures and the intentions discernible in the conduct of other people. It is as if the other person's intentions inhabited my body and mine his.” (cited in Rizzolati & Sinigaglia, 2008, p. 130). This theoretical framework has a wide range of applications, from the phenomena of mirror neurons—which become active both when an individual executes an act and when she observes it being executed by others (Rizzolati & Sinigaglia, 2008)—to empathy, as evidenced by the following scenario:

A woman dreamed that the gold statue of the Buddha that she kept at home was having pain in the left knee. When she woke up, she found a hole in the Buddha’s knee (Tao Xuan, 7th Century, 1929, p. 416c).

Similar versus Dissimilar Others

The distinction between parity and disparity in relationship seems to fall along the divide between collectivistic versus individualistic cultures, as noted by Oyserman, Coon, and Kemmelmeier (2002). The authors state that collectivistic cultures are characterized by “the permanent bonds formed among similar others,” whereas individualistic cultures by “temporary relations formed in complex societies among dissimilar others” (p. 3, emphasis added). Fiske (1992) points out that transaction with “similar others” is a transaction based on the principle of “kin selection,” namely “treating others as equivalent to oneself” (p. 716). In contrast, individualistic cultures are characterized by “smaller investment in related others and greater need to impress and compete with others for resources” (Oyserman, Kemmelmeier, & Coon, 2002, p. 116).
A Shared Common Horizon between the Minds

Lastly, ganlei discloses a dimension that is not operative in the relation of disparity between mind and world/matter. In sharp contrast to the Western notion of the mind as a lone ranger in relation to the world, ganlei discloses a common horizon between self and other, an intermental arena variously referred to as a shared mental space by the mirror neuron researchers (Rizzolati & Sinigaglia, 2008), or as an innate intersubjective openness by Thompson (2007). According to Stern (2004), infants are born with minds that are especially attuned to other minds. This is evident in infant mimicry. As Meltzoff and Moore (1999) point out, for an infant to learn about inanimate objects she must manipulate or mouth them, but to learn about people she must imitate them. The intermental arena has the following properties:

Emotion as Expression and conversation:

Contrary to wide spread assumptions in the West, inner states—intents, concerns, feelings—are not the private property of the individual psyche, so much as the privileged currency of the intermental transactions. From the Chinese point of view, inner states are meant to be expressed—to a mind, one’s own or other’s. This expressive view of the inner states is consistent with the notion of emotional signaling. According to Greenspan and Shanker (2004), infants, early to midway in the first year of life, are initiated by the care-giver into the intersubjective space which makes possible “long chains of emotional signaling” (p. 30).

In order not to confuse this expressive view with the “expressive monologue” (Archer, 2000, p. 196) that looms large in the cognitive accounts of emotions (Sundararajan, 2008a), it is important to situate the expressive view in the intermental
Chinese notion of *Ganlei* arena as transaction between minds. A cognate notion is Bogdan’s (2000) mind minding the mind, which consists of two sub-types, making the intent known to oneself (minding its mind, or MIM), as is the case with savoring (Firjda & Sundararajan, 2007); or making the intent of the other known (minding other mind, or MOM), as is the case with emotion attunement (Stern, 1985). MIM and MOM are structurally the same, as both can be rendered as transaction between Mind1 and Mind2.

This line of thinking is further developed by Archer (2000) in her formulation of emotions as an internal conversation, or more precisely as “commentaries upon our concerns” (p. 195). According to Archer (2000), when there is mismatch between anticipation of concern and the body’s relation with the environment, emotional commentaries arise to modify the latter (p. 204). Unlike a sports commentator’s running commentaries which have no impact on the game, the commentaries we make about our own concerns can modify the concerns themselves. This can be explained by the self-reflexivity thesis of Charles Taylor (1985), who claims that as reflexive beings, we change as a result of the comments we make to ourselves or to each other. On this view, emotions evolve as a result of progressive articulations and re-articulations to ourselves or others, resulting in an evolution from the inarticulate to the articulate, from the less adequate to the more adequate expressions and appraisals of our feelings and experiences.

Presence:

Presence can only inhabit the common horizon of minds, as it is being called into being by another being: “The Latin root for /presence/ is /prae/ (before) + /esse/ (to be); thus, /presence/ means ‘to be before.’ Consequently, presence in a therapeutic setting can be understood as the capacity ‘to be before’ or to be with one’s being and/or ‘to be
Chinese notion of *Ganlei* before’ or to be with another human being” (Schneider & Krug, 2009, p. 18).

Although presence is a potential that depends on recognition (by another mind) to be actualized, the recognition of presence differs from facial recognition in two interrelated aspects: First, presence is not knowledge representation, but rather an encounter that demands responsive action such as acknowledgment. Second, presence has an ethical dimension, where responsiveness becomes responsibility. Knowledge representation is ethically neutral—knowledge gleaned from facial recognition or mind reading (see next section) can be used to help or harm the other (for instance used in torture). Presence, on the contrary, is an encounter that calls for responsiveness; failure to do so constitutes an ethical breach (Schneider, 2003).

**Implications for Emotion Theory and Research**

*Potential Contributions of the Notion of Lei*

There are two variants of empathy—mind reading and emotional attunement. Although the term “mind reading” has been used loosely to include both variants, I shall reserve the term for what is known as “mentalization” which is defined as the process of interpreting oneself and others in terms of mental states (Jurist, Slade, & Bergner, 2008). The difference between the two variants of empathy is brought into sharp focus by the notion of *lei*: Mentalization gives an edge of advantage in competition against dissimilar others, whereas emotional attunement capitalizes on responsiveness to and bonding with similar others (*ganlei*).

Consistent with the mind to world framework of Western metaphysics, mentalization is believed to have its evolutionary source in competition and social
Chinese notion of *Ganlei* survival (Fonagy & Target, 2008). It privileges accuracy in interpretation and representation of self and other’s mental states. By contrast, emotion attunement privileges not information processing or knowledge representation of the other’s mind, so much as participation-- such as “to be with,” “to share,” “to join in” (Stern, 1985)--in the inner states of another mind.

To tease apart the algorithms for dissimilar others versus similar others, it would be instructive to add an element of deception to mimicry. To the extent that mimicry enhances social bonding (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999), it can be expected to function in the transaction between similar others in a sympathetic universe (*ganlei*). What if the person to be mimicked is a liar, a dissimilar other? The study of Stel, van Dijk, & Olivier (2009) can shed some light on this question. In this study (Stel, et al., 2009), targets (persons to be mimicked) were instructed either to lie or tell the truth, and observers were divided into three groups: mimickers received instructions to mimic, nonmimickers were instructed specifically not to mimic, and controls who received no specific instructions either way. The results showed that observers who were nonmimickers were more accurate in their estimates of the targets’ truthfulness and experienced emotions than mimickers, which included those who were told to mimic as well as the controls who mimicked automatically even without being told to do so. Why is it that people’s ability to detect deception is improved when they are given explicit instructions NOT to mimic? The authors attributed this effect to the fact that mimicry “hinders observers in *objectively assessing* targets’ true feelings” (Stel, et al., 2009, p.9, emphasis added). This conclusion is consistent with the prediction of Fonagy and Target (2008) that social competition promotes, while social bonding inhibits, mind reading.
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How do algorithms for transaction among similar others (*ganlei*) deal with deception, if their stock in trade—such as mimicry and emotional attunement—is meant to enhance social bonding rather than lie detection? Suggestions for an answer come from studies of mimicry (Johnston, 2002; Stel, van Baaren, Blascovich, et al., 2008) in which the targets were experimentally rendered dissimilar others—disliked, negatively stereotyped, or stigmatized—beforehand, resulting in a reduction of mimicry on the part of the observers. That *lei* (similar or dissimilar other) can be manipulated to reduce responsiveneness is consistent with my hypothesis of *lei* as setting the boundary condition for responsiveneness (*gan*).

In sum, the problem posed by the liar is handled differently: To the *ganlei* system, which is evolved for social bonding among similar others, the liar is handled as a group membership (*lei*) problem, which is resolved by screening out dissimilar others—such as liars—as protection against misuse of responsiveneness (*gan*). The mind reading (mentalization) approach as characteristic of Western metaphysics has a one size fits all solution for liars and truth tellers alike, namely safeguarding objective truth by improving accuracy in knowledge representation, such as lie detection. This solution works only to the extent that one’s judgment is not clouded by the seductive influence of affective bonding. Thus emotion attunement and mind reading are diametrically opposed so far as affect is concerned: The former capitalizes on the responsive order of affect and its law of attraction, whereas the latter rational control of the same.

*A Ganlei Account of Emotions*

Rejecting the mentalization approach to empathy, Thompson (2007) proposes a phenomenological perspective on the same:
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... in empathy we experience another human being directly as a person—that is, as an intentional being whose bodily gestures and actions are expressive of his or her experiences or states of mind. (Thompson, 2007, p. 386)

Reiterated in the above quote is the expressive view of *ganlei*—perceiving the other as a being just as oneself, a being with the need to expressive herself to another mind. This expressive view can be illustrated by the long chain of emotional signaling between the child and care giver:

... the baby who is angry and begins to make an angry expression through a grimace is conveying the intent to bite or hit through the expression. If the caregiver responds before the baby actually bites or hits, that is, responds to the intent, the baby is likely to respond in return with another *intent*. For example, the parent responds to the baby’s angry looks with a soft soothing look of “what’s the matter” and, with hands out, an offer to pick him up... The baby responds with a softening of his grimace and anger and a look of expectation. The parent then responds with another gesture... and the baby now begins to break into a smile... A second later, the parent is holding the baby... and the baby relaxes. The tension in his body dissipates and he has a look of calm.

(Greenspan & Shanker, 2004, pp. 31-32)
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As the above scenario demonstrates, the key player in the expressive model of emotion is lei, the ontological categorization that opens up a common horizon between similar others. This process is initiated by the mother (Mind1), who interprets the baby’s facial grimaces as expressions of a being capable of intent, just like herself. When a relation of parity between Mind1 (care-giver) and Mind2 (baby) is thus established, the responsive order becomes operative, which subsequently unfolds as a chain of emotional signaling in recurrent feedback loops. The baby’s ticket to the game is an innate responsiveness (gan) to the care giver. That suffices. The rest of the story is told by the feedback loops between Mind1 and Mind2, with more rounds of the intermental conversation resulting in more refined development in emotional signaling. On this view, the child’s emotional development can be summed up as a footnote to the law of attraction, which is eloquently expressed by Johannes Tauler, a medieval German mystic: “So God [read “care-giver”] attracts, invites, and draws man [read “child”] out of himself, from a state of unlikeness into one of likeness” (Shrady, 1985, p. 142).

What Holds Emotions Together?

There is the consensus in the field that emotions can be decomposed into multiple components. But the other way around is not so clear. What holds the multiple components—brain modes, cognitive structures, instrumental actions, feelings, facial, vocal and autonomic changes, and whatnot—together to become an emotion? The bad news is that these components are dissociated more often than associated, and evidence for the allegedly causal connection among them is found wanting (Russell, 2003). There are currently two competing solutions to the coherence problem of emotions (Sundararajan, 2008a): Core Affect theory (Russell, 2003) attempts to retrieve the basic building blocks from the rubble; Basic Emotions Theory (Panksepp, 1998) resorts to the
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Crazy glue of biology. The answer from ganlei offers a third possibility, namely that it is in the intermental arena that things come together. This perspective is consistent with the relation alignment theory of Parkinson (2009), who claims that “In a realistic emotion model, the agent needs to be more tightly embedded in a continually responsive environment and to be oriented from the outset to the relational positions of other agents” (p. 44). A similar story is told by Ross Buck in the context of emotion communication. Buck (1984) found generally low intercorrelations among measures of receiving ability in emotion communication. After reviewing the receiving-ability literature, he concludes that these tests measured information flow in one direction only: In presenting videotaped expressions of strangers in a non-interactive setting, and then instructing judges to attend to those expressions, these tests may be missing the most important clue to social sensitivity, namely interactive settings.

Concluding Remarks

I have argued for a dynamic paradigm of psychological science, in which folk theories, no matter how much infested with magical thinking and peculiar beliefs, can function as potential competitors and valued interlocutors on the platform of theory construction. I have demonstrated how the Chinese notion of ganlei can contribute to psychology of emotions by bringing greater clarity to existing concepts, and participating meaningfully in the current debates on emotions. More important, ganlei suggests a shift of focus in emotion research from epistemological (emotion labels) to ontological (similar others) categories, and from mental representations to intermental transactions (Sundararajan, 2008a).
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Will *ganlei* add a transformative detail, or will it join the ranks of other painted dragons that languish on the walls of affective science? Of note among the languished dragons are Rizzolati and Sinigaglia’s (2008) endorsement of a phenomenological interpretation of intentionality, and Stern’s (2004) call for a paradigm shift from one person to two-person psychology. These voices are so far muffled by the compatibility assumptions, which ensure that business is as usual—new discoveries simply add a detail or two to the existing models of mind reading and empathy. Hopefully critical thinking espoused by Slife and Reber (in press) and others (e.g., Sundararajan, 2008b) will prevail one day to tip the balance of assimilation and accommodation in mainstream psychology (Teo & Febbraro, 2003), rendering the latter more open to novel and deviant ideas from both within as well as without the field.

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