

Afterthoughts | Column

Our debt to pleasure

Nurturing delight in a dangerous world

By [Irina Dumitrescu](#)



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Detail of "Saint Catherine of Alexandria in Prison" by Paolo Veronese, c.1580-85

Recently, I dipped into *The Chinese Pleasure Book* (2018) by the Berkeley historian Michael Nylan. Nylan is interested in a particular word in Chinese, “lè”, which other scholars translate as “happiness” or “joy”. Chinese thinkers from the fourth to the eleventh centuries had a rich vocabulary at their disposal to describe delight and amusement, but “lè”, according to Nylan, referred to something more than fleeting gratification. It was used in phrases to describe the pleasure that one can find in activities that “promise deeper satisfactions in return for steady, long-term commitments”.

What kinds of pleasure could “lè” describe? Listening to music, spending time with close friends, learning, maintaining family traditions. One could take pleasure in being alive, in duty, in home, in one’s profession, and in the order of the Cosmos. Perhaps my favourite unexpected gratification in Nylan’s list is “inducing good men to serve in office through suitable politicking”, one I will keep in mind the next time it is my turn to ask colleagues to serve on university committees.

The idea as I understand it is that one can feel delight in finding and nurturing order in a chaotic, dangerous world. Classical Chinese authors were no strangers to hedonism, but they knew some pleasures aimed at nourishing something deeper. I think of it as the difference between simply eating to fill the stomach - a transitory feeling, needing to be repeated a few hours later - and the resonant, lasting contentment when we share a meal with a good friend.

In English, the natural opposite of pleasure is pain. But classical Chinese thinkers opposed pleasure to anxiety. It makes sense to me: the satisfaction we can find in spending time with people whose company we cherish, in immersing ourselves in art, or in learning something new, can offer us a brief respite from worry. It may seem obvious that a period of crisis would be one devoid of pleasure, but often

the opposite is the case. The worst of times demand the most dedication to pleasure.

Ten years ago, when I was studying memoirs of political prisoners in 1950s Romania, I was struck by the ways inmates used pleasure to keep themselves sane, even in a system designed to strip away their sense of self. Many found solace in literature. The artist Lena Constante, who was in jail for twelve years, much of it in solitary confinement, would mentally leave her cell by recalling the French and Romanian poetry she had read earlier in her life. As she repeated lines of verse to herself, she analysed how they were constructed, marking the rhythm, rhyme and alliteration. Constante then began composing her own poems, committing them to memory, sometimes even setting them to music. “I abolished the prison,” she writes, “I really lived moments of utter plenitude there, in that cell as in many others ... hours of total forgetfulness.”

Thinking about literature was a way of surviving, but the memoirists I read also recalled the delight they experienced revisiting their favourite works. Madeleine Cancicov, who spent fifteen years in prison, writes that she used to recount the plots of books to other inmates. “The younger girl calls them cakes,” she writes. “The more captivating the books, the higher the cake becomes, it becomes a tiered cake with whipped cream.” Given the terrible rations in the so-called “Romanian Gulag”, I find it remarkable that listening to a story could feel as hedonistic as gorging on an elaborate dessert.

Some activities prisoners used to maintain their spirits would have been work in another context. At Sighet, where many academics were detained, jailed faculty held seminars on Romanian history, medieval French literature and Edgar Allan Poe. True to form, one former professor delivered twenty lectures on “My Biography”. The academics also sang Italian canzonette and made mental lists of the books they would write if they should ever be let out. One historian kept a

running list of future projects, including “Fishing and Fish Hatcheries in Our Past”, a series of 260 articles, and “The History of Romanians”, with planned translations into nine languages.

Oana Orlea, a writer who was imprisoned at the age of sixteen, describes observing how a group of wise older women developed a programme to give structure to their days. Mornings were devoted to calisthenics and lessons in German, English and history, while in the afternoon they kept each other amused by recalling the plots of books they had read, singing songs and describing their favourite recipes. (I thought of these women often during the first months of pandemic closure, when helpful memes told us to establish schedules so we would not spend all day wallowing in our pyjamas.)

There is a seriousness about pleasure that stayed with me long after reading these memoirs. Their authors were intent on keeping a part of their soul untouched by imprisonment and torture. For them, singing a song, describing a mouth-watering dish, and teaching a seminar on medieval literature were all equally useful recreations. Like “lè”, they gave shape to a life that had become erratic and inhumane.

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