

Emotions and ethical life: perspectives from Asia

Diogenes
2022, Vol. 63(1–2) 3–11
Copyright © ICPHS 2022
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/0392192120970415
journals.sagepub.com/home/dio



**Suwanna Satha-Anand and Wasana
Wongsurawat**

Chulalongkorn University, Thailand

Emotions are an integral part of the human condition. Yet, in the academia, how much credit do we give to emotions in terms of being evidence of human experience? Historians often debate the reliability of memoirs, diaries, and eyewitness accounts on the grounds that they are ‘personal’ records, highly emotional and, therefore, biased. Economists often analyse and predict market trends based on assumptions made about the ‘rational’ and purely ‘speculative’ investor or consumer. In situations of political conflict, we often see statements discouraging conflicting parties from being ‘emotional’ and to, instead, resolve problems logically and reasonably. More often than not, in the academia, it seems that emotions are often banished to the far corner of a few disciplines that appear to embrace emotional aspects of human life more than others – visual arts, music, literature, and so forth.

Strangely enough, it would appear that we are more comfortable with segregating emotions into the realm of fiction and fantasy – something beyond the logical boundaries of what is commonly considered as ‘real’ and ‘concrete’. But emotions are as real as life itself. How could it be possible to comprehend life and its ethical complexity without exploring consideration of emotions as valid evidence of human experience at the centre of academic investigation? If we consider all academic disciplines to be, but different methodologies to seek a better understanding of life and its contexts – different lenses through which we perceive, interact, and understand the world around us – then emotions should most definitely be an integral aspect to be considered and analysed in all fields of academic research. The collection of 10 articles in this volume was inspired by pioneering works in the study of emotions by leading scholars, such as Robert C. Solomon, and Martha C. Nussbaum, whose works have created a significant space for creative discussion of the role and significance of emotions (Borges 2004; Nussbaum 2001, Solomon 1995). We would like to think that the articles in this volume would open new pathways for investigation of and reflection on emotions as expressed in the rich and varied venues of religious, cultural, and political expression of emotions in different historical periods in Asia. For examples, one article explores the Buddha’s compassionate way of dealing with grief, another discusses the deep trauma suffered by Korean widows during and after the anti-Communist propaganda in the 1960’s, and a third article analyses the use of humour as a tactic in street protest in Bangkok in the past decade. We hope these challenging studies and critical

Corresponding author:

Suwanna Satha-Anand, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand.

Email: suwanna.sat@chula.ac.th

analysis of emotional expressions in various societies in Asia, from the classical period to modern history, to recent events, would ignite further interests and studies in other societies throughout the world.

Emotions and Ethical Life: Perspectives from Asia is a project that aims to investigate and analyse emotions so as to establish a better understanding of the role and significance of emotions in ethical life through Asian perspectives. There are a few important reasons why the subtitle 'Perspectives from Asia' plays a crucial role. First, is the fact that the initiators and authors of this project are Asian scholars or those working on Asian materials. Second, is the notion that, as much as emotions have been mostly neglected in academic research, it seems to be even less invested in on this side of the globe. There is a persistent stereotype of Asians as people who do not reveal their true emotions and regard expressions of emotions in public situations as signs of weakness. Could it be that the discourse of emotions has long been dominated by Eurocentric perspectives that do not necessarily recognize or appreciate the great cultural diversity that could be involved in emotions and the way they are expressed and function in different societies? The study of 'Emotions and Ethical Life', from Asian perspectives should help broaden the horizon of research and understanding of emotions from an academic perspective, as well as allow us to better re-comprehend the Asian ethical life and, consequently, better understand Asian societies as a whole.

The collection of 10 articles that have emerged from our investigation into *Emotions and Ethical Life: Perspectives from Asia* have collectively shed new lights on the nature of emotions in ethical life as well as how they are expressed, affected, and understood through the Asian eyes. What might be considered the most exciting discovery of this intellectual exercise is that, to perceive and understand emotions' status and roles in the ethical life and within the context of the Asian perspective, it is necessary to be aware of and understand the blurring processes of several crucial dichotomies. At the beginning, we started out with a clear demarcation between the private realm where emotions appear to belong and exercise great influence, and the public sphere where we expect logic and reason to be the main mode of operation. However, as we delve deep into the sources, affects, and how our understanding of emotions exists and functions in life, we observe, with increasing clarity, the blurring of boundaries between the private and the public, the individual and the social, and ultimately, between emotions and ethics. The greatest surprise that emerged from this collection appears to be that, instead of being suppressed or segregated from ethical life in favour of the logical and the rational, emotions in the Asian context is such an integral part of life, both private and public, and in most cases, nearly impossible to separate one from the other or maintain one without the other or even to eliminate one without the destruction of the other.

Grief, mourning and compassion: the Buddha, Buddhist art, and Mencius

For our purpose, religious traditions emerged as the most logical starting point of our investigation. First, religion is an institution that is both widely public and exclusively private at the same time. On the one hand, religion professes itself as the realm of the spiritual – a place where the innermost consciousness of each individual could be cultivated, healed, or liberated. On the other hand, religion is also a social institution that provides culturally specific/accepted codes of conduct that are meant to help promote social harmony and peaceful coexistence among the great diversity of human society. Indeed, this social aspect of religion does not always work positively. It is tragically

evident that, as much as religions encourage collective unity among practitioners, there are just as many incidents in which religion becomes the ideological implement of segregation, discrimination, and often times violent conflicts throughout human history. Religion remains one of the most potent socio-political driving forces precisely because it deals with the most fundamental and powerful human emotions, including, love, hate, envy, sorrow, and fear. More importantly, perhaps, is the fact that religion provides a space for connection and negotiation between private personal emotions and public collective emotions. Religious rituals in all religions are the most obvious examples of this powerful connection between the private and the public. The first three articles in this collection explore and analyse this crucial in-between space of private and public emotions through the philosophy, traditions, and representations of Buddhism and Confucianism.

Channarong Boonnoon's 'Compassionate Detachment: The Buddha's Approach to Healing Grief', investigates how the Buddha, while teaching the virtue of detachment, deals with grief, which is an emotion closely connected to the feeling of attachment and the pain of loss of loved ones. Through the investigation of three narratives in Buddhist scriptures – including the stories of PatācārāTherī, KisāGotamīTherī, and Ānanda – Channarong argues that the Buddha gently shows great compassion for those with deep grief and anxiety and actually helps alleviate their suffering while at the same time cultivate a sense of detachment in them. The critical discussion in this article points to an innovative juxtaposition of 'caring' and 'compassion' on the one hand, and 'detachment' on the other. This caring detachment indicates neither an impersonal indifference nor a form of suffering through empathy. It is an exercise of wisdom when compassion, indicating care, is the motivation in fostering an attitude of detachment in those who suffer deep loss. We believe this term points to a new approach in the study of emotions in Buddhism, freshly proposed here in Channarong's article. In this article, there is also a fresh discussion of the 'community' dimension of emotions, within which a deeply grieving mother could regain her sanity and be healed from her deep loss, first of members of her family and then of her own self.

Jeehee Hong's 'Grieving through Stone and Clay: The Affect of Mourning Images in Middle-Period China', in certain aspects, demonstrates Channarong's arguments through carved images on funerary objects from middle-period China. Hong eloquently demonstrated, through her analysis of Chinese tomb art, that there appeared to be a shared mode of expression of grief across the Confucian and Buddhist traditions during the middle-period of Chinese history. Though Confucianism is generally understood to be a highly humanistic doctrine that places great importance upon harmonious social relations and the institution of the family, carved depictions of weeping monks from a Buddhist tomb suggest that Buddhist traditions of that period allowed for the very similar expressions of grief as those of the Confucian tradition. The expression of extreme grief of sons towards the death of their parents as a clear demonstration of filial piety appears to be almost a mirror image of the pious weeping monks mourning for their deceased master. The collective representation of grief on the part of the disciples and descendants of the deceased – as depicted on funerary objects within the tombs – reflects the socially accepted norms of emotional expressions in such situations in the middle period. Moreover, such expressions of grief also provide an emotional link between the private and public spheres as well as a possible process towards detachment, considering that the depictions were part of funerary objects found inside the intermediary space between life and the afterlife that is the tomb.

If we consider Channarong's as the Buddhist interpretation of the possibility for detached collective emotions, and Hong's as the shared expressions of such collective emotions across the Buddhist

and Confucian traditions, Sarinya Arunkhajornsak's 'Political Implications of Compassion in Mencius', provides a thorough explanation of how the core emotion of compassion could become a significant foundation of a political ideal according to the Confucian tradition. Sarinya's article demonstrates how, according to Mencius's interpretation, the emotion of compassion of an individual, especially of the ruler, could be extended to the entire human species because it is inherently a part of human nature. Hence, at least certain emotions could clearly have socio-political implications beyond the private realm of the individual. What started as a private emotion of compassion could become the foundation of state policy that could then influence not only a small collective of mourners like in the cases discussed in Channarong and Hong's articles but also the entire population of a state under the leadership of a compassionate sage king.

Politics of emotions: belonging to a nation, resentment, and despair from grief

Sarinya's socio-political interpretation of compassion within the Confucian framework of Mencius serves as the perfect bridge into the second section of the general narrative of this collection – politics. Along the same line of logic that proposed that compassion could be extended to include the whole of humanity because it is an inherent aspect of human nature, emotions are often employed in politics for the purposes of both including and excluding certain populations from the politically categorized group. In the realm of politics, emotions could be observed in their most potent form through state power and propaganda. Like religion, the state also occupies a highly peculiar and problematic position in between the private/public dichotomy. Though it is often perceived as the impersonal representation of a collective public, each and every public is made up of private individuals whose trusting support is constantly required to assure the stability and security of the state. Consequently, there remains a constant need for state propaganda of the most personal and emotional sort to instill a sense of unity or unity against the *other* within the general population, so as to gain majority support for what state power claims to be emotionally humane policies.

Wasana Wongsurawat's 'National Emotions: The Art of Converting to Heroism in King Vajiravudh's Anti-Chinese Propaganda Writing', presents the case-in-point of how emotions are often employed in politics as a means through which to bridge the gap between the private and the public, which, in turn, results in the inclusion or exclusion of certain individuals to/from a certain political group. In this piece, a Thai absolute monarch of the early-20th century (King Vajiravudh, Rama VI, r. 1910–1925) attempted to create a sense of unity through the novel concept of the modern nation-state and nationalism. He tried to achieve this goal through propaganda writing that was designed to help overcome the strong sense of inadequacy and inferiority complex that was perceived to be the problem with the majority of the Thai general public at that time. Vajiravudh's typical propaganda narratives glorified what the monarch portrayed as the loyal and courageous characteristics of the heroic 'Thai' people while demonizing what he perceived as the fickle and untrustworthy ethnic 'Chinese' population. At the same time, the king provides very concrete measures through which one could cultivate oneself so as to become less 'Chinese' and more 'Thai'. This could be done most easily through devotion to the monarch and his royal projects, which could be expressed most clearly through donations and participation in related activities.

The cozy feeling of being included into the glorious Thai nation that was provided in King Vajiravudh's propaganda is then seriously challenged once the main target of such nation-building

propaganda gets the rare opportunity to travel beyond the boundaries of the nation-state. Janit Feangfu's 'Ignorance is Bliss? Stupidification and Thai Identity in 1970s Cold War Fiction', investigates and analyses how the Thai nationalist protagonist reacts when he realizes, for the first time, that his understanding of the Thai nation was mostly a result of the ruling class's propaganda that was designed to enhance the ruling class's superior position and assure the masses subservient position throughout the modern era. The main emotion that arises, in this occasion, is one of anger and resentment towards the state for keeping its people ignorant for so long, as well as at oneself, as part of the masses, for trusting and believing such outlandish propaganda narratives without questioning. This challenging realization is, of course, brought about by another set of propaganda within another political setting of transnational/global conflict – the American-left progressive narrative during the Cold War era. Hence, the angry emotional response to the realization of Thai elite propaganda is actually framed within the bliss of falling into another spell of ignorance under the influence of US Cold War propaganda.

The reader is then awakened once again from the ignorant bliss of Cold War propaganda with Eun-Shil Kim's 'The Politics of Speaking and Despair/Defilement Experienced by the 4.3 Holomong', which investigates the impossibly painful recovering experience of the widows of the April 3rd Massacre on the South Korean island of Jeju. This article demonstrates how certain emotions that drive state propaganda – especially hate and fear – could have very real and severe influence on the emotions of individuals and communities at the receiving end of the brutality that resulted from state propaganda. Anti-communist propaganda on the Korean peninsula prior to the outbreak of the Korean War was not simply about harmonious political inclusion or blissful ignorance from biased state-sanctioned narratives as was the case described in Wasana and Janit's articles. In the case of Jeju Island in 1948, political paranoia invaded the villages and terrorized people in their own homes. Through the course of six years, approximately 30,000 people were murdered as a result of state propaganda and paranoia. Surviving the horrors of such propaganda, in the case of the Holomong widows, requires an emotional experience that goes far beyond anger and frustration of past ignorance or even blissful hope in a new/alternative political ideology. Unlike the protagonists in the stories analysed in Janit's article, the widows of Jeju could not rely on any ready-made narrative, especially not a foreign one since it was largely foreign influence that drove the deadly Cold War propaganda on the Korean Peninsula to begin with. They have to find a way to speak out for themselves and construct their own narrative in order to truly have a voice and accurately express their experience of despair and defilement from the violence they and their families endured more than half a century ago.

Sexuality and humor in social movement

Once emotions are brought into the public sphere and employed for political purposes through the fabrication and dissemination of propaganda, it inevitably leads to emotional reactions and responses from the general public. Kim's article also demonstrates how the public's reaction and response to emotional propaganda from the state could eventually transform into another form of emotional expression – social movement.

Janjira Sombatpoonsiri's article, 'Carnavalesque Humor: Transcending Emotive Paradoxes of Street Protests in Thailand', investigates and analyses how humour is employed in public demonstrations in Thailand, not only to mock the oppressive political elite but also to create a less intense

and more playful atmosphere upon which discussions and negotiations between opposite political ideologies could become a possibility. The losses resulted from state violence in political oppression in the cases involved in Janjira's analysis were both real and severe. Antagonistic emotions that arose on both sides of the conflict were also quite extreme. It would be impossible to begin any process of negotiation or reconciliation without taking into consideration the emotional trauma that has resulted from the conflict. Yet, negotiation and reconciliation would also be impossible in the midst of such overwhelming emotional intensity. Janjira's article provides a brilliant example of how intense emotional expressions, which often appear to be an inherent part of the public's response towards unfavourable state policies and propaganda – as demonstrated in the anger of the protagonist in Janit's Cold War literature and the extreme grief of the Holomong widows in Kim's article – could be partially neutralized and managed with carnivalesque tactics and humour.

Janjira's article proposes a potential method of creating a productive platform for negotiation and reconciliation in political conflicts that involve intense emotional trauma. To the present day, the 'Red Sunday' activist group has yet to succeed in starting a constructive dialogue that would lead to actual negotiations with the military dictatorship in Thailand. Nonetheless, the dialogue and negotiation of state and public emotions through social movements, along the same lines as Janjira's proposal, could be observed in practise in Suchada Thaweessit's article, 'Emotional Clashes over Female Public Nudity in Thailand's 21st Century'. Through the investigation and analysis of two major case-studies, Suchada presents an intriguing and highly emotionally charged debate, dialogue, and negotiation between the state's standpoint of national identity and Thai women's expression of their sexuality in the public realm. Suchada demonstrates clearly that intense emotions were involved in the arguments on both sides. Though many may assume that public nudity would be the more extreme expression of emotions, the article argues convincingly that the 'moral panic' expressed by numerous state officials related to the cases was at least as intense and significant in the negotiation of emotions in this conflict.

The debate of what it means to be a Thai woman, whether or not public nudity is undignified, and whether the nudity of an individual could damage the collective dignity of the entire Thai nation – as investigated and recounted in Suchada's article – is intriguing because it brings the discussion of the place and practice of emotions full circle back to the private/public dichotomy. The emotions an individual woman feels concerning her body and sexuality is private. At the same time, there is a collective identity that has been established through state propaganda that Thai women are part of the Thai nation. There is then a significant emotional element of this feeling of being included as part of the Thai nation and the need to protect and enhance the glory of this national imagination of Thai-ness. At this point, when an adolescent female citizen decided to bare her breasts in the midst of the traditional New Year's water festival, she entered into severe conflict with the ruling political elite's accepted definition of the code of conduct for what a dignified young Thai lady should be. As the state-sanctioned nationalist emotions perceive the nude female body as shameful, the matter of the bare-breasts teenage girl's freedom of expression of her own sexuality becomes a highly contested matter.

Horror in film, performativity of pain in media

As the *Emotions and Ethical Life* collection of articles explores the sources, the scape, and the influence that emotions seem to have within the Asian context – from the spiritual – public domain of

religion and philosophy, to state-dictated political propaganda, to popularly driven street demonstrations and other forms of social movement – the last section brings the journey of emotions full-circle back into the public sphere that seems to be forever functioning within the privacy of every household the media.

Arnika Fuhrmann's 'Abnormal Beauty: Horror, Homoeroticism, and Agency in Southeast and East Asian Films of Possession', raises the classic question concerning agency and power between a performance and its audience. One of the horror films she focuses on in her analysis for this article, *Abnormal Beauty*, is narrated through a complex framework of contesting gazes of the different characters in the film and, at times, including the audience as well. The film is about a photographer and film maker who enjoys capturing moments of death. Meanwhile, this female protagonist is also being filmed constantly through much of the story by an unknown character who tries to murder her on film at the end of the movie. If we believe that the gaze represents power, agency, and subjecthood, then the audience of *Abnormal Beauty* is at the top of this chain of power. Conversely, as Fuhrmann's analysis of the film also leads us to wonder, what if power and agency are not with the gaze, but instead with the performer who holds the ultimate power to decide which direction the narrative should take through his/her own actions in front of the gaze. In this case, the audience becomes powerless spectators at the receiving end of the performance of power struggle. The film itself would appear to support this latter analysis in the final instance, as the female protagonist manages to use her power and influence as a performer to overpower and kill the murderer who was posing as director of his own film of death.

Fuhrmann's analysis of *Abnormal Beauty* raises important questions concerning the role and influence of emotions in ethical life across the private and public spheres. Whose emotions are influencing whom and how? This question can also very well be posed in the situation discussed in Suchada's analysis of incidents involving female public nudity in Thailand. Is it the rigid conservative directives of the state concerning female sexual identity that so pressure the younger generation to rebel in various forms of public nudity, or is it the performance of female nudity that caused 'moral panic' among the older generation, who appear to be in control of the political scene but not yet of the mass sense of sexual identity and property. Fuhrmann's article demonstrates very eloquently how the media in the globalizing era could be employed by everyone with so much as a smartphone and internet connection. Long gone are the early days of published propaganda when King Vajiravudh, Rama VI, could still wage propaganda war by publishing his own articles in one of the very few newspapers in circulation among a very limited literate readership. In the 21st century, anyone could be a performer and express their emotions as well as attempt to influence a wide audience through very advanced communication technology that is widely and readily available to most.

From Fuhrmann's highly complex analysis of power and agency of emotions in the realm of the modern media, the reader arrives at the very last article in the collection, L. Ayu Saraswati's study of the extremely private internet porn industry, 'The Performativity of Pain: Affective Excess and Asian Women's Sexuality in Cyberspace'. This article is a brilliant demonstration of how the realm of emotions is, in fact, overtly private and personal and extremely public at the same time. Saraswati takes the question of gaze and agency in the media further into cyberspace, where human interaction goes beyond the one-way direction of the performer and the audience of the traditional movie. Internet porn can be easily produced and distributed by anyone with the interest, time, and effort. It could be downloaded and consumed by almost anyone an internet connection. Moreover,

the community of producers and consumers of porn in cyberspace could also influence fellow members by making comments and suggestions concerning the porn they had just produced or consumed.

Needless to say, porn is a special kind of performance. It concerns the most private and intimate interaction among human beings. It is made to be consumed mostly in private. Yet, there is a multi-million industry evolving around it. With the development of the internet, cyber porn could be consumed and become a shared experience of millions of people across the globe. Inevitably, cyber porn comes to influence people's attitude and expectations related to matter of gender and sexuality. Saraswati's article focuses on Asian women's sexuality in cyberspace through the performativity of pain in cyber porn. In her analysis of this one particular aspect of cyber porn, Saraswati demonstrates how emotions expressed in the performance could have significant impact upon spectators as reflected in the copious amount of clicks and comments on the most popular thumbnails. At the same time, the great number of clicks and comments could also lead to even more spectators drawn to a certain performance. It could also reflect what appears to be the general attitude and expectations towards Asian women in circumstances depicted in the most popular performances. All this, in turn, could definitely have a significant emotional influence upon the Asian women involved in this whole scenario, both as performer and audience, most definitely including Saraswati as the researcher/observer as well.

Emotions and ethical life: perspectives from Asia

As the collection of 10 articles in *Emotions and Ethical Life* should well demonstrate, it is clearly a serious misconception that Asians are traditionally less emotional or even that emotions have less of a role in ethical life in the Asian experiences. To the contrary, emotions appear to have been an integral part of the Asian ethical life from very early on and even in the most traditional forms of ethical socialization, such as in religion and philosophy. The most striking characteristic of emotions and ethical life that has been demonstrated through the Asian perspective in this collection is the fact that, in most cases, emotions are not segregated to remain only within the private sphere of each individual's personal thoughts, feelings, and decisions. Instead, emotions are constantly integrated into various aspects of social life in nearly every level of the community. Aside from religious socialization, emotions also appear and have significant roles to play in state propaganda, social movements, as well as in popular media.

As reflected in a variety of ways throughout this collection, emotion is one of the most fundamental qualities of human nature. Even as human society becomes increasingly complex so as to mislead us to perceive certain institutions as more mechanical than humane, even as we employ impersonal pronouns to certain social constructs – such as, 'the state', 'society', 'media', or 'the movement' – there is always a human being or groups of human beings – all fully equipped with emotions – as the driving force behind such institutions and social constructs. There is always a real person who composes the state propaganda, even though it often sounds like repetitive words from behind the walls. There are always real people who organize social movement and draft the scripts and direct the performances presented in the media. Even though they are often treated linguistically as organizations, the Asian public is both extremely human and exceedingly emotional.

In the Asian context of this collection, it appears that emotion serves as crucial link between the private and the public. As the public is fundamentally made up of private individuals who are

constituted in a complex web of inter-connections, emotions of the private individuals inevitably affect that of the public and vice versa. Following this same line of logic, emotions also appear to transcend class and proved, in many cases, to be the key persuasive factor that allows the ruling class' policies and propaganda to be accepted and supported by the masses and provide a middle ground upon which negotiation and compromise between subaltern social movements and the ruling regime could take place. This quality of enhancing understanding and acceptance in and among human society is the foundation of emotion's ethical value and how emotion has come to be an integral part of ethical life from the Asian perspectives.