

Anthropology of Cruelty: Historical and Cultural Verification

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Abstract—Cruelty and its possible forms, manifesting in cultural consciousness and language, including indifference, mockery, heartlessness, ruthlessness, vindictiveness, and barbarism is a crucial and vital topic of modern culture and thereby it should be carefully studied. The following research is based on principle of interdisciplinarity, uniting diverse research perspectives, however with the dominance of anthropological discourse with its focus on search for universal foundations of human existence. Referring to materials of the historical realities of the late Manchurian period of Chinese history, we reveal territorial, hierarchical, gender, and age factors, determining the manifestations of cruelty that were inherent in the Manchu court and characteristics of reign and personality traits of Empress Cixi. The irrational nature of cruelty, noted by researchers with regard to habits, character traits, and specific behaviors of the Chinese Grand Empress of the Western Palace, can be interpreted with regard to the marked anthropological basis. These foundations, persistently manifesting in communities of various types and partially in the lives of higher animals, make the phenomenon of cruelty constant. In fact, cruelty retains, like violence, “irrepressibly deep rooted in historical and psychological experience and in human ontology itself” (A. Guseinov). At the same time, it is obvious that the civilized process pushed out cruelty into the area of anti-values. The cultural and historical verification of the anthropological approach is one of conditions for confirming its heuristics.

Keywords—*anthropology of cruelty, principle of interdisciplinarity, history of China, Empress Cixi*

I. INTRODUCTION

Modern philosophical, scientific, and fiction literature is full of research and reflection on a phenomenon of cruelty. For example, there are three remarkable works. In the philosophy of the twentieth century, Max Scheler was the author of one of the most striking ideas, related to resentment consciousness [1]. Resentment, as an intense clot of negative experiences, is considered as delayed retribution, waiting in the wings. Besides, the retribution is not a curb to evil, but revenge, causing damage - physical, moral, and psychological. Intentionally prepared revenge is one of the manifestations of cruelty, if the latter is understood as a desire to inflict suffering on others while enjoying it [2].

In the sociological literature, Philip Zimbardo generalization about the Stanford experiment resulted in the

raise of an issue: why and how civilized people unconsciously accepted a set of destructive prison values, making them move away from their own humanistic convictions. In addition, "some guards have transformed into perpetrators of evil, and other guards have become passive contributors to the evil through their inaction" [3].

William Golding, the Nobel Prize winner in Literature, managed to show emergence and manifestation of cruelty impulse in building of a social hierarchy in initially unstructured environment of children's life [4].

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II. METHODOLOGY

There are a variety of methods to study the phenomenon of cruelty [5], but the cultural and anthropological approach offers special opportunities for the present studies. Its essence was formulated by Claude Lévi-Strauss. He underlines, that since Descartes's time, the starting point of the argument was Self (*cogito ergo sum*) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau concept - Self as another marked a new research perspective. There was a goal to shift the focus from the primacy of self-experience to search for the invariant basis of the existence of unique self [6]. Anthropologists are infinitely pushing the envelope in search for constants of the human existence, revealing their manifestation in the natural-cultural universe. In the anthropological literature, analysis of the phenomenon of cruelty, supported by ethological and ethnological studies, allows considering it as a persistent characteristic of human existence [7,8]. Cruelty is functional, since it is able to ensure stability, balance, hierarchical alignment, and integrity of the social organism. In this light, “the primitive man was no more uncultured or crueler than the people of our time” [7].

In cultural communities, cruelty, as an ethical and psychological constant, generating relevant practices, is inherited directly - in separate social groups, or symbolically, for example through emblems and images of a lion or eagle, which express an idea of strength, aggression, and cruelty. However, excessive cruelty in society is limited through rituals of revenge or through judicial procedures. There allowed to be only a

demonstration of aggression without acts of cruelty. Besides, aggressive behavior is balanced by reconciliation rituals known in higher animals and in human communities [8,9].

Study of cruelty in a broad (natural and cultural) perspective requires methods of interdisciplinarity. Multidimensionality of cultural phenomena (we are interested in cruelty as a holistic cultural phenomenon) implies a possible combination of various ways of their research with the dominance of a certain discourse.

In the paper, we combine philosophical (ethical one, related to a problem of violence / non-violence, scientific and methodological one, connected with an idea of verification as a criterion of scientific knowledge) historical (we analyze episodes of China history of the second half of the XIX - early XX centuries), and anthropological approaches, but with the dominance of anthropological discourse with its focus on search for universal foundations of human existence.

III. GOAL

This study tries to identify anthropologically given constants of cruelty, referring to the historical and cultural specifics. The subject of the following paper is the late period of the Manchu dynasty under Empress Cixi and peculiarities of life of the Manchu court.

IV. RESULTS

Modern authors underline extreme cruelty of Empress Cixi reigning methods and specific characteristics of her character [10,11]. The anthropological analysis of the present situation allows to finding out the reasons, explaining the cruelty of Cixi. These include territorial, hierarchical, gender, and age factors [7]. This situation of marking and protecting one's territory is revealed in the life of the imperial court. The Forbidden City is a symbol of confrontation of court life with its special order with daily profane world. These features were often supported by both extremely cruel rules of life for inhabitants of the palace world (restrictions on family visits for concubines, exile or even illumination an emperor's "trial wives" during his preparation for marriage), and a cruel reaction against those, who dared to cross of the border between the palace space and life outside the imperial court without permission. For example, when a dentist was invited to the palace of Emperor Guangxu, the eunuch responsible for appearance of a stranger in the palace, was subjected to the death penalty and his body was exposed "for public viewing" [11].

In traditional societies, there is ritual cruelty. For example, in initiation rituals, "torture and pain are one of the means of maintaining internal stability" [7]. In the traditional China at the Manchu court, there was a practice when members of imperial family departure from life and mass illumination of a clan as demonstration of its "collective" responsibility for a certain failing of its

member. Moreover, "according to disturbing and incomprehensible Chinese laws, if an empress or a concubine took poison, all their relatives should have been slaughtered, at the same time death from starvation was not pursued" [11]. For this reason, Alute, Emperor Tongzhi's concubine, who had fallen into disfavor, did not dare to take poison and decided to die of starvation.

A concept of distinction between particular spaces is manifested in the idea of the sacrality of boundaries. In this light, the boundaries are a symbolically interpreted zone of special tension. For example, when Ci'an, the Empress of the Eastern court and Cixi's co-ruler, died, her brother came to the gate of the imperial palace and began loudly demand an investigation into the sudden death of her sister." Cixi and her ministers often passed through this gate but did not dare to silence him, because "calling for justice at a gate" was a tradition, consecrated by Confucianism" [11].

The hierarchical system of relations in court circles, the order of pecking, was accompanied by a tough struggle, specifics of which can be understood through the phenomenon of resentment consciousness [1]. Suppressed energy splashed out against those whose social positions became precarious. An illustrative example is the fate of a young eunuch An Dehai. Jumped-up "Little An" who succeeded to deserve the favor of Cixi by its helpfulness, was smashed by his rivals as soon as it became possible [11].

However, the nobility showed utmost caution, fearing their rivals. According to Pu Yi, his grandfather was absolute caution, utmost modest, and ready for self-deprecation: "Cixi had granted Yi Huang and his wife the right to ride in the apricot-colored palanquin, but they began to use it only after a while. Such fear and caution were manifested not only in all his speeches and actions, but they also left a mark even on the decoration of his house. A room, where the grandfather lived he called 'a hall of humble thoughts', his work-room – 'a room of acknowledged mistakes', and on his desk was a cup with an inscription: 'Satedness leads to impoverishment, and modesty leads to well-being'" [12]. The idea of revenge, postponed due to impossibility of immediate satisfaction, was also manifested in crowd cruelty, enjoying the sight of mockery of a victim of public execution

In 1861, after the death of Emperor Yizhu (Xianfeng) and strengthening of Cixi's position, she ordered to execute a representative of the highest nobility, the dignitary Su Shun in the Western market (the major market in Beijing). Chronists note the extreme cruelty of the execution: "Before his execution, they threw stones at him, broke his whole face, but he was loudly cursing and knelt only after an executioner began to beat him with an iron bar. First, the executioner axed his both hands and then beheaded him" [11].

Anthropologists suggest distinguishing between male and female cruelty [7]. Male cruelty is functional. Among the Manchu nobility, it manifested itself in the struggle for

survival, power, and influence. The female aggression is understood as “a means of expressing ... anger and relieving stress” [7]. Often Empress Cixi’s cruelty was deferred, insatiable, and uncontrollable. Once she said “whoever will ruin my mood at least once, I will ruin it for the rest of one’s life” [11].

When Cixi strengthened her position, she decided to take revenge on Ci’an, the Empress of the Eastern Palace, for beatings and humiliation on her part in the past. Cixi poisoned her.

In 1874, Emperor Tongzhi’s wife, who irritated Cixi with her mind and beauty, was declared guilty of the Emperor death and was limited in food and soon died. “Her death did not extinguish Cixi’s anger, and she removed Chun Yi, the Empress’s father, from the post of deputy head of the ministry.” The following year, a censor proposed to give her posthumous signs of attention by saying commendable words or awarding posthumous title, and etc. to calm people who shared grief and rumors about her death from starvation. However, the vengeful Cixi did not support the proposal and even more “the censor lost his place” [12]. The age plays an important role in building a social hierarchy. Old Buddha, Old Ancestor, the Great Empress took full advantage of these features of Confucian culture. She was quite tough in building relationships with her subjects, even with Emperor Guangxu. Sources note that the Emperor could kneel for half an hour before a eunuch of the Old Buddha invited him to Cixi. In the presence of Cixi, “the Manchu and the Chinese had to stand even while eating” [11]. Traditionalism provokes cruelty because of a special nature of power relations. Cruelty is a symbolic expression of a ruler’s power, consolidating society as a whole. Unlimited nature of power makes it unnecessary to search for ways to contain aggression. Cruelty takes on irrational forms. According to Pu Yi, aging Cixi had symptoms of a nervous tic on her face. One of the eunuchs kept his eyes on the face of the Empress a bit longer than permitted and was beaten with sticks. “When one eunuch heard this, he was afraid to raise his head in front of her. She found fault with him as well: ‘Why have you lowered your head?’ The confused eunuch was beaten with stick as well.” [12] Cruelty, according to researchers, became the main character trait of the Empress. “Her cruelty manifested not only in killings but also in numerous beatings”. No less terrible was the moral persecution: “She even could take away a prince’s child and give it to another prince. Many were driven mad by this or even committed suicide” [11]. It is worth noting, that the cruelty which became an ordinary thing at the Manchu court under the reign of Empress Cixi, caused concern even among her close circle: “Even her maids of honor, who sometimes turn a blind eye, emphasized her instability, associated with her deification and impunity” [11].

V. CONCLUSIONS

What does the proposed analysis add to understanding of the phenomenon of cruelty? The cultural and historical verification of the anthropological approach is one of conditions for confirming its heuristics. The anthropological approach allows us to find out age, gender, territorial, hierarchical reasons, causing the phenomenon of cruelty in historical and cultural specifics. Steadily manifested in communities of various types and partially in the lives of higher animals, these reasons make the phenomenon of cruelty constant, while also preserving, like violence, “deeply rooted in historical and psychological experience, and in human ontology itself” [13]. At the same time, it is obvious, that the civilized process pushes out cruelty into the sphere of anti-values. Confronting violence and cruelty is possible in various forms. Such are passivity, counter-violence, non-violence. Moreover, it is the latter form that can be understood as the highest, since “it transfers goals and means of struggle into a qualitatively homogeneous moral plane” [13]. The irrational nature of cruelty, noted by researchers in cases to individual historical figures, in particular Cixi’s habits, personality traits, and her specific behavior can be understood with regard to the marked anthropological foundation.

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