

The Aesthetic Life of Power
Chinese and Western Insights into the Rituals of Subject Life

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Introduction

It must cease forever describing the effects of power in negative terms: it “excludes,” it “represses,” it “suppresses,” it “censors,” it “abstracts,” it “masks,” it “conceals.” In fact power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth.¹

– Michel Foucault

The task of accounting for how persons, how subjects are made brings a convergence between what Euro-American traditions tend to deem the separate domains of ethics and aesthetics. It is in this regard that alternative voices, particularly those from China, and even more particularly from the Confucian tradition, possess a distinct advantage. Having had such a long history in which to develop its own terms, Confucianism can address the conjunctions of ethics, aesthetics, and politics that occur in person-making in ways that the best, though still ultimately tradition-bound and reactive efforts from Euro-American critical theory cannot.

Here the path is sixfold, going through the critical post-structuralist notion of (I) becoming subject, subjectivation, and the accompanying idea of (II) autonomy alongside (III) the classical Confucian idea of ritual, *lǐ* 礼, as well as contemporary notions of (IV) subjectivity, a Confucian/Marxian-materialist approach to collective unconsciousness in social ritual, (V) technique in appearance, and (VI) somaesthetic (bodily) practice. This results in an intercultural and interdisciplinary account of how a set of traditions, some newer and reacting to dominant traditions and others relatively older and with longer histories of internal conceptual development, still nonetheless converge on an important issue for philosophy generally—understanding and broadening the radically (A) relational, (B) discursive, (C) bodily, (D) ritually impelled self.

¹ Foucault, Michel: *Surveiller et Punir: Naissance de la Prison*. Paris: Gallimard 1975, p. 196.

[All non-English-language text has been translated by the author from the primary sources listed unless otherwise indicated, namely with the Greek-language sources]

(I) Subjectivation

The first key word here is subjectivation. Judith Butler follows Michel Foucault in using a variant of this term, subjection, to describe how melancholy defines the emergence of subjects as the question of survival induces them to perform a kind of ritually driven life in order to gain recognition from broader social forces. Butler specifically breaks down her account in terms of five key paradigms—Hegel’s unhappy consciousness, Nietzsche’s bad conscience, Freud’s ego, Althusser’s interpellation, and Foucault’s power-resistance dynamic (with bits of Lacan and other sources). All of these sources form her narrative of the body being turned on itself and trapped in a skin-tight prison, sentenced to go through a rigmarole of ritual motions in order to get through the day, with the repetition itself bringing a meager measure of freedom in the form of rage and the re-appropriation of the terms of the ritual/symbolic field. However, this view of rage as resistance as re-appropriation offers little more than the temporary relief that a prisoner might likewise obtain through using “the routine” of prison life against itself. The argument here starts from the finding that this subversive reclaiming of words like “nigger” or “faggot” and of more extended ritual behavioral norms cannot be the endgame, and that even as an intermediate strategy it should be but one approach. Even with its somewhat unsatisfying conclusions, Butler’s paradigm remains compelling as a framework for considering subject life and the challenge of possibly improving this psychic dimension of life amidst the machinations of power.

As a base premise, Butler holds that a subject’s identity arises from external normativity, which initiates and continually takes up residence within an inner sphere of self-consciousness.² In her view, what Hegel sees as the split between recognized master and recognizing slave internalized in unhappy consciousness, Nietzsche rearticulates in his notion of the bad conscience as a socially driven split of the self into tormenter and tormented, creditor and debtor.³ Working from this convergence, Butler develops the insight in psychanalytic terms, reasoning that melancholy occurs as social forces form the psyche, with the social regulating the psychic sphere so that the subject’s conduct occurs within

² Butler, Judith: *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford: Stanford University Press 1997, p. 3; Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich: *Phänomenologie des Geistes. Werke*. Eds. Eva Moldenhauer & Karl Markus Michel. Vol. 3. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1970, p. 163.

³ Butler: *The Psychic Life of Power*, pp. 3, 75; Nietzsche, Friedrich: *Zur Genealogie der Moral: Eine Zeitschrift. Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Einzelbänden*. Eds. Giorgio Colli & Mazzino Montinari. Vol 5. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 1988, pp. 305-307 [2.8].

social norms.⁴ In her readings of Hegel, Nietzsche, and Freud, social forces establish the layout of the mind, regulating it and foreclosing socially unacceptable behavior. Therefore, for Butler, the social regulates the psychic, leading to an internalizing of society's values. All of this enables the will to be tame enough to get by in society. The self, being so constituted, does not really possess its own will, but is formed in relation to others. Hence, in explaining the relational self, Butler writes, "the 'will' is not...the will of a subject, nor is it an effect fully cultivated by and through social norms."⁵ She suggests instead that the will is "the site at which the social implicates the psychic in its very formation—or, to be more precise, as its very formation and formativity."⁶ Moreover, her more recent work sees Butler further repudiate the "interesting posture" taken by "many people [who] act *as if* they were not formed."⁷ With her emphasis on relationality, she couches her critique in terms of Kierkegaard's notion of despair. She thus examines the anguish resulting from "denying the place of God as the true author of human existence," to use similar, more secular language to flesh out her decidedly less theological project in terms of a common understanding of the misery that results from the chauvinistic insistence that one is one's own sovereign person simpliciter.⁸ This all signals that, as understood in terms of subjectivation, the subject is (A) deeply relational.

Butler goes on to distill her notion of a will that formatively turns on itself with the help of Louis Althusser. Imagine Althusser's hypothetical scene where a police officer yells "Hey, you there!"⁹

"You" turn around, recognizing yourself in this hail with a literal turning of the self back upon self. The self, so recognized, guiltily submits before the law without reason. This plays out thousands of times in the subject's life, where outright pejoratives, lesser slights, and indirect cultural messages hail the subject into being, into acting out a certain role—a kind of ominous unsettling speech act of vocation. "It's [hereby] a girl" calls the infant to be, to look, and to act in certain ways. Calls to be this and/or that enact the psychic constitution of

⁴ Butler: *The Psychic Life of Power*, p. 171.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁷ Butler, Judith: *Senses of the Subject*. New York: Fordham University Press 2015, p. 8 [emphasis preserved from the original text].

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 115, 123, 147.

⁹ Althusser, Louis: "*Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d'État. (Notes pour une recherche)*". *La Pensée*. No. 151 (June 1970), p. 31.

particular subjects and enable the performance of roles, highlighting (B) the discursive character of subjectivation.

This scene of Althusser's, like Hegel's master-slave antagonism and the imposition of bad conscience in Nietzsche's creditor-debtor model, greatly influence the subjectivation model put forth by Butler, but the scene is seldom reducible to two parties. Indeed, for Foucault, those granting recognition are themselves subjects, watching and surveilling each other in society's grand, self-regulating, panoptical prison. In any case, similarly pernicious effects result. The subject body unthinkingly turns on itself, disciplined and preternaturally ready to submit, be it to Althusser's singular authority or that of innumerable, invisible, displaced, and paradoxically ubiquitous "Others." This body, ready to turn on itself, is initially inchoate, undefined, and unintelligible in a way that Butler likens to Aristotelian prime matter.¹⁰ Calls to be this and/or be that stamp raw bodily matter into a recognizable form. Thus these impressions form a subject, where the subject *is* a body that matters and, in order to matter, betrays itself for continued subject life. This calls attention to (C) the bodily nature of subjectivation.

Before long, the subject ego is continually comporting the body in order to achieve a dubious form of social recognition. Taking up Foucault's language, repetition becomes the basis for discipline, whether it be within physical prison walls or those figuratively built by society as a means of control. With this repetition, behavior thus becomes patterned and conduct becomes a type of ritual performance driven by a need to maintain a level of recognition and legitimacy. This shows subjectivation to have (D) a profoundly ritualistic character.

This turning of the self back upon the self occurs in such a way that there is no inside or outside prior to the formative turn, because that barrier is precisely what is being formed.¹¹ There is no core, no eternal soul that comes prior to the social implication of the psyche. Peeling back the onion only yields more onion and sifting through the sediment of past social relationships only unearths more sediment. There is no redemption, in the sense of recovery of original essence or original soul, precisely because the soul qua psyche, so considered, is not a pre-given quantity, being instead always in the making. This marks a break with conventional notions of the soul, and in this regard the project becomes less about

¹⁰ Butler, Judith: *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. New York: Routledge 1993, pp. 31-34; Butler: *The Psychic Life of Power*, p. 91.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

redemption and more about rehabilitation. Though Butler does not put it this way in her reading of Nietzsche and the imposition of *slave* morality, the implication is there—the challenge here is gaining, or perhaps regaining, a sense of *nobility* for this (A) relational, (B) discursive, (C) bodily, and (D) ritually impelled subject.

Tabling the issue of subject nobility for the moment, Butler looks to Nietzsche's bad conscience and Freud's id-ego-superego dynamic for inspiration here, particularly as concerns the former's remark "that bad conscience *fabricates* the soul."¹² For both Nietzsche and Butler this fabrication is "artistic" in nature. This means that the subject, the co-articulation of psychic form and somatic matter, is itself a work of art created by our moral life. In appropriating Nietzsche, Butler describes the subject "as a kind of necessary fiction, [being] also one of the first artistic accomplishments presupposed by morality."¹³ Following Nietzsche, Butler describes bad conscience as "the instinct for freedom made latent."¹⁴ She continues and, reminiscent of Nietzsche, claims that this form of self-consciousness is "a peculiar deformation of artistry" and that "the soul is precisely what a certain violent artistry produces when it takes itself as its own object."¹⁵

However, Butler does not adequately follow up on the link between art and freedom, neither within the context of her analysis of Nietzsche, nor within the broader scope of her general project. Regarding Nietzsche, it is almost as if her appropriation stops precisely at the second stage of what his Zarathustra calls the metamorphoses of spirit, that of the lion, of the beast who snarls "no" and violently refuses the dragon that embodies a thousand years of old values with its golden scales each emblazoned with a gleaming "Thou Shalt!"¹⁶

Considered in these terms, Butler follows much of Nietzsche's template regarding the assumption of society's burdensome norms in the first "camel" stage and the subsequent contrarian denial of those values in the second "lion" stage, but she by and large disregards the third stage—the child stage.¹⁷ Read in terms of Nietzsche's Zarathustra, this means that after saying "yes" to conventional norms and then saying "no" to imposed, internalized morality as the lion does, there is little room in Butler's view for psychic life beyond

¹² Ibid., p. 67 [emphasis preserved from the original text]; Nietzsche: *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, p. 322 [2.16].

¹³ Ibid., p. 67.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 75; Nietzsche: *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, p. 325 [2.17].

¹⁵ Butler: *Psychic Life of Power*, pp. 75-76.

¹⁶ Nietzsche, Friedrich: *Also sprach Zarathustra: Ein Buch für Alle und Keinen. Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Einzelbänden*. Eds. Giorgio Colli & Mazzino Montinari. Vol 4. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 1988, p. 30.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 29-31.

everyday good and evil. In her account there is no joy of saying “yes” to oneself, to artistry, to constructive artistry, a new type of *moral* artistry, to spontaneity, and to the creation of novel values for the self. Now, it may well be the case that Zarathustra’s particular *deus ex machina* resolution would ill serve the more sober work of Foucault and Butler on subjectivation/subjectation. But putting the eccentricities of Nietzsche’s project aside, there still remains the challenge set forth by him of *affirming* (A) relational, (B) discursive, (C) bodily, and (D) ritually impelled subject life in a way that links artistry and autonomy.

(II) Autonomy

For Butler though, the subject has no real resources except those problematically granted by power structures and thus no way out. This leaves only metonymy in the form of enraged resistance to twist already pre-given terms of discourse. Just like the game where one repeats a word to the point where it strangely ceases to sound like a “real word,” this kind of strategic repetition of terms is meant to expose the more obvious absurdity of social constructions like pink being for girls and blue being for boys or of race being presented as an objective fact as well as of the illogic at play in more subtle ritualized normative performances in the everyday.

Therefore in order to supplement, and not undermine, subjectivation theory, I propose looking at another possibility, first by examining alternate notions of autonomy beyond the problematic version precariously obtained in the process of subjectivation, namely the type of autonomy exhibited by works of art, and then secondly using intercultural approaches to apply this artistic sensibility to the locus of subjectivation—the body that matters in social ritual.

What is needed here is a reconsideration of autonomy, particularly of how the subject attains this dubious state in and though the “Other.” Butler’s paradigm explores how the need to survive and be recognized as a valid subject by society at large marks the subject as mediated self-consciousness. This means that rather than immediately expressing will in the manner of artistic creativity praised by Nietzsche, the will instead doubles back on itself and uses its now deformed artistry to devise new ways to torment itself with this implement called conscience so as to try, however haltingly, to pay back the debt owed to “Other” as part of the subject’s continued, supposedly autonomous existence.¹⁸

¹⁸ Butler: *Psychic Life of Power*, pp. 67, 75-76; Nietzsche: *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, p. 322 [2.16].

However, this constellation of autonomy, artistry, and the “Other” need not be the end of the story, and indeed the first phase of this argument involves reconfiguring these notions in terms of artworks. Simply put, people are not the only kind of “Other.” The world presents objects, natural or artificial, that variously make claims on us, demanding that attention be given to what is variously sublime or beautiful (the latter being the focus of this account).

Honing attention to what is made, contingent, and nonetheless powerful in art’s claim on our attention and its ability to speak to the subject can show the ability of artworks to serve as a different kind of “Other” through which the subject might enter into a mode of self-recognition, which despite being fleeting, would not be so bound up with demands that the subject take up a self-monitoring, self-berating posture in wielding the force of conscience to determine itself as this or that type of subject in order to survive. Because it does not arise from the Faustian bargain for survival that characterizes subject life, the less deterministic brand of autonomy manifest in art and artifice makes it possible to begin to recognize the contingency at the heart of the human world and all of its power structures, thereby loosening the stifling strictures of subjectivation.

Turning to art is only a start; the second phase is making one’s own bodily life an artwork and indeed a different kind of “Other.” And so, the argument presented here applies this notion of self-recognition through art to the ritualized subject body formed in the course of subjectivation. This makes sense, as subjectivation is all about a body turning on itself in order gain recognition and status through embodying social norms and roles ritually performed in everyday life. The question then turns to developing an account of artful, ritual cultivation of the body.

(III) Ritual Propriety - *Lǐ* 礼

Butler and the thinkers crucial to her account are already somewhat at odds with the dominant orientation of the Euro-American tradition, which itself does not provide many resources for talking about ritual and body that do not at some point lapse into the kind of mind/body hierarchical dualisms that are problematic both to her account and more generally speaking. The vocabulary and the root premises need to change.

Why not then step outside of this tradition and these geographic bounds, especially when there are so many intriguing insights into ritual and body? Why not then look at a body of philosophical thought which excels in its sensitivity to (A) the relational self, to (B)

discursively-formed roles, to (C) the body, and to (D) ritual performance *and* which has the added benefit of being more attuned to the artful side of subject life than post-structuralism? Why not look to other sources like this? Why not, at least as a starting point for the time being, look at what may be the most influential philosophical tradition in East Asia, namely Confucianism?

Stemming from what Karl Jaspers calls the “axial age,” the defining period for Athenian philosophy and for Buddhism around 500-400 BCE, the still-living tradition of Confucianism set the stage for ensuing East Asian philosophical schools. It continues to furnish a great deal of the basic vocabulary for both academic discourse and of everyday life in the region, with Confucian perspectives on role-based ethics, ritual, and family proving particularly influential up into the present day.¹⁹

The benefit of Confucianism, spanning the classic and the contemporary, is that here it can do what the largely reactive enterprises of critical theorists often cannot—that is, Confucianism can speak in its own voice about person-making. Confucianism can supply its *own* vocabulary of body and ritual without having to reckon with a mind-body hierarchy entrenched in thinking spanning millennia. If fruitful points of connection can be found with the subjectivation paradigm, which itself it at odds with major frames in the Euro-American tradition, this would allow for looking at the relational self in terms beyond endless struggle in ways that point to real autonomy.

Therefore, a historical reading of the key Confucian terminology relating to society and self will drive the first part of the investigation here, allowing for evaluation of the major debates within the Chinese tradition. Confucians have dealt with the issues at play here in fights with Mohists and Daoists as well as in quarrels within the tradition, e.g. the clash between Mencius and Xún Zǐ on human nature. Parsing these arguments with respect to the historical development of Confucianism can help anticipate major topics only recently emerging for critical theorists and point to novel senses of autonomy.

And so, perhaps unexpectedly, the third key word is *lǐ* 禮. Unlike post-structuralism, which, as a new field, seeks to redefine terms like “body,” “power,” “subject” and so on, Confucian philosophy has developed on its own terms and has its own vocabulary for dealing with many

¹⁹ Jaspers, Karl: *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*. Zürich: Artemis 1949, pp. 19-21.

of these issues, with *lǐ* being perhaps the most important here because of its (A) relational, (B) discursive, (C) bodily, and (D) ritualistic senses.

Lǐ means ritual propriety, broadly connoting everything from the subtly ritual-habitual to grandiose formalities.²⁰ *Lǐ*, though rendered here in terms of a singular concept for the sake of smooth translation, is a bit more ambiguous, also connoting the plural form of ritual acts in a way that points to deep pluralism in the transactions of the everyday. Simply put, *lǐ* is social grammar.²¹

Lǐ, as Confucius puns, provides knowledge of where to stand.²² *Lǐ* coordinates the where and when of social comings and goings. *Lǐ* attends to gesture and comportment. *Lǐ* describes how the players and the audience each take their various places, and act just so at just the right time.²³ *Lǐ* forms a pair with *yuè* 乐, music, or more precisely musical theatre, with connections to all arts.²⁴ *Lǐ* brings a convergence of bodily movement and moral excellence.²⁵ *Lǐ* is both a social grammar and a social choreography. *Lǐ* encompasses what the classifications of academic philosophy might label the ethical and the aesthetic nature of (A) the relational self.

Lǐ speaks to how language stands in society. *Lǐ* connects the regulation of cultural expression and of society. *Lǐ* sets up codes of difference and deferral in the basic historical movement of discourse. *Lǐ* addresses much of what Derrida does with *différance*.²⁶ *Lǐ* expresses how (B) the discursive climate defines how people live up (or down) to social role archetypes.²⁷

Lǐ describes the body that stands. *Lǐ* relates linguistically to *tǐ* 体, the corpus, with a sense surpassing simple physical matter, pointing to the dynamic, ongoing arrangement of bodies.²⁸

²⁰ Ames, Roger T. & Rosemont, Henry Jr.: "Introduction". *The Analects of Confucius*. New York: Ballantine Books 1998, p. 51.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

²² 孔子: 论语译注. Ed. 金良年. Shanghai: 上海古籍出版社 2004, §8.8, §16.13, §20.3.

²³ 荀子: *Xunzi* (2 vols.). Eds. John Knoblock & Zhang Jue. Changsha: Hunan People's Publishing House 1999, §20.2, §20.3 & §20.12.

²⁴ 孔子: 论语译注, §16.5, §17.11; Ames, Roger T.: *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press 2011, p. 74; Garrison, James: "The Social Value of Ritual and Music in Classical Chinese Thought" *teorema: Revista internacional de filosofia*. Vol. 31, No. 3 (2012), p. 212.

²⁵ 孟子: 孟子今注今译. 3rd Edition. Ed. 王雲五. Taipei: 臺灣商務印書館 中華民國六十七年 [1978], p. 410 [四一〇 盡心篇第七: 七十九 堯舜章 §7.79].

²⁶ Hall, David L. & Ames, Roger T.: *Thinking Through Confucius*. Albany: State University of New York Press 1987, pp. 292-293; cf. Derrida, Jacques: "la *différance*". *Marges de la Philosophie*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit 1972, pp. 8-9, 12-13.

²⁷ 孔子: 论语译注, §13.3.

²⁸ Ames: *Confucian Role Ethics*, p. 109.

Lǐ grounds self-cultivation, *xiūshēn* 修身 in Chinese, literally habituating the person, the body. *Lǐ* addresses the role of ritual in physical growth, coordination, and habituation. *Lǐ* works in relational processes. *Lǐ*, which, depending on context, could be rendered in English in the singular or in the plural, thus deals with both (C) “individual” human bodies and common bodies politic.

Lǐ provides knowledge of when to make a stand. *Lǐ* conditions social relations. *Lǐ* establishes bounds and bidirectional demands between ruler and advisor, parent and child. *Lǐ* refers to (D) a ritual-based sense of appropriateness, including knowing when and how to call out inappropriate failure to fulfill a name or role.²⁹

In sum, *lǐ* points to the thread running through human development, and through the work of Butler and Foucault as well—the artful process of cultural sedimentation and normative subjectivation.

This similar, though distinct, vocabulary opens up a new avenue for dealing with the (A) relational, (B) discursive, (C) bodily, and (D) ritually impelled self of subjectivation, and this can show how society’s grand apparatus of normative rites, what Foucault might call power, might enable as well as constrain. Though Foucault and Butler do indeed make this point themselves, their political and theoretical commitments lead them to focus on the latter as expressed in notions like bodily subject life being a prison and discourse occurring through the proliferation of sign chains that might be refashioned in the course of repetitive use. Could there be perhaps another side to things here? Could rites, could *lǐ*, taken with a bodily and artistic sense, serve not just as a tool of power against the subject, but perhaps a tool *for* the subject’s self-cultivation? Might *lǐ* help not only to empower the subject, but also aid in the project of subjecting power to reappraisal, especially as regards the basic dynamic of contingency, necessity, and autonomy underlying subjectivation?

(IV) Subjectality

Subjectality is the fourth term here, and this neologism speaks to the historical roots of subject life and the use of collective cultural psychology as a tool to define human society.

²⁹ 荀子: *Xunzi*, §13.5, §19.3 & §19.9; cf. 孔子: *论语译注*, §12.11; Garrison, James: “Confucianism’s Role-Based Political Ethic: Free Speech, Remonstrative Speech, and Political Change in East Asia”. *Non-Western Encounters with Democratization: Imagining Democracy after the Arab Spring*. Eds. Christopher K. Lamont et al. Surrey, UK: Ashgate 2015, pp. 31-47.

Subjectivity is the term that contemporary philosopher Lǐ Zéhòu 李泽厚 crafts to translate the phrase *zhǔtǐxìng* 主体性, literally “subject-body nature,” in describing ritual’s formative role in human social life and its artful use as a tool for human survival. Post-structural subjectivation does well in talking about technologies of the self, but subjectivity gets at the root *tekhnē*, with its blend of premises from Marx, Confucius, and Kant.

Briefly, Lǐ uses Marx’s statements on the “humanization of nature” and the “naturalization of humanity” to explain how shamanistic art, music, and rituals operated as tools for social cohesion in the early material economy of human survival.³⁰ Moving forward historically, Lǐ Zéhòu sees Confucianism as being particularly apt (but not exclusively so) at describing and formalizing the cultural/psychological edifice which sediments over time in subject rationality.³¹ Finally, Lǐ turns to Kant and Marx in reconsidering the Confucian framework of “being inspired by poetry, taking a stand with *lǐ* [rites], and finding perfection in music”³² to describe how tools like ritual artifice form humankind’s supra-biological body, thus allowing for labor on an object, on a “noumenal humanity” akin to “Jung’s collective unconsciousness” which can provide an aesthetically structured source of internal freedom.³³

For Lǐ Zéhòu, the ground of this freedom lies in how humans naturally excel at artifice,³⁴ at the art and craft of building society and culture in the deployment of labor and material. This approach gives hope that, if the species is naturally capable of the sometimes-dark artistry behind the social formation of ritual normativity, individuals might then rehabilitate this prior, though often concealed form of creativity and put it to work in daily life.

Subjectivation, while being useful in talking about the machinery of person-making, can lose view of what can be termed the *tekhnē* behind the machine. Lǐ Zéhòu attends to this oversight with his notion of subjectivity and the formation of collective ritual normative structures.³⁵ Subjectivity extends subjectivation by showing the constitutive role of artistic creativity in

³⁰ 李泽厚: *华夏美学*. Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press 2001, pp. 67-71; cf. Marx, Karl & Engels, Friedrich: “*Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844*”. *Werke*. Vol. 40. Berlin: Dietz 1956, pp. 537-546.

³¹ 李泽厚: *华夏美学*, pp. 67-69.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 67; 孔子: *论语译注*, §8.8.

³³ 李泽厚: *华夏美学*, p. 69; 李泽厚: *美学四讲*. Beijing: 三联书店 1989, p. 109; Li Zehou: “Subjectivity and ‘Subjectivity’: A Response”. *Philosophy East and West*. Vol. 49, No. 2. Apr 1999, pp. 174-175; cf. Jung, C.G.: *Die Archetypen und das Kollektive Unbewusstsein. Gesammelte Werke*. Eds. Lilly Jung-Merker & Elisabeth Rūf. Vol. 9/1. Zürich: Rascher 1976, pp. 13-17.

³⁴ 李泽厚: *美学四讲*, p. 75.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

the unconscious rhythm of the everyday. This rhythm, this background hum of ritual practice, can become a symphony when properly attuned. This is what it means to refine *lǐ* in practices like *t'ai chi ch'uan* (*tàijíquán*) 太极拳 and the martial arts, where the body takes on *a life of its own*, as a more artful kind of other.

These practices thus transform rigid, regular, and sometimes punishing discipline into a type of learned and practiced spontaneity. This phrasing might seem counterintuitive if not outright contradictory, but such disciplined spontaneity accords well common phenomena. Take, for example, the way in which in the arts, in music in particular, training is necessary for genuine, skillful improvisation. Confucianism, starting from well before Lǐ Zéhòu, has understood this and addressed the nature of practiced spontaneity in subject life more generally. To wit:

The Master said: “At fifteen, I was determined to learn; at thirty I took my stand; at forty there was no longer any doubt; at fifty I realized the propensities of the heavens; at sixty my ear was attuned; at seventy I could follow my heart-and-mind freely without going too far.”³⁶

In short, discipline, properly attuned, gives way to mastery gives way to autonomy and spontaneity. The twist here lies in bringing improvisation and a measure of unanticipated and unregulated autonomy to the discipline meted out in the course of the subject’s psychic life. It is in this way that self-disciplined self-cultivation can open up novel modes of self-recognition that outstrip any founding disciplinary powers, thereby changing the basic stakes for subject autonomy.

Lǐ Zéhòu’s work on subjectivity shows the need for subjectivation theorists to better address the aesthetic side of subject life in the ongoing creation of the social field. Though he is not directly addressing subjectivation theorists, Lǐ perhaps nonetheless surpasses the post-structuralists in responding to the following gauntlet thrown by Foucault:

It must cease forever describing the effects of power in negative terms: it “excludes,” it “represses,” it “suppresses,” it “censors,” it “abstracts,” it

³⁶ 孔子: 论语译注, §2.4.

“masks,” it “conceals.” In fact power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth.³⁷

Lǐ Zéhòu does precisely this in describing the historical material roots of subjectality. What is the upshot of this, then?

To some extent Nietzsche anticipates the benefit of an approach like that of Lǐ Zéhòu’s. Though the bolder statements of Zarathustra on creativity occurring in terms of an ineffable, child-like, yes-saying spontaneity pose difficulties, elsewhere Nietzsche points to how understanding the formation of social custom can bring a realistic, plausible possibility of self-growth. On the confinement of thought by language and social habit, Nietzsche writes:

Only by forgetting this primitive metaphor-world...only through the undefeatable belief that this sun, window, and table might have a truth in itself, in short, that one forgets oneself as a subject, and indeed an artistically creating subject, does one live with any calm, security, and consistency: if one could get out of the prison walls of this belief for a moment, then “self-consciousness” would immediately be gone.³⁸

And here, the language of subjectivation, particularly the voice of Judith Butler comes back into the conversation. What Nietzsche is pointing to, much like Lǐ Zéhòu, is a dynamic of foreclosure. Here the idea is that a type of constitutive forgetfulness occurs as habits sediment in the most basic use of religious-cultural-aesthetic-normative technologies, forming something akin to what is described by Jung where he speaks of collective unconsciousness. A kind of practiced forgetting of the everyday that instead remembers and recovers unconscious cultural resources to loosen the strictures of subject self-consciousness is thus needed to get past the lion stage that characterizes Butler’s approach and into the stage of the child marked by “a forgetting, a new beginning.”³⁹

It may be that Nietzsche’s somewhat untenable description of attaining third stage concerns reckoning with time and the possibility of the interwoven moments and deeds of one’s life recurring eternally, but time per se will not be the key to this attempt to square Butler’s

³⁷ Foucault: *Surveiller et Punir*, p. 196.

³⁸ Nietzsche, Friedrich: “Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinne”. *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Einzelbänden*. Eds. Giorgio Colli & Mazzino Montinari. Vol 1. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 1988, pp. 883-884.

³⁹ Nietzsche: *Also sprach Zarathustra*, p. 31.

second-stage, no-saying lion with Nietzsche's third-stage, self-affirming child (though time will factor into this account). Instead, given that the task laid out here concerns a practiced forgetting the ritual performance of normative subject life in the everyday, the contention here is that this must take place in and through the body and the ritualized bind of having to appear as a body that matters in order to get by.

(V) Technique in Appearance

And so, the fifth key term here is "technique in appearance," and, as the connotation suggests, phenomenology enters the conversation at this juncture, bringing memory (and thus time) to bear on the technology of ritual. It is this regard that Bernard Stiegler's exploration of the Promethean myth's insights into technique and memory has a great number of intriguing connections to the discussion here. Of particular interest is his description of how the proliferation of "technization" leads humanity to a profound forgetfulness, where access to origins is lost and remembering original, authentic temporality occurs through attention not to organic or inorganic matter, but to how we organize matter, *i.e.* the conjunction of technique and time.⁴⁰ Though Stiegler's work represents a somewhat anthropological approach to Dasein that might upset chapter-and-verse Heideggerians, it excels in showing how the development of humanity and future-oriented care for being, born of anticipation and ultimately being-toward-death, occurs neither through the subject (who?) nor the object (what?) of primeval techniques, but with "*différance*...below and beyond the who and the what."⁴¹

And so, humans invent techniques *and* techniques invent humanity, both on a macro-level of the ongoing, continual development of the human species as well as on the micro-level of the human individual and "the accents of his speech, the style of his gait, the force of his gesture, the unity of his world."⁴² Putting his own gloss on Heidegger's reading of *tekhnē* (τέχνη), Stiegler defines techniques in terms of savoir-faire or skill, pointing to "politeness, elegance, and cuisine" as techniques, and he observes that only with the latter, cuisine, does one find the kind of overtly material "*productive*" technique that dominates conventional

⁴⁰ Stiegler, Bernard: *La technique et le temps: 1. La faute d'Epiméthée*. Paris: Galilée/Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie 1994, p. 31.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 151-152.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 150-153.

understanding whereby an artisan serves as the efficient cause of bringing forth, or *poiēsis* (ποίησις).⁴³

For Stiegler, following Marx and detouring through evolutionary anthropology, such technique is best understood in terms of the humanization of nature and the naturalization of humanity, which, in this reading, is where the question emerges concerning the meaning of being. Stiegler, addressing what he sees as shortcomings in Heidegger's account vis-à-vis the "dynamic of *organization*," maintains that this occurs through techniques that themselves are the constitutive organon of the interior and exterior, of the who and the what, of the subject and the object, of the technician and the material.⁴⁴ With historical, cultural, and economical forces sedimenting and concealing the temporality of techniques, the interior/who/subject/technician/Aristotelian efficient cause becomes the star of a narrative where human subjects stand over objects and master more and more banal technology at the expense of authentic technique.⁴⁵

Now, in terms of his greater phenomenological project, Stiegler is calling for a reconsideration of *tekhnē* with regard to the meaning of being. Taking a cue from Judith Butler and Hannah Arendt, what is at issue here is the technology that draws together being and appearance in public political society and the way in which this dynamic runs prior to and suffuses the process of subjectivation and the experience of subject life with a deep ritual history.⁴⁶ And so, within the space of *this* project and *its* theme of normative subject life, that call echoes with a similar appeal to return attention to the finer technologies of ritual, of *lǐ*. And so, despite the complexity of their works and their varying theoretical commitments, there is a convergence in how Bernard Stiegler and Lǐ Zéhòu frame the issue of how finer techniques with a ritual basis lie at the root of human life (with whatever scope or definition) and how such techniques become covered over and lost with the passage of time. Though the idioms differ and perfect translation remains elusive, the conversation ultimately has great bearing on the main topic here—that of something being lost and foreclosed in becoming a normative subject and the possibility of recovery through artful ritual technique.

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 105-106 [emphasis preserved from original text].

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 151, 248-249 [emphasis preserved from original text].

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 248-249 [emphasis preserved from original text].

⁴⁶ Arendt, Hannah: *The Human Condition*. 2nd Edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1998, pp. 198-199; Butler, Judith: "On This Occasion..." *Butler on Whitehead: On the Occasion*. Eds. Roland Faber, Michael Halewood & Deena Lin. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books 2012, p. 15.

The point to which Li, Nietzsche, and Stiegler all variously draw attention is that the cultural, traditional, political, human animal has always had an aesthetic bearing rooted in the ritualized organization of labor and material and that there are structural reasons why human subjects work ceaselessly to forget this. But is this forgetfulness a total foreclosure? An *ur*-foreclosure? What would an *ur*-foreclosure be? How can this forgetfulness be understood not just as a mere memory lapse, but as having the specific structure of “never, never” and ungrieved grief so crucial to Butler’s account? How can Stiegler’s language of forgetfulness of authentic temporality and Li’s of the sedimentation of collective unconsciousness connect to the terminology of foreclosure set out by Butler? And most importantly, how does any of this help with the question of the subject’s plight?

Recall that, for Butler, subjectivation on an individual level occurs through the foreclosure of certain possibilities for attachment. Foreclosure here has the specific meaning of “never loved, never lost” such that subject life occurs as a type of melancholy, a pre-empted mourning, a grief that can never be grieved because what is lost, even in the subtle losses of what Freud terms “setbacks and disappointments,” is an “object-loss [is] withdrawn from consciousness” for subjects intent on and *dependent* on self-monitoring and self-punishment.⁴⁷ The subject stays intact as a subject through disciplinary power, as internalized in the watching, surveilling super-ego in a way that closes off the possibility of even thinking about certain forms of attachment (*e.g.* queer and interracial, to give a few specific examples from Butler’s work on contemporary power structures).⁴⁸

The *ur*-foreclosure is the such that, to use Nietzsche’s words, “one forgets oneself as a subject, and indeed an artistically creating subject.” The “never, never” structure occurs in the subject never being attached to something other than the necessity-contingency dynamic of subjectivation, such that the very idea of indeed being an artistically creating subject becomes lost. The etymology of the word “subject” itself, *i.e.* the confining notion of being “thrown under,” indicates the extent of not only what has been lost, but of what has been foreclosed *as* lost. The artful side of subject life is what is lost and never properly grieved in an *ur*-foreclosure stretching back to the very formation of early human ritual life in what

⁴⁷ Butler: *The Psychic Life of Power*, p. 23; Freud, Sigmund: “*Trauer und Melancholie*”. *Gesammelte Werke. chronologisch geordnet*. Ed. Anna Freud. Vol. 10. London: Imago 1940, pp. 431, 437.

⁴⁸ Bell, Vikki & Butler, Judith: “On Speech, Race and Melancholia”. *Theory, Culture and Society*. Vol. 16, No. 2 (April 1999), pp. 163-174; Butler, Judith: “Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?”. *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*. Vol. 13, No. 1 (2002), pp. 14-44.

Nietzsche calls “this primitive metaphor-world.”⁴⁹ Though not directly responding to Nietzsche, the point that both Stiegler and Lĩ end up making in varying ways to his dilemma is that attunement to this *ur*-foreclosure, occurring through real *bodily, material* work, can help to recover what has been lost. Putting it all together and responding to the issues highlighted by Foucault and Butler, this means making the bodily ritual material of subject life in some way artful.

And so, thinking in terms of subjectivity opens up the possibility of attuning oneself to the artistic fashioning of the long-sedimented and often unconsciously neglected world of signs, gestures, rituals, and cultural productions in and through which subjects emerge. If the sign chains of discourse and the skin-tight prison of the subject’s body are themselves understood as having been built, as a sort of artistic achievement of social technology, then society appears contingent, much like the self. The basis of power is recognition; and recognition requires repetition; and repetition requires a ritual performance so that the power structure of recognition might be embodied and internalized over time. If all of that is a human invention, what Foucault might call a technology of self, why then be limited to the unconscious, sometimes slavish performance of everyday normative rituals that paradoxically mark self-consciousness? Why not then explore the possibility of empowering subjects, especially in the bodily dimension, through ritual and bringing conscious attention to what slumbers unconscious in culture?

These questions point the way to a response to Butler’s *The Psychic Life of Power*. This particular approach is aesthetic because of its attunement to body, sense, and feeling—the proper domain of aesthetics as . It is artful insofar as it reveals and thrusts the contingent technology of subjectivation into unconcealment and opens up the possibility of bodily purposiveness without the determinate trappings of conventional purpose. The response lies in ritual attention to the body, or, to borrow a somewhat recently coined word, it lies in “somaesthetics.”

(VI) Somaesthetics

Somaesthetics is the sixth and final key word here, and it refers to a pragmatic, intercultural approach to conscious bodily/somatic cultivation with the aim of broadening subject life. Somaesthetics is the signature paradigm of Richard Shusterman, a leading philosopher with a

⁴⁹ Nietzsche: “*Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinne*”, pp. 883-884.

distinct American pragmatist and intercultural bent. Shusterman resists using the term “body” because of its connection to oppositional mind/body dualism, and he instead opts to use the term “soma” to refer to what he calls “a living, feeling, sentient body rather than a mere physical body that could be devoid of life and sensation.”⁵⁰ Though he does not base his project on Chinese thinking per se, he quite aptly points out the way in which core Confucian vocabulary takes the crucial role of bodily life as a basic premise, leading him to describe his own usage of “soma” in terms of the Chinese word for body, *shēntǐ* 身体, where he writes:

If the *ti* body in classical thought is closely associated with generative powers of physical life and growth and the multiplicity of parts (such as the bodies four limbs), the *shen* body is closely identified with the person’s ethical, perceptive, purposive body that one cultivates and so it even serves as a term for self. The concept of *shenti* thus suggests the soma’s double status as living thing and perceiving subjectivity.⁵¹

Likewise in his use of the term “aesthetics,” Shusterman simultaneously emphasizes soma as both perceiving as self-fashioning, as observer and artist, as it were. “I thus both am body and have a body,” as Shusterman says.⁵²

When it comes to artistically cultivating the soma, Shusterman is interested in many practices including “various diets, forms of grooming and decoration (including body painting, piercing, and scarification as well as more familiar modes of cosmetics, jewelry, and clothing fashions), dance, yoga, massage, aerobics, bodybuilding, calisthenics, martial and erotic arts, and modern psychosomatic disciplines like Alexander Technique and Feldenkrais Method.”⁵³ The connections here to *lǐ* are obvious, since all of these approaches bring together ritual and self-cultivation, as are the connections to Foucault’s work on care for the self, both of which Shusterman references. The practices of interest to Shusterman all can provoke somatic awareness, albeit in different ways, but for him a similar effect obtains in a kind of family resemblance, namely a new sense of self in everyday relations. The thinking here is that as one becomes more attuned to the soma, unconscious habit likewise becomes conscious practice. An example of this familiar to many can be found in the focus that many somatic

⁵⁰ Shusterman, Richard: *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 2008, p. 1.

⁵¹ Shusterman, Richard: “Somaesthetics and the Utopian Body”. *International Yearbook of Aesthetics: Volume 14, 2010*. Ed. Wang Keping. Beijing: International Association for Aesthetics 2010, p. 85.

⁵² Shusterman: *Body Consciousness*, p. 3.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

disciplines place on breathing and awareness of breathing. This is supposed to spill over to everyday life, allowing for conscious reflection on typically unconscious changes in breathing, say in states of agitation, arousal, etc., including those arising from latent feelings about race, sex, gender, and the like.⁵⁴

When ritual bodily practice takes on a life of its own, genuine autonomy becomes possible with self-recognition not being wholly determined by the Master, the creditor, the power structures of the day, or the pejorative “Other.” And so, much like subjectivation, somaesthetic practice takes repetition and turns it into autonomy, though the mode of self-recognition here brings a measure of freedom from outside norms unlike the quasi-autonomy promised by the recognition of others and of the “Other” in subjectivation. Looking at somaesthetic practice with subjectivation in mind, it is thus possible to see how the basic stakes of contingency, necessity, and autonomy can undergo a definite shift *and* how this can change subject life for the better. While superficially similar as regards repetition, this is unlike Zarathustra finding grand spontaneity in embracing the eternal return of the same, as this program of repetitive, disciplined somaesthetic self-cultivation points to perhaps a more realistic notion of free growth modeled on the social, affective, and cognitive play that *recurring* experiences of art, artistry, and artfulness generally bring.

Considering the aesthetic life of power in terms of subjectivity and somaesthetics in this way is not meant to counter, but rather to enrich, the observations made by Foucault on subjectivation and Butler’s extension of that work in her work *The Psychic Life of Power*. In that book, Butler sets out a strategy for resistance against harmful, life-threatening power structures using the weakness inherent in what Nietzsche calls “sign chains.” As Butler explains, the passage of time and the accrual of historical accidents make it such that “a sign is bound to signify in ways that estrange the sign from the originating intentions by which it is mobilized.”⁵⁵ Since it is impossible for a single person acting alone simply to “invent” discourse without using material at hand, since it is impossible to invent out of nothing the terms whereby society recognizes self and self recognizes self, the strategy is instead to exploit, through re-signification, the weakness of terms given by power for the initial purposes of subjectivation, subjugation, and subjection.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 131.

⁵⁵ Butler: *The Psychic Life of Power*, p. 72.

A common, if somewhat prosaic, example can be found in the subcultural re-appropriation of words like “nigger” and “queer.”⁵⁶ As Butler describes, such slurs can in fact be reclaimed because of how they “live and thrive in and as the flesh of the addressee...[because of] how these slurs accumulate over time, dissimulating their history, taking on the semblance of the natural, configuring and restricting the *doxa* that counts as ‘reality.’”⁵⁷ It is through already having become a material part of social reality inhering in the body that such re-appropriated discourse and associated behavior norms can have real effect over and above any doomed attempt to “invent” or “introduce” novel discourse out of nothing.

Perhaps a better illustration, and Butler’s own preferred example, is the hyperbolic re-appropriation of conventional gender norms in drag performance, which allegorizes heterosexual melancholy and the way in which those norms are formed through the loss of a loss, through the foreclosure of certain socially dangerous possibilities.⁵⁸ Put roughly, the approach set forth by Butler does not promise freedom from the sign chains of subjectivation, but it suggests that some small freedom of movement might be possible as those chains inevitably rust.

The assertion being made here in this project is somewhat different. The claim is that it is possible to use the sign chains of power to chain power, that it is possible to tie power in its own knots. With subjectivity theory and somaesthetic practice drawing attention to the contingency of entrenched power structures, there exists the possibility of new forms of self-recognition not fixed by the terribly sublime necessity of the powers that be. This is to say that, by feeding the basic premises of a system back upon itself, paradoxes unanticipated by that system may result. Here, somaesthetic practice informed by subjectivity takes one of the major “rules” for subject life, that it be ritually regulated, and it uses ritual self-regulation to expose the contingency of those originally given rules. And so, in keeping with Butler’s approach to resistance, this approach does not posit the use of anything beyond the sign chains already there, nor does it depend on miraculous redemption à la Nietzsche. But going beyond Butler’s approach and the negativity and rage to which it necessarily and with good reason leads, the claim here is that turning attention to the aesthetic life of power can open up some *minor* possibility for affirmation and hope.

⁵⁶ Butler: *Bodies That Matter*, p. 223.

⁵⁷ Butler, Judith: “Performativity’s Social Magic”. *Bourdieu: A Critical Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999, pp. 125.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

To take what might be a more familiar and pleasantly accessible example, consider the Wizard of Oz. Seeing past the imposing simulacrum of the Wizard of Oz to the doddering figure at the machine does not change the circumstances for Dorothy and the rest, but knowing that his “power” is similarly contingent allows the heroes to realize that they have been able to face those circumstances with this less-grandiose type of power all along.⁵⁹ Now, nothing so dramatic as an all-revealing pull of a curtain is possible in the case of the subject, for subjectivation takes place through a multitude of encounters where countless different rituals are enacted with a variety of other subjects. But just as subjectivation occurs from a thousand different points, so too can a thousand tiny curtains be pulled back in a thousand particular contexts, all aggregating into burgeoning recognition of the ultimate contingency of subjectivation’s rites and rituals. The material, bodily, and somaesthetic work of realizing this contingency takes place across a manifold of settings and it does not erase the subject’s basic needs, meaning that there is no easy answer like that of Dorothy tapping her heels together three times and chanting “There’s no place like home.” Home does not even make sense for this kind of relational subject, this kind of soul in the making, if only because the fragmented discipline of subject life proves so far from home, so uncanny, so *unheimlich*, that it precludes any simple A-to-B-and-back-again narrative. Indeed, the deeply public nature of appearance and the social character of ritual indicate that whatever limited improvement may be possible might not rest in an *atomically individual* subject per se. Nonetheless, even if nothing like Zarathustra’s redemption of the will or a ruby-slipper return trip to Kansas is in the offing, exposing the contingency of subjectivation through conscious ritual work on the body and bodily norms can bring genuine improvement to the plight of subjects generally.

Conclusion

To sum up, this approach does not completely solve the problems of (I) subjectivation, but by providing a new sense of (II) autonomy through attention to how (III) *li*, in the process of (IV) subjectivity lead to a sedimentation of (V) techniques of appearance in collective unconsciousness, (VI) somaesthetic practices can ameliorate the dilemma bit by bit. This approach is meant to supplement rather than supplant resistance strategies exploiting sign chain rust by also creating tension with sign-chain knots.

⁵⁹ Baum, L. Frank: *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas 1999, p. 128; Fleming, Victor [director]: *The Wizard of Oz* [DVD]. 1939. Beverly Hills, CA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer 1997.

The claim being advanced in this project is that by confronting the effects of (I) subjectivation and obtaining (II) newfound autonomy with conscious attention to (III) *lī*, (IV) subjectality, (V) technique in appearance, and (VI) somaesthetic feeling, subjects can go past what Slavoj Žižek terms Butler's "mere 'performative reconfiguration'...within the hegemonic field"⁶⁰ in appropriating the technologies *of* the self for use *on* the self, resulting in a restructuring of the playing field, as Žižek wishes, and perhaps setting a new direction for critical theory (one hopes).

Moreover, a framework so built on the notions of (I) subjectivation, (II) autonomy, (III) *lī*, (IV) subjectality, (V) technique in appearance, and (VI) somaesthetics furthers the enterprise of intercultural philosophy. This approach advances intercultural thinking by pointing to a fruitful convergence being possible amidst supposedly disparate bodies of thought, and it does so, not out of intellectual vanity, but in its response to the genuine philosophical call to think through how the (A) relational, (B) discursive, (C) bodily, (D) ritualistic subject might encounter itself anew as a work of art hewn with other subjects in the medium of everyday practice.

⁶⁰ Žižek, Slavoj: *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*. London: Verso 1999, p. 264.