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Beyond WEIRD

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Psychobiography in
Times of Transcultural
and Transdisciplinary
Perspectives

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Abstract	While the concept of psychobiography has been largely developed in the West, this chapter demonstrates how it can be applied in China. The author describes and analyses Chinese celebrities with regard to the specific patterns of behaviour, based on the relevance of body language and nonverbal communication in their specific Chinese culture. Insofar as celebrities embody elements of typical cultural patterns, these celebrities are role models in terms of important social and cultural functions. Because the author is not experienced in the Chinese language he favours a transcultural and ethno-analytical approach. The chapter also illustrates the specific concept and methodology of adult observation. In contrast to infant observation, this method relates to people in their real-life situations. The psychobiographical analysis of “virtual persons” in relation to the background of personal patterns of behaviour and cultural impact is presented as a form of “learning history”.
Keywords (separated by ‘-’)	Body language - Transcultural communication - China - Learning history - Adult observation

Psychobiography of Chinese Celebrities: 1 Body Language, Adult Observation 2 and Learning History 3

U. Sollmann 4

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Keywords Body language · Transcultural communication · China · Learning 17
history · Adult observation 18

1 Psychobiography and Learning History 19

This chapter deals with the psychobiographical research perspective as applied to the 20
analysis of two Chinese celebrities. So far I have not found any specific literature 21
which could guide psychobiographical research in China as a non-WEIRD-context. 22
Therefore, I describe and discuss my methodology, approach and research process as 23
a meaningful part of the research design. I understand my approach as a further step 24 AU2
in the development of new trends in psychobiography” (Mayer & Kovary, 2019). 25 AU3

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AU1

Using the examples of two Chinese celebrities, I will shed light on some aspects of the cultural context of China. The hermeneutic approach informs my professional experience in a foreign cultural context.

A lot of psychotherapeutic research is usually concerned with the life history of clients. In addition, psychobiographical research explores the life of artists, politicians or other famous people who are no longer alive (Holm-Hadulla, 2019). In the German-speaking world, there were occasional psychobiographical analyses by psychoanalysts of still-living persons until the end of the last century. Sigmund Freud, for example, wrote about the American president Thomas Woodrow Wilson (Freud & Bullitt, 2007). In my book *Schaulauf der Mächtigen*, I psychobiographically trace behavioural and impact patterns of German government politicians in the context of media scenarios (Sollmann, 1999). A psychobiographical reference to public persons is not infrequently based on (psycho)analytical models of understanding. This can be elicited in different ways. The psychoanalyst and body psychotherapist Alexander Lowen expanded these concepts in the 70s and 80s to the extent that he clearly refers to the role and function of human corporeality (Lowen, 1981). Life experience is thus, and this is an essential insight, also expressed in body language (facial expressions, posture, movement patterns, etc.). On the one hand, life history shapes a person's physicality, but also vice versa. The analysis of nonverbal and para-verbal expression can enable differentiated conclusions to be drawn about biographical experiences and related patterns of behaviour, experience and expression. Building on this, I have applied this concept to the psychobiographical analysis of public persons since 1995 (e.g. Sollmann, 1995, 1999). Similarly, in this chapter I will trace my own experience and learning process in the sense of a "learning history". This serves, on the one hand, to illuminate my research design and methodology, which is mainly characterised by an action research approach. On the other hand, it illustrates and explains my analysis of Chinese celebrities.

A learning history is a process of documenting my own development, learning and analytic efforts to increase self-awareness. It presents my own understanding of and relationship to a new field of experience, including reports of actions and findings. It shows how my learning is an approach to become familiar with what I do, where I do it and with whom I do it. It also illustrates how I achieved my results (Roth & Kleiner, n.d.) www.thesystemthinker.com. In the learning history, I describe learning methods and the design of interventions, as well as my underlying assumptions and reasoning, which in this case help me to do psychobiographic analysis in an unfamiliar context. It serves as a critical element in developing my own research structure (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, n.d.).

My leading questions in this research were:

- How can I judge the success of my psychobiographical analysis in terms of improved understanding?
- How can readers and/or colleagues benefit from this experience?
- What type of personal behaviour patterns (of the subjects) helps me to understand the individuals' typical approach to their own life?

- What characteristics help to better understand this as a function in and of the cultural context?

2 My First Psychobiographical Analysis

In 1995 I was commissioned by *Der Spiegel*¹ to analyse the relationship pattern between the German tennis player, Steffi Graf,² and her father, as reflected in the media (Sollmann, 1995). The most famous features writer from *Der Spiegel* at the time (Jürgen Leinemann) refused to make such an analysis, since he knew neither Steffi Graf nor her father, nor had he ever spoken to them. According to Leinemann, it was part of a journalist's code of ethics to write only about those people with whom one had spoken.³

At that time, the editors-in-chief of *Der Spiegel* approached me because I had already published work dealing with the analysis of body language, expression and behaviour. Unlike Leinemann, these editors believed that one could draw conclusions about the person to be analysed from their visible expressive behaviour as noted by and reflected in the media. Since I had never spoken with Steffi Graf or her father, I could not make any statements about them apart from their relationship as it had been presented by the media (Sollmann, 1995). So I focussed not only on the real people but also on their virtuality. This integrates the awareness of the real people, their impact on the world, and the way in which the media mirror this, which can be termed the *media scenario*. The more this is focussed by observation, one could say that the main object of the study is a *virtual person*.

At that time, to the best of my knowledge, there was no known or differentiated methodology in Germany to make such an analysis of famous or public personalities. I therefore relied on the effect and analysis of body language and nonverbal communication, as I had done in my practice as a body psychotherapist and executive coach. As part of my body psychotherapy training, I was also familiar with personal life analysis. In addition, I expanded on concepts of observing infants (Trunkenpolz & Hover-Reisner, 2008) in non-therapeutic settings (Sollmann, 2006, 2018). Infant observation aims to learn more about relational behaviour as a whole by observing and analysing babies' development, especially in relation to their mothers. Adult observation, on the other hand, attempts to both elaborate typical patterns of behaviour, expression and action of the observed person and to draw conclusions about relevant biographical developmental experiences in this regard as well as formative experiential incidents (Sollmann, 2018).

¹*Der Spiegel* is the oldest and best-known German weekly political magazine.

²World's best female tennis player for many years.

³Jürgen Leinemann, Portaitist of "Der Spiegel" at the press conference at the Federal Press Conference, 04.08.1999, to the book presentation from Ulrich Sollmann "Schaulauf der Mächtigen—Was uns die Körpersprache der Politiker verrät"

3 Media Scenarios as a Seduction to Emotional (Partial) Identification

Media scenarios show the impact of public figures and often offer insights into the private lives of these public figures through home stories. However, a media scenario is something more than and different to factual reporting about public personalities or home stories. A media scenario offers itself as a mediator to enable media consumers to partially identify with public persons (Peters, 1996). A media scenario therefore acts as a projection surface for emotional milieus (Sollmann, 2011a, b). In so doing, the media scenario represents a transitional space in which public figure, emotional environment and society/culture meet (Ciompi, 2011).

Media work usually refer to the behaviour of a public person in relation to the situation in question and discuss the significance of this behaviour for the particular occasion or subject (Sollmann & Mayer, 2021). As a rule, however, this cannot identify this as a typical pattern for the person and the particular life story, nor can this usually view or even evaluate the specific occasion from this special perspective.

A more detailed analysis of media coverage, which I undertook when writing my book on politics revealed that different media took different reporting perspectives regarding public figures. My analysis at the time showed that the sum of the different perspectives produced a plausible overall picture of the individual public figure and reflected typical patterns of behaviour and impact that were biographically shaped and relevant for the entire life of that person (Sollmann, 1999).

Accordingly, some media reported more intensively on an aspect A, others on aspect B, others again on aspect C. This subliminally aroused the interest of media consumers who favoured a particular medium. The more space this partial coverage was given, the more likely a reader could partially identify with aspect A or aspect B. This subset of the population can be called the emotional milieu, which I refer to as circular emotional self-affirmation. The aspect A or B favoured in this medium became more concise and meaningful the more it was enacted. This vitalised the emotionality of the subpopulation (Sollmann, 2000).

Conversely, the importance of specific, personal patterns of expression and effect were reinforced. The interaction of specific media scenarios with the partial identification by the media consumers promotes projections on the part of the latter. This leads to a strengthening of the virtual relationship between public person or celebrity and the audience. The celebrity, audience, and media scenario merge into a virtual entity, fed by the personality traits of the public person or celebrity and by basic social or cultural attitudes.

A reciprocal resonance then occurs. Celebrities serve social and cultural needs, especially through their nonverbal patterns of expression and impact. In this case, the media act as mediators and amplifiers of the mutual resonances. Put simply, celebrities in Germany or the USA are more likely to have a meaningful impact and successful career in their own cultural sphere. A well-known politician may be perceived as charismatic in one country, but not in another (Günter, 2005).

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4 Between Confirmation and Ethical Controversy

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My analysis in *Der Spiegel* caused a broad social and media response.⁴ There were hostilities, accusations and even a complaint to the ethics commission by professional colleagues.⁵ The accusation was that I should not have used psychotherapy concepts and methods to analyse people I had never seen or spoken to. I should have asked Steffi Graf and her father for permission first. I took these responses and reactions personally and professionally very much to heart. Consequently, over the next 2 years, I dealt with the questions:

- Was I allowed to write like this? 154
- Who or what was the subject of my analysis? 155
- What are the ethical considerations in the psychobiographical analysis of public persons? 156

The collegial exchanges which followed finally encouraged me to embrace the view that a psychotherapist has a social obligation to write about specific relationship patterns of public figures, if they have any social relevance (Kant, 2018).⁶ Such an approach to the fundamental ethic assessment and pragmatics of ethics can be well illustrated by the example of the corresponding discourse in the USA. On the one hand, there is the ethical requirement not to comment on a public figure from a professional point of view. On the other hand, there is the so-called Tarasoff Doctrine, from which the necessity can even be derived to even have to speak out as a psychological and psychotherapeutic expert if there may be potentially dangerous consequences of the behaviour (Ewing, 2005). In the case of the relationship of Steffi Graf and her father, there was clear relevance in that the relational abuse pattern was frequently found in the lives of top female tennis players (e.g. Monica Seles⁷). Two years later, the German Tennis Federation took up some of my thoughts and proposals in one of its magazine editorials (Sollmann, 2022a, b, c), in order to stipulate conditions for working with girls in top tennis. I refer to this experience to emphasise that a flexible, ethical method is needed to solve moral problems by a recourse to practical wisdom (Gordon, 2019), in contrast to the categorical imperative of Immanuel Kant (2018).

After all, the ethical and “moral universe” is too complex for all problems to be solved by a master principle alone. “Rather, a flexible, ethical method is needed that solves our moral problems by recourse to practical wisdom “ (Sollmann, 2022b, p. 68, referring to Gordon, 2019). According to Gordon, ethics must also be

⁴Letter to the editor by psychology professor Tausch in “Der Spiegel”, No. 33, 1995.

⁵Complaint to the Ethics Committee of the Professional Association of Bioenergetic Analysis (DVBA), End of August 1995 by the psychologist Richard Redl.

⁶The practical experience and the media echo as well as basic ethical reference helped me to develop more self-trust in this approach as well as a deeper, professional reference (e.g. Kant, 2018).

⁷Welt (2022).

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180 understood as thinking about questions of the “good life” (ethics). In consequence,
 181 ethics can never be seen without the aspect of “ethics as a method”. This makes it
 182 possible then to select the right aspect for the respective situation as determining
 183 under the essential aspects of morality. (Sollmann, 2022b, p. 81, referring to Gordon,
 184 2019).

185 Encouraged by this experience, and by positive feedback from people I had
 186 previously analysed (Sollmann, 2017), I also endeavoured to analyse public figures
 187 and celebrities in other cultural contexts (Sollmann, 2000, 2004, 2020a, 2022a, b, c).
 188 In 2014/2015, as part of my professional work in China, I was asked to do similar
 189 analyses of Chinese celebrities for Internet TV. This request confronted me with an
 190 extraordinary challenge since I did not know the Chinese language, nor was I
 191 familiar with the Chinese media scenarios. For the first time in my life I stepped
 192 into a cultural sphere that had hitherto been completely foreign to me.

193 5 Analysis of Chinese Celebrities

194 In 2015, the operators of the internet platform www.iepsy.com⁸ asked me to make
 195 analyses of Fan Bing Bing (actress), Faye Wong (singer), Jin Xin (transgender talk-
 196 master), Zhou Li Bo (stand-up comedian) and Ma Yun, the founder of the Alibaba
 197 company, among others. I received minimal information regarding age, profession
 198 and the type of activity the celebrities were involved in. A Chinese colleague who
 199 was an excellent translator helped me to search for any videos available on the
 200 Chinese Internet. These were videos regarding professional activities and concerning
 201 the celebrities’ lives (Sollmann, 2015a, b). Following my analyses, I was asked in an
 202 on-camera interview for my assessment, and for recommendations, as a life coach, to
 203 achieve even more success or greater wealth.

204 Initially I was relieved to refer only to the effect of body language and nonverbal
 205 expressive behaviour. On the other hand, however, I was faced with the great
 206 difficulty of relating my impressions to the cultural context, without having learned
 207 more about the life and work of the celebrities in the Chinese environment.

208 In the course of my professional work and ethnological research in China, I was
 209 concerned with the practical, everyday behaviour of the Chinese people. In addition,
 210 I tried to relate typical patterns of behaviour and action to the particular social
 211 situation and the cultural and historical influences in China (Sollmann, 2015a, b,
 212 2018). In this respect, related experiences as well as hypotheses from my ethnolog-
 213 ical research in China served as a frame of reference.

214 As previously noted, the analyses of Chinese celebrities took place in a cultural
 215 habitat that was previously foreign to me. The experience, knowledge and perspec-
 216 tive with which I was quite familiar in the West were largely lacking in China.
 217 Nonetheless, I wanted to harness my unusual transcultural perspective to be able to

⁸The videos can be found via the website and the search function.

analyse the celebrities and vividly describe the media consumer experience. Since I 218
 was interested in gaining in-depth insights in a relatively foreign context, my 219
 intention in these analyses was to understand the expressive behaviour as meaning- 220
 ful, culturally appropriate behaviour and as an expression of patterns of expression. 221
 Therefore, to analyse in a meaningful way, I needed to analyse the person coherently 222
 (of course only perceived from my perspective) and at the same time demonstrate a 223
 sufficient fit with the audience and the fans in an accessible way. In this respect, I 224
 thought I could sufficiently relate person to culture for my purposes. In addition, I 225
 placed great emphasis on, transculturally speaking, my resonance (including emo- 226
 tional resonance) when viewing the videos. This resonance served me for profes- 227
 sional partial identification, for emotional co-experience, and for the necessary 228
 critical distance. One may call this transcultural communication (Krämer & 229
 Nazarkiewicz, 2012). 230

6 Basic Questions 231

I agree with Fouché and Van Niekerk (2010) that psychobiography is a method of 232
 deeper re-understanding and re-interpreting the lives of individuals. In terms of the 233
 Chinese cultural context, I had very little basic information available regarding 234
 celebrity biographies. Therefore, I had decided to refer to the celebrities' perception, 235
 assessment and analysis of central patterns of behaviour and effects. After all, these 236
 are actually visible and perceptible in the here-and-now. In this way, the perception 237
 and assessment of nonverbal expression and effect offer a door into a life story that 238
 needs to be opened. Some helpful questions to ask in the process of understanding a 239
 learning history are the following: 240

- How do I find a suitable key to be able to open a door into a biography that is 241
 completely foreign to me? 242
- Are there other doors of participant observation and understanding? 243
- What is the appropriate perspective that opens up for me to see biography in a 244
 cultural space that is foreign to me? 245
- Which basic methodological understanding is suitable and meaningful for such 246
 an approach? 247
- Which methods correspond best to the psychobiographical approach I have 248
 chosen? 249
- How can a possible interplay between the effect of the public persona, media 250
 scenario and emotional (partial) identification of the media consumers be deter- 251
 mined in more detail? 252
- Are there any emotional and cultural projections that might be at work here? 253
- If so, does a celebrity embody a social-cultural function? 254

Psychobiography is characterised as a process of understanding from a distance. 255
 Research therefore integrates the object of research (the person to be analysed) and 256

257 the subject (the researcher himself). Questioning helps to find a way of better
258 understanding this relationship.

259 7 Body Language as Nonverbal Communication Is Always 260 a Process

261 Body language and nonverbal effect are always an interplay of personal expression
262 of the acting person and personal impression by the counterpart. They are an
263 effective part of the current relationship situation. The interplay of expression and
264 impression characterises not only the relationship scenario but also lives from the
265 individuality and particularity of the people involved. The body and body language
266 behaviour are source, representation, control of communication and interaction. In
267 this respect, people often react unconsciously to these patterns of movement and
268 behaviour. Often they do not reflect on this and therefore cannot cognitively grasp,
269 describe or consciously react to their own behavioural patterns let alone those of
270 their counterparts. This is not the case for experts, however. Studies have shown that
271 experts are superior to non-experts in the accuracy of their judgements regarding
272 adult observation. They differ significantly from the random level. Bioenergetic
273 analysts, for example, assign depicted or self-observed people to typical behavioural
274 structures with relatively high agreement (Koemeda-Lutz & Peter, 2001).

275 The analysis of movement, reaction, behaviour patterns allows an interactive
276 access to the body image of the counterpart, which in turn allows conclusions to be
277 drawn about the subjective organisation of experience in the counterpart, their self-
278 perception, orientation to and behaviour in the world. Body experience and body
279 expression thus combine in a person's outward effect and as part of the communi-
280 cative event with the counterpart. Body language is characterised and shaped by
281 photographic elements, the outward quality of effect, the dialogic potential and the
282 response of the counterpart. It therefore constitutes a central space of personal
283 experience, of communicative events and of human development in general. It acts
284 as a consciously difficult-to-control interplay of general human characteristics,
285 experience, personal peculiarities, behavioural patterns and so on.

286 The body expression shows how someone stands in the world, how they react to
287 their life circumstances and have formed their personality. In the personality struc-
288 ture, central historical experiences and conflicts are conserved to a certain extent and
289 become visible later in life. However, a personality model is not an image of a
290 person, but a description of recurring experiences and patterns of action of real
291 people in specific social and cultural contexts. Especially when under stress or
292 emotional strain, in conflict and in crises, one unconsciously falls back on the
293 early experiences patterns of action from one's life history. These then serve as the
294 best possible pattern in the sense of a survival mechanism (Lowen, 1981; Sollmann,
295 1997). Outsiders can often semi-consciously recognise these patterns, while it is
296 usually difficult to do so for oneself. In stressful and strained conditions, and also

when one is in love, recurring, typical patterns of expression and action are more likely to be recognised. They usually function automatically, as if by themselves (Lowen, 1981). They are to be understood more in the sense of a stress reaction, less as individual responses, owing to the particularity of the relationship.

To that extent, these reactivated patterns reflect the essence of central biographical experiences. Understanding this essence helps one to develop more knowledge about specific characteristics of the individual. It also allows conclusions to be drawn about relationship situations when they are experienced at the time as distress or crisis. Such situations certainly also reflect societal and cultural influences that were significant at the time. After all, the conditions experienced by the individual as emotional distress are also an expression of surrounding and formative culture. These acquired patterns of behaviour and action then correspond to an emotional survival mode in the respective culture.

With this in mind, my purpose in analysing the Chinese celebrities was not to gain more insight into the life histories of the celebrities. Instead, my interest was in gaining a better understanding of the behavioural and expressive structure of the individuals and their impact and meaning in the Chinese cultural context.

8 Concept of Adult Observation

Adult observation (Sollmann, 2006) is a concept and an instrument to systematically conceive the interplay of person and behaviour/behavioural patterns in a public space or professional context, to analyse it in a process-like manner, to relate it to its context and to identify implications for impact. It deals with the interplay of nonverbal impact, body language, personality and behavioural patterns in a specific context.

In a culturally foreign context, I find the concept of adult observation helpful in relating to the visible expressive behaviour, nonverbal effect and corresponding communication/effect on me as an observer. My previous analyses in China confirm the sense and usefulness of such a methodological approach in a culturally foreign environment (Ekman, 2016).

For the thinking model of adult observation, movement means lively exchange, interaction with others and recognition by others. Movement patterns contain information about the identity of the actor, their age and gender, about their intentions and their state of mind, health and inner emotional state. The human perceptual system is excellently equipped to recognise these complex motion sequences. For example, in a crowd of people, one can recognise a friend even that friend is wearing new clothes and has an unfamiliar haircut, even if one cannot see the friend's whole body. Movement patterns play a central role here. Moreover, only a few characteristics or distinctive points are enough for the brain to convey certainty that this is the person (Lischke, 2000). Bioenergetic analysis (Lowen, 1981) and analytical movement models (Lischke, 2000; Rick, 1989; Trautmann-Voigt & Voigt, 2009) offer

ways to understand the personality from the body, the movement patterns and the energetic processes.⁹

Adult observation in the non-pathological field makes use of the so-called *affect modes* (Krause, 2017, 1998; Ciompi, 1998; Ciompi & Endert, 2011). These are a matter of identifying and analysing situationally related feelings, perceptions and behaviour, which are connected in memory to form functional units in the sense of integrated feeling, thinking and embodied behavioural programmes which become visible in behaviour and structure (Ciompi, 1998). The procedure of adult observation of public persons in the context of media scenarios could be understood as an operationalisation of body language and nonverbal communication as a meaningful and essential focus.

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9 Personification, Role and Public Relations Competence

Public celebrities gain competence by mastering the interplay between nonverbal effects, body language, personality and behavioural patterns in a given context. They learn the art of “being myself” (as a personality), “being different” (distinguishable in role behaviour), “being common” (by serving unconscious fantasies and projections of the audience) and “being public” (in terms of public-speaking skills). Then they know their job. They are media competent, familiar on the public stage. Through their “lead” they influence by offering a direction for partial identification. They have learned to hold tensions in abeyance in such a way that curiosity on the part of the audience is not only served, but also grows steadily. At the same time, this serves to increase notoriety, fame, popularity and wealth, while they have the courage to make important decisions. In this way, they embody a role model function and unconsciously act vicariously for their fans.

The more sensitive and aware these celebrities are of their behavioural patterns and of themselves, the more easily the audience connects with them in their respective contexts. They are less influenced by a socially determined code of good behaviour and are instead convincing as an individual type in their special habitus. The more credible and consistent the particular type is perceived to be, the higher its personal effectiveness in the public field. In this case, being effective means subtly attracting partial identification. In this way, celebrities invite their fans to identify with them and to project themselves onto the celebrities. Fans then feel close to these celebrities, as if they were friends, personal companions, providing hope in times of need, and encouragement through difficulties.

⁹At this point, no further reference can be made to the description and discussion regarding other, similar models. No further reference is possible because of the space of this chapter.

10 Analysis of Two Chinese Celebrities

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In the following, I will use two examples to illustrate typical behavioural and impact patterns of Chinese celebrities. I then relate this to the effect these behaviours have as interpreted by public media, in order to finally derive from this a specific function in the Chinese cultural context.

10.1 Fan Bing Bing

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Preliminary information provided by client: Fan Bing Bing is a Chinese actress and singer. A few years ago, she topped the Forbes list of the highest-paid celebrities in China. She graduated from Shanghai Normal University Xie Jin Film and Television Art Academy. She made her debut in a famous Chinese teledrama at the age of 15. She became famous from 2001 on and this led to her taking on various leading roles, including in the US. In 2013, she was named International Artist of the Year (The Hollywood Reporter).

Chinese actress Fan Bing Bing impresses with two nonverbal expressive qualities. On the one hand, she captivates with her actual beauty, elegance of movement, and a shy, coy, mysterious and attractive smile. On the other hand, she convinces with full body movements that she is not too shy to figuratively “roll in the dirt”, to wrestle with men, to fight physically and never to hide her sense of lusty fun. She always moves naturally and flowingly, which she herself seems to enjoy when playing her role, while at the same time performing in a highly concentrated manner, with all her strength and personal commitment. One sees this on her face and feels directly addressed by the sound of her voice. During a fight in the mire with several men, for example, one feels her liveliness and is surprised by the variety of her reactions.

In one scene, she throws kisses with her hand into the crowd, unobtrusively, elegantly, attractively and perfectly like a queen. In another, when playing in the morass, one senses the quick-wittedness and punch of her subtle aggressiveness. This underlines her need for independence and autonomy, without being hurtful or destructive.

She seems to be in close and easy contact with her counterpart, which she often seems to express through her head position, the gaze directed at the counterpart, and in the variety of her facial expressions. One can get the impression that she has mastered the art of “Talking by Moving” (in the sense how she talks nonverbally by bodily expression). At the same time, she never loses the charisma of being the “girl from the neighbourhood”.

Fan Bing Bing masters the habitus of a perfect, beautiful, attractive “queen”, and the independence, self-reliance and tomboyishness of a pubescent teenager who has once again arranged a new prank or a scuffle with the neighbourhood boys. It seems that just then one can “do anything” with her. She is not too shy for any outrage. She

410 enjoys every moment, every touch, every look and convinces in a language without
411 words. Especially in this ensemble of nonverbal expressions she persuades and
412 unconsciously offers emotionally rich identification.

413 Fan Bing Bing seems to have major cultural significance as a “role model” in
414 China. She offers herself as a mirror for the projection of being able to feel
415 independent and autonomous, but also pleasurable in one’s own physicality. At
416 the same time, one can see the social-cultural shyness and shame inherent in the role
417 of women in today’s China.

418 She also shows herself to be feisty and not afraid to take risks. For example in real
419 life, she happened to see a car accident in which a boy was injured. She stopped her
420 cab, carried the boy to the cab and drove him and his mother to a hospital. There she
421 took care of the treatment and still gave the mother money for the medicine. On the
422 one hand, she was celebrated on social media for this act; on the other hand, she was
423 showered with an enormous on the other hand, she evoked a chaotic and violent
424 response. This rather expressed the cultural perspective on this event. After all, in
425 China it is dangerous to do such a thing. As a rule, people in China do not care about
426 such things. Otherwise, one could be in danger, without any reason, of being held
427 responsible later for possible treatment errors or compensation for pain and suffer-
428 ing. Even though this seems to be completely foreign to Western culture, this
429 example also shows that Fan Bing Bing not only shows full commitment, but also
430 appears to take risks herself.

431 During the production in the studio, I heard about a statement made by the actress
432 that could not be more apt: *“The more slanders one can take, the higher praises one*
433 *should deserve”*.

434 10.2 Zhou Libo

435 *Preliminary information provided by client: Zhou Libo is a Chinese stand-up*
436 *comedian. As the founder of Shanghai Style Talk Show, he experienced enormous*
437 *nationwide success. In 2009, he was named “The most influential figure of Asia” by*
438 *CNN. A year later, the China Charity Federation gave him an award as “The most*
439 *generous philanthropist”*.

440 His professional career has taken him through ups and downs, including time in
441 jail for what is described as “wounding with intent” (Zhou, 2022). In his role as
442 stand-up comedian and businessman, he is very controversial.

443 When Zhou Libo enters the stage, he is there. He is present with words and body
444 expression and convinces in a split second. This is what distinguishes him as a stand-
445 up comedian, and as an audience member, one can expect the same from him. His
446 body expression conveys that he is level-headed, deliberate and impressive in his
447 first steps. When he starts to speak, he brilliantly plays the choreography of the
448 subtly exaggerated, striking, nonverbal expression. I, as someone who does not
449 know the Chinese language, could not avert my gaze, already completely fascinated
450 by him. He moves with full body language and yet his movement is only

conditionally spontaneous. He masters the metier of being in direct, unmistakable contact with his audience. He acts in a state of readiness that enables him to place a specific message in a targeted manner. It is precisely in this way that he binds the audience to himself, and does not release them from his spell. His subtle, barely noticeable ability to place “pause” without interruption seems to be in the service of his self-assurance. The ensemble of unerring verbal expression and the competence of self-assurance form essential expressive elements of his art of communication. He has people in his grasp.

One either loves him or rejects him completely. Having friends and enemies seems to be part of his formula of irony and sarcasm. By exaggerating, but without losing himself in this exaggeration, he does justice to his role as a stand-up comedian. And yet his expressive movements and facial expressions reflect a language of their own. They emphasise the intended dramaturgy while reflecting his subtle competence in maintaining the necessary self-assurance that protects him from hurting his counterpart through provocation, irony and sarcasm.

But he can also do quite the opposite! In one lengthy interview, I saw an emotionally collected, introspective, smirking man with calm gestures and pleasant voice make confident contact with his counterpart in a meaningful way. His attention seems to be turned towards the interviewer, and through this, he embodied the seriousness and respect of his counterpart.

He is also a clown, an artificial character who is proud of himself and wants to be seen as a *flâneur* (Not doing anything in particular. Just walking around, watching people.). I think of stand-up comedians I know from television in Germany, only a few of whom know how to embody irony, sarcasm and respect effectively and credibly in this way without offending the audience. Perhaps this gives him an important cultural function. In China, it is not necessarily customary to “call a spade a spade”, to “put one’s finger in the wound”, or to dare a possible conflict in communication. Of course, the Chinese can also be very emotionally confrontational and offensive. However, this seems to be primarily more likely when someone feels emotionally cornered or is in great distress. Chinese seem to be either moderate or too impulsive and expressive.

Listening to Zhou Libo, eavesdropping on him, and putting oneself in his place through partial identification, could then be like a socially accepted transitional space where, by participating in Zhou Libo’s programme, one can unconsciously relieve oneself internally through emotional rehearsal. Spectators, it seems to me, enjoy his wit and irony. Spectators also leave his stage performance inwardly relaxed and emotionally well-tempered.

During the TV production, I learned of a central slogan of the artist: “*It is redneck-like to eat garlic and aristocracy-like to drink coffee*”. (Comment from my Chinese interpreter, Peking, 14.06.2015)

491 11 Conclusion

492 This approach is appropriate to psychobiography in a non-WEIRD context insofar as
493 it refers to the nonverbal expression of specific behaviour patterns, which were
494 developed in the personal biography of the public person. These patterns embody
495 aspects of the psychological state of the person and implicitly offer structural
496 information about the life history.

497 This approach is a first and helpful methodological choice in a strange cultural
498 context,

- 499 • because it supports a basic transcultural understanding.
- 500 • It relies on the hermeneutic perception in the here-and-now,
- 501 • acknowledging virtuality as a relevant transition space.
- 502 • Its procedural architecture satisfies the need of action research, and

503 the concept of “learning history” seems to be an appropriate approach to open
504 learning.

505 Of course, this approach needs further deeper conceptual and methodological
506 discussion in the field of psychobiography which could not be possible in this first
507 step of research.

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