

Lost in the Translation: “Chi” and Related Terms of Shame in the Confucian Tradition

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Editor's note: Hakomi grows and changes through its encounter with cross-cultural contexts, both within the United States and throughout the world. In this article we are privileged to benefit from the wisdom of Louise Sundararajan, who has a long history of exploring mindfulness emotions and multi-cultural issues, especially those related to the East. Her article here was first published in the *Emotion Researcher*, Vol. 26 (3), pp. 9-11, and is used with permission.

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ABSTRACT

The concept of shame is examined in relation to the Chinese concept of chi. An examination of the Chinese Confucian context offers a contrast to common Western understandings of shame as developmentally negative resulting in insecure attachments. The concept of the relational self in the East is contrasted with the atomic self of the West, and shown to support the development of compassion and empathy that are important for group cohesion and intrinsic morals.

Key words: shame, relational self, atomic self, compassion, empathy, child development, group cohesion, attachment

Shame is a negative emotion, of which the Chinese seem to have an especially large repertoire. We are told in numerous cross cultural studies that this serves to capitalize on conformity and adherence to group norms. A close examination of the language game based on chi and related terms suggests a more nuanced story.

Consider the famous statements of Mencius: “One is not a human without the feeling of commiseration; one is not a human without the feeling of shame [chi] and dislike . . .” (Legge, 1971, Vol. II, pp. 202-204). Unlike emotions such as guilt, feelings of compassion and chi (shame) are enduring sensibilities without any specific antecedents or end points. Such sensibilities are essential to moral autonomy, a factor occluded by the notion of interdependent self construal, but is consistent with the proposal of Kağıtçıbaşı (2005) that the relational self may go hand in hand with an independent autonomous self. Indeed, it was as an alternative to morality through fear conditioning and group think, that Confucius advocated for the development of chi. The Master said:

If the people be led by laws, and uniformity sought to be given them by punishments, they will try to avoid the punishment, but have no sense of shame [chi]. If they be led by virtue, and uniformity sought to be given them by the rules of propriety, they will have the sense of shame [chi], and moreover will become good. (Legge, 1971, Vol. I, p. 146, emphasis in the original)

In support of moral autonomy is the distinction made in the Confucian tradition between intrinsic and circumstantial shame—the former concerns one's moral character; the latter social norms such as position, appearance, wealth, and so on. The Master said, “When internal examination discovers nothing wrong, what is there to be anxious about, what is there to fear?” (Legge, 1971, Vol. I, p. 252). Thus a Confucian gentleman does not let

circumstantial shame bother him—only intrinsic shame counts (Cua, 1996, p. 183). In the Chinese tradition, the ability to withstand extrinsic shame is the hallmark of a crowd defying, creative individual, such as Mao Zedong (Fang & Faure, 2011) and countless poets and statesmen before him.

This protocol of shame is missing from the collectivistic accounts of China, an omission which may be attributable to self-construal—that of the researcher's. The assumption in Western psychology is that the self has two pathways, either to affirm itself as an independent agent or to efface itself for the sake of group cohesion. However, evidence is accumulating (e.g., Harb & Smith, 2008) that beyond the individualism and collectivism dichotomy, a relational self can be differentiated from the collective self. The relational self (Gergen, 2009) account does not first start with an atomic self which then forms relations with other atomic selves. Rather, it conceives of the self as having its origin in a matrix of relationships—as Tu and others have argued, “selfhood arises out of filial (or unfilial) relations with parents, not out of themes of self-relation” (Neville, 1996, p. 216, note 1).

For illustration, consider the following scenario (Mascolo, Fischer, & Li, 2003): A young child refuses to comply with mother's request to share candy with grandma. Mother says with a sad voice and expression, “Aiya [my goodness], Lin won't share her candy,” or “I have a child who won't share with Grandma” (p. 395). Cast in the framework of the relational self, the child might feel her mother's distress over her noncompliance, just as mother feels for hers on a routine basis. In China, “heart aching love” (xin teng) is one of the earliest expressions children learn (Shaver, Wu, & Schwartz, 1992), who are often teased with the question, “does your mother's heart ache for you?” This is part and parcel of the Confucian pedagogy, in which it is empathy—the capacity to feel for the other's pain, not fear of punishment—that motivates one's self correction.

The Chinese parent's tendency to comment on the child's failure in front of others has been interpreted as shaming by Mascolo, Fischer, and Li (2003). An important detail that tends to be overlooked is the fact that the “others” in these scenarios are usually not strangers, but members of the in-group—relatives and friends, who give effusive praises to the child when mother makes disparaging statements about the child. What the child learns in this situation is not necessarily the discrepancy between mother and others (Mascolo et al., 2003), so much as the dialectic of yin-yang complementarity (Fang & Faure, 2011) in social discourse, in which mother and others are on two

sides of the teeter totter of behavioral appraisals. The potentially buffering role of the in-group other is neglected in the analysis, when the mother-child dyad becomes the focus of a collectivistic narrative that highlights the use of shaming to reinforce the values of modesty and self-effacement for the sake of group cohesion.

In sum, there are two accounts of chi that fall along the divide between two types of attachment, secure and insecure (Rothbaum, Morelli, & Rusk, 2011). The collectivistic account casts chi and related terms in the framework of insecure attachment, characterized by the defensive coping of loss of face and its restoration. The Confucian account, by contrast, seems to have capitalized on secure attachment, as evidenced by its emphasis on the constructive coping of compassion, perspective taking (mom hurting for me), and self-correction. It is an empirical question as to which developmental scenario of chi and related terms is more prevalent in different historical contexts: Taiwan, Hong Kong, or mainland China. However, to the extent that the Chinese notions of shame are not always negative in connotation, and to the extent that they are broader in scope than their Western counterpart, there is reason to believe that the secure attachment version of chi constitutes an essential ingredient in the Chinese understanding of this emotion.

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