

Lost in the translation:

"*Chi*" and related terms of shame in the Confucian tradition

Louise Sundararajan

(In press). *The Emotion Researcher*.

Shame is a negative emotion, of which the Chinese seem to have an especially large repertoire, which serves to capitalize on conformity and adherence to group norms, so we are told in numerous cross cultural studies. 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 and 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 and 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, emphasis in original).

For illustration, consider the following scenario (Mascolo, Fischer, and 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 for 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, and 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, et al. (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 latter. 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 and 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, and 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.

References

- Cua, A. S. (1996). A Confucian perspective on self-deception. In R. T. Ames, & W. Dissanayake (Eds.), *Self and desception/A cross-cultural philosophical enquiry* (pp. 177-199). Albany, NY: State University of New York.
- Fang, T. and Faure, G. L. (2011). Chinese communication characteristics: A yin yang perspective. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 35, 320-333.
- Gergen, K. J. (2009). *Relational being*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Harb, C., & Smith, P. B. (2008). Self-construals across cultures: Beyond independence-interdependence. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 39, 178–197.
- Kağıtçıbaşı, Ç. (2005). Autonomy and relatedness in cultural context: Implications for self and family. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 36, 403–422.
- Legge, J. (1971). *The Chinese classics: Vols. I & II*. Taipei: Wen Shi Zhe Ch'uban Shè (First edition Shanghai, 1935)

- Mascolo, M. F., Fischer, K. W., and Li, J. (2003). Dynamic development of component systems of emotions: Pride, shame, and guilt in China and the United States. In R. J. Davidson (Ed.), *Handbook of affective sciences* (pp. 375-408). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Neville, R. C. (1996). A Confucian construction of a self-deceivable self. In R. T. Ames, & W. Dissanayake (Eds.), *Self and deception/A cross-cultural philosophical enquiry* (pp.201-217). Albany, NY: State University of New York.
- Rothbaum, F., Morelli, G., and Rusk, N. (2011). Attachment, learning, and coping. In M. J. Gelfand, C-y. Chiu, and Y-y. Hong (Eds.), *Advances in culture and psychology* (pp. 153-215). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Shaver, P. R., Wu, S., Schwartz, J. C. (1992). Cross-Cultural similarities and differences in emotion and its representation/A prototype approach. In M. S. Clark (Ed.), *Review of personality and social psychology (Vol. 13), Emotion* (pp. 175-212). Beverly Hills, LA: Sage.