

ELATION AND JOY -喜樂 - XI LE

Translation from the French by Laurence Mourey.

ELATION - XI 喜

Elation and anger (xi nu 喜怒)

Elation has traditionally been paired with anger:

“Are men exceedingly joyful? They will do damage to the yang element. Are men exceedingly angry? They will do damage to the yin. And when both yang and yin are damaged, the four seasons will not come as they should, heat and cold will fail to achieve their proper harmony, and this in turn will do harm to the bodies of men. It will make men lose a proper sense of joy and anger, to be constantly shifting from place to place, to think up schemes that gain nothing, to set out on roads that reach no glorious conclusion.” (Zhuangzi 11)

Elation and anger make up two opposing movements, since elation is cooling and anger is warming. It is therefore inherent to these two emotions to disorganize the yin yang harmony of a person's qi. Since man belongs to the qi of the cosmos, his disharmony is also the disharmony of nature: the Four seasons, which are the perfect example of the alternation and the harmonious composition of the yin and the yang, are disorganized. The disorder of the Four seasons is, within a being, the disorder of his qi, the poor composition and the poor alternation of the yin and the yang within his body and his mind.

This pair of emotions is discussed in medical texts, where it can represent imbalances generated by poorly managed emotions, next to diseases caused by exterior pathogens (heat and cold) or by other causes such as poor sexual habits:

“Thus, Knowinging-How is the maintenance of life.
Do not fail to observe the Four seasons and to adapt to heat and cold,
To harmonize elation and anger and to be calm in activity as in rest,
To regulate the yin/yang and to balance the hard and the soft,
In this way, having deflected the perverse influences, there will be long life and everlasting vision.” (Lingshu 8)

Someone whose constitution is dominated by yin or by yang will have a natural tendency, as well as spontaneous reactions, towards elation or anger, towards elation and liveliness or towards nervousness and irritation.

“A lot of yang is a lot of elation. A lot of yin is a lot of anger.” (Lingshu 67)

Here the yin is connected with anger, since anger is caused by a blockage, whereas the yang corresponds to expansion and liveliness.

Elation and anger as a pair also represent all emotional disorders, since these emotions damage both the yin and the yang, the blood and the qi, all that nourishes, moistens and irrigates, as well as all that animates, warms and transforms.

“Heaven has Four seasons and Five elements for generating, growing, gathering in and burying, which produce cold, heat, dryness, dampness and wind. Man has Five zang and, through transformation, Five qi, which produce elation, anger, sadness, oppression and fear.

Thus, elation and anger injure the qi, whereas cold and heat injure the body form. Violent anger injures the yin, violent elation injures the yang. The qi in counter-current flows upwards, congests the vital circulation (mai) from which vitality leaves the body. If elation and anger are not well regulated, if cold and heat are excessive, life is no longer firmly established.” (Suwen 5)

Both elation and anger are “yang” emotions, since they correspond to the elements (Wood and Fire) associated with the yang seasons (spring and summer), and to the “male” zang (Liver and Heart). Hence, there is a yin yang pair within the yang. Elation is not a yin emotion, but it is yin only within the emotions characterized by a yang movement of qi.

It is easy to understand how anger damages the yin, by violently driving the qi upwards, in an uncontrolled yang movement that leaves the lower empty and which damages blood and body fluids. It is not as easy to understand how elation damages the yang.

Elation corresponds to the Heart, to the qi of Fire:

“In Heaven, it is heat; on Earth, it is fire. Among the organs zang, it is the Heart. Among the expressions of will, it is elation (xi 喜). Elation injures the Heart.” (Suwen 5)

“When essences and qi are all together (bing 并)¹ in the Heart, there is elation (xi 喜)”. (Suwen 23)

Pathological elation, an excess of elation, should logically be an excess of fire, an excitement, a warming which damages the yin and unduly inflates the yang. This can indeed happen in the case of excessive elation; but one may prefer to focus on the damage to the yin.

The reason is probably of a double nature. First, because elation is first and foremost a normal and desirable feeling, with a relaxing and cooling effect, much more than a warming effect; then, because if the wind is too strong, the qi of Wood, having lost its balance, rouses violence and excessive heat, and the qi of Fire, having lost its balance, burns and consumes not only the body fluids but also the qi:

“An excessive fire diminishes the qi, a light fire reinforces the qi;
An excessive fire feeds on qi, qi feeds on a light fire;
An excessive fire disperses the qi, a light fire produces qi.” (Suwen 5)

¹ To encroach is to be in excess, blood and qi gathered in one place, instead of sharing and flowing into the different areas related to their function.

Elation as a loosening of the qi

Elation represents the qi of Fire. In normal circumstances, the qi of Fire is what nourishes life, not what destroys it. Here is a presentation of the Fire element in a text written in the 3rd century:

“Fire is situated in the southern quarter. On the southern quarter, yang is superior and the Ten thousand beings hang down their branches. Fire (huo 火) means to bend and conform, that is to say that the Ten thousand beings multiply and spread themselves out. Fire also means transformation (hua 化): the yang qi regulates everything and the Ten thousand beings are changed and transformed (bian hua 變化). The southern quarter is in charge of growth and maintenance (zhang yang 長養)” (Baihutong, chapter on Five elements)

The fire that maintains life is not that which blazes and burns; it is that which warms and nourishes, like the Heart, as the organ representing the Fire element, circulates the blood to warm and nourish the whole body. Summer, the season which corresponds to the Fire element, is the period where this function is at its peak, when the tree branches are weighed down by the fruit and the earth carries the fully grown harvest (Fire generates Earth). Fire, qi and yang are closely related: the action of the qi can therefore be associated with Fire, through its constant transformations of essences and all the vital substances, which enable the evolution and maturation of beings. The Heart also enables the maturation and fulfillment of personal life. Fire also represents the qi, which circulates everywhere, moves upwards and seeps in like smoke, it is everything that enables propagation and expansion. The Heart is connected to it by controlling the vital circulations (mai 脈) that regularly spread the blood and all that maintains life.

Thus elation, as an expression of the balanced qi of Fire, supports the circulation of blood, the diffusion of nutritive elements and the operations of yang qi. The unobstructed circulation of a rich and fluid blood enables the spirits to be expressed, the thoughts and intimate dispositions to be more commonly correct, and the ruminations, brooding, resentments and worries to have less of a hold on us. This is the representation of elation found in chapter 39 of the Suwen:

“When there is elation, the qi becomes loose (huan 緩). When there is elation, the qi is properly harmonized and the will (zhi 志) spreads out well everywhere. Nutrition and defense (ying wei 營衛) are in free communication and function well. This is how the qi is loosened.”

The qi is relaxed because it is not subject to any undue tension; there are no knots in the chest that would impede the distribution of yin (nutrition) or yang (defense) qi; there are no blockages in the mental aspect that would prevent the good functioning of the mind.

However, elation can become too heated, thus leading to an imbalance of the qi in which yang dominates yin, fire burns fluids and consumes qi. The loosening of the qi then turns into exhaustion.

This squandering only lasts for a while; once the reserves are empty, one becomes exhausted and resourceless. All the vitality has been wasted and the qi is now lacking. A total loosening, a lack of dynamism and even exhaustion and melancholy often follow periods of ecstatic joy.

This can be seen in young children who will enjoy a party to their Heart's content, then will fall with exhaustion into apathy followed by a refreshing sleep. And how about all those who get excited beyond measure during a sports event, without being able to slow down; they keep feeding their excitement, which becomes less and less joyful and more and more violent, using all known means, such as shouting, alcohol or others. They are confusing the acceleration of their vital rhythm with the pleasure of elation.

Elation as overexcitement and confusion

Elation can also be considered as overheating, overexcitement. The acceleration of the vital flow of blood and qi cannot slow down, contain itself; it spirals out of control. The Fire, which is too strong, then attacks the Metal, the Lung, according to the controlling cycle (ke):

“In elation and joy, the spirits are scared away and disperse; hence there is no more keeping” (Lingshu 8)

Normally, elation causes an expansion, an outward expression: one jumps with joy, one quivers, one turns towards others, even foreigners. A great joy can even take one's breath away or make one yell. This can be seen and heard every day in the sports arena.

The gift of oneself or of one's resources made under the influence of the excitement caused by a heated elation is rarely appropriate, thoughtful or even useful: a man who just won the lotto will give his shoes to a person with no legs, without awareness of his incongruity.

Where diffusion is healthy, dispersion is pathological. In the latter case, there is emptying of the inside, squandering towards the outside. The unconsciousness that follows elation makes one lose all sense of danger or simple reserve; nothing is kept nor retained; but instead of being real generosity, there is only futile wasting. The strength of life, the essences and qi, are pushed outside the body. Following them, the very spirits, left without support nor resonance, act like sparrows that have flown away.

The spirits (shen 神) are birds in the ancient world. They are free to roam. Like birds, they are also fragile, wild or scared. A heated bout of excitement will be like a crazed dog bringing the henhouse into a panic or a cat making the sparrows fly away.

If everything is pushed outside, how could the essences still be treasured inside? If the essences are no longer retained, how could the spirits become one's vital spirit (jing shen 精神, word for word, essences and spirits)? If one is no longer guided by one's vital spirit, how can one behave in a considered and reasonable way? Isn't this insanity? This is discussed a little further within the same chapter 8 of the Lingshu:

“When the Lung is prey to limitless elation and joy², the Po are damaged. Once the Po are damaged, sanity is lost (kuang 狂, one becomes insane), one’s speech ignores others, and the skin shrivels up and becomes thin. The hair breaks easily and one gives the signs of a premature death. One dies in summer.”

What are elation and joy blamed for? For being without boundaries, limitless. They need to be constantly more. If nothing opposes them, they develop uncontrollably in all directions. It becomes an excitement that uproots the grounding of life, of our spirits; the foundations are being carried by the uncontrolled movement towards the exterior, stirred by elation.

The Po structures, which are strictly defined by and connected to the essences, are carried far away from their task. Nothing is as it should be any longer. The surging of the yang reaches the Po, which is connected to the essences; the natural and instinctive behaviors of life become corrupted; the appropriate behaviors of a human being become senseless; there is emptying of the yin and diminishing of the essences.

The Po becomes insane, in the way pertaining to the Po, and one speaks of insanity and craziness (kuang 狂), like the Hun become insane in the way pertaining to the Hun, when sadness grips the Liver³. But the difference with the insanity related to the Hun is that the insanity related to the Po is not said to come with oblivion. Oblivion here normally means that an individual escapes themselves; this crisis is an identity crisis, and it is specific to the Hun, as superior authority.

The Po, being damaged, transmits the received blow to the intent (yi 意). The Heart becomes agitated with elation and joy, its own emotions; it feels the effects of the excitement of the qi of the Lung, therefore no longer focusing the intent, no longer energizing the Spleen correctly and no longer recognizing what is of benefit and what it requires. If the Heart does not stop, does not apply itself, there is no real intent but a succession of inconsistent and aborted sentences. When one cannot hold on to one’s intent, the ability for authentic will is lost, as is the ability for a healthy and meaningful direction of the emotions and the mind. Neither thoughts nor real contemplation happen any more. The intent is no longer able to serve as the matrix to the will and the thought, to recognize and consider beings and things. The behavior is uncontrolled, with no respect for human relationships, the relationship with the exterior is deprived: the intent ignores others, it is the end of the relationships that are characteristic of man; it is irrationality, insanity.

² Elation and joy (xi le) in to be understood here only with the meaning of elation. See further the study of joy.

³ See the presentation of sadness. It is noticed that, in Lingshu ch.8, the damage to the Hun and the Po shows in an agitated madness, resulting from an excess of yang. In the case of the Liver, prey to sadness and oppression affecting the Hun, the strength of the yang results from the blockage and the burning of the essences; the yang turns its power against the internal vitality, leading to death. In the case of the Lung prey to elation and joy affecting the Po, the excess of yang leads everything outside, leading to death through the burning of life.

Generally, each emotion leads one besides oneself, and leads to insanity and madness, each in its own way.

The Fire of the Heart, being too strong, attacks the Metal of the Lung (in the controlling cycle), which propels the qi of the Lung everywhere. It flows, full of pathogenic heat, and reaches the skin, connected to the Lung, which shrivels up and becomes thin from these blasts of burning air.

One dies in the summer, when the heat from the exterior and the natural seasonal tendency towards externalizing support this pathology and give the final blow to the lack of treasuring of the essences and the qi internally.

Chapter 22 of the Lingshu describes the insanity caused by elation, when it is too strong:

“Crazyness (kuang 狂): the patient eats a lot, easily hallucinates demons and geniuses (gui shen 鬼神), has a tendency to laugh, but with no real sound. This results from a too strong elation (da xi 大喜). One treats by needling the Taiyin, Taiyang and Yangming of the foot (Spleen, Bladder and Stomach meridians); following by needling the Taiyin, Taiyang and Yangming of hand (Lung, Small intestine and Large intestine meridians).”

Heated elation intensifies the natural movement of the qi of Fire towards elevation and externalizing, and towards diffusion so that this movement is not sufficiently balanced by the other qi any more. The qi of the Heart dissipates towards the exterior and become unable to keep the essences in the interior. A situation of emptiness of the qi of the Heart and absence of the vital spirit (jing shen 精神) then occurs.

“When elation creates a great emptiness, then Kidney qi encroaches (cheng 乘, encroach upon the qi of the Heart).” (Suwen 19)

The emptiness of the qi of the Heart is experienced as an interior emptiness, for example in the epigastric area, which one is compelled to fill through a kind of bulimia. But eating a lot is not enough to reorder the movement of the qi, since nothing guides it correctly towards the Heart. The essences are not able to renew the blood of the Heart and to nourish its correct qi.

The inspiration that comes from the spirits can not be seen in the eye; this inspiration is what gives illumination to the Heart and brightness to the vision; one does not recognize what one sees; since it is the Heart that is damaged, hallucinations come up as demons and spirits. The eyes are particularly damaged for two reasons: they are closely connected to the Heart since they are its messenger, and they are located high up at the place reached by the qi that rises up along the Heart meridian⁴. The qi pushed out of the Heart follows the yang movement upward.

The qi sent by the Heart into the throat normally produces the sound of laughter. In this case, laughter becomes a grin, since the qi is not strong enough to produce its sound.

Lingshu chapter 22 suggests a treatment based on revitalization of the qi of the body, which includes the qi of the Heart, through tonification, treating the meridians of Spleen and Stomach as well as the meridian of Urinary Bladder to guide the fluids, which are nourishing and cooling. Then, the meridian of Lung, Small intestine and Large intestine are treated, in order to dissipate the excess heat in the chest, the Small intestine being connected to the Heart and the Large intestine to the Lung⁵.

⁴ The Shaoyin of hand, which has a branch connecting the Heart to the internal eye system.

⁵ Commentaries quote the following points most often: SP 1 and 4, UB 39, 58, 61 and 63, ST 36 and 41, PC 9 and 7, SI 7 and 8, LI 6 and 7.

LAUGHTER

According to traditional etymology, the character for laughter xiao 笑 represents a man 大 who leans over and bends his head forward 夭, twisting like bamboo 竹 = 𠄎 shaken by the wind.

Laughter, like elation, is either beneficial or unhealthy. Like elation, laughter is under the control of the Heart:

“Among the zang organs, it is the Heart. Among the sounds, it is laughter” (Suwen 5)

When the qi is directed by Fire, by the Heart, it comes up into the chest and comes out at the throat, producing the sound of laughter; in the same way, for example, when the qi is pushed swiftly by Wood, by the Liver, it produces shouting. When the qi of the Heart is balanced, the laughter is sound and calm; it comes up and bursts out from a situation of peace and serene elation; it relaxes tensions, especially at the level of the Heart; it puts at ease and allows for a better communication. But it can also burst under the pressure of uncontrolled excitement and agitation.

In chapter 22 of the Suwen, uncontrollable laughter is described as an imbalance of the qi of the Heart:

“An excess of the spirits⁶ is uncontrollable laughter.”

In chapter 8 of the Lingshu, it is introduced as a pathological fullness of the qi of the Heart, as excessive heat:

”The Heart preciously keeps the vital circulations (mai), which house the spirits. When the qi of the Heart is empty, there is sadness; when there is fullness, one laughs without being able to stop (xiao bu xiu 笑不休).”

Uncontrollable fits of laughter indicate an unhealthy internal situation, as opposed to the expression of well-being.

A forced laughter, called cold laughter by the Chinese (leng xiao 冷笑) does not express the reality of the internal situation. The Heart is cold, drained of its heat by a mourning which leads to grief or by an embarrassing situation that leads to shame. But one keeps an air of composure, to not lose face; one laughs in a way that does not pretend to imitate a warm laughter, but in a way that means one will keep a brave Heart. Any well educated person will understand and will let it be, in order not to increase the embarrassment or disrupt the grief.

⁶ The spirits represent here the Heart, the qi of the Heart. There can be no excess of the spirits when they are connected to the celestial presence, to the spiritual intelligence. When talking about the excess of the spirits, one talks about an excess of heat, fire, the qi of the Heart.

ELATION AND JOY

The double aspect of the Heart

Elation is also paired with joy (le 樂). Joy is not always very different from elation and both emotions can express the same situation where the qi of the Heart escapes without being held back or controlled. This is the case described previously in chapter 8 of the Lingshu.

But most often, joy is fundamentally different from elation, although they are both connected to the Heart. In this case, they express perfectly the double aspect of the Heart, elation representing the Heart as one of the Five zang organs, as the qi of Fire, and joy representing the Heart as the sovereign, as the unity of being and consciousness, as the center of all the movements of qi that make up the physical and mental aspects.

The traditional etymology of the characters clearly points out their difference: 喜 xi, elation: a hand strikes 士 the skin of a drum 豆 and joyous songs burst out of the mouth 口: elation is the pleasure of village festivals, the excitement of the singing and dancing to the frenetic sound of the little drum.

樂 Le, joy: the big drum 白 framed by bells 么 = 么 set up on a wooden base 木: this is joy, represented by the official music⁷ which provides rhythm in the Court, for ceremonies and the life of the Empire, with power and majesty.

In elation, there is excitement, something rapid and light, just like the hand striking the drum in a quick and rhythmic manner; the vital dynamism bursts out and manifests itself with the exuberance of youth, from the impetus of a bright red blood.

In joy, which is also music, there is more stillness and slowness, depth and tranquility; there is also more harmony and devised and orchestrated vibration.

Where laughter expresses elation, often seen in a group, smiling is enough to fully communicate with joy, which is harmony within oneself and harmony with the cosmos and the myriad of beings who inhabit it.

Where elation accelerates the circulation of blood and qi and makes our internal sensations and external perceptions easier and more pleasant, joy is the serenity which makes our life coincide with the life of the universe. The Heart, master of the vital circulations (mai 脈), is also our capacity to follow the natural order, to accept Heaven within ourselves and to house the spirits (shen 神).

The Joy of Heaven

Joy is not an emotion; it is a deep feeling which comes from the fact that life within us follows its way without being diverted from it by desires or activities that are contrary to our own nature. Joy is what one feels deep within oneself when one is unified with

⁷ In Chinese, the character 樂, pronounced "le" means "joy", and pronounced "yue" means "music".

Heaven, with the order of the world, which is expressed in the regular movement of qi. It is like harmoniously composed and performed music⁸ when each instrument of the orchestra, obediently following the conductor, performs only for the harmony of the whole and lives only through it. Those who do not behave this way prevent joy from blossoming within:

“They lead their spirits disharmoniously, they keep busy and weaken their Heart, they go counter-current from joy (sheng le 生樂).” (Suwen 1)

Instead of following the tempo and of playing in turn and in harmony with the others, each one wants to exist for themselves and through themselves and wants to be heard. Such a hyperactivity, being the fruit of an ego that will not give in, is opposed to the yin/yang harmony, made of a balance of alternation and unification. It is the opposite from the joy of life.

One who is able to give up the greed of life enjoys the joy of life fully and with serenity; this is the joy or the music of Heaven:

“So it is said, for him who understands Heavenly joy, life is the working of Heaven; death is the transformation of things. In stillness, he and the yin share a single Virtue; in motion, he and the yang share a single flow. Thus he who understands Heavenly joy incurs no wrath from Heaven, no opposition from man, no entanglement from things, no blame from the spirits. So it is said, his movement is of Heaven, his stillness of earth. With his single mind in repose, he is king of the world; the spirits do not afflict him; his soul knows no weariness. His single mind repose, the Ten thousand things submit – which is to say that his emptiness and stillness reach throughout Heaven and earth and penetrate the Ten thousand things. This is what is called Heavenly joy. Heavenly joy is the mind of the sage by which he shepherds the world.” (Zhuangzi 13)

Elation and Joy as Servants of the Heart

In chapter 8 of the Suwen, elation and joy are found together to express the perfect functioning of the qi of the Heart, thus serving the Heart:

“The Center of the chest (dan zhong 膻中) holds the charge of the servants and messengers (chen shi 臣使); elation and joy (xi le 喜樂) stem from that.”

The Middle of the chest (Danzhong) is the seat of the sea of qi; this is where the qi that comes directly from Heaven through the breath, and the qi that comes from the Earth through the transformation of food, meet. There is therefore a constant yin/yang harmonization in this sea, a harmonious composition blending that gives the qi its quality and its rhythm. The harmonization happening in the sea of qi represents the yin/yang harmony in all the qi of the body, blood and qi, nutrition and defense. The correct rhythm that stems from it is perceived through the regularity of the breath of the Lung and of the beat of the Heart. There is therefore a local effect, in the chest, the Lung and the Heart, and a distal effect in all the circulations, sent from the chest and traveling

⁸ Since it is the same character for joy and music.

through the body. This harmony allows life to follow its natural rhythm and it is also the best way to serve the Heart and allow it to be the ruler of life as it needs to unfold.

When the servants serve a master like the Heart, they are not only in charge of the blood and qi, nutrition and defense or flesh and bones; through these circulations, they also spread the influence of the Spirits. The health is good, the complexion has a healthy glow and the eyes are bright, but also one feels in their Heart that one fully belongs to life, to one's own life: this is joy (le 樂); this provides a cheerful stimulation (xi 喜) in all the zang organs and all the movements of the body (circulation of blood and qi). This feeling, felt harmoniously everywhere, reinforces the unity and cohesiveness of the human being and is the sign that an authentic lord (master) is operating. The pleasure to spontaneously follow what life orders through the Heart is also a sign of authenticity.

Lack of Joy

Contrary to what happens for all the emotions, which become pathological when in excess, there isn't and there cannot be pathology by excess of joy. The pathology of joy is always a lack of joy (bu le 不樂).

The absence of joy is not a simple lack of pleasure; it is the sign that one is not in harmony with oneself, that one does not allow for the blossoming of one's inherited potentialities, and that as a consequence one is not integrated in the cosmic harmony.

The absence of joy is a symptom, which can signal damage to the Heart before any other sign appears:

‘Illness by heat of the Heart: first the patient is without joy; then, after several days, fever occurs’. (Suwen 32)

The damage to the Heart, indicated by the absence of joy, is not only physical, it can be in the mind:

“Beginning of this madness (dian ji 癲疾): first the patient is without joy (bu le 不), then the head is heavy and painful, and the eyes turn upwards and are red. When the disease increases without possibility of stopping the process, there is agitation and a feeling of unease in the chest and Heart area. (Lingshu 22)

This is madness (dian 癲), and not craziness (kuang 狂) as happens in the case of elation, because the disease begins with a weakness of the correct qi, an inability of the Heart to maintain its qi in good order. As a result, an ascending counter-current takes place and explains the head and eyes symptoms. The absence of joy signals the weakness of the Heart.

As seen in chapter 24 of the Lingshu, the absence of joy can even signal the weakness of the Heart, which can no longer maintain life, thus becoming the last symptom in the evolution of a disease; after this, one can only wait for the fatal outcome.