

EMOTIONS ACCORDING TO THE CLASSICAL TEXTS

A basic question opens the Lingshu ch.8, this chapter being the greatest reference concerning the pathologies induced by emotions :

«Huangdi put this question to Qi Bo :

For every needling, the method is above all not to miss the rooting in the Spirits.

Blood and vital circulations (blood circulation, xue mai 血脈), nutrition and defence (ying wei 營衛), essences and spirits (vital spirit, jing shen 精神), these are treasured by the Five zang organs.

If a situation becomes such that by a succession of overflows and total invasion they leave the zang, then the essences are lost, and Hun and Po are carried away in an uncontrollable agitation, will and intent become confused and disordered, knowing-how and reflection abandon us.

Where does this state come from ? Should Heaven be blamed ? Is it man's fault ?»

Then the chapter proceeds with the presentation of what makes the spirit, the souls, the mind and the working of the mind in an human being. At the center of this presentation stands the heart /mind (*xin* 心) which enables a person «to take charge of the beings». Then the chapter continues with the exposition of the diseases caused by exacerbated emotions and how these diseases lead to a premature death.

How is a human special and different from the myriads of other beings ?

Heaven and Earth interweave in a unique way to produce a human :

«Man is (the product of) the vital power (de 德) of Heaven and Earth, (by) the intermingling of yin and yang, the union of the spirits of Earth and of Heaven (gui shen 鬼神) and the finest of the five elements.» (Liji, Liyun)

The humans, produced with the most subtle vitality, are provided with their own vital spirit :

«Coarse qi makes insects, subtle qi (jing qi 精氣) makes humans Therefore the vital spirit (jing shen 精神) belongs to Heaven and the bony frame belongs to Earth.» (Huainan zi ch.7, Jingshen, Monkey Press)

One way to express this intertwining of the qi from Heaven and from Earth in a human is to see his animation ruled by two kinds of soul : the heavenly spiritual souls, called Hun, and the earthly corporeal souls called Po.

A corporeal soul may appear as an oxymoron in our culture and language; in traditional China, it is the reality of human life in which the flesh, the body is pervaded by the mind, the spirit. Reversely, the mind, the spirit is affected by what happens in the body.

Thus a human can never behave like an animal, just following his natural tendency, his instinct. All what he is doing is always the result of the interplay of the bodily and the spiritual. The place or function which expresses this at the best and the utmost is the human heart which participates to both aspect of life : the heavenly one with the mental skills, the spirit as well as the earthly one with the physical form, the flesh and blood. One aspect can never be separated from the other. The human heart represents the intertwining of Heaven and Earth at its best.

The heart is always a physical mass, a corporal organ and a physiological function; it is also the feeling, the ability to experience desires and emotions and to control them; it is also the mind, the ability to know and to think, to evaluate and to decide, capable to understand the underlying patterns which are the principles organizing all and each form of life, hence capable to perceive and penetrate the deep meaning of what exists in order to conduct and nourish his life accordingly to these principles.

Thanks to the flowing of the blood which keeps constantly a relation with the heart and its beating, what is in the mind and how is the heart pervade every space of the physical body. So ultimately, it is the heart/mind that decides the movement of the qi and the reaction of the body. As a human, to fulfill his destiny is to cultivate one's heart to built his vital spirit, to become like a spirit in his inner reality.

«By nature (xing 性), human possesses blood-and-qi (xue qi 血氣) and a heart that allows knowledge (xin zhi 心知). Grief as well as joy, elation or anger do not exist permanently within. They are reactions to the incitement of objects. Hence, the practice of the Art of the Heart (xin shu 心術).» (Liji, Yueji)

By nature, a human has the intelligence to enlight the working of the heart/mind and to behave following the natural order, diminishing desires and passions which disturb the well balanced movements of qi within him.

An emotion always pertains to both the physical and the spiritual aspect of life. The feeling of an emotion does not exist without a physical sensation; the movement of qi concerning an emotion works both in the mind and in the body.

An emotion intensifies the movement of the qi of same nature, causing turmoil in the normal functioning of life. In the medical classics, these movements of qi are classified according to the Five elements, which are the five aspects of the activity of the life giving qi.

So, the question of the Lingshu 8 is : what is really human nature ? Is it to be prey to overflowing passions without being able to avoid them ? Or to use his natural endowment to enlight his mind and to evolve toward a more balanced life ?

Many texts assert that what distinguishes human and other creatures is his discernment :

Fire and water possess vital breath (qi 氣) but have no life. Plants and trees possess life, but lack awareness. Birds and beasts have awareness (zhi 知) but lack a sense of morality and justice (yi 義). Humans possess vital breath, life, and awareness, and add to them a sense of morality and justice. It is for this reason that they are the noblest beings in the world.. (Xunzi ch.9, Transl. John Knobloch, C.U.P.)

The main feature in a human is the ability of his heart/mind to know and discern, to understand the principles of life and to see its underlying patterns to guide his life. Part of the problem is that when an emotion disturbs a movement of qi, it disturbs all the functioning of the organ responsible for this qi, creating disorder in the physiology and diseases in the body, but creating also a disorder in the working of the mind, since to function well the mind needs the best possible balance of the five zang organs, the five elements, the five spirits.

No one is without desire and without emotion. Likes and dislikes naturally exist in a human; but if he does not educate himself, these likes and dislikes - which contribute to nourish his life when they are appropriate and moderated - will harm it. It is natural and good to desire to eat; it is harmful to eat badly and too much by gluttony, like no animal will do. Only a human may die under the effect of a violent uncontrollable anger.

«When Heaven gave life to human it caused them to have appetites and desires. Certain desires belong to the essential nature (qing 情) of humans, and those that are essential to their nature are inherently self-limited (jie 節). The sage keeps these limits in good repair to make the desires stop at the right place; this is why when he acts he does not transgress the limits belonging to his essential nature (qing 情). Thus, the desire of the ear for the five sounds, of the eye for the five colors, and of the mouth for the five flavors, belongs to our essential nature. In regard to these three, the desires of the noble and base, the wise and stupid, the worthy and unworthy are one. [.....] What differentiates the sage is that he maintains the limits on the desires inherent in his essential nature. If a person's action are grounded on valuing life, he will satisfy the desires that belong to his essential nature. If his action are not so grounded, he will fail to do so. Grounding or not grounding action on valuing life is the root of life and death, survival and destruction.» (Lüshi chunqiu II, 3, Transl. J.Knoblock & J. Riegel)

In ancient Chinese, the character *qing* 情 means natural dispositions, «essential nature», innate propensities; but the same character is also used for the emotions and passions which destroy the natural order of life and disconnect from the original endowment. The difference lies in the use a human makes of what makes him human, i.e. his heart/mind.

It belongs to each human to canalize his desires and emotions, not to constraint his life but to achieve it better and fullier. This has nothing to do with repression or suppression.

Perhaps the best known myth of ancient China is the story of Yu the Great regulating the flooding waters. Deadly floods have always been a problem in China. A legendary man, by the name of Kun, was the first to address this difficulty; he built dikes and levees to prevent the overflow of the river, forcing the water to be contained under pressure, constrained to elevate its level, which is to act contrary to its true nature, since by nature water descends and does not go up. After a while, the dikes broke and the floods were more deadly than ever. His son, Yu (the Great) did the opposite : he dug ditches to channel the water toward the sea, allowing the water to follow its nature, which is to descend, and to achieve its destiny which is to reach the sea. Therefore, to canalize the water is to allow the water to fulfil its destiny by following its nature; it is not to coerce it. The water which expands in floods lost its own way and brings disasters and calamities all around.

Emotions which are not controlled are often say to be overflowing, to be like the flooding waters (including in the Lingshu ch.8). If the emotions disturb the clarity of the mind, what makes the uniqueness of a human, his discernment, is obscured, his mind is as blinded instead to be enlightened. So, a person unable to control his emotion is unable to realize his humanness, to access to his true nature.

To know the danger of the emotions leads to cultivate various means or methods to avoid their untimely and exaggerated coming. To keep a mind clear enough to be aware of the surging of an emotion allows the person to control it.

The Art of Nurturing Life (*yang sheng* 養生) offers technics to work on the qi, for instance breathing exercices to calm an emotion. In case of a swelling anger on the verge to disturb one's judgement, the appropriate exercice will put back in balance the inner movements of qi. When the qi are well balanced, where is the anger ?

All what has an effect on the qi has to be checked in order to not disturb their regulation. This include sexuality, eating and drinking, attention payed to the seasons, etc.

«The early kings established the doctrine of the five tastes, so they made the harmony (he 和) of the five notes to make their minds equable (ping qi xin 平其心) and to perfect their government.» (Chunqiu Zuozhuan, Duke Zhao 20, transl. Fung Yulan)

Confuceans use Rites - or Propriety - to guide and moderate the emotions; it is also part of education. A good Confucean scrutinizes daily his inner feelings and thoughts, vigilant to detect anything inappropriate or misplaced.

«When joy, anger, sorrow, and happiness, do not arise, this is called balance (zhong 中). When they arise, but are all expressed with balance and restraint (jie 節), this is called harmony (he 和).» (Zhongyong, transl. G. Richter)

Some deepen their merging in nature, taking for nothing all what cause men emotions and desires, including the fear of death or love of life. The empty their heart to unite with the Dao.

All these methods, physical or mental, try to discipline the emotions in order to avoid any misconception, fruit of a heart working while full of an emotion.

When the heart is occupied with an emotion, every thought or conception or will or intent will reflect this emotion and then will no more reflect the reality of a situation, a being, a relation, etc.

The image frequently used in classical texts is the one of the mirror, either the bronze mirror or the mirroring water. A stain on the bronze mirror or agitation in the water alters the image; the stain does not belong to the object but to the mirror; the stirring also belongs only to the water. Emotions belong to the heart and distort all his working, making it more and more mindless.

What is in the heart is everywhere, in any perception, action and reaction.

«It is the essential nature of the ear to desire sounds; but if the mind (heart, xin 心) finds no pleasure (le 聲) in them, the ears will not listen even to the Five Tones. It is the essential nature of the eye to desire colors; but if the mind finds no pleasure in them, the eye will not gaze even on the Five Colors. [.....] The locus of the desire is the ears, eyes, nose, or mouth, but the locus of pleasure or displeasure is the mind (heart, xin 心). Only when the mind has first attained harmony and equilibrium (he ping 和平) does it find pleasure in such things.» (Lüshi chunqiu V, 4. Transl. J.Knoblock & J.Riegel)

Only an heart/mind quiet and calm, allows the qi to proceed perfectly through all the organs, the physical and psychological aspects of life to be at their best; it is the perfect health and the strongest prevention against diseases. To control the emotions empowers the person by avoiding the lost a vitality linked to the disorder in the movements of qi. To calm down the emotions allows to come back to one's true nature. It is the basis for the nourishment of life and the long life.

«When blood and qi (xue qi 血氣) are concentrated in the five organs (zang) and not dispersed outside, then chest and abdomen are replete, longing and desire diminish. When chest and abdomen are replete, and longing and desires diminished, then ears and eyes are clear (ming 明), hearing and seeing acute (cong 聰). When ears and eyes are clear, hearing and seeing acute, that is called illumination (ming 明). When the five organs are able to submit to the heart without resistance, then however powerful the rising of the will, the behaviour does not deviate. However powerful the rising of the will, if the behaviour does not deviate, then the vital spirits (jing shen 精神) thrive and the qi are not scattered. When the vital spirits thrive and the qi are not scattered, then there is perfect order (li 理). Perfect order, then equilibrium equilibrium, then free communication, free communication, then the spirits (shen 神).

With the spirits, in looking there is nothing that is not seen; in listening there is nothing that is not heard; in doing there is nothing that is not accomplished. Thus worries and concerns cannot enter and perverse qi (xie qi 邪氣) cannot strike.» (Huainan zi ch.7, Jingshen, Monkey Press)

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