

THE PSYCHE AND EMOTIONS IN CHINESE MEDICINE

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THE EMOTIONS

The Chinese term for what we translate as “emotion” is “*qing*” 情 which is composed of the radical for “heart” and another component that is partly phonetic and partly conveying the idea of “green of growing plants”. The word “**emotion**” itself is not a good term to indicate the Chinese view of the “emotional” causes of disease. The word “emotion” derives from Latin and it refers to “*e-movere*”, i.e. to “move out”: it is used to indicate any feeling of the mind as distinct from the cognitive or volitional states of consciousness.

情

Qing emotion

心

Heart

青

Green (of growing plants)

SHENG

生

Life

DAN

丹

Cinnabar, red

In this sense, the term “emotion” may refer to any feeling such as fear, joy, hope, surprise, desire, aversion, pleasure, pain, etc.: it is therefore not entirely suitable as a term denoting the emotions as intended in Chinese medicine.

It is interesting to note that the word used to indicate a suffering of the mind originally was “passion” rather than “emotion”. The word “**passion**” derives from the Latin verb “*patire*” which means “to suffer”. The word “emotion” replaced “passion” only in the time between Descartes and Rousseau, i.e. between 1650 and 1750 (as the former used the word “passion” and the latter the word “emotion”).



Passion 1650



Emotion 1750

The word “passion” would convey the idea of mental suffering better than “emotion” also because it implies the idea of something that is “suffered”, something that we are subject to. Indeed, feelings such as sadness, fear, anger become causes of disease when they take over our mind, when we no longer possess them but they “possess” us.

Indeed the Chinese expression most Chinese books use to describe the “stimulation” or “excitation” produced by the emotions is *ci ji* 刺激 where “*ji*” contains the radical for “water” and means to “swash, surge” as a wave does, i.e. it denotes the surge of emotions like a wave that carries us away.

刺

Thorn,
prick,
irritate

激

swash,
surge

Emotions are mental stimuli which influence our affective life. Under normal circumstances, they are not a cause of disease. Hardly any human being can avoid being angry, sad, aggrieved, worried, or afraid at some time in his or her life but those states will not lead to any disharmony. For example, the death of a relative provokes a very natural feeling of grief.

The emotions become causes of disease only when they are either long-lasting, or very intense. It is only when we are in a particular emotional state for a long time (months or years) that they become a cause of disease.

In a few cases, emotions can become a cause of disease in a very short time if they are intense enough: shock is the best example of such a situation.

One of the oldest mention of emotions is from Confucius's "Book of Rites" (*Li Ji*) dating back to c. 500 BC. In this book, Confucius lists seven emotions: joy, anger, grief, fear, love, hatred and desire.¹



According to "Chinese Medicine Psychology", the Daoist Lao Zi lists seven emotions that differ from those listed by Confucius: these are joy, anger, worry, sadness, love, hatred, desire.² Other texts mention six emotions: love, hatred, desire, anger, grief and joy.³



Interestingly, both these lists are close to the "7 Emotions" of Chinese medicine.

1. Gu Yu Qi 2005 Chinese Medicine Psychology (*Zhong Yi Xin Li Xue*), China Medicine Science and Technology Publishing House, Beijing, p. 54.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 54.



Joy
Anger
Grief
Fear

Love
Hatred
Desire



Joy
Anger
Worry
Sadness
Love
Hatred
Desire

OTHERS

Joy
Anger
Grief

Love
Hatred
Desire

The emotions taken into consideration in Chinese medicine have varied over the years. From a 5-Element perspective, the Yellow Emperor's Classic considered 5 emotions, each one affecting a specific Yin organ:

- **Anger** affecting the Liver
- **Joy** affecting the Heart
- **Pensiveness** affecting the Spleen
- **Worry** affecting the Lungs
- **Fear** affecting the Kidneys.

Chapter 5 of the Su Wen says: *“The 5 Zang produce five kinds of Qi and these give rise to joy, anger, sadness, worry and fear. Excessive joy and anger injure Qi. Excessive cold and summer-heat damage the body. Sudden anger damages Yin and sudden joy impairs Yang.”*

Chapter 66 of the Ling Shu: *“Excess joy and anger damage the Zang.”*

Chapter 28 of the Ling Shu: *“The Heart is the Ruler of the 5 Zang and 6 Fu. Sadness, grief worry and anxiety [bei, ai, chou, you 悲哀愁忧] will disturb the Heart. When this is disturbed, the 5 Zang and 6 Fu are shaken.”*

However, these are not by any means the only emotions discussed in the Yellow Emperor's Classic. In other passages sadness and shock are added, giving 7 emotions:

Anger affects the Liver

Joy affects the Heart

Sadness affects the Lungs and Heart

Worry affects the Lungs and Spleen

Pensiveness affects the Spleen

Fear affects the Kidneys

Shock affects the Heart.

Chapter 8 of the Ling Shu: “*Fear and pensiveness [chu, ti si 怵 惕 思] injure the Shen and this will lead to loss of Jing [sperm?]. Sadness and grief [bei, ai 悲 哀] agitate the Middle [Burner] and exhaust life. Joy disperse the Shen so that it cannot be housed. Worry and anxiety [chou, you 愁 忧] make Qi stagnate so that it cannot move. Anger causes mental confusion and loss of [self] control [bu zhi 不 治].¹ Fear scatters the Shen which cannot be held in [literally “astringe”].”*

1. The modern Chinese translation translates *bu zhi* as “it is difficult to treat”, but *zhi* refers to “governing”, “controlling” or “managing” [oneself]. Typical Confucian equivalence between self-control and good governance.

Chapter 8 of the Ling Shu:

“Fear and anxiety of the Heart injure the Shen which leads to loss of self-control.

Worry and anxiety of the Spleen injure Yi which leads to confusion [literally “chaos”, men luan 亂].

Sadness and grief of the Liver agitate the Middle [Burner] and injure the Hun which causes mania.

Joy of the Lungs injure the Po which causes mania.

Anger of the Kidneys injures Zhi which causes loss of memory of what one has just said.