

Chapter Two

Xīn ('heart / mind') – An NSM View of a Chinese Cultural Keyword

'What would it be to have a language where hundreds of phrases treat the state of our heart and mind as one? (...) In English the "heart" connotes a sense of romance or medical science. We fall in love with our hearts or have heart transplants. The word "heart" in English, though of importance, occupies a secondary position to the logical or analytical path.' (Moore 1992: 14)

'Suddenly, my black heart (*hēi xīn*) died and I recovered a revived red heart (*hōng xīn*). I have come to believe that a man's life is not merely the existence of flesh and blood.' (Ogden et al., 1992: 148)

1. Introduction

As noted by Enfield and Wierzbicka (2002: 1), 'a careful description of linguistic data from as broad as possible a cross-linguistic base is (...) an important part of emotion research.' Following that proposition, NSM researchers have focused their attention not only on emotion words directly labelling affective states, but also paid attention to other culturally important ethnopsychological concepts, such as, for instance, Russian *dusha* (roughly, 'soul', see Wierzbicka 1992: 31–65), Korean *maum* (roughly, 'mind', see Yoon 2003), or Malay *hati* (literally, 'liver', see Goddard 2001: 167–197).

Linguistically, historically, and culturally *xīn* is an important Chinese keyword. Usually translated into English as 'heart' or

‘mind’ (and sometimes rendered as an ad-hoc coordinate compound ‘heart-mind’ in some of the English language sinological writing – see, e.g. Hansen 1989), or often simply left out from a translation, it is, as Huang (1982: 101) observes, ‘so central a concept that a significant portion of Chinese vocabulary makes use of it as a radical, in particular that part of the vocabulary that describes thoughts and feelings, hopes and fears, memories and expectations, moods and humours, features of personality and character, acts of deliberating, motives and intentions, and so forth.’

Bloom (1985: 299), who traced the development of the concept of person in the Confucian philosophy, sees in *xīn* one of the essential differences between the Chinese and the Western notions of personhood, pointing out that:

‘Early Confucians showed little inclination to counter-pose mind and body (still less, soul and body) as competing contenders for the necessary mastery of the person they comprise. The very conception of *xin* as mind-and-heart, the seat of the affections (*qing*) as well as thought or reflective consciousness (*si*), had associations which were visceral rather than cerebral. Such a conceptualization was in itself conducive to (or reflective of) a holistic rather than a dualistic understanding of person.’

A major contemporary Chinese Confucian philosopher Tu Weiming (1984: 48–49) concurs with that claim, stressing that: ‘One concept that differentiates the Confucian approach to learning from other forms of mental exercise or merely psychological techniques is the notion of *xin*, which has been rendered both as heart and mind. It combines dimensions of both conscience and consciousness (...) Although it is awkward to render *xin* as heart-and-mind, it is important because *xin* is both a centre of feeling and sensitivity, and of will-power and cognition. To speak of “mind” in the Chinese context always involves the dimension of the heart.’

From yet another, a critical literary/psychoanalytic perspective, Elvin (1989: 2) approaches *xīn* as ‘a concept that can be

interpreted as the psychological field of force that is attempting to control the body.' Thus, *xīn* appears to be portrayed as a kind of a 'holistic' concept mediating between what from the Anglo ethno-psychological perspective would, in principle, be seen as quite separable areas of personality – thinking, feeling, evaluating, and wanting.

This 'all-encompassing' meaning of *xīn* was also the reason why, as Shen (1992: 3) observes, it was chosen as the most fitting Chinese term capable of rendering the conceptual scope of the Western science of 'psychology' when it was being introduced in China in the beginning of the 20th century. Apart from the currently used expression *xīnlǐxué* (lit., 'the science of the principles of *xīn*') other words proposed at that time were also based on the morpheme *xīn*, as in *jiěxīnshù* ('the art of explaining *xīn*'), or *shìxīnshù* (lit., the art of knowing *xīn*).

Xīn is a part of a person (cf. Huang 1982: 88). It is also that part of a person which is typically juxtaposed with *shēn* (approximately, 'body / person / health') in order to characterize someone in a 'holistic' or 'unified' way. For example:

(1)

<i>shēn</i>	<i>xīn</i>	<i>jiànkāng</i>
body	xin	healthy

'of sound *xīn* and body'

(2)

<i>shēn</i>	<i>xīn</i>	<i>shòudào</i>	<i>cuīcán</i>
body	xin	receive	ruin

'to suffer mentally and physically'

(3)

<i>shēn</i>	<i>ān</i>	<i>bùrú</i>	<i>xīn</i>	<i>ān</i>
body	calm	not.like	xin	calm

'peaceful *xīn* is more important than the healthy *shēn* ('body')' (Chu 1970: 169)

(4)

<i>Yěxǔ</i>	<i>yīnwéi</i>	<i>bǐ</i>	<i>nánxìng</i>	<i>bìjìng</i>	<i>zài</i>
perhaps	because	than	male	after.all	at
<i>shēn</i>	<i>xīn</i>	<i>gèng</i>	<i>cuiruò</i>	<i>gèng</i>	<i>mǐngǎn</i>
body	xin	more	frail	more	sensitive

‘Perhaps this is so, because (they, women) are, after all, more frail and more sensitive than men.’ (RMWX 1987/2: 51)

Yet, a full parallel with the contemporary English ‘mind’ vs. ‘body’ dichotomy – some of the significantly different meanings of Chinese *shēn* notwithstanding (see, e.g., Ames 1993: 164–166) – could be rather misleading. Wierzbicka (1989: 46–48, 1992a: 45; see also Bock 1984: 135–155) having followed the historical semantic changes of the English word *mind*, concluded that ‘it shed its spiritual connotations, lost its links with values and emotions, and became a concept focused on the intellect, more or less to the exclusion of any other aspects of a person’s inner life.’

Indeed, some of the most readily available collocational evidence – such as, e.g., ‘brilliant mind’, ‘good mind’, ‘inquisitive mind’, ‘dull mind’, or ‘mindless’ – leaves little doubt as to the predominantly cognitive (‘thinking’ and ‘knowing’) scope of mind, as does the scanning of the subject index of an important study in the ‘philosophy of mind’ (cf. Searle 1992: 262–267), where no reference at all is made to emotions, moral values, or spirituality.

It seems, however, that Mandarin Chinese collocational evidence provides no such unambiguous clue with respect to *xīn*. Thus, for example, on the level of compound words (see Chao 1968: 359–480), *xīn* underlies a substantial part of the vocabulary for the person-oriented talk, which may have a fairly clear (i.e., in English) cognitive content, as in the following expressions:

(5)

xīn-líng (*xīn*-quick) 'clever, quick-witted'
xīn-qiào (*xīn*-aperture) 'capacity for clear thinking'
xīn-cái (*xīn*-judge) 'conception, mental plan'
xīn-jì (*xīn*-scheme) 'calculation, planning'

Or, an equally clear affective (i.e., FEEL-oriented) content, for example:

(6)

xīn-suān (*xīn*-sour) 'sad'
xīn-huǒ (*xīn*-fire) 'hidden anger'
xīn-tēng (*xīn*-pain) 'love dearly/feel sorry'
xīn-jiāo (*xīn*-scorched) 'anxious'

Or, an essentially desiderative/intentional (i.e., WANT-oriented), as in:

(7)

xīn-yuàn (*xīn*-hope) 'cherished desire, aspirations'
xīn-yì (*xīn*-wish) 'regard, intention'
xīn-shēng (*xīn*-voice) 'wishes, aspirations'
xīn-shù (*xīn*-tactics) 'design, intention'

Or, a moral/evaluative (i.e. GOOD vs. BAD) focus, for example:

(8)

xīn-fú (*xīn*-float) 'unstable, superficial'
xīn-hěn (*xīn*-ruthless) 'cruel, merciless'
xīn-ruǎn (*xīn* soft) 'tender, soft'
xīn-xì (*xīn*-exquisite) 'meticulous, careful'

Arguably, a parallel pattern of meanings can be unravelled when examining the uses of *xīn* both as an independent lexical item and as a component of various lexicalized expressions and aphoristic sayings. Everyday cognition, communication, emotions, will and moral discourse are brought together as jointly important and prominent aspects of a key Chinese cultural concept of *xīn*.