

Jacqueline Li

Professor Katarzyna Dziwirek

Honors 211C: Ways of Meaning

February 2, 2017

### Chinese 心 *Xīn* as the Center of Thoughts and Beliefs

In a literal sense, 心 [*xīn*] translates to heart, but like American culture, “heart” is polysemous and is used interchangeably. It can mean the center of something (中心 [*zhōng xīn*], meaning “center,” and in the character 芯 [*xīn*], meaning “core”), or as a sense of pride and courage as in 怍 [*xīn*], which translates to “fearful,” or a “lack of courage.” In addition to these primary definitions, phrases such as 决心 [*jué xīn*] and 恒心 [*héng xīn*], meaning “determination” and “perseverance,” respectively, can be used in the same context as “heart” as in the saying “Don’t lose heart” to establish similarly rooted perceptions of the term across both American and Chinese culture. In Chinese, though, 心 is regarded as an even deeper sense of duty - the 心 represents morality in Chinese language and culture, and even acts as the origin for what could be described as religion.

American “heart” and Chinese 心 can both describe a more innate belief, but the Chinese appear to have a more fluid application of the word to describe an individual’s inner thoughts and personal character. As established by Dr. Ning Yu from Penn State University in his essay “When Conceptual Metaphors Govern Linguistic Expressions: A Textual Analysis,” 心 can be defined in five main propositions:

1. Heart is the central faculty of cognition
2. Heart is the locus of moral senses and values

3. Heart is the seat of the inner self
4. Heart is a microcosm of the universe
5. Heart is sacred and holy

Rather than the pragmatics or semantics behind the language, we can discern the intent behind the Chinese language by looking into the characters themselves. The use of characters like 心 within other characters can indicate a deeper connotation within those words, and we will examine these very examples in uncovering the multidimensional idea of 心.

Most prominent is the use of 心 as a guide for morality and judgment, and how it serves as the center of cognition. The heart is said to be representative of one's "inner self" and thereby reveals the truth behind one's character (Yu 2009). One's heart can be "clean" if moral, but a "dirty" heart is immoral and unwanted. The use of 心 in the phrase 居心 [jū xīn] means "to have dishonest intentions," as in the idiom 居心叵测 [jū xīn pǒ cè], which loosely translates to being "deceitful" or "two-faced," reveals this notion of morality. 心 also appears in many characters that can be used to describe one's character, like 愿 [yuàn], which means "virtuous," 慈 [cí], meaning "benevolent," and 恶 [è], meaning "wicked." Paired with words and creating phrases such as 好心 [hǎo xīn] ("good intentions") and 诚心 [chéng xīn] (sincerity) also emphasizes the role 心 plays in defining morality, and perpetuates the view of 心 as an object that can be clean or dirty on the basis of one's morality.

In measuring one's 心 with morality, there is the idea that 心 also dictates how individuals interact in a society and with others. In both America and China, there is the social practice that you should treat others the way you want to be treated, and 心 is believed to be the guiding force that dictates one's actions. That is, 心, being the center of one's cognition, guides

people's actions and can thus serve as the determinant of their morality depending on how they act. There is the idea that one should compare their 心 to others in society and in doing so they can contribute to the society by fostering its growth and improving one's morality. In this way, the Chinese seek to find a balance between an independent society, like the US, by focusing on one's own 心, and establishing a more interdependent construct by improving their relationships in society. The character 憑 [píng], meaning "depend on," highlights this interdependence and further perpetuates the social balance between the individual and the whole: one should aim to grow a heart that is clean and pure while still pushing their actions to the benefit of society.

The reasoning behind this practice is due to the belief that one's 心 serves as a religious guide of sorts - there is no God to the Chinese, but 心 can be viewed as a guide for one's actions in that how one acts should be in the pursuit of a better 心. Therefore, 心 is the silent guide dictating an individual's actions, as a god would. This is somewhat of a circular relationship: 心, being the center of cognition, dictates one's morals and actions, and by doing so helps improve upon society and can act as one's spiritual guide because it is the source of thought and telling individuals what is and is not morally right. Characters such as 忠 [zhōng], which translates to loyalty, come to mind in the context of being loyal to one's 心 just like one is devoted to a God.

A lot has been said about 心 being the center of cognition without much basis for this claim. Characters that represent this notion include 想 [xiǎng] ("to think"); 感 [gǎn] ("to feel/perceive"); 忘 [wàng] ("forgot"); and 聰 [cōng] ("clever, wise"), which is also used in the phrase 聰明 [cōng míng], meaning "smart" or "intelligent". Each feature 心 in the character themselves, thereby highlighting the role of 心 as a significant source of knowledge, contrary to the Western belief of the brain as the center of cognition (Yu 2015). The phrase 心想 [xīn xiǎng]

best embodies this idea - it translates literally to “heart think” and directly exemplifies the belief in the heart as the source of all thought.

On the surface, heart and 心 can be used interchangeably, and both even describe a more thoughtful sense of duty, pride, and passion. What the English term “heart” fails to portray in the Chinese character 心, though, is the overarching view of 心 as a much more prominent factor in fundamental human intelligence. 心 is viewed as the source of all thoughts and ideas, and acts as the driving force for one’s actions. Coupled with the 心 of society, it harbors the balance between independence and interdependence that Chinese culture hopes to bridge, and can be viewed as a higher force guiding people’s actions. As such, 心 embodies more than the polysemous term “heart” - it portrays the idea of some greater inner force driving human action and interaction.

Works Referenced:

Yu, Ning. "Embodiment, Culture, and Language." *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Culture*. Ed. Farzad Sharifian. New York: Taylor and Francis Books, 2015. 234-235.

Print.

Yu, Ning. "When Conceptual Metaphors Govern Linguistic Expressions: A Textual Analysis." *Intercultural Communication Studies*, 2009, 221-232.

Zhai, Zhimin. Personal Interview. 25 Jan 2017.