

What is an Emotion?

An Early Chinese Perspective in the *Xing Zi Ming Chu*

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1. Introduction

What is an emotion? The dominant view among analytic philosophers and affective scientists is that an emotion is first and foremost an internal state triggered by an external event. As Robert Solomon (1995) asserts, “any question about emotion must initially come to terms with the fact that emotions are, first of all, in some sense to be defined, ‘subjective’ phenomena, ‘in the mind’ of the subject...” (254) Furthermore, according to John Deigh (2018), the modern philosophical and psychological understanding of emotion as an inner state since the nineteenth century is largely characterized by two themes: (1) the identification of emotions with affective feelings and (2) the treatment of emotions as intentional states of mind that are directed at or towards some objects.¹ Regarding the second theme, the cognitive approach to the study of emotion, represented by the Belief-Desire Theory of Emotion (BDTE) that explains emotions in terms of beliefs and desires, has dominated the fields of analytic philosophy and science of emotion for the last 30 years (Reisenzein 2012).

In recent years, studies of cultural psychology (Frijda and Wiers 1995; Danziger 1997; Gendron & Barrett 2009; Gendron 2010; Mesquita 2022) suggest the category of emotion as inner states with affective and/or cognitive features is not a universal construct but rather a local cultural-linguistic practice. For one, not every cultural-linguistic tradition has a term for the abstract conception of emotion (Mesquita 2022). As Batja Mesquita (2022) puts it, “the category

(of emotion), as we think we know it, is historically new, and geographically unique...there is no universally shared way of drawing the boundaries around the domain of emotions.” (138-139) In light of this insight, a substantial body of literature has emerged in the realm of comparative studies of emotion that brought together researchers from a variety of disciplines. For example, cross-cultural psychological studies have shown that some cultural-linguistic traditions put behavioral concepts, such as smile, under the category of emotion alongside joy, anger, sadness, etc., (Frijda and Wiers 1995; Gendron et al., 2014). In addition to seeing certain behavioral concepts as emotion, Ling Hon Lam proposes the idea of viewing emotion as space or “emotion-realm” (*qingjing*) in the history of Chinese literature. Taking these alternative constructions of emotions seriously opens new doors for rethinking how the concept of emotion could be thought differently, challenging the default assumptions that dominate contemporary analytic philosophy and science of emotion.

In early Chinese philosophy, the abstract category that superordinates joy, anger, sadness, and grief is sometimes identified with the term *qing*, one of the most complex terms in the early philosophical lexicon (Andreini 2006; Graham 1986; Hansen 1995; Allan 1997; Bruya 2001; Puett 2004; Eifring 2004; Harbsmeier 2004; Andreini, 2006; Middendorf 2008; Holloway 2013; Virág 2017, 2024; Cai 2020).² A clear example of *qing* as the abstract category of emotion can be found in the *Li Ji*: “What is human *qing*? Joy, anger, sadness, fear, love, hatred, and desire. These seven things, we do not need to learn to be capable of them.” (“Li Yun” Chapter, *Li Ji*)³ Similarly, the excavated “Xing Zi Ming Chu” text (hereafter XZMC) also demonstrates that *qing* encompasses prototypical emotional experiences, such as joy and grief (Chan 2009, 2019b). The XZMC is among the excavated texts recorded on the Guodian bamboo slips. The Guodian corpus were unearthed in 1993 from the Guodian tombs near Jingmen, Hubei and are believed to

have been buried around the fourth century BCE (Chan 2019a; He 2024). Parts of the XZMC can be found in the “Xingqing Lun,” a fragment that is part of the Shanghai Museum’s collection of Chu bamboo slips (Chan 2019a; He 2024). Although the authorship of XZMC remains a topic of debate, scholars generally locate it as a text from the Warring States period (Perkins 2009; He 2024). The XZMC has sparked significant scholarly interest since its excavation, especially concerning the central role of *qing* in the text.

In this paper, I take *qing* to denote “emotion” in the sense that it serves as an overarching term encompassing prototypical emotions like joy and anger. I examine *qing* in the XZMC as a theoretical kind understood as a grouping of entities that participates in a body of philosophical generalizations due to the properties these entities have in common (Scarantino and De Sousa, 2021).⁴ I aim to bring the following questions to the forefront of current discussions: What is the *qing* conceptualization of emotion in the XZMC? How can dominant characterizations of emotion found in contemporary analytic philosophy and science of emotion help us understand *qing* in XZMC? Conversely, how can *qing* in the XZMC help us reflect on some of the default contemporary assumptions about emotion?

This paper focuses solely on the conception of emotion in the XZMC, as it is arguably the most significant early Chinese work to present a comprehensive examination of emotion (Andreini 2006). It not only discusses the abstract concept of emotion but also provides a detailed analysis of specific emotions such as joy and grief. I argue that we can distill an exceptionally clear, detailed, and nuanced discourse on emotion from the XZMC in light of key ideas found in contemporary analytic philosophy and science of emotion.⁵ The comparative analysis not only provides important insights into how the XZMC philosophers understood emotion, deepening our grasp of the philosophical views on emotion from that period, but also

presents an alternative framework and perspective that question our contemporary assumptions. By bridging historical and contemporary perspectives, this paper aims to enhance our understanding of the conceptualization of emotion in both ancient and modern contexts.

It is important to note that I am *not* suggesting the XZMC offers a standalone conception of *qing* that exists independently of the broader classical Chinese discourse on emotion, human disposition, and self-cultivation. Though the XZMC is an excavated text, it shows clear connections to the discussions in transmitted texts like the *Analects*, *Mencius*, *Xunzi*, and *Liji*. This relationship has been frequently examined in both English and Chinese studies on the XZMC. Johanna Liu, for example, considers XZMC as part of an interconnected body of cultural texts, which can be viewed horizontally as having a dialectical relationship between the authors and their audience, and vertically, as interacting with previous texts and its various forms of contemporary culture (63). Specifically, Liu cites the popular idea that the XZMC is part of the Mencius-Zisi tradition while *qing* resembles the four sprouts that connects the natural with the normative (64).⁶ Perkins (2017), on the other hand, discusses how the XZMC conception of emotion underpins the function of music and ritual in self-cultivation, traceable in the “Yuelun” (“Discourse on Music”) chapter of the *Xunzi* (326) and the “Yueji” (“Records of Music”) chapter of the *Liji*. Paul Goldin also notes that Xunzi adopts the same account of music as in the XZMC, which inspires genuine *qing* while conforms to the way, thereby able to influence human beings and guiding them towards the way (120, 132), a point I will revisit in section 4. The perceived varied connections to works from different philosophical streams of the same era indicate that while scholars generally agree on the centrality of *qing* in the XZMC, the text is exceptionally subtle and nuanced in its philosophical positioning.

2. The Role of *Qing* in the XZMC: Connecting the Natural and the Normative

First and foremost, the XZMC conception of *qing* must be understood within the context of its broader metaphysics-ethics framework. In this framework, the concept of *qing* is uniquely positioned as a hinge that connects the natural and the normative. In other words, *qing* is both a descriptive and normative concept, a dual role that I will further elucidate in this section.

The XZMC text opens by the following claim:

“Although all humans have a nature, the heart-mind has no fixed determination. It depends on (engagement with) things and only then it becomes active; it depends on positive appraisal and only then it starts to act; it depends on adjustment and only then it becomes settled.” (1.0)

This opening statement describes the basic structure of human agency broadly-so-called: Every human is born with human nature (*xing* 性). The heart-mind (*xin* 心) is the cognitive-affective-conative agent in our nature that does not have a fixed orientation or direction. The heart-mind in our nature must be stimulated by things to become active.

So, what constitutes nature?⁷ The text continues to explain that “the vital energy of joy and anger, grief and sadness is nature. When it comes to its external manifestations, then it is because things pulled it out.” (1.1) From this strip, we can see that the vital energy or material force (*qi* 氣) of joy, anger, grief, and sadness is considered human nature, and only when such vital energy is stimulated by things does it start manifesting, which corresponds to the previous statement that our nature has to engage with things to become active.

What is the role of the heart-mind in this case? The relationship between nature and heart-mind is a highly contentious topic in early Chinese philosophy. Here I mainly follow Ding Yuanzhi’s understanding of the XZMC in thinking that the heart-mind is the cognitive-affective-conative agent in our nature that can get activated, lead to action, and become settled through interaction with external things (20). According to Shirley Chan (2019b), “*Xin* is the receptor of

external stimuli...and the words “*xin* is moved” (*dongxin* 動心) are used when it is affected.”

(222) The heart-mind can also form a determination or will (*zhi* 志) that orients the agent in a given context or environment. In this process, the heart-mind forms a stable orientation or commitment (*dingzhi* 定志) towards things. As Perkins (2009) notes, “This initial sentence of the XZMC thus describes a three-step process: encounters with external things stimulate some immediate movement of the heart; if this response is followed by an internal sense of pleased approval, then we act on it; if these actions are repeated and practiced, then our heart develops a stable commitment.” (125)

The passage further explains two questions: First, where does human nature come from? And second, how does this basic structure of agency relate to how we should act? This is also where the concept of *qing* comes into the picture:

“[Human] nature comes out from the decree, the decree comes down from Heaven. The Way begins in *qing*, and *qing* is born from [human] nature. In the beginning, one is close to *qing*; in the end, one is close to goodness. Those who know their *qing* (are able to) refine *qing*, and those who know goodness are able to embody it.” (1.2)

Although 1.2 does not explicitly say that *qing* is the *qi* of joy, anger, grief, and sadness manifested outwardly, Perkins (2009) thinks that it can be inferred that “*qing* is born from *xing*” refers to the same process by which the *qi* of joy, anger, grief, and sadness enacts. Moreover, these lines tell us the following: A. Human nature, which consists in the vital energy of joy, anger, sadness, and grief, is issued by the mandate of Heaven; B. Human beings start out close to the state of *qing* that is born from human nature. Furthermore, since human nature is issued by the mandate of Heaven, and Heaven is the source of normativity, the way that we should travel (the Way/Dao) also begins in *qing*; C. In this picture of self-cultivation, human beings start from a state close to *qing*, travel the way that we should travel (the Way/Dao), and in the end, we can be close to goodness (*yi* 義); D. The ability to draw on *qing* as our starting point and enter into

goodness requires an understanding (*zhi* 知) of *qing* and goodness, a point that bears considerable similarity to the *Analects* 17.2.

What is the difference between *xing* and *qing*? Attilio Andreini believes that “the substantial difference between *qing* and *xing* seems that the former represents an explicit manifestation, while the other refers only to an internal dimension, a potential, latent state.” (156). According to Chan (2019b), “It is not difficult to see from this that *xing* itself is non-active, and that it awaits (*dai* 待) induction by external stimuli in the *xin*...” (219) In his *Guodian Chujian Xiaoduji*, Li Ling affirms the same line of thinking: *qing* is the manifestation of the *qi* of joy, anger, grief, and sadness (151). Here Perkins, Andreini, Chan, and Li coincides with Zhu Xi (1130-1200)’s interpretation that *xing* is the unmanifested *qi* of joy, anger, grief, and sadness (*weifafa* 未發), and *qing* is after it is stimulated into manifestation (*yifafa* 已發).⁸ It is important to note that being “manifested” does not preclude any phenomenal components of prototypical emotions. The idea of being “manifested” simply means that the subject is in an active and not latent state.

According to Qing Dynasty scholar Xu Hao, *qing* is manifested from the bottom of the heart-mind, the cognitive-affective-conative agent of our nature. Similarly, Andrew H. Plaks (2006) also describes the heart-mind as the seat of emotions (113). The same idea is echoed by Chan (2019b), stating that “the interaction between external things and inborn nature is completed in the *xin*” (222). This metaphysics-ethics set-up in the XZMC can be roughly represented with the following diagram:

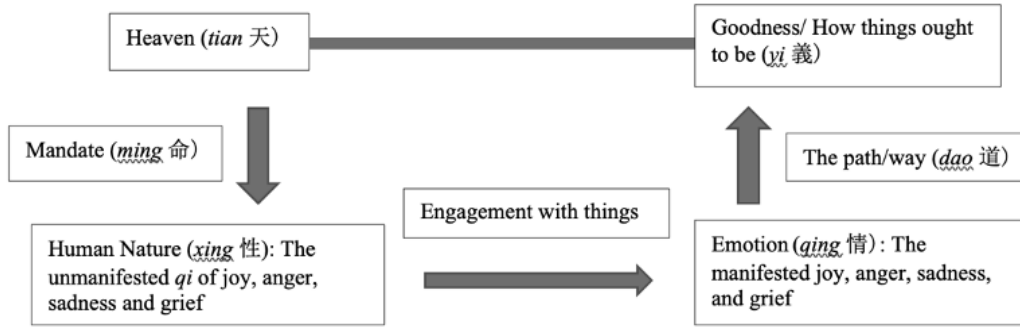


Figure 1: Metaphysics-Ethics Structure in the XZMC

As the text states, “The Way begins in *qing*, and *qing* is born from [human] nature. In the beginning, one is close to *qing*; in the end, one is close to goodness.” (1.2) In this metaphysical-ethical framework, the concept of *qing* serves as a conceptual hinge, connecting the natural with the normative. *Qing* could also be understood as a “thick concept” in Bernard Williams’ terms. According to Williams (1985), a concept is a thick concept when it is both “world-guided” (descriptive) and “action-guiding” (evaluative), for instance, the concept “cruel” describes a particular kind of act or situation and simultaneously evaluates it negatively. *Qing*, in this sense, is a thick concept that is guided by what is understood as our human nature and simultaneously set the foundation of what we should do to be good (ritual).

The text further explains *how* the concept of *qing* connects the natural and the normative. According to the text, the way we should reach goodness (*vidao* 義道) both individually and collectively is embodied in the proper order of social rituals, broadly construed to include music. The social ritual, *li* 禮, is wrought from our human *qing* (*lizuoyuqing* 禮作于情) and yet identifies, expresses, and prescribes the realm of *qing*. For example, the text analyzes two emotion events: excited joy (*xi* 喜) and grief (*yun* 慍). In the case of grief, grief leads to anxiety and sadness, which leads to sighing, beating one’s chest, and eventually stomping the ground. Stomping is the climax that eventually relinquishes sadness. Here, the text references an

established Zhou funeral ritual of stomping the ground. As the syntax of human social interaction, ritual is supposed to be founded upon the understanding of natural emotional reaction in the face of serious loss. The ritual system then reshapes, refines, and makes appropriate the repertoire of grief in relation to other social practices. According to the Zhou ritual, stomping marks the climax of grief, which then leads to the exiting of such emotion. Moreover, the Zhou ritual has a detailed prescription of how much and how often one should stomp the ground, depending on the relationship with the deceased. In other words, it tells us how much one should grieve in comparative terms. This way, one's grief stays proportionate to the relationship one has with the deceased. Through conducting the repertoire of grief, ritual shapes, modifies, and refines a crude *qing* and makes it socially proper, or more specifically, in Perkins (2010)'s words, it involves "conformity to rules developed with regard to the needs and orders of the world around us." (25) This view of the XZMC acknowledges the existence of general natural *qing* as the starting point of the socialization and perfection of *qing*, which set forth the path towards goodness (how things ought to be). I will revisit this important social feature of *qing* in section 4.

Last but not least, XZMC understands *qing* as intimately connected to the notion of genuine care or authenticity. As Goldin notes, "'Xing zi ming chu' emphasizes the importance of speaking one's genuine *qing*." (119-120). Specifically, the text draws our attention to the following: If somebody is perceived as acting out of *qing*, then such behavior is generally more accepted. When a mistake is committed out of *qing*, people do not hate it that much. The socially proper *qing* (*qing* that went through ritual refinement) could gain people's trust without having to speak about things. (6.1-2) In other words, the philosophers of XZMC observed a basic social psychological phenomenon that we are much more accepting, forgiving, and trusting when we

perceive emotion in the other party. Even when only crude and un-ritualized emotions are involved, we are more accepting and forgiving, and we are more trusting when ritually refined emotions are presented. This important social psychological phenomenon further supports the adoption of *qing* as the conceptual hinge connecting the natural and the good.

In summary, the XZMC views *qing* as a thick concept that bridges the natural and the normative. Specifically, *qing* is seen as a cultural artifact that originates from fundamental, instinctive reactions and serves as the basis for establishing rituals. These rituals enable us to properly modify and express our crude *qing*, ultimately guiding us toward goodness. After outlining this basic metaphysics-ethics framework, the text delves into a detailed explanation of the essential features of *qing*, which I will further elaborate on in the next section.

3. The Features of *Qing*

In this section, I explain three essential features of the *qing* conceptualization of emotion in the XZMC: **A. The Intentionality of *Qing*:** *Qing* is clearly seen as being directed towards something, indicating its intentional nature. On one hand, within the *qing* framework, the stimulus is not separate from but is an integral part of the emotional event. On the other hand, *qing* views emotions as emerging from the mental pre-conditions generated by the innate functions of human nature, a perspective that can be interpreted through the lens of the contemporary Belief-Desire Theory of Emotion (BDTE). **B. The Interconnected and Dynamic *Qing*:** *Qing* does not regard emotions as isolated and discrete entities. Instead, emotions like joy and sadness, though seemingly opposite, are seen as interconnected and continuously flowing into one another. In this dynamic process, *qing* highlights two important gears of the mechanism of emotion: the heart-mind, which encompasses the affective, cognitive, and motivational

aspects, and bodily expression, involving physical and behavioral elements. These two gears interact in a reciprocal and dynamic system, propelling emotional change. **C. The Social *Qing*:** *Qing* thinks of different emotions as similarly having risen from basic, first-nature reactions that are identified, communicated, and shaped through shared music and ritual practices. In the following, I will explain these crucial aspects of *qing* in light of key characterizations of emotion found in contemporary analytic philosophy and science of emotion.

A. The Intentionality of *Qing*

In the XZMC, *qing* is clearly understood as being directed toward something. In other words, *qing* possesses intentionality, as it is always *about* something. As Perkins notes, “The point is that, while loving and hating are reactions of our *xing*, they only arise in relation to external things, to what is loved and what is hated” (120). In the text, this *aboutness* of *qing* is discussed in two-fold: the external stimuli and the internal evaluative components. On the one hand, the XZMC text considers the emotional state as a matter of what the causes are. When it comes to the causes or triggers of emotions, the text employs a strong language of “being seized” (*qu* 取) to describe the process of engagement with external things. The text says, “although humans have nature, the heart-mind would not discharge without being seized by external things.” (1.4) The engagement process is described as if the external things are reaching into our nature, grabbing, and bringing out our heart-mind. Furthermore, the text uses the following analogy to further elucidate the engagement of *xing* with external things: “metal and stone have (the ability to make) sound, but they will not ring without being struck.” (1.4)

According to the analogy, the inherent qualities of metal and stone that allow them to produce specific sounds are analogous to *xing* (nature), while the phenomenon of the metal and stone ringing when struck represents *qing* (emotion). Perkins (2009) argues that this analogy

highlights the passivity of *xing*. While I agree with Perkins on the passivity of *xing*, I believe the analogy also emphasizes how external stimulation is integral to the overall emotional event. In my view, the analogy suggests that external stimulation does not merely trigger a passive response but becomes a crucial part of the larger emotional process. In this case, “ringing” is meant to capture not just the quality of the sound of the metal or stone, but the overall event of our *xing* being set into motion. As Middendorf (2008) puts it, “the component of arousal and bodily symptoms is described as event-focused stimulation by external objects which set the mind into motion.” (141) By positioning external stimuli as co-constitutive elements in shaping emotion, the text establishes a framework for exploring the interconnectedness and dynamism of emotional events, which I will turn to in the next section.

The XZMC further discusses two mental preconditions (desire and belief) of *qing* generated by the innate functions of human nature, revealing another key aspect of *qing*’s intentionality. As the text states, “Liking and disliking are (part of) nature. What one likes and what one dislikes are things. (Believing that things are) good and (believing that things are) not good are (part of) nature. What is (believed to be) good and what is (believed to be) not good are circumstances.” (1.3) Through this passage, text establishes that the abilities to “like and dislike” (*haowu* 好恶) and “believing something as good or not good” (*shanbushan* 善不善)⁹ are parts of our *xing*. The objects of such mental functions are things (*wu* 物) and the situation of things (*shi* 勢) respectively. The two mental functions inherent to our nature, *haowu* and *shanbushan*, interact with the external object and situation, respectively, to form the desire and belief from which *qing* arises.

Perkins (2009) categorizes *haowu* and *shanbushan* as species of *qing* alongside prototypical emotions like joy, anger, and grief. He argues that “all of these must be taken as the

spontaneous responses of our dispositions to things in the world and thus can be considered as affects in a broad sense” (327). I disagree with this interpretation. The textual evidence suggests that *haowu* and *shanbushan* are parts of our nature (*xing*). As the text explains, “liking and disliking are (part of) nature,” and “(believing that things are) good and (believing that things are) not good are (part of) nature” (1.3) whereas “*qing* is born from nature” (1.2). In this sense, *haowu* and *shanbushan* are best understood as mental functions rooted in our nature that give rise to desires and beliefs about the world, which serve as the mental pre-conditions of *qing*.

The nuances of this claim become clearer when examined in the context of the leading contemporary cognitive theory of emotion, the Belief-Desire Theory of Emotion (BDTE). BDTE explains emotions as arising from an individual’s beliefs and desires. Beliefs are cognitive states that portray the external events in a particular way. Desires, on the other hand, are motivational states that reflect a person’s likes or dislikes of the external event. Similar to the BDTE, the XZMC text also outlines two types of mental pre-conditions of emotion: liking or disliking something and believing whether the situation is good or not good. In this case, “like or dislike” (*haowu*) might be taken as referring to a desire relationship to the external object, which coincides with the desire component of the BDTE. The XZMC diverges from BDTE in its treatment of beliefs. Rather than emphasizing factual representations of the external thing, the text focuses on evaluative beliefs about whether the overall situation (*shi*) is good or not good (*shanbushan*). The evaluative belief about the overall situation, not merely the representation of the external thing, serves as a pre-condition to the emotional response. This divergence highlights the XZMC’s emphasis on contextual relationship between agent and circumstances as a precursor of *qing*.

As mentioned above, the XZMC understands *qing* as encapsulating the interaction between external stimuli and our latent state of nature. The metaphysical relationship between *qing* and *xing* is captured by a generative and biological metaphor (“born from” or *shengyu*), like a baby being brought to life by its mother. This idea can be further illuminated by contrasting the two general approaches to BDTE. Cristiano Castelfranchi and Marie Miceli (2009) and O.H. Green (1992) advocate for the gestational BDTE, according to which emotions emerge as gestalt-like wholes from the integration of their constituent belief-desire components (See also in Reisenzein 2009: 215; 2012: 181). In contrast, Reisenzein (2009, 2012) thinks that beliefs and desires are causes of emotions but not integral parts of emotions themselves. For the XZMC, *qing*’s generative emergence (*sheng* 生) from the interaction between the two mental functions of our nature and external stimuli aligns well with the gestational view, which views emotions as rising from the gestalt integration of its cognitive-motivational building blocks. This stands in contrast to Reisenzein’s causal perspective, which regards belief-desires as mere causes rather than integral components of emotions.

In the preceding discussion, I have addressed two facets of the *aboutness* of *qing*, which align with Chad Hansen’s interpretation of *qing* as “reality feedback” or “reality-induced distinction-making reactions.”¹⁰ Following Hansen’s view, we can see that both the “reality” and “feedback” constitute essential elements of *qing*’s intentionality. The “reality” aspect is evident in how the interaction with external stimuli is integral to the overall concept of *qing*. Meanwhile, the “feedback” or “distinction-making reaction” is demonstrated by how *qing* is emergent from the conative-cognitive building blocks of our nature. In both cases, how the intentionality of *qing* is constructed sets the stage for the discussions of its connective and dynamic nature, which I will further elaborate in the next section.

B. The Interconnected and Dynamic *Qing*

The XZMC views *qing* as both interconnective and dynamic, propelled by the interaction of its two gears. According to the text, sadness and joy are closely connected such that the highest joy will give rise to sadness. Rather than treating these seemingly opposing emotions as isolated and discrete entities, the text presents them as moving in a continuous emotional flow. In this view, emotion is understood as a fluid process that reflects the ongoing interaction between our nature and external stimuli. This perspective emphasizes the movement and fluidity of emotional experience, where emotions are not discrete reactions but interconnected parts of a larger emotional cycle

XZMC emphasizes that emotions share a similar structure in terms of their progression: Both begin with an initial enactment, progress towards a climax, and eventually reach a conclusion. In the case of joy, the excitement leads to an outpour of feeling, which leads to singing, swaying, and at least dancing. Dancing is the climax that leads to the exhaustion of excitement. In the case of grief, grief leads to anxiety and sadness, which leads to sighing, beating one's chest, and eventually stomping the ground. Stomping is the climax that leads to the cessation of sadness. It is evident that these progressions involve changes in two fundamental dimensions of *qing*: the inner aspect, such as feelings of excitement and anxiety, and the outer physiological-behavioral aspect, such as sighing, beating one's chest, dancing, and stomping.

More specifically, the text explains that the ongoing changes in *qing* are driven by the interaction between its inner and outer state. This point is clearly stated in section 4.3, “When the voice changes, the heart-mind follows; when the heart-mind changes, the voice also follows.”

(4.3) In this context, “voice” (*sheng* 聲) symbolizes the outer physiological-behavioral aspect of *qing*, whereas the heart-mind (*xin* 心) represent the inner affective-cognitive aspect of *qing*. The

changes in the interior state (*xin*) are impacted by shifts in the outer state (*sheng*), and likewise, changes in the outer state are driven by alterations in the interior state. The two gears form a reciprocal dynamic of *qing*: changes in the outward expressions of *qing* bring about shifts in its inner dimensions, and vice versa.

The nuance of this perspective in the XZMC becomes especially apparent when considered alongside two competing contemporary models of emotion that explores the link between the subjective experiences and physiological changes of an emotion: the latent variable model and the emergent variable model. In the latent variable model, subjective experience of emotion is thought as a cause of physical indicators of emotion, such as facial or vocal actions, etc. The emergent variable model, on the other hand, suggests that the experience of emotions arises from the physical indicators of emotion. In contrast, the XZMC proposes a reciprocal dynamism between the inner and outer dimensions of emotion: When one gear turns, the other will follow. If one gear resists, the other will also have to slow down or change course. This unique perspective frames emotion as a continuous, interconnected process rather than as isolated causal mechanisms proposed by the two contemporary models.

C. The Social *Qing*

One of the most important focuses of XZMC is to develop a metaphysics-ethics theory that provides a functional guideline for the cultivation and refinement of self and society. In other words, it is concerned with the mechanisms of *qing* accessible to us as a society and how these components can work together to cultivate human changes towards goodness. The social nature of *qing* has been carefully set up throughout the text.

Lisa Raphals argues that the XZMC presents a weak mind-body dualism, as the text distinguishes between the body's passive response to sensation and emotion and the mind's

capacity to actively control those responses (241). I agree with Raphals' diagnosis of an apparent weak mind-body dualism in the XZMC. However, I argue that the text is less concerned with the ontological distinction between mind and body, as seen in traditional Western accounts. For example, the difference between "heart-mind" and "voice" is not primarily that the former is mind or mental and the latter physical or bodily. The "heart-mind" is a mental faculty with a physical presence inside the human body that is also made of the material of *qi*. In the context where this conceptual duality is presented, "when the voice changes, the heart-mind follows; when the heart-mind changes, the voice also follows" (4.3), the text carves out the dimensions of "heart-mind" and "voice" more in terms of the different ways that society interacts with the workings of a human being. This is why I have been consistently referring to the inner and outer dimensions of *qing* as "gears" or "handles."

The reciprocal dynamic structure of *qing* ultimately finds foothold in the shared social practices of music (*yue* 樂) and ritual (*li* 禮). XZMC conceptualizes *qing* as something identified, communicated, and refined through shared music and ritual practices. For example, the text uses the change of "voice" as an example to represent broader physiological and behavioral changes of *qing*. The choice of voice as a representative example implies an emphasis on the communicative feature of *qing*. According to Middenorf, "Overall, *qing* as an internal feeling episode, if not universally, is generally observable in motor expression (the emotional expression in face, body, and voice which serve to communicate an individual's emotional reaction and intended action)." (141) Through the example of voice, we can see that the physiological and behavioral outlook of *qing* is thought to be, by default, communicative.

The text also emphasizes that the heart-mind cannot operate by itself, just like the mouth cannot speak by itself. In other words, we cannot have *qing*-properly-so-called without shared

social practices such as music and rituals. Two important points can be inferred from this: A. The shared social practices (e.g., music and ritual) are like language to our speech, without which we are just making sounds instead of speaking. B. The shared social practices inform us of the proper make-up of *qing* in each context regarding behaviors and inner experiences. For instance, we express grief through the funeral ritual, and we can identify grief as “that thing” expressed through the funeral. The funeral ritual also teaches us to think about the deceased, feel the loss we are suffering, and weep. In other words, rituals both identify and communicate *qing*. Note here that the claim is much stronger than saying that we can get a glimpse of the emotion of others through ritual and music. The text indeed considers *qing* as conducted by social practices of music and ritual. In this sense, *qing* is akin to a shrilling: A shrilling is a small round silver plate engraved with set patterns. A small round silver plate itself is not a shrilling without the engravement. Similarly, without its social features, we only have the material of *qing* and not *qing*-properly-so-called.

Last but not least, *qing* must be refined (*mei* 美) through ritual and music, “the gentleman refines his *qing*.” According to Middendorf (2008), “after adding appropriate, socially wanted design features to the process of *qing*, modified through cognitive appraisals that give appreciable shape to otherwise formless affects and desires, humans’ expressive behavior and action tendency would be brought to completion.” (143) A fundamental feature of *qing* is that it is malleable and needs to be worked on both in terms of the inner experience and the outer expressions. The reciprocal structure between the outward manifestation and inner experience of *qing* serves as the foundation for the shared practice of ritual and music to not only identify and communicate *qing* but also shape and modify it. The process of beautifying *qing* is not purely outside-in or inside-out. Instead, it is a long-term process of aligning the emotion apparatus in

accord with the proper music and ritual, making a reciprocal determinist structure of inner and outer gears “tick.”

In this case, the appropriate music helps rectify our inner feelings and conducts our bodily movements around it. Following rituals correct our outward behaviors while also cultivate the appropriate moral feelings in us. The goal is to reach a state of alignment where the inner and the outer states align with the social guidelines of ritual and music. For instance, the Zhou funeral ritual requires us to think about the deceased, feel sad and anxious, weep, and eventually stomp the ground. A less cultivated person might weep at a funeral without truly feeling sad. Similarly, another less cultivated person might genuinely mourn the loss and feel deep sorrow yet fail to weep alongside others as the ritual demands. The gentleman’s refined *qing*, however, would meet all the requirements of proper inner feelings and outer displays. Moreover, *qing* in this case is also an elicitation of action tendencies and preparation of action. Thus, to refine one’s *qing* is to be prepared to act in accordance with ritual and music in each situation with the proper alignment of one’s inner and outer states.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I begin by identifying *qing* as the overarching term for emotion in early Chinese thought, as it encompasses prototypical cases such as joy, anger, and sadness. My primary focus is on the XZMC text, the most significant early Chinese philosophical work that offers an exceptionally nuanced theory of emotion. According to XZMC, *qing* as emotion has distinct features: First, *qing* plays a critical role as a conceptual hinge between the natural and the normative, grounded in basic, first-nature modules while connecting to the ultimate goodness. Second, *qing* is a dynamic event with a list of key components, such as the external stimulus and

its desire-belief building blocks. Third, the interior experience and physiological expression of *qing* form a reciprocal dynamism. This mechanism underpins the identification, communication, and refinement of *qing* through shared social practices of rituals and music. These practices, in turn, shape both the inner and outer dimensions of *qing*, illustrating how emotions can be holistically transformed by social practices.

Characterized by its social nature, intentionality, and dynamism, *qing* conceptualizes emotion as a complex phenomenon rather than purely internal, subjective experiences. This perspective aligns with Flanagan's (2021) description of emotions as “emotion events,” which are determined by their causes, interpretations, and associated action tendencies. As Flanagan notes, “the emotional state one is in is a matter of what the causes are; how the causes are understood, interpreted, and affectively evaluated; the content of the emotion (what it is about); the action tendencies that are activated; and so on.” (p. 9) According to Flanagan, emotion is thus best understood in broad functional terms, encompassing its causes, inner phenomenal features, content, dispositions, and actions—a perspective he refers to as the “holism of emotion.”

To summarize, in the West, we use the term “emotion,” while in classical Chinese philosophy, we encounter *qing*. By bringing the diverse ways of conceptualizing emotion into conversation, we broaden the conceptual possibilities for understanding emotion, ultimately deepening our insight into its function and significance in human life. To achieve this goal, I have demonstrated how some of the dominant contemporary approaches of emotion can shed light on our understanding of the XZMC. By juxtaposing these perspectives, we uncover the rich complexity and subtlety within the XZMC account of emotion. Moreover, I argue that crystalizing the concept of *qing* in the XZMC enhances our perspective on emotion as a multifaceted human phenomenon. *Qing* reveals that emotion need not be viewed primarily or

merely as an internal experience, such as feelings or thoughts. Instead, emotion can be viewed as a dynamic event with essential elements, including external stimuli, desire-beliefs, and functional adaptability.

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Notes:

¹ Of course, not all research on emotions fits neatly within these two themes. For instance, behaviorists, such as John Watson and B. F. Skinner, who have largely fallen out of fashion, often view emotions as observable behavioral events instead of unobservable inner events (LeDoux, 2872).

² Among scholars, many argue that the term *qing* had a unified meaning in the pre-Han period, with the concept of “emotion” emerging much later. For example, A.C. Graham (1986) asserts that *qing* as a noun means “facts” or “essence,” a view shared by Shun Kwong-Loi (2022). Graham acknowledges instances where certain psychological aspects are considered *qing* or the essence of being human. However, he does not equate *qing* with “emotion,” which he views as a

simple “feeling concept.” As such, my view of *qing* as broadly constructed “emotion”—rather than merely a “feeling concept”—does not directly contradict Graham's perspective.

³ According to Li Xueqin (1998) and Li Tianxiang (2001), *Li Ji* constitutes texts mostly from the pre-qin period and was edited into an anthology by later scholars from the Han dynasty.

⁴ Here I take the conceptions of emotion in affective science and psychology also as theoretical kinds. The question of whether any of these conceptions capture a natural kind is not the target of this paper.

⁵ This approach aligns with Fan He’s recommendations for advancing current scholarship on the XZMC. He argues that “Since most of XZMC’s key terms, such as *xing*, *xin*, and *qing*, concern moral psychology, a study with psychological depth and contemporary philosophical relevance should consult as many recent advances in cognitive science as possible...” (702)

⁶ This view was first made popular in the Chinese literature on the XZMC by scholars such as Li Xueqin and Liao Mingchun in the late 1990s. In the English literature, James Behuniak also sides with this position. For more on this point, please see Paul Goldin’s overview of the history of associating the XZMC with the Zisi school in his article “Xunzi in Light of the Guodian Manuscripts” (115).

⁷ In the “Recontextualizing *Xing*: Self-Cultivation and Human Nature in the Guodian Texts,” Perkins argues that discussions of *xing* emerged in relation to problems with self-cultivation. The focus of self-cultivation in the text, according to Perkins, is to cultivate our nature so that appropriate actions guided by externally determined norms genuinely emerge from it. While I agree with Perkins’ overall assessment that the discussions in XZMC are largely oriented towards self-cultivation, I would like to emphasize the centrality of the concept of *qing* as the connective joint between nature and goodness.

⁸ Ding Sixin (2005) challenges the idea that *qing* is the superordinate category for joy, anger, sadness, and grief in the XZMC. Instead, he thinks *qing* is the activated ontological foundation for joy, anger, sadness, and grief. I argue that we need to be able to look at the phenomenon of emotion in a much broader sense. At the most minimal level, the current literature on XZMC agrees that *qing* involves the prototypical members of emotion. To investigate *qing* is precisely to see how *qing* provides new ways of conceptualizing the broad phenomenon of emotion.

⁹ It is worth noting that the interpretation of the *shanbushan* line is subject to debate. Perkins (2009) and Chan (2009) both interpret the line to mean that we judge the circumstances to be good or not good. On the other hand, James Behuniak interprets this line strictly in accord with the Zisi tradition, argues that “just to be disposed is to have some degree of goodness (*shan* 善)” (83). Here I side with Perkins and Chan in seeing *shanbushan* as functioning in parallel to *haowu*.

¹⁰ Hansen (1995) rejects Graham's explanation of *qing* as “what is essential or genuine.” Hansen thinks it is impossible for the term *qing* to shift from referring to something purely metaphysical and objective (facts or essence) to something subjective and psychological (emotion) in later periods. He hence proposes that *qing* means “reality feedback” or “reality-induced distinction-making reactions” (201). For Hansen, these reactions can sometimes include things like “pleasure, anger, sadness, fear, love, hate, desire” (196).

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