

## *Inside Out: Pleasure in Chinese Intellectual Traditions*

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Michael Nylan. *The Chinese Pleasure Book*. New York: Zone Books, 2018, pp. 456 with 12 black & white illustrations, USD 32.95.

*What is the role of pleasure in Chinese intellectual traditions? Do Chinese thinkers shun all desire for pleasure? Contrary to received opinion, The Chinese Pleasure Book illustrates and argues that early Chinese thinkers across traditions, from the fourth century BCE to the eleventh century CE, all assume that pleasure-seeking and pleasure-taking are part of the human condition and that it is right to engage in such actions. The volume is an ambitious project and Nylan has done a superb job.*

**Key words:** pleasure; Chinese philosophy; Confucianism; Daoism; poetry; Mencius; Xunzi; Zhangzi; Yang Xiong; Tao Yuanming; Su Shi

Michael Nylan, one of the best-known sinologists in the world, presents us with an intellectual feast worth savoring in her *Chinese Pleasure Book*. This volume is well-researched with abundant explanatory notes, an impressive bibliography, and a helpful list of suggested readings. Throughout the book, Nylan makes interesting east-west comparisons on what pleasure is, the origin, variety, experience, and physiology of pleasure, and how pleasure relates to the body and the body politic. The layout of the chapters includes a wide range of thinkers from the fourth century BCE to the eleventh century CE and traces the evolution of theories of pleasure in early China. Nylan argues that Chinese thinkers during this long period all assume that pleasure-seeking and pleasure-taking are part of the natural human condition and that it is right and proper to engage in such actions. But these thinkers are equally certain that long-term relational pleasures are more sustainable, more satisfying, and less damaging in their overall effect than short-term, impulsive, immediate delights.

The book begins with an informative introduction, followed by seven chapters. Chapter 1 sketches the key vocabulary and concept clusters as well as the difference in theories of pleasure between Chinese philosophy and the classical Greek and Roman traditions and modern philosophy. This chapter attempts to lay the groundwork for later chapters and for readers who are less familiar with Chinese traditions. Chapter 2 discusses how music and intimate friendship (in contrast with mere sociability) function as metaphors, illustrating the inherent value of interrelating with others and the “continual readjustments of ‘attunement’ of temper” through such processes (18). Chapter 3 focuses on Mencius, a well-known Confucian in the fourth century BCE, and his arguments aimed to persuade kings and princes that the best political practice of securing their material and psychological goods is by means of a people-centered humane government where the ruler and the subjects share the same desires for pleasure and hope for stability. As a contrast to Mencius’s view, which endorses the hypothesis that human nature is good, chapter 4 expounds Xunzi’s systematic application of “the pleasure calculus” to human nature and governmental measures; it became immensely influential on later political thinkers. Chapter 5 zooms in on the Daoist classic, the *Zhuangzi*. The chapter discusses Zhuangzi’s advice on being fully present in the present as the way to

respect, and to respond to, the uncertainty of life, to ensure vitality, and to jettison unwarranted worries. Chapter 6 explores the Han philosopher and court poet Yang Xiong's view on pleasure. Yang was influenced by Mencius, Xunzi, and Zhuangzi. An interesting feature of Yang's perspective on pleasure is that Yang takes a more introverted approach than other thinkers regarding the cause of one's deepest pleasure (i.e., by immersing oneself in the great words of ancient writers). Chapter 7 examines two famous Chinese poets, Tao Yuanming of the Eastern Jin Dynasty and Su Shi of the Song Dynasty. The chapter tackles the theme of home, returning home, and the concomitant pleasure that results. The chapter is followed by a generous translation of matching poems by Tao and Su. The volume is an ambitious project, and Nyman has done a superb job.

There are a few limitations of the book, however. First, the publisher decided for some reason not to include the notes and works cited in the print copy, probably due to the length of the book and consideration of cost. The only way to access these important resources is through the publisher's website. This arrangement inconveniences anyone who is interested in finding out more about where a quotation is located or the author's further explanation on a point because one must always have access to an electronic device with internet access for a serious reading of this book.

Second, there are a number of choices made regarding the translation of certain words that obscure crucial philosophical points. It is true that how to best translate a key word from another language is always subject to debate. But the author's reasons for her choice to translate the Chinese word *le* 樂 as "pleasure" rather than "happiness" are less than convincing to me and I suspect to some others as well. I shall enumerate a few concerns I have. For example, the author argues that "happiness" brings too much conceptual burden from contemporary American culture, including "the anodyne Happy Face" and "a link between happiness and psychosocial clinical normality" (35). Moreover, "by 1725, happiness was associated (in the work of Francis Hutcheson and later writers) with the utilitarian concept of the 'greatest happiness of the greatest number'" (36). However, replacing the word "happiness" with the word "pleasure" does not solve the problem. One can surely ask: doesn't "pleasure" carry a similar cultural and historical baggage, although different from the baggage that "happiness" carries? Just consider how the contemporary public perceives the word "pleasure" and how Bentham and Mill (both utilitarians) use the term in their theories. Another worrisome point is when the author firmly asserts: "The word I translate as 'pleasure' is *le* 樂, denoting an action, pleasure-seeking or pleasure-taking, rather than a state such as 'happiness'" (34) and, two pages later, "finally and most importantly, 'happiness' refers to a state of being, whereas the Chinese graph for 'pleasure' implies actions: pleasure-seeking, pleasure-giving, and pleasure-taking" (36). However, the author offers no analysis of the Chinese graph of the word *le* 樂 as to why she thinks the word merely implies actions, but not a state of being. Interpreting *le* 樂 as actions and actions only, whether they are pleasure-seeking, pleasure-giving, or pleasure-taking, eschews the rich contours of *le* 樂, which encompasses not only actions but also a state of being. The *Analects* 6.21 states just as much, "The wise enjoys/delights in water. The humane enjoys/delights in mountain. 智者樂水, 仁者樂山."

Third, although "pleasure" is one of the cornerstones of Chinese philosophy, especially in public rhetoric and political persuasion, whether all motives of action can be reduced to "pleasure" and the "pleasure calculus" (a heavily Benthamian term) in Chinese philosophy remains uncertain. The author's emphasis, and at times almost an over-emphasis, on the desire for pleasure risks an oversimplification of moral psychology in Chinese philosophy.

Fourth, the author's claim that the early Chinese theorists "consistently opposed pleasure not to pain, but to anxiety or insecurity" and "[t]his is one crucial difference between Euro-American ideas and those in China discussed here" (40) seems too absolute. While it is partly true

that *le* is used at times as the opposite of *buan* 不安 (disease, insecurity) or *you* 憂 (worry, anxiety), it is also deployed as the converse of *ku* 苦 (suffering, hardship), a term often associated with *tong* 痛 (pain). A number of texts in Chinese early writings testify to this point. Juxtaposition of *ku* and *le* as a conceptual cluster can be found in Han texts such as the *Shiji*, e.g., “to experience the suffering/pain and pleasure/happiness with the people (*yu baixing tong ku le* 與百姓同苦樂),” and the *Shuoyuan*, e.g., “make the people pleased/happy and do not make them suffer (*le zhi wu ku* 樂之勿苦),” as well as earlier texts such as the *Mencius*, the *Xunzi*, and the *Zhuangzi*. These are some further points for readers to ponder.

The book is a remarkable resource for specialists in Chinese philosophy who seek new ideas and new directions for reading Chinese texts. It is equally an invaluable book for a non-specialist who is interested in learning more about Chinese culture, especially on the subject of friendship, the tradition of exchanging literary work between good friends owing to mutual admiration, and the poetry authored by two great poets-scholars-officials, Tao Yuanming and Su Shi.

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