

# On the Rationality of Li Zehou's Philosophical Viewpoint on “A Culture of Optimism”

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**Abstract**—In the 20th century, in order to distinguish between “guilt culture” in the west and the “shame culture” in Japan, Chinese philosopher Li Zehou (1930) uses the “leguan wenhua” to summarize Chinese culture, and translated the philosophical viewpoint into “A culture of optimism”. To prove the rationality of the naming of the cultural feature in China, this paper demonstrates the following three points, mainly comprising three meanings, that is to say, (1) the word “optimism” (spelled “le” in Chinese Pinyin) has undergone a long historical evolution in Chinese culture, mainly holding three main meanings, namely music, pleasure, and optimism; (2) “A culture of optimism” mixes various ideas of Confucianism, and (3) “emotion as substance” is the core of “A culture of optimism”. In addition, it should be noted that the English translation “A culture of optimism” of Li Zehou lacks the content of “The culture of music/pleasure”. The significance of this research is to systematically clarify the essence of the “The culture of music/optimism/pleasure”, and thus lays a foundation for a deeper and more thorough comparison between Chinese and Western cultures in the future.

**Keywords**—Chinese philosophy; Li Zehou; A culture of optimism; Emotion as substance; Rationality

## I. INTRODUCTION

As early as 1946, the American cultural anthropologist Benedict (1887-1948) pointed out that “one of the important tasks was to distinguish whether culture was based on shame or guilt in the anthropological research on various cultures. The genuine culture of shame enabled people to do good deeds on the basis of external constraints, while the genuine culture of guilt motivates enabled people to do good deeds on the basis of the cognition of guilt in mind” [1]. In another word, Ruth Benedict divided cultures all over the world into two types in accordance with the way people did good deeds: “shame culture” and “guilt culture”, and classified Japanese culture as the former.

Which type does Chinese culture belong to? If referring to the classification of cultures by Benedict, Chinese culture would belong to the “shame culture” of non-religious beliefs. However, Li Zehou opposes the statement and believes that “a culture of optimism” is more appropriate, in that “Chinese rarely fall into a state of complete pessimism, and they are always willing to look into the future optimistically” [2].

The term has been widely recognized by scholars of the research field in China. Sun Xiguo, a professor of philosophy at Shandong University, maintains that “a culture of optimism” in China generates from ancient sorcery culture, and its cradle is Book of changes [3]. Professor Lin Weisheng analyzes the rationality of “a culture of optimism” from the perspectives of the culture of sorcery history and myths and legends [4]. The scholar Xu Zhen analyzes the relationship between “a culture of optimism” and the shamanism rationalized which means that “乐” (“optimism”, spelled “le” in Chinese Pinyin) originates from “乐” (“music”, spelled “yue” in Chinese Pinyin) [5]. Nevertheless, a majority of scholars neither systematically analyze the evolution of the word “乐” (“optimism”) in Chinese culture from the perspective of etymology, and nor prove whether the meaning of the philosophical viewpoint of the term given by Li Zehou is consistent with the transformation of the meaning of “乐” (“optimism”).

## II. THE ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF THE WORD “乐” (“OPTIMISM”, SPELLED “LE” IN CHINESE PINYIN)

The academic community has not yet determined the origin of the word “乐” (“optimism”) so far, and there are three different viewpoints:

(1) The word “乐” (“music”) in inscriptions on bones or tortoise shells of the Shang Dynasty is 𠂔. In Origin of Chinese Characters (or ShuoWen JieZi), the sentence that “music, a general term of five ancient sounds and the sounds of eight musical instruments, is like the wooden bracket of a drum (spelled “gu pi” in Chinese Pinyin)” explains the meaning of “乐” (“music”) in inscriptions on bones or tortoise shells of the Shang Dynasty, which means that it is a combination of five ancient sounds (including Gong, Shang, Jue, Zhi and Yu, the synonyms of Do, Re, Mi, Sol and La ) and the sounds of eight musical instruments (Bo, Qing, Qinse, Xiao, Sheng, Xun, Gu, Zhuyu). The upper part of the word in inscriptions on bones or tortoise shells of the Shang Dynasty is like a war drum, and the lower part is like a wooden stand that supports the drum. “Strings (Cong and Si in Chinese Pinyin) attached to the wood are much like the shapes of Qin and Se (two ancient Chinese

musical instruments) in *The Book of Yin Ruins* which explains the meaning of the word “乐” (“music”) in inscriptions on bones or tortoise shells of the Shang Dynasty (1600 B.C.–1046 B.C.). Specifically, the word “乐” (“music”) consists of two parts: the upper part is 𠂔 (string, “si” in Chinese Pinyin) and the lower one is 木 (wood, “mu” in Chinese Pinyin). Put it another way, strings are attached to a wooden stand, which is extremely similar to a harp and lyre (Qin and Se, two Chinese musical instruments). The two books are divergent in the understandings of “乐” (“music”), and the former thinks it is a drum, while the latter thinks it is a string, but both of them aim to demonstrate that the word “乐” (“music”) is a general term for musical instruments that can play music, and can be used as a symbol of “Music” because it can produce sound [6].

The early word “乐鼎” (“Yue Ding”) in Bronze Inscription (Jinwen) of Shang Dynasty inherits the glyph 𠂔 of “乐” (“music”) in inscription on bones or tortoise shells of the Shang Dynasty, and adds the word “白” 白 (“white”, “bai” in Chinese Pinyin) on the basis of the original word in inscriptions on bones or tortoise shells of the Shang Dynasty, so the word “乐” (“music”) in Bronze Inscription is 𠂔 in late time. However, Chinese scholars have different understandings on the word “白” in Bronze Inscription. Xu Shen (30-124) holds that the word “白” in inscription on bones or tortoise shells of Shang Dynasty refers to explaining something in vain, or working hard to explain something. When it comes to 𠂔, the word “白” refers to rap, and its overall meaning are playing, accompanying and singing [6-7]. The oracle bone scientist Luo Zhenyu (1866-1940) explains that 白 is like a stringed instrument of tune, and just as that people touch strings when playing lute (Pipa) and Ruanxian. Dai Jiexiang (1906-1998), an expert of ancient Chinese characters, points out that 白 may be a drum. Hence, the understanding of the word “白” is still in the speculative stage, and no consensus has been reached.

(2) Lin Guizhen (1974), an associate professor at Xuzhou Normal University, makes a bold assumption on the word “樂” (“music”) in Regular Script, in which he adopts the viewpoint of Dai Jiexiang that the word “白” is a drum, and proposes that the word “𠂔” (“yao” in Chinese Pinyin) is actually the word “玄” (“xuan” in Chinese Pinyin), namely a hanging bell. Therefore, the “樂” (“music”) means that a small wooden bell and a big drum are hung on a large wooden stand, which is “related to the musical activities for worshiping the Heaven performed by the ancients” [8].

(3) Music researcher Xiu Hailin (1952) maintains that the word “樂” (“music”) in inscriptions on bones or tortoise shells of the Shang Dynasty can be regarded as “the hieroglyphic of mature cereals” [9].

Later on, the script 𠂔 in Bronze Inscription is written into the word “丝” (“string”, “si” in Chinese Pinyin) in Regular

Script; the script 白 is written into “白”; the script 木 is written into “木” (“wood”, “mu” in Chinese Pinyin), and thus the form of the “乐” (“music”) in Regular Script is “樂”. Nowadays, the script “乐” (“music”) widely used is simplified by the word “乐” (“music”) in Cursive Script.

Among all above the viewpoints, (1) is similar to (2), and both of them recount the fact that the origin of the word “乐” (“optimism”) is related to music and musical instruments, and (3) is to establish the connection between the origin of the word “乐” (“optimism”) and the harvest of cereals. However, all of the three viewpoints attempt to establish the evolutionary logic between the word “乐” (“music”) and the word “乐” (“optimism”). The logic refers to “the so-called ‘乐’ (‘optimism’), is actually the ‘乐’ (‘music’)” [10]. That is to say, anything that delights people and makes the senses of people enjoyable can be widely called “乐” (“optimism”). According to Chinese scholars, the transition from the word “乐” (“music”) to the word “乐” (“optimism”) can be explained from the following two major aspects.

Firstly, music and optimism. Music plays a pivotal role in Chinese culture (especially in philosophy). As the esthetician Zong Baihua (1897-1986) says, “to study ancient Chinese philosophy, we must also understand the thoughts of Chinese music; for instance, Zhuangzi implies the most difficultly expressed thoughts by means of musical fables” [11].

Music can be traced back to ancient times, in which sorcerers had to follow a set of rigorous and complex rituals, including music and dancing when communicating with the Heaven. On such an occasion, music is mainly used to delight the Heaven, thereby meeting the demands of human. Just as what the British social anthropologist Malinowski (1884-1942) believes, sorcerycraft manifests that music is ritualized by human, in that it can enable people to be self-confident, thereby being full of hope for overcoming fears in engaging in something important [12].

By the time of the Pre-Qin Period (2100 B.C.-221 B.C.), a set of musical theories had been preliminarily formed, such as *The Book of Music*. It records that “music generates from voice, and originates from the fact that the human heart is moved by exterior objects. Therefore, when a sorrow emotion arouses in the heart of a person, his voice will be rushed and lowered; when a pleasant emotion arouses, his voice will be relaxed and smooth; when a delightful emotion arouses, his voice will be exhilarating and unrestrained; when an angry emotion arouses, his voice will be rough and agile...”, which shows that the voice of a person is stimulated by exterior objects, and thus the emotions such as sorrow, joy, pleasure and anger, vary from person to person [13]. Music can have an effect on reconciling emotions of human, see “music can reconcile human emotions.” If carefully comparing “when a pleasant emotion arouses in the heart of a person, his voice will be relaxed and smooth” and “music can reconcile human emotions”, it will be found that music is mainly used to adjust

emotions such as sorrow, joy, and anger of a person to the emotional range of pleasure or optimism, namely the relaxation and smoothness [13]. Hence, the meaning of the word “乐” (“music”) extends and evolves into the word “乐” (“optimism”, “le” in Chinese Pinyin).

Secondly, mature cereals and optimism. Xiu Hailin boldly deduces that “乐” (“music”) is a mature grain, and people will show an optimistic mood when harvesting cereals. Therefore, the original meaning of the word “乐” (“optimism”, “le” in Chinese Pinyin) is gradually forgotten by people, and finally transforms into an expression of optimistic mood [9]. Certainly, this statement is still far-fetched and not widely recognized by the academic community.

On the whole, music is extremely significant for shaping human dispositions, and ultimately makes people spiritually pleasant and embrace an optimistic attitude towards life. As the British philosopher Russell (1872-1970) comments that “Chinese people, more specifically Chinese people of all classes, are much more amused than any other race I have ever known, in that they can always find pleasure or optimism from everything in the world...” [14]. Thus, we can see the importance of the word “乐” (“optimism”) in Chinese culture.

### III. DEFINITION OF “A CULTURE OF OPTIMISM”

Li Zehou does not give a systematic explanation and definition of “a culture of optimism”. Through the study of several articles from Li Zehou, the paper systematically summarizes the definition as follows:

(1) Confucianism always pays close attention to the shaping of human emotions, and puts forward the assertion of “good human nature”. According to viewpoint of Li Zehou, western moral laws are based on external orders, such as God and customs, while Chinese moral laws are based on human emotions. In this way, “A culture of optimism” can motivate people to do good deeds by means of reasonably controlling over emotions by themselves [2].

(2) “Chinese people regard life as a pleasant thing”, so Chinese culture serves as a culture of optimism compared to Western and Japanese culture [2].

(3) The word “乐” (“optimism”) reflects the thought “Harmony of Man and Nature” of ancient Confucianism. “Harmony of Man and Nature” means that people are integrated into the whole universe harmoniously, so that people can gain the greatest pleasure, and reach the acme of life. The acme of life in “乐” (“optimism”) is not the conversion to God desired by western religions, full of guilty sense in mind, but to enjoy the cultivation of emotion and ratiom from aesthetics, thereby facing life with optimism [2].

(4) The word “乐” (“optimism”) has an ontological nature in Chinese philosophy, in which the ontology mainly refers to the unity of emotion and reason. That is to say, beyond a manifestation of human emotion, “乐” (“optimism”) also refers to a spiritual pleasure integrated with reason, which is called

human nature by Li Zehou [2]. It should be noted here that many scholars do not pay attention to the philosophical meaning of “pleasant” in the sentence, that is, “Is it not pleasant to learn with constant perseverance and application? Is it not delightful to have friends coming from afar? [15]” They simply equal the word “optimism” as “pleasant emotion”, whereas Li Zehou attaches deep philosophical meaning to the “optimism”, namely the unity of emotion and reason.

(5) “A culture of optimism” has the characteristics of “Yue Cong He”, that is to say, the melody of Chinese classical music is relaxing and peaceful, and does not cause an atmosphere of tense. In addition, the emotion is defined at a relatively harmonious and peaceful level, which is also the reason why Chinese people are not endowed with the dispositions such as ruggedness, ebullience, and free and easy spirit of westerners [2].

(6) Li Zehou also points out in his later years that the word “乐” (“optimism”) can be spelled as “Yue”, in that Chinese philosophy attaches great importance to music. For instance, “the music shows the harmony between the heaven and earth; rites show the order between the heaven and earth” (The Book of Music in The Book of Rites) demonstrates the melodic beauty and harmony of music.

Throughout understanding on “A culture of optimism” of Li Zehou, firstly, “乐” (“optimism”) reflects that the Chinese pursue a happy and optimistic attitude towards life; secondly, it refers to a kind of emotion into rationality; finally, it is also connected with the extensive and profound music in Chinese philosophy.

### IV. THE CORE OF “A CULTURE OF PLEASURE”

The relationship between “emotion and rationality” has always been the core topic of Chinese Confucian philosophy. In the further discussion on “A culture of optimism”, Li Zehou transfers focus to the “emotion as substance”, and believes that “emotion as substance” is the core content of “A culture of optimism”, which aims to explore the height of the substance in philosophy.

As a unique cultural psychology in China, “A culture of optimism” is differentiated from that of western world. Similarly, the core of “emotion as substance” is different from the priori and transcendental rationality in western world. Li Zehou maintains that “the priori categorical imperative of Kant has nothing to do with the empirical world, and the noumenon and the phenomenal world can be completely differentiated”. Therefore, the western regards noumenon as rationality [16], which is totally different in China. There are not favorable conditions for separating the empirical and the priori, noumenon and phenomena in Chinese culture, so Chinese people pay special attention to emotions. In conclusion, the “本体” (“benti” in Chinese Pinyin) can be translated into “substance” in English rather than “noumenon” [16].

The “benevolence” in Confucianism is closely connected with emotions. Feng Youlan (1895-1990) says, “on benevolence, Confucius focuses on the true feelings of people” [17]. Liang Shuming (1893-1988) says, “The teachings of

Zhou Gong and Confucius are not based on reason, but rooted in emotion.” [18] Li Zehou also points out that Confucius attaches special importance to the cultivation of human nature and emotions. As a matter of fact, he regards the emotion as the basis, entity and source of human nature and life. That is to say, (1) he emphasizes that the family affection (filial piety and fraternity) serves as the ultimately real ethical relationship to establish the foundation of benevolence, and it is constituted by the five kinds of relationships such as the relationship between parents and children, between emperors and subjects, between brothers and sisters, between husbands and wives, and between friends in a radiant and overlapping way, thereby constituting various social emotions; (2) he emphasizes the education on the cultivation of human emotions, and thus regards education as a fundamental element of society [16].

On the whole, the “emotion as substance” is the infiltration of the rationality of the biological desires of daily life, actually a similar statement of the “love” and the doctrine of the mean in the scope of Chinese morality.

#### V. THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION DEFECT OF “A CULTURE OF OPTIMISM”

Li Zehou translates the term into “a culture of optimism” in his English works. However, its translation has been questioned by Michael Nylan, a historian from California University, Berkeley. The two reasons are as follows. Firstly, the word “乐” (“optimism”) should be translated as “pleasure”, and “a culture of optimism” means “a culture attuned to pleasure”; secondly, the translation does not conclude the entire content of the “a culture of optimism” [19]. The author also finds the defects of its English translation when studying on the term of Li Zehou, but does not totally agree with the first viewpoint of Michael Nylan, because it has been proved that the origin of the word “乐” (“optimism”) is closely related to music at the beginning of this paper.

By analyzing the etymology of the word “乐” (“optimism”), this paper discusses that “a culture of optimism” of Li Zehou actually comprises both music and pleasure. Therefore, the term can also be translated as “The culture of music/pleasure”.

#### VI. CONCLUSIONS

It can be deduced from the origin and evolution of the word “乐” (“optimism”, “le” in Chinese Pinyin) that: (1) music and human spiritual pleasure complement each other, so music serves as a crucial means of Confucian culture to cultivate human emotions; (2) Confucianism pays special attention to shaping human emotions. The interpretation of Li Zehou on “A culture of optimism” follows the process of the extension and evolution of the word “乐” (“optimism”), and emphasizes that the ideal emotion Confucianism wants to shape is not to eliminate rationality, but rationally combine emotion with reason, so as to achieve the so-called the perfect state – “harmony” (spelled “he” in Chinese Pinyin). “The culture of optimism” all along reflects the spirit of Chinese ancient culture and Confucian culture, which is a unique cultural psychological structure in China.

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