

**Chinese-Western Discourse**

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**Band 3**

**The Good Life and  
Conceptions of Life  
in Early China and  
Græco-Roman Antiquity**

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Edited by R. A. H. King

**DE GRUYTER**

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## Good Fortune and Bliss in Early China

Even in ancient China you could be fortunate – and unfortunate. The significance of fortune, chance or coincidence comprised the main topic of the first chapter in a sceptical treatise from the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, the *Lùnhéng* 論衡.

Celestial bliss has always been sought, in China as elsewhere, by means of rituals and sacrifice. The essential ingredients for promoting human good fortune can be read off the burial objects since time immemorial, such as symbols of high social status, ritual responsibility for sacrificial offerings, wealth most of all, ravishing jewellery, even servants where appropriate, to say nothing of charming concubines evidently killed young. Bliss in the afterlife was construed in the image of bliss on earth – even to the extent of realistic lavatory slits for the dead, in the grave. Thus the funerary goods of ancient China reveal a conventional picture of the utensils thought necessary to happiness in the ever after of those whose graves we excavate, for the most part, that is, of the Chinese aristocracy.<sup>1</sup>

Fortune often favours the undeserving, but bliss and happiness are things we must work for. Bliss has to be achieved in order for it to be acquired in any real sense.

The principal primacy of individual human happiness, including self-interest, in the philosophy of life was the subject-matter of the philosopher Yáng Zhū 楊朱. Ultimately, the happiness of others was important to the individual human being only as a means to the end of protecting his own self-interest, if we understand Yáng Zhū correctly, which is by no means certain given the problematic source material.

The aim of philosophers like Zhuāngzǐ 莊子 or Zhuāng Zhōu 莊周 is not material or power-political self-interest but rather an individual's happiness as an independent spirit. However, he believed that cultivating such an almost mythical spiritual bliss would foster peace among all human beings and the individual's peace of mind precluded the will to rule over others. In his state of bliss the True Human Being 真人 of Zhuāngzǐ is sufficient to himself. Apart from this, such a human being is, at best, merely concerned about conveying such self-sufficient tranquillity as an objective to others, be it by way of setting the example himself or in any other way. For his way of blissful peace of mind cannot be communicated directly, any more than the right way of bicycling: everybody has to fall off their bicycle in order to learn from their own mistakes. There is nothing

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<sup>1</sup> For a nice survey in its historical context, see von Falkenhausen 2006.

for it but to stay on top of the muddle that makes up the unpredictable life of a human being which we have been cast into until death eventually drives us out of it.

Having grown wise from adversity, one doubts, like a daydreaming butterfly, whether one is really a butterfly dreaming it was Christoph Harbsmeier, or whether one has actually been Christoph all along dreaming he was a butterfly. We indulge in these fantasies as realities because we take reality to be unknowable. “Who knows if knowledge is not in reality ignorance, and ignorance knowledge?” That is not a question Zhuāng Zhōu addresses but rather an expression of an emphatically epistemic *epochē*. Thus bliss is not seen as dogmatic scepticism but as the acute awareness of the provisional nature of all knowledge due to our subjectivity. Bliss for Zhuāng Zhōu then also consists precisely in the selflessness of this psychological state. He renounces his self, abandons it to the infinity of the unfathomable cosmic way in which he ecstatically puts his trust.

Impishly, he out-tinkers the logical tinkers of the ilk of Huì Shī 惠施 in the second chapter of the book that carries his name. At the same time, a rebellious anarchic intellectualism is sparked off by a friendship that is almost touchingly intimate with that great theorist, who was the first in ancient China to observe that an arrow in flight is not actually flying at any given instant, and so on and so forth.

Thus for Zhuāng Zhōu the essential ingredient of spiritual bliss consists in the conduct-guiding insight that we cannot know whether we understand anything at all of what we believe we understand in any strict sense of the word. He relishes positively logically, as it were, in the fact that we can never actually know whether and in what sense we have ever known and been able to know anything.

Zhuāng Zhōu considers bliss to consist in the ecstatically eccentric, but spontaneous self-identification with this subjectivity of the avowedly non-existing self. In this consciously lived absurdity of self-construction articulated by a literary genius the conventionally comprehensible is subverted continuously by the intellectually flippant, ambiguous, deadpan and, most of all, ironic formulations of the text.

It is therefore impossible to pinpoint Zhuāng Zhōu's position; and it is quite poetic that we do not even know how much of the book was actually written by him, a book that was compiled more than six hundred years after his death by Guō Xiàng 郭象. The book *Zhuāngzǐ* 莊子 was most likely collated in its original form several hundred years after Zhuāng Zhōu's death, around the middle of the second century BCE by his admirer, the rebellious poet-prince Liú Ān 劉安.

The bliss of Zhuāng Zhōu lay precisely in not only rejecting the conventional values of his times, i.e. wealth, power, glory and in particular also knowledge

and wisdom, but in going beyond rejection positively to sneer at them. The high priests of his idea of bliss were therefore, if not universally then certainly overwhelmingly, cripples, convicts, poor sods, lesser lights, in short the despised ones of this despicably narrow-minded world. He was by no means the pope of his own beatifying “doctrine”.

Zhuāng Zhōu viewed everything “under the aspect of infinity,” instead of *sub specie aeternitatis*, to put a fine point on it. His idea of bliss included, as early as the first chapter of his book, this perspective of infinity, transposed to the finite in an infinitely beautiful manner, applying it to human existence, to himself, allowing him to experience the death of his beloved wife as something bearable.

Thus Zhuāng Zhōu's bliss is realised and manifests itself in the medium of enigmatic and ambiguous literature. To appropriate Goethe: there he is man, there he apparently dared to be.

*Sub specie aeternitatis* everything is trivial to Zhuāng Zhōu. Even life, even death. Thus, under the aspect of infinity, all is void *xū* 虛. Man's bliss again consists in becoming, like everything else, empty *xū* 虛 and receptive for this unfathomable life, devoid of pompous fullness, susceptible to the trivially real, capable of the trivially natural, to the spontaneity that is a mystery onto itself – always linked to Stoic-skeptic *epochē*, intellectual reserve.

Ever since the first century BCE and throughout the literature on the history of Chinese philosophy Zhuāng Zhōu has been counted among the proponents of the philosophical school of Daoism, a school that did not exist at all, however, in the times of its purported main proponents. This philosophical school of Daoism did not even come into existence by the second century BCE, hence during the time of prince Liú Ān 劉安 and his not yet Daoist encyclopaedia *Huáinánzǐ* 淮南子 (139 BCE).

Just as the Jabberwocky leapt forth into the world from the poetic lyre of Lewis Carroll and has since taken on a life of its own, so the school of Daoism is the brainchild of a historian's sense of order, in this case the historian Sīmǎ Tán 司馬談 of the late second century BCE. The conception has since acquired an almost mandatory character in the description of ancient Chinese philosophy.

The second proponent of what is by now the pertinent school of old philosophy, so-called “Daoism” 道家, who is of great significance in our context here, is of course the philosopher Lǎozǐ 老子, whose identity as well as the authorship of the work handed down under his name – *Dàodéjīng* 道德經 – remain, however, for the most part in the dark. According to tradition Lǎozǐ 老子, or more precisely Lǎo Dān 老聃, is said to have been an old man by the time of Confucius when the latter is supposed to have visited the former in his venerable library. However, doubts about this tradition have been raised from an early stage and

recently some have argued for dating the *Dàodéjīng* 道德經 to the third century BCE.

These doubters were very much inconvenienced by the latest appearance of a bamboo manuscript containing large parts of the *Dàodéjīng* 道德經 evidently dating from the fourth century BCE. The discovery affords us unique insights into the history of the origins of the *Dàodéjīng* 道德經 from the fourth century, a silk manuscript from the late second century BC and manuscript fragments from the Silk Route in Dunhuang through to the earliest printed edition with the Wáng Bì 王弼 commentary of 1445.<sup>2</sup>

The interpretation of Lǎozǐ has grown into a philological mass industry making the *Dàodéjīng* 道德經 into arguably one of the most often translated books in world literature. The deification of Lǎozǐ has been described in beautiful detail by Anna Seidel in her seminal monograph *La divinisation de Lao-tse* (1969). A presentation and analysis of this highly interesting early phase of the extensive commentaries on the classical work is provided in exemplary fashion in Robinet 1981.

Lǎozǐ, too, locates man's happiness, his bliss, in the mythical-enthusiastic union with the *dào* 道, the cosmic "path" of things. It could also be called the way of things. Yet according to the *Dàodéjīng* 道德經 the course of things conforms to what is thus by itself, by *zì rán* 自然, by "nature," if you will.

However, man's bliss neither consists neither in having knowledge of *dào* 道, nor in knowing that this *dào* 道 is guided by that *zì rán* 自然. Rather, something much more fundamental and critical is at stake: this is about "achieving the way" *dé dào* 得道, about realising the way in oneself and by oneself, to be spontaneously, effortlessly and undistorted, simply as one is. What is difficult about this naturalness, this uncontrivedness (*wú wéi* 無為, literally "doing nothing") is precisely that one cannot "operate" them in a philosophically justified manner, as one operates a philosophy. Naturalness in operation is not the spontaneous, blissful naturalness in question here.

The teachings of the *Dàodéjīng* are, in this sense, not an existentialist philosophy. The text merely provides a trigger for spontaneous humanitarian as well as political mastery of human existence. This mastery of human existence, in turn, bestows enormous worldly power on the wise man. The *Dàodéjīng* was thus able to develop into a mystical handbook for managing humans. The wisdom of the wise in the *Dàodéjīng* does not only become a spiritual site for the blossoming of the individual's bliss but, by this reckoning, an instrument of the political training of the ruler. The wise man's happiness assumes importance, incidentally and

perhaps even mostly, insofar as it becomes an art of survival and an instrument of the ruler's wisdom.

The encyclopaedia *Huáinánzǐ* 淮南子 from the middle of the second century BC already mentioned draws on the examples of the *Dàodéjīng* as well as the book of *Zhuāngzǐ* 莊子 to create a comprehensive, even encyclopaedic mirror for princes in which the mystical human bliss of union with the *dào* 道 forms the starting point of the very first chapter. Another chapter contains a narrative-illustrational commentary of the *Dàodéjīng*. In this encyclopaedia the welfare of the state originates in the mystical bliss of its ruler who then metamorphoses the mysticism into statecraft. The blissful union of the ruler with the cosmic forces that pervade this world becomes the cosmo-political foundation of the higher harmony between state and universe. Hence the happiness of the ruler lies precisely in his heightened sense of a higher harmony.

Even the common bureaucrat had, in this connexion, a higher role to play in the state, if he was able to enter into that higher sphere by a mystically blissful sensitisation for the higher harmony of the spheres of yin and yang, of the *dào* 道, of the natural course of events in the world and of the "five agents" *wú xíng* 五行, linked by stages. For this higher context the main responsibility lies with the emperor, while an ancillary responsibility rests with kings and rulers and an inferior responsibility is borne by the bureaucrats. We are also dealing with a hierarchy of kinds of bliss in this period of Chinese history; a hierarchy, that is, in which even the common people feature, albeit almost imperceptibly, and resonate in a ritual manner.

## A Xanthippe-less civilisation

The ruler's bliss is talked up to be the foundation of the state. The common man's happiness goes largely unmentioned. Instead it is the mystical bliss of the ruler which enables the happiness of the people in a cosmo-harmonic society.

The happiness of the ruler as such, apart from this mystical bliss, however, unsurprisingly remains locked in the sphere of the family and the social: a long life *cháng shòu* 長壽 in peacefulness *ān lè* 安樂 and wealth *fú lè* 福樂 top the list, yet most of all a life lived within a large family housing as many generations as possible under one roof. The happiness of a man is almost measurable by the number of generations living under one roof – or, closer to the Chinese: in one homestead – at the time of his death.

As to Confucius, many commentators have observed that he used the word *lè* (old Chinese probably \*glak) 樂 "happiness" as soon as he opened his mouth in

<sup>2</sup> See Hendricks 2000.

the *Analects*. In the first section of the first book of the *Analects* he calls old friendship a source of happiness and a higher delight. (On this, see also *Analects* 16.5.) During such higher delight he forgot all cares (*Analects* 7.19).

Confucius was well aware that the bitterly poor commoners would of course first and foremost conceive of a measure of happiness perhaps less in terms of money than in material wealth. *Fú* 福 was “happiness through wealth”, closely related to *fù* 富 “wealth”. This is what Confucius consciously sets himself off against. In being happy in poverty (*Analects* 1.15) that was his aim, an aim which, according to him, his favourite student Huí had attained in exemplary fashion (*Analects* 6.11). It was indeed a high delight for Confucius to eat food without meat, drink water and sleep without a pillow: the devil takes wealth and honour in an unjust world! (*Analects* 7.16) As an original moralist he, by necessity, swims against the mainstream and breaks with the obvious. After all, he would have never achieved any fame, if he had not distanced himself from the commonplace. Knowledge of a thing is nowhere near delight in a thing. And this enjoyment of a thing is, in turn, nothing compared to that higher delight in a thing, a higher delight which belongs in the realm of happiness. (*Analects* 6.20)

Even the virtue he places above all others, kind-heartedness, human-heartedness or human empathy *rén* 仁, he sometimes seems to put to the service of this higher delight. Without being kind-hearted 仁, he emphasises, no lasting happiness can be achieved (*Analects* 4.2).

The Confucians then found a higher pleasure in the rituals of the family and later in the rituals of the state. In particular they were taken with the burial rites; even the art of elaborate lament at bereavement was a higher music to their ears. In general, the place of happiness was idolised, not the individual in his particular private sphere, but rather the person in his involvement with family, society and state. Equally, the Confucians celebrated the asymmetrical hierarchy of love between children and parents as well as that between, on the one hand, the younger brothers and the big brother on the other, the oldest of the bunch, who was due to inherit the mantle of *pater familias*. Happiness thus did not lie in the symmetry of mutuality but in the emotional ensoulment of given hierarchical structures: meeting someone for the first time in China, even today, means having to determine who is the “older brother.” The modern custom is a cultural remnant turned into a playful jest. In ancient times this was often deadly serious. The hierarchical structure of society was staged at every turn. It was permanently reaffirmed and reinforced, by ritual as well as emotion. Happiness consisted precisely in bestowing one’s place in this continuously verified hierarchy with genuine, heartfelt emotional, even downright sentimental content: the unbearably intrusive mother and the cruel father had to be experienced as loving; the complete imbecile of an oldest brother as promising offspring, the

most wretched tyrant as noble ruler and so forth. Confucius would say to all this ritualised sentiment: *lè zài qí zhōng* 樂在其中 “therein lies high delight.”

That is the happiness of the Confucian. It goes far beyond what wealth, lust, fame, power and honour offer him.

Something else, too, is of central importance for the Confucian in ancient China: happiness is social for him and not just in the sense of social involvement. Happiness is almost always thought of as the commonweal, not only within a circle of esteemed colleagues *péng* 朋 but particularly among like-minded people *yǒu* 友. Happiness is negotiated, hoped for, sought and politically achieved, with varying success, as the commonweal, the bliss of a community. Then it is the happiness of the typically superior Confucian to create the conditions for just such a commonweal.

However, this commonweal, this social happiness is not discussed or even addressed as *summum bonum*. The *idée fixe* of Western philosophy (inspired by Aristotle), that there should be a something for the sake of which everything else that is desirable was desirable, this *idée fixe* had no *equivalent* with the Confucians.

Arguably, such a counterpart can be found in the Mohists, who were founded by a renegade student of Confucius and were much more interested in arguments and justifications than the Confucians. They thought everything should serve the commonweal and the rather prosaic happiness consisted, according to them, in living service to just that commonweal. Put simply, it was about being beneficial to the people *lì mǐn* 利民. Happiness resided in the practice of symmetric mutual love, enthusiastic ethical universalism, internalised and spiritualised resistance against all forms of tribalism, parochialism and family-patriotism. It is hardly a surprise then that Chinese tradition turned its back on Mohism and its highly developed logic and art of argumentation.

In actual fact, apart from Confucianism and Daoism, there has only been one later tradition of specific conceptions of happiness, which to the Chinese felt “western” and foreign, namely that of Buddhism.

What is peculiar about the conversion of China to Buddhism is that the religion encountered another highly articulated, alien, intellectual superpower here. Buddhism had to prove itself against the competition of other popular religions and intellectual traditions. Initially, Buddhism positioned itself as a popular religion in China.<sup>3</sup> The main natural competitors were the popularised Daoists who had by then deified Lǎozǐ 老子 into Lǎo jūn 老君 and revered the *Dàodéjīng* 道德經 as an almost magical holy scripture. They naturally interpreted

<sup>3</sup> The classic study remains Zürcher, 2007.

Buddhism as a western offspring of Daoism: this Buddha, according to them, had to be converted by Lǎo Dān 老聃 in his Far West, who had actually established Buddhism as an offshoot of Daoism.<sup>4</sup>

In spite of all attempts at promoting the convergence of Daoism and Buddhism by daoising the translations of Buddhist terminology (which became famous as *gé míng* 格名 much later), the profound contrasts emerged clearly early on. The difference is by no means that the popular religion of Daoism is less transcendental than that of Buddhism: the Daoists had cultivated their conception of the afterlife to the highest degree and were in no need of lessons from the Buddhists in this central regard. Hypotheses about the immanentism of traditional Chinese popular culture are totally without empirical foundation, as the Daoist canon *Dào zàng* 道藏 amply demonstrates. However, the transition in Daoism from the ideals of a blissful “long life” in this world to the spiritualised, transcendent immortal beings *xiān* 仙 oriented towards a higher afterlife remains of acute interest.

From time immemorial, the happiness of the religious Daoists consisted in a supernaturally long life *cháng shēng* 長生 but nevertheless a life in this world. With time, more and more spiritistic alchemy was roped in so that the alchemy of happiness turned into a literary as well as real Daoist mass industry. In many respects this alchemy of happiness can be regarded as religiously motivated, alchemist sport.<sup>5</sup>

Parallel to this tradition, however, China saw the rise of that yearning for a happiness no longer caught up in the here and now but relates to a transcendental, afterlife-oriented immortality taking the form of deification. The seminal work of this tradition is the book *Liè xiān zhuàn* 列仙傳 “Biographies of the Immortals,” which Max Kaltenmark (1987) has prepared splendidly for a bilingual edition in French and Chinese.

Now the happiness of this immortality, and the mortal mystical bliss, is reached in stages in the ancient “philosophical” Daoism, making it seem as if there is something like a bureaucratic hierarchy for the higher reaches of happiness which is quite palpable, even in the iconography, in the nether regions of hell. (See Lothar Ledderose on the serial production of these in his important book *Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.) Happiness then becomes something supernatural which one succeeds in, as it were, by all kinds of religious practice, to a higher or lesser degree. This happiness is, then, the objective and end of life.

In contrast, Buddhism regards all kinds of happiness, in the end, as mere anticipation, anticipation of a salvation for which the Chinese, however, use foreign words almost exclusively: *níhuán* 泥洹, *nièpán* 涅槃 and the like. Conceptually speaking, *nirvāṇa* was an alien element. *Nirvāṇa* was not something with which the Daoists could cope intellectually: an obliteration like *nirvāṇa* was exactly what could never occur in the great transformation of things *dà huà* 大化. Things might have originated from nothing, but one thing is clear: no entity is ever transformed into nothing. Nothing disappears. Everything enters into the ever-changing cycle of changes. The *Yìjīng* 易經 knows no end of the world, nor an end of particulars, only changes from one to another.

Therefore, the desire of a blissful escape from the transmigratory cycle, a religious self-obliteration, could only be grafted on, as it were, or annexed to the Chinese conceptual scheme, even though Zhuāng Zhōu 莊周 already had declared defiantly by the first chapter of the book name after him that the wise man could do without an ego.

The concept of happiness could not play a role in Buddhism if for no other reason than that it experienced and hence interpreted the world as a vale of tears full of unavoidable suffering. It therefore stands to reason that joy can only ever be anticipation of salvation from this structurally implicit and thus inevitable misery.

Buddhist conceptions of bliss have been known to us over millennia to an almost deafeningly repetitive degree. Yet what is supposed to have been the highest bliss in China during the Han dynasty is most accessible in a genre of text which has not become part of the Chinese literary Parnassus. It is a genre that could not be more different from the traditional fiction or the classics in style alone: I am referring to the texts on mirrors dating from around 200 BC to roughly 300 AD. Achim Mittag of Tübingen University has directed me to this highly interesting source.

These mirrors were precious items of the highest order. The general population certainly could not afford to acquire them. Yet they were manufactured as presents and in quite high numbers. Bernhard Karlgren, in his “Early Chinese Mirror Inscriptions” (BMFEA 6 (1934), 9–79), has dedicated an exemplary little monograph to the texts on the mirrors, in which he transcribes and explains 257 such inscriptions. (In what follows, his translations have been used.) It turns out that the texts on the mirrors are without exception about emphasising the magical power of the mirror that will bring the owner precisely this highest bliss on earth. The texts reveal the full spectrum of what was important to the wealthy of that time. First of all, it was a successful career as a bureaucrat. This is so pervasive as to suggest that the ancient Chinese were just as obsessed with success as modern Germans. However, things are not that simple. Success is

<sup>4</sup> See Kohn 2008: p. 195–197.

<sup>5</sup> See Sivin, 1968, and Pregadio 2009.

not an end in itself but enables the pious service to ancestors and elders on the one hand and the procreation and training of piously subservient descendants in as many generations as possible. All this happiness, in turn, integrated into a mythological-religious context, in which heaven *tiān* 天 itself and the Goddess of the Far West *Xi wáng mǔ* 西王母, together with a host of mythological and religious figures, serve as good luck charms and patron saints of a secular happiness-oriented history of salvation.

“May you have sons and grandsons!” remains the main theme. To this success is attached: “May you forever have sons and grandsons. May you be a prominent person who receives in Imperial audience.” (*ibidem* no. 7) And finally the correlate: “May you have extended longevity and ten thousand years; may you benefit your father and your mother.” (*ibidem* no. 33)

“Mr Wu has made the mirror, may seasons and days be good; to the left the Dragon and to the right the Tiger eliminate what is baleful; may your two parents be there complete (i. e. neither of them dead); may your sons and grandsons be prosperous; may your longevity be like (that of) metal and stone; may you have joy without end.” (*ibidem* no. 122)

Beside these standard conceptions the mirrors celebrate friendship as they are gifts made for and sold among friends: “May you have constant prominence and wealth; may you have joy without end; may we forever think of each other; may we not forget each other.” (*ibidem* no. 38)

Emotional ties play a distressingly small part, if the mirrors are to be believed. Even inscriptions like the following are rare: “May you constantly be prominent and rich; may you have wine and food; flutes and lutes shall assemble (round you); beauties shall wait upon you.” (*ibidem* no. 29) *N.b.*: the beauties are mere servant characters. There is no question of private emotional intimacy, e. g. in 82: “...beauties shall assemble (round you), flutes and lutes shall wait upon you; your business shall be prosperous...”

However, at least one mirror was for a king and his mistress:

“The beautiful lady and the great king, in their hearts they think (of each other) and will not forget (each other).” (*ibidem* no. 56)

The pleasure principle occasionally appears, yet never dominates: “May you constantly be prominent and rich; may you enjoy being free from (bad) events; may you very day have delight; may you obtain what you find pleasure in.” (*ibidem* no. 30)

The tutelary beings are often mentioned: “On it (the mirror) there are the Pixie and the Hornless Dragon.” (*ibidem* no. 8)

Infrequently we even find traces of megalomania: “May you have great joy, prominence and wealth without limit; may you be the equal of Heaven and Earth” (*ibidem* no. 31)

This is not the place to address the many unanswered questions about popular religion. Mention must be made, however, of the fact that a mirror’s property of being a lucky charm clearly and typically derived from its producer having made it *yōu* 幽 “opaque / obscure” or, according to Karlgren’s translation, “secludedly.” The mirrors come out of the cultivated darkness of the inglorious, humble union of man and world in the work of a craftsman.

Good fortune dovetails into a mythological folk cosmology, which we cannot explore here. However, this good fortune seems to be stubbornly this-worldly; it is tempting to say: “banal”. As model, academic citizens we eschew this term, of course. Yet the higher, non-consumerist, creative joys of friendship, love, artistic aesthetics in the fine arts, philosophical reflection or communicative poetry remain peculiarly marginal in the mirror texts. After all, this is about public happiness of the presentable variety. Inward happiness does not express itself and is not present in these lucky mirrors. In contrast to children’s blessings, professional success, wealth and their like, it was never a matter for public consumption, not even on mirrors.

Discreet reticence prevails throughout ancient Chinese prose on all matters of private and personal subjectivities of happiness. To use traditional Chinese terminology, discourse on such matters would constitute *yín cí* 淫辭 “loose talk”, or, in the eyes of the historian Simǎ Qiān 司馬遷, *xū yán* 虛言 “empty discourse”.

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## ***Bing*-distress in the *Zuo zhuan*: the not-so-good-life, the social self and moral sentiment among persons of rank in Warring States China**

This chapter contributes to the theme of this collection in an indirect way by examining the not-so-good-life in the idiom of *bing* 病, a term which gained currency in Warring States China (475–221 BCE). In the medical domain *bing* is nowadays commonly glossed as the antonym to *zhi* 治 ‘to govern, to order’ (Sivin 1987, p. 106). Indeed, as we will see below, in political contexts where *luan* 亂, ‘chaos’, tends to be *zhi*’s antonym, *bing* ‘to be in disorder’ is sometimes used interchangeably with *luan*. Accordingly, *bing* would be a body political notion *par excellence*, and the good life would be dependent on good government.

With a view to the above claim that the good life was primarily a function of the body politic this chapter will examine contexts in which *bing* occurs in the *Zuo zhuan* 左傳 (see Yang 1981, Legge [1872] 1991). As we will see, *bing* was indeed used in a body political sense but not exclusively; in about one third of the cases it referred to the distress of a person of rank (*ren* 人). Accordingly, the good life also critically depended on the social self and a sense of rank-specific honour and prestige, which was sometimes explicitly coupled with the self-respect derived from ritual propriety and land holdings.

The chapter is based on preliminary research undertaken in the context of the translation of 25 medical case records within China’s first dynastic history, the *Shi ji* 史記 (*Records of the Historian*, see Sima ([2<sup>nd</sup>–1<sup>st</sup> c. BCE] 1959) and Takeda (1934)), in the second Memoir of chapter 105 (Hsu 2010).<sup>1</sup> In the context of a physician of the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE who treated members of the nobility in Eastern China, *bing* played a central role and had functions of a ‘text structuring

<sup>1</sup> The prose in the *Zuo zhuan* is rather challenging, and this project could not have been undertaken without the help of Bill Jenner, Robert Neather and John Moffett in the late 1990s, and Zhang Jianjun, Visiting Professor at the University of Oxford in 2012–13, with whom the text excerpts were revisited, and grammatically and semantically dissected. Finally, some important detail was double checked with Rodo Pfister in spring 2015. Legge’s ([1872]1991) translation is masterful; and I leave it to someone else to undertake its updating. The study has taken into consideration recent text critical research (e.g. footnote 10), and the analysis is based on Yang Bojun’s (1981) excellent edition. Y4.1415 means: Yang (1981), vol. 4, p. 1415; L769 means Legge (1991), p. 769.