



## Transcultural Dictionary of Misunderstandings European and Chinese Horizons

The Transcultural Dictionary of Misunderstandings. European and Chinese Horizons is the result of an initiative which forges a radically new path for promoting transcultural understanding by studying culture-bound keywords. The stimulating idea is to create and address with intention that which is generally held to be by all means avoided: namely, misunderstandings.

The experiment starts with a level of communication that is not political per se but cultural. Cultures have no rigid borders like nation-states. They are more dynamic and meandering, open to influence, and translatable. Like cultures themselves, keywords are saturated with history, long-term experience, values, and collective emotions. They carry a load of tacit knowledge and implicit axioms that have the advantage of not having to be unpacked, explained, or spelled out.

Working through various semantic layers of keywords on both sides helps to create a more transparent language for transcultural dialogue. The creation of such a language is the effect of producing, exchanging, and working through misunderstandings on both sides. Within the framework of transcultural dialogue, misunderstandings turn out to be an innovative tool for mutual learning by seeing oneself through the eyes of the other.

It is high time for researchers in various parts of the world to join forces and translate basic concepts from one language and culture into another. Every translation is a transformation, marking similarities and differences which can lead to an uncovering of new ideas, values, and cultural practices. This unconventional dialogue is a great source of inspiration because it works through hardened assumptions and misrepresentations, unsettles schematic thinking, and leads to unexpected insights and new points of contact.

**Aleida Assmann**

Professor of English Literature and Literary Theory,  
University of Konstanz, Germany

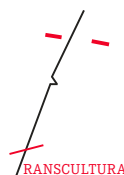


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跨文化誤解辭典

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Edited by Huang Ping, Alain le Pichon,  
Tinka Reichmann, Zhao Tingyang

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Collection TRANSCULTURA  
edited by Alain le Pichon



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Writing	书写

# Heart



Xin

SUN Xiangchen  
Stefano Della Torre



Xīn

## Chinese perspective

SUN Xiangchen

The Chinese word Xin (心) is a very old concept, having an important meaning in Chinese philosophy. Its pictogram describes the human heart and its location in the body; but the meaning of the word “heart” (Xin) quickly evolved to be associated with “thinking”. In the Book of Songs (11<sup>th</sup> century BCE to 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE), we can find lines such as the following: “My heart is full of sorrow and cannot shut out my thoughts.” We see here that “heart” (Xin) often means the same as “thinking”. In Chinese, “heart” and “thought” are often used together. Furthermore, “heart” has a broader meaning, which has been influenced by Buddhism, and all spiritual phenomena are called “heart”; therefore, “heart” (Xin) roughly has three meanings. First, it refers to the “heart”, which is in the centre of the body, and based on this meaning, it is also extended to mean centre and core; the heart also means the power of dominance. Second, according to Mencius, the function of the heart is mainly “thinking”. So, Xin is equivalent to mind, which is related to cognition and emotion; therefore, Xin is always related to mental phenomena such as thoughts, ideas, feelings, and mood. Third, all spiritual phenomena are determined by the “heart”. “The Doctrine of heart” was developed in Chinese philosophy in the Song and Ming Dynasties (1127 – 1644), which used the “heart” (Xin) to indicate the ontological ground of the universe.

In *The Analects*, “heart” is not a concept that appears frequently. The most famous occurrence is when Confucius said, “At seventy, I could follow what my heart desired, without transgressing the norms.” Here, “heart” represents the power to do whatever you want. As a form of desire, “heart” is what’s inside, which is opposite to external rituals and norms. At the same time, “heart” is also the root of inner virtues, and “norms” is the external rule. The perfect stage of the superior man is, then, the unity of inside and outside, of inner freedom and external rules, showing a supreme stage of life.



In the Mencius, “heart” (Xin) is a very important concept. Mencius (372 BCE – 289 BCE) put forward a basic proposition: “All men have a heart which cannot bear to see the sufferings of others.” More specifically, the Four Principles are used to explain the human heart. The Four Principles are the feeling of commiseration, the feeling of shame and dislike, the feeling of modesty and complaisance, and the feeling of approving and disapproving. Here, the “heart” (Xin) is the source of all virtues. Therefore, Mencius said that “What belongs by his nature to the superior man is benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and knowledge. They are rooted in his heart, and their growth and manifestation are harmony appearing in the countenance.” Mencius also proposed the concept of the “Child’s Heart”: “The great man is the one who does not lose his child’s heart.” The “Child’s heart” is used to express the innate purity and kindness of the heart.

In Mencius’ philosophy, the “heart” is not only related to man, but also to the universe, to Heaven. He especially emphasises that “He who has exhausted all his mental constitution knows his nature. Knowing his nature, he knows Heaven.” From this, “heart” (Xin) is associated with Heaven. In Mencius’ view, by fully reflecting the Four Principles in his heart, he could understand his innate goodness and his true and inner human nature, and then he will be able to understand Heaven, or transcendence. In theory, through the heart, the superior man could understand human nature and then know Heaven; in practice, the superior man preserves one’s mental constitution, nourishes one’s nature, and then serves Heaven.

In Chinese philosophical tradition, “heart” and “knowledge” are related. Zhu Xi (1130 – 1200) said: “Knowledge is what is in my heart, principle is what is in the thing itself. To know the principles, there will be a debate between the subject and the object.” The heart is the god of man, and all kinds of principles are reflected in the heart. So, the person who has the universal principles in his heart could respond to all things. This kind of principle is not derived from the heart’s self-reflection but discovered by the method of “investigating the nature of things”. In this sense, the heart has a strong cognitive meaning. In addition, “heart” is also related to concepts such as “human nature” and “emotions”; in Zhu Xi’s doctrine, human nature is related to the principles of heaven, reflected in the heart; emotions are related to human temperament, which is the reaction when encountering things. The heart is a kind of emotional activation and lies between “human nature”

and “emotions”. All kinds of clues come from “heart”, which is why Zhu Xi said “the heart governs human nature and emotions”.

Lu Jiuyuan (1139-1193), a contemporary of Zhu Xi, put forward the proposition that “the universe is my heart, and my heart is the universe”. He is called the pioneer of the Doctrine of Heart. A key issue of this doctrine is how to understand the universe starting from yourself: “Heart is a metaphysical principle.” Its ontological presupposition is that Heaven and man are one: “The great man could integrate all things between Heaven and earth as one, and it’s not done by consciousness, but by the benevolence of the heart, which is one with all things between Heaven and earth.” “Heart” is the source of all norms in the world. This is consistent with Mencius’ doctrine. They believed that the heart is so great, that if you can exhaust your heart, you can know Heaven. The meaning of “learning” also lies in this: people are often deceived by their opinions and lose their original heart, and by learning we can overcome the interference of various opinions.

Wang Yangming (1472 – 1529) inherited this idea and made his own proposition that “there is nothing outside the heart.” “Human is the heart of Heaven and earth, and the heart is the lord of Heaven and earth.” The heart is not only the spirit of man, but also the lord of Heaven and earth. Wang Yangming went on to introduce the concept of “the moral knowledge” (*liang zhi*). According to this theory, “the moral knowledge” is the feeling of right and wrong that “can be learned without learning and can be known without thinking”. It is the direction initiated by the heart, which is regarded as the noumenon of the heart. At the same time, “the moral knowledge is the spirit of the nature. These spirits give birth to Heaven and earth and become ghosts and kings; all are born from then on, and there is really nothing against the heart.” “The moral knowledge” is where everything comes from, and the human heart is the root of everything in the universe. A disciple asked Wang Yangming, what does it have to do with my heart when the flowers bloom and fall in the mountains? Wang Yangming replied, “when you did not look at this flower, the flower went into silence with your heart. When you looked at this flower, the colour of this flower became clear immediately. Therefore, this flower was not outside your heart.” It sounds similar to Berkeley’s proposition “to be is to be perceived.”

Since “heart” is at its foundation, moral philosophy in Chinese cultural tradition is also understood through “heart” as the core. Two concepts, “the original heart” and “the lost heart” are put forward. Human

behaviours are determined by their hearts, but people often lose their “original heart”. Therefore, if people let their heart loose, then they will lose their benevolence; if they hold onto their original heart, they will preserve their benevolence. So, in your daily life, you should “seek your lost heart,” and nourish your heart by reducing desire. “The reason why a superior man is different from ordinary people is based on his heart. A superior man will use benevolence and propriety for preserving his heart.” One’s cultivation is to remove these barriers, to restore the noumenon of the heart, which is the original heart of human beings. Wang Yangming further put forward the concept of “realisation of the moral knowledge”, acting in good faith, rectifying one’s heart, and improving his own morality.

The concept of “heart” is not only about individual, but also about the public. In *The Analects*, Confucius once said that “he revived states that had been extinguished, restored families whose line of succession had been broken, and called to office those who had retired into obscurity, so that throughout the kingdom, the hearts of the people turned towards him.” The concept of “the hearts of people” expresses the opinions and thoughts of the people. It seems to correspond to the concept of public disposition, a kind of public emotion and opinion, “it is impossible that anyone should become ruler of the people to whom they have not yielded the subjection of the heart.” In this sense, the heart (Xin) is also a concept of Chinese political philosophy.

The heart (Xin) in Chinese is associated with several English words: mind, heart and spirit. Different from the concept of mind, which contains the meaning of “cognition”, Xin is not merely pure intellect; therefore, Xin is closer to the English word “heart”, which has a strong emotional meaning. It is by no means pure emotion, but the emotional foundation of morality or a certain intuition, which is a way to understand reality holistically, like Pascal’s difference between geometric spirit and *esprit de finesse*. The Chinese word Xin contains these two meanings: geometric spirit and *esprit de finesse*. At the same time, “heart” is not only related to people, but also to the universe, to Heaven and earth. In Chinese cultural traditions, there is no strong concept of personal god. So, its transcendence dimension is mainly reflected in Heaven and earth. In this sense, the relationship between “heart” and the universe is equivalent to the position of “spirit” in Western cultural traditions. The subjective spirit is also the manifestation of the Absolute. This is very vividly embodied in Hegel’s phenomenology of spirit.

Consequently, Xin in Chinese corresponds to many concepts in Western language, such as “mind”, “heart”, and “spirit” in different contexts respectively.

# Heart

## European perspective

### Stefano Della Torre

The concepts of “heart”, “spirit”, and “soul” are all related to the mystery of life. They have different origins, and each of them has many meanings, but they also share wide overlapping.

Starting from ancient Greeks, they had the *psykè* as a definitely nonmaterial being, whose existence could be separate from the body, and philosophers thought of it as immortal. This concept is equal to the Latin *anima* (French: *âme*, Italian: *anima*, Spanish: *alma*) and the ancient German *seula* (English: *soul*, German: *Seele*).

The etymology of *psykè* reveals the relationship with life acknowledged in something sensible, even if not visible, as the word is connected with the verb meaning “to breathe” or “to blow”: life ends with the last breath, and this movement of air becomes the sign of ending or enduring life.

Hence the idea of *thumos* as a concept which is more related to physical life, identified with the breath. This concept is equal to the Latin *spiritus* (English: *spirit*, French: *esprit*; Italian: *spirito* Spanish: *espíritu*) and to the German *Geist*.

Basically, the spirit is what makes the body alive, and the death is the end of this synergy. The overlapping among *anima* (soul) and *spiritus* (spirit) (in any European language) became more and more complete: the spirit became both a being that exists also after the end of the person’s life, and the fantastic elaboration of the concept produced the idea of a spirit as good, or bizarre and maleficent, often described as the ghost.

The link with life bridges with all breathing beings, besides human-kind: “animal” has the same root as *anima*, without any ambition to immortality. The idea of an individual human being composed of a mortal part, the body, and an immortal part, the soul, was elaborated by the ancient religions and became central to the Christian vision. In popular thought, the soul is the inner being, the most authentic and private part

of a person. Psychology is the branch of medicine that works on feelings, memory and thoughts, and this shows the path of the concept.

Looking at the many meanings of these words in the dictionaries, it is possible to observe that the most popular meanings are the same for both the terms, and only few meanings are specific, sometimes producing funny “false friends”, such as *spiritoso* (Italian: something or somebody that makes people laugh) and *spirituosen* (German: alcoholic beverages, as alcohol is produced by a process of evaporation, and in the Middle Ages the vapor given off and collected during an alchemical process – as with distillation of alcohol – was called a spirit of the original material). But in general, both “spirit” and “soul” bear the sense of the nonmaterial essence, the animating principle or actuating cause of an individual life, and from this shared origin, the multiple metaphoric senses arise. Therefore, a soul or a spirit are attributed to things, places, ideas, times...: some examples can be the “spirit of the time” (German: *Zeitgeist*), “the soul of a place”, “the spirit of the movement”, “the soul of the team”, and so on.

There was another organ definitely related to life, that is the heart. The end of life can be described as a stop to the breath, but also to the heart beating. It is why European peoples developed a vast metaphoric use of “heart” in a semantic area related to life. Some of these meanings correspond with (secondary) meanings of spirit and soul: heart, spirit, soul, are all frequently used to speak of courage and bravery.

Furthermore, if the soul and the spirit symbolically came to signify the inner part of a person, the heart is physically the inner part of the body, used also in popular everyday expressions (the heart of vegetables), and therefore there is a wide area of overlapping metaphoric uses (“to comply with the spirit of the law”, “to reach the heart of a discourse”, “to portray the soul”, or “the spirit” or “the heart of a person”...).

Regardless, the most frequent and specific sense in which “heart” is used is related to the sphere of feelings. “Heart” is the international symbol of love, also by very popular logos and emoticons. This is because “heart” is used to underscore the good, which is present in actions, such as welcoming somebody (German: *Herzliche willkommen*), to deal with somebody with openness and friendship (Italian: *cordialmente*), to accept something or somebody with openness, to do something with a generous commitment, with passion. “To learn by heart” in English (*apprendre par cœur* in French) means learning a text so as to be ready to repeat it perfectly without reading: related with memory, but more with the sphere of care and focus.

Beyond the common meanings, “heart” tends to signify the richness of feelings and sense in human life, whilst “spirit” and “soul” tend to be related to nonmaterial essence, and they move towards the vision of an everlasting life, often within the sphere of religion.



Xīn

# Heart

## Final remarks

SUN Xiangchen, Stefano Della Torre

Both Xīn and “heart” are very complex concepts in Chinese and Western cultural traditions, and their uses always involve very different contexts. Strictly speaking, each word is related to a series of concepts, which together form a word-family, and Xīn or heart is the core concept in each word-family.

Generally, Xīn is used to translate “mind” and “heart” in Chinese. Xīn and “heart” have more in common. Regardless of Chinese or Western language, Xīn or “heart” is first and foremost a human organ, and both are related to the sphere of feelings and intuitions in human life, which are also associated with the basic emotions of love. In this sense, there is no problem in the mutual translation between them.

In Western contexts, the idea of a non-material being bringing life to the body is expressed by the concepts of “spirit” and “soul”, which have several meanings in common among them and some also with “heart”, but with a strong theological connotation. Since there is no Chinese concept of transcendence in the Western sense, Xīn plays a role in connecting with the universe or heaven in Chinese philosophy.

So Xīn and spirit have certain transcendent dimensions in their respective cultures. But in modern Chinese, in order to highlight the particularity of spirit in Western sense, people generally do not use Xīn to translate spirit; instead they create modern Chinese Jingshen (精神) or shuling (属灵) to translate “spirit”. The former refers to individual or collective spirit in its secular sense, while the latter refers to gods or the Holy Spirit.

In Chinese, Xīn is also not used to translate soul, which refers to a non-material substance. In the Chinese cultural tradition, there is no concept which refers to substance, but there is a distinction between body-shape and breath. Modern Chinese created Linghun (灵魂) to translate the concept of soul, where Hun (魂) emphasises the existence of something while the body is dead, so the meaning of Hun is closer to soul.