

THE PURSUIT OF HARMONY:
EXPLORING EMOTIONAL
WELL-BEING IN CHINESE CULTURE

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Happiness or Harmony?

Positive emotions are considered a prominent ingredient of well-being. Yet, what makes emotions positive is still debatable. Since emotions are intertwined with cultural values, emotional well-being is best understood in specific cultural contexts. Hence, a more nuanced conceptualization of optimal emotional experience can help to inform public policy and advance the science of happiness. In this vein, research suggests that the phenomenology of emotions in Chinese culture exhibits a tendency toward lower frequency, intensity and duration. Extending current discourse on culture and well-being, I postulate that the cultural value of harmony underpins this particular emotionality orienting towards balance and peace among Chinese population. From an affective lens, harmony is posited as a generative state that springs from the unity of opposites for adaptive functioning. Construed as the highest virtue in Chinese culture, harmony is experienced as an elevated state that delights and dignifies.

Interpreting happiness in terms of harmony, I aim to delineate the contours of emotional well-being endorsed by Chinese culture. A two-dimensional concept of emotional harmony is proffered. The subjective dimension indicates an enduring peace of mind that constitutes the locus of emotionality in Chinese culture. It is intertwined with cultural beliefs about optimal physical health and cognitive functioning. In comparison, the objective component captures the social functions of emotion. It refers to the socially appropriate and role-congruent affective display that enhances social relationships. In a collectivist culture, emotional harmony is congruent with the centrality of relationship and the typical interdependent self-construal in Chinese society. It encompasses both feeling good and functioning well. The two dimensions are considered complementary and function in tandem to foster a flourishing life. The evolving emotional patterns in the transitional era in Chinese society are also discussed.

Culture and Emotion

The study of emotion at the intrapersonal level has mainly focused on its informational value and motivational property. Nonetheless, emotion is also a social entity that sustains cultural order or drives social changes. The social functions of emotion hinge on various unwritten rules that guide the meaning of affective events. As *cultural animals*, humans conduct their emotional lives in a way that is shaped by cultural expectations, beliefs and norms.

Research suggests that Chinese individuals are prone to value low-arousal positive affect more than European Americans do. Since emotions are intertwined with cultural patterns, I presume that the **cultural value of harmony** underpins this particular emotionality orienting towards balance and peace among the Chinese population.

The pursuit of harmony is a **cornucopia of meaning and wisdom** in Chinese culture. In modern China, notwithstanding tremendous social changes, harmony remains a **predominant cultural value** and a **socio-political vision** in a transitional era.

Chinese Philosophy of Harmony

Harmonizing relationships is the pathway towards human thriving.

Confucianism

Benevolence (仁): Humanistic orientation

Emotions are the basis of moral education.

Conducting oneself genuinely in social life with propriety

Taoism

Ying and Yang (阴阳): balancing opposing elements

Unity with the harmonious rhythm of nature

The virtue of contentment as a wellspring of happiness

Buddhism

Transcendence from suffering

Mindfulness & Compassion

Enlightenment & Peace

Taken together, the value of harmony is deeply rooted in an philosophical appreciation of the unity of opposites. Therefore, positive and negative feelings are not compartmentalized but balanced for adaptive functioning, and internal feelings are intertwined with the social functions of emotions to engender a harmonious relationship with one's surroundings.

Emotional Harmony

Essence and expression of harmony from an affective lens

Subjective component

✧ A balanced and stable affective state that orients toward peace and calmness

✧ A tendency to neutralize intense inner feelings and revert to an equilibrium state of mind

✧ But not “half pain and half pleasure”!

Rather, a sense of harmony is an elevated affective state in **an optimal range of human functioning**.

✧ Locus of emotionality in Chinese culture

Physiological substrate of subjective emotional harmony

Emotions are instantiated through the complex reciprocal causal links between psychological, behavioral and somatic functions.

Calmness: masterful management of one's energy

Qi (气): a vital yet limited resource

✧ "Emotional diseases". Salient emotions such as joy and anger are both injurious to the spirit, and should be moderated towards inner equilibrium.

✧ A sense of harmony indicates an optimal salutary mood state of **calm energy**.

Subjective emotional harmony and cognitive functioning

At the emotion-cognition interface, the prevailing goal is to maintain a sophisticated form of homeostasis in order to respond adaptively to emergent stimuli in the environment.

- ✧ Thinking and feeling in Chinese culture are regarded as an **integrated process** rather than a bifurcation.
- ✧ **Reflection** on both positive and negative affective events can help develop **self-knowledge** and awareness. This effort creates a broader mindset and fosters insights, leading to better decision making, and **proactivity**.
- ✧ Emotion is a genuine and enriching component of daily life not to be suppressed but to be moderated for balance and stability.

Subjective and Objective

Whereas inner harmony is experienced as the peace of mind, it does not denote emotional rigidity or showing no emotion in public domains. Rather, a harmonious emotional state is characterized by **flexibility and social appropriateness**.

Objective component of emotional harmony

Socially appropriate and role-congruent affective display that enhances relationships with other people.

- ✧ Traditionally built on the extension of family relations, China has evolved into **a relation-centered society**.
- ✧ Emotional control is regarded as a major component of the socialization process.
- ✧ Adherence to cultural norms of emotional expression is crucial for maintaining group solidarity, and for acquiring resources in service of instrumental ends in the social milieu.
- ✧ The objective dimension thus captures the quintessential cultural directive for the most appropriate action in a given situation in the Chinese society.



Subjective & Objective Emotional Harmony

*Encompassing both **the psychological and social functions of emotions**, the concept of emotional harmony underscores the centrality of relationship and the typical interdependent self-construal in a collectivist culture.*

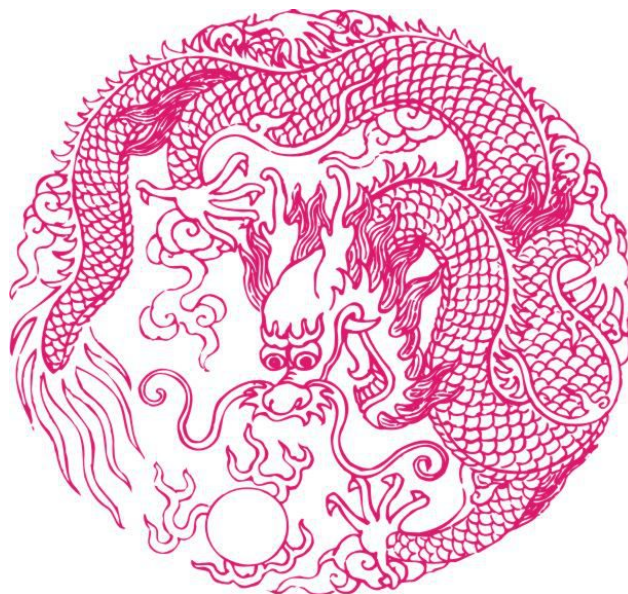
***Interdependent self** is not a system with clearly defined boundaries, but rather is defined by social relationships.*

- ✧ The conceptualization of the self in Chinese culture can be seen as a relational process. Inner harmony is conjoined with the external harmony to foster well-being. Self-concordance is intertwined with context-concordance.
- ✧ **Individuality and relationality** are simultaneously activated.
- ✧ Mutually reinforcing. An individual's appropriate emotional display facilitates relational harmony, which then contributes to a positive self-construal and inner peace. Conversely, deeply felt peace of mind can facilitate autonomous self-regulation in role performance, leading to more context-congruent emotional display in social interactions.

Indigenous perspective

The pursuit of happiness seems to connote the pursuit of harmony in Chinese culture. Hence, emotional harmony can represent a unique indigenous view of well-being in Chinese society.

- ✧ Although the subjective component of emotional harmony parallels the construal of emotional well-being indexed by the experience of frequent pleasant affect and infrequent unpleasant affect, there are considerable discrepancies between these two concepts.
- ✧ Maximizing positive emotions while minimizing negative emotions V.S.
Not polarizing positive and negative emotions
- ✧ The present measurement of positive emotions typically emphasizes moderate and high-arousal positive affect, whereas the subjective emotional harmony **gravitates toward low arousal positive affect** such as peace and calmness.



A Sense of Authenticity

A sense of authenticity might be moderated by interdependent self-construals and collectivist cultural beliefs.

Although I contend that the subjective and objective components of emotional harmony can function in concert to drive well-being, ***a tension might arise between genuine feelings and the social utility of emotions***. Consequently, the discrepancy between the two aspects of emotional harmony seems to constitute a threat to the very concept of harmony.

No easy task after all!

It is through the dual task of legitimizing social hierarchy while fostering cohesion does the value of harmony flourish in Chinese society. Notwithstanding this cultural imperative, rarely does any Chinese's affective state rest squarely in perfect harmony. Rather, the ability to tame desires and become masterful in emotional regulation requires life long practice.

Yet, this practice is **self-engaging** rather than self-estranging.

Authenticity is determined by the consistency between behaviors and inner feelings and values, thus it is influenced by the structure and content of one's self-construal.

The degree to which values become internalized in one's identity corresponds with the degree of felt authenticity in self-regulation. Based on this premise, people with interdependent self-construals tend to have **a higher degree of internalization of their connections with others** and thus may have a higher sense of authenticity in regulating emotions in role performance. As a result, cultivating moral capacity in service of fostering group harmony is a path to achieving inner harmony. The inconsistency between feelings and outer actions might be **less attributed as inauthentic but more accepted as a developmental challenge**. Hence, integrating the duality of emotional harmony is a meaningful path towards self-actualization. The ultimate goal is to integrate sincere feeling states with role performances to acquire a sense of wholeness. The convergence of self-concordance and context-concordance yields a fuller type of authenticity characterized by deeply internalized moral perspective.



Limitations

It is a truism that researches embracing culture as a unit of analysis are often tempted to abstract a general norm from a myriad of variances within a culture.

- ✧ Even in a relatively homogeneous culture, the generalizability of emotional harmony is subject to future inquiry and validation.
- ✧ Any study on culture should cautiously differentiate cultural ideal from practice. Emotional harmony represents **an affective archetype** that is being practiced to varied degrees when Chinese conduct their emotional lives in different contexts. Thus, qualitative researches are needed to contextualize emotional harmony and to examine its utility.
- ✧ I draw on cultural traditions to theorize the emotional well-being, yet Chinese society and culture is undergoing profound changes that lead to the **coexistence of traditional values and modernity**. Traditional family values have been diluted by the rapid change in family structures and the move towards a market economy. Meanwhile, the typical interdependent self-construal in collectivistic culture is eroding with the large scale urbanization in the past few decades. Thus the underlying assumptions of emotional harmony are subject to boundary conditions and are sensitive to moderation by socio-economic variables.