

On 'unspeakable feelings' in Chinese

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Abstract

The Chinese language (Mandarin and other dialects) is full of words and expressions that allude to 'unspeakable feelings' on the part of the experiencer (e.g. Ye 2024). Why is this so? What can such vocabulary tell us about Chinese attitudes and beliefs about emotions? In this paper, we delve into this question by looking closely at the cultural key word *weiqu* (often glossed as 'feel wronged') and the cultural assumptions that are deeply embedded within it. To fully spell out the cultural meanings associated with this term, we employ the natural semantic metalanguage (NSM) and its off-branch, the cultural script theory (Besemeres and Wierzbicka 2009; Wierzbicka 1973, 1992, 1994, 1999; Goddard, 2018; Goddard, Wierzbicka and Ye 2023; Ye 2013, 2016, 2020). We also discuss the implications of the present study for applying the psychiatric construct of alexithymia in the Chinese context.

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