



Undergraduate assignment feedback form
(to be completed by marker)

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<i>Module title: Lexicology and Grammar of Classical Chinese</i>	
<i>For completion by marker:</i> <i>Comments:</i>	
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☐ I have not used AI in my assignment

I confirm that I have not used any AI tools in the research and creation of this assignment. I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated materials as my own work. I confirm I have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used, which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

☒ I have used AI in my assignment

I acknowledge the use of Doubao (<https://www.doubao.com/chat/>) on 15th November 2025 for proofreading reasons. I used the prompt(s):

1. Check and rephrase own translation texts.

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Introduction to the Polysemy of the Chinese Term "le" (樂)

Module code: SICH3011

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Student: Yichun Wang

Student ID number: 2503135

Date: November 18, 2025

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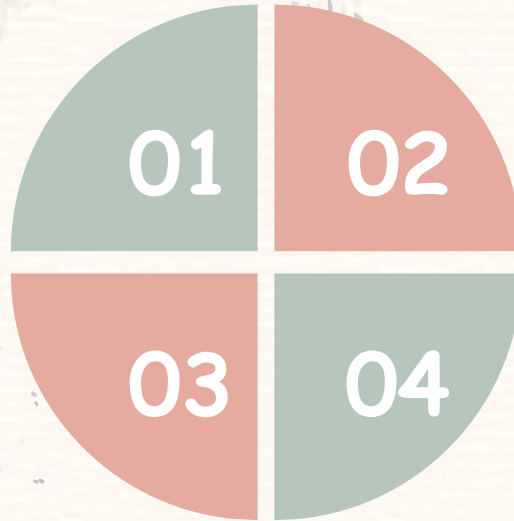
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SEMANTIC RELATIONS
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Graphic Form Evolution

樂



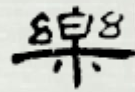
Oracle Bone
Script
Shang Dynasty



Bronzeware
script
Shang Dynasty



Clerical script
Qin Dynasty



Clerical script
Eastern Han
Dynasty

← 1600 B.C. 220 A.D. →

Polyphone

樂

Medieval period
pronunciations
(《广韵》)

Modern times
evolution

central
meaning

“五角切”



yue

music



“卢各切”



le

happiness



“五教切”



yao

to like sth. 
(only in specific
expressions)

lao

luo

liao

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**MEANING
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Original Meaning

<Shuowen Jiezi>

· music

《說文解字》：

"樂, is the **general name** for the Five Tones and Eight sounds (in ancient China)."



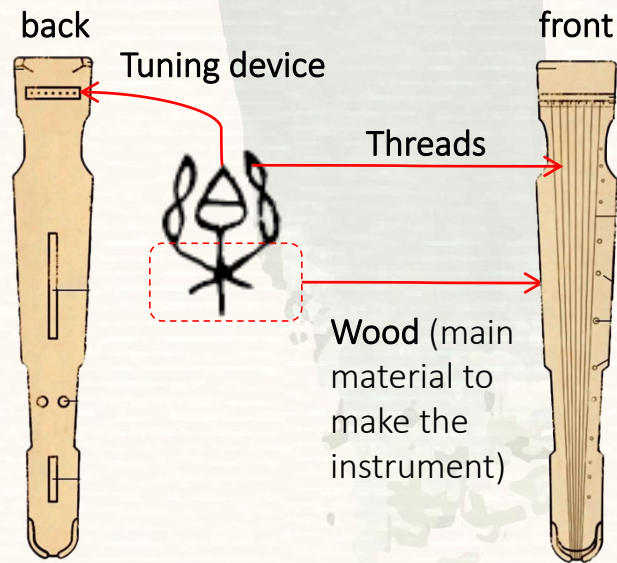
Original Meaning

<Zengding Yinxu Shuqi Kaoshi>

· instrument

《增订殷虚书契考释》：

"The character is a picture of 'si' (絲 threads) attached to 'mu' (木 wood), like a shape of a qin (琴 zither) or se (瑟 zither-like instrument). The component '△' is added later to represent the tuning device."



Definitions of 'le' (樂) from *Hanyu Da Cidian*

- yue** 1. 音樂 music (n.)
2. 泛指音樂舞蹈 general reference to music and dance (n.)
3. 奏樂 playing music (v.)
4. 樂器 instrument (n.)
-



- le** 5. 快樂、歡樂 happiness (n.)
6. 使其歡樂 to make sb. happy (v.)
7. 安樂 cozy, comfortable (adj.)
8. 笑 laugh (v.)
-



- yao** 9. 喜好 like sth. (v.) (similar to the 10th meaning)

emotion, state &
specific identification

yue

音樂 music (n.)

· Ancient Chinese

“樂者，所以變民風化民俗也”¹

Music serves to change customs and cultivate folkways.



yue

泛指音樂舞蹈 General reference to music and dance (n.)

· Ancient Chinese

“三曰六藝：禮、樂、射、御、書、數。”

Third, the Liuyi (Six Skills): Etiquette disciplines, **Music and Dance**, Archery, Driving, Calligraphy, and Arithmetic.



yue

奏樂 playing music (v.)

· Ancient Chinese

“歲兇，年穀不登.... 士飲酒不樂。”

In years of drought and flood, when the harvest is poor, scholars cannot **play music** to entertain their guests.



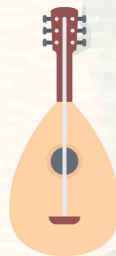
yue

樂器instrument (n.)

· Ancient Chinese

“故竽先則鐘瑟皆隨，竽唱則諸樂皆和。”

Therefore, when the Yu (an ancient wind instrument) plays first, Zhong and Se will make its accompaniment, and other instruments will follow and play together.



le

快樂、歡樂 happiness (n.)



· Ancient Chinese

“然而禽鳥知山林之樂，而不知人之樂。”

But birds and beasts know only the **delights** of the mountains and forests, not the **pleasures** of man.

le



使其歡樂 to make sb. happy (v.)

· Ancient Chinese

“君為東上，冕而摠干，率其群臣以樂皇屍。”

The king stood on the eastern side, wearing a ritual cap (a special headgear for sacrificial ceremonies) and holding a shield in his hand. He led his ministers in a dance **to please** the royal corpse (imperial personator of the deceased ancestor).

le

安樂cozy, comfortable (adj.)

· Ancient Chinese

“事戒不虞曰知備，毋患曰樂。”

To be prepared for important matters that require vigilance against accidents is said to be prepared; to experience no misfortune is said to be **peaceful and comfortable**.



le

笑laugh (v.)

· Modern Chinese

他樂的停不下來。

He couldn't stop **laughing**.



yao

喜好like something (v.)

· Ancient Chinese

“智者樂水，仁者樂山。”

The wise **delight in** water, the
benevolent in hills.?



Why different pronunciations ?



樂

Why different pronunciations ?



convey different meanings in same line



樂

Why different pronunciations ?



convey different meanings in same line



① “故王者功成作樂 (yue), 樂 (le) 其德也。”³

So, when kings had their work done, they compose a **musical work**
to recognize it.



to praise their work
(benevolent government /
territory expansion, etc.)

extension of meaning
“to make sb. happy”

Why different pronunciations ?



convey different meanings in same line



② “知者乐 (yao) 水, 仁者乐 (yao) 山... ...知者乐 (le), 仁者寿。”

The wise delight in water, the benevolent in hills... ...The wise enjoy life, while the benevolent achieve longevity.⁴



(n.) (adj.)
happiness → be happy

flexible use of meaning
“happiness”

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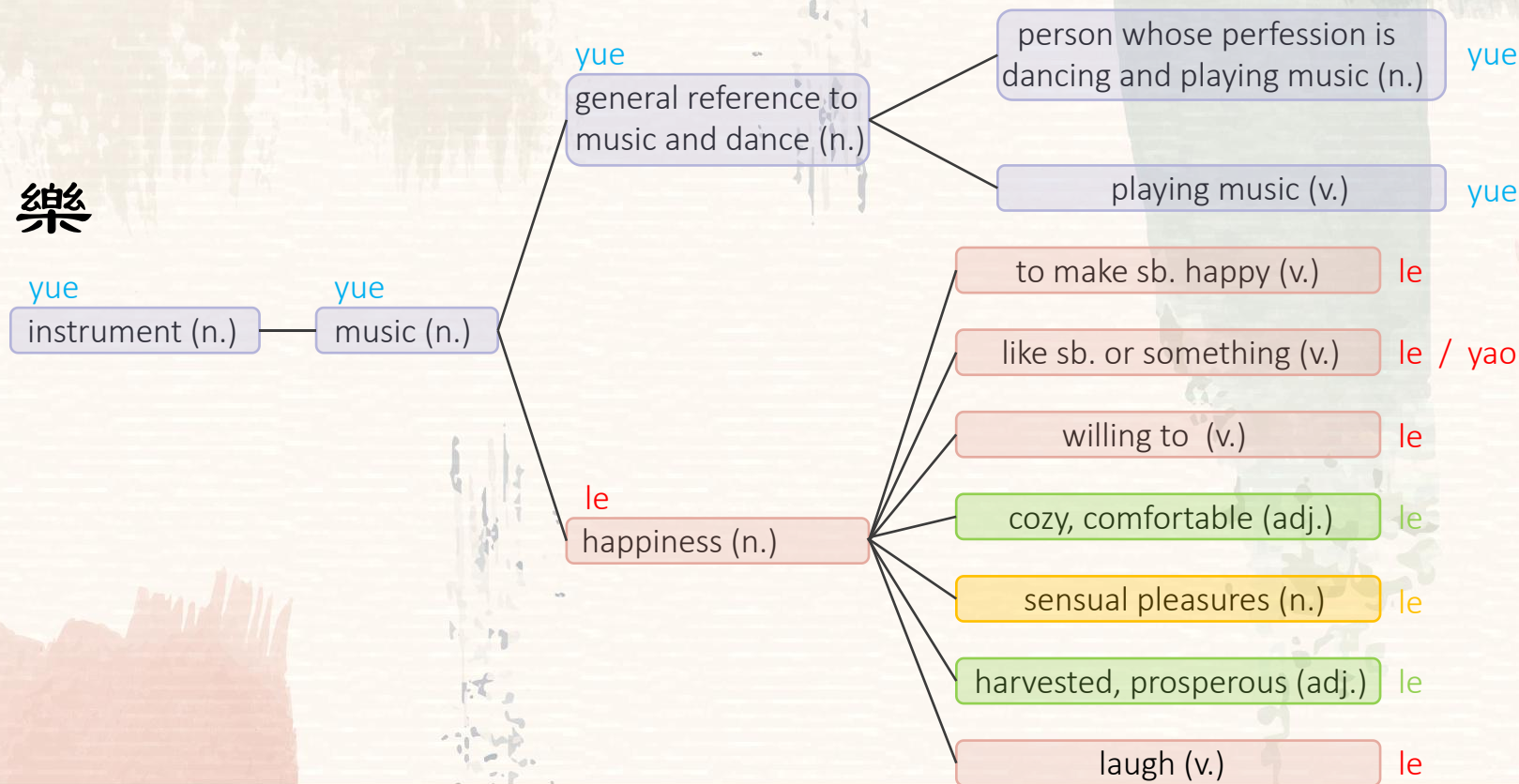
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Semantic context digram

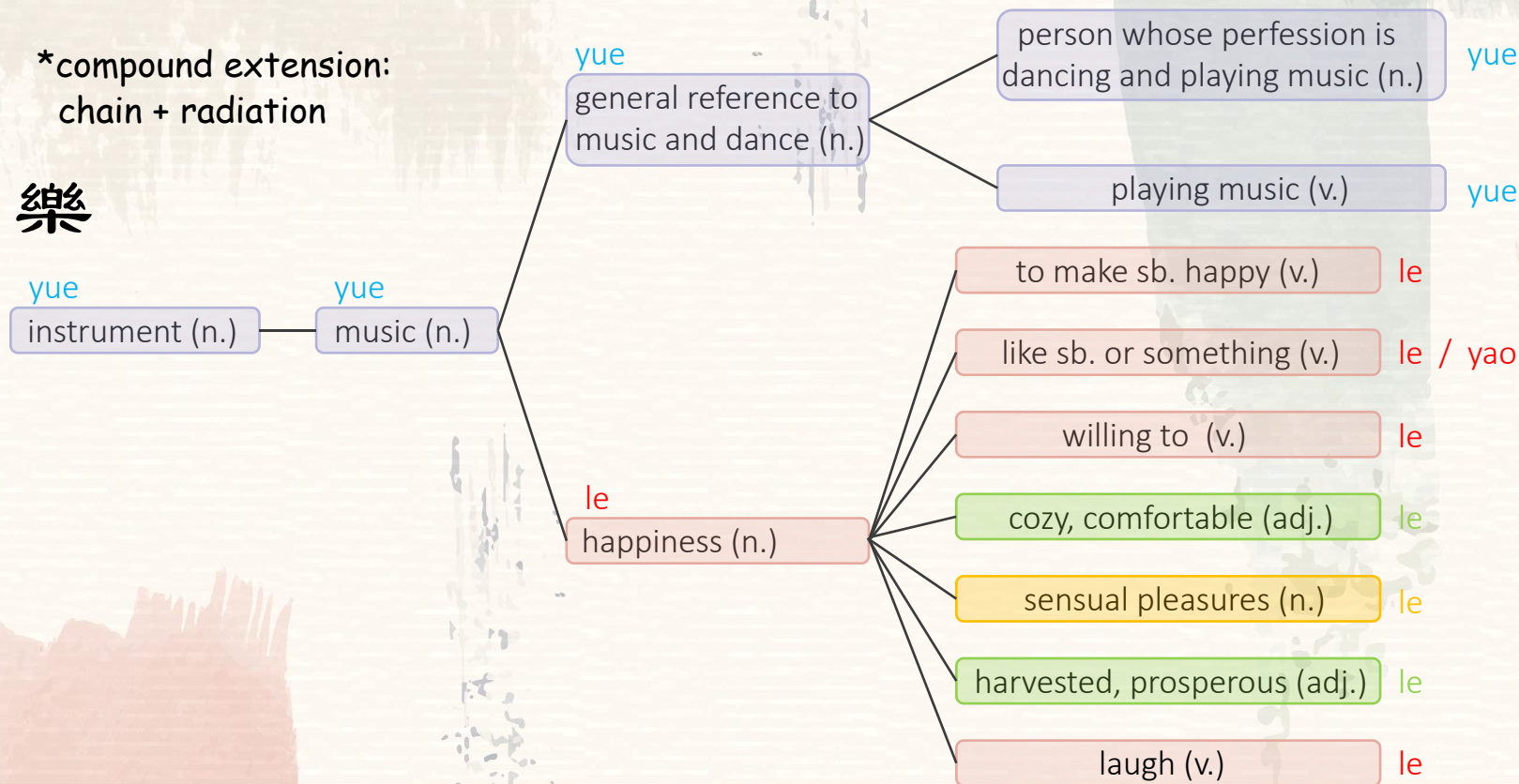
樂



Semantic context digram

*compound extension:
chain + radiation

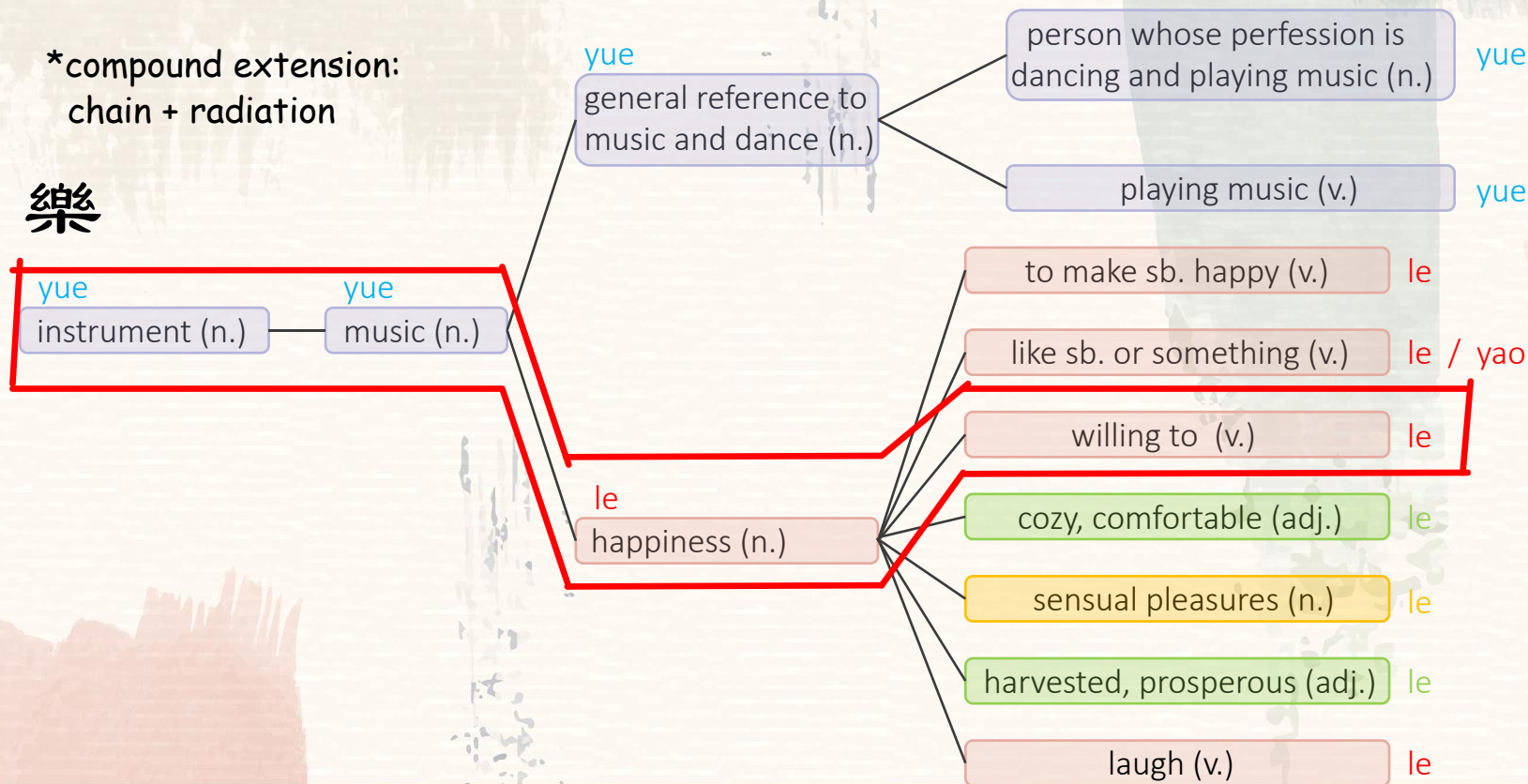
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Semantic context digram

*compound extension:
chain + radiation

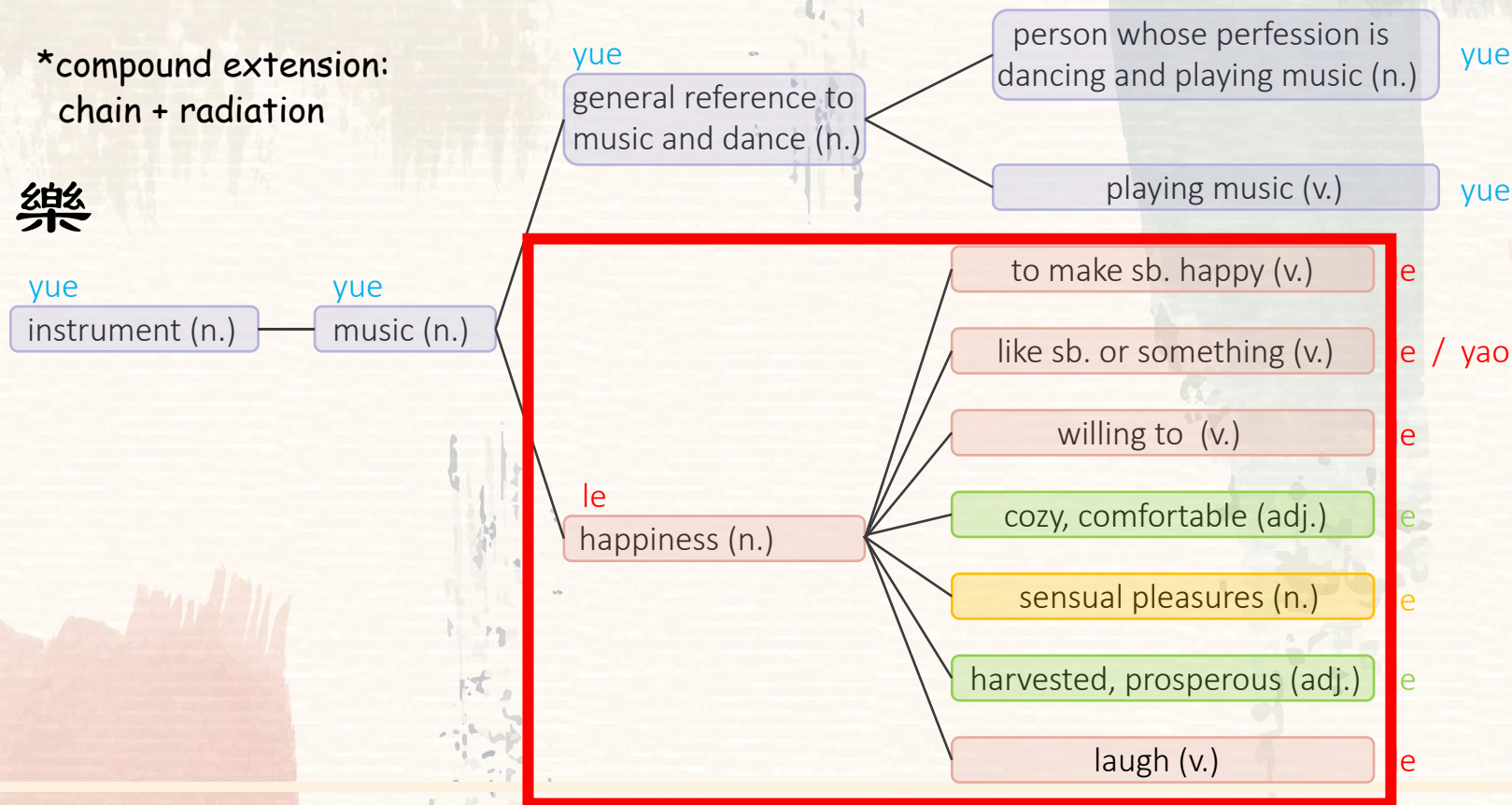
樂



Semantic context digram

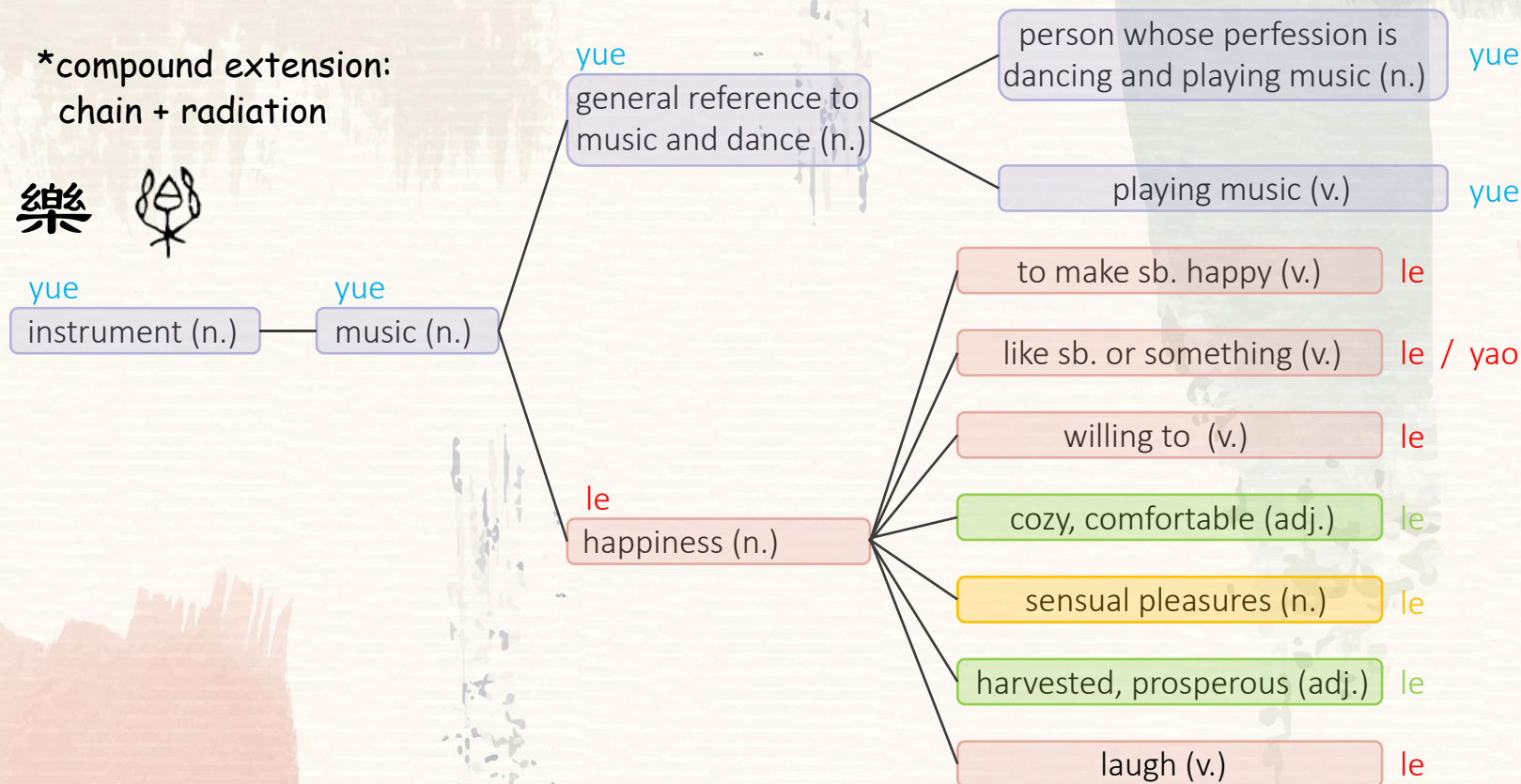
*compound extension:
chain + radiation

樂



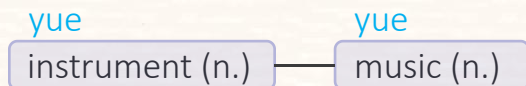
Semantic context digram

*compound extension:
chain + radiation

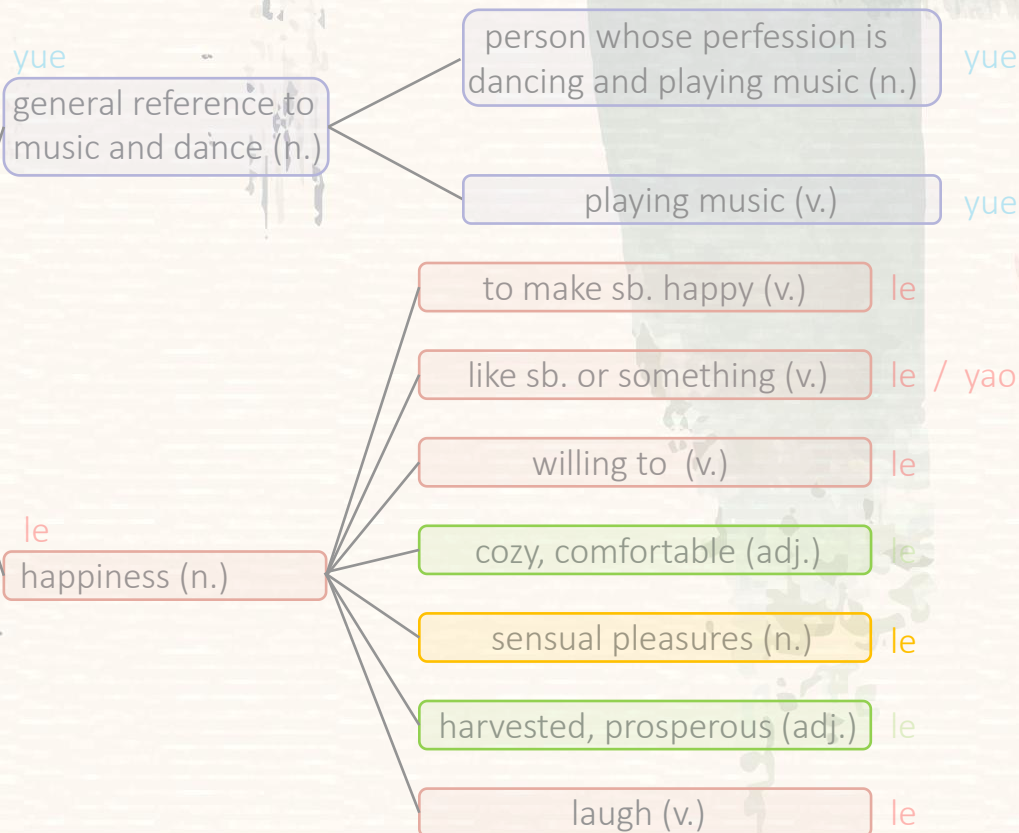


Semantic context digram

*compound extension:
chain + radiation

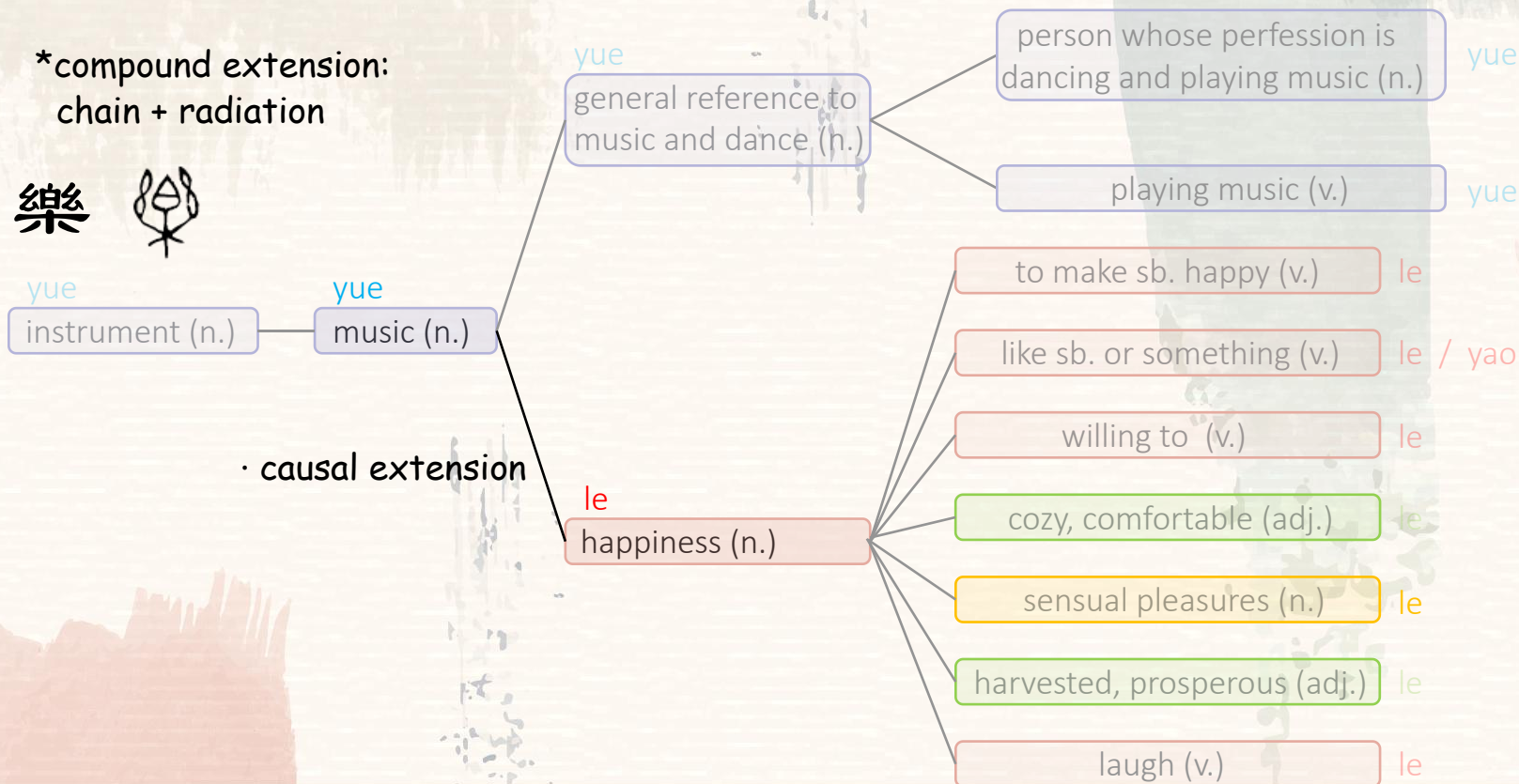


· causal extension



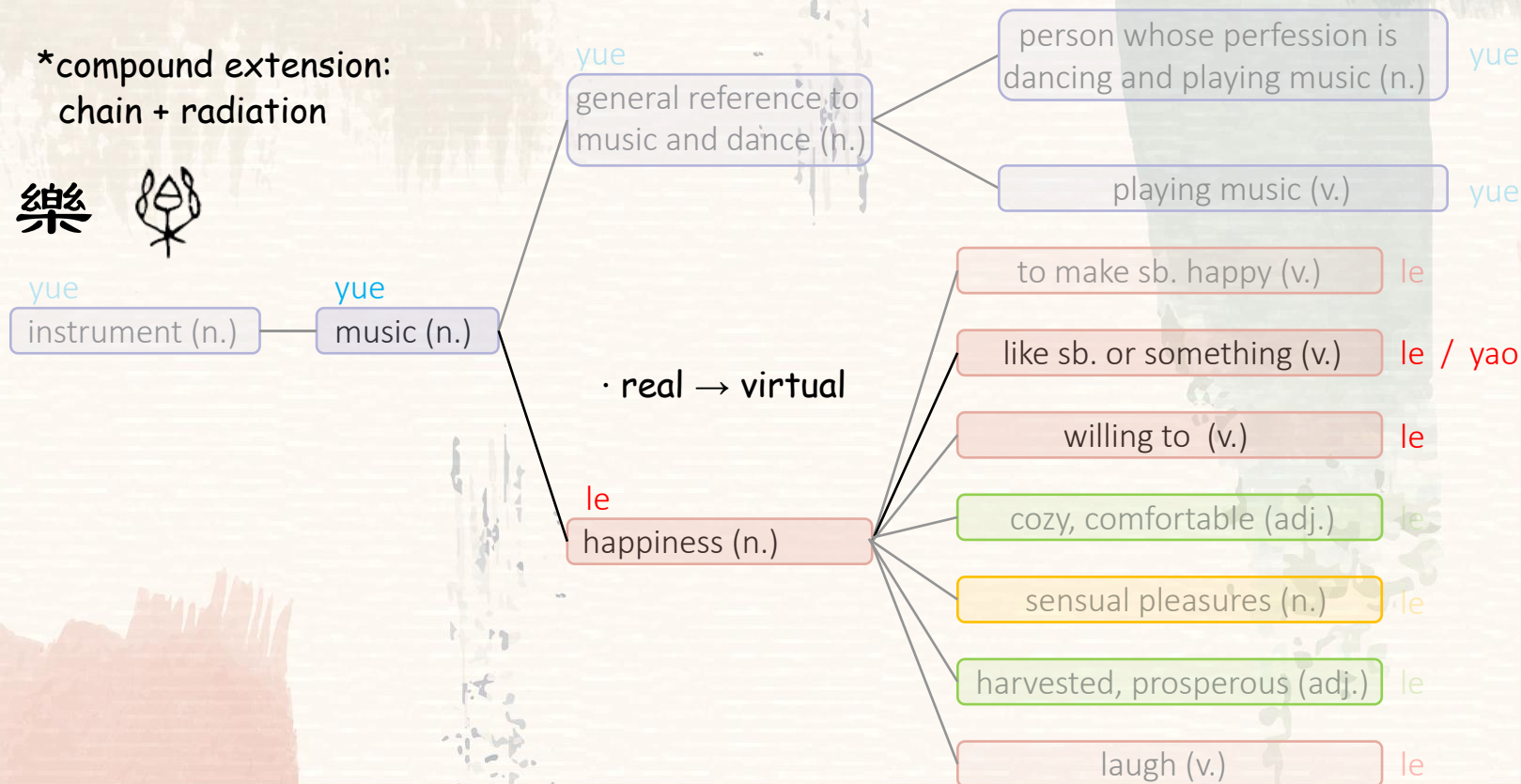
Semantic context digram

*compound extension:
chain + radiation



Semantic context digram

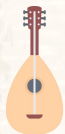
*compound extension:
chain + radiation



Cultural comparison of the meaning 'music'

Cultural comparison of the meaning 'music'

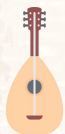
Ancient times



1. “禮”(li) and “樂”(yue) were usually used together to represent the **core method of establishing a stable and harmonious society.**
2. Therefore, “樂” not simply means 'musics' we listen to nowadays, but **a tool strongly associated to politics and ethics that can cultivate people's temperaments naturally.**

Cultural comparison of the meaning 'music'

Ancient times



1. “禮”(li) and “樂”(yue) were usually used together to represent the **core method of establishing a stable and harmonious society.**
2. Therefore, “樂” not simply means 'musics' we listen to nowadays, but **a tool strongly associated to politics and ethics that can cultivate people's temperaments naturally.**

Nowadays



1. “樂” as a meaning of 'music' **lost its ancient political and ethical function.**
2. Only refers to **entertaining 'musics'** like:
Popular / Instrumental / Pure... ..

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CONCLUSION



Different literature → Different original meaning.
(graphic shape / <Shuowen Jiezi>)

CONCLUSION



Different literature → Different original meaning.
(graphic shape / <Shuowen Jiezi>)



Evolution in a Chinese character's pronunciation
refelcts and symbolize the **appearance of an extended**
category of meaning. ('music' related (yue) → emotional
state (le))

CONCLUSION



Different literature → Different original meaning.
(graphic shape / <Shuowen Jiezi>)



Evolution in a Chinese character's pronunciation
reflects and symbolize the **appearance of an extended category of meaning.** ('music' related (yue) → emotional state (le))



The phenomenon of **definition extension** can strongly
associate with changes in **cultural backgrounds.**
(politics → entertainment)

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Thank-you

Feedback greatly
appreciated