

Cultural psychiatry and transcultural implantation of psychotherapy in China

Xudong Zhao & Jie Qian

Abstract Cultural psychiatry is a specific field of psychiatry dealing with cultural aspects of human behavior, mental health, psychopathology and treatment. Psychological services in the Chinese society require significant emphasis on the cultural sensitiveness and competence of the practitioners regarding the unique cultural background of Chinese culture and its diversity of subcultures. Much needs to be explored about the transcultural implantation of psychotherapy in developing countries such as China and how it may influence the development of cultural psychiatry in the rapidly changing society. We present a brief introduction of Chinese culture matrix of psyche and an overview of the development of psychological services in the Chinese society across the past 30 years based on multi-factor analysis of peer-reviewed articles, classical textbooks, personal oral history, interviews, and clinical experiences, and it discusses potential implications for culturally adaptive psychotherapy. We report that the modern Chinese culture matrix of psyche is a comprehensive combination of Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Communism, and Socialism Market Economics as five dominant philosophies. The contemporary mainstream of the healing model of psychotherapy for Chinese patients includes 4 schools such as psychodynamic, cognitive and behavior, humanistic, and systematic models. The traditional Chinese medicine as well as the localized religions, superstition, and folk healing practices used to be the most common methods for ordinary Chinese people to deal with their psychological sufferings. We discuss how the contemporary Chinese are carving modern psychotherapy with complex dynamics, and the general quantity, quality of effectiveness, and professionalism of the psychotherapists in China are still in distance with people's expectations. Chinese culture matrix is profoundly comprehensive and each individual in psychotherapy presents his or her unique belief system and psychological needs within his or her own subcultural matrix. Contrasting the traditional healing practices and modern trends in psychotherapy in China point towards the need of a new system of mental health service with more humane paradigm and techniques.

Keywords: cultural psychiatry, transcultural implantation, psychotherapy, China

WCPRR 2017: 18-25. © 2017 WACP
ISSN: 1932-6270

INTRODUCTION

Cultural psychiatry is a specific field in psychiatry dealing with cultural aspects of human behavior, mental health, psychopathology and treatment. Much needs to be explored about the cultural matrix in the macro-system of society level and the diverse subcultures according to each specific region, religion, age, etc. in Asian countries such as China and how they may influence psychopathology and psychotherapy. This paper presents a brief overview of the modern Chinese cultural matrix, which is a combination of the tradition and new trends of the rapidly changing society. And then discusses the development of the psychological services in China across the past 30 years with a comprehensive analysis of the “civilization-diseases” of Chinese in the modern society. This paper is based on transcultural analysis of peer-reviewed articles, classical textbooks, personal oral history, interviews, and clinical experiences, and it discusses potential implications for culturally adaptive psychotherapy.

INFLUENCES OF CULTURE ON PSYCHOPATHOLOGY AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

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Tseng (2001) elaborates 7 kinds of effects which relate to the influences of culture on psychopathology, including (1) pathogenic effect, (2) pathoselective effect, (3) pathoplastic effect, (4) patholaborating effect, (5) pathofacilitative effect, (6) pathodiscriminating effect, and the last (7) pathoreactive effect (p.190). He describes the spectrum of psychopathology as a continuity of 6 categories, such as organic mental disorders, major psychiatric disorders, substance abuse, minor psychiatric disorders, epidemic mental disorders, and culture-related specific syndromes. The succession of the 6 categories contains the different natures of determinants corresponding from biological determinants, to psychological determinants, and to socio-cultural determinants. Each effects impact differently on each category. For instance, the pathoplastic effect is mostly common in culture-related specific syndromes and epidemic mental disorders, but few on the other 4 categories of psychopathology. Pathoreactive effect almost impacts all kind of psychopathology except the organic mental disorders (p.190).

Besides the organic mental disorders, most of the psychopathatic disorders and syndromes are culture-related or at least treated differently whithin cultural context traditionally fullfilling of unique meanings to each individual. Culture-related psychopathology calls for culturally sensitive healing practice and psychotherapy. According to Tseng, 2001, psychological therapy may be classified in terms of culture for three types, such as (1) culture-embedded indigenous healing practices, (2) culture-influenced unique psychotherapies, and (3) culture-related “common” psychotherapies.

Culture-related effects have been devalued along with the development of biological-medical model since 18 century in the west. As biological medical model faces its own challenges and is forced to get the holistic view of human beings back into the treatment of psychopathology, the importance of the role of culture is re-evaluated and needs to be empowered. As Tseng, WS (2001) states in the very beginning of his book *Culture and Psychotherapy*, “Contemporary mental health practitioners widely recognize the importance of cultural issues in psychotherapy (p.3).” China holds thousands of years of civilization and eastern wisdom to treat people’s psychic pains. Following we will present a brief view of the culture and cultural diversity in China and discuss how psychopathology was been treated and healed within the context of the Chinese cultural matrix.

MODERN CHINESE CULTURE MATRIX OF PSYCHE

The modern Chinese culture matrix of psyche is a comprehensive combination of Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Communism, and Market Economics, the five domain philosophies. Each of the philosophy is a profound knowledge system. To the limits of this paper, there is a risk to oversimplify these philosophies to give a taste of each to present a rough but accurate map of the culture matrix of China. For instance, Confucianism provides Chinese the ethnical value system and the regulation of interpersonal relationship, and it simply emphasizes on the order and harmony. Therefore, Chinese who are raised to respect authority figures and please others on the face tend to suppress their own distressed feelings and dissatisfaction, aim to compensate with social respects. Another example is that Taoism provides the ontology of cosmology and emphasizes on the unknown. Therefore, Chinese who identify with Taoism respect supernatural power more than social authority, and they look more like the western individualism enjoying their own inner world but still very different from the western individualism. And Buddhism provides a sophisticated faith system and emphasizes on humbleness and circulation of life and death. Due to the theoretical description of the life and death, Chinese who identify with Buddhism experience more fear caused by the assumptions of punishments and superiority by identifying with the Buddha. These three philosophies have been dominating formation of the Chinese culture consistently for over two thousand years.

Communism as a new culture trend was introduced from the West into China at the beginning of 20th century, and then became one of the leading ideologies since the foundation of the 'People's Republic of China' in 1949. Culturally, Communism provides the sense of political equality and respect for the labour in comparison with the culture traditions. Meanwhile, other Western culture influences such as rationalism, scienticism, democracy, etc. present themselves in the culture matrix of Chinese psyche. Therefore, a new type of social order has been constructed in Chinese society and women are entitled with equal power and share independent interests like the men.

For variety of reasons including political and economical ones, the central government economics and development of the life quality of people became the most popular public topics and evidently created impact on people's behaviours and beliefs as different from the traditions as well as communism. The social phenomonons such as materialism, hedonism, money-worship, and the exchange of power and money have been pervasive and have become a part of the modern culture in China.

Therefore, by considering the complex culture matrix of Chinese psyche of the heritage in the culture traditions and the new trends of ideologies, Yu Xin (2014) describes the living philosophy of modern Chinese as "materialism in belief, opportunism in action, and utilitarianism in social life", and he summarizes three characteristics of the mentality of Chinese as "practical, optimistic, and self-centered." From the observation and analysis of modern Chinese culture matrix characterised by the co-existence of multiple mainstream philosophies and the radically challenged mentality related with the rapidly changing life styles, it is accessible for us to conclude the image and as we called the "National character" of modern Chinese as the following:

- (1) It is necessary to understand the mentality of the current Chinese people. They are no longer the Chinese who were known by the Westerners decades ago.
- (2) Generally, they are still world-oriented, family-centered, flexible, optimistic, peaceful, harmonious, and tolerant most of the times, because they follow the natural and positive views of world, views of life and death.
- (3) Psychologically, contemporary Chinese possess more confidence, more "masculine" traits.
- (4) Meanwhile, some new trends have also emerged which notify that the Chinese are changing their concepts of relationships regarding self and environment, body and mind.

SOCIO-CULTURAL CHANGE AND MENTAL HEALTH IN CHINA

China is progressing rapidly. As we discussed earlier, the new cultural trends of communism and socialism market economics drive into the traditions of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism have led to enormous changes in the socio-cultural level of China. All people have to readjust their behavioral ways and psychological states according to this significantly comprehensive cultural matrix.

Socio-cultural changes have inevitably induced radical changes in the individual inner psychic life. While enjoying the progress and experiencing individual growth, many people have to pay high price for such a new 'Great Leap'. Michael R. Phillips, et al. (2009) did a series of epidemiological studies from the year 2001 to 2005 to estimate the variables of prevalence, treatment, and associated disability of different types of mental disorders in four provinces of China. He found the prevalence of mental disorders of any kind was 17.5% (p.2044). In the most developed city in China, in Shanghai, the prevalence of any mental disorders was 18.25% in 2009 (Shanghai Municipal Health Bureau, 2010). According to the findings of Phillips (2009), the patients presented culture differences in terms of gender and age, such that "mood disorders and anxiety disorders were more prevalent in women, and in individuals 40 years and older. Alcohol use disorder was 48 times prevalent in men than in women"

(p.2041). The society has to pay a high price, too. Behavioral deviations relating to psychopathology have been observed as major causes of some serious social events and emergencies.

Table 1*

Classification	4 Provinces (2001-2005)	Hebei (2004)	Shanghai (2009)
Mood disorders	6.1	7.3	7.52
Anxiety disorders	5.6	5.3	3.91
Substance abuse disorders	5.9	2.0	5.45
Personality & behavioral problems	NA	NA	4.22
Psychotic disorders	1.0	0.6	0.74
Organic mental disorders	0.3	2.3	0.12
Other mental disorders	0.3	1.4	1.81
Any disorders	17.5	16.2	18.25

*Phillips MR, et al. The Lancet, 2009, 373: 2041-2053; Shanghai Municipal Health Bureau, 2010

The prevalence of mental disorders is related to the socio-cultural changes significantly but not exclusively present. The causes of psychopathologies in Chinese are a reflection of the “old problems”, which means that these factors have been playing a role in the Chinese society in the traditional way and have not been reshaped much by the external changes. For instance, the attitude towards mental illnesses and disorders of the general population is continuously passive and negative. Guilt and shame are still the initial emotional reactions of the modern Chinese towards mental illnesses which is as similar as their grandparent generations. Correspondingly, the help and support from the society as well as from the family for the mentally ill is weak and fragile. This prevalent negative attitude jeopardizes patients’ help-seeking behaviors and consequently interferes the process of healing and recovery.

According to Phillips et al. (2009) present,

“on the basis of analyses done by WHO, the combined category of neuropsychiatric conditions and suicide accounted for more than 20% of total burden of illness in China in 2004, making it the most important category of illness or injury in men and women. But only 2.35% of the government’s health budget is spent on mental health and less than 15% of the population had health insurance that covered psychiatric disorders (p.2050).”

The increasing mental health problems and the number of underserved population are two of the major problems that the Chinese people and their government are encountering. Specifically, China is facing the huge demands for mental health services, and the dominant biological psychiatry remains insufficient. A new system of mental health service with more humane paradigm and techniques is urgently needed. The new model of services should supplement the dominant model of the authoritarian physician-patient relationship.

PSYCHOTHERAPY IN CHINA

Traditional Healing Methods

The term traditional healing refers to non-orthodox therapeutic practices based on indigenous cultural traditions that operate outside official health care systems (Tseng, 2001b, p.7). The situation in China, however, is somehow different. Generally, the Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is regarded as the orthodox therapeutic practice in Chinese history but categorised as traditional healing in comparison with modern therapy.

The traditional Chinese medicine as well as the local religions, superstition, and unofficial healing practices have been the most common methods used by ordinary people to deal with their psychological suffering and to improve their mental well-being. Many scholars of the Traditional Chinese Medicine have started to study the psychotherapy methods of TCM and shared some inspiring findings. For instance, Wang (2015) introduces the theoretical system of psychotherapy of TCM including 3 theories such as Yin Yang Five Elements Theory, Visceral Manifestation Theory, and Seven Emotions Theory; in combination with 8 methods of intervention such as rationaliation, evidence-based convincing, paradoxical emotions, etc. Rooted deeply in the traditional culture, TCM still plays an important role as a healer similarly with other various forms of folk therapy which the TCM doctors present as authority figures, and arouse hope by capitalizing on the patient's dependency on others to make the intervention effective.

Meanwhile, superstitions as a healing practice is still acceptable in some under-developed areas in China such as Shamanistic healing rituals in the contemporary Mongolian. Mongolian is one of the minor ethnicities in North China. One of my students has videotaped two sessions of Shamanistic healing rituals. One is about a young woman presenting severe headache without organic illness. The other is about a young woman with depressive moods after the breakup with her boyfriend. Shamanistic healer dealt with the patients' physical and emotional symptoms by using rituals of dramatic body movements, esoteric language, and symbolic drama settings.

Legitimizing Psychotherapy

As Prof. Yu Xin states, Chinese are carving for psychotherapy for mainly three reasons. First is for spiritual needs and psychotherapy is regarded as some kind of religion or superpower. Second is for the sense of belongingness and therefore the therapists are perceived as a mother-like figure. The third is for self-value or self-esteem, hereby the patients seek help for growth and development psychologically. The Traditional Chinese Medicine together with other traditional healing practices may provide some satisfaction for the first and second expectation of the Chinese when they seek help in psychotherapy. Meeting the need of the third expectation and matching it with the cultural elements, the modernized psychotherapy gains more popularity in the urban areas of China.

There are four types of institutions providing different levels of intensity and interventions of mental health care in contemporary China. They are: (1) mental hospitals or mental health centers (also called specialized psychiatric hospitals) on the province level and district level; (2) departments for psychiatry or psychosomatic medicine in general hospitals; (3) counseling centers in universities, schools, out-patient services of hospitals; and (4) private clinics. As Tseng (2001b) states, "the practice of psychotherapy is strongly influenced by the socio-economic and medical system (9)." Historically, "talking therapy" was not valued by people as much as ordinary medical treatment that uses medication or surgical procedures in China. And the acceptance of psychotherapy had been obstructed by political ideology in China during the Cultural Revolution.

Psychotherapy and psychological counselling became the focus of the professional field of medicine in China not until the 1980's. The milestone is the First Chinese-German Symposium for Psychotherapy held in Kunming, Yunnan Province, in the year of 1988. The legitimacy of psychotherapy and psychotherapists was just given by the Mental Health Law of the People's Republic in China (short in the Law) officially launched on May 1st, 2013. It was the first time that psychotherapy was acknowledged as a "scientific medical treatment" and psychological counseling as "useful method to promote mental health" by law in the Chinese history.

According to the Law, psychotherapy as a medical treatment term is endowed with legal status, and precisely differentiated from psychological counseling by the identity of the practitioner, the aim, the location, etc. For instance, coding from article 51 in the Chapter III, Diagnosis and treatment of mental disorders,

"Psychotherapy shall only be practiced within medical facilities. Persons only qualified to provide psychotherapy must not diagnose mental disorders, prescribe medications for persons with mental disorders, or perform surgical treatments. Technical regulations for the provision of psychotherapy will be formulated by the administrative departments for health under the State Council."

Article 51 critically clarifies the different responsibilities of mental health practitioners and promoters among psychiatrist, psychotherapist practicing in medical facilities, and psychological counselors in non-medical facilities for many benefits of policy. One benefit is to regulate the growing market of psychotherapy and set up the boundaries of medical and non-medical purposes for the welfare of patients. The other benefit is to encourage the professional development of psychotherapists and counselors in the different responsibilities as healers.

Transcultural Implantation of Psychotherapy

Over the last thirty years, since 1980s', the subject of psychotherapy experienced significant change in itself from being obstructed to being legalized. Main forms or schools of psychotherapy including psychodynamic, cognitive behavioral, humanistic, and systemic have been transplanted into China. And thousands of psychiatrists and counselors have received some sort of professional training in psychotherapy in different schools and continue in gaining their educational credits. According to Prof. Zhang Yalin's study (2013), 1232 psychotherapist in six administrative areas in China were surveyed either by interview or by questionnaire in 2012 and 2013 and were asked about the methods of psychotherapy they applied in their daily practice. The most frequently used methods by the Chinese psychotherapists were as following: (1) cognitive (24.0% of frequency by 59.2% of total therapists), (2) behavioral (15.4% of frequency by 38.1% of total therapists), (3) psychoanalysis (11.9%/29.4%), (4) family (6.5%/16.0%), (5) CBT (6.3%/15.6%), (6) humanistic (6.3%/15.6%), (7) sandbox (3.8%/9.4%), (8) hypnosis (3.5%/8.6%), (9) holistic (2.3%/5.7%), (10) Morita (2.2%/5.6%), (11) others (17.8%/43.9%). By reviewing the data, we may assume three characteristics of the methods as used by the psychotherapists in China. The first is that most of the psychotherapists may use psychotherapeutic methods across different schools. The second is that nearly half of the psychotherapists (43.9%) use some kind of the methods which cannot be categorized into the most common methods. And the third is that cognitive interventional methods are the most popular methods used by both the therapists and patients in China.

To further discuss the possible cultural related reasons behind the three phenomenon, firstly, using methods across the schools may imply insufficient training for each school, so that the psychotherapists make the maximum benefits from the variety of training experiences to be effective in the therapy. Secondly, using methods other than the orthodox ones may imply the creativity of the therapists to compensate the culturally related needs of their Chinese patients as a healing intervention. Thirdly, the popularity of cognitive intervention may imply the symptom-reduced preference of the

psychotherapists as well as patients due to the “practical character” of Chinese, as well the authority figure preference of the psychotherapists.

PHILOSOPHICAL AND META-THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

No matter which school of psychotherapy implants, practices and develops in modern China, it is important to balance the main contradictions in the sense of philosophy or on a meta-theoretical level. There are at least five pairs of philosophical contradictions in the process of transcultural implantation of psychotherapy. First is universality versus uniqueness- it is possible for us to develop and use a relatively universal framework to describe, analyze and solve indigenous and unique problems.

Second is collectivism versus individualism- collectivism is a cultural tradition shared within many Asian countries and has been criticized over fusion and anti-humanity during the period of western culture-centered era. Now it is possible to value each individual for the sake of a collective social well-being.

Third is harmony versus perturbation- harmony is ideal for a society in the sense of an interpersonal relationship but it interferes the dynamic development and growth of the society. Perturbation may relate to stress but it also leads to change. It is also true in the mental health of individuals.

Fourth is localization versus globalization- it is possible to implant the western theories and practices of psychotherapy into the earth of east, and it is also important to introduce the contribution of psychotherapy with the east wisdoms into the western world.

The last but not the least is psychology of understanding versus psychology of explanation. Jaspers used to describe the subject of psychology as psychology of explanation which aimed to provide nothing but the truth and the facts of human psychology. Human beings should be more than material or physical existence, he criticized. As a philosopher and psychiatrist, Jaspers declared a new view of psychology as a ‘psychology of understanding’ that the psychologists should promote mutual understanding and collaborations among various mental health professionals. It is also important for the psychiatrists to yield the pure biological-orientation but to extend their knowledge, skills and services according to the so-called “bio-psycho-social and medical model.” Meanwhile, the psychologists should develop new working relations with the psychiatrists, while they are becoming major practitioners in psychotherapy.

In the process of balancing these 5 pairs of philosophical and meta-theoretical contradictories, the cultural understanding of human nature may be deepened and the cultural-specific approaches to psychological problems may be developed. Psychological dilemmas, distresses and disorders are universal to some extent, while the problems in various nationalities have colourful and cultural characteristics. Based on successful introduction of Western psychotherapy, it is the time to contribute to the world. Wisdom from traditional culture to solve problems and to pursue harmony are still enlightening for dealing with troubles in the rapidly developing society, if we were to integrate it well with contemporary psychological sciences.

To lead the discussion one step further, it is necessary to make the shift of paradigm of psychotherapy from medical model which is based on linear determinism to moral model and systemic thinking, which prefer meaningful connection over causality. Theoretically, systemic thinking is useful for us to understand the relationships better between human and nature, individuals and society, body and mind. Clinically, it can be utilized in clinical practices to deal with problems of various natures. The fact that family therapy has been widely welcomed in China is a good example. Systemic thinking fits

Chinese tradition and the “here-and-now” social reality very well so that the Chinese colleagues like to employ it with their own understanding and creative innovations.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD A CULTURALLY ADAPTIVE PSYCHOTHERAPY

China is a country with a significantly long history of civilization over 2,000 years as well as known for an incredible short history of modernized psychotherapy over 30 years. Upon the rewarding experience of healing history constructed mainly by the Traditional Chinese Medicine and the variety of folk healing practices under the comprehensive background of Chinese cultural matrix of psyche, contemporary Chinese society accepts and welcomes the introduction of western psychotherapy. Nowadays in China, where the government begins to stress the value of “Scientific view of development” and “Human-centered governance”, the tasks of mental health professionals can be defined as to promote psychological harmony. Therefore, psychological services in the Chinese society require significant emphasis on the multicultural competence of the practitioners regarding its unique cultural background and its diversity of subcultures.

Chinese culture matrix is profoundly comprehensive and each individual in psychotherapy presents his or her unique belief system and psychological needs within his or her own subcultural matrix. Contrasting the traditional healing practices and modern trends in psychotherapy in China point towards the need of a new system of mental health service with a humane paradigm and technique.

China is currently one of the fastest developing countries in the world and the impact of the rapid socio-cultural change influences a population of 1.3 billion. As a matter of fact, there are only 20,000 psychiatrists, 2,000 psychologists, and 960,000 counsellors who have very limited clinical experience to serve the mental health care for these 1.3 billion people. Chinese government has made significant progress in regulating and promoting the development of the professional field but still needs to work hard. It is also critically important for the practitioners to follow the professional ethical rules and make indigenous contribution to the development of psychotherapy also as a creation of science and arts.

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