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**PROCESSES AND AIMS OF IDENTITY
DEVELOPMENT EAST AND WEST:
IMPLICATIONS FOR PSYCHOTHERAPY
FOR CHINESE YOUTH**

Jessica Ball

**Paper presented at the Second International Conference on Psychotherapy
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Processes and Aims of Identity Development East and West:

Implications for Psychotherapy for Chinese Youth

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Abstract

Psychotherapy for Chinese youth must be understood with reference to the sociocultural context and normal processes of development among the Chinese in various geographic settings. Most research on adolescent development has been conducted in Western countries, and little is known about the developmental challenges that characterize the experiences of young people in Asia. The present paper proposes that Chinese youth, perhaps especially those living in Asia, have different socialization experiences and encounter different sources of psychological conflicts and crises compared to their Western counterparts. The culture of psychotherapy has emerged in response to personal problems and aims important among a certain, largely upper socioeconomic sub-population of Westerners. Therapists must be aware of the historically and culturally situated nature of normative expectations of development and of the aims of various therapeutic approaches, including psychotherapy. A clinical vignette, representative of the author's experience with Chinese adolescents and young adults, illustrates the use of psychotherapy with this population.

Processes and Aims of Identity Development East and West:

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Introduction.

This discussion begins with the assumption that there are situations involving Chinese clients in which clinical experience and research evidence would suggest that psychotherapy is the treatment of choice, given the client's presenting problems and intentions in seeking help.* Use of term "psychotherapy" is taken in this discussion to mean, generally, an insight-oriented approach to symptom alleviation and personal growth based on psychodynamic principles. What can we expect when working with Chinese young people in therapy in terms of the kinds of issues that are likely to be salient and in terms of optimal outcomes? Exploration of this question is timely because of the growing numbers of "overseas" Chinese seeking therapy in Western countries, and because of recent interest among practitioners in China and other Asian countries in the use of various therapeutic modalities for psychological problems.

Salient issues in psychosocial development: East and West.

An understanding of the extent to which psychodynamic psychotherapy is transferable to clinical work with Chinese young people requires an understanding of normal processes, challenges, and aims of development among Chinese youth in the context of contemporary culture in Confucian-heritage societies such as those in China, Hong Kong, Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Singapore. Unfortunately, there is little research evidence or accumulated clinical lore about normal developmental processes among Chinese youth or the distinctive psychological challenges that Chinese youth tend to encounter as they negotiate the

* It is evident that there are many kinds of psychological problems and many client goals for which this treatment approach is not optimal, at least initially. Also, many psychodynamically oriented clinicians, beginning with Freud, have argued that there are people who are not suitable candidates for intensive psychodynamic psychotherapy because of their psychological make-up and/or situation.

transition from childhood to adulthood. Major theories about adolescent psychosocial development have been formulated by Western scholars based on research and clinical experience largely involving youth in Western countries (e.g., Erickson, 1968; Havighurst, 1972; Marcia, 1966), where the ideology and social norms of individualism prevail.

Nevertheless, enough is known from cultural comparisons describing the radically different conceptualizations of the Self and of life from Eastern and Western perspectives to lead us to expect that Chinese and Western youth encounter quite different psychosocial challenges during their formative years (Ogbu, 1981; Roll, 1980). Cultural comparisons have emphasized the individual-centredness of Western cultures and the situation-centredness of Eastern cultures (Johnson, 1985; Roland, 1989).

In Chinese societies in Asia, heavy demands are usually placed upon young people to display behaviours that reflect Confucian values such as filial piety, thrift, maintenance of patriarchal social structures, and subjugation of personal desires in favour of fulfilling obligations that help to preserve and enhance the family and community (Bond, 1986; Hsu, 1985).

In Western societies, freedom of expression and achieving a sense of personal uniqueness and autonomy are paramount: the embeddedness of the individual in social contexts is downplayed (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler & Tipton, 1985; Slater, 1970). The manner in which one chooses to form connections with, or remain aloof from, societal institutions, such as family, education, work, and religion, is largely a matter of one's own preferences, ingenuity, and initiatives.

An important challenge for young people in the West is to construct a sense of self-worth through personal achievements and to determine one's own set of values, spiritual beliefs, sense of belonging, and direction in life (Johnson, 1985). Thus, the psychological difficulties that bring young people to therapy often stem from their overwhelming sense of personal responsibility and interpersonal isolation combined with a lack of readily discernible external structure, purpose, and spiritual meaning in life.

In contrast, clinical experience and conceptual considerations suggest that the psychological problems experienced by young people in Confucian-heritage societies are more likely to stem from an overwhelming sense of social constraint and obligations to social institutions including the family, education, work, and national goals and organizations.

Consolidation of personal identity is a universal developmental challenge. However, for Chinese young people, the difficulty of forming a deeply felt, coherent sense of personal identity may be intensified by the expected subjugation of self to the needs of the group and the expected alteration of self

presentation depending upon situational demands. While research is lacking, we might assume that Chinese young people also experience special challenges to establishing self-esteem as a result of their lack of personal control over the events shaping their lives. Western youth have at least the illusion of more personal control.

Psychological mirroring of Confucian-heritage cultures in flux.

Developmental challenges for Chinese youth are complicated by the fact that Confucian heritage societies are themselves undergoing major developmental transitions. Shifts are occurring along familial, community, economic, political, and religious dimensions, creating challenges to traditional cultural forms and values. In my years of experience working with Chinese young people in Singapore and Malaysia, I have found that this uncertainty is mirrored in the kinds of dilemmas that are most problematic and that often play a role in the emergence of clinical symptoms.

Most Chinese youth growing up in Chinese communities are exposed to traditional values and hierarchical social relationships. At the same time, these young people are exposed through the media, tourism, educational materials, the commercial sector, and other sources to ideas and practices originating in the West. These often idealize freedom of expression, the primacy of personal autonomy and goals, and other values associated with individualism.

Concurrent exposure to culturally mixed messages tends to give rise to various expressions of identity crises and confusion. These are often reflected in decision-making dilemmas and conflicts with significant others. For example, young Chinese clients often present with problems involving turmoil in boy-girl relationships, disputes with siblings, dissatisfaction with authoritarian structures in schools and in government. It is interesting to note that cultural messages from Western sources do not appear to present significant challenges to traditional spiritual beliefs, the value of education or military service, or to patriarchy. In contrast, these are precisely the dimensions that tend to be problematic for American youth (i.e., lack of spiritual meaning or sustenance, inability to commit to educational goals, and gender-role related issues).

In my experience with young Chinese clients, anxiety, depression, somaticization, compulsions and other symptoms can nearly always be traced, at least in the client's immediate experience, to problems involving their alignment on issues in which they feel they must choose between seemingly mutually exclusive and culturally opposite courses of action. These dilemmas often occur within an inchoate or truncated sense of personal identity and self-efficacy. Common approach-avoidance conflicts are:

- (1) their perceived freedom with respect to self-expression;
- (2) their latitude in determining educational pursuits;
- (3) their obligations to the extended family unit; and
- (4) their sense of control over events affecting their future, particularly pertaining to their own family formation and immigration.

The following example of clinical work with a Chinese young adult illustrates the dilemmas often faced by Chinese young adults growing up in contexts in which there is an increasingly exciting but confusing blend of traditional Chinese values and behavioural prescriptions, on one hand, and ideas imported from the West stressing personal autonomy and free expression of one's "true self," on the other hand.

Case illustration: Beng Chong.

Beng Chong, a 21 year old, Singaporean university graduate, sought help for agitated depression shortly after he began his first assignment in his first government job in Singapore. His symptoms included poor concentration, insomnia, irritability, weight loss, and social isolation during the previous four months. He accounted for his depression with reference to fear that he would shame his family and fail in his duty to the government if he quit his current post, which he detested. He had completed his training and begun his professional life full of optimism, but had been disappointed with the job he had been given, since it did not capitalize on his considerable talents or his interest in serving a particular constituency. He described the people whom he was assigned to serve as whining and unreasonable. He described his co-workers as cold and self-absorbed. He held out no hope for a reassignment, and would not consider requesting one for fear that this would evoke anger on the part of government officials and shame on his family's part for "wanting everything to be just the way I want it."

Over the course of weekly sessions, Beng Chong soon changed from complaining of feeling despondent and hopeless to giving voice to his outrage about the seeming irrationality of the "system" and the behaviour of his constituents and co-workers. As he did so, his most acute symptoms dissipated, although his outlook remained gloomy and he continued to isolate himself socially.

As we explored his childhood and current family life, his attention focused upon upsetting memories of his life as a schoolboy. Although he had been a high achiever, he had experienced his teachers as over-controlling and rejecting. He began to recognize that he was projecting an image of a tyrannical "cold" paternal figure onto his government department. Similarly, he recognized that he was projecting his worst fears

about himself as a spoiled and unreasonable child "wanting everything to be my way" upon his constituents, towards whom he had been behaving in an abrupt and distant way. As we explored these defensive maneuvers, he gradually became able to see his coworkers and his constituents in a more differentiated way, and to see his job more realistically as well, including the fact that he would not be in this particular position forever. He began to consider how his sullen behaviour may have exacerbated his problems at work, and we worked together on improving his role taking and social skills.

After four months in therapy he felt that he had returned to his "usual affable self." He was enjoying a new sense of camaraderie with some of his coworkers, and had re-oriented himself to his work as a short-term challenge that he could accept "one day at a time." His therapy ended when he reported that he had been free of symptoms for more than 3 months and felt that he could deal with his work "more as my own person." He added that, after all, he was really quite adaptable and could always "play along" if necessary until an opportunity to request a change in his position came along. The following year, Beng Chong initiated and was granted a request to transfer to a different government department more in line with his training and interests.

Case discussion: Beng Chong.

This case illustrates a common struggle among Chinese young people between longing to pursue individual goals and feeling an obligation to do one's duty to one's family, social institution, and the nation. In Singapore, as in other Chinese societies, forthright expression of feelings and making personal demands are generally not acceptable modes of behaviour. Rather, suppression of feelings, acceptance of duty as prescribed by authorities seen as acting on behalf of the community at large, and patience in awaiting a more desirable turn of events are the virtues towards which one must strive.

Symptom emergence in Beng Chong's case was overdetermined. In brief, a combination of unresolved rage and self-doubt stemming from unmet needs for nurturance during his boyhood, an unfortunate job assignment, and a strong personality with considerable talents and specific goals produced an almost overwhelming sense of frustration. This frustration, prompted unconsciously driven defenses and failure of mature coping strategies.

Psychodynamic psychotherapy provides a safe environment in which to express deeply-felt frustrations, feelings, memories, and seemingly irrational thoughts, which can lead to symptom relief. In this case, as in others, providing support and acknowledging that the client's frustrations and feelings are understandable, either from a rational perspective or because of unconscious determinants, was followed by substantial symptom remission. Tung (1991) has also described clinical experiences

in which "liberation" of suppressed material, such as painful memories and fears, was effective in dealing with somatic symptoms and led to better integration and functioning.

Like other Chinese young people with whom I have worked, Beng Chong showed a high degree of tolerance for the work of psychotherapy, and he developed considerable insight about the unconscious determination of his depressive reaction. He was further helped by working on his capacity to take the role of other persons in the problem situation.

At the same time as recognizing that his options for potential remedial courses of action in the situation were extremely circumscribed, he was able to recognize his own aggressive behaviours and regressive fears and to appreciate how these were exacerbating his problems on both affective and practical levels. He gained a greater sense of personal control by changing his own behaviours and viewing his first posting more realistically as temporary and therefore bearable, especially if he was patient and "played along," both highly valued Confucianist attitudes. Thus, this case illustrates how a combination of exploring the intrapsychic and specific sociocultural determinants of the client's problems led to an increased sense of personal control in the situation, increased self-awareness, and positive behaviour change.

Concluding comment.

This presentation adds to reports by other therapists who have found success in using psychotherapy with some of their Chinese clients (e.g., Tien, 1989; Tung, 1991; Wong, 1988). Despite the widely held view of Chinese young people as passive and guidance-seeking in response to perceived authorities, the view that emerges from the case vignette is that at least some contemporary Chinese young people are receptive to psychotherapy and are able to contribute actively to the work.

The extent to which a working alliance develops between a Chinese young person seeking help and a therapist of any cultural background depends importantly upon whether the therapist is culturally self-aware and is able to avoid seeing the client as an instance of a racial or cultural "type." The therapist must be willing to become informed, through dialogue with the client, about the client's experiences of their socio-cultural situation and the various influences upon their ability to meet the challenges of psychosocial development.

This paper advances the proposition that the nature and resolution of problems presented by our young Chinese clients can be understood with reference both to traditionally Western-based theories about psychodynamic processes, development, and change, and to our nascent understanding of the psychosocial goals and challenges of socialization experiences in Chinese cultures.

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