Short Paper

Application of psychoanalytically oriented therapy for the Chinese: cultural considerations
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Abstract. The cultural aspects of the application of psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapy for the Chinese are elaborated. This includes: the understanding of transference, based on the culturally rooted interpersonal relations and attitudes toward authority and healers; views about sexuality and gender; coping or defense mechanisms; and dream interpretation due to cultural symbols used in primary thought.

Key words: psychoanalysis, transference, sexuality, gender, defense mechanism, dream interpretation.

INTRODUCTION Although psychoanalysts tend to believe that the theory and practice of psychoanalysis is applicable universally because it deals with the psychology of human beings; yet, clinical experience has shown that such theory and practice should be subject to cultural values. Psychoanalytically-oriented psychotherapy was re-introduced in China in the last few decades. It has become apparent that there is a considerable need to modify its theory and practice for the Chinese, for its meaningful application. This view will be elaborated in the following article from several perspectives starting from the matter of transference.

TRANSFERENCE All of us know that the concept of transference is derived from psychoanalysis. It refers to the process by which a patient displaces onto his analyst feelings, ideas, and attitudes, which derive from previous attachment figures in his life; by which he relates to his analyst as though he were some former object in his life; by which he projects on to his analyst object-representations acquired by earlier introjections; by which he endows the analyst with the significance of another, usually prior, object.

Transference is related to a human being’s emotional relation to different objects. What is the potential difference between transference manifested among people of different nations or cultures due to the different sets of feelings, emotions and interpersonal relations that they have? In other words: what are the special features of transference manifestation within Chinese culture?
CHINESE INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIP  We could take a glimpse at how Chinese understand interpersonal relationships, since the transference between the patient and therapist could be a type of person-to-person relationship. Traditionally, the Chinese understand the interpersonal relationship with more emphasis on family, group, and country; and are more collectively oriented. Inner harmony is almost the optimal aim among these groups. Like the Confucian view, “To be in the middle, never to express conflict directly.” These characteristics are an intrinsic part of Chinese mentality and superego.

Within such a cultural background, in interpersonal relationships, and in therapeutic situations; the patients would be spontaneously reacting and relating to the therapist in one of the following ways:

“ I should/ must respect the doctor,”
“ I should be polite towards doctor,”
“ otherwise I will be looked at as an impolite person…”

As a result of this tendency, within the psychotherapeutic situation, the Chinese patients tend to have more difficulty expressing their conflicts and negative feelings towards therapists. The therapists need to be more careful in understanding the exact inner feelings, or attitudes of patients toward the therapists.

Generally speaking, the patients have quite high expectations of the “Doctor/ Therapist” as one who should be kind, clever, of high moral caliber, and should resolve everything for the patients. The therapists are viewed as omnipotent figures, and should be good “mother” figures caring for every aspect of the patient’s life. As a response toward the patients’ expectation of the therapist, many un-experienced junior therapists easily begin to experience guilt when they feel unable to fulfill their patients’ (cultural) expectations. The authorities demand that professionals be altruistic, insisting that the “Patient is the FOCUS of all activities,” which results in higher consumer expectations, fewer resources, and more punishment oriented controls on professional performance. All of these result in the professionals feeling under pressure which in turn influences the superego of the professionals, and the whole therapeutic process.

CHINESE VIEW OF SEXUALITY AND GENDER  Beyond interpersonal relationships in general, there is a need to elaborate on the interpersonal relationships between people of opposite sex. Let us discuss briefly how Chinese people understand the sexuality and the relationship between the two genders.

In ancient China, people described their daily life as “drink, food; man and woman” - the basic components of life, which are quite closely related to human health and enjoyment. Special provisions for the care of food, for practicing Qigong (mediation), for physical exercise, and for proper sexual activities were seen as essential to maintain optimal health. But the situation changed when the Qing dynasty blamed this concept for the fall of the previous Ming dynasty. This resulted in a split, and conflicting attitudes towards sex – strong desires versus conventional moral views.

The “Cultural Revolution” was the most critical time. At that time, any topic to do with sex was forbidden in the media, with the threat of severe punishment of illicit sexual affairs. The public figures or heroes were non-gender oriented; a relationship between comrades was emphasized as
“pure, friendly, warm and nonsexual.” It was the sublimation of the whole society towards sex, a kind of sexual repression.

The situation changed 20 years later: there were more open attitudes towards life, and some young people imitated the Western way of life. On the negative side this lead to more problems during puberty, more conflicts between the generations, and sometimes the patients felt more confusion in their new lifestyle.

The Chinese people are still very sensitive to expressing (sexual) feelings with each other. The spectrum of positive feelings towards the opposite sex are often expressed more subtly and indirectly, using words such as: “like,” “admire,” “appreciate,” and “love.” People tend to stay within the realm of fantasy when expressing their sexual feelings.

On the other hand, there is more responsibility is linked with love outside of marriage. Although associated with a cultural change, and becoming more liberal, the love relationships outside of marriage are more widely accepted; there are still conflicts between lovers in such affairs. Financial payment or compensation for the love affairs; the desire to live together; decisions whether to marry or separate; concerns about negative repercussions on one’s professional career or social life, are some of the matters often cause concern to people in such extramarital affairs or affairs that meet with social disapproval. People tend to view such love affairs as being, “More burdensome than enjoyable.”

Within the social and cultural setting of the present time, in therapeutic situations when therapists try to understand the dynamics of relationships between Chinese patients, particularly relating to sex, gender issues and transference, the therapist must understand Chinese culture first; otherwise a totally different interpretation will follow when comparisons are made with Western culture.

**CULTURALLY-SHAPED COPING STRATEGIES**

In spite of the common belief that defense mechanisms are universal, it is subject to cultural influence. We could find many types of Chinese defenses, or coping methods, which correlate with “passive aggression,” “reactive formation,” and “devaluation/omnipotence.”

For the Chinese, we found the following commonly used idioms reflecting the Chinese style of coping with problems: “Retreat for advancement,” “Softness against hardness,” “Two faces with three swords,” “Hiding a knife with smiling face,” “Sleeping on rough wood, tasting bitter gall – trying to remember painful event for revenge,” “Hiding a needle in the cotton,” “Trying to keep favorable relations with the left and the right.”

As we know in the famous ancient (military) book of Sun-zhi Strategy, there are 36 strategies prescribed against the enemy. For Daoism (or Taoism), one of the three philosophies which emerged in China, there are many theories and strategic teachings described for people learning how to survive in life. Therefore, when you want to understand the Chinese patient’s defense mechanisms, or coping methods, including the proper understanding of transference phenomena; you must be familiar with Chinese culture.

**INTERPRETATION OF DREAMS**

There are many ways that thoughts can be examined. Analysis of dreams is one of them. To what extent is the content of dreams shaped by culture and what are the attitudes toward the interpretation of dreams a part of the therapy, are interesting subjects needing special considerations. We know that there exists a long history and many studies of dreams in China. It is critical to know that since the ancient times it has been an interest amongst the Chinese in the special symbols seen in dreams, as illustrated by the document “Interpretation of dreams by (Mr.) Zhou Gong.” The content and method of interpretation has been under influenced by religions, such as Buddhism, as well as Tao philosophy. Thus, in China
scholars need to spend time studying the Chinese language and its symbols to understand Chinese dreams, which would have quite a different context and associations, when compared to people from other cultures.

In conclusion, psychoanalysis is a commendable technique or pathway to delve into a human being’s inner world. However, we should be careful to note that different cultures have different impacts on the human mind, both the conscious and unconscious, in China as well as in other places.