

In Harmony with the Sky, (天, Tian, Universe): Implications for Existential Psychology

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Although the word psychology had not been introduced in Asia until more recently, I have always thought that Chinese psychology has developed over the thousands of years of Chinese culture. It integrates science and the laws of nature, agriculture and industry, philosophy and poetry, and history and politics. This psychology favors the collective and social aspects of humans, their relationship with each other, and their harmony with the ever present symbolic and mythic principles of sky nature (天, Tian, universe)(He 2007; Wang, 2008). In Chinese psychology, and personal phenomenological and ontological experiences of the individual has been neglected or compromised.

In this respect it is very different from many modern Western clinical theories, which are based in a scientific mythology based in the separateness and discreteness of each individual. Since Descartes famous statement of “I think therefore I am,” Western psychology has been focusing on individual consciousness and individualistic expressions of emotion, thoughts, and behaviors. These experiences are reduced, defined, measured, and analyzed, but rarely realigned with the whole person or the larger society context. This minimized psychology has helped to try to capture the label of a scientific discipline, but shuns addressing the larger questions of existence and how does one live a meaningful life.

On the other hand, Chinese psychology has more directly sought a more holistic, experiential, and embodied understanding the psyche (Bond, 1986; 1993; Wang 2008). However, this approach to existence has been deeply, and to a large degree subconsciously, subjected to the ideas of Confucianism, and more specifically Confucianism’s view of collectivism. In this chapter I am going to analyze the Chinese ideas and myths of the importance of humans being in harmony with the sky nature (天, Tian, universe), and its implications on existential perspective of psychology. I believe that

this foundational idea of finding harmony within the sky nature, has influenced the Chinese development of their collective psychosocial and political psyche, and in turn has an immense impact on Chinese cultural context, individuals' social relationships, and individuals' relationship with themselves. Collective and social harmony surely develops under such context, but at the cost to the personal individuation of each member of society.

Returning Home

I was born in Hong Kong, but most of my adult life in the Western communities of England, the United States, and Canada. Two years ago I returned to live Hong Kong. On the surface my return was for new opportunities to teach and lecture, but in my heart I have discovered hidden meanings. Living in Hong Kong makes me feel like I am already home, but sometimes I feel like I need to return to Canada where I founded my individual 'self.' Perhaps, in the depth of my Chinese psyche I am yearning to be completed with a collective order, a collective sense of psyche which Jung (1965) emphasized, but my individual self keeps questioning the validity of my yearning.

Recently I have been supervising a group of students in Shenzhen. We meet in a hotel named *Harmony*. The Chinese name is "Tien, Die, Yen" hotel, whose direct translation is "Heaven, Earth, and Man." When I travel in China and I have seen similar names in different provinces and cities throughout the country. It makes me wonder if we, as Chinese, are yearning to be at peace with the universe, or in a more holistic sense are we reminding ourselves that we are part of the universe? My curiosity sets me venturing into the Chinese mythology.

Sky

Sky (天, Tian, universe) bears the synonym of nature (He, 2007; Wang, 2008). It is the dominant force regulating the cosmic order. Besides being the home of the god and goddesses, Sky encapsulates moral commands, from on high one might say. The ancient agricultural Chinese culture developed and co-existed with the sky. The importance of coexisting with and being in harmony with the sky nature, the sky cosmic orders, and the sky moral commands is embedded in the Chinese collective culture. Sky nature has been ingrained in each Chinese life for thousands of years. I believe this sky nature belief system provides insight into the Chinese personality, and is vital to understand and consider when working with Chinese clients in psychotherapy.

In Sichuan

After the earthquake in Sichuan, on May 12, 2008, I went up to Chendu, where the disastrous response center was located. In Sichuan, many Tibetans live, one of the minority people of China. In my travel there, I had the fortune of having a dinner with a Tibetan family. The family organized a traditional BBQ lamb dinner for travelers, and over the generous and delicious meal I was told about the "Sky Burial."

My hosts explained to me that Tibetans live at very high altitude; the average elevation is 4,900 meters (16,000 ft). It is the highest region on Earth and is commonly referred to as the "Roof of the World." Tibetans rely on herding sheep and cows on the plateau grasslands. They believe their life is dictated by nature, the mountains, the sky, and the rivers. Tibetans believe that humans have two lives; a physical life and a spiritual life. The spiritual life is everlasting and death is the beginning passage. When someone is dying the passage from the physical life to the spiritual life breaks open. A close family member or a friend will gently talk to the dying person that his or her physical life is coming to the end. The dying person will be reminded to let go of the earthy physical body and enter to the spiritual world, to mingle with the sky and the true nature of all existence.

A sky burial scaffold is built halfway up the mountain away from chilly winds and from there the spirit will ascend to heaven to join the gods and goddesses. The burial ritual is performed by a Tibetan Buddhist priest in three stages. First, the corpse with a cloth covering the head is put on the scaffold naked and facing downwards towards the earth. Then smoke is raised to attract eagles to snatch the outer flesh. After this initial clearing of the flesh, the priest then uses a surgical knife to separate all the bones, organs, and tendons to allow the eagles to full access to the body. Finally the priest removes the cloth covering the face and head. It is believed that the faster the physical body is decimated, the sooner the spiritual body will start the homeward journey to heaven.

Sky Burial sounds mysterious, also horrific. I was told about this ritual just after dusk and I felt the spirit world that they were explaining all around me. Tibetans believe humans are created by the nature of all things and that our spirits return back to this nature. Death and the destruction of the body allow us to achieve harmony with nature, the natural order of things. The inevitable cycle of life and death provides the ground for deep meaning in our limited time in human form (Ga, Cai, & Ge, 2000). Although this is a Buddhist

ritual, it echoes the Taoist understanding of our search to be united with sky, heaven, nature (He 2007; Ho, 1995; Wang, 2008).

This cross cultural and cross religious Chinese belief of being reunited with nature has developed from the Chinese philosophy (He 2007; Ho, 1995; Wang, 2008). It is believed that humans, as finite beings, need to rely on the unlimited sky to be complete and to become in harmony with the nature. These ideas are found in all the major religions of China: Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Although there are differences between each understanding, I want to draw focus to the similarities.

These ideas could be simply explained in that sky nature dictates the fate of humans and at the same time grants blessings on us. We are dependent upon and part of the sky nature. A human life is finite, but the sky is infinite. These concepts emerged during the period when China was primarily an agricultural society. Nature provided the resources for survival, while at the same time nature constricted the communities with impervious destructive forces such as drought, fire, and disease. Sichuan had just experienced recent economic growth that was lost in the aftermath of the deadly earthquake.

Infinite sky nature sets boundaries on humans, but we are not helpless. Humans have an endless reservoir of spirit that allow us to adapt and adjust to changes and to coexist within these contradicting tensions. The sky nature does not necessary stand in opposition to the human existence, but co-exists with us. The sky nature is the passage between the infinite and the finite (He, 2007; Ho, 1995; Wang, 2008).

In Harmony with Sky

The concept of humans seeking to be in harmony with the sky nature has existed since ancient China. We have had to find a way to exist despite, and in co-existence with, the contradicting tensions between the infinite sky nature and human limitedness. The Chinese farmer has always given blessing to this the infinite sky nature as it provides all the necessary resources for life: soil, rain, crops, and livestock. Simultaneously, the farmer is also at the mercy of the unpredictable and unwelcome aspects of sky nature: drought, sickness, earthquakes, and death.

While I was traveling from Hong Kong to Macau to teach at Macau Inter-University Institute, I met a coarse looking man with tattoos down both of his arms. I had been talking with my dean about a student and had not realized that he had been listening to our conversation. He came up to us and asked my profession. I told him I

was a lecturer at a university and family therapist, and he took this as an invitation opportunity to educate me about sky nature. He was like a modern sage that I met not on the ancient Silk Road, but on a state of the art hovercraft. He explained he retired as a fisherman nine years ago because the sea gave less fish than ever before. He said he was not so brash and foolish as to compete with the sky nature.

He described his experience of fishing. He would go to sea with his crew for a week at a time. He would travel into the ocean, where there was only the sea and sky as far as he could see in all directions. He awoke each day at dawn, and worked until dusk when he would be rocked to sleep by great waves. He said that although he made a living, he understood that he risked his life each trip. He felt tremendous humility in the power and vastness of the sea, but his greatest respect went to the sky. He said no human could compete with the nature. Many of his friends had lost their life to the sea as sky nature did not give mercy to them. He believed that his life and his livelihood depended on the blessing and mercy of the sky. He praised the sea goddess for her generosity, but feared the sky immensely.

He explained that each time at sea he would struggle and maneuver with and within sky nature to maximize his catch. He made clear that I understood that he was not only talking personally, but mythically. "This is not only the fate of the fisherman, but this is all of life." The immense contradicting tensions are shown in the lines of fear and gratitude in his face. On each journey he was hopeful and hopeless, assertive and subservient. I finally understood what the spiritual traditions of China had been trying to teach me: One must find a union with oneself and sky nature. This is the essence of harmony.

Chinese culture and collectivism has been built upon this foundation. Perhaps only through the notions of harmony and being in collective can humans can survive. Striving for this harmony is a pragmatic journey, as it supports the individual but also the timeless Chinese collectivist values and institutions of family structure, social order, and survival. This shaped our shared and complicity agreed upon ethics and morality.

Grand Dad Sky

The following sky myth illustrates how earnestly the Chinese desire harmony. The story was told to me by a student I supervised. In his village, they have an annual festival for the *Grand Dad Sky*. It is the most important festival of his village; all household have to participate. All have to contribute food that gets redistributed after the

celebration. The priest leads the worship and has the obligation to be fair in the redistribution of food, as *Grand Dad Sky* is fair. During the ceremony, the priest invites the gods and goddesses from heaven to give blessings to the village.

The annual festival recognizes the infinite of the sky nature. A myth that humanizes the gods and goddesses accompanies the celebration. The community is destined receive both blessings and curses from the gods and goddesses. Therefore, by offering food, the community tries to bribe them to provide only blessing. The resolution comes as they meet in the middle. If the community agrees to be submissive to their orders and be harmonized with the sky nature, the gods and goddesses will be less wrathful.

Chinese Collective Foundation

I believe that the phenomena I have described above form a significant part of the foundation for the prevailing cultural collectivism, belief systems, and myths of contemporary Chinese civilization (Wang, 2008). The co-existing tensions and blessings between human beings and the nature sky (天, Tian, universe) are endless. To be in harmony with nature without disturbing the blessings and good faith from the sky (天, Tian, universe) nature is the destiny of human beings. This belief is core in Confucianism and Taoism: the union of humanity and the sky (天, Tian, universe) nature is the essence of harmony. These concepts continue to influence Chinese civilization and culture. Therefore, Chinese existence is based on harmony with the collective context and in relating to nature. The Chinese psychological sense of collective security has been developing on the platform of harmony within collectivism (Gou, 2008; He 2007; Wang, 2008). Chinese security has emphasized its collective roots and skirted the Western individualism that has been exported globally by way of global mercantile structures and mass media. We recognize, however, that many Western ideas have already permeated the social organization of the East and that there will be a continued mutual interpenetration of ideas resulting from our increasing contact through commerce, tourism, and the media.

The Self and the Collective

In my heart and through my contemplations, I believe individualism is a given. But in the Chinese cultural collective context and individualist concepts have to be endorsed and legitimized by the rulers of the social order and in turn legitimized by the sky (天,

Tian, universe) nature. This legitimizing of hierarchy is analogous to that achieved by ancient Chinese emperors. The worship of the sky (天, Tian, universe) in China was started with the Emperor of Huang, (Huang Di) (He 2007; Wang, 2008; Ho, 1995). He built the worship altar not only to use it for worshipping the sky (天, Tian, universe), but also to ask heaven to legitimize his ruling legacy. Confucius stated that worshipping heaven signified emperors receiving the blessing and heavenly orders to rule their kingdom. This ritual signified the emperors of ancient China gaining the passage to rule. Those who received the blessings would rule and those who lost the blessings would lose their kingdom in chaos and die. Chinese culture thus embraced harmony, which enabled everyone to live cooperatively. Ancient Chinese history records that emperors sent their daughters to marry the neighboring princes in order to establish a harmonized relationship between territories. If this harmony was not established, Chinese rulers were obligated to prevent chaos by any means at their disposal. The 1989 Tiananmen Square incident provides a recent and well documented example of the dynamic. The Tiananmen Square Incident represented the moral voice of the people, including the students, intellectuals, workers, and even some of the government officials looking for more social, economical and democratic political changes in facing of corruptions. Unfortunately, the ruling party leaders ultimately saw that as a potential chaos which threatened the harmony of the society and led them to their choice to call the military.

The Great Wall was built under the command of many Chinese rulers between the 600 BC and the 16th century. The goal was to protect the northern borders of the Chinese Empire and to ensure harmony. We could say that these emperors merely do not want to be attacked, but psychologically, it bears the symbolic meaning of guarding the harmony. I believe that Chinese emperors feared the disharmony, chaos, and consequences of war.

Confucianism: Preservation of Order and Harmony

Chinese psychologically fear chaos and conflicts. They endorse a collective psyche and consequently a strict social order rooted back to the rise of Confucianism. At that ancient chaotic time, centuries before the birth of Christ, order set the boundaries that preserved individuals and the collective. Confucius wanted to have a

social order in which everyone is in harmony. Their fear is evident throughout history in seeking peace and harmony. The values of Confucianism, like the Great Wall, have preserved Chinese social, political, and family structures over millennia. Confucius constructed five relationships to which he wanted the Chinese to strictly adhere. These are relationships between: ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, elder brother and younger brother, and friend and friend (Bond & Hwang, 1986). With strict obedience to these five social orders, the harmony of the collective society will be preserved.

Filial piety, the father-son relationship, is considered the most important among the five Confucian relationships. Historically, a central Chinese value is the strict family structure that requires devotion and obligations of children to their parents. It is parallel to the strict devotion and loyalty to the emperor from officials (Bond, 1986; Bond & Hwang, 1986; Gou, 2008). Confucian filial piety provides an example of culturally defined intergenerational relationships with absolute obedience. Although some of its component ideas (obedience, for example) are shared by other cultures, filial piety surpasses all other ethical prescriptions in its historical continuity, the proportion of humanity under its governance, and the encompassing and imperative nature of its precepts. The attributes of intergenerational relationships governed by filial piety are structural, enduring, and invariable across situations within Chinese culture. They may be generalized to apply to authority relationships beyond the family and they are thus potent determinants of not only intergenerational, but also superior-subordinate interactions.

I remember when I was a child; my father was, in a typical way, the outsider to the family. He worked and we had a very distant relationship that appeared harmonious but had unseen tensions. He wrote on a board in our home that “when a family is harmonious everything is perfect and when a family is problematic there will be unceasing conflicts.” In my father’s eyes, “harmony” among family member was not just central guiding principle, it was the essence of his existence. His beliefs were deeply reinforced in the collective perspective that the security of the collective is rooted in harmony within the family. At this stage of my life, having been a father myself, I understand and am deeply moved by this paternal essence. At the same time I am conflicted by the attitudes I absorbed in my journey of adulthood in individualist communities of the West. Sometimes I am puzzled by several notions: Do we become secure by first being self-differentiated and later are enabled to be united and connected with others in a more intimate union? Or do we find our integrity by

playing the strict, assigned role and through acceptance of it come to appreciate the collective security of being? Or can both collective and individualistic natures of human being co-exist, in a paradox of human nature, and thus be cherished by human existence? When these two “natures” are in conflict, it seems that the contraction within self could broaden to conflicts in other intimate relationships and may eventually result in conflicts between groups and even nations. Nonetheless, in a family systems perspective, emotional conflicts and projections within the cross generational and nuclear Chinese family will generate the sense of a deep need for harmony and a fear of chaos and conflicts (Bowen, 1994). Hence, I believe my father desired harmony and feared conflicts.

During my studies in the West, I came to adopt Bowen’s ideas of self differentiation; that is individual self is both intrapsychic and interpersonal, that is both individualistic and collective. It is the ability to reflect on an individual’s wish and feeling but not respond automatically to emotion. Perhaps the debate of individualistic and collective culture is only a rhetoric expression; the consciousness of a human self embraces both individual and collective meanings. Leading existential psychologists, Ed Menedelowitz (2008) and Kirk Schneider (2008) ground the examination of the nature of self in ideas similar to Martin Buber and contemporary Buber scholar Maurice Friedman (1999), who have an implicit recognition of these dual aspects of human nature. For a mature individual, one needs the blessing found in the paradox of individual independence and collective interdependence.

Emotion in a Chinese Mind

For the Chinese people, showing emotions is risky business. Emotions are dangerous because they demonstrate individual desire and chaos; both of which are threats to relational and collective harmony. Consequently, Emotions need to be suppressed, denied, ignored, and jettisoned from the self experience. From a tradition Chinese medicine perspective, emotions are evidence of internal imbalance. Therefore, emotions are signs of illness (Bond, 1993; Kleinman, 1986). Strong feelings are dangerous because they may be contagious.

When compared to the West, emotions are less valued and relevant in Asian psyche (Potter, 1988). The expression of emotions has no social value, nor do they move the individual or the collective towards any possible constructive outcome. For example, unlike Westerners who engage with the emotional expressions of others,

the Chinese believe that the open expression of feelings should be met with only indifference. My early training in emotional constriction served me poorly when I moved to the West, but the openness I worked hard to attain has often been met with concern and confusion when I returned to Asia. When I urge students to embody and passionately engage with the psychological concepts they are learning, they look at me as if I am speaking a foreign language and not our native Cantonese.

In the West, I learned to communicate in a more transparent, assertive, and candid manner. It was not an easy task. It was filled with false starts, awkward moments, and profound self doubt and conflict. Not only did I have to fight against my internalized cultural bias, but I believe my temperament has always been introverted and shy. However, I learned that only through sharing my opinions that my knowledge and wisdom was expanded and enriched. Only by sharing myself did I move towards the true intimacy I longed for. When I returned to Hong Kong with my new skills, I experienced a cultural shock. Chinese colleagues and students desired hierarchy and harmony within the education context, not the interactive and fiery discourse I learned to admire in my Western education.

At first I could not understand why students remained silent when I asked for their opinions and experiences, but after one class a brave and insightful student shyly approached me. She said that although the students appreciated my invitations they dare not disturb the classroom by interrupting the teacher to ask a question. They had never experienced a pedagogy in which their opinions were valued. This experience helped to reacquainted me with the power of filial piety and its psychological consequences. Within a collective learning context, a student never draws attention away from the teacher's expertise. Students may have questions, doubts, and even feelings, but these must remain secret as individual learning is subordinate to the social order. In Chinese culture, feedback and complaints must only be given by those higher in the collective social order. Therefore, despite my repeated invitations, I rarely receive the honest feedback from students that would improve my teaching. It is a closed system that does not engage in process and consequently limits progress.

Professors are seen as the knowledge and wisdom experts, therefore acceptance and patience without contesting is the most respectful and harmonious attitude. It nullifies the possibility that the harmony within the learning environment will ever be disturbed. This sheds new insight into my understanding of the Chinese personality. The Chinese character reveres harmony and subverts itself to the

societal and cosmic hierarchy. The Chinese have blindly accepted an oversimplified understanding of the Taoist beliefs that to be harmonized with the natural order is the supreme way of being.

Avoidance of Conflicts

According to Tao, to avoid unnecessary controversy and to be in harmony with one's world is the goal of life (Gou, 2008; Ho, 1995). It is also a pragmatic way of life. The Tao is quintessentially Chinese allowing its adherents to attain harmony with the universe, the social orders, and with nature. If we seek harmony, we can alleviate and avoid of suffering. A negative definition is adopted because, as in physical illness versus health, people more readily agree on what psychological suffering is than they do on happiness. Moreover, just as physical well-being is achieved in medicine through the prevention and cure of illnesses, so we shall attempt to achieve psychological well-being by the avoidance and alleviation of suffering. One is not just a metaphor of the other. From an evolutionary point of view, physical and psychological well-being go hand-in-hand. What is good for the body usually makes us feel good emotionally, and vice versa. The so-called pragmatic philosophies of Taoism and Buddhism as understood in China reinforce this belief.

All these stories reflect deeply the ancient Chinese belief that an individual becomes mature as his or her life harmonizes with heaven. These same ideas continue to be elaborated by modern Chinese philosophies (Gou, 2008; He 2007; Wang, 2008; Ho, 1995). When people become mature, their minds will have integrated with the cosmic orders. Once they achieve this maturity, they breathe with the cosmic rhythms. I have found that my context has profoundly influenced my beliefs; as I settle more into my new life in China I discover a deeper appreciation of these beliefs.

Existential Givens in Chinese Psychology of Harmony

Recently, a couple sought my services to assist with their eldest son. He had not eaten for five days and had not spoken to them for over a month. I will call this family the Voiceless Family. There are four members in the family: the father is Chinese, the mother is Filipino, their eldest son (the identified patient), G, is 32 years old, and his brother is two years younger. The parents met in Canada and have been married over 33 years. Mr. and Mrs. Voiceless worried that their son's condition has worsened over time. In Hong Kong, where they now live, crisis workers are not readily

available. Since I had worked as a crisis therapist at a hospital in Toronto for several years, they were able to locate me in Hong Kong.

G studied in primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong. He then went abroad to attend college before returning home. After school, G had worked as a computer technician until he was laid off in 2007. Since then G had stayed at home with his parents. It was apparent that his mental health was declining. Mr. Voiceless afraid that their sons would lose their facility with the Chinese language and forget their cultural roots wanted them to return to Hong Kong.

G first returned from Canada when he was 3 years old. Both Mr. and Mrs. Voiceless went to work and put him and his brother under the care of his grandmother and aunts. Such familial support is common in China and indeed is virtually mandatory. The extended family was initially disturbed that G did not have the mastery of Cantonese that was typical of other three year olds in their community. He was told that he was dumb because his language skills did not meet the family's expectations. Moreover, he looked different since his mother was Filipino. As G matured he became markedly quiet and reserved. In his adolescence, he would later try to defend the insults cast upon him by stating that he was introverted and shy like his father. Throughout his development, G rarely raised his voice to assert his ideas and tried to avoid of conflicts with his family and peers. Apparently, Mr. Voiceless was the biggest avoider.

My initial phone conversation was with G and his mother. G said that he did not really know his father. Mrs. Voiceless quickly discounted G's experience and stated that their boys love both their parents. G quickly asserted back that he did not know what love his mother was talking about. The mother then attacked her soon again by retelling an earlier consultation with psychiatrist in which G was labeled as capable of rationality, but incapable of having feelings. I did not engage in the dynamics over the phone and just arranged a time for me to visit family in their home.

As I traveled to meet the family I was not sure what to expect. I had the recollection of being struck by a paranoid youth twenty five years earlier when I had just began my career. As I entered the home, Mr. and Mrs. Voiceless looked worried and pointed me to G's room. When I entered the small room, G was sitting on the floor. He did not rise to greet me nor did he look at me. He was quite slim and a sad and suspicious face stared out at the wall below his greasy hair. My instincts told me to sit on the floor near the door and not force communication. In our silence, we heard voices of the family talking about him.

After a few minutes I introduced myself again and explained

that I was invited by his parents to assist him and his family. He now had the choice to either engage with me or to ask me to leave. His first statement was, "Nobody listens; I have nothing to say." While I felt like perhaps I should get up and leave, I continued to sit with him silently. He soon began to talk directly and deeply with me. He stated that he was physically abused by his grandmother and aunts, and that he was teased and bullied by schoolmates because he looked different. He said that the best way for him to keep peace was to be silent. He only liked to go out late at night when there was no one on the street. He put his head down which seemed to symbolize that he was finished talking with me for now.

I returned to the living room and was met by Mr. Voiceless who quickly told me that G, like himself, does not like conflicts, keeping the peace in vital to his family's survival. Mr. Voiceless went on to explain that his brothers and sisters have land in the New Territory that is very valuable and that it is essential that his wife and sons do not create trouble in his extended family. Mr. Voiceless explained that his brothers and sisters can be abusive and make his family the objects of their jokes. Mr. Voiceless tried to minimize contact with his extend family, but G protested that he did not want to see any these relatives, not even once a year on the Chinese New Year. Mr. Voiceless admitted that there is conflict among his siblings about the land, but he accepted the way his family was. He denied that he was afraid of asserting his opinions with his family, but stated that he chooses to make peace and avoid conflict. He accepted the collective family decisions even though he is not convinced that they are fair. He asked me if I understood that the collective co-existence prevails over any *individual's* desire. I asked whether he had internal conflicts between his own needs and his family's collective decisions. He then put a smile on his face that did not mask his underlying bitterness.

Mrs. Voiceless came and joined us. She stated that her husband never talks to her about his family, the land, or the conflicts that trouble his own family. She quickly became emotional. She said that she loves her husband and sons and feels that she did the best she could as a wife and mother, but now feels that her job is done as her sons are adults. She desires to move forward into the next stage of her life with or without her family, although she worries that if she left her sons would not be able to withstand the collective emotional ridicule from her husband's family. She has grown resentful of her husband's silence. In consequence, she also learned to be voiceless and therefore her sons are the same. Now each of her sons has turned into a "hiding youth," a new contemporary term to describe

youth with emotional problems whose refuge is their room where they spend their days playing computer games.

According to Mrs. Voiceless, her husband has been living a life without direction or meaning. He refuses to change or grow. She gave the example that he will order dim sum every time the family goes out for lunch because that is the family tradition, even though neither he nor his family actually enjoys this traditional meal. He lives and breathes, but has not done anything since he returned to Hong Kong. He just eats, sleeps and gambles to pass time. She is the one tackling life pressures and conflicts. Unfortunately, he quietly demands that his wife and sons live as he has lived. If they do not comply, he verbally attacks them, accusing them of being angry people and then withdrawals again.

In discussing the harmony with the sky (天, Tian, universe), I wonder how much China's way of collectivism stifles individuals' authentic self as proposed by existential psychotherapy. In my sessions with the Voiceless family, we explored these themes. I have asked them if love could only be expressed through obedience; if life could be harmonious when life is only half lived, fulfilling prescribed roles; if harmony can only be achieved by sacrificing one's self and one's family?

Rollo May (1981), regarded freedom as "man's capacity to take a hand in his own development. It is our capacity to mold ourselves" (p.7). In Mr. Voiceless's situation, he blindly followed his destiny without question and without allowing himself or his sons to grow. Tragedy happened not only to him but to his next generation.

Any values that a person develops will be based upon his or her experience of autonomy and the sense of personal power and possibilities. G was not able to express himself. His voice and experience were not being heard and consequently he chose to shut down. I suspect that freedom is enhanced when one's expression is recognized regardless whether it is accepted or rejected.

G's first statement to me was, "Nobody listens I have nothing to say." May (1981) suggested that freedom is life's creative goal and coercive destiny is the opposite because it "leads to decay" (p. 19). Therefore, freedom gives meaning to destiny. As there is no freedom or meanings in G's life, he chose to avoid life, to become a breathing corpse.

In terms of love. G has not felt loved. According to Eric Fromm's (1956/2000) *Art of Loving*, G has not felt the experience of an exchange of respect or the cherishing of self and other's ideas, desires, thoughts, life-goals, and performance. I asked Mr. Voiceless he ever wanted his father to tell him about his internal emotional life.

Mr. Voiceless quietly admitted his wishes. I simply asked Mr. Voiceless if he could do this for his sons. Over time, Mr. Voiceless and G began to speak more honestly and openly with each other. Although Mr. Voiceless did not change his stance of trying to maintain peace and harmony with his extended family, he was able to let the rest of his family make their own choices of not visiting with this side of the family.

Mr. Voiceless also began to identify and question the conflicting family roles he adheres to. Does he want to be the well behaved younger brother of his family or would he prefer to be his sons' father. Does he want to lose his wife because she does not comply to the ideas of obedience that are not part of her culture, or is he willing to feel the anxiety of doing something new, uncharted, alive, and even passionate. Mrs. Voiceless also found more of her voice. She clearly stated that she is no longer participating in a life of obedience and silence, and that he would like him to join her in the time they have left. While his father struggled with changing the strict societal roles, G surprising bloomed. The idea of creating his own destiny was not dissimilar to his journey in the computer games he used to use for escape, but G wanted to try this in his own life. He left the family home, returned to work in software engineering, and when I last meet with him he was embracing the Filipino and Western elements of himself, and found some balance with his Chinese aspects that had held him and his family as prisoners.

Chinese Psychological Freedom

I have encountered many clients that have difficulties making decisions due to limited resources and difficult social situations. They usually feel trapped and believe that they do not have free will to choose their destination in life. On the other hand, some clients with more impulsive or narcissistic qualities may abuse their free will and end up in overwhelming destitution. I suppose the virtue of freedom depends on how much we can handle; a little child does not have the maturity of judgment to handle momentous issues and a non-benevolent dictator will abuse freedom. We see this not only in individuals, but also in a collective form. Various empires in history have abused freedom, imposing their will on other countries, which resulted in devastating consequences for all involved.

I appreciate the mistrust between East and West that has developed in the past few centuries. The transparency, openness, and idealism (at least in principle if not always in practice) of individualistic societies purport to equip the democratic social and political system with the means to promote equality for all. In an

individualistic society, communities need to have idealistic forces to make individuals accountable to one another. However, in major portions of the Chinese population, it is the strict social orders, roles, and implicit moral codes that militate against malfeasance and disturbing collective harmony. The concept of individual growth is foreign to these populations. The self-actualization and growth of individuals are based on the well being of the community rather than on the transcendence of the individual.

In China, the minority of people who promote creativity, freedom, and individualism do not find acceptance and, in some cases, are exiled to prisons or other countries. The lives and work of two of China's greatest poets Li Bai (李白, *the god dismissed from heaven*) and Du Fu (杜甫, *the poet of history*) provide poignant examples. However, when we primarily seek universal harmony and obedience, we compromise the necessities of individual differences, personal freedom, and creativity. Thus, traditional Chinese arts are sometimes regarded as only crafts. Although beautiful in their classic style and technical mastery, they lack the creativity and originality that has become increasingly important among present-day Chinese artists. Contemporary film maker, Ang Lee (李安), however, is an excellent example of how many of China's current cultural visionaries integrate traditional and modern sensibilities, individualism and collectivism, Eastern and Western influences in their art.

Chinese individualized transcendence is a union with the sky (天, Tian, universe) nature as a collective union. This notion, deep rooted in the Chinese collective psyche, has inhibited the Chinese people from speaking up boldly and being assertive. This generated internal tensions between wanting a collective harmony and pursuing one's personal wishes. However, even today many Chinese prefer the collective ideal and grow indifferent within themselves and with the larger society. This internal chaos and disharmony within the self can often leak out onto the collective society that they are trying to protect.

May (1981) similarly challenged the one dimensional aspect of traditional American psychology, which had been deeply rooted for decades in biological, experimental, and behavioral theories used in academia and research institutes. To some degree, psychology at its best will always challenge the cultural norms, even if in other places being a prime example of them. May's notion of freedom and destiny not only wakes up the soul of human existence in psychological terms but also includes the moral and philosophical and spiritual quest that exists in current psychology.

I was recently supervising a team of young social workers in Shenzhen. Social work is a new profession endorsed by the central government in Beijing and Shenzhen is a testing region for this profession. I have appreciate that the government wishes to bring in this new discipline for the harmony and well being of the community. I have found that many young social workers are disappointed with the limited vision of their emerging role in China. Like many Western social workers and therapists, they complain that most of their time and energy gets used up in primarily administrative tasks rather in the engagement with individuals, families, and communities. What has complicated this matter is that these young social workers are suspiciously received by the existing government services. Under my encouragement, they have become more courageous in asking for appropriate social work assignments. To my surprise, the reviews have been very positive across individual, family, community, and governmental rating questionnaires. These young visionaries and hard working social workers are forging important new ground in China. They have found the balance of helping individuals and the collective in a harmonious manner. They are viewed as both culturally cooperative and agents of change and growth.

Conclusion

I have discussed the strengths and limitations of collective harmony in China. The strict moral and social codes of Confucianism need to be examined in light of our modern era. I believe the cross cultural dialogue between East and West has had a positive effect in both societies. This interchange has helped to highlight the timeless wisdom in the various views of both traditions, while also exposing the myopic vision inherent in each of them. From my experience of *being in* and *in between* both cultures and traditions, I believe that individualism and collectivism are continuous variables. No person or community can be characterized as being entirely one or the other. At its best, the collective society allows families and communities to share life experiences, care, love, cooperation, responsibility, and meaning closely with one another. At its worse, collectivism can suffocate creativity, freedom, individual and collective growth. The sense of harmony needs to be achieved not only through strict social codes, but also through the processes of interpersonal engagement, discussions, mutuality, intellectual and emotional fearlessness, and appreciation and acceptance of our individual differences

As for the individualistic perspective, I believe life starts with the blessings of collective unions, deep attachments, social supports,

mentoring, and love. A self differentiated person needs to connect not only to his or her personal wilderness, but also to the larger collective. Freedom, courage, commitment, humanity, compassion, integrity, and love are all necessary for the general well-being of oneself and one's community. As Alfred Adler (1929/1969) taught, interest and involvement in the full life of one's community is characteristic of the healthy person. A good life is predicated on this spiritual-psychological dimension. We need to embrace and seek to understand the individual and collective tensions within ourselves, within our cultures, and within our global community. If we are accountable to ourselves and each other, this is the good life, individuated and connected, mature, realistic, and psychologically healthy and alive.

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