

MYTHS, LEGENDS, STORIES: A CROSS-CULTURAL REFLECTION ON PSYCHOPATHOLOGY

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SUMMARY

Myths and stories from the West are compared with those from the Chinese. It is suggested that these stories reflect cultural expectations of behaviours of the individual. Whereas in the West achievement is encouraged, permitting the disposing of the older generation as illustrated in the Oedipus story, the Chinese achievement is limited by the demand for the loyalty to the family and the social network. Propriety of behaviour within this network and between different roles demanded of the individual set up situations of conflict. This role-conflict can lead to psychopathology which if not unique in the Chinese is at least more likely to occur in this culture. This is an important area to consider if psychotherapy from the West is to be offered to the Chinese.

PREAMBLE

In the psychotherapy of the Chinese we have to ask whether assumptions about psychopathology in Western psychotherapy are truly "universal" problems that would allow us to import the technique without modification. Specifically, do we really know Oedipus complex is the basis of all problems, as Freud would have us believe, or whether the Chinese have different problem or problems as the basis of their psychopathology.

One basic assumption of this paper is that myths, legends, and stories reflect the psychology and personality of the culture (e.g. Bettelheim, 1977). These will reflect what life tasks are expected of an individual, and what behaviours are allowed. This paper will compare selected stories from China and the West, and will draw some conclusions.

It has frequently been said that in general, the West are individualistic, achievement oriented, and aim for self-actualization. The Chinese, on the other hand, are more collectivistic, socially oriented, and primarily concern with harmony within a group (e.g. Parsons, 1966). These are points of departure for this paper.

THE WEST

THE BIBLE AND FAIRY TALES

God Jehovah commanded Adam, immediately after the

latter was created: "Be fruitful and multiply..." (Genesis, 1:28). This is the fundamental task of the Western man. To achieve is the thing. In the Parable of the Talents Jesus described how a servant who failed to invest the "talents" (an amount of money) given to him by his master was punished by being thrown "outside in the darkness; there he will cry and gnash his teeth." In the fairy tales we have this commendation to achieve symbolized by Jack the Giant Killer. This boy, with his father's blessings, ended up killing seven man-eating, cattle-devouring giants.

GREEK MYTHOLOGY

A celebrated example from the Greek is the twelve labours of Heracles. In fact, Heracles did more than the twelve labours: in one story he wrestled with Thanatos (Death himself) to rescue Alcestis (Admetus' wife) who had offered to die in her husband's stead. As expected, Heracles won. Hence, for the Western man, even Death himself can be challenged and beaten.

If the task of life is to achieve, then one is allowed, perhaps expected, to surpass one's elders, thus Oedipus killing of father is allowed. In Greek mythology, there are many killings of the father.

The first is the killing of Uranus by his son Cronus. With the sickle his mother Gaia gave him, Cronus castrated his father. But his turn was to come, later he was killed by his son Zeus. Other examples include Odysseus being killed by

Telegonus, Althamaenes accidentally killed his father Catreus, and the most famous, at least in psychiatric circles, Oedipus. In many of these stories, the killing of the father is usually accidental, seldom with malicious intent. This was so with Oedipus, Althamaenes, and Thesus. In the story of Thesus we see a symbolic handing over from father to son when the father, Aegeus, left his sword and his sandals for the son. The death of Aegeus, although over Thesus, was not "caused" by the latter as such. May be the young taking over from the elders are not always so intentional. In many of these stories, too, the mothers encouraged the children to take over, to fight the fathers.

However, the sons frequently feel guilty about the incidents. For example, on discovering what he did, Althamaenes prayed for his death which the gods granted by opening the earth to swallow him. Similarly, Oedipus blinded himself and sent himself into exile, eventually dying a sorry death. It obviously is not the easiest thing to do to have to surpass your father. It should not be assumed that the fathers or the elders would just lie down and make way for the younger generation. Admetus, when he asked his parents to die in his stead, was disappointed and surprised to find that they simply refused. They told him, "God's daylight is sweet even to the old. We do not ask you to die for us. We will not die for you." There are other examples of the old refusing to retire into obscurity. For instance, Sisyphus tricked Hades (God of Underworld) to let him return to Earth. Similarly, the adventures of Ulyssus is frequently seen as an example of an old king's refusal to abdicate at the end of his reign.

The old sometimes even fights back. The young failing to kill off the old symbolizes failure to achieve. In Greek myths we have Daedalus the great craftsman killed his nephew-apprentice Talos when the latter learned so well that he established a reputation for himself. Similarly, Marsyas the flute player, and Linus, son of Muse, suffered the same fate in the hands of Apollo who became jealous of their abilities. Atlas and Prometheus exemplified what happens when one offends the gods. Atlas had to shoulder the earth, and Prometheus was bound and had his liver eaten by eagles.

CHINESE STORIES

PAN GU AND NU WA

The separation of Heaven and Earth by Pan Gu (盘古) and the mending of the vault of the heaven by Nu-Wa (女娲) could be seen as early examples of the Chinese achievement stories. Kua Fu (夸父) and Jing Wei (精卫) also have left with us stories of their tasks. However, in these stories, there is not the same immensity, same sense of glory and adventure as that found in the Greek myths. They are quieter stories, so to speak. Although the heroism is there, there is less drama. We could almost say that a characteristic of the Chinese stories is that these deeds of adventure were done quietly and matter-of-factly. They lack the excitement of killing of the giants, for example.

There seems to be a divine certainty to them, that things will happen if the gods are willing. Compare these stories with Heracles wrestling with Thanatos for Alcestis, or his killing of the Nemean Lion.

Moreover, in these stories, troubles and difficulties occur if the gods are not willing for something to happen. They will, with their might, intervene. In these cases, there is also no sense of men being able to fight with the gods, the Gods are all powerful, and men are doomed.

THE MONKEY AND THE HEAVENLY PALACE

One of the best known stories in Chinese is that of the Handsome King of Monkeys (美猴王), he was born out of stone in the hills, and crowned king by the other monkeys. He later learned from a master and received from him the name of Sun Wu Kong (孫[猴]悟空), or The Monkey Who Has Achieved Understanding of Nothingness. He was taught various tricks including the famous somersault which would carry him 108,000 miles each time, and he could also pull a hair from his body and make himself into various shapes or appear in numerous alter-egos. With all these capabilities he thought now he could take over from the Jade Emperor of the Heavens (玉皇大帝), and proceeded to demand what he thought was his rightful throne in the Heavenly Palace. Even with the rank of The Great Sage Equalled to Heaven (齊天大聖), he still was not satisfied. He declared that "Kings throughout history have had to pass on their power. The strong should be honoured--he should give way to me....." and that "Emperors are made by turn; next year it may be me," (Journey to the West, tr. W.J.P. Jenner, Ch. 7). He was eventually brought under control by the Buddha who imprisoned our hero under the mountains. He was not released until Tang San Zang (唐三藏) passed by his way and took him under his protection. However, to make sure he was under control, Wu Kong's head had a golden band put on which will contract and apply pressure every time Tang San Zang recites a script. This is no introjection, it is very much external control forced onto one.

CHALLENGERS

There are few stories where the young were able to defeat the Gods. Usually challengers end up being killed. Our Huang Di (黄帝), were challenged several times in the myths. Each time, however, he was able to beat them off. These challengers include Yan Di (炎帝), defeated at the outskirts of Ban Quan (阪泉); Chi You (蚩尤), who fought the decisive battle at Zhuo Lu (涿鹿) where he was killed and dismembered. Later we have Xing Tian (刑天) who had his head chopped off by Huang Di. Then we have Gong Gong (共工) rising against Zhuan Xu (顛頊), this is said to be a continuation of the war between Huang Di and Yan Di. Gong Gong likewise was defeated and in anger he hit himself against the Bu Zhou Mountain (不周山) causing heaven and earth again to suffer a change of shape.

XUE REN GUI AND XUE DING SHAN

The story of Xue Ren Gui (薛仁贵) was seen by Drs. Tseng Wen Shing and Hsu Jing as the Chinese equivalent of the Oedipus complex (Tseng & Hsu, 1972). Their point was that in Chinese the way out of the primeval triangle was for the father to kill the son, and not vice versa. Although there are definite merits to this interpretation, my point in this paper is not so much the Oedipus complex, but rather that of the relationship between the son and the father, or more generally, that of the individual and the society at large.

This legend is found in the popular writing "Conquering of the East" (薛仁贵征东), and continued in "Conquering of the West" (征西演義). Our story opens with the return of Xue Ren Gui, who was a general in the Tang (唐) Dynasty. He accidentally killed his son when he tried to save the young boy, whom he did not recognize, from being attacked by a monster. The boy, unbeknowing to Ren Gui, was taken away by a tiger and saved by an old Daoist priest (王敖老祖), who not only brought him up but also taught him the art of war. Seven years later Xue Ding Shan (薛丁山) was sent to save his father's life. However, instead of being grateful to this son of his, Ren Gu was furious that his son, without the father's consent, had married a common high-way-person. He would have his son executed for this, if it were not for the intervention by the Emperor. Such is the Chinese father's thankyou for a son whom he had "killed" previously, and who saved his life in return. The story continues and many years later, Ding Shan was again sent to rescue his father. When Ding Shan got there, he saw a white tiger, and shot it, only to realize that this tiger was his father Ren Gui's spirit, who was then dead. The son, at last, kills the father. However, when Ren Gui "killed" Ding Shan many years ago it was dismissed as the lack of good fortune on the part of the son (孩兒沒福), but when Ding Shan killed Ren Gui, he was accused of being non-filial (不孝), perhaps the most serious of all charges in the traditional Chinese society.

Although Ding Shan was able to ride through this disaster, he was later executed by Wu Huang Di (武皇帝), the usurper and the first and only Empress of China.

This was described as a miscarriage of justice but nevertheless she was the Tian Zi (King 天子). As was usual in Chinese tradition, the whole family was to be executed because of one family member's wrong-doing. Ding Shan dismissed the call to rebel from his followers by echoing Kong Zi's (Confucius 孔子) saying which had become the traditional answer: if the emperor wants a minister to die, the minister could not refuse without incurring the accusation of being disloyal (君要臣死, 臣不死不忠). Loyalty to the throne was to be carried to the extreme even when one is wrongly accused and wrongly punished.

THE CHINESE CULTURAL ATMOSPHERE

Frequently discussion about the intellectual history of the

Chinese starts with Kong Zi (Confucius 孔子). It is important to point out that Confucian ideas in fact develops from the fertile soil that exists there before Kong Zi arrives on the scene. The progression in prehistoric times from the worship of animals and plants to that of the totem and then to the ancestral god (the Di, Emperor [帝] in the Yin [殷] period) signifies a gradual acknowledgement of human ability. With the overthrow of Yin by the Zhou (周) Dynasty the idea of a righteous supernatural god Tian (天) is introduced. This in turn demands that human beings, who are now seen as not only capable, but also responsible for their behaviours, should act properly within the social network.

KONG ZI AND MENG ZI

Now what we have is a healthy respect for the human ability. This ability allows humans to understand nature, since it follows certain natural laws, and with this understanding, humans at times can challenge nature. Human beings, similarly then, must follow laws which define their behaviour. This is the concept of righteousness. Kong Zi and Meng Zi (Mencius 孟子) take up this idea and generate from this budding Humanism the idea that humans can be and should be responsible for their actions.

Ren (仁) becomes the central concept in this philosophy of human nature, and as is evident in the word-root, is relationship between two people, and by extension, the basis of family relationship (Xiao 孝), which is later extended historically to the past to one's ancestors, and also to the future to one's progeny. Outside of the immediate family, this basic idea of the proper relationship extends to contemporaneous and horizontal relationships of friends and the clan, and later also further extended universally horizontally to all human beings (老吾老以及人之老) (Mencius, Book I Part I, Ch. 8, James Legge 孟子·梁惠王上). There is also a longitudinal extension to the obligation of the people and officials to the Emperor (君). Rules and regulations of social relationships are now set up (Li 禮), every individual performs certain roles whose duties are pre-assigned and not subject to individual's choices. This is a very important point for our later discussion. With this Li, there is then an expectation that individual's duty is to fit into these roles, and a person's meaning in life is realised through the performance of these roles and the harmonious interchange within this social network.

FEATURES OF THE CHINESE CULTURE

With the stories and this cultural atmosphere framework, we can look at some features of the Chinese culture.

AUTHORITY FIGURES

The father figure, and by extension, that of the Emperor, holds absolute power, whose decisions are never to be questioned, and, if ever challenged, strikes down the challenger. There is therefore no Oedipus killing of the elders, as is so common in Greek mythology. Rather, as Drs. Tseng

Wen-Shing and Hsu Jing suggested, in the Chinese context, it is the son (instead of the father) who is killed. In the Chinese, no "sons" were to take power from the father without this being handed down. This was so when Yao Di (堯帝) chose Shun (舜) over his own son Dan Zhu (丹朱), whose armed rebellion was quickly dismissed. We have also seen the repeated beating off of challengers by Huang Di, and the readiness of Xue Ding Shan to have himself executed even though that was a miscarriage of justice.

NO SELF-DETERMINATION

As part of this absolute authority, the young do not have self-determination. Chinese achievement stories are usually stories of orders from above. Yi's (羿) shooting of the suns is an example. However, when the job is done, or if it is not done right, the rewards are uncertain, and punishments are frequent. Compare this with Heracles, whose "labours" are chosen by himself for his own atonement.

LABOUR WITHOUT REWARD

In a lot of the Chinese stories, labours are ordered by the Gods, but when accomplished, rewards are not always forthcoming. In fact, at times, one incurs punishments instead. This is so in the story of Yi (羿) the Archer. Although Yi was sent to shoot down the ten suns, he was obviously too enthusiastic and this made Di Jun (帝俊) quite angry. So Yi was no longer allowed back in heaven, and had to suffer on earth. Huang-Di (黃帝), our illustrious forefather, gave us two further examples of how easily the "children's" achievements are forgotten. After the war with Chi You (蚩尤), Huang Di left his daughter, Ba (嫫) and one of his generals, Ying Long (應龍) banished on earth although both had expended their energy in helping him to win, but were now unable to return to heaven because their power had been exhausted in their attempt to help Huang Di.

FILIAL OBLIGATIONS

Not only that challenges are not permitted, the young is expected to show absolute piety to the elders. Xue Ren Gui story gave us one example of this. The "24 Stories of Filial Piety" (二十四孝) are anecdotes of how the children sacrificed themselves in one way or another for the parents. One may well compare these stories with Admetus asking his parents to die in his stead. It would be unthinkable in the Chinese. And yet Admetus had the gall to be angry with his parents and shouted "You, standing palsied at the gate of death and yet afraid to die!" Thus are the differences between the two cultures.

King Shun (舜) was a pious son, but was treated badly by his father, Gu Sou (瞽瞍), his step-mother, and his brother You Xiang (有象). They even tried to kill him. However, this did not dampen his devotion to his father, he tolerated their mistreatment without complaint. As we have seen, he was later made king by his father-in-law Yao Di. His story is an arch-example of how far one would be expected to discharge one's filial obligations and, in return, how far that would be rewarded.

ROLE CONFLICTS

We thus have a situation where one is expected to fulfill pre-assigned roles in the social network, with little opportunity for self-determination. There is seldom any fulfillment other than that of fitting harmoniously within this network. However, because of the complexities of social life, one has, at any time, many roles to fulfil. For example, one may be at the same time a father and a son, or an official and a son. At any time, these different roles may demand different role performances. We might suggest that in this cultural atmosphere, one of the first things that might go wrong is the tension between different assigned roles one has to performed. This is well illustrated by the hypothetical situation that Meng Zi was challenged on. Shun was Tian Zi (King), Gao Tao (皋陶) was the chief minister of justice, If Gu Sou, Shun's father, committed murder, what would happen? Shun being a virtuous king, would not use his position to influence justice being done, but then he was also a man known for his piety to his father. On the other hand, Gao Tao was a well-known just person, he would be put in a difficult position to have to pass judgement on the King's father. Meng Zi's answer was quick and without hesitation. For Gao Tao he should simply have apprehended Gu Sou, the law has to be exercised without regard to the position of the person who committed the crime. For Shun, however, "he would have regarded abandoning the empire as (easily as) throwing away a worn-out sandal. He would privately have taken his father on his back, and retired into concealment, living somewhere along the seacoast. There he would have been all his life, cheerful and happy, forgetting the empire." (Mencius, Book VII, Part I, Ch. 35, James Legge. 孟子·盡心上) This echoes well what Kong Zi had said earlier, for him, uprightness is done when "The father conceals the misconduct of the son, and the son conceals the misconduct of the father. (Analects, Book XIII, Ch. 18, James Legge. 論語·子路) It should be no surprise that Meng Zi reiterated Kong Zi's sentiments so wholeheartedly.

In "the Stories of Virtuous Women" (Li Nu Zhuan 列女傳), we see some further examples of how difficult this may be, especially for people with little alternative means of handling them. Three of these women committed suicide because of conflicting demands made on them, or at least perceived as being made on them, by their different roles of being the daughter or sister on the one hand, and that of a wife on the other.

DISCUSSION

PSYCHOPATHOLOGY IN THE WESTERN CULTURE

We should now look at some of the characteristics of the Western stories. The stories are of towering dimensions, the adventures dangerous and risky. There is also a sense of self-determination. These adventures are done for the atonement of one's misdeeds, or for the glory of conquering or self-actualization, simply "because it is there". Frequently authorities are challenged. This challenging of the

authority is not only allowed in the Western culture, but indeed encouraged and expected. There is the expected conflict between one's strife for achievement, and the displacing of the elders. We should also note the apparent lack of reference to the group in most of these stories. It indeed is individually oriented.

We can see, from these stories, that in the West, difficulties arise if an individual fails to live up to this expectation of achievement, whether it is due to a lack of ability, or a lack of opportunity. Even hesitation is not well tolerated, as can be seen in the tragedy of Hamlet. In the West, psychotherapists frequently see people who feel they have not achieved. Another group, paradoxically, are people who although have achieved, realizes the futility of this achievement. The French existentialist writer Albert Camus refers to this in his book "The Myth of Sisyphus". The continual rolling of the rock up the hill, only to have it roll downhill, and this to repeat endless times signifies, to Camus, the futility of life and therefore of life's apparent achievements. Perhaps, at some point of everyone's life, we all become aware of this futility, and suffer from existential angst.

PSYCHOPATHOLOGY IN THE CHINESE CULTURE

For the Chinese, it is different. It would not be fair to say that there is no expectation of achievement. But the achievement that is expected is different. The achievement is less for personal glory, much less by personal choice. There is a sense of fulfilling certain duty ordered by a higher power. There is certainly suggestions of an expectation of fitting in with the greater social network. At the end, however, rewards are not necessarily forthcoming. Indeed, one might suffer punishment as a result of not doing it right, or, worse still, suffer banishment to obscurity even if one has done the job right. On the other hand, if the labours are of the person's own choice, then they are usually blocked by the elders. These labours usually failed.

But there is another problem which is unique to, or at least exaggerated in, the Chinese. This is the tension between different role demands. Everyone experiences this, since everyone has many roles simultaneously. Unfortunately the demands of each of these roles are absolute, but there may not be adequate guidelines available to allow us to deal with the conflict. The spear that can pierce everything and the shield that nothing can pierce through is perhaps the parable of this irresolvable situation. Even in

the parable, there was no solution offered.

Different culturally sanctioned solutions have been suggested, but none of these, at least on first sight, would seem to be "healthy" solutions. They include:

- (1) Escape and avoidance as suggested by the famous counter-culture, Taoism, seen in the writings of Lao Zi (老子) and Zhuang Zi (莊子).
- (2) Passive acceptance or resignation to the situation. This is frequently the stuff Chinese tragedies are made of.
- (3) Giving up of one or other of the roles. This is the solution suggested by Meng Zi for King Shun.
- (4) Redefine roles, so that tension no longer exists. A famous example is found in Meng Zi who redefines the overthrowing of King Zhou (紂王) by King Wu (武王) not as regicide, which would be unacceptable, but because Zhou "outrages righteousness" and therefore a "ruffian," a "mere fellow." Thus Meng Zi says "I have heard of the cutting off of the fellow Zhou, but I have not heard of the putting a sovereign to death, in his case." Disposing of King Zhou then becomes simply disposing a "mere fellow," at worse a homicide, which is much more acceptable. By thus redefining the situation, Meng Zi avoids the question of regicide. (Mencius, Book I Part II, Ch. 8, James Legge. 孟子·梁惠王下)

CONCLUSION

This paper suggests, with examples from folklore and mythology, that the Chinese may well present a different set of problems compare with the Western counterpart. Because of this, it would make sense that this 'tension between role expectations' be looked for in our patients. It could be suggested, by implication, that psychotherapy for the Chinese should endeavour to address problems presented specifically by the Chinese, and that the whole-sale importation of Western concepts should be cautioned.

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