

Gender, family and intergenerational transmission of traumatization¹

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Abstract

China is a rapidly developing country and at the same time a country where traditions play an important role. The society is also marked by centuries of upheavals that has affected individuals and families. Recent growth has brought millions of people out of poverty and increased possibilities for young people and families, but this development brings new tensions and conflicts affecting individuals and families.

Ingrained in Chinese society and culture is a system which specifies implicit rules and patterns of rules, obligations and responsibilities on social relations between men and women and between generations. Generally, family interests are more important than those of the individuals, and when the two are in conflict with each other, the family interests win.

This article focus on how the complex socio-cultural situation affects individuals and families and how this manifest itself in the clinical situation. The aim is to to highlight some aspects of reality met in clinical encounters in China and to argue for an openness to thinking about how context always plays a role both in clinical and theoretical work.

Keywords: China, Gender, family, Social Upheaval, Intergenerational Transmission of Traumatization

Introduction

The title of the 51st IPA congress in London 2019, at which this paper was first given, was “The feminine”. The title may give an impression that there exists an essential phenomenon, a definite feminine and also a masculine quality that characterizes the identities of women and men. This is of course not the case as we see a plurality of expressions of femininities and masculinities both in western and Asian contexts. In the consulting room we have patients with different expressions of their gender identities, some with troubled identities and others with a feeling of gender that seems new and strange for themselves and for others, but who nevertheless want to pursue their way of living based on their feeling of what their gender identity is. We also have troubled gender identity development due to social conventions, social upheaval and intergenerational traumatization.

China

China is a rapidly developing country. Since the reform period, which started in 1978 with Deng Xiaoping, China has opened up for market economy and globalization. There has been dramatic economic growth with increasing consumption but also increasing inequality.

The bottom-line is, however, that this growth has brought millions of people out of poverty and increased the possibility for young people and families to get education, good jobs and longer and healthier life. All this, however, brings new tensions and conflicts in relation to tradition.

China is a complex society. Any attempt to make simple narratives about China will be incomplete and simplified: for example, we could see China as the Communist state that controls its population, or as a traditional society based on the old traditions of Confucianism, or as a euphoric modern society where all possibilities are open. China is a society with many facets, traditions and developments that precludes any attempt to put its development into one formula. So also, with the development of gender identities in modern China. This paper will only be able to cover a small part of the development on this theme (Halskov Hansen & Thøgersen, 2008).

The Chinese family

One important tradition in China concern filial piety (孝 ,xiào), that is, the obligation for

young adults to show respect to their parents and also support them in old age (Yang Yunping, 2014). This is part of the Confucian tradition and it concerns gender in several ways. It is a moral codex that regulates intergenerational relations and it is reciprocal. The care and support that is expected from adult children is a return on investment to all that the parents have invested in their upbringing. It is ingrained in Chinese society and culture. It is a system which specifies implicit rules and patterns of rules, obligations and responsibilities on social relations between men and women and between generations. Traditionally there is a family hierarchy where older family members are superior to younger, and men are superior to women. It is thus a gender axis and a generational axis.

The family and the extended family have a strong position in China as “family” represents obligation, possibility and a network that may secure life – and as we shall see, also a place where conflicts and problems manifest themselves and either find solutions or become perpetual problems that can be transmitted through generations.

Danwei, the work unit, plays a similar role as a network of support and possibility. It has an important emotional significance but not in the same way as the extended family. As an organization, the main aim of the family is to create a good environment in which individuals can grow and develop into members of a society. However, in the Chinese tradition, the existence of family is not mainly for the purpose of supporting individuals. Instead and unlike in the West, the existence of individuals is mainly for the purpose of sustaining the family line. The aim of child rearing is different between the East and the West. In the West, parents attempt to encourage their children become independent adults who can achieve self-realization. In China, children are valuable, not for the reason that their lives will reveal their unique potentials, but for the reason that they, and most especially sons, are valuable assets for, among others, farm work. Sons are obligated to carry on the family name, to support their parents when they get older and to bury them after death. In all these senses, the family has been extremely important for the Chinese. The yardstick by which every idea and behavior is judged is the value for the well-being of the family. Generally speaking, the family interests are more important than that of the individuals in China. When the two are in conflict with each other, family interests win. This is the ruling

principle, for in China, the family is more powerful than individualism. The family is the core value for Chinese people (Shen & Zhang, 2010). The Chinese self (zi wo, 自我) is thus a related self from the start, and therefore the feeling of self, the feeling of identity, is most centrally as part of a familial network.

The modernization process in China has, however, strained and caused changes in the family-oriented traditions in China. In an interesting study on young urban people's situation regarding their families and the challenges of modern life, Liza Eklund (2018) demonstrates that filial piety now is negotiated in an increasingly complex situation in which intergenerational obligations are renegotiated to manage new obligations to spouses and to job conditions. She demonstrates that there is both continuity and change. Filial piety remains by and large in force in that there are higher demands on sons to follow traditions, however daughters are given some more leeway to negotiate their life course.

In clinical presentations we see differences from our western experience in the way history and the situations of the patients' families are presented. In line with the above short introduction to the concept of filial piety and the Chinese self, we see how family relations are ever present in patients' narratives and how wishes, desires, plans for future etc., are always situated in a complex pattern of relations to an extended family. (There are, for instance, different names of all family members signifying the specificities of the familial relations; for example, for aunts and uncles depending on whether they are on the mother's or father's side, whether they are younger or elder and so forth [(姑姑(gū gu) "aunt" (father's sisters), 叔叔(shū shu) "uncle" (father's younger brothers), 伯伯(bó bo) "uncle" (father's older brothers), and 舅舅(jiù jiu) "uncle" (mother's brothers) and so forth].

Transgenerational transmission of traumatization and Gender identity

China has experienced extreme social change and traumatization in its modern history (the opium wars, Japanese invasion, the Great Leap forward, to mention a few). This means that many families have both living and dead members who have been traumatized, killed,

humiliated or suffered starvation. How this affects the family systems and next generations is an understudied theme. We see, however, in the clinic, what may be the results of traumatization of parents, grandparents, or any from a patient's extended family, in the form of severe problems of identity, of relational competence and in open psychic illnesses (e.g. personality disorders, posttraumatic conditions).

The modes of transgenerational transmission are complex pathways for how parents' and even grandparents' traumatization may influence subsequent generations are unclear. I doubt how much western research on this can clarify things precisely. What we hear in the clinic, however, is the patients' narratives of how it was to live with parents who, due to earlier hardship (often both due to own traumatizing experiences and those of their parents) may have influenced their children's development in a negative way.

Because children are emotionally dependent on caregivers, the quality of relationships with parents and their significant others may either buffer or aggravate the potential effect of the multiple risk factors facing children. However, in times of need of special attention and care, severe parental distress may make it difficult for the parents to respond to the emotional needs of their children (De Haene et al., 2010). The prolonged stressful life circumstances experienced by many Chinese parents may be a risk factor for family violence and children, and in some families may lead to abuse and neglect. In the West, this usually has been hypothesized as having been mediated through parental psychopathological symptoms, leading to disruptions in attachment representations and caregiving abilities. This seems by and large to be true also in the Chinese context. The social Chinese self (zi wo) seems, however, to mark these disruptions in specific ways.

Based on our clinical experience these influences seem to affect people in gender specific ways.

I will bring one short vignette so that we can look at both the gender dimension but also at the role of specific Chinese family constellations (Varvin & Rosenbaum, 2014).

A woman in her early thirties sought treatment for depression, insomnia, and

episodes of uncontrolled outbursts of anger, which had caused severe problems in her marriage and also made her relation to her twelve-year-old daughter difficult. She had often entertained suicidal thoughts and had once attempted suicide by taking an overdose of medication. The attempt was considered more as an appeal, although a dangerous one, and she had to be taken to hospital.

The patient described her inner life as chaotic with constant doubt about the right way to see things, what decisions to make and endless arguing with herself about her decision to marry and whether her husband was good enough. She had a deeply ambivalent relationship to her daughter. She had a life that alternated between hectic activity in which mode she worked a lot and engaged in social activities, and periods with severe depression and feelings of profound emptiness. She had also engaged in extra-marital affairs several times, which had all ended with her being rejected. Her way of describing her life was fragmented. She had difficulty finding coherence or getting a feeling of meaning in what she told. It was as if events in which she had little control happened to her all the time.

The patient came from a lower middle-class rural family. Her father had worked as a teacher and her mother had occasional factory jobs. Being born shortly after the end of the social disturbances of the 1960s and early 1970s, she learned in her teens that both parents had been persecuted without, however, telling their daughter in what way and for what. She knew almost nothing about her grandparents. Her maternal grandfather had lived until she was five years old. She had vague memories of him as a withdrawn old man who mostly sat by himself. At age two she had been sent to a paternal aunt to live for three years when her parents had to work in another of the country. She remembered this as a good time, but then she was taken from living with her aunt to her parental home without notice. She had vague memories of feeling confused and of missing her aunt. She remembered a depressive atmosphere in her family all through her childhood and youth.

Father and mother hardly talked with each other. There were severe quarrels when

father was drunk, in which state he beat her mother. She was criticized by her parents for minor things in a quite unpredictable ways and was often called stupid and dumb. She realized that it had to do with the fact that she was a girl. When she became a teenager, her father especially made derogatory remarks about her body and her way of dressing. She dared not protest: "Because I feared that he would look at me with contempt. I hated his look. The look hurt me so deeply". She dreamt of being independent from her family as she believed her friends were, but never realized what she could do to make this happen.

When she graduated from high school and went to college in another town, she moved from her parental home. At first, she experienced this with relief and engaged in school and social activities. Soon periods of depression came to dominate her life. She managed to graduate at bachelor level with great difficulty. She felt she was profoundly entangled in her family: "Whatever I do, I have to report to my family! I know they are concerned about me, but I feel I am chained by them", she said.

About her mother she said: "It's very complicated. I love her, because she is my mother, but I do not like her as a person". Her father she described as a scary and depressive man from whom she tried to keep a distance. This suffering made her think maybe there was something wrong with her. Otherwise she couldn't explain her parents' behavior.

From a western perspective one may interpret this as if the woman had internalized bad relations with her parents and thus remained dependent on them internally, which made it difficult for her to go through a proper process of separation and individuation. In the Chinese context, however, individuation and separation will have another quality and meaning, in which the individuated person's self (zi wo) must remain deeply involved in her family network with all the obligations this implies. One may hypothesize that she felt an obligation, in a qualitatively different way, to take on parents' suffering and that she constantly needed to struggle to relieve their pain.

Discussion

There are substantial differences in family culture especially regarding the gender dimension in the Chinese society. Any generalizations will be misleading. In this case we see, however, certain themes that are significant both regarding the historical and gender dimensions. The woman came from a family that was burdened both by historical traumatization, the claims of the working culture in a growing modernization process and by a rather strict gender culture. From this woman's perspective, her childhood was characterized by a rather confusing relational reality with lack of care and sudden, unpredictable separations. She seems not to have experienced meaningful relationships that could have guided her. Her parents were actually described as quite helpless in dealing with her developmental problems. At the same time, she was as deeply involved their destiny as they were in hers. One may imagine an enmeshed reality with unclear boundaries and unclear identity development in all members. She described her family as if all were struggling in more or less constant hard weather with few possibilities to navigate into quieter waters. In this situation, leaning towards culturally imposed gender roles, although imposed quite rigidly, may have been a refuge in order to create some meaningful structure in the family. The lack of internalized stable structures made culturally determined traditions even more important.

This kind of situation may share common characteristics with similar family situations in other cultural contexts that are characterized by social upheaval and possible large-scale traumatization. The situation for this woman and her family was, however, marked by the specific historical, actual and culturally determined context of living in China at a particular historical time.

From the perspective of a western psychoanalyst working in the Chinese context, this creates specific challenges both on clinical and theoretical levels. The psychoanalyst and the supervisor must attune listening to several dimensions: to actual family oriented network and specifically to the meaning filial piety (孝 ,xiào) has for the patient and his/her family; to the historical context of the patient (to what degree and in what way is the

family affected by social upheaval); and to the present situation of the family in relation to implications of the rapid modernization process in China.

On a theoretical level it creates difficulty if one only transposes theory to the Chinese context. Any theory gives insufficient understanding of the reality we meet in the clinic. The social and cultural context of the patient and his/her family is constantly changing, and theory always lags behind, maybe more so in psychoanalysis than in other disciplines. In this context, we must rely on how psychoanalytic theory may develop in the Chinese context, a work that primarily will be done in the future by Chinese psychoanalysts and psychotherapists.

The main aim of this article has been to highlight some aspects of the reality we meet in clinical encounters in China, but also and more importantly to argue for an openness to seeing how context always plays a role both in clinical and theoretical work.

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