Psychotherapy with Chinese clients: the effects of cultural assumptions such as filial piety on the working relationship

A systematic literature review with
illustrations from clinical practice

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<u>Attestation of Authorship</u>

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the qualification of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning, except where due acknowledgement is made in the Acknowledgements.

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Acknowledgement

Abstract

Filial piety is one of the core values in Asian cultures that are informed by Confucianism. In a psychotherapy process, it is almost impossible to explore a parent-child relationship with a Chinese or Asian client without encountering such an important cultural concept. However, as cross-cultural psychotherapy is increasingly in demand around the world, there has been little discussion of filial piety in the psychoanalytic field. By means of a research method of modified systematic literature review and a discussion based on my clinical engagement with a Chinese client, this dissertation is intended to explore the potential effects of filial piety in Chinese culture on the working relationship in the context of psychodynamically-oriented practice. The research result reveals a number of findings and arguments. Firstly, filial piety, exemplified in the cultural concepts of *Ming* and *Fen*, is still embodied in the Chinese family system. Secondly, I argue that psychotherapy with a Chinese client is like an immigration process for the psychotherapist. The psychotherapist needs to acculturate her/himself with the client's culture in order to identify psychopathologies and separate them from the client's normal daily practice which is culturally different from that of the therapist. Thirdly, given the significant position a family holds in the Chinese world-view, which emphasizes interdependence and collectivism, I argue that psychotherapists need to adapt and adjust their clinical interventions according to how much separation-individuation would need to be facilitated in the client based on the Western developmental concept of independence and individualism. Fourthly, establishment and maintenance of a therapeutic relationship remains a key factor in helping Chinese/Asian clients make changes, just as it is with non-Chinese/Asian clients.

Chapter 1: Introduction

I came to New Zealand in the early 1990's as one of thousands of immigrants from Asia who hoped for a better life for both themselves and their families. Immigration presents individuals with huge challenges. Among those challenges, one of the most significant is the emotional process of integrating the cultural differences between their original countries and adopted countries. As many researchers have pointed out (e.g. Miller, 2007), this emotional process, which is conceptualised as acculturation, involves amalgamation of different beliefs, practices, behaviours, and values. It is through acculturation that immigrants adjust and adapt themselves as a result of contacting, understanding, and integrating with another distinct culture (ibid).

Another emotional factor that plays an equally crucial role in the immigration process is ethnic identity. Ethnic identity has to do with how much immigrants identify with their ethnic groups. It is from one's ethnic group that a self-concept can be generated through an understanding of the cultural context and a building of attachment with it (Ying & Lee, 1999). An immigrant's ethnic identity is also about a sense of belonging, commitment, shared values, positive feeling toward one's own ethnic group, and involvement in its cultural activities (Ahnallen, Suyemoto, & Carter, 2006).

Looking back, my entire learning process in becoming a psychoanalytically-oriented psychotherapist seems to have paralleled exactly what I have gone through as an immigrant to a foreign country. The journey of learning at AUT has been like a mental and emotional immigration into a new land of knowledge and it has also included the inevitable process of acculturation and finding of my own ethnic identity.

While my idealization of a Western way of living was ostensibly the

reason for my physical immigration to New Zealand, it was the underlying desire to withdraw from the vicissitudes of life that pushed me to hide away from my own people and move to a place where I hoped that no one would know my past. The unconscious thrust to have a different sense of self was so strong that I believed that a new environment could help me start my life all over again.

Similarly, while my conscious motivation to study psychotherapy was to train myself into a profession that could provide me with a financial income, it was the unconscious curiosity and desire for solutions to my own psychological pains that guided me to the psychotherapy programme at AUT. Therefore, I was both a student studying academically at AUT and at the same time an Asian client who was unconsciously approaching Western style psychotherapy and looking for a way to psychologically rescue himself.

Academically, I started the training process at AUT with idealized hopes because the philosophy of psychoanalysis has never been fully made known in Chinese culture. Like a child taking on an adventure, I felt excited when I was for the first time tentatively analysing my own life suffering with theories I had just learned in the class. In particular, I felt a strong sense of relief and hope when I was able to make sense of a huge part of the pain in my life based on the attachment theories of Bowlby (1980).

Emotionally, learning at AUT during the first year felt like feeding from the good breast, sucking in milk that I experienced as informing, nurturing and comforting. Gradually, I came to believe that I could use the newly-learned knowledge to help other people who also suffered psychologically, including my own Chinese fellows.

However, for the following three years, while I continued to enjoy and

identify with most of the psychoanalytic concepts, I started to encounter brief moments of confusion, sometimes even doubts, when I tried to apply some of psychoanalytic thinking back to a Chinese context. At first, it was only a vague and fleeting sense of 'something not quite fitting'. Gradually, the further I travelled down the psychoanalytic path, the more strongly I felt the concern at the back of my mind around what would happen to therapy with Chinese clients if some of the unmodified psychoanalytic ideas and skills were applied. Psychoanalytic thinking includes such foundational ideas of Freud's (1951) Anal and Oedipal stages of psychosexual development, the separation and individuation process as postulated by Mahler (1975), and the Western concepts of the function of family.

For me, there seem to be fundamental differences between Chinese and European ways of thinking, with individualism, or independence, characterizing the West, and collectivism, or inter-dependence, the East (Markus, & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1996). One of the examples of my early confusion can be best demonstrated in the following vignette:

Case vignette #1

During my early days of placement training, I volunteered to participate in various groups as an observer at a local drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre in Auckland. The agency employed psychodynamic interventions as part of its treatment models. One of the groups was called the 'Family Group' in which clients and their family members were encouraged to talk about how they had experienced each other in their lives and how drugs or alcohol had damaged their relationships.

Demographically, the majority of the group members were of European descent and only a small percentage of them were either Maori or Pacific Islanders. As a Chinese myself, I was particularly curious about how many

Chinese clients would come and seek help for their alcohol and drug issues. In fact, throughout my entire placement duration of three years at that agency, I did not see any Chinese clients coming up for treatment. I wondered where they were and, if they did turn up for treatment, what would need to be adjusted in terms of interventions in order to adapt to their cultural background.

As a rule, the family group facilitators would encourage clients to write letters to their significant family members, (most of the time, parents). The clients were also encouraged to be assertive in expressing pent-up emotional feelings, be they anger or remorse, to family members who they had tried to emotionally avoid in their previous interactions in life. The rationale behind such an intervention was that helping clients deal with their unresolved issues was therapeutic; clients were able to directly confront their internalised object relations and release associated cathected emotions through the entire letter-writing process.

With each letter read out in the group, I enjoyed witnessing the tidal and pounding dynamic exchange between group members. However, as the only Chinese person in the whole environment, I also felt taken aback at the same time as the process continued. It was the first time in my life I noticed that almost all European clients were able to complain or even accuse their parents to their face of wrong doings in their life. Moreover, I was shocked to see that the whole process was allowed and encouraged in Western culture. I was also amazed at the attitude of those parents in the group who not only were accommodating enough to take on board what their children had to say, but also admitted their wrongdoings and then responded to their children lovingly.

For me as a Chinese, the relationship between those European clients

and their parents felt like friendship and their form of interactions was culturally foreign to me. In Chinese culture, a normal relationship between parents and children is governed by the idea of filial piety that essentially discourages challenge from the younger generation. Therefore, feeling a moment of confusion and disbelief, I remember silently asking myself if such interactions would be accepted, let alone encouraged, in a Chinese group setting. I also asked myself what I needed to do differently as a facilitator when I was with Chinese clients. Challenging myself, I further asked myself whether or not, as a client, I would be able to challenge my own parents as those European clients did to their parents in the group.

Interestingly, a Maori client in the same group overtly rejected the advice from his case manager to write a letter to his parents. He claimed that it would be 'over his dead body' if such a letter were to be written. Just like most of his European peers in the agency, this Maori client came from a family background of chaos. However, unlike his European peers, what the Maori client did was to protect his parents by being considerate and forgiving toward them. Instead of blaming his parents, he attributed both his and his family's suffering to negative heritage in the family system that had been handed down through generations.

For a very brief moment, I felt emotionally close to this Maori client and his refusal to blame his parents. There seemed to be an intrinsic urge in me to side with him because what he did matched the filial piety behaviour in my culture. Looking at him, I wondered whether filial piety was also a fundamental value in Maori culture. However, no sooner had I fleetingly emotionally identified with him than psychoanalytic thinking came in and made me feel suspicious. I immediately started to suspect that there might have been a defence mechanism of resistance, rather than a cultural element,

that prevented the Maori client from freely experiencing his pent-up feelings. Meanwhile, I also suspected that there were unresolved childhood issues that were so painful that he needed to unconsciously defend against making them conscious.

The above vignette clearly illustrates how ready I was in the first year of training to leave behind my own cultural experience and ignore the importance of taking cultural components into account in a clinical situation.

Being a Chinese student learning in a Western culture, I would liken myself to a computer that had been programmed with a new operating system but assigned to work on a huge stockpile of life data that had previously been encoded with a different operating model. The computer would often 'freeze' when it came across data like the above-mentioned vignette concerning filial piety and many other family-related issues.

In order to accommodate psychoanalytic thinking, I would usually put aside my beliefs in the Chinese family and family values whenever they were in conflict with ideas of individuality and independence introduced in the class. Throughout my learning at AUT, I shared the coping mechanism of most immigrants on their journey of acculturation in a new culture by compartmentalizing conflicts of values between cultures and waiting for further understanding and integration. However, at the back of my mind, I seemed to be constantly aware that I would encounter difficulty when the learning environment changed and my clients were no longer mostly European.

With the learning environment being completely western and all my clients Europeans, those momentary feelings of confusion gradually developed into a sense of lingering loneliness. It was only through my

personal therapy that I came to understand that the sense of loneliness was caused by my being away from my own ethnic group that advocated interdependence. With no one around for me to ethnically and culturally relate to, I felt extremely lonely.

However, in spite of those brief moments of confusion and doubts, my belief in psychoanalytic practice continued to grow as my learning proceeded. Eventually, I consciously learned that to regain the ability to be emotionally self-assertive was one of the ultimate goals of psychodynamic psychotherapy, even when it meant that clients needed to psychologically oppose their own parents.

In retrospect, the occasional feeling of confusion that happened in the learning process helped me relate to Alan Roland (2003), an American psychoanalyst of European origin, when he first started to understand local cultures and treat patients in both India and Japan in the 1980s. Before he had learned the culturally appropriate approach to patient treatment in Asian countries, which differs somewhat from traditional psychoanalytic practice, he was confronted with everyday patterns of interpersonal interactions that could only be interpreted as pathological within a Western frame of reference.

The final challenge arrived in my last year of study when a Chinese client was referred to me at the AUT psychotherapy clinic. Although I am a Chinese through and through, professionally I had been trained to assess, diagnose, and formulate clinical interventions entirely in a Western way of thinking. My practising style was Western too, which is of advocating and facilitating a sense of individualism and independence in clients. To this end, when I met with the Chinese client, I was actually acting like a Western psychotherapist and carrying out clinical practice in accordance with

psychodynamic values.

After the first few sessions with the Chinese client, the issues of filial piety gradually manifested as expected and the client began to resist my European-style interventions to help him tentatively explore his anger toward his father. The client told me more than once that talking about his father was a 'no go area' and would change the topic whenever he suspected me of going in that direction. The client seemed extremely sensitive to filial piety issues. The moment he rejected my intervention, I was confirmed in my long-standing worry over what would happen to therapy if I apply unmodified Western theories and skills to Chinese clients.

Although there have been discussions over the applicability of psychodynamic psychotherapy to non-Western client groups (Leong, 1986; Ng, 1985; Tyler, Sussewell, & Williams, 1985; Kozuki, & Kennedy, 2004; Valbak, 2004), I have always felt confident that psychodynamic psychotherapy could be trans-cultural based on my own therapy experience. However, the clinical experience with the Chinese client mentioned above was so powerful that it prompted me to re-think the significance of the cultural element of filial piety and its potential effects on the therapy process, which is psychodynamically-oriented. Since then, I have taken cultural factors into serious consideration, especially when treating non-Western clients in therapy.

In order to have a thorough understanding of filial piety, I would like to make it a research topic and use this dissertation to explore literature to answer the following question: When working with Chinese clients in the context of psychodynamically-oriented practice, what effects will cultural assumptions such as filial piety have on the working relationship? To address this question, I intend to make an in-depth exploration into the

origins of filial piety and its evolution into a major frame of reference of reciprocity and interdependence in interpersonal relationships. It is based on such a frame of reference that Chinese people establish their interpersonal relation patterns (Wu, 1994). At the same time, it is also my objective to explicate the implications of filial piety for Chinese family, in regard to family dynamics and the influences on a child's personality development and future inter-personal interactions.

Subsequently, I would like to use a clinical case vignette to discuss the therapeutic relationship with Chinese clients. Psychodynamic psychotherapy is a reciprocally dynamic and mutually influencing process that constantly takes place between clients and therapists (Slote, 1992). It is, therefore, necessary to understand the impact that phenomena such as the cultural tradition of filial piety and its promotion of collectivism and inter-dependence has on psychodynamic psychotherapy that advocates individualism and independence. In Chapter 5, I shall explore the necessary adjustments to interventions a therapist with a Western influence needs to make when the Chinese concept of filial piety is experienced by the therapist as an obstacle to the therapeutic process. In a cross-cultural clinical situation, it is crucial to avoid hindrance as a result of either cultural mis-attunement or prejudice on the therapist's part (ibid).

Although Galois and his colleagues (1996) argued that filial piety is a popular behaviour among all people around the world and does not belong only to Asians, Ho (1994) claimed that filial piety in a Chinese context is unique in the world with its emphasis on obedience in a hierarchical social setting. Hence, whenever it is mentioned and discussed in this dissertation, filial piety is defined within a Confucian context and applied not only to Chinese culture but also to other cultures in Asia which are also influenced

by Confucianism.

Relevant cultural phenomena such as attitudes toward homosexuality, somatization, and help-seeking behaviour in Chinese society will also be briefly discussed. As Rogler (1987) reminds us, it is clinically important for therapists to understand those cultural phenomena and to enable them to see their clients from where they stand and understand how they experience the world.

By completing this literature review, I hope that I can be better equipped with culturally appropriate interventions when treating non-Western clients. At the same time, I also hope that therapists trained in a Western tradition can be better informed of implications of filial piety and adapt themselves accordingly when establishing and maintaining therapeutic relationship with Asian clients.

Finally, by bringing the missing cultural element into consideration, I hope that this dissertation will help me make sense of the learning process as a whole. It is also hoped that this dissertation will serve not only as part fulfilment of a Master degree requirement, but also as a further integration of my psychotherapy practice.

Structure of discussion

Chapter 1 talks about the author's own experience of immigration and the acculturation process in New Zealand, which includes confusion over filial piety values caused by cultural differences during academic training in psychotherapy. Chapter 2 introduces the research method, a qualitative approach in the form of a modified systematic literature review. In Chapter 3, I discuss both the historical evolution and the contemporary meaning of filial piety in Chinese culture. Chapter 4 discusses the potential effects that filial piety in Chinese culture has on personality development. Chapter 5

focuses on the implications of filial piety for cross-cultural psychotherapy.

Clinical vignettes are included for discussion and illustration purposes.

Chapter 2: Methods

This dissertation employs a methodology of modified systematic literature review to explore both the historical and contemporary meaning of filial piety in Chinese culture and the potential effects filial piety has on a Western style of psychotherapy that is psychodynamic psychotherapy.

As defined by Dickson (1999), the purpose of a systematic literature review is to provide informative and empirical answers to scientific questions with scientific evidences and studies. Based on the concept of evidence-based practice (Sackett et al., 2000) in the medical sphere, a traditional systematic literature review is focused on comparison between quantitative research outcomes that are made available mostly by means of randomised controlled trials (Persons & Silberschatz, 1998). Methodologically, a traditional systematic literature review aims to acquire the best answers to solve a clinical situation through comprehensive collection, evaluation, and integration of relevant studies and researches (Sackett et al., 2000; Dawes et al., 1999). This way of doing research is both cost effective and time saving because a single research project is usually costly and time consuming (Earlam, Brecker & Vaughan, 2000).

A 'modified' systematic literature review carries the same research requirements and quality as required in the afore-mentioned traditional review method, but differs in content that is profoundly qualitatively based. In this dissertation, I have adopted a qualitative approach rather than a quantitative one because it helps my research process. This is because the implication of a moral concept of filial piety for the therapeutic relationship can be best explored and illustrated by a descriptive and narrative discussion of the therapeutic process (Loewenthal, 1999; Heaton, 2001). Literally, a qualitative approach helps demonstrate "the insight into why people do it"

(Earlam, Brecker & Vaughan, 2000, p. 10). Qualitative researchers argue that "qualitative subjects such as values, meaning, and experience that people attribute to their daily life can not be measured in the ways that quantitative research demands" (Davidson & Tolich, 1999, p. 29). Indeed, filial piety is one of the crucial moral values in Chinese culture and therefore a modified systematic literature review is methodologically the best tool to carry out my research.

A modified systematic literature review follows a number of discrete steps (Sackett et al., 2000). It first involves formulating a research question that best represents the goal the research is to achieve. In this dissertation, I formulate the research question based on one of my clinical encounters with a Chinese client who rejected interventions to help him explore his denied anger toward his father. In that clinical experience, I suspected that the Chinese cultural value of filial piety was the major underlying element that morally and defensively motivated the client to reject my interventions. Hence, the goal I endeavour to achieve in this dissertation is to find answer(s) to the research question: "When working with Chinese clients in the context of psychodynamically-oriented practice, what effects will cultural assumptions such as filial piety have on the working relationship?"

Secondly, a modified systematic literature review involves locating relevant studies and research with the best available evidence through comprehensive and systematic search into established databases. This stage of work also includes ad hoc search methods that will come up from time to time through actions such as referring to reference lists of identified studies, taking advice from supervisor or colleagues, and viewing relevant internet websites etc.

To put the systematic search into practice, I conducted database

searching. PsychINFO and PEP (Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing) are originally the two major databases into which I searched for articles written by psychoanalytically oriented theorists or psychotherapists. In these two databases, a key phrase such as 'filial piety' had 164 hits but unfortunately, most of the articles are beyond the coverage of the AUT e-journal list. Alternatively, a combined search using a key phrase such as 'psychoanalysis and filial piety' has only 5 hits that are directly relevant to the subject. In order to broaden the search outcomes, key words and phrases such as 'Chinese', 'Chinese patients', 'Chinese family', 'Chinese culture', 'Asian culture', 'Confucianism' etc. were used to extend possible coverage of filial piety in the literature.

Because this research topic involves filial piety, which is one of the core social and moral values in Chinese culture, another database, Blackwell Synergy, became the main source of articles written by Asian writers in the later stage of my search process. By way of ad hoc search, this database is located in the reference list of a published paper. Among journals that provide needed research data in Blackwell Synergy, the *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* stands out. From this journal, I adopt discussion articles as well as empirical research data regarding filial piety, family values, and social structure that are all written by Asian authors.

In this dissertation, both qualitative and quantitative studies of filial piety behaviour are chosen from various databases for inclusion. It is from these studies that data are extracted and synthesized into the body of my work, which is a key process in a systematic review (Dickson, 1999). Along with the process of data searching and synthesizing, critical appraisal of the evidence based on its validity, applicability, and impact is carried out to prevent bias (Jensen & Allen, 1996; Hofstede, 2007).

Empirical research results on historical and contemporary filial piety behaviour adopted in this dissertation are research outcomes from various researches done in Asian countries such as China, Japan, Singapore, Taiwan, and Korea. Traditionally, Confucianism is one of the major backbones of philosophy in those countries. Other empirical research results about filial piety are made available from Asian communities in both the U.S. and Canada where Asian immigrants have densely congregated.

Once the search process is completed, the next stage is to categorize literature in order to identify relevant themes and carry out systematic analysis. Compared to other stages, this stage is the core of the systematic research and also is where genuine learning takes place.

Even with limited articles relating to filial piety located in the psychoanalytic database, I nonetheless choose psychoanalysis as the major theoretic basis on which clinical phenomena are analysed and understood. Moreover, I take the liberty to include discussions of filial piety from a social psychological perspective because filial piety behaviour is a significant social phenomenon in Confucian societies in Asia. Also taken into account are views and discussions of cross-cultural adaptations of intervention when treating clients from non-Western cultural backgrounds.

Articles in Chinese language that carry such topics as filial piety, Confucianism, and Chinese culture are excluded because similar materials in the English language are sufficiently made available by Asian writers. Throughout the whole research process, the main purpose of study is for me to seek understanding of the overall topic and there is no intention to add new research.

I include clinical vignettes from my learning process at AUT and clinical practice to illustrate the points made in this literature review

regarding filial piety and other cultural concerns. However, they are included only for illustrative purposes and should not be treated as evidence.

The lack of writing on filial piety in the psychoanalytic field might suggest that filial piety is not a significant cultural phenomenon in the West that has caused concerns in the therapy process. However, it is suggested that more effort is injected into this particular area in future studies of cross-cultural psychotherapy, given the fact that cross-cultural encounters between people around the world are increasingly on the rise.

Consents from clients to use clinical materials for research purposes were acquired during the first sessions of clinical work. Ethics approval was granted by AUTEC on 27/04/2004.

Chapter 3: Filial Piety

In this chapter, I explore the origins and evolution of filial piety in Chinese history. At the same time, I will give examples to demonstrate how the concept of filial piety was inherited and enacted in my family when I was young. I will also discuss the dynamics of filial piety in Chinese families. Finally, I will consider empirical research outcomes to illustrate the contemporary meaning of filial piety as honoured by the majority of Chinese communities around the world.

Filial piety

Filial piety, pronounced '*Xiao*' in Chinese language, is one of the core values of Confucianism in Chinese culture (Tang, 1992; Chuang, 1998; Liu, Ng, Weatherall, & Loong, 2000; Yeh & Bedford, 2003; Nuyen, 2004). Filial piety is an attitude, together with sets of prescribed behaviour, which stipulates how children and parents should contractually interact with each other (Wu, 1994).

Cultural values are representations of abstract ideas that are collectively shared in a society. They are social institutions that indicate what is good, proper, and desirable. Varying in different cultures around the world, cultural values underline the specific norms that inform people of what behaviours or attitudes are most appreciated in a variety of situations (Williams as cited in Schwartz, 1999). Members of a society learn from their culture the explicit and implicit value emphasis that characterize a culture through everyday experiences with local customs, laws, norms, and organizational practices. In turn, their cognition, emotions, and behaviour jointly shape and express the prevailing cultural values (Markus & Kitayama, 1994).

Filial piety and Confucianism

Western people as a whole seem to regard filial piety in Chinese culture as no different from what is meant by it in a Western context. They tend to judge filial piety as nothing more than obligatory behaviours whereby one takes good material and emotional care of one's parents. Some Westerners may know a bit more about Chinese filial piety through frequent contact with Chinese affairs, such as the importance of ensuring continuity of family bloodlines in Chinese families by having male descendants. However, only a few Westerners have come to an experiential understanding that bringing honour to one's family, avoiding disgrace to its name, and being obedient to the elders without dissent are also equally essential in fulfilling filial piety duties in Chinese culture. In order to gain a thorough insight into what filial piety in a Chinese context is like and how the idea of filial piety has affected Chinese people, we need to delve into the origins and historical development of it by going back to Confucianism.

Confucianism, along with Taoism and Buddhism, has been one of the most influential philosophies that have informed the every day life of people in Chinese culture. Confucianism originated from the philosophy Kung Tzu preached around 2650 years ago.

Kung Tzu, commonly Latinised as Confucius, was both a scholar and a bureaucrat who developed a strict moral scheme of interpersonal conduct that has been widely followed by Chinese people to this day. Kung Tzu was born in China around 600 B.C., at a time when the whole society was undergoing a great deal of turmoil and chaos as a result of long-standing warfare between feudal barons (Choi, 1985). It was in this tumultuous social-political climate that Kung Tzu conceived and developed his strict code of conduct that emphasizes the importance of protocol and obligation.

The chaotic social background and the cry for immediate stability at the time also explain the strong emphasis on a hierarchical social structure and obedient behaviour in the preaching of Kung Tzu and his followers (Hong, Yamamoto, Chang, & Lee, 1993).

The concept of filial piety derives from the Confucian thinking of five cardinal relationships, which are relationships respectively between ruler-minister, father-son, husband-wife, older-younger siblings, and friend-friend (Legge, 1991a). Each of the cardinal relationships carries a contractual quality with mutual entitlements and responsibilities between each party in the dyadic relationship.

Filial piety is further reinforced by the doctrine of *the Rectification of Names* (Legge, 1991b), which emphasizes the importance of *Ming* and *Fen* promoted by Confucians (Nuyen, 2004). *Ming* in Chinese culture represents a person's culturally legitimate status or recognised position in a particular situation in the society, such as 'Parent', 'Teacher', 'Ruler', or 'Wife' etc. *Fen* is *Ming*'s corresponding role that means entitlements, duties, and responsibilities for the same person in that particular position. In daily practice, *Ming* and *Fen* always go hand in hand and see each individual as a relational being in interpersonal interactions with sets of specific social roles to fulfil throughout one's life (Tang, 1992).

Based on the concept of *Ming* and *Fen*, Confucianism endeavours to guide every individual into taking up one's role corresponding to one's status/position and carrying out allocated entitlements/duties in a specific social group. It is believed that such a social protocol creates the greatest benefit and harmony for the whole group (Hwang, 2006).

In order to transform and implement the idea of *Ming* and *Fen* into a social scheme, Confucians promoted clear rungs of hierarchy by nominating

various official statuses (*Ming*) in the society and defining their entitlements, duties and responsibilities (*Fen*). There is a belief within Confucianism that the whole of society would be in an ideal order if each individual fulfilled their duties based on the requirements of their hierarchical status. "Let the ruler be the ruler, the minister the minister, the father the father, and the son the son, Kung Tzu preached (Legge, 1991a). In terms of *Ming* and *Fen*, what is implicitly contained in such a statement is a complex of obligations that go along with one's status. The effects of implementing such a hierarchical social structure has been long lasting in Chinese history. A study (Chuang, 1998) on filial piety behaviour in Taiwan showed that people in Taiwan still honour traditional thinking in Chinese culture that validates authority ranking based on generation, age, and sex. Translating such *Ming* and *Fen* thinking into daily behaviour means that socially, for those who fail to take up their assigned roles and the corresponding responsibilities in a particular hierarchical situation, heavy condemnation in the form of public criticism arise to cause a strong sense of shame in the offenders.

Obviously, filial piety has its '*Ming* and *Fen*'. Taking the father-son relationship for example, a person who is in the position of 'Father' (*Ming*) should expect certain duties and responsibilities from the person in the 'Son' position (son's *Fen*). According to the preaching of Confucians, the father should treat his son with both strictness in delivering discipline and kindness and benevolence when giving care. The privilege for a father to do so is the father's *Ming* and what he is obliged to do is his *Fen*, implying both entitlement and responsibilities. Similarly, the son is obliged to treat his father with honour, devotion, respect and obedience (Sung, 1998). The *Ming* and *Fen* in a father-son relationship becomes much more obvious when the father and the son come from a different marriage. Unlike most

stepfather-stepson relationships in the West, the *Ming* and *Fen* in such relationships in Chinese culture remain unchanged. The stepfather is still obliged to treat the stepson as his own birth son with all the associated duties and responsibilities prescribed by the culture. The same rules as described above for the son apply to the stepson in his relationship with his stepfather.

For thousands of years, filial piety has developed as an ideology of guiding principles for Chinese socialization and patterns of interpersonal communication. In China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, countries in the South East, and other areas and places that have been culturally influenced by Confucianism, filial piety has always been taken as the most valuable of all virtues in social relations.

Filial piety and ancestor worship

In Confucianism, the doctrine of filial piety is taken as the most fundamental family value. Furthermore, the father-son relationship is considered both as the 'root' of a harmonious family relationship and, in expansion, as the foundation for all the other human relationships (Tsai, 2005; Kim, Li, & Liang, 2002).

More than two millennia on, filial piety in Chinese culture has basically remained unchanged and has been passed on through generations by means of ancestor worship (Ho, 1996). A good example in my family attests well to this tradition. When I was a child, my father would, during Chinese New Year, set up a small wooden shrine on the dinner table with food offerings in front of it. My father taught me that that small wooden shrine represented all the ancestors of the Liu family. For roughly 15 days in the Chinese New Year period, my father and I would take turns to serve the shrine three times a day by bowing to it and changing food offerings at meal

times. It was as if the ancestors of our Liu family were there to celebrate Chinese New Year together with us. This kind of cultural practice was not limited to my family only; the same practice of ancestor worship was carried out in almost every household in our neighbourhood during Chinese New Year.

Ancestor worship implies that soul and spirit of ancestors continue to stay within the family and watch over their offspring. Through the worship of both the immediate direct ancestors and those of the clan and its remote ancestors, the solidarity of the family and clan can be kept alive and the authority of the parents enhanced (Bi & D'agostino, 2004). The *Doctrine of the Mean* (Legge, 1991c) clearly explains that filial piety is linked to the activities of ancestor worship:

> To remember the ancestors, to perform the same rites and the same music which they performed when alive, to reverence what they reverenced, to love what they loved, to serve them after death as they were served during their life, and to serve them, though they have deceased, as if they still existed, is perfect filial piety (Chapter XIX).

Based on what is preached in the *Doctrine of the Mean*, Nuyen (2004) pointed out that ancestor worship is an extension of being respectful to one's parents. In Chinese tradition, filial piety attitude involves paying due respect not only to one's living parents, but also to the deceased and remote ancestors by following what they had preached when alive. In glorifying the deceased ancestors with a mysteriously powerful force deserving of worship, Confucianism fortifies the connection between ancestor worship

and filial piety.

Hsu (1949) wrote that Confucianism takes the father-son relationship as the basic relationship for the maintenance of family continuity. Ascribing authority to the father and demanding filial piety from the son regulates the power structure of father-son solidarity. However, Hsu (ibid) claimed that the father's authority is not simply conceived as originating from the father himself, but as coming from the ancestors and being reinforced by them. Unconsciously, the father acts as the ancestors' representative when alive. When dead, he becomes one of the ancestors whose influence remains in the family to guide his son's life and behaviour. In effect, the son is constantly under ancestral supervision to ensure that the sameness of family tradition will not be broken. Ancestor worship takes place as a natural consequence of paying absolute tribute to one's parents and vice versa.

Hence, if the son were to publicly accuse the father of misconduct, he would unwittingly put himself under the pressure of disrupting the continuity of family heritage he is responsible for maintaining. Hwang (1999) argued that consequently, the son would also undermine the structure of the family by challenging and dishonouring the authority of the father, and subsequently humiliating the ancestors. Confucianism considers filial piety toward one's parents as the most fundamental element in human relationships. Therefore, no matter how poorly the father may behave toward his son, the nature of the relationship based on *Ming* and *Fen* between father and son cannot be changed (Makra, 1961).

Filial piety as a political manipulation

In Chinese history, filial piety was originally identified as the main virtue within the familial sphere. Soon it was utilised to create a stabilising political power in an attempt to help unite the then fragmented nation. Confucians

believed that filial piety could be given a wider meaning for that purpose by releasing it from simply being a moral foundation for the family. Through political measures, the doctrine of filial piety was advocated and preached by Confucians not only as a private and personal moral stance, but also as an attitude to help create a political ambience. Finally, the ideal of filial piety that was initially family-oriented was manipulatively expanded and transformed into loyalty to rulers (Hwang, 1999).

Around 127 B.C., Confucianism became the sole state moral doctrine for the Han dynasty in Chinese history and filial piety was formally introduced and extended from a familial parameter to a social-political realm. It was a political manoeuvre in an attempt to bring discipline and stability to the empire.

Under such a politically engineered campaign, the idea of loyalty to the ruler was openly promoted and enshrined as filial piety writ large. Ideologically, Confucianism conceptualised the family as the foundation of the state and the state as the enlargement of the family. It was, therefore, logical for people to infer that harmony began in the family as a result of good filial behaviour, and would collectively spread to the state as a whole. In Confucian thought, the political realm was not separable from the ethical one. When the central government was promoted as the head of the household, then the fragmented political factions across the nation needed to be not only filial but also loyal to it.

Chu and Chu (1967) pointed out that in the ideal world proposed by Confucianism, it was generally believed that both an enduring political stability and a sense of sustained societal harmony could be eventually achieved and maintained if children at home were educated with filial piety behaviour early in their childhood. Confucian ethics likened 'disloyalty in

serving one's ruler' to 'what is un-filial in the family'. Likewise, an un-filial son could not be expected to be loyal to his ruler.

Ever since the Han Dynasty, almost every empire/government in Chinese history has whole-heartedly politicised Confucianism as one of the governing tools for its extraordinary emphasis on the complementary relationship between filial piety and loyalty (Hwang, 1999). As a result, with filial piety and loyalty being given so high a position in Chinese people's mentality, teaching young people concepts of filial piety and loyalty has been seen as one of the important basic duties for adults. Through music, arts, drama, media, publication, and other forms of cultural presentation, education of filial piety and loyalty by the younger generation has continued non-stop in Chinese societies right up to this day (Chuang, 1998).

Filial piety in my family

From my early childhood, my mother constantly told me filial stories, with the *Twenty-four Filial Stories* (Cheng, 1956) being the most classic ones. By contemporary standards, the filial stories told in this collection would be treated as child abuse cases if they were re-enacted today. All the child figures in the stories are depicted as being in parental roles with the responsibility of taking care of their parents in various manners that are unheard of in modern times. For example, one of the twenty-four stories tells of a young boy who is eager to catch a fish in a river to feed his ill father. However, it is winter and the ice crust formed over the river is so thick that it is impossible for a young boy to break, even with heavy tools. The story ends with the young boy lying down and thawing the ice crust with his body warmth. Another filial story involves a teenager who puts himself up for sale in the local labour market for money to bury his father.

Rather than feeling fearful of what these children did in the stories, I remember feeling competitive with the major filial figures whenever those stories were told to me. In my little mind, I always felt encouraged and wanted to do better with much more positive filial behaviour toward my parents.

My parents' marriage broke up when I was ten years old. I ended up staying with my father who had never had experience of taking care of a child. I moved with him from place to place for two years before we finally settled down in a slum.

My father was a hard-working person. Because he did not have sufficient education when young, he could not find decent jobs and had to try anything that came his way to make ends meet. After the marriage break-up with my mother, he led a very simple and thrifty life. He never watched movies or bought a proper suit for himself. My father sacrificed his life to bring me up and support me financially until I had established a safe foothold in my own life. By being a strict but responsible 'Father' to me, my father had well fulfilled his '*Ming and Fen*' of a father's role as defined by the traditional ideology of filial piety in Chinese culture.

For my part, I naturally treated my father as prescribed by the role of filial piety in the culture. After my parents' separation, I was very aware of my cultural duty to perform filial duty to my father. As encouraged and promoted in all Chinese folklore, one of the best ways of fulfilling one's filial duty was to be academically successful. Traditionally, Chinese parents expect and enjoy good academic outcomes from their children and treat these outcomes as one of the paybacks for their unconditional sacrifice in supporting the children. Given the conditions with which a slum could have provided me, I did well by successfully going into various good schools and

finishing with a university degree. In our relationship as defined by the contractual filial piety concept, my father's sacrifice in supporting me left me no choice but to bring honour back to the family, which would in turn make him feel he was looked up to in the neighbourhood.

Throughout my developmental years, while praising me for my academic achievements, adults around me in various social gatherings never failed to remind me of the importance of filial piety for my father. They would repeatedly quote stories of a filial nature from either anecdotal or published sources to encourage my good filial behaviour. They would also look critically at me and call me un-filial when my behaviour toward my father indicated any sign of non-conformity or reluctance. As a result, I was very conscious of my behaviour so as not to let my father down or cause concerns around me. I would feel ashamed at my father's disappointment if I did something wrong or did not perform with my best efforts. In a sense, I felt that I owed my whole life to my father because I would not have survived without him. The sense of indebtedness from a child to his parents will be further discussed later in this chapter.

Looking back, my father, I, and those people around us were all behaving in a way that fitted our respective roles as traditionally set up in the culture (Chuang, 1998). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, those roles are best summarized as the five cardinal relationships in Confucius's teaching.

The dynamics of filial piety in Chinese families

For every Chinese individual growing up in a family environment in which filial piety is the guiding principle, the relationship with his family is multidimensional (Donorfio & Sheehan, 2001). Chen (2006) indicated that for a Chinese person, the filial relationship with his family is based on a

"dyadic conception of the self and the family that is quite different from that of most Western cultures" (p. 56). Essentially, an individual in Chinese culture is morally responsible for his family, which includes every family member in the family system and vice versa. This type of relationship in a Chinese family traditionally aims to achieve and maintain a close and harmonious family atmosphere, which is always the ultimate goal for every family member to strive for throughout his life span. This type of relationship is also a representation of 'We-self' rather than 'I-self' which is characteristic of the West; I will explore this topic further in the next chapter.

Some researchers, for example Chiu, (1987) and Rao, McHale, & Pearson (2003), claimed that Chinese parents who hold firm on a value of filial piety are more inclined to adopt an authoritarian attitude toward their children than their Western counterparts. An authoritarian parental attitude means exertion of parental control over their children's life. More on this topic will be discussed in the next chapter also.

Chen (2006) observed that Chinese family dynamics are in sharp contrast to Western cultures; the desire and will of a Chinese individual is much more often subjected to that of the family, which would normally mean the parents. Therefore, instead of existing as a person that is autonomous and independent with decisions over his own life, an individual living in a Confucian tradition is constantly associated with a set of hierarchical relationships and obligations to other family members within the family.

Because the filial relationship between parents and children is seen as the foundation for all other relationships in Chinese culture, the relationships between other family members share the same quality and are

hierarchical too. Deference to senior siblings and relatives is taught and demanded in everyday interactions from early childhood (Hwang, 1999).

The strong sense of indebtedness and obligation to one's parents is another significant dynamic for people holding to the concept of filial piety. Tu (as cited in Chen, 2006) pointed out:

> The Confucians believe that self-cultivation of morality begins with the recognition that biological bondage provides an authentic opportunity for personal realization. The duty and consciousness generated by the acknowledgement that we are beneficiaries of our parents and older siblings, and that our well-being is inseparable from theirs is not just one-way obedience. Rather, it is a response to a debt that one can never repay, and is also the awareness that the willingness to assume such a responsibility to re-pay that debt is morally exhilarating (p.128).

In a Chinese family, "The sense of duty and indebtedness toward one's parents (and siblings) weaves an iron web mesh of material, emotional, and spiritual interdependence between members of the family" (Chen, 2006, p. 580). While the sense of responsibility drives parents to offer their children the best, as my father did for me, children from a very young age learn hard and fast to behave well as a way of paying their parents back. Parents' sense of responsibility and the children's sense of indebtedness alternately feed into each other as *Ming* and *Fen* in the parent-child relationship. It is here that I believe Mahler's (1975) theory of individuation and separation might encounter disagreement from Chinese people because they would not find it relevant or applicable to their developmental experiences.

Based on those aforementioned family dynamics, a sense of family solidarity is therefore formed. In a traditional Chinese family, the flow of the family dynamic circulates around "ancestors, family unity, submission to authority, father-son identification, filial piety, and so on" (Hsu, 1949).

Filial Piety nowadays

Historically, failure to adhere to filial behaviour by family members of the Confucian tradition has always been a source of intergenerational tension (Mehta, & Ko, 2004). Academic achievement, marriage, and employment, for example, are issues that often cause conflicts and tensions in Chinese families, particularly when children want to have their own freedom in making decisions but are frustrated by their filial roles to be obedient to their parents.

Studies (e.g. Lin, 1939; Lang, 1946) on filial piety in the past traditionally tended to focus on its philosophical ideals and ethical significance in Chinese culture and did not inform people of its contemporary meaning. Lately, various researchers have attempted to investigate the impact of Westernisation in recent decades on the Confucian family system and the social foundations of filial piety.

Gutmann (1982) pointed out that the more a society evolves with technological progression and increased access to the outside world, the more easily younger persons are able to achieve autonomy from their elders. Seemingly, the role of filial piety and its significance is changing in Chinese communities. Factors like the increasing availability of public education, the trend of nuclear families in place of extended families, and improved personal financial autonomy have been widely discussed and identified as evidence that filial piety nowadays is not as influential as it was (Isay, 2005; Yue & Ng, 1999). However, given the central position of family in Chinese

mentality, it is fair to say that recent social and economic changes might have had some influence but not to the extent that they totally wipe out filial obligations and expectations from Chinese people's minds.

Yeh (1997) indicated in his report that while some filial obligations such as ancestor worship, considerate and affectionate interactions with parents, and physical care of parents are still enshrined by most Chinese, other behaviour such as absolute obedience and suppression of individual needs under parental authority are seen as being gradually ignored.

Chuang's research (1998) found out that people in Taiwan still believe that children should be filial and respectful to their parents, and that younger siblings should be submissive to the elder siblings. A recent survey in New Zealand (Liu, Ng, Weatherall, & Loong, 2000) showed that the local Chinese communities continue to hold an overall high sense of filial obligations and expectations, which is affirmed by an earlier study (Yue, & Ng, 1999) in China on the same subject of filial expectations and behaviour.

Social values direct the perception and treatment of elderly people and those values are reflected in the daily ritual and norms (Palmore, 1989). Although some respondents in Hong Kong regard paying attention to parents' wishes, obeying their preferences, and pleasing them by bringing honour to the family as less important nowadays, most respondents still see these behaviours as intrinsic to showing filial piety (Lau, Chi, & McKenna, 1998).

Sung's study (1998) in Korea listed in detail expectations as well as actual behaviours that could be defined as filial piety by the general Korean population. He also gave evidence that good filial behaviour is still highly regarded in the Korean society. One recent research in Singapore (Mehta, & Ko, 2004) indicated that although transformation of social values is always

an on-going process as social-economic structure changes, core cultural beliefs and values such as filial piety survive.

In Chinese culture, the Confucian teaching of filial piety has been honoured, shared, and followed globally by most Chinese for numerous generations. The research and studies mentioned above demonstrate that participants as a whole still take filial piety as an important moral value for them. Among all filial behaviours studied in those studies, looking after the material and physical needs of parents and other elder relatives in the extended family is chosen as the key behaviour of being filial nowadays (Cheung, Kwan, & Ng, 2006; Cheng, Chan, &Philips, 2004). Based on the research outcomes as indicated above, filial piety as a core cultural value will, without doubt, continue to command a significant position in the Chinese population (Ho, 1994).

Chapter 4: Filial Piety and Personality Development

In this chapter, I explore the implication of filial piety for personality formation in Chinese culture through discussing and comparing parental attitudes in child-rearing behaviour between the East and the West. I will also comment on the different types of 'self' that are formed as a result of different cultural influences.

Criticisms of Chinese filial piety and 'Ethnotransference'

Filial piety causes far-reaching and profound psychological implications when "it comes to the formation of Chinese personality characters, social norms, and worldview" (Hwang, 1999, p. 36). Researchers of filial piety, such as Ho (1994) who is a Chinese social psychologist with Western training, claimed that filial piety cultivates authoritarian moralism that, in turn, builds conservatism into Chinese social behaviour. Ho (1996) also argued that, developmentally, the Confucian ideology of conformity to parents' demands might result in the inhibition of psychosocial developmental goals for children, which in turn 'negatively' shapes their personality. Also from a social psychological perspective, another study of social phenomena in Chinese society by Hofstede (1991) reached a similar conclusion. It showed that compared to those living in the West, Chinese people are more accustomed to hierarchical relations as a result of a filial piety tradition.

Long before these contemporary researchers expressed their viewpoints on filial piety, Lucian Pye and Richard Solomon had, in 1969, made public their study results on the Chinese personality character based on long-term research in China (see Sun, 2002). Lucian Pye and Richard Solomon are American political scientists who are psychodynamically informed. From their findings, they claimed that Chinese people in general couldn't handle

aggression in an appropriate way as a result of 'stunted sexuality' caused by their authoritarian parents. They further equated filial piety in Chinese culture with moral masochism and saw the filial piety attitude as self-esteem seeking behaviour by "yielding submissively to the cruelties of one's authoritarian father" (as cited in Sun, 2002, p. 207). In their eyes, such a moral masochistic personality tends to hold a sense of narcissistic omnipotence by always throwing itself into a victim's role and turning its impotence to defy parents into a sense of moral superiority (McWilliams, 1994).

Tracing further back into history (almost twenty years before Pye and Solomon), another American researcher, Warner Muensterberger, who is also from a psychodynamic background, heavily criticized Chinese mothers' role in child-rearing. Warner (as cited in Sun, 2002) claimed that Chinese mothers help develop "oral indulgence, dependency and passivity which results in food being the principal link between people, due to her own ambivalent attitude rooted in her own penis wish and penis envy" (ibid, p. 207). More criticisms by him about the Chinese mother's role in child rearing are as follows:

> She whimsically alternates between over-protection, over-indulgence, and demands-prohibitions. The effect is to de-autonomize the Chinese male's ego functions, making him anxiety laden when confronted with the adult sexual task. Defense against such anxiety assumes forms of regression to early childhood such as seeking refuge in oral forms of gratification and the masochistic wish to be castrated (ibid, p.202).

However, there is good and bad in everything and this is especially true

when it comes to cultural beliefs. As mentioned before, the ideal of filial piety in Chinese culture is a contractual concept (Tang, 1992). It demands the young generation be caring, respectful, and obedient to their parents. At the same time, it also requests the elder generation to reciprocally fulfil their role as responsible parents to provide for, raise, and teach their children in a nurturing environment (Yao, 2002). Culturally, this interdependent way of interaction is how Chinese people have lived and appreciated their life.

From a cross-cultural point of view, the criticisms made by those Western researchers were based on their own cultural experience and in a context that celebrates individualism. In this instance, Grey's idea (2001) of *ethnotransference* seems to fit well. According to Grey, ethnotransference is a set of "firm convictions shared with members of one's own ethnic group about diverging convictions and practices of another" (p. 684). The criticisms made by such researchers as Pye, Solomon, and Muensterberger may seem reasonable in their own culture context or training background, "but not to those belonging to the context in which they are expressed" (ibid, p. 684). For these reasons, those Western researchers' views may be seen as biased because they do not validate other types of living that are not in line with theirs (Hofstede, 2007).

With the rapid development of modern technology, people around the world are no longer blocked or isolated by geographical distance in their communication and connection with each other. Today, through the speedy exchange of information and knowledge, people are much more able than before to 'surf' between various types of human values and beliefs. Funk (2002) pointed out that by making comparison with other cultures, people are more and more able to reach a conclusion that there are no values or norms that can be 'objectively' ascribed to any human culture. The direct

impact such an understanding has on our intellectual consciousness is that "the valuable and the normative are simply what people acknowledge through the way of life they choose" (ibid, p. 18).

<u>Chinese child rearing</u>

A child's initial socialization process facilitated by his parents might be one of the most powerful experiences of early development (Chen, 2006). Research by Ho and Kang (1984) showed that the traditional Chinese style of child-rearing reflects important cultural values and has not been influenced by Western individualism so much as other aspects of the culture, such as democracy in politics. In Chinese culture, the principle of filial piety plays a significant role in guiding and forging a child's learning experiences and goals of socialization (Yao, 2002; Rao, McHale, & Pearson, 2003; Lieber, Fung, & Leung, 2006).

As has briefly been mentioned in the last chapter, many researchers (Chiu, 1987; Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown 1992; Ho, 1994; Hofstede, 1991) have pointed out that compared to their Western counterparts who cultivate independence in their children, Chinese parents embrace the concept of filial piety and tend to adopt an authoritarian and controlling attitude to child-rearing. However, Chao (1994) took a different approach and argued that despite the fact that Chinese parents are technically controlling and authoritarian in 'training' their children into proper role requirements in Confucian society, they remain very supportive and caring parents. Chao (2001) continued to argue that there is a difference in the definition of authoritarian parental control in child-rearing between Chinese and Western cultures. He contended that it is the developmental context and approach by which Chinese parents carry out 'training' that makes their ways uniquely different from their Western counterparts.

Basically, I agree with Chao's argument that Chinese parents 'train' their children rather than behave in an authoritarian, abusive manner towards them. My own upbringing supports this viewpoint. Based on cultural heritage, it was widely believed by almost all adults in my neighbourhood that it is every Chinese parent's responsibility and social obligation to 'train' his children to obey moral and social rules. There is a popular Chinese saying that aptly elucidates such an attitude. It says: 'It is the parents who are at fault if their children behave poorly'. Accordingly, it is therefore crucial for parents to train their children into being sensitive to the consequential shame both to the child himself and to the whole family if they fail to behave properly. (Lieber, Fung, & Leung, 2006). A line can therefore be drawn between being authoritarian and satisfying power needs and training a child into role requirements.

Cultural heritage results in different practices in child-rearing (Rao, McHale, & Pearson, 2003). According to traditional Chinese thinking, a baby is generally considered as a very weak and fragile being that needs total protection and concentrated care from its mother. Therefore, compared to the Western style of taking care of a baby, the Chinese way of baby caring definitely seems prolonged in that the baby sleeps with its mother for as long as it takes and there is no timetable for weaning (Tseng & Hsu, 1970).

In fact, even after the baby has grown into an adult, a close relationship with the parents is still encouraged and seen as one of the virtues of the filial tradition (Tseng & Hsu, 1970). This close relationship may include playing and behaving like a child before his parents to entertain them (Makra, 1961).

Developmentally, the toilet training stage as first described by Freud (1951) and later modified by Erikson (1963) is a remote idea to most

Chinese mothers. I had a very unusual experience with the Western idea of 'toilet training' in my first year of training at AUT. During one of the 'Human Development' classes, Freud's psychosexual phases were introduced. When the potential psychological effects of toilet training on children was brought up and discussed in the class, there was a mutually embarrassing moment when I asked one of my classmates what toilet training meant. When I saw the disbelief on my classmate's face my question caused, I felt I must have missed out on one of life's crucial developmental stages. My confusion concerning the Western idea of toilet training came from my own experience of growing up during which neither my mother nor others ever put any pressure on such a 'task'. In this regard, Chinese mothers are very generous. Although they need to attend to and clean up their children numerous times in a day, mothers carry no expectation that their children should help themselves. Therefore, "Toilet training is certainly much less emphasized as a developmental milestone than it is in Western cultures" (Tang, 1992, p.380).

Accordingly, the concept of shame in Chinese culture carries little relevance to Freud's idea of anal obsessiveness or Erikson's concept of doubt. Shame is in fact a measure most Chinese parents use to help their children conform to their role requirements from the time they start to attend primary school (Tang, 1992; Tseng & Hsu, 1970). The functional use of shame in Chinese culture is noteworthy. Shame is purposefully applied as the major moral tool to motivate proper behaviour, to remind an individual of appropriate social cues, and in the end to evaluate all social interactions (Lieber, Fung, & Leung, 2006).

A Chinese child's 'training' starts early in life around the age of six. Once begun, it is mediated intensively through all agents available in

society such as family interactions, children's books of folk tales, teaching in classrooms, public gatherings, and media (Miller, Wiley, Fung, & Liang, 1997). The contents of training at this early stage are focused on moral perspectives such as filial piety, emphasis on maintenance of collective harmony, social expectations, and personal motivation toward achievement (Fung, 1999). During this early socialization process, children are taught to be alert, mostly through self-monitoring, to evaluation and criticism from others, while following adults' guidance to conform to various personal, familial, and social rules and roles (Leung, Lau, & Lam, 1998).

Past anthropological and psychological studies (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1988; Rao, McHale, & Pearson, E. 2003) observed that mothers from most Asian cultures affirm interdependent behaviour and a deferential attitude toward others throughout their children's developmental stages. These studies also pointed out that children growing up in an interdependent culture tend to be more sensitive to others' feelings and needs than children in the West. Yi (1995) argued that patterns of interaction that emphasize interconnectedness and interrelatedness in a child's early developmental years and the internalised hierarchical relationship result in a self and object representation in the child that not only "actively anticipates and meets the needs of others, but also tends to meet the duty and expectations of his role in that hierarchical relationship" (p. 310).

The hierarchical relationship pattern as a cultural norm in Chinese culture deserves special attention from psychotherapists from the West. To illustrate the influence of filiality and *Ming* and *Fen* on interpersonal power structure in Chinese culture, one needs to look no further than at the educational materials for children. In any given culture, children's stories, folktales, and myths are the best places to study covert parental attitudes

toward child rearing. Such fictional expressions of culture not only reflect collective personality characteristics and social values, but also help to facilitate the development of coping strategies (Tseng and Hsu as cited in Tseng, Kim, and Hsu, 2005).

Tseng and Hsu's study (1972) of Chinese children's storybooks showed a significant disparity with their Western counterparts. Children's stories in the West usually picture young children as winning heroes who are able to defeat parental/authority figures with ease. In sharp contrast, Chinese children's stories, e.g., the classic *Twenty-Four Stories of Filial Piety*, *The Monkey,* and *White Serpent Opera* etc. carry a common theme that is without exception in favour of parental authority. In general, Chinese children's stories often conclude that challenge or defiance of parental authority by Chinese children ends up with negative or disastrous consequences such as scolding, reprimand, or even death of the young offenders. Based on the Chinese cultural norms that tend to encourage one to respect authority figures, the message which is implicitly communicated through the children's storybooks is: "conflicts between generations always end in the triumph of the elders" (p. 101).

West: Independence and the 'I' self; East: Interdependence and the 'We' self
From a psychodynamic point of view, one of the ways to define a particular cultural institution is to interpret it as "a symbolic resolution and a repository of shared anxieties, defences, and neuroses" (Manson as cited in Sun, 2002. p. 195). Like psychoanalysis, existentialism also places anxiety at the centre of the dynamic structure of the human world (May & Yalom, 2000). Yalom (1981) argued that as a human being, there are four inherent concerns that cannot be ignored and avoided when it comes to one's existence. They are death, freedom to make decisions, ultimate isolation,

and meaninglessness in life. In the existentialist view, those four existential concerns cause inner conflicts as a result of a person's efforts to confront them.

It is an interesting question to ask as to how these inherent existential concerns identified and defined by a Western philosophy of existentialism are resolved in a Chinese way of living. For me, the answer is obvious: through a close-knit family system. Chinese people have tried to overcome existential concerns and the resultant anxiety as indicated by Yalom (op. cit.) through a tight and interdependent family system.

Balint's concept (1955) of human existence can be applied to illustrate the mental mindset in Chinese culture when it comes to how a Chinese learns to psychologically defend against the truth that he is separate from others and alone to deal with his surroundings. As a creation of his own culture, a Chinese person tends to see the world as a dangerous expanse dotted with similar others who are as weak and as powerless as himself. He only feels safe when he is physically close to others who help each other out to collectively fight against the unsafe environment. As a result, interdependence and cooperation have always been widely promoted and encouraged as a valuable culture ideal in Chinese thinking (Hwang, 1999). Such an existential awareness also helps to give family a much more crucial and significant position in Chinese culture than in the West (Slote, 1992). In a traditional Chinese family, not only is economic security provided, one is also able to meet all one's social needs through the functions of one's family. The world outside a Chinese family is usually depicted as ruthless and lacking in warmth, a world in which one's future and fate is unforeseeable (Yang as cited in Tang, 1992).

People growing up in the West, however, learn to rely on their own

resources to overcome treacherous objects in a basically inviting expanse where everything is possible as long as one cares to commit oneself (Balint, 1955). The world is one's oyster and in such an environment, people tend to see autonomy as an absolute value that upholds ideas such as independence, assertiveness, and free expression of feelings and beliefs (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Tang, 1992). Comparatively, family plays a less important role in a person's life in the West.

In terms of dealing with the ultimate death of human beings and the question of one's life being meaningful or not, I would argue that through ancestor worship and a filial-based family system, Chinese culture has for thousands of years cultivated a spiritual environment. In this spiritual environment, death is not so threatening once a person realizes that he is just one of the links of familial heritage and that his life will continue through his offspring. Such a spiritual environment also supports one's belief that the meaning of life is firmly tied to the overall well-being of the family. In this context, when every family member takes on the responsibility of taking care of the whole family, the collective dynamic in the family changes one's 'I-self' to a 'We-self' (Roland as cited in Brearley, 1992, Slote, 1992, Hwang, 1999), which also greatly reduces the sense of a person being isolated in the world.

For Chinese people and other people growing up under the influence of filial piety, independence and autonomy as defined in Western culture is a foreign concept to them (Slote, 1992). When I was a child, I remember listening to adults who described the Western world. Essentially, the Western world was seen as a paradise for the young, a battlefield for the greedy, and a graveyard for the old. In terms of filial piety behaviour, those people in my neighbourhood would talk with amazement, sometimes even

with disbelief and protest, when it came to sending one's own parents to a rest home and leaving them there to fend for themselves till they die. In the East, because the social welfare system in the society is generally not well established, the term 'filial piety' for most people assumes such a crucial significance that it is actually life-determining. It is therefore dreadful for anyone to imagine being sent away from his family support and living alone.

Compared to the West, where one is encouraged to see oneself as a part of a whole like a slice of an apple pie, the collective unconsciousness in the East tends to regards everyone as "ingredients in a lentil soup in which one's identity and sense of self is inextricably established only within the context of the whole" (ibid, p 445). The sense of interdependence in a family is so firmly established that one can not afford psychologically to live outside the family system.

Chapter 5: Filial Piety and Cross-cultural Psychotherapy

In this chapter, I discuss the clinical implication that filial piety may have for a cross-cultural therapeutic process. I also bring attention to several cultural phenomena that are important for psychotherapists to be aware of when approaching Chinese clients. Finally, I illustrate the necessary adaptation of interventions to deal with filial piety issues in cross-cultural psychotherapies, with a case vignette of a Chinese client.

Culture and psychotherapy

Many cross-cultural researchers (Lee & Bishop, 2001; Donorfio & Sheehan, 2001; Li-Repac, 1980; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Chen, Liu, & Li, 2002) have pointed out that within different cultural backgrounds there exist differences in how people see the world, display emotions, make decisions, and carry out actions.

A study by Matsumoto, Takeuchi, Andayani, Kouznetsova, and Krupp (1998) showed that for people who grow up in a culture which values and promotes an individualistic world view, the tendency is to internalise and take for granted behaviour patterns that advocate personal autonomy and uniqueness. For such people, there is a sense of entitlement to having their own desire, needs, and wishes put before the social group of which they are a part. Another kind of entitlement that is endorsed by their culture is that they also feel less restrained in terms of displaying negative emotional feelings in front of others.

Similarly, studies by other researchers, for example Triandis *et al*, (1988), showed that there are cultures in the world that encourage group harmony and give much more significance and importance to a collective approach as a way of being. Under such a paradigm of life, people tend to cherish interpersonal cohesion and cooperation over their own personal

benefits. Emotionally, their personal feelings are second to the collective atmosphere of their cultural groups. Therefore, maintaining the overall harmony of their cultural groups by suppressing negative personal feelings and putting up positive ones becomes one of the essential social norms by which everyone abides.

Based on the divergent natures of cultures worldwide, it is fair to argue that different cultures cultivate different perspectives to conceptualise psychopathology and consequently develop different strategies in the form of psychotherapies to solve the problems. Therefore, psychotherapy is the product of a cultural institution (Sue & Sue as cited in Lee & Bishop, 2001).

Asian immigrants in New Zealand and their mental health needs

Although New Zealand is geographically situated among Polynesian countries, culturally the mainstream philosophical beliefs and moral values in New Zealand are predominantly European, and thus advocate personal freedom and individualism. With its recent open immigration policy to Asian immigrants, New Zealand has just started to establish its association with Asian affairs.

According to the 2006 census, there were 355,000 respondents who identified themselves as of an Asian origin, which made up 9.2% of the total New Zealand population. Of this Asian population, a substantial proportion of people were immigrants from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Malaysia. Culturally, if other nationalities also under the influence of Confucianism, such as Korean, Japanese, and Cambodian, were counted together with the Chinese population in New Zealand, the total population that was directly or indirectly under the influence of Confucianism would be well above 5 % of the total New Zealand population (Statistics New Zealand 2006).

Anttila (1995), who is an immigrant from Finland to New Zealand, described the immigration process as encompassing the fantasy that the new country is a better place to live, that "the new land is the land of hope where the nurturing earth mother will take care of her (new) children" (p. 78). However, a research (Ho, Au, & Cooper, 2002) commissioned by the Mental Health Commission to identify mental health issues for Asian immigrants in New Zealand painted a grim picture of their acculturation process. The research group located issues such as language, employment, disruption of social support network, and traumatic experiences prior to immigration as major factors that contribute to mental health problems in the Asian communities in New Zealand.

Treatment wise, the commission report further pointed out that poor treatment outcomes and under-utilization of mental health services by Asian clients has raised serious concerns. Specifically, it indicated that cultural differences in the assessment and treatment of mental illness of Asian clients, and lack of quality mental health care providers who are culture sensitive are two major causes behind the under-performance of the service. Therefore, one of the recommendations that the research group made is that mental health care providers could deal with Asian clients more competently if they were knowledgeable about their Asian clients' values, beliefs, and cultural background.

The rapid growth of the Asian population in New Zealand and the pervasive sense of the un-preparedness of the country's mental health sector raises the question: How is it possible to carry out cross-cultural mental health treatment to immigrants from Asia?

It is, therefore, extremely relevant for psychotherapists in New Zealand to pay attention to this fast emerging culture group of people. It is also

crucial for psychotherapists to be well informed of these new clients' growing psychological needs, about which they have very limited cultural understanding.

Case vignette #2

John (name changed to preserve anonymity) is one of the Asian immigrants who arrived in New Zealand in the early 1990's. I would like to use the clinical experience with this client to illustrate the points made in the dissertation.

I saw John in early 2006 as a student psychotherapist in the AUT psychotherapy clinic. John was a 36-year-old gay Chinese from Hong Kong. His presenting issue was depressive symptoms and depressive episodes that had been lingering on and off for some years. John reported that during each depression episode, he would seek help from his family doctor and take anti-depressants to help improve his physical symptoms. However, medical treatment did not help get rid off the constant feeling of sadness in the background of his mind.

Before coming to the AUT clinic for help, John had contacted another counselling agency in Auckland but took up only one session there. According to John, the European therapist at the counselling agency was very caring and particularly attentive to his issue of being gay. He asked John to be assertive about his own rights in being gay and advised John that he could live a life without fear. Further, the therapist suggested that if necessary, John could leave his family behind because he was 'mature' enough to be independent and autonomous and could take care of his own life affairs. John told me in our first session that he felt the session with that therapist was "going nowhere" because he did not want to leave his family and live alone. He felt misunderstood and decided not to go back.

After sharing his first ever counselling experience with some close friends, the AUT psychotherapy clinic was recommended to him although he had no idea about what psychotherapy was like and how it was going to work for him.

John came to New Zealand as an immigrant at 16 with his parents and other family members. The trip was an early attempt to create a safety net for his family's fortune if the impending handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997 did not go as promised by the Chinese government. Typical of a Chinese father, John's father bought him and each of his brothers a house in Auckland to help them settle down. His father then went back to Hong Kong to continue his family business. Gradually, as the doubt and anxiety regarding the handover eased, all of John's brothers were asked to go back to Hong Kong to help his father expand his business into China. John's father entrusted him with the task of taking care of all the properties in Auckland and collecting rents for the family, while carrying on with his academic study at university.

In 1997, John's parents came back to attend his graduation ceremony from a local university. It was only then that John broke the news to his parents that he was gay. Both of his parents felt shocked and he remembered his father asked him to "go and see a doctor to get the problem fixed". From then on, there were numerous silent wars between them over his sexuality and John's father continued to emotionally ignore him over the phone. As a result, he found himself feeling more and more reluctant to visit his parents in Hong Kong, preferring to stay in Auckland however lonely he felt.

John's father is a hard-working person with low education who came to Hong Kong along with other refugees from China during the Chinese civil war around 1949. With resilience and good business sense, plus help from

within the family, he was able to establish a profit-making family business. In his role as 'Father', as dictated by *Ming* and *Fen* in Chinese culture, John's father fully supported him in receiving good education and gave no indication of any financial difficulties the family might be going through. Never letting anyone down, John was always the apple of the teacher's eye at school and his academic achievements had continued to be the best payback to his parents. The whole family felt proud of John and he was often the source of pride and honour to his father in a social setting.

John's father rarely showed emotions before family members, just like every other father in Chinese culture. John described his father as a quiet but strict person at home who would not talk when he was angry. Usually, the silence generated by his father's anger was frightening enough to keep everyone in the family away.

John described his mother as a woman who was submissive and would vent her distress through somatic complaints. John would always feel a sense of stress before he picked up the phone and talked to his mother. He would wonder what kinds of complaints she would flood the conversation with. However, his mother was the only person in the family with whom John had established an emotional connection and could share some of his emotional difficulty in being gay. Indirectly, John's father would collect information about him and how he was getting on through his mother. Similarly, through his mother, John was able to learn that his father was disappointed at him being gay and would often grudgingly complain about him for not being able to have a normal marriage and give him a grandson. In the stalemate, John's mother acted like a messenger between him and his father, a phenomenon that is very common in a traditional Chinese family when an issue occurs between one of the parents and children.

I have used John's family to describe a family atmosphere and interpersonal relationship pattern that I feel is typical in Chinese culture. In my description, readers can see the different roles and responsibilities each family member plays under the traditional Chinese concept of family. In this type of family, filial piety takes a major position under *Ming* and *Fen*. Therapists with Western training would benefit if they could put themselves in such a context when approaching Chinese clients (Yi, 1995).

Homosexuality and filial piety in a Chinese context

In one of our sessions, John started to identify a constant feeling of regret and shame. He regretted that because of his sexuality he was unable to have his own children in life and felt ashamed of how disappointed his parents must feel about him because of it.

Gay people in Chinese society face a much more difficult and humiliating environment than in the West. In addition to the ridicule and discrimination that gay people in the West often experience, in Chinese society gay people face extra stress imposed upon them by their filial role in the family to continue the family bloodline (Wong & Tang 2004; Zhou, 2006).

The entire 'coming out' process for John is full of pains and tears. Aside from his struggle to deal with the internalised guilt (Erni & Spires, 2001), the fear of not being able to get married and have children as prescribed by the traditional Chinese male role haunt him at every stage of the process. From the perspective of ancestor worship, his parents would have felt guilty for having a son that shamed the family ancestors by being gay. Moreover, upon awareness of John's homosexuality, the whole family lost not only a male member, but also the hope and expectation of a continuing family line. This totally opposes the concept of filial piety within

Chinese culture. According to Mencius (Legge, 1991b), there are three things that are regarded as extremely un-filial in a person's life. They are, firstly, bringing shame to one's parents; secondly, making no effort to improve the family's financial situation and leaving one's parents in poverty; and thirdly, producing no male descendants. Usually, any one of these three can be seen as moral defects. However, by comparison, the non-production of male descendants is taken as the worst of all by most Chinese.

Wong and Tang (2004) pointed out that contrary to a Western way of thinking where disclosure to parents of a homosexual orientation is used as a measure to reduce stress and improve relationships between parents and child, such behaviour in a Chinese context places additional stress and shame on parents who believe in the concept of filial piety. This may lead to an aggravated relationship between parents and child.

Help seeking behaviour in Chinese culture

Like most new Asian immigrants in New Zealand, John started to seek help for his psychological difficulty by first tentatively sharing it with gay friends, then close acquaintances, and gradually extending to a limited number of relatives in the family system (Ho, Bedford & Cooper, 2002). As a Chinese, John was aware of his filial piety role and one of the inherent duties that role prescribes is not to have parents worried over a child's problems. Therefore, despite the numerous episodes of depression in his life, he had only made these episodes known to one of his brothers, but never to his parents.

Just as it is difficult to locate a corresponding term for *'Xiao'* (Chinese word for filial piety) in Western civilization, the term 'psychotherapy' in English had no counterparts in the Chinese language until the late 1990s (Rascovsky, 2006; Halberstadt-Freud, 1991). In Chinese culture, the individual is encouraged to repeatedly reflect inward on his or her issues, be

they psychological or behavioural, as part of the process of becoming a mature adult. Through constant self-monitoring and self-cultivation, Confucianism exhorts that self-awareness of personal defects can be made available to pave the way for continued behaviour change toward a near-perfect person (*Jun-Tzu* in Chinese language*)*. Such a moral insistence on one's own efforts to self-help not only implies that seeking help from others means shame and willpower failure, but also greatly discourages the development of a profession that could lend a helping hand to those who are in psychological need. Under such a cultural ambience, when I suffered from psychological difficulties and could not cope by myself, I felt very helpless and lonely. More than once, I could not find a way out, let alone help others who were in the same boat as me.

Research (Hong, 2000; Lin, 2002) in Taiwan into help-seeking behaviour among students of universities showed that less than 4% of participants sought professional services provided by their universities to deal with their psychological problems. When asked why they did not make use of these services, most students reported that they had no awareness of such services existing and being available to them.

One of the implications of such a negative attitude to help-seeking behaviour is that when Chinese clients approach therapy, their issues are already very desperate and urgent. Usually, there is the expectation that immediate symptom relief will be provided. Many studies, such as the one by Sue and Kirk (1972), have shown that in comparison to the West, clients from Asian countries tend to look for immediate and practical solutions to their psychological problems, rather than exploring the causes behind them. It is perhaps because of this tendency for a quick fix that most Asian clients do not bother to stay in therapy for long if they do not find the therapy

process working as efficiently as seeing a doctor.

<u>Somatization</u>

John would always come to our appointments on time. Throughout each session, he was always polite and often wore a grin while describing somatic problems from which he had been suffering for years. It is noteworthy that Asian clients tend to somatize their psychological problems (Tseng & Hsu, 1970). The studies by Rahe *et al.* (1978) and Tseng (1975) also showed that people from Asia tend to express their psychological issues through somatic symptoms. For example, they might complain of long-lasting migraines, feeling low, or having a lump in their throat, rather than being specific about the life issues behind those somatic symptoms. Therefore, these studies suggest that it is essential for a therapist trained in the west to be familiar with the terminologies a Chinese client would use to describe his or her bodily feelings that implicitly indicate psychological issues.

Among the somatic terms that are popular with Chinese people, such as 'Shen-Kuei' (waning of the kidneys' function in a metaphorical sense), 'Gi-Chi' (frustrated breathing), and 'Shenjin-Shuairuo' (weak nerves) (Cheng, 1995), special attention needs to be drawn to Shenjin-Shuairuo. Shenjin-Shuairuo is a very popular somatic term in Chinese lay language close to "neurasthenia" (Cheung, 1989). It is used to encompass a wide range of combined physical symptoms and psychological feelings, from depression to schizophrenic disorders (ibid). By presenting with Shenjin-Shuairuo, Chinese people are possibly complaining to their doctors or therapists of a mix of physical and psychological feelings that may include a sense of "weakness and fatigue, worry and depression, excitability, nervous pain, or sleep disturbances" (Cheung, Gan, & Lo, 2005, p. 33).

In the atmosphere of a hierarchical Confucian family, it is understandable that a filial family member would normally deal with emotional impacts alone due to the concern of worrying his parents or other family members, or of upsetting the harmonious family ambience. Out in society, that the cultural institution does not encourage expression or sharing of personal feelings is a result of a collective approach in the culture with filial piety at its root. Therefore, somatization of psychological difficulty is a common defence mechanism, along with reaction formation, for Chinese people to deal with their life issues (Ng, 1985).

Transference and counter-transference

For psychotherapists in New Zealand, doing psychotherapy with Asian clients can be a very challenging task. From the very moment that an appointment with an Asian client is made, the therapist's initial transference feelings resemble boarding a flight to a foreign land, with which he or she is familiar only through media such as books, newspapers, television, or movies. I would argue that the journey of performing psychotherapy with Asian clients is also like an immigration process for the therapist during which he or she needs to gradually develop his own sense of acculturation. Leong (1986) pointed out that understanding the differences of cultural contexts in a clinical relationship could increase a therapist's sensitivity to his or her clients' experience and help facilitate treatment planning. Due to the numerous cultural phenomena and behaviour that can be confusing and misleading to a Western mind, therapists might stumble from time to time when looking for the most crucial aspect of dealing with Asian clients, which is to "differentiate the characteristic from the skewed" (Roland, 1995. p. 284).

My own transference before I saw John in treatment for the first time

was an anxious feeling. Prior to meeting him, I had had no experience of applying psychodynamic psychotherapy to any client who was not of European descent. I felt worried about our differences of worldview in terms of individualism and collectivism, and over whether or not he would accept psychotherapy because psychotherapy is an unfamiliar experience for Chinese people.

During our first few sessions, John came across as a quiet and deferential person. He would not initiate the conversation and usually waited for me to ask questions. Very often, there were periods of silence between us when I did not raise any questions. As a result of a filial piety focus and the resulting hierarchical relationship pattern in Chinese culture, Chinese clients may fairly readily develop a positive and idealized image of their therapists (Yi, 1995). They may transferentially fit their therapists into the role of authority figure as prescribed by social roles and their corresponding *Ming* and *Fen* and unconsciously interact with them in a submissive manner and with respect. For example, emotionally, John would look at a loss when I asked him how he was feeling about a particular person or a life incident. Usually, he would reply politely by saying that he felt fine while scratching his head and feeling embarrassed. It was as if he felt ashamed of being unable to implement his role as a patient (or a student) whose duty was to describe his problems fully to a doctor (or a teacher) who holds authority and power over him.

The initial counter-transferential feelings a therapist experiences with an Asian client may be various, ranging from being seen as a mentor (Roland, 1995) to a teacher (Yi, 1995). I argue that there is another strong counter-transferential feeling when involved with a Chinese client; the therapist is seen as a medical doctor and the client a sick patient waiting to

be worked on. As the above help-seeking behaviour of Chinese people indicates, going to see a psychotherapist is never an experience in most Chinese people's lives. A psychotherapist is usually mistakenly associated with a psychiatrist in the medical system and immediate symptom relief is expected as discussed before. Actually, almost all of my Chinese clients at work called me "doctor" although they knew that I was not a medical practitioner. For those Chinese clients, *Ming and Fen* meant they could only relate to me in the same way as to a medical doctor.

Psychotherapists with little experience in treating Chinese clients need to be mindful that it is crucial to be extremely patient in the first sessions to explain in detail what psychotherapy is about. They also need to allow time for Asian clients to firstly internalise the clinical encounter, make sense of it, and then figure out how to make the best use of it. This process is necessary and always takes time to establish.

Diagnosis and treatment

Compared to most European clients of mine, John often expressed little emotion when talking about his suffering in life. The inclination for Asian clients to use a lower level of verbal and emotional expressiveness than their white counterparts has long been identified in various studies (Ayabe, 1971; Fukuyama, 1983; Johnson & Marsella, 1978). As mentioned above, in order to maintain a sense of harmony in a particular social group, Chinese culture emphasizes both 'reservedness' in showing emotions and considerateness and intricacy in dealing with interpersonal relationships (Sue & Kirk, 1972). However, such culture-based emotional behaviour could easily receive scepticism from Western therapists who are emotionally in anticipation of directness and assertiveness from their clients (Sue & Kirk, 1972; Roland, 1995). Diagnostically, therapists might, therefore, mistakenly assume that

such a presentation from an Asian client indicates a personality trait of repression, inhibition, or shyness. In practice, they might further formulate interventions based on such diagnoses to help clients understand their pathological traits that are in fact culture-based (Leong, 1986).

As a matter of fact, when I first saw John, I carried out my diagnosis and formulation of a treatment plan based totally on a Western perspective. With the idea of achieving individuation and separation as the ultimate goal in mind, I initially formulated my interventions based on hypotheses that John depended too much on his family and needed to learn how to be independent. I further hypothesized that John needed to cultivate his assertiveness, become his own master, and claim emotional freedom from his family.

With transferential and counter-transferential feelings, I slowly started to help John explore the denied anger toward his father. However, before long, John began to turn down my interventions and pointed out that talking about his father was a 'no go' area. After a few more attempts had failed, I began to feel incompetent. It was as if we were in two separate spaces and had reached a dead end. Deep down inside me, it seemed that my ever-existing worry over the applicability of Western psychotherapy to Chinese clients had been confirmed.

At this stage, although knowing that we were in a cross-cultural context, I nonetheless started to feel frustrated over John's resilient reluctance to put aside the imposed traditional role. I also began to feel agitated not only about John's stubbornness but also my failure to 'liberate' him. I related fully to the emotional reactions of Torii (2006), a Japanese student psychotherapist, who treated a Chinese woman who abided by the patterns of relationship in a traditional Chinese family and their emphasis on

the filial role and *Ming and Fen*. Torii's emotional reactions may illustrate the counter-transferential feelings of therapists who have undergone Western training and have had few experiences with non-Western clients. The following is an excerpt of Torii's writing about her Chinese client and her frustration:

> As we progressed, I found myself growing frustrated. She really was not motivated to increase her sense of internal control to cope with problems. She wanted to be helped, but she wanted to stay helpless. ……………. . My frustration was caused by my wish (or need) to liberate her.

And

> My wildest fantasy perhaps was that all she had to do was to follow my footsteps. I wanted to show her the way to recovery and liberation. Since I knew a way out of the unbearable, which was to adopt individualism values from Western culture, it was tempting for me to educate and convert her as well (Torii, 2006).

It is to Torii's credit that she soon came to an awareness of her bias against collectivism as a result of her own life experience.

However, when I was with John, my struggle was between the inclination to formulate and intervene from a Western perspective and the uncertain feelings around how he would accept Western style psychotherapy. For me, cross-cultural psychotherapy is like a meeting point in which two different belief systems encounter each other, in this case, individualism vs. collectivism, or independence vs. interdependence. In the Western part of

my mind, I was indeed tempted to educate and convert John to experience the freedom that I had experienced as a result of my own adoption of individualism. However, in the traditional part of my mind that supports my ethnic identity, I felt torn and lost. As a therapist, I was in a sense still groping to find a way to integrate psychodynamic psychotherapy with Chinese culture.

Filial piety and adjustments of clinical interventions

In psychoanalytic thinking, a male person's growth and maturity depends on a thorough resolution of the Oedipal stage in the developmental process. Likewise, an individual growing up in the West is not ready to be equal and compete with others in the adult world if he cannot successfully defy his father and be independent of him psychologically (Slote, 1992; Sun, 2002; Tang & Smith, 1996).

From a totally different perspective, a mature individual in a Chinese cultural context that adopts filial piety is regarded as a person who is able to 'surf' through all interpersonal relationships without causing confrontation that attracts shame. In order to do so, a 'mature' Chinese individual is also a person whose ego structure and sense of self consist of many other objects, predominantly his family and numerous significant social roles (Slote, 1992). In Chinese culture, a person's sense of maturity does not come from him being his own master, but from his ability to manoeuvre and integrate relationships in order to keep every member in his interpersonal circle as harmonious as possible. By Chinese standards, asserting one's own rights over the collective benefits of the group of which he is a member is usually seen as selfish and immature.

Consequently, when adapting and adjusting clinical interventions to fit into a Chinese filial piety context, I argue that the biggest challenge for a

therapist in performing psychotherapy with Chinese clients is how to properly deal with the parent-child relationship and to decide to what degree individuation and self-assertiveness can be achieved.

Leung & Lee (as cited in Sun, 2002) pointed out that the theories behind Western styles of psychotherapy tend to construe psychological problems as intra-psychic and individual, while Chinese traditional thinking based on Confucianism tends to see problems as social and relational. According to Leung and Lee, it is therefore, crucial that differences between the respective cultures are recognised. If they are not, psychotherapists with Western training will misdiagnose the relationship problems in Chinese culture and advocate autonomy and independence.

While agreeing with the importance of discerning cultural differences, I find it difficult to side with Leung and Lee's observation that the psychological problems of Chinese people can be construed and categorised only as social and relational. On the contrary, my own therapy experience led me to believe that my own relational/interpersonal issues could be broken down into various intra-psychic conflicts and brought into my consciousness in therapy. Therefore, I argue that the key point here is not whether psychodynamic thinking is applicable to non-Western clients, but that before helping Chinese clients explore and understand their unconscious dynamics and achieve appropriate individuation and self-assertiveness, a therapist must be able to establish and maintain a therapeutic relationship with them without being hindered by cultural differences in the first place.

The stagnant situation between John and me changed when I was aware of the significance of filial piety issues in Chinese culture and decided not to focus on John's individuality at the early stage of therapy.

Instead, I adjusted myself to an inter-subjective approach by switching to thinking and feeling in an Asian cultural context and dedicating myself to continuing to provide a holding environment (St. Clair, 1986) for John. It was only then that I started to regain a feeling of connection with him. I no longer viewed John's deferential and polite facial expression as a reflection of a pathological false self (Winnicott, 1960) that needed to be replaced by his true self. Nor did I experience John as a person with dependent traits unable to assert his own independence. The focus now was to help John feel understood and supported within his life experience. This inter-subjective approach, in the form of an empathic-introspective technique, refers to "the attempt to understand a person's expression from a perspective within, rather than outside, that person's own subjective experience" (Stolorow, Brandchaft, & Atwood, 1987, p. 15). In retrospect, such an adjustment and adaptation of the clinical approach proved successful and worked well with John.

Verbatim

As our therapy sessions moved on, John seemed to become more and more used to the safe, non-judgemental, and trusting ambience of psychotherapy and would often initiate conversation. While my efforts to maintain a therapeutic relationship with John continued, I also tried to find the right moment to help him explore the unconscious conflicts within filial piety issues. Over time, John became increasingly able to understand how authority figures, which are culturally connected with concepts such as filial piety, family, and a hierarchical social institution, had unconsciously affected his decisions in life. The verbatim below illustrates John developing such an understanding.

The theme of the verbatim is about John's understanding of his

unconscious fear of authority figures and the correlation with cultural institutions. The verbatim is quoted from the 26th session and it involves two incidents at a new job that helped lead him to such an understanding. The first incident is a transferential feeling of being a primary school student in the office where John expected good care from senior colleagues, such as parents or the elders would provide in a big Chinese family. The second incident involves his unconscious deferential behaviour toward superiors and the secondary treatment of his own needs as in a hierarchical society. Both incidents reflect crucial Chinese cultural values with filial piety at their roots, which are harmony, interdependence, and *Ming* and *Fen* in the first incident, and deferential and obedient behaviour toward authority in the second.

T: *Yes, John, you mentioned about feeling like a primary student in the office, and also the need for others to take care of you. And you also mentioned about the lady you went to see. But when her phone rang, you needed to give all the space and time to her and you left. And… you know… I wonder… those people are all authority figures. And for you, it is like in a primary school and you look around, they are all very powerful persons and much more powerful than you can deal with* (interrupted by client)…

C: *Mmm*

T: *To* (interrupted again by client)...

C: *To find your own say.*

T: *Yes, to have your own ideas heard by them, to talk to them.*

C: *Mmm*

T: *It is quite fearful,*

C: *Yes.*

T: *To deal with them*

C: *Yes.*

T: *It is like dealing with those authority figures is quite dangerous, and frightening…*

C: *Yes,*

T: *And I wonder if it has something to do with your father… You know in the family…as a child… it was hard for you to talk to your father… and*

get your voice across to him and be heard...

(silence……………………………….)...

C: *(Client laughs bitterly and murmurs)... Another silence... Sometimes it feels like Ooop, no go area in the past!*

T: *Yes, it is frightening...*

C: *I would say... half of it is culture and family background and half of it is probably the education system. In Hong Kong, all the knowledge is force-fed to you and you have to accept and remember. Like all the instructions and you don't ask questions. Like the teacher says this is the formula and you just take it. That type of environment of how it works. That is why it is a bit scary when you raised the question, and challenged...*

T: *to stand up and let yourself be seen and heard.*

C: *Yes, it is difficult for the students in Hong Kong*

T: *You are right, most Chinese society...*

C: *Mmm*

T: *….do have that kind of education system...*

C: *Students here... quite young... they gain a lot of freedom to talk about themselves, in Hong Kong, Ooop, it is big class, basically, you don't challenge your teachers. This is the textbook, and that is the rules, end of story.*

T: *Yes.*

C: *Difficult.*

T: *Yes.*

C: *You haven't been given the opportunity...*

T: *To assert yourself.*

C: *Yes, you just like absorb, absorb and absorb... for me, my learning is like, ok I absorb...and I just tried to understand the logic behind it, and (John went on talking about his ways of learning for some time). ...So when you talk about father, I would say it is a fact, but as the only reason I doubt it is.*

T: *The whole culture thing.*

C: *The whole culture ...the schooling system in Hong Kong...*

T: *Although you family had also played a part in shaping you ...*

C: *Yes.*

After my last attempt (in session 6) to help John understand his denied anger toward his father, my interventions resumed as demonstrated in the

verbatim to help John explore his unconscious fear and to link it with the early object relations with his father. This time, based on a well-established trusting relationship that had been achieved and maintained ever since the 6th session, John did not turn me down and change topic, but was able to participate in the conversation. He was also able to put his unconscious fear into perspective and came up with insights.

The verbatim demonstrates that psychoanalytic approach in helping Chinese clients understand their intra-psychic dynamics is no different from what could be achieved when with European clients. However, there needs to be a well-established relationship to be successful. Moreover, Asian clients who are controlled by the concept of filial piety might need a much longer time to warm up to clinical interactions. To avoid shame, Asian clients unconsciously seek a nurturing and trusting environment in the therapy process before feeling equal and safe enough to move out of various cultural positions dictated by *Ming and Fen* to really be themselves.

After 30 sessions of psychotherapy with John, his depression symptoms disappeared. He thanked me for my help and left therapy. Like Yalom (2002) who thanks all his previous clients for the clinical experiences that help him to better understand future clients, I appreciated the clinical encounter with John and the cross-cultural learning that has helped my understanding of how to integrate Western psychotherapy with Chinese culture.

The case vignette above illustrates the importance of understanding the cultural background of a client who is not culturally in line with the therapist. It also gives a clear indication that Western psychotherapy, that is psychodynamic psychotherapy, can fit with Chinese traditional values of filial piety if proper modifications of interventions are developed and

applied.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This dissertation has sought to understand the effects of cultural assumptions such as filial piety in Chinese culture on psychodynamic psychotherapy. Accordingly, necessary adaptations and adjustments of interventions in a cross-cultural therapy context are also sought to enhance therapeutic relationship and bring about positive treatment outcomes (Chang, 1998; Hwang, 2006).

I have answered the research question as outlined at the beginning of this dissertation with firstly a qualitative account of my own cross-cultural experience as a Chinese immigrant student who studied psychotherapy and trained as a psychodynamically-oriented psychotherapist in New Zealand. The narrative account itself is also self-explanatory to provide readers with a picture to reflect on what it would be like for a Chinese client to cross-culturally approach Western-style psychotherapy.

I then explore into the origins and evolution of filial piety in Chinese history with illustrations of Confucianism, ancestor worship, social-moral institutions such as *Ming* and *Fen*, and political manipulation. The contemporary meaning of filial piety is also researched and presented. The attempt here is to demonstrate the ingrained nature of filial piety in Chinese culture. Like individualism in the West, filial piety is in every Chinese person's blood.

Subsequently, I make efforts to explore family values, filial piety practice in a family context, and its potential influences on personality development.

Finally, using a case vignette, the discussion is expanded to include the crucial adjustments and adaptations of clinical interventions necessary to encourage therapists to inter-subjectively understand their Asian clients

from within their life experiences and put any philosophical/ideological intervention in second place.

For most Asian cultures in which filial piety is central to upholding hierarchical social institutions, being emotionally assertive about a person's rights as advocated in the West tends to be perceived as taboo. Therefore, for therapists who are trained psychodynamically, I argue that their experience in treating clients from a different cultural background is like an immigration process that mainly consists of acculturation and establishment of ethnicity identity. In a clinical situation, it is about understanding a client cross-culturally and honouring the fact that there are indeed significant cultural differences in how an Asian client and a Western therapist view the world.

My learning from carrying out the research on filial piety in a Chinese context is very rich and encouraging. It helps me to understand thoroughly the dynamics behind such a cultural phenomenon and feel informed and prepared as a therapist for its potential clinical implications for the therapeutic relationship in the therapy room.

I would like to complete this dissertation with a quote from Kohut (2003) who emphasized why psychotherapists cannot afford to ignore culture. He wrote:

> Psychoanalysis should be regarded once again not only as a form of therapy but also as belonging to the general attempt to understand human beings, an attempt that is at once individual and cultural, inextricably psychological and historical (p. 235).

Such a statement is particularly true when it comes to a cross-cultural

encounter. My learning experience of becoming a psychotherapist as a Chinese student is indeed an attempt to understand, through my own individual and cultural lens, how other human beings see the world and live their lives under their respective cultural ambience. It is also a crucial learning process to distinguish between behaviour and attitudes that might seem pathological from a western psychological perspective, but are in fact healthy and culturally appropriate for people from Asian cultures when it comes to applying a western style of psychotherapy to Chinese or other Asian clients. To close the chapter, the whole learning experience from the Adult Psychotherapy Programme at Auckland University of Technology has helped me start on a never-ending journey to continuously use this understanding to explore human beings throughout my professional life as a psychotherapist.

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