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Psychic Impact and Outcome of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). A Psychoanalytic Research Project at the Sigmund-Freud-Institut, Frankfurt (Germany)[1]

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ABSTRACT

The paper lines out a research project done as a cooperation between Sigmund-Freud-Institut (Frankfurt, Germany) and 5 Chinese professors of different universities. It focusses at traumatic experiences of witnesses of the Chinese Cultural Revolution and the transgenerational transfer to one of their children. Method and results of this qualitative research are outlined. Copyright © 2011 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Key words: China, cultural revolution, trauma, transgenerational transfer

In Germany in 2009 we celebrated the 20th anniversary of the breakdown of the Berlin wall and the following reunification of our country. These fascinating events have been the starting points for social psychological research at the Sigmund-Freud-Institut in Frankfurt. We call them the 'East Projects'. Together with some colleagues[2] we investigated the transformation of teacher's opinions and behavior in East Germany and in the Czech Republic, in the years after 1989. In another project we investigated the unconscious motives of unofficial collaborators of the East German state security service.

The project I will describe in this paper goes Far East and investigates the psychic handling of individual experiences by witnesses of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) including their children. Naturally, as German psychoanalysts we did this research against the background of our own history and the extensive literature concerning the psychic impact of the Nazi period, especially the holocaust. These investigations, undertaken by Bergmann, Jucovy und Kestenberg (1982), Eckstaedt (1986, 1989), Faimberg (2005), Grubrich-Simitis (1979, 1984), Laub (1998), Laub and Auerhahn (1993), Leuzinger-Bohleber

(1989, 1990, 2003), Leuzinger-Bohleber u. Zwiebel (2003) and many others clearly show the transgenerational influence of traumatic psychic structures from one generation to another.

Let me begin with a short historical overview. When, in 1911, the Qing Dynasty came to an end and China became a republic, a power struggle developed between rival groups. From 1927 to 1945 China went through a civil war,[3] while the second Japanese-Chinese war took place from 1937–1945.[4] In these wars, more than three million soldiers lost their lives, more than nine million civilians died in the cross fire, and more than eight million civilians died in non military accidents. About 95 million people were displaced or took flight. In 1949, following the victory of the communist party, the People's Republic of China was founded, eliciting yet another series of catastrophes. The so-called "Great Leap Forward" between 1958 and 1962 resulted in the biggest famine in the history of mankind with about 20 to 40 million dead.

Then between 1966 and 1976, the so-called "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" was initiated by Mao Zedong (1893–1976). Officially it was supposed to serve the fight against the enemies of the socialism inside China. To maintain the power of the people, their enemies inside the communist party as well as in the whole population had to be fought – particularly the intellectuals. The process cascaded into a dynamic of its own which could no longer be steered by responsible politicians. From 1966, starting in universities and schools, public prosecutions of professors and other teaching staff through posters and public meetings spread and affected many other social institutions: The party, the army, and the whole economy. This produced a state of permanent national persecution. For example, accused professors were exhibited to the public with shields of accusation around their neck and tapered shame hats on their heads, then were beaten, tortured, and murdered. Many of them committed suicide. There were lootings and arbitrary arrests. Politically or personally unpopular people were tormented and murdered.

Officially, the groups waged a fight against the so-called four old evils: Old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits. Over time, one could observe a shift of roles between persecutors and victims: The political and institutional power shifted more and more from the official organs of party and state to locally dominant groups of red guards, rebels, armed forces or revolutionary committees. Finally, state and party institutions collapsed. By the end of 1968, the whole society drifted into an anomic state that was only appeased by dispatching approximately 12 to 17 million municipal teenagers and former "red guards" to the countryside.

The overall number of victims is not known. Estimates range between hundreds of thousands to several million. A whole national class of intellectuals was largely eliminated. There was an extermination crusade against the legacy of China's traditional high culture. Moreover, in Tibet most of the religious institutions and representatives were destroyed, and many people were killed or imprisoned and tortured in re-education camps. In Tibet alone, more than one million

DOI: 10.1002/aps

people lost their lives. At the end of the Cultural Revolution, only 13 of 6000 former Tibetan temples were still in existence.[5]

METHODS

We organized our research within three directions: Psychoanalytical (head: Dr Tomas Plänkers, Frankfurt), socio-psychological (head: Prof Dr Dr Haubl, Frankfurt), and sinological (head: Prof Dr Gentz, Edinburgh). In this paper I will restrict myself to the presentation of the psychoanalytical branch. Our project predominantly aimed at the collection of qualitative data, which could be interpreted psychoanalytically in order to gain a deeper understanding of the ways contemporary witnesses experienced these anomic times, the nature of their psychic trauma, its processing and its influence on the next generation. To realize this goal we avoided statistically representative research, which would have meant applying huge numbers of questionnaires. We restricted ourselves to a small number of semi-structured, psychoanalytically-oriented interviews. By applying a structured, transparent, and comprehensible way of interpretation we tried to generate hypotheses to arrive at deeper understanding. In contrast to speculations, hypotheses are statements that can be justified and related to further empirical findings in order to confirm or to modify them.[6]

After a period of methodological considerations and pre-test interviews the research interviews were conducted by four professors from different universities in China.

They performed six interviews with the first generation and six with the second generation. On the one hand, these semi-structured interviews should allow the interviewee to unfold his narrative in a free and personal way. On the other hand, we wanted to gain some information about special topics.

These were related to *biography* (experiences in early childhood, family origin, meaningful events [separations, losses, illnesses, moving, etc.], education and professional career, choice of partner, family, important relationships, psychic symptoms), and the time of the *Cultural Revolution* (memories of the Cultural Revolution, personal experiences, processing of these experiences, personal attitudes at that time and today). So the interviewers were told to keep these topics in mind and to inquire about them during the interview. We agreed upon starting the interview with an open question, something like: "I thank you for coming here, today. As I have already told you I would like to talk to you about your life experiences. If you look back at your life now: Where would you like to start?" The interviews had no time limit and it was possible to have a second meeting in case the time was not sufficient in the first interview.

The Chinese colleagues recruited their interviewees from their relatives, friends, and patients. We agreed upon passing on an interviewee to another member of the interviewer group, when there was a personal or professional relationship to him or her. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed according to certain transcription rules. Then the Chinese group checked the

DOI: 10.1002/aps

text to see whether all topics we hoped for were actually included. To save money we only translated those interviews which covered all of these topics.

To ensure a structured way of interpretation we outlined an evaluation questionnaire with a total of 38 questions. A group of five psychoanalysts,[7] in the first stage, each read all interviews and completed the questionnaire. In a second stage, they discussed their evaluations point by point in a group session. If they disagreed, they tried to form a consensus judgement. By following this procedure we ended up with consent for a single evaluation for each interview.

Along with the interview we applied three questionnaires: An *interviewee questionnaire*, which had to be completed by the interviewer for some outline data; an *interviewee-biographical-questionnaire* to be completed by the interviewee; and an *interviewer questionnaire*, that had to be completed after the interview to collect some data concerning the setting and course of the interview. The first two questionnaires were aimed at releasing the interviewers from collecting "hard data;" the third provided information about the interview's setting.

RESULTS

Our Chinese colleagues told us that it was not easy for them to find the interviewees. We assumed that there might be different reasons for not being willing to participate in our interviews: One can view it as a resistance against coming into contact with vulnerable parts of one's own life history. One can assume other anxieties. But what seems to be most probable is the lack of acquaintance with being interviewed as part of scientific research. Even for our Chinese colleagues this was a new experience and it took several journeys to Beijing to get them acquainted with the process. Moreover, being asked to take part in an interview caused confusion and suspicion. That is why our original plan to get a well balanced group concerning age, sex, and educational level could not be realized. As we did not strive for a representative research sample, this was not really of concern. Originally we planned to conduct the interviews within the course of one year, but due to these difficulties, and perhaps due to resistance among the interviewers, it ultimately took more than two years.

Interviewees of First Generation

Participants (five men and one woman) were between 66- and 87-years-old. Born between 1918–1940, they were between 26- and 48-years-old, when the Cultural Revolution started. (See Table 1 for interviewee details)

Interviewees of Second Generation

Participants (four daughters and two sons) were between 34- and 54-years-old, born between 1953–1972. Accordingly, the eldest was 13, when the Cultural Revolution started. Three of the interviewees were born before the Cultural Revolution, three around 1970, i.e. in the middle of that period. (See Table 1 for interviewee details)

DOI: 10.1002/aps

Table 1: Interviewee details

	Six interviews	Six interviews
	First generation	Second generation
Age at time of interview (2006–07)	66–83	31–51
	Born between 1918–1940	Born between 1957–1971
Sex	Five Male	Two Male
	One Female	Four Female
Partner	Married (6)	Married (5)
Education	Three university graduates	Four university graduates
	Three non graduates	Two non graduates
Present profession	Five retired	Three university employees
	One engineer	Three employees

Some Results

Approximately half of each generation was very motivated for the interview because they were looking for someone who could help them process their conflicts. The other half agreed more or less to do their interview partner a favor. We were surprised at the interviewers' behavior in the interviews. They fluctuated between short-term empathy and frequent unempathic reactions with some semi-suggestive interventions. It was striking that the interviewers avoided a deep examination of early object relations and of deeply emotionally meaningful sequences. Predominantly, they used question-and-answer communication. This applied to the interviews of both generations. It turned out that the training carried out before the interviews was only partly successful, apparently due to the defensive needs of the interviewers. It may be that we are dealing with symptoms of early traumatization in the interviewers, where instead of a deepening narrative they remained concrete on the surface (see Grubrich-Simitis, 1984). Furthermore, we noticed that most of the interviewees presented merely descriptive memories, and were rarely self-reflective. Nevertheless, the interviews mostly allowed the evaluating analysts to deepen their psychodynamic understanding of the interviewees.

The Family of Origin

Firstly, the older generation interviewees' relationship to their primary objects was complicated, because only three of the six grew up in their family of origin. Two interviewees grew up with the grandparents, one with a substitute family. It seemed remarkable that only one interviewee (1A) grew up in a family, who apparently did not traumatize him. Instead it allowed for a constant development of relationships and secure attachment! However, with four interviewees (3A, 5A, 6A, 7A) we found early separation traumata, especially existential survival

DOI: 10.1002/aps

anxieties due to extreme poverty. When these interviewees spoke about early relationships with parents or grandparents, they mostly reported a depressive dependency, especially on their mothers or grandmothers (3A, 4A, 5A, 6A). We could see clearly the negative effects of the lack of positive representations of fathers in all interviewees! Either the father was hardly mentioned or he was described with contempt and hatred. This reinforced our impression that the early mother relation had an unconscious dominance for all interviewees.

All but one of the first generation interviewees came from families with three to seven children. However, brothers and sisters were hardly mentioned in their narratives. When they were, only concrete details were reported, such as the care for the family by the brother (6A), who had hung himself during the Cultural Revolution. Or else: That brothers and sisters obeyed and look up to him (4A). Only with Mr Hong (7A) did feelings of guilt become clear, because he considered himself responsible for a sibling's early death. We suspect that this omission was due to the advanced age of the interviewees coupled with the early traumatic experiences that limited their capacity to form a family narrative.

What Did They Experience During The Cultural Revolution?

When the interviewees spoke about the Cultural Revolution, they mostly portrayed themselves as victims: They outlined the violence they had suffered and its consequences. Addressing any roles as perpetrators was understandably more difficult, since this seemed to be impeded by shame and guilt. Only one interviewee (Mrs Song, 5A) also described herself as a perpetrator: She searched in personnel files for "impure elements" and denounced them. This is remarkable, as it is well known that perpetrator and victim roles changed quickly during the Cultural Revolution as warring sides alternately dominated each other and persecuted the newly inferior group. Many people were forced to take part in public impeachment meetings. As the Cultural Revolution lasted for ten years, it was expected that perpetrator and victim roles would be described in the interviews.

Altogether, we were impressed by the extent of violence this small number of interviewees reported suffering. They described observations of violence against previously respected authorities, for instance college lecturers (1A, 4A) were publically humiliated and beaten. They became witnesses to suicides (1A, 4A, 5A), torture (4A, 7A), and detention (5A). They learned that members of their peer group (e.g. students) (1A) became violent.

Understandably, their own experiences dominated the interviews. They described, how their privacy was penetrated (e.g. destruction of the household effects, 3A); their family cohesion destroyed (3A, 5A); how they were hindered professionally (1A), persecuted (5A, 6A, 7A), accused and humiliated publicly (1A, 5A, 6A, 7A), insulted (1A, 6A), socially isolated (5A), arrested (5A, 6A), and tortured (with night-long interrogations, sleep deprivation and caning). They became victims of different types of physical violence.

DOI: 10.1002/aps

Mr Wang, (3A): Beaten with leather straps, salt poured into wounds, urinating into the children's meal, destruction of his furnishings.

Mr Li (4A): All night interrogations, sleep deprivation, strokes.

Mr Zhao (6A): Interrogations with torture, banging his head against the wall, kicking his head, dirtying him with sewage, stubbing cigarettes on his skin, forcing him to undress, trying to drive him to suicide, crippling of his legs by strokes.

Some had to suffer the death of family members (5A, 6A) and their imprisonment in forced labour camps (4A, 6A).

Impact

With all interviewees of the first generation, the consequences of these traumas were heavy and chronic. Most of the interviewees were also pre-stressed. Namely, five of the six interviewees described traumatic childhoods from early separations from primary objects (3A, 5A) or severe poverty (4A, 6A, 7A). Thus, there were traumatic pre-experiences among almost all interviewees, implying a serious vulnerability to the ensuing traumata of the Cultural Revolution. We have seen earlier that missing out on early attachment experience (as for the Romanian orphans) creates a long term vulnerability from which children may never recover. A capacity for mentalization is never fully established, leaving them vulnerable to later trauma (Fonagy, 2008, p. 7; O'Connor, Marvin, Rutter, Olrick, & Britner, 2003, Rutter & O'Connor, 2004). This could be seen in our interviewees, five of whom showed symptoms of PTSD, including: Recurring thoughts and memories (3A, 4A, 5A, 6A, 7A); hyperarousal (3A, 5A, 6A, 7A); and avoidance (4A, 5A, 6A, 7A). Five of the six interviewees showed fragile self-esteem, as assessed by the experts (only 5A was judged to have good self-esteem).

Most interviewees felt a mixture of depression and rage looking back at the Cultural Revolution. Their assessment of the Cultural Revolution was negative throughout: Three of them regarded the Cultural Revolution as a regime "of the primitive mass," as a "chaotic, terrorist and anarchistic event," as a catastrophe instigated by struggles for power. Two addressed it rather neutrally as a fault. Only one distanced himself from the event and spoke of an "episode in the big flow of the revolution." Not surprisingly, their attitude to current political authorities was also negative. Most felt disappointed and deprecated today's political authorities. On the contrary, they emphasized their own personal principles (3A) and independent thinking (5A).

Some Features of the Second Generation

Most of the second generation interviewees (4) learned about the Cultural Revolution from family members. Moreover, four of the interviewees apparently tried to learn actively about the Cultural Revolution, while two had a passive attitude. Half of the interviewees thought they knew a lot about their parent's

DOI: 10.1002/aps

experiences during the Cultural Revolution, while the other half reported knowing little (1B, 3B, 4B). Four assessed the effects of the Cultural Revolution on their own family as serious. The other two regarded them as insignificant (1B, 4B). Like the first generation, they mostly agreed that the Cultural Revolution had disastrous consequences. Only Mr Wang Jr. (3B) tried to defend the idea of the Cultural Revolution in comparison to its practical failures.

Psychodynamics of Second Generation and Transfer of Trauma from First to Second Generation

We were interested particularly in the question of whether and how traumatic experiences of the first generation effected the second. Looking for conscious opinions, we asked interviewees how their parent's experiences of the Cultural Revolution effected themselves. Four of them spoke about serious lasting consequences; two assessed the consequences as 'not at all' or minimal (1B, 7B). In a second step we drew indirect conclusions about unconscious generational transfer based on the childhood experiences they described.

Five interviewees described their upbringing as achievement-orientated, imperious, and strict (1B, 3B, 4B, 5B, 6B). Only three reported also positive elements in their parent's behavior towards them (warmth, love, stimulating). Five reported a negative with their mothers: Cold, distant, with disappointment and hate. This often represented one side in a split between mother and grandmother, in which the grandmother was perceived as a positive. For three, father was the central love object.

Turning to the question of a intergenerational transfer, three of the six interviewees reported significant infantile separation (3B, 5B, 7B). Those who experienced the Cultural Revolution as children (5B, 6B, 7B) also reported traumatic losses. All together, these experiences were classified as traumatic, for they overtaxed the interviewee's capabilities of understanding and integration. However, at the time of the interview, we found a PTSD only in two interviewees (3B, 5B), and in one other case (6B), a post-traumatic personality disturbance. All three showed symptoms of hyperarousal. Generally, we judged that the emotional health of the second generation to be between good and moderate, better than that of the first generation.

Intergenerational transfer was manifest more clearly when we compared the psychodynamics of the second to the first. The second generation was considerably impaired in their ability to experience and establish good relationships, to develop well delimited egos with secure self control. The deficits were caused by the suffering of parents' trauma and by identification. I refer here to theories on intergenerational transmission of trauma: The telescoping of generations (Bergmann, Jucovy, & Kestenberg, 1982; Faimberg 1987), transposition (Grubrich-Simitis, 1984; Kestenberg, 1980, 1989), and Kogan's model of four types of parental transfer of trauma (Kogan 1990, 1995, 1998, 2002).

DOI: 10.1002/aps

I would like now to summarize some central ideas from each interview:

Mrs Yi (1B)

This daughter, born during the Cultural Revolution (1971), identified herself with her strict, intrusive father (born 1940). At the time of the interview, she was a rather anxious, conflict avoiding person, with a resigned depressive mood and a distinct inhibition of aggression. She took over the strict super-ego her father had demonstrated from childhood. For example, like him, she beat her daughter and was achievement-orientated. We also discovered a disturbance of her female identity. In both generations, we understood the exaggerated achievement orientation as a defence against coming into contact with internal weakness, with anxieties and with the sequelae of traumatic experience.

Mr Wang Jr (3B)

Like his cumulatively traumatized father (born 1920), this son (born 1969) experienced early separation trauma magnified by being frequently locked in until age three. His emotional retreat and narcissism reflect the failed positive childhood attachment. Apparently, his traumatized father was not able to find a positive mother for him. This pattern recurs in the son, whose narcissistic pathology reflects a defence against unbearable traumatic experiences.

Mr Li, Jr (4B)

We judged this son (born 1972) to be fatalistic. He draws little satisfaction from his work and regards his marriage as an unloving fulfilment of duty. Unconsciously, he experiences his wife like his mother: Strict, aggressive, unloving. The emotional deafness of his cumulatively traumatized father (born 1939), as well as his authoritarian anger, surely contributed to the son's experience of an unempathetic parental home. The negative experiences of childhood connected to the parents' divorce, recurred in Li Jr's marriage, which is as disappointing for him as his father's marriage. He shows an inability to form relationships as a result of these early negative experiences, caused at least in part by the father's traumatized personality.

Mrs Liu (5B)

This daughter (born 1954), the youngest of five sisters and two half-brothers, was traumatized by spinal poliomyelitis in her childhood, resulting in her being disabled and having difficulty walking. She also suffered a congenital cardiac defect necessitating many medical treatments in childhood. Consequently, she developed precocious ego maturation. The mother (born 1918), traumatized by

DOI: 10.1002/aps

the Cultural Revolution, had used the interviewer as a "rubbish bin" to help her bear her own traumatic situation. We postulate that the mother used this daughter in much the same way. Consequently, the interviewee developed great empathy for the sufferings of others in whom she met a projection of her internal maternal object. At the time of the interview Mrs Liu worked as a consultant for handicapped persons.

Mrs He (6B)

This daughter (born 1953) apparently grew up with an unsupportive, unempathetic mother and a traumatized father (born 1921). Like the father, Mrs He suffered from infantile separation trauma, which added to the destruction of the family during the Cultural Revolution. She developed a withdrawn character, with fear, uncertainty, and hostility towards others. Her insecure attachment in adult relationships repeats that of her father, and presumably of her mother as well.

Mrs Fan (7B)

Her father (born 1924) was brought up in extreme poverty, on both material and psychic levels. In childhood, he experienced little containment and attachment, also suffering childhood trauma due to the death of his sister and during the Cultural Revolution. When Mrs Fan was born (1957), he and his wife did not look after her, but handed her over to her grandmother and aunt. When Mrs Fan was three, she was put into a weekly kindergarten, which we understand as an early separation trauma resulting in an insecure attachment. Today, by unconscious identification Mrs Fan re-enacts her childhood separation with her daughter. While working far away (like her father and mother,) she hands her daughter over to her grandmother for extended periods. For instance, when her daughter was little, Mrs Fan went to Hong Kong for three years, visiting her family only occasionally.

CONCLUSION

We could view the social processes between 1966–1976 as being like a fundamentalist movement with religious, apocalyptic, and violent characteristics. The "Red Book" had the status of a divine message, splitting society into believers and heretics. Like Islamic fundamentalism, Mao's movement tried to purify society from the evil in opposition to any governmental power. Only Mao's words – which were God's words – were acceptable for revolutionary jurisdiction. The totalitarian character of this movement made everyday life a religious cause: Either it served the great leader or it did not. Both our interviewees and interviewers had to struggle with this regressive period of their society. We found with most of them psychic sequential and cumulative traumatizations in the

DOI: 10.1002/aps

sense of Keilson (1979). So the experiences during the Cultural Revolution were severe ones within a longer line of trauma beginning with childhood.

We have to question whether our Western style of research in this field, especially our style of interpretation is appropriate for such a different culture. In the center of this problem is our familiar idea of the individual, which feels more or less separated from others and has his responsibilities and guilt problems. So our structures of psychodynamic assessments works along the lines of separation, object relations, instincts, wishes, and guilt. But can this be the basis for adequately assessing Chinese? In the following paper,Friedrich Markert will discuss this topic more in detail.

NOTES

1 Paper presented at the International Psychoanalytic Congress Chicago 2009.
2 Dr Ingrid Kerz-Ruehling, Dr Rene Fischer.
3 The Chinese Civil War was a struggle for political leadership between the nationalist Kuomintang under the leader Chiang Kai-shek and the Chinese Communist Party under Mao Zedong, that started with Chiang's north crusade in 1927 and finished with the Kuomintang's flight to Taiwan.
4 The first Japanese-Chinese war was between 1894–1895.
5 Information from Wikipedia 19 August 2007.
6 I am very grateful to Prof Dr Marianne Leuzinger-Bohleber, who inspired us to follow this way of qualitative psychological research.
7 I am very grateful for the contributions of Dipl Psych Ulrich Ertel, Prof Dr Dr Rolf Haubl, Dr Friedrich Markert, Gertrud Reerink, MA, and Dr Hermann Schultz.

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