

Cultural Factors and Projective Identification in Understanding a Chinese Couple

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ABSTRACT

The assessment and treatment of couple relationships in China requires an understanding both of each couple's dynamic situation, and of their relationship to conscious and unconscious attitudes and changes in Chinese culture. The description of a Chinese couple illustrates the use of Fairbairn's concepts of psychic organization and of projective identification in understanding their individual and shared couple organization. We also locate the couple's difficulties with reference to the changing attitudes in modern Chinese culture.

Key words: internal object relations, projective identification, changing cultural issues, China's culture, transference, countertransference, enactment

When I am given things that I do not want, I should not give them to others either. If others give me things that I really want, they should do it out of heart and not due to coercion. This is the difference between kindness and tolerance. Tolerance is the premise of kindness and my principle. (Wang Shouren, 'To Huang Zongxian' [Ming Dynasty])

This paper describes the evaluation of a Chinese couple who illustrates the tension in many couples in this time of rapidly changing cultural expectations in China. We also demonstrate the use of Fairbairn's description of the psyche as composed of multiple parts of self and object in relation, and couples' use of mutual projective identification to help us understand the couple's dynamics and their cultural dilemma.

Chinese social identification has undergone dramatic changes in the last century. The pattern of male-female relationships has evolved from a hierarchical male dominant, authoritarian pattern towards an egalitarian one. Additionally, in the past decade, the spread of the Internet has freed much social thought from the control of the ruling party. In a Chinese idiom we could say that people's thoughts are now like wild animals, losing control and meaning. One of the most

important cultural identifications began with Confucian ethic 2500 years ago: Women should be obedient to men and everyone should submit to their fate. However, women no longer blindly depend on men, and people do not yield to their fate. Although in modern China the advocacy of atheism has not eliminated religions completely (Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism), there is now a tension with a modern pseudo-religious ethic that emphasizes physical well-being, spirit-uplifting and financial success. There is increasing variety in social identifications in a newly multicultural environment, but in this time of social change, people lack stable objects of identification. New cultural concepts exist in tension with old ones. Conflict between them is played out between parents and children, within couple relationships, between families and society, and between outer and inner realities.

It is useful, therefore, to examine ways that changing social reality is reflected in the internal worlds and intimate relationships of our patients. In evaluating a couple who sought treatment from one of us (Shi Qijia), we employ Fairbairn's concepts of psychic organization and the concept of projective identification to understand these matters.

During development, each person takes in aspects of the parents in order to form a mind. This happens through the continuous conscious and unconscious exchanges between child and parent, in which the parent's mind forms a container for the unstructured processes of the child, and then the parent feeds them back to the child in progressively more structured form. In this process, the child develops a central self in relation to an inner good-enough object parent, with two less conscious and often more painful components: A part of self concerned with rejection, limits and mistreatment in relationship to an inner rejecting or persecuting object; and a part of self that longs for relationship in relationship to an exciting, beckoning, tantalizing object. These inner parts are always in dynamic relationship to each other, but in illness, the dynamics are distorted and often one of them becomes dominant. This imbalance is often symptomatically represented in difficulty in couples' sexual lives. We will illustrate this in the couple described in this paper (Fairbairn, 1952; Grotstein, 1993; Scharff, 1982; Scharff & Scharff, 2005).

The major force organizing all intimate relationships, from parent-child to marital partners, is affective unconscious communication. This process determines the long-term quality of intimate partnerships (Dicks, 1967; Scharff & Scharff, 1991). We use the term *projective identification* to describe this process (Klein, 1946; Ryle, 1994; Scharff & Scharff, 2005). One person puts a lost, unconscious part of the self into the other, identifies the other person with that part, and at the same time, the other person introjects and identifies with it through *introjective identification*. This continual process is the basis for the unconscious communication in depth that is essential to all intimate relationships. It is the basis for the kind of exchange that structures the child's mind, and is the way couples relate unconsciously in depth.

The statement by Wang Shouren with which this paper opened corresponds with the parents' *container* function (Bion, 1970; Scharff & Scharff,

1991). His understanding of kindness and tolerance means that if there is not enough kindness, parents may be internalized as rejecting objects that are part of an angry relationship with the self. Being over tolerant, the parents have the potential to be taken in as overly exciting objects that foster life-long craving. The same issues of kindness and acceptance apply to marital partners who need to be containers for each other in order to have a successful marriage and to avoid excessive resonance with each other's rejecting or overly exciting internal objects.

The social system and special cultural atmosphere also influence the unconscious and the developing mind, because they form equivalent unconscious social objects that make up and then are in resonance with each person and each couple's social unconscious. This social unconscious makes an impact on all identifications, which in turn influence the development of the couple and the whole of society (Aviram 2009; Hopper, 2003; Scharff & Scharff, 2011).

THE COUPLE

This couple presented after the wife had an affair with her boss, who then rejected her. We will summarize individual interviews with each spouse before giving some material from the couple evaluation and another individual session.

Mrs A was a 33-year-old nurse who had been experiencing anxiety, lack of attentiveness, insomnia, and diminished functioning at work for about a year. She had an extramarital affair during that year with her 40-year-old boss. In the beginning they worked closely together, but they began the affair when the boss initiated sex on a business trip. Though she had no orgasm, she enjoyed the sexual experience. Afterwards, she felt so guilty that she immediately took her whole family on a trip. When her boss paid ever more attention, promising to elope with her and start a new life, she abandoned herself recklessly to the relationship. Mrs A recalled, "I even ignored my seven-year-old son. Though I felt guilty, I lost interest in caring for him." Soon, however, the boss began to criticize her. When she complained to her company and his family, the boss became hateful. In therapy, Mrs A wanted to understand why he broke his promises and treated her badly. She said, "Despite all these problems, if he is good to me again, I would give up everything for him. I was like a slave to him and I'm still willing to do anything he asks."

Mrs A grew up with her poor parents and a favored younger sister. Her father was a worker and her mother an accountant. Her father was violent, often blaming and beating her. Mrs A remembered that once when she got a poor grade at school, she went home and cooked a meal. Nevertheless, her father gave her sister rice and she was only given poor congee. During her childhood, she got up early to carry out most of the household duties. Now, besides her nursing job, she also worked as a supermarket cashier, and a MacDonald's waitress. Deciding to impress her family by earning money, she bought them a house and found her

sister a job, supported her parents and let them live with her. She was so competent at work that soon she became a head nurse, earning more than her husband. She claimed she was the boss at home, proud that she could take care of her parents and sister. Her family listened to her. She also felt that her son was afraid she would abandon him, so that he, too, placated her and acted humbly.

Mrs A met her husband in 2001 and did not think that he was the one she wanted. However, after she maintained the relationship for three years, he was still waiting for her. So they got married even though she knew he was not the right man because he had a poor job and no sense of competence. But he had neither bad habits nor any obvious shortcomings. They married in 2003 and their son was born in 2004. Following the birth of their son, the couple only made love about once a year. Sometimes she wondered whether her sexual desire was too strong. Once, learning that a co-worker had an abortion, she felt jealous because her co-worker must have more sex. She also had heart surgery for an undefined ailment some years ago, a turning point in her desire to get more out of life.

Mrs A's disappointment towards her husband increased because he had no motivation or prospects in his menial, deteriorating job situation. More importantly, he showed little interest in sex and had difficulty with erections, making her wonder if her own sexual desire was excessive. At the beginning of her extra-marital affair, she felt guilty and made many attempts to improve marital sex life. Failing in that, she recklessly threw herself into the affair where sex made her feel real and no longer the lonely independent woman who had to control everything.

Mr B was born into a family of intellectuals. His quiet father worked in another city with his two years younger brother, while he lived with his mother who managed everything. He was close to his mother, spending time massaging her, shopping, and chatting with her. When he was nine, his father and brother returned home, and his relationship with his father was poor. Mr B saw his job now as busy and stressful. When recently he was transferred to a situation that was more stressful than his previous role, he lost interest in talking at home. When his son was born in 2004, his wife's parents moved into their home. He had worked away from home for some time, but once he came back home, his parents-in-law stopped helping, expecting him to take care of everything. Mr B said, "I am so tired that I have no interest in doing anything."

In the first of four sessions the couple came together, but Mrs A insisted on being seen alone. The second and fourth sessions were couple sessions. The third was with Mrs A alone because Mr B was unable to attend.

In this first segment of a couple session, we notice that husband and wife agree on the unsatisfactory nature of the relationship and on much about each other, but disagree about what causes their difficulty. While focusing on the husband's development and assessment of the marriage, the therapist heard that Mr B. "knew his wife was a bit spoiled from the beginning, but I felt that would not matter." The couple moved when their child was two in order to enable him to go to kindergarten. Mr B felt that he had difficulty adapting to his several job changes, moving between companies.

Mr B: "When I was in the old state-owned enterprise, there was pressure because of the enterprise's ineffectiveness. But when I was in the private company, the boss had every say and kept an eye on you. Perhaps I am not adaptive . . . Our family situation became bad since we had moved house. First, she made more money than me. Second, I felt stressed at work. I had to be cautious about the many conflicts working as a salesperson in a state-owned enterprise. But at home, I also have to be cautious. The family atmosphere should be relaxing, but my wife's temper was bad, and so was her parents'. I am not allowed to make mistakes. They always criticize me, but I do not like to be criticized. Like in my job, I do not like either to be criticized or to criticize."

Therapist (T): "Do you have any time that you felt comfortable together? For example, when you fell in love with each other, or when you got married?"

Mr B: "I have been adapting all the time. At home, I have to be cautious all the time. My wife's relationship with her father is bad. When they disagree, her father won't tell her. He wants me to talk to her, so I become the center of conflict. I'm under pressure at home and at work. I come home tired, so our sexual life is not good. I haven't been able to satisfy her since the beginning of our marriage. The more I want to perform, the more stressed I am. I've avoided sex increasingly for the past year or more."

Later, Mr B was talking about his parents, when Mrs A said, "His parents are discontented with me. They feel I control too much of his life."

Mr B then continued, "My academic results weren't good, so I couldn't get into college. But my father said a man should study, so I went to university at night. Afterward, I worked in a factory, where I had no chance to meet women. I only had met my wife. I was passive and never thought about trying to meet someone else."

Mrs A interjected again, presumably thinking about his passivity: "His mother makes decisions in his family, whereas my father makes all decisions, apart from me."

The therapist continued,

"Mr B: You said you were passive with your wife and after three years you were still waiting to marry her. Is this your passivity?"

Mr B: "Yes, I did not want anything to change in my relationship. We had conflicts before marriage, but I thought marriage might be a way to avoid conflict. She insists on her own way in many trivial family matters."

Therapist: "Mr B, you could have your own way of thinking."

Mr B: "Yes, but she insists on her way. If I insist on my way, she nags and nags. When there is conflict in our family, I retreat and don't think about it. Now I care more about the impact on our child. I don't want him to be hurt."

T: "So you endure no matter what. I suggest you propose a new pattern: That she should start to obey you. She said if your relationship improves, she might feel good."

Mr B: "These are only words."

T: "So you think no matter what you do, she will do things her way."

Mr B: "Yes."

T: "May I suggest you become the decision maker. You think making decisions isn't in your

character, and that you are weaker and your economic status is lower. What if now you were to take charge, for instance to decide what to do in your sex life?"

Mr B: (Silence) "I don't know. I feel I don't have . . ."

Mrs A: (Sighs) "It is very hard for us."

T (to Mrs A): "You are sighing?"

Mrs A: "Because he doesn't do anything in his family."

T: (to Mrs A) "Do you feel you are his mother treating him like a younger brother or son? You take away his responsibility. Now we have to give it back to him. You implied that you wished him to be a real man, and that you made many attempts to turn him into a real man, but he can't do it, right? So can you make some suggestions?"

Mr B interjects: "No, I could never make the decisions. Because if any of my ideas is wrong, both of us will insist on our own idea. Then our family will . . ."

T: "What did you say? 'If any of my ideas are wrong?'"

Mr B: "Sometimes we do agree with each other, but if we don't, she insists on her idea. And if I insist too, then we quarrel."

T: "If you quarrel, what will happen? She will win?"

Mr B: "Yes, because I always back down."

T: "She regards all your ideas as wrong?"

Mr B: "Not totally. But, she always acts according to her opinion."

This segment of the couple session shows that the dominance of the wife is supported by the couple. In traditional China in the Confucian tradition through the 19th century, women had to obey their fathers when they were girls, obey their husbands when married, and obey their sons when old. This reflected the subordinate and dependent status of women. In family hierarchies, females were submissive to males, and younger generations to older ones. Male respect to females was demonstrated by respecting the man's mother and older women. In fact, men looked down on women. Confucius said that women and servants were the most difficult to deal with. In those times, women were forbidden at the supper table and could not take part in important family ceremonies for fear of bringing bad luck. In the early 20th century, the May Fourth Movement liberated Chinese mentality. Women no longer needed to bind their feet and people could choose their spouses freely. After the founding of New China in 1949, women's liberation covered a wider scope. In urban China today most women have jobs, go outside the family, earn a living, build their own social circle and have their own opinions. As male-female relationships change further, men often care for children and share household duties, but they are still expected to earn more than their wives, to achieve at school and move up at work beyond menial jobs.

This couple's conflict is embedded in these generational social changes. It is common for men to cling to the old values and the inheritance of being the privileged boy. Meanwhile, women move rapidly towards a modern ethos of gender equality. Personal issues then come to embody these social issues. Mrs A was the major breadwinner and bought the family home. She had a wide social network and more job success. The husband had job instability, lower pay and a smaller social network. The husband's poor self-esteem

and conflict avoidance was also conveyed in the interview when he behaved like a nervous little boy, avoiding eye contact and nervously playing with his fingers while his wife devalued him. He justified his passive-aggressiveness protestations of helplessness. The couple agreed the wife was assertive, while the husband could only avoid conflict by assenting on every point.

The therapist, who did not accept the innate weakness and impotence of the husband, acted in the countertransference because of his own identification with the old values: He reverted from his analytic stance to an assertive stance himself, essentially instructing the couple to reassert old values and bolster the husband's interpersonal potency. But the couple defeated him, saying it would be useless. Later, when the wife requested time for a private interview, the therapist now identified with her, went along with her despite meaning to give the husband more of a say.

Because the husband was close to his mother and is used to being taken care of without taking responsibility, he now demands continual satisfaction. His internal mother is an over-caring exciting object. His father's absence supported intimacy and merger with this maternal object. He therefore sought a caregiver instead of an adult relationship with his wife. This preference for a maternal figure also leads to difficulty in developing an adult sexual relationship, which would feel incestuous to him. This enabled him to overlook and not even want to know about his wife's affair. Here we see that the husband's cultural legacy of being the pampered son conflicts with the wife's desire for a strong man, but it fits with her increased sense of potent self in the emerging culture of China. Underneath, however, she also longs to be loved and cared for.

In an individual interview, the wife described her wishes in searching for a husband:

Mrs A: "We were dating, and I told my father that our relationship was very plain. He said, 'Which is better for you, water or coffee everyday? Water is better for health'."

T: "It seems your father supported this relationship . . ."

Mrs A: "They think he is a dull but good man with no bad habits, such as smoking, drinking and gambling. My parents persuaded me to take him, because his temper was always good – at least better than my brother-in-law. My matchmaker advised that I needed to wait longer to know better. I wanted to separate from him, but he said gold would shine ultimately and hoped that I would give him a chance. Now I think I actually was clear then. When I got married, I already had my own savings. He had almost nothing in his bank account and was already over 30. People say that one should be established at the age of 30, yet he had nothing. What could we live on? He tended to choose the most expensive items to buy. He is the youngest son and lived with his mother who patted his butt or touched his head! Maybe she hugs him when I'm not there. It is impossible in my family! I am the eldest child and seldom have intimate behavior with my parents. My family thinks I should bear the family burden. I talk with my parents in an adult way. I give suggestions regarding things like buying a TV set or air-conditioner. When my father coughs, I want to give him a spittoon. But I don't

do it myself: I tell my younger sister to do it. I want to express my love, but in other ways. If I expressed it directly, my father would worry that I had changed.

"Since childhood, my father has blamed me, not my sister. My sister is not healthy. I am the eldest, so demands are made on me and I have to take care of her. My relationship with my mother is better than that between my sister and her. My father cried at my sister's marriage, but not mine. I am independent. My parents don't worry about me."

"My father was a worker and is arrogant. Our relationship is bad. I told my mother that I hated him because he was mean to me. I can't forget when he gave my sister rice and gave me congee as a punishment. At that moment, I swore that I must be more useful than my sister, and let my parents depend on me and not on her. I have hatred in my heart that I do not express. To others, I am a filial daughter. When I started to earn a little money at work, I bought my family expensive items and luxuries. My grandma suggested I save money for myself. I replied my only thought was to improve my parents' living. I enjoy this responsibility, and that my father makes requests. When he said he wanted a leather belt or pair of trousers, I told him to follow me to the shopping mall. I can afford whatever he chooses. I feel satisfied when he gets what he wants. When I got married, I wrote in my diary that I wanted to marry someone who was like a younger brother so I could control him, and continue to arrange my life. When we married, I thought at least I was in command and could make him listen to me. Now, when I feel contemptuous, I treat him even better, so as to make him feel guilty towards me. I will not hurt him or withdraw my support."

T: "You convey to me that you are not grateful to your father. You still feel angry?"

Mrs A: "Yes, because of his unfairness. I have supported my grandma financially, not him. So I always quarrel with him."

T: "Deep inside though, do you look up to your father?"

Mrs A: "I prefer to talk with my mother. My father hardly communicates with me. As family head, he still comments on important matters. He may complain, but he is not ungrateful. I tell myself not to argue with my parents. They are old so they should enjoy life. They take care of my son like nannies, so I should not argue with them."

T: "Your relationship with your father is an important foundation of your relationship with men. When you were young, your father was rigid and critical of you. You were afraid of this, so you try your best in everything in order to earn their respect, and you succeed."

Mrs A: "I have thought about your question. I looked down on my father all the time, and after I know a man well, I start to look down on him in my heart."

T: "Do you look down on all men after you know them well?"

Mrs A: "Once a relationship is established, they need to listen to me. I am stronger than they are in the end."

T: "So with your husband, you want to find a younger brother you can control?"

Mrs A: "I had many suitors, but no time to think about love affairs, as I had five or six jobs at a time. Guys pursued me, but when I looked, he was the only one still there."

T: "You devalue him, like your father. Do you do the same to every man?"

Mrs A: "I have adored some men before."

T: "Are there men whose control you accept?"

Mrs A: "I do really want to be controlled. After I had heart surgery, I felt tired and thought that if I died now, this man still doesn't know how to look after me. I want some one who

can take care of me, someone to rely on. After that incident, I preferred someone to do things for me. Someone told me that women do not need to think anything and should let men worry. Just wait to be served. I thought that was right."

Later Mrs A said: "The house my family lived in was small with only one bedroom and a living room. Sometimes when I went to the toilet in the night, I saw my parents making love and felt embarrassed. I realized what they did only when I was older."

T: "Did you talk to your mother about your sex life?"

A: "My mother also felt sad about my marriage. She saw that we seldom talked to each other and had no romance. When I told her of our sex life, she was shocked. She was surprised it had been five years. She understands that because he looks like a good man it is difficult for me to give him up. I am worried that even if I met a new man and we loved each other, could I tolerate it if I couldn't control him? I have never met a man who can control me, even though I long for a man who is stronger than me and could control me."

T: "If you both cooperate to improve your sex life, would you feel better?"

Mrs A: "I think so. I felt all right that we had sex only a few times a year. A few times are better than none. But now my desires become stronger. I have talked to him many times! I told him to watch pornographic movies or take some medicine. I tried everything to let him get into my body, but in the middle, he says he's tired! I wait patiently for him to penetrate. Then he gives up. He believes he is impotent. When he can't satisfy me, I want it desperately. In my dreams I beg others for sex. I even dreamt that I kneeled and begged the man whom I liked to do it with me."

In the interview, The therapist saw that Mrs A focused on the relationship with her father and its inheritance of a hateful, disparaging attitude towards all men, which she defends against by being controlling, and by a conscious reaction formation of caring for them. As a child, no matter how hard she worked to please her father, it was never enough. So she used a pseudo-altruism to satisfy her parents and sister. Satisfying others sets up a projective identification of her inner desire to be satisfied, the other side of her unsatisfied rejecting object. She found a husband who is like a younger brother, but eventually the unsatisfied repressed object relationship returns as this vicarious way of gaining control fails, leaving her once again feeling unloved, bitter, and sexually rejected. The extramarital affair brought union with a man with elevated social standing, money and authority, who cared for her. As an exciting object, he satisfied her needs and compensated for the rejection from her father and husband. He provided sexual satisfaction, even without orgasm. This Oedipal triumph was an opportunity to take revenge on her internal rejecting father.

The exciting object transference to the therapist offered a momentary cure for her suffering from a rejecting object relationship with the husband and the now rejecting lover. When Mrs A claimed the therapist for her self by asking to talk to him alone, the therapist was pulled into a symbolic version of an extramarital affair. Sharing the secret of the affair with the therapist and not the husband was a way to draw the therapist into an Oedipal quest to enlist his help to find a man to love her. Thus he became a new exciting object whom she felt could understand her disappointments.

THE COUPLE UNCONSCIOUS AND THE SOCIAL UNCONSCIOUS

This couple illustrates how mutual projective and introjective identification operate to allow each partner to find missing parts of themselves. Mrs A finds the pampering and care she longs for in the inner world of her husband, while Mr B finds the aggression and dominance he dares not show actively directly in supporting the assertiveness of his wife. Each supports these aspects of the other because they identify with them unconsciously. Through projective identification, Mr B's aggression supports the rejecting object organization of his wife, and Mrs A vicariously finds an exciting object in the perpetual care she gives to her parents and husband. Ultimately these unconscious mechanisms fail, becoming frustrating in continuing interaction, returning each partner to deprivation and suffering. On behalf of the couple, Mrs A seeks to regain the exciting object relationship in her sexual affair, supported by Mr B's obliviousness because unconsciously he hopes another man can supply what he dare not. Ultimately, this also fails.

We can also see the cultural issues expressed in the couple's dynamic. The couple's story and their relationship to their Chinese therapist illustrate how the social unconscious is internalized as a force in their conflict. China's changing opportunity for women presents Mrs A with an opportunity to make up for her family's and her own deprivation. Her outward traditional compliant demeanor is a reaction formation masking control and dominance, a revenge for the deprivation imposed by old cultural values. Mr B, the pampered favorite of his mother, has developed a character structure of passivity that demands care. Together the couple relationship is a tragedy of intersecting cultural values. All this is delivered into the transference: The therapist identifies with the cultural imperative for male authority. In an enactment, he tries to reassert male authority on behalf of the repressed life of the couple and of the culture. But the forces of change in the couple and in the culture defeat this enactment, as the spouses agree that such a reassertion of the old values would be personally futile.

This interview illustrates the way that object relations theory allows us psychoanalytically to understand the dynamic interaction of a Chinese couple. Understanding Chinese culture and the social unconscious enables us to see the couple's conflict as a common problem in a rapidly changing Chinese social world.

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