

# The Cultural Revolution—a Traumatic Chinese Experience and Subsequent Transgenerational Transmission: Some Thoughts About Inter-Cultural Interpretation

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## ABSTRACT

*Shortened interviews with a Chinese father, born 1930, and his son, born in 1968 are presented, in order to discuss the traumatic experience of the Cultural Revolution, its Transgenerational Transmission and some Problems of Inter-cultural Interpretation. Copyright © 2011 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

**Key words:** Cultural Revolution, traumatic experience, transgenerational transmission, problems of intercultural interpretation

I would like to present edited interviews with a father, born in 1930, and his son, born in 1968, in order to discuss the traumatic experience of the Cultural Revolution, its transgenerational transmission and some problems of intercultural interpretation. (The interviewer was a native Chinese speaker, but not an experienced psychoanalyst, so there are times in the interview when we do not have all the information we might wish.)

## “IT CANNOT BE MADE UP FOR”

The father, Mr Wang, 73 years old at the time of the interview, had worked for the police before the Cultural Revolution. In 1964 he lost his wife, to whom he was much attached. He was still suffering from a state of profound depressive mourning when he became a victim of the Cultural Revolution. His problem began when his mother-in-law's adopted son denounced him as an alleged land-owner in August 1966.

It was at night. I was fast asleep. They pulled me out of bed and beat me up without even asking any questions... They got a leather strap... They beat me all night and destroyed everything in the room... The shirt I was wearing stuck to my wounds because of the blood. They ripped off the shirt, got salt from the kitchen and scattered it on the wounds. They poured urine in my children's rice gruel.

Because he was now suspect, Mr Wang was locked up for 20 days in a small dark room with ten others. His daughters, three- and seven-years-old, were lost for a while in the chaos of that time because their grandmother was not allowed to take care of them; Mr Wang only found them again after a long search.

Although Mr Wang was released for lack of evidence, they sent him to the countryside for "re-education." He was not permitted to take the children with him, and was forced into a hasty marriage with a woman assigned to take care of them whom he was supposed "to learn from" as she belonged to the poor peasant class. To his great dismay, however, his second wife not only neglected the children but also beat them. The children's suffering was so great that he was finally permitted to come home nights, since his banishment was near Beijing, but it was a long journey. When he eventually asked for a divorce, permission was refused. When a boy was born to the couple in 1968, their marital relations relaxed.

Later in the conversation, Mr Wang revealed that he had already been subjected to persecution and injustice before the Cultural Revolution – and would have been branded as a rightwing dissenter if he had not gone up on a stage and subjected himself to stringent auto-criticism. Mr Wang then described how all these experiences are still present in his mind daily:

All these experiences are like dreams. They are very painful memories. I recall something and feel pain, nothing but pain. The memories of that time are unbearable. Sometimes I dare not think about them at all. One doesn't remember them intentionally but nevertheless the scenes and experiences appear automatically before one's eyes... Sometimes, when I cannot fall asleep, the more unpleasant things from the past are regurgitated and run through my mind like a film. That affects me a lot.

In the following example Mr Wang describes his memories:

When I enter the courtyard and the buildings, then I remember. When it snows in the winter, I remember. The day I was banished it was snowing too... When I arrived, I was as white as a snowman and freezing terribly. Certain scenes are associated with certain feelings...

In the second interview Mr Wang gave an account of his childhood. At the age of two months he was put into the care of his grandparents, with whom he developed a close relationship. He experienced his grandmother as particularly caring. She much preferred him – as the eldest grandchild – to his brother. When he was 23, his grandmother died. He experienced her death as such a heavy blow that he leapt into the open grave to follow her, as he had no desire

to live any longer. During the interview this memory affected Mr Wang so deeply that he foamed at the mouth.

After his grandmother's death, he felt lonely and depressed. Neither his grandfather nor his parents were able to give him any sense of security. It was only when he married his first wife at the age of 25, that he felt he had a home again. Actually he had first fallen in love with her younger sister but then married the elder sister on her grandmother's advice. Nevertheless, the marriage seemed to become sustaining for him. His wife died in 1964 of breast cancer that was recognized too late. Mr Wang recounted this with extraordinary forbearance, without reproaching the doctors. As on the occasion of his grandmother's death, Mr Wang was plunged into a deep depression. Because of this abnormal state he was not permitted to participate in the funeral, and was sent to an outpatient clinic for psychiatric treatment. The extended mourning from which he could not recover made it impossible for him to enter into a new relationship with a woman until the assigned marriage. On the other hand he regards his son, born of this second marriage, as a connecting link for the whole family. Without his son (who was questioned in the second interview below) he would have got a divorce. Looking back on his life, he states that he has "suffered a lot in life" and that his "health is ruined." Because of the Cultural Revolution he was never promoted. He had been rehabilitated after the Cultural Revolution, it was true, but what had been done to him could "ever be made up for."

## **LIFE IS LIKE A TREE THAT IS ONLY HEALTHY WHEN IT CAN GROW FREELY**

Wang's son, born in 1968, grew up like an only child (his half-sisters were nine and 13). As he discovered later, his father was in custody when he was born and his parents had only married under political pressure. Wang Jr still lives in his parents' house in an apartment of his own. He said: "My family is not quite normal. What good does a family do you if it is dominated by contention?" Because of his painful experience, he has lost belief in the family as "the only form of existence in life," and decided that he will never marry. His parents are incredulous and critical about this decision – and, it may be noted, the interviewer also felt similarly critical: "Yesterday evening I got cross-examined at home. They want me to get married. That was very unpleasant." The interviewer replies: "That's because they love you." "If they loved me, they should let me enjoy a happy life, but they don't. They say my enjoyment of life isn't genuine. What else could I say? I could only sit there and smile."

He ascribes the fact that his parents show no understanding for his attitude to life to a "gulf between the generations in China." He welcomes the fact that modern Chinese society is becoming more tolerant and that other, non-family-based life-styles are developing in the big towns. His credo is: "Life is like a tree that is only healthy when it grows freely."

One sentence of Wang Jr's that is worth reflecting upon may be placed here at the end of our account of this first interview: "For a long time now I have regarded the Cultural Revolution as a culture."

In the second interview Wang Jr spoke in more detail about the atmosphere in his family and his parents' style of child rearing. His family had been conscious of tradition and daily life had been marked by lack of money.

At the beginning I was left at home on my own. Locked in. The door of the house was locked from the outside. My sisters came home in the afternoon and let me out . . . I rarely played with the neighbours' kids . . . As a kid, I didn't know what to say to strangers . . . I got into a sweat and just walked away.

There had been a lot of quarrelling in the family, but at the same time he had been pampered with exaggerated care that he dared not reject although he felt it to be interfering and infantilising. "If you reject it, they believe that you want to estrange yourself from the family . . . If I created a boundary, they would immediately think I have a mental illness." On the whole he described his upbringing as "a kind of brainwashing. It consisted of hammering something into the children's heads."

Wang Jr revealed his trusting of the interviewer and his trusting attitude in general in the following words: "If I had told you nothing about myself, you would never believe that I am unhappy. Nobody I know believes that I am unhappy." He added, "Teacher Li, if you say to me one day, Wang Junior, go somewhere with me, then I'll go along with you. No problem – I'll follow you."

Asked whether he had ever been separated from his family, he replied that he was held in custody for 180 days after being denounced in connection with the events of the 4th of June 1989. At first he reported that he had experienced panic and fear but then remarked:

Wherever I get put, I have to accept it. What else can I do? . . . Sure, I can't just forget that business, but it wasn't such a big thing either . . . The whole affair didn't really mess me up. And I still don't feel the need to be ashamed of myself . . . I wanted to be there. I broke the rules of public order. I don't think I was politically motivated or committed then. I was too young to think politically in any way. I just enjoyed being where it was all happening.

At the end of the interview Wang Jr thanked his interviewer effusively, giving the impression that he would have quite liked to take part in further conversations:

For me it was a review of my childhood. Normally I hardly have any time to think about things in the past. I am very grateful to you for giving me this chance . . . For the first time I am digging up the old things inside me and airing them in the sun. It is good, I feel good.

## DISCUSSION

Wang Sr, born in 1930, gives a harrowing and moving account of the traumatic experiences he suffered during the time of the Cultural Revolution, suffering that still revisits him in the form of flashbacks and nightmares. The trauma is

also manifest in his method of rearing his children as portrayed by his son. His son speaks of “educational methods similar to those at the time of the Cultural Revolution.” This statement can be interpreted as an identification of his father’s internalization of treatment by the perpetrators.

Mr Wang Sr had been given by his parents to his grandmother at the age of two months. Unfortunately the interviewer did not inquire in more detail about the circumstances and reasons. I assume, however, that either there were already traumatic events in the first two months of his life or that he experienced the separation from his parents as his first traumatic experience. Perhaps his parents too were traumatized by the many traumatic political events of that time in China (the civil war, the Sino-Japanese war, famine, and perhaps the time of the Great Leap Forward that was also a social trauma for much of China.) Mr Wang developed a very close relationship with his caring and loving grandmother. When she died – Mr Wang was 23-years-old – it was a “heavy blow” for him. During the funeral he jumped into the open grave, not wanting to go on living. When he discussed his “deep emotional relationship” with his grandmother and his memory of her death, he was plunged into a kind of abnormal condition in which he gave a confused impression and foamed at the mouth. So Mr Wang seemed to have been precipitated into a profound existential, depressive suicidal crisis after his grandmother’s death, one that was then experienced again within the framework of the interview, which seems to confirm the impression that he had already experienced traumatic suffering in the first year of his life. It was only when Mr Wang married his girlfriend’s sister, as recommended by their grandmother, that he overcame the severe crisis after his own grandmother’s death.

When his first wife died in 1964 of breast cancer that was diagnosed too late for treatment, he fell once more into an existential depressive crisis. He was not allowed to go to the funeral for fear that he might try to leap into the grave as he had with his grandmother, and he had to be given psychiatric treatment as he was frenzied with despair and flooded with unbearable feelings.

The terrible events during the Cultural Revolution took place two years after this traumatic loss of his wife. It may be assumed that Mr Wang had at that point not yet mourned the loss, which he experienced as traumatic, similar to the experience of losing his grandmother. Then a new trauma of the Cultural Revolution befell him. His social and physical torture then was not only directly traumatic, but also drew on and exacerbated the earlier traumas and losses. In the aftermath of those experiences, he experienced flashbacks of a PTSD character. The traumatic events of the Cultural Revolution also triggered memories of earlier periods and experiences of earlier traumatization and loss, as well as the intolerably painful emotions of those earlier times, leading to multiple levels of encapsulation analogous to the doll within a doll within a doll. This capacity of one trauma to worsen the effects of earlier traumas is well illustrated in Mr Wang.

Mr Wang’s portrayal of his experiences and events during the time of the Cultural Revolution meant that catastrophes suddenly erupted into his life, overwhelming him completely when he was not only unprepared, but was also primed to react

in an exaggerated way because of the earlier traumatic losses. The panic, despair, and profound feelings of impotence and suicidal self-abandonment were a consequence of Mr Wang's repeatedly undermined basic trust, a process that seemed to begin in the first year of his life. I assume, therefore, that the experiences Mr Wang described during the Cultural Revolution had both direct traumatic consequences, and were also triggers for the reactivation of the trauma suffered earlier in his life.

*"Life is Like a Tree that Is Only Healthy When it Can Grow Freely."*

I would now like to discuss the effect that Wang Senior's traumatic experiences had on his son. We know that traumatization can exceed the psychic power of the person to work through, and thus may have a profound effect on the next generation. Usually traumatized parents can provide their children with only limited containment or protected space. Wang Junior's traumatized father (his mother is by and large ignored in the interview) was probably so busy psychically trying to cope with his own cumulative trauma – and the related fear of annihilation, panic, impotence, despair, guilt, shame, hate, and depressive mourning – that he was not sufficiently capable of empathizing with his son's needs and individual nature. It is likely that to a great extent he used his son as a self-object. Wang Junior's individuation and separation processes appear to have stalled, perhaps when his individuation and potential separation represented a threat of abandonment to his traumatized father. His father was moreover generally absent during the first few years of his life due to his banishment to the countryside, so the separation that Wang Junior's growth threatened to promote may have therefore been a direct unconscious threat to Wang Junior as well. A traumatized father is also not able to help his son with the process of individuation and separation from his mother, although we do not hear about this in either interview.

At the time of the interview, Wang Jr had not accomplished either an inner or outer separation from his mother and father in a "good-enough" way. I postulate that it would have been nearly impossible to work out developmental separation in a relationship with a traumatized father, as the aggression inherent in such a step is immediately transformed into separation anxiety and guilt.

We can note that Wang Jr compares his parents' child-rearing style with "brainwashing." He says that things were "hammered and rammed" into him, and "I was quite often beaten." This makes it clear that his parents, presumably identified with the "methods of the Cultural Revolution," brought up their son in conformity with these methods, and that their son seems to be characterized as though he is a misunderstood, abandoned child, abused and encroached on by various means including beatings and over-zealous parental "care." Although Wang Jr suspects that there is massive interference, infantilization, and intrusiveness behind his parents' style of care, he could not defend himself against it. I can add that his interview is exemplary of all the interviews carried out under the auspices of our "Cultural Revolution" research program, in which

we have noticed how little empathic public awareness for situations of early separation and children who have been beaten exists in China. This lack of awareness continues up to the present day.

The identification processes of children who have grown up with traumatized parents have been described at length in the literature. Kestenberg calls these identifications “transposition” (Kestenberg, 1989), unconscious identificatory participation in the past traumatic life-experience of a traumatized parent. Faimberg (1987) calls these identification processes “telescoping,” meaning the shifting or huddling closer together of the experiences of earlier generations. These identifications are forced into the next generation, partly by projective identificatory means, often leading to alienation on the part of these children. Is it, then, possible to observe the identificatory processes just described in Wang Jr’s psychic life in the interview material?

To begin with, it is striking how much Wang Jr is involved in a counter-identification with his parents: They want to impose their will and their care on him; they want him to marry; they want him to think and feel like them. He defends himself against all that. Together with this counter-identification, however, Wang Jr is intensely involved in an identification with his parents that is outside of his awareness. Because of this, neither inner nor outer separation processes can go forward. Without the possibility of a good developmental separation or a relationship with a woman, Wang Jr has withdrawn into his parents’ home and escaped into a surrogate world of film and books.

Both Wang Jr and his interviewer regarded his imprisonment for 180 days in connection with the massacre on Tiananmen Square in 1989 as “no longer politically charged.” In the course of the two interviews Wang Jr said: “I consider the Cultural Revolution to be a ‘culture’.” As I understand this, he is trying to say that a new culture can only begin when the experience of the young (rebels and Red Guardists) achieves a value of its own, apart from that of the old (Kung Fu-Tse). Like his father Wang Jr was also denounced and taken into custody. He did not become conscious of this parallel, however. In the interview he says: “Psychology is a Western affair” – and therefore Wang Jr and his interviewer did not investigate the significance of his June 4th 1989 involvement. Of course, without professional help, it would be almost impossible to separate oneself from a traumatized father. In the interview Wang Jr made a rather touching and significant transference offer to his interviewer, when he said: “Teacher Li, if you say to me one day ‘Wang Jr, go somewhere with me’, then I will immediately go along with you.” I surmise that in this moment Wang Jr expresses his yearning for a “father” who could help him to escape from his infantile dependence on his parents.

### *Some Thoughts about Inter-Cultural Interpretation*

In a discussion such as this, we should ask if we are permitted – and is it meaningful – to analyze an Eastern, foreign culture from our Western attitude and



psychoanalytical perspective. Of course it is meaningful – if only in order to build a bridge between two alien-seeming cultures. The intellectual world of the Chinese is marked above all by the three great philosophical currents of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. To understand the Chinese psyche it is essential to enter into these intellectual and philosophical worlds. Confucianism, the dominant Chinese ideology from 136 BCE to 1911, has been a bedrock of the Chinese collective unconscious. I would therefore like to offer a brief summary of the Confucian idea of piety, a principle certainly still influential in the Chinese mind, even though the Cultural Revolution attempted to annihilate Confucian teaching. Comparing Confucian piety with Western ideas of individualism, helps understand how utterly differently the processes of individuation and separation, and the management of generational conflicts are in the two cultures. Therefore relations between the generations are vastly different in China and the West,

The Chinese ideogram “Xiao,” which may be translated as “piety,” is composed of the elements for “age” and “son.” It principally implies a hierarchical relationship between father and son, requiring sons to comply with the principles of care, reverence, respect, and admonition. In his “Analects” Confucius says: “When your father is alive observe his intentions. When he is deceased, model yourself on the memory of his behaviour . . . , then you may be considered a filial child.” While the father is alive and beyond his death, it is the son’s duty to conform to his will, even if Kung Fu-Tse permits the pious son to gently beg his father to correct his errors. If the father fails to comply with this request, however, his son must accept his father’s decision all the more deferentially.

In light of a son’s duties towards his father, as they have existed for thousands of years, Wang Junior’s behavior is culturally consonant. Although Wang Jr describes his parents’ child-rearing style as authoritarian and dictatorial, he does not wish to complain, “After all, they *are* my natural parents”. “If I create a boundary, they immediately think I have a mental illness.” And “If you reject their exaggerated care, they believe that you want to estrange yourself from the family . . . the older generation indoctrinates the next generation with its attitudes. In the West it is different. They pay more attention to individuality for several thousand years now we have been allowing ourselves to be pressed into the formula of traditional culture,” he says.

According to Sun, the Chinese solution for the generational conflict consists of the younger generation capitulating to the older generation. It is only thus that the child’s duty (Xiao) can be fulfilled. As harmony is an ideal of Chinese culture, a break with one’s parents is not permitted. In this way, according to Sun, no generation was ever able to spread its wings. Instead, each generation was wrecked by its parents only to ruin the following one in turn. Thus individuality is flattened generation after generation. If Western culture may be characterized as the culture of parricide (see the myth of Oedipus), then the Chinese is the culture of filicide. The Cultural Revolution was in



many respects diametrically opposed to the deep structure of Chinese society: It was its intention to destroy the traditional striving for harmony and eradicate the traditional hierarchy of thinking and obedience. The tremendous rebellion of youth against the old was intended to revolutionize the culture of filicide (Sun, 1983, 1990). Now we can understand that Wang Junior's saying, "The Cultural Revolution is a culture" has personal revolutionary significance, as did his participation in the protest in Tiananmen Square in June 1989.

Plänkers (2008) has drawn attention to the fact that we must always take the Chinese circumstances into consideration, if we wish to understand how the Chinese ego experiences trauma. In China, bearing and enduring suffering play an important role. Plänkers points out that enduring suffering, without becoming upset or rebelling indignantly, is a sign of maturity in China. Suffering is to be put up as a natural phenomenon. Therefore, the Cultural Revolution too should be understood – like a natural phenomenon – as due to fate and providence. Taking the collective traumatization of the Cultural Revolution into account, the question arises as to whether Chinese society should offer a containment of individual experiences via public discussion in order to integrate them in all their variety. This would be the prerequisite for the individual's ability to associate his traumatic experiences with historical events and thus to close the gap "which traumatic experience has ripped open in individual mentalization" (Plänkers, 2008).

When we say that Chinese intellectual history has not gone through and known a period of "Enlightenment," this fact may be described as a significant difference from the Western intellectual tradition. Enlightenment means the critical scrutiny of traditions, preserving the useful and changing outmoded conventions without accepting things simply because they are old. But are there not similarities to be found in comparing the Chinese and Western worlds? In 1922 Bertrand Russell was in Beijing for a year and wrote a book about his experiences entitled *The problem of China*, which was republished unchanged in 1966. "There is a theory among Westerners," Russell writes, "that the Chinese are inscrutable and full of secret thoughts, impossible for us to understand . . . but I was not able to see anything that supported this view, at least during the time that I was working in China."

My experience in China has been similar to Russell's. Since 2008 I have been taking part in a program of further education with the title 'Group Analysis for Chinese Psychiatrists and Psychologists'. Before the first group session I feared that I would not be able to distinguish and recognize the faces of the individual group members. As it turned out, this problem did not exist. Group process in this Chinese group was similar to that which I had experienced in Frankfurt. The basic ideas of psychoanalysis are ubiquitous. Just as the laws of physics are valid in China, so are the basic psychological ideas of psychoanalysis. However, we also need to know the cultural context of China in order to apply these basic tenets wisely.

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