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REVISITING THE FATHER-SON CONFLICTS IN CHINESE FAMILIES FROM A CULTURAL LENS: IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILY-CENTERED PRACTICE IN CHINESE SOCIETIES

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Abstract: A Chinese proverb reads “Wu Chou Bu Cheng Fu Zi” — 無仇不成父子 (hatred bonds the father and his son). This well describes many of the father-son struggles found in clinical cases in Chinese families where the son rejects the father, who tries his best to get along with the son. The explanation for this phenomenon can be found in the field of family therapy (Bowen, 1976, 1985; Minuchin, 1996, 1993), which states that the son is being triangulated in the marital conflict and allied with the mother.

However, there is no comprehensive account of the issue of father-son conflict and its inconsistency with classical Chinese concepts such as filial piety. This gap in the research can be addressed with interviews of Chinese families in a clinical context, in which the concept of family justice (大義滅親) can be deduced. This article not only unearths the concept of family justice in Chinese families, which hitherto has been rather hidden (Hall, 1990), but also prepares that way to continue the research practice of conducting family interview on Chinese families. Through such conceptual discussions, classical concepts in Chinese culture can be recalled, and strategies for indigenous Chinese family therapy can be cultivated.

Keywords: Father-son conflict, Chinese family, family justice (大義滅親), Yi (義), family Practice

The Concept of Family Triangulation in the West

In the West, Freud was one of the earliest psychologists to investigate the conflict between father and son in relation to the mother. He articulated this conflict through his construct of the Oedipus complex. Although he did not propose a clear method of solving the father-son conflict, Freud explained that the son's need for intimacy with his mother led to jealousy, which in turn led to conflict with the father. The classic concept of family triangulation itself contains the interplay of the mother-son and father-son twosomes.

The Oedipus complex explains the unconscious internal struggle in a young boy in search of his identity through his relationship with his parents. Attachment theory further explores the mother-son connection and provides a new focus on understanding the mother-son twosome interaction. According to Bowlby's (1973) theory, interactions with significant others who are available and supportive in times of stress facilitate the formation of a sense of attachment security. Over the past decades, attachment theory has been extensively studied throughout life-cycle stages along with various problems such as mental disorders, neurosis, suicide and depression (Byng-Hall & Psycht, 2002; Johnson & Williams-Keeler, 1998; Johnson, Makinen, & Millikin, 2001; Parkes, Stevenson-Hinde & Marries, 1991; Weiss, 1982).

Studies using attachment theory provide a solid base for understanding the mother-child twosome, one of the three twosomes in the father-mother-child triad (the other two being the father-child and father-mother twosomes). If it is true that the mother and the child are linked by a strong bond, it is not difficult to understand why when parents are in conflict, the child, who is drawn into the triangle, often identifies with the mother's emotions rather than those of the father's. However, the concept of family triangulation expands attachment theory from mother-child twosome studies to father-child and father-mother-child studies. The interplay of attachment theory and family triangulation in twosome and threesome relationships is the foundation of this study, and also an attempt to understand and articulate the father-son conflict in the context of the father-mother-son triad.

Bowen (1976) defined the triangle as "the smallest stable relationship system." Bowen explained that a two-person emotional system was unstable. When it is under stress, the system transforms into a three-person system or a triangle. A system consisting of more than three persons becomes a series of interlocking triangles. He stated that the function of a triangle was to stabilize the two-person system when it was in danger of disintegrating. If two people can get interested in or be distracted by a third person, object, issue or fantasy, they can avoid facing the real, threatening or frightening issues between them. Ultimately, the triangle enables them to avoid having to change themselves and their problem. In contrast, two people who share healthy common interests or activities, or who work through their conflicts, can nourish and enrich their relationship.

Hence, the concept of triangulation can be summarized and defined as detouring conflict between two people by involving a third person who stabilizes the relationship between the original pair in the process (Nichols and Schwartz, 2008).

The concept of triangulation has been widely adopted in the field of family therapy. Satir (1991) perceived that people came into this world as part of the primary triad: mother, father, and child. This triad is regarded as the most influential of all systems. In his book *Leaving Home*, Haley (1980) highlighted the symptomatic distress of troubled young runaways as a reaction to conflict between their parents. The parents would unite to try to deal with the strange symptoms of the child and perhaps hospitalize the now identified patient. The patient would recover in hospital and begin to take steps toward autonomy. Without the presence of problems in the life of the child, the parents would again become distressed and begin to argue. The patient's symptoms would then resume upon return to the family, and so on and so forth. The rule governing this disabling sequence is that the parents' marriage cannot survive if they are left alone to face each other.

The complexity of the family triangle is also analyzed in the structural school, although in different terms. In fact, the concept of triangulation is articulated as a dysfunctional boundary between two subsystems. Enmeshment between father and son is reflective of the father and mother's disengagement. Minuchin (1993) stressed the concept of cross-generational coalition and detouring conflict between subsystems, namely, parental and sibling systems. Detouring conflict means that parents who cannot resolve conflicts between them divert the focus of concern onto a child who is being victimized or used as a scapegoat. In other words, the child is absorbed into the conflict within the parental subsystem (in which the child is rather passive), and the parental conflict is the main source of such incident. Father-son conflict in the perspective of family triangulation in the West has been identified and articulated for about thirty years. Now we turn to a discussion of the issue in a Chinese context.

Father-son Conflict in the Traditional Chinese Context

A Chinese proverb reads "Wu Chou Bu Cheng Fu Zi — 無仇不成父子" (hatred bonds the father and his son). This well describes many of the father-son struggles found in clinical cases in Chinese families where the son rejects the father, who tries his best to get along with the son.

The phenomena of the conflicted father-son relationship can be found in a huge volume of stories in classical Chinese literature. Hsu and Tseng (1974) examined the father-mother-son relationship in stories in popular Chinese opera. They surveyed more than 100 classical Chinese operas, and the contents of the stories were categorized and analyzed according to the themes of mother-son, father-son, mother-daughter, father-daughter, man-woman, husband-wife, sibling,

and in-law relationships. Although the authors of the article did not categorize the father-mother-son relationship in a threesome, all of the 12 father-son opera stories involved the mother as the key character in the father-son relationship. The distribution of the themes is listed below:

Table 1: Distribution of relationships in opera stories

Mother-son	16	Husband-wife	31
Father-son	12	Sibling	8
Mother-daughter	2	In-law	8
Father-daughter	7	Man -woman	27
Total	111		

From Table 1, it can be seen that there are 12 stories about father-son relationships in the classical Chinese operas studied. In contrast to mother-son relationships, the father-son relationship is described as positive only in a few stories. The Chinese father usually shows affection for his son only when the latter is a small child. When the son grows up, the father seldom openly expresses his feelings toward him. Triangular conflict among the father, son, and mother is the major theme among those stories with father-son conflict. The popular stories include Ding Shang's Wild Goose Shooting (薛仁贵杀子) and *Nuo zhe Storming the Sea* (封神榜之哪吒闹海). It is argued that the concept of family triangulation has been present in Chinese culture, even though it had not been mentioned explicitly. From these classical Chinese operas, it is clear that family triangulation is not a new element.

However, the question of whether the concept of family triangulation can be applied in Chinese culture is contentious because the culture stresses filial piety. The very idea of father-son conflict is contradictory to the themes of filial piety in classical literature and to the statements of traditional Chinese proverbs, such as: It is the fault of the father if the son is not properly disciplined (养不教, 父之过); a competent father does not have a weak son (虎父无犬子); the father and the son are on the same front to fight (上阵不离父子兵); kind father and filial son (父慈子孝).

In fact, there is no comprehensive account of the issue of father-son conflict and its inconsistency with those classical Chinese concepts mentioned, especially filial piety. Filial piety has been discussed as one of the guiding principles in the parent-child relationship (杨国枢, 1998). Two significant implications of filial piety are that, first, the child is expected to "return favors" (specifically a son's filial response to his father's loving kindness, 回报亲恩, 子孝报答父慈) which implies

an affective and exchanging relationship between parent and child. Secondly, it is implied that there is a power relationship between the two, with the father being dominant (父爲子綱), and the son conforming to the superior father.

The abovementioned literature on the father-son relationship in Chinese culture is largely based on the belief that filial piety is an important principle to be universally followed. For a Chinese son to fight his own father, he has to have a very strong justification. This brings us to explore the concept of “family justice.”

The Concept of Family Justice in Chinese Culture

Being a private practitioner in family therapy in the past, I received my family therapy training in the United Kingdom, Hong Kong, and the United States. My experience tells me that the forms and motivations of the son’s involvement in the family triangle are quite different in the East and the West. The Chinese notions of loyalty (忠), filial piety (孝) and justice (義) (楊國樞, 1998) are key concepts. The notion of justice has been widely discussed in the context of the Chinese community (Chan, 2000; Chiu, 1988, 1989a, 1989b, 1990a, 1990b, 1991a, 1991b; Chiu & Dweck, 1993; Chiu, Hong, Dweck, 1997).

One would easily associate the notion of “justice” with “social justice”. However, the concept of “justice” in the Chinese is different from what it means in the West. “Justice” in Chinese can be translated literally into “public and balanced” (公平), “public and right” (公正), “public and rule” (公道) or “righteousness” (正義), and there are studies about all these concepts. However, Chiu (1988, 1989a) argued that the notion of justice as the fulfillment of role expectation is deeply ingrained in traditional Chinese thinking and has been institutionalized in the traditional Chinese legal system. This means that different expectations are attached to different relations among modern Chinese people (Chiu, 1989a; Ho and Chiu, 1993). Injustice occurs when one violates role expectations in a specific context-related relationship. Chiu (1991c) further elaborated that the Chinese could have different justice standards for different relationships, and that the standard of justice is dominant in a particular relationship, for example, between husband and wife, so that specific behavioral expectations are attached to that relationship.

What Chiu has written about Chinese justice is mostly referred to as the traditional concept of *yi* (義) and is not equivalent to the concept of righteousness. *Yi* is a traditional Chinese concept that governs cultural behavior. In fact, the order of relations in traditional Chinese society is clearly defined by Confucian ethics: *ren* (humanity or benevolence, 仁), *li* (ritual propriety, 禮) and *yi*

(rightness, 義). *Ren* concerns love and care for one's fellowmen, *li* focuses on the traditional ritual code which is essentially a set of formal procedures or proper behaviors, and *yi* is about rightness. *Yi* (義) is deemed as a moral standard and is higher than the rules of *renqing* (favor /人情) and *mian zi* (facework /面子) (King, 1988). It has two meanings. The first meaning is justice (公義) in social exchanges such as equity, equality and the need for rules. The second meaning is the rightness of behavior (義行).

However, the difference between the notions of justice and *yi* (義) has not been differentiated in detail in Chinese culture. Chiu (1991b) tried to differentiate the concepts of justice and *yi* (義) in a series of studies. His conclusion is that the notion of *yi* in Chinese culture can hardly be differentiated from normative expectations of proper role conduct, and that both notions are the principal criteria Chinese people use in making judgments about justice. For example, there is an expectation of proper role conduct on how to be a "father" in Chinese culture, which can mean taking care of financial needs, protecting the mother, and disciplining the children. The criteria of each role seem "built-in" in the culture, and are shared among the family members. This means that both mother and son may share the expectation that the father should respect the mother and comfort her when she is emotionally hurt. Hence, the concept of *yi* (義) can be applied in different contexts, and even in the context of the family, a certain role expectation is shared among all family members.

The Concept of Family Justice in Chinese Families

The meaning of the term 大義滅親 from the Chinese dictionary is based on a superior principle to kill one's kin for the course of righteousness, or one of the family members can sacrifice the other kin despite being a close family member (遵從正大的道理 (大義), 縱使骨肉 (至親) 亦不惜犧牲).

In Chinese culture, there is an idiom which goes "大義滅親" (prosecuting family members in the name of justice), and is found in *Zuo Zhuan* in which a father kills his son to show loyalty to his master (《左傳》—石碏殺其子石厚, 以忠其主). The details of the history are found in *The Fourth Year of Yin*. Shi Que was a loyal minister anguished by the evil acts of Zhou Xu, while his son Shi Hou was on the side of Zhou. Shi Que thought it unforgivable of his son to help Zhou Xu in killing Zhou's brother. He therefore pretended to help his son by suggesting that he seek help from the neighboring country Chen. In the country Chen, Shi Que had arranged for his son Shi Hou to be killed. Because of the principle of righteousness, he could not forgive his son for helping Zhou Xu with the murder of Zhou's brother.

The original meaning of the term was related to a value which legitimizes the act of family members killing other family members in the interests of a higher common good such as national interest. However, the concept of “大義滅親” in modern times has been used in a much broader sense than its original context — “killing” the son in order to fulfill a sense of justice. Nowadays, this term suggests that in the name of justice, one can “kill” any person who has committed an act of “injustice.” In this article, I adopt the concept of “family justice”, which means that the son may fight the father if the son believes his father has done injustice to other family members, in this case, the mother.

The concept “大義滅親,” when translated into “family justice,” is not an accurate translation. First, there is simply no exact translation in English of the Chinese concept of “大義滅親”. As such, developing a personal one becomes unavoidable. Second, the original meaning of the concept of “大義滅親”, of “killing” (which justifies even the ultimate violence of killing a human being), is transformed into the family context. This is surely wider and more incisive than a symbolic or metaphorical interpretation, and more insightful than using it for *mere filial disobedience, rebellion or insubordination*. This interpretation and use should be legitimate as it is logically included in the concept’s original meaning as a minor rule infraction.

How can the concept of “justice” be developed in the context of social psychology, and how can the idea of collective safety be used within the family to become “family justice?” Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1984) stated in their book *Invisible Loyalties* that “justice became an emotion climate built in the family (familial justice),” and each family member executed the concept of family justice in the eyes of one’s own perspective.

In the context of contemporary families, the execution of the principle of righteousness may be manifested in terms of the balance of power and harmony in the family. The actual behavior may not, however, be manifested through killing or physical damage. Instead, it may appear in the form of disagreement, conflict and verbal challenge. To make the term family justice a more common one, it can be defined as “a sense of righteousness to protect a family member against another who is perceived as being unfair, so much so that all other values can be overruled.” The essence of the definition is that family justice is regarded as an ultimate principle that can override the “foundation of all virtues,” including filial piety.

The concept of family justice can be explored in those cases in which family triangulation exist to explain why the son goes against the father in the context of a culture that emphasizes filial piety. Narration and non-verbal messages are the elements to be sought. Special attention should be given to any injustice

done by the father toward the son and mother in the eyes of the son, as well as their respective responses. Those cases which originally presented with family triangulation are not employed for the exploration of the concept of family justice. It is necessary to capture such features of family justice rather indirectly, from the narration, such as in the participants' manners of expression, interaction and wording, as well as in their non-verbal messages.

The Contrast between the Concept of Family Triangulation in the West and Family Justice in the East, and Discussion

If triangulation is a Western concept which explains how a parental relationship can affect the son, then family justice, *yi* (義), is a Chinese concept which explains how a son enters the conflict with his father in a culture that stresses on filial piety. In order to execute a sense of righteousness and maintain the balance of power and harmony, the son executes the principle of "family justice" by rebelling against the father, thereby ignoring filial piety, which is of high value in Chinese families.

At first glance, the similarities between the Western idea of triangulation and the Chinese idea of family justice may not be obvious. As these two concepts are outlined in the early part of this paper, they are both trying to provide a reason to explain conflicts in a family. Triangulation focuses on the creation of triad relationship in a conflicting dyadic relationship. Family justice provides a base for children standing up to their parents in a collectivism society. In other words, triangulation is a description of interaction in a family, whereas, family justice is the justification for a triangulated family.

Tuason and Friedlander (2000) had studied triangulation in Philippine, a close neighbor of China. They concluded that triangulation exists in Asian culture. More specifically, Filipinos experience low psychological distress when level of differentiation is high. The higher the level of differentiation, the lower the psychological distress sums up the concept of triangulation. Although Philippine is not a Chinese country, Tuason and Friedlander's conclusion gives us a ground for further triangulation study in Chinese culture. As family justice provides a reason for conflict between a child and its parents, triangulation exists in Chinese culture.

As we may assume the applicability of triangulation in Chinese culture, it is important to understand family justice. Chinese culture is a collectivism culture. It encourages and reinforces filial piety in the young. One significant implication behind filial piety is the expectation of the child to "bao" (Yeung, 1998; Liu & Lin, 1998); which implies an affective and exchanging relationship between the parent and child. Another is about unequal relationship between the parent

and child, which implies a power relationship. When a young is defying the old, he or she needs to provide strong evidences to do so. In other words, the evidence of family injustice needs to be proven without a doubt (Chiu, 1989a; Ho and Chiu, 1993).

Following the logic of filial piety, we can begin to see the psychological struggle in a young is astronomical: on the one hand, the tradition of filial piety; on the other hand, a great injustice happens in which a confrontation with the authorities is unavoidable. These inner distresses are best illustrated in Chinese immigrants in North America. Children of Chinese immigrants have experienced different levels of distresses when confronting their parents (Soontiens, 2007; Chung, 2006; Kwak, 2003). Chinese immigrant families maintain a high level of Chinese culture and beliefs in filial piety are among them. These children have reached their young adulthood but they still find it difficult to go against the hidden and internalized beliefs of filial piety. In one case, a daughter felt ashamed because she had put her father under arrest after hurting her (Yeung & Chang, 2002). Physical harm certainly falls into the category of family injustice, but this young woman still found it difficult to disrespect her father.

Indigenous Approach

When trying to develop an indigenous approach in counseling Chinese family, we should not overlook Chinese culture. An indigenous approach is not merely a study on Chinese clientele using Western concepts, but also developing an approach that goes with the Chinese culture, values, and beliefs (Yeung, 2002). Before a new approach is developed, we can combine the concept of triangulation with the concept of family justice for the time being.

In Chinese culture, Chinese generally adopt an internal locus of control which is different from external locus of control in Western culture (Ip, 2002). When applying triangulation on the Chinese population, this difference may have become a problem. Western triangulation focuses on a level of differentiation among family members to become a healthy family. In a Chinese family differentiation is against the harmony value in Chinese culture. A social worker working with Chinese family needs to be critical when applying the concept of differentiation. Although some Chinese family may have been exposed to Western cultures, family is still seen as a collective entity for most Chinese. It is especially true when Chinese parents take it as their obligation to teach their children even when they have grown up. Chinese family promotes interdependence among its members, which the opposite of independency in western family (Ip, 2002; Hui, 1996).

Another characteristic of Chinese culture is the authoritative status of parents. While western family favors equality within the family, Chinese family believes in the total authority of parents (Ip, 2002; Hui, 1996). When working with a Chinese family, a worker should, therefore, be careful or even avoid criticizing parents in front of their children. Parents may become uncooperative if their authority is challenged while their children are present. A social worker who has been sensitive to this cultural characteristic may choose to challenge parents when their children are absent.

Emotion management, especially confrontation, is dealt with differently in the west and the east. In Western society, confrontation is sometimes seen as positive through which family members understand each other. In contrast, emotions are hidden in Chinese family. A social worker needs to handle confrontation or sharing of feeling carefully with Chinese family. It is probably hard for family members to share their feeling because they are not accustomed to do so. A worker can guide the family through some simple exercises in expressing emotion. Developing a step-by-step sharing may avoid immature confrontation among members. Immature confrontation may be defined as blaming each other while unable to handle the issue at hand.

After all these considerations, one may start to think: is the Western concept of triangulation actually applicable to the Chinese culture? If a social worker needs to make so many adjustments when applying triangulation, he or she would better find a new concept or an indigenous approach that works for the Chinese culture. Perhaps the Chinese concept of “family justice” should be explored further.

Implications for Future Research and Study

Current developments in family therapy highlight the influence of culture on families and the need for cultural sensitivity in clinical sessions (White, 1993; 1995). As such, indigenous study has become a key concern of the field (Young and Fok, 2005). This article aims to shed light on the concept of family justice in Chinese families, which hitherto has been rather hidden (Hall, 1990). This discovery and application to family therapy provides an explanation of how sons in Chinese culture can justify conflict with their fathers.

Another result of this article is its contribution to furthering practice research using the family interview in Hong Kong. Family therapy has existed in Hong Kong for more than ten years already, but there is little research on clinical practice which is closely linked to conceptual integration.

Therapeutic interviews conducted by expert therapists are invaluable for all clinicians, especially for Asian therapists. This is because most existing therapeutic studies on Chinese families are actually based on American-Chinese families (Ho, 1987; 1993), in which most of the investigators had already been in that culture for a significant period of time. As such, it was controversial to what extent they still carried Chinese cultural values.

Practitioners are recommended to pay special attention to the triangular perspective in their practices, especially in cases of father-son conflict. The exploration of family triangulation can be a reference for dealing with father-son conflicts, or the emotional and behavioral problems of adolescents in general. I do hope that clinicians in the Chinese community will grasp the concept of family triangulation and its centrality to the issues of triangulated sons. For instance, therapists can focus on helping the father not only realize the significant role of the mother in the father-son relationship, but may also advise him how to help “de-triangulate” his son. Finally, therapists may share with family members metaphors from the opera stories with the goal of highlighting and symbolizing their roles in the “theatre” of the family. Ultimately, my hope is that the concepts of family conflict and triangulation, which hitherto were lacking in the field of family therapy (Nichols and Schwartz, 2008), as well as the concept of family justice, which hitherto was not even part of family therapy, can now be employed in a therapeutic context for the benefit of individuals, families, clinical practitioners and family therapy science in general.

Finally, our newly developed indigenous approach can now be not only tested, but also applied in daily family therapy with Chinese and Asian families. This means that any clinician or practitioner who faces the problems of triangulation, father-son conflict and/or father-mother-son triangulation, especially in cases where there may be an incident of Chinese family justice, is now in a position to better understand the ramifications and complexity of the case, and to formulate his or her recommendations according to the circumstances of the patient and the family. The context of Chinese and Asian families and Chinese family justice means that this insightful perspective for family therapy practice can also be drawn on by overseas Chinese and Asian communities, especially those in the West, if they still adhere to strong traditional Chinese influences in their family lives and education. All in all, I hope to have made a necessarily limited but decisive contribution to the theoretical understanding and the practice of family therapy.

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