2001 INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON PSYCHOANALYTIC RESEARCH

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Introduction

This brief report is intended as a record of a quite unusual psychoanalytic meeting, which took place recently in a country that has had very little exposure to the discipline.

Curiously, and I think unintentionally, it appears to have been the event which coincided most closely with Jacques Lacan's centenary which occurred on the day before it began, on Friday the 13th. But this was by no means an explicitly Lacanian meeting and a variety of psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic tendencies were represented, especially on the Chinese side but on the Western side also.

The Symposium was the brainchild of Ed Robins and was prompted by a five-day workshop he had conducted at the Medical University of Beijing the previous year. The high-point of that visit was the way in which he demonstrated in a few brief sessions, conducted though an interpreter, that a nine-year-old inpatient who was being treated as a schizophrenic was really acting out a profound distress associated with the death and burial rites of his beloved grandmother. So impressed were the authorities of this very biologically oriented institution, that the idea of an international psychoanalytic meeting was suggested and promptly organised by Ed and his wife Lian-Pey Robins, who provided the perfect liaison with the Chinese side. Central to the whole enterprise was Teresa Pai, a Taiwanese psychoanalyst, who single-handedly, throughout the symposium provided a consecutive translation

that was so competent and unobtrusive that both sides tended to forget that we were speaking different languages.

The initial flier extended an open invitation to whoever wished to attend but the rationale behind the eventual composition of the Western contributors remains a little obscure. Ed Robins specifically approached a number of English speaking analysts while Gérard Pommier and Claus-Dieter Rath looked after the mainland Europeans. A number of those who were invited eventually did not make it – understandably in view of the distances involved, the abiding memory of the students who died at Tian'anmen Square and the sabre-rattling of the US and China which had reached a higher pitch than usual with the spy plane crisis of early April.

The Western participants were told that our Chinese hosts, mainly psychiatrists and psychologists, would know very little about psychoanalysis and we were asked to be as sparing as possible with the theory, and to focus on clinical examples and applications. This proved good advice for the bulk of the audience. However, the few Chinese *psychoanalysts* who participated were highly sophisticated and three papers in particular – two based on close readings of the *Interpretation of Dreams* and one on the Confucian ideal of the duty to feed the ancestors as a key to the Chinese unconscious – would have graced a psychoanalytic conference anywhere in the world.

Psychoanalysis and the Chinese language

A purist might have seen the core scientific interest of this meeting as an opportunity to put to the test, *in situ* as it were, the claims made by both Freud and Lacan that the Chinese language, and especially its writing, is of particular relevance for understanding the structure of the unconscious.

Lacan's interest in Chinese is well known but what analysts may be less aware of is that Freud anticipated him in a passage of the *Introductory Lectures* that was mentioned in at least two papers but whose context may be worth recalling here. Having given ten lectures on dreams Freud turns

to his listeners' objections and in particular to the objection that the translation of the dream symbols of the manifest text into the coherent latent content is a procedure that is riddled with uncertainties and is ultimately left to the arbitrary choice of the interpreter. Developing an earlier notion that 'it is more appropriate to compare dreams with a system of writing than with a language'[1] Freud argues that the scripts of most ancient languages whether Semitic, Egyptian or Persian 'betray vagueness in a variety of ways which we would not tolerate in our writing today'.[2]

These ancient Middle-Eastern languages had long been a familiar stomping ground for Freud but now he finds a contemporary analogy for the indefiniteness of the way dreams express themselves: 'An extremely ancient language and script, which however is still used by four hundred million people ...'. Chinese 'has no verbal inflections by which one could recognise gender, number, termination, tense or mood ... has practically no grammar' and yet 'is a quite excellent vehicle for the expression of thought'.[3]

Thus far Freud. Lacan makes numerous allusions and even systematic use of elements of Chinese language, science and culture. Readers will remember the reference in *Seminar XI* to the way fighting is depicted in the Peking Opera: everything is gesture and intimidation with the actors never touching one another, still less coming to blows; in *Identification* the unary trait is illustrated by a brushstroke in Chinese calligraphy; and the audience of the seminar of 1970-71 are promised 'some little introductions to the origins of Chinese thought' as a way of illustrating discourse. In that same seminar, Lacan even goes as far as to say: 'I have noticed one thing, which is that I perhaps am only a Lacanian because once upon a time I did Chinese'.[4]

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[1] S. Freud. S.E., XIII, p. 177.

[2] S. Freud. S.E., XV, p. 230.

[3] ibid.

[4] J. Lacan. (1970-71). *Le Seminaire, Livre XVIII, D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant , 1970-71.* Session of January 1st . Unpublished.

The beginning of a dialogue

Rather than offering a summary of the whole proceedings which amounted to twenty-four papers spread over two and a half days I propose to mention briefly those presentations which seemed to me to try to bridge the East-West gap either by exploring the Chinese/unconscious analogy or by introducing us Westerners to a psychoanalytic reading of the Chinese unconsciousness.

Three Chinese

The opening Chinese speaker, Professor Peicheng Hu, Chairman of the Organising Committee and of the Department of Medical Psychology, gave a lucid presentation of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis in China using state-of-the-art computer graphics. The briskness of his abstract gives the tone:

> *Aim:* Introduce the history and present status of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis in China.
> *Method:* Use the retroview research and analysis method.
> *Result:* Psychotherapy has a long history and short present in China.
> *Conclusion:* Psychotherapy and psychoanalysis should be developed fast.

No need now to wonder at the speed with which this symposium was arranged after Ed Robins' initial visit!

In the discussion that followed Gérard Pommier wanted to know if there was any interest in sexual trauma and its treatment in the ancient texts that had been referred to. Professor Hu thought not, but a voice from the floor proposed that sexual trauma was traditionally avoided in China by ensuring that children had a wet nurse until they were three or four; by

young men getting married to older and more experienced women; and finally by the practice of having many concubines. There were no further questions!

The Cultural Revolution, which had closed all institutions of higher education from 1966 to 1976, did not explicitly figure in this paper but in the other two I will mention it played a major role.

The first of these by Meng Xian Zhang spoke of a piece of research begun in 1999 in conjunction with a German psychoanalyst, on the wound and the scar of the Cultural Revolution. What we heard was mainly the personal testimony of prominent intellectual figures about the way in which they had allowed themselves to be carried along by the orgy of violence and public humiliation that had been unleashed by Chairman Mao against all those holding positions of privilege and power. Curiously, this testimony continued the tone of self-abasement and self-criticism that the youngsters brandishing their *Little Red Book*s had demanded of them throughout that terrifying decade and while fascinating for the non-Chinese, the paper was short on psychoanalytic interpretation.

The same cannot be said of Catherine Liu's paper on *The Appetite of the Ancestors,* which, unfortunately, we only have in the form of an abstract. As I understand her argument, ancestor worship has been a central aspect of Chinese religion since the time of Confucius, and this has involved keeping one's ancestors alive by feeding them – either in ritual meals or by literally offering food and drink at their altars. This Catherine Liu linked to Freud's theory of melancholia in that, rather than mourning the dead and letting them go, in China the dead are not allowed to die but continue to be sustained by this feeding. This maintained the Chinese people in a state of paralysing familial narcissism in which the debt to one's predecessors could never be repaid.

The Cultural Revolution, in smashing the idols of the past – museums were a prime target – was a violent attempt to put an end to ancestor worship and to substitute for it a sororal/fraternal Communist Republic. National narcissism replaces familial.

But can family feeling be completely stamped out? For Catherine Liu eating well is a way of continuing to feed the ancestors and much more than the ravages of the Cultural Revolution the phenomenal multiplication of Western-style fast food outlets will effectively kill off the millennial practice of feeding them. But how then, she concludes enigmatically, will their demands be met?

Three Westerners

Many of the Western contingent contributed papers of value and originality but most - including my own - dealt either with work in progress or with specific clinical issues. I would consider that three people in particular - Dany Nobus, Gérard Pommier and Erik Porge - tried to tackle in their different ways what I have called above the core scientific issue of this encounter. All three papers go into areas of Chinese writing with which I am completely unfamiliar but their linking of the script to an understanding of dreams and symptoms seems to prolong in an innovative way the ideas of Freud and Lacan.

In *Beyond the Rebus Principle* Dany Nobus suggests that if the dream content of Freud's patients can be seen as analogous to Chinese script, then the dreams of Chinese people must be written in an even more ancient script. To quote from his abstract:

> ... I argue that Chinese dreams are likely to contain ideograms instead of actual rebuses, and that these ideograms will exploit phonological rather than semantic connections. The composition of a Chinese dream is, therefore, radically different from that of a Western dream ...

I am not sure that I know what that means, but it seems to be an extraordinarily suggestive development of Freud's remarks quoted above, and may well pave the way towards a liberation of psychoanalysis from the limitations of its historical roots in Jewish/Christian religion and

Western philosophy. Dany even raises the question of whether we might not require every student of psychoanalysis to learn Chinese. Since he was prevented at the last moment from delivering his paper in person this question will have to be taken up in a different venue.

Gérard Pommier took the theme of the need to analyse the repressed drives that lie behind the desire to heal others, especially when it is directed towards the mentally ill and more especially children. But he transforms this rather overworked subject by linking it, in a way that would need serious study, to the particularities of Chinese culture and writing. As I understand it, his main contention is that Chinese writing, unlike our own, was for centuries used exclusively for sacred, ritual purposes, rather than for the conduct of commercial affairs. Thus its characters, like the body and its representation in other cultures, have a sacred, religious character, which corresponds to an unconscious investment. The linking of all this to the case of an eight-year-old French boy who could neither read nor write is intriguing and once again would merit a careful study to explore its further relevance to clinical work.

'Going to China is a way of meeting up with that part of ourselves that is unknown'. This sentence in the opening paragraph of his paper on *The Place and Contribution of Handwriting in Clinical Psychoanalysis* shows how much the sense of place would colour Erik Porge's contribution. Here again is someone who has run with Lacan's idea of the central role of Chinese writing both in psychoanalytic theory and practice. What the Chinese language demonstrates, as opposed to our alphabetical ones, is the specificity of writing and its autonomy with respect to speech. This distinction, he argues, has led to a new clinical approach. For me this is the fascinating thing: that a paper like this can combine an erudite discussion of Chinese script with an illustration of its clinical relevance to the treatment of Western children who have problems with reading and writing. Child guidance centres, please copy.

In conclusion

There was much else in this unique occasion that would merit comment or at least mention. Apart from a number of very interesting papers that we hope to be able to publish in *The Letter* over the next year, there were the karioke sessions in which the teleprompter was switched off and the Chinese were introduced to the Irish custom of 'the noble call'. There was the University Hospital, which could be transplanted unnoticed into any city in the world. There was Beijing itself, as big as Belgium say the guide-books, and certainly there must have been many trips from Ghent to Arlon that took less time than some of our transfers through its endless, traffic-choked streets. Then there was the tourist-thronged Great Wall just outside the city; the vast Tian'anmen Square which is surely the last place on earth where unarmed students should try to take on tanks; the nine million cyclists who survive, it appears, by looking neither left nor right; the chilling sight at an Easter Sunday celebration of scores of couples each with their only child; and the energy and simplicity of a people who are never without their container of tea and who look with astonishment at, and generally refuse, any attempt to offer a tip.

Finally, as a gesture towards the ancestors – my wife's two Jesuit uncles had spent their lives in China - we made a visit to the Ancient Observatory which had been established by Kublai Khan in the thirteenth century and was revolutionised by the Jesuit missionaries who found themselves working in it from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century.

A good omen perhaps for the future of East-West co-operation on psychoanalysis but also a hint that it may be a long haul.

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