

The cultural basis and feasibility of the post-quake “bare-foot psychotherapist”

Yin Yuan^a, Yanchun Yang^b

^a Chengdu Mental Health Center (No. 4 People's Hospital of Chengdu), Chengdu 610036, People's Republic of China

^b Mental Health Center, West China Hospital, Sichuan University, Chengdu 610041, People's Republic of China

Funding / potential conflict of interest: No funding. No conflict of interest.

Summary

Objective: To explore the local cultural foundation for the concept, and discuss the feasibility for the existence of “bare-foot psychotherapy” from the view of Chinese culture in terms of the similarity of philosophical thoughts, thinking patterns and psychological features of the Chinese people.

Methods: Clinical practice and theoretical research.

Results: By mixing traditional Chinese culture and modern psychological science, “bare-foot psychotherapists” tried to understand, support and help quake-victims to solve their psychological problems according to their special cultural backgrounds. The application of “bare-foot psychotherapists” proved to be feasible, practical and effective.

Conclusion: Deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture, “bare-foot psychotherapy” is a successful example of indigenous psychotherapy. It promptly and effectively met the psychological needs of victims after the Wenchuan earthquake. Two years after the tragic earthquake, this application of “bare-foot psychotherapy” has proven to be a sound model for post-disaster psychological rehabilitation.

Key words: Bare-foot psychotherapist; cultural basis; Wenchuan earthquake

The Wenchuan earthquake, which hit the authors' home town on 12th May 2008, was a huge disaster, killing about 70 000 people, injuring about 400 000 people and severely impacting a total area of 100 000 km². After the terrible tragedy, there was a great demand for professional psychologists to help local people to solve psychological problems. However, the amount of professional psychologists in the quake-hit areas was not enough for such a huge need.

Due to this background, Yang Yanchun defined a new concept of “bare-foot psychotherapy”. In her definition, “bare-foot psychotherapist” refers to personnel who provide post-disaster psychotherapy service to meet the long term factual needs. They consist of grass-roots medical workers, including village or community doctors as well as public health workers, and grass-roots intellectuals, such as village cadres or teachers, from the quake-hit zones. With their Chinese-culture philosophical thoughts, thinking patterns and psychological features, these people, despite

only receiving short psychotherapy training instead of being formally trained as professional psychologists, are basically able to help mental-illness-free quake-victims to improve their mental health conditions.

The concept of the “bare-foot psychotherapist” comes from the interesting title of “bare-foot doctor” appearing in the southern rural areas of the Yangtze River in the 1960s. “Bare-foot doctors” were doctors who served people in poor and remote villages. They worked both as doctors and farmers at the same time. They were needed on standby for patients' needs at anytime, even when farming in the water-fields whilst bare foot. Therefore local villagers called them “bare-foot doctors”.

“Bare-foot doctors” were usually local educated youths or urban educated youths who went to work in the countryside and mountain areas. They were trained for a short time between 6 to 12 months for basic medical knowledge and practical skills concerning diagnosis and treatment of common diseases, and these doctors were good at combining traditional Chinese medical theories and modern western medical science.

Bare-foot doctors were called out to the patients' home in some cases and they did not charge for this kind of service. Instead, they received subsidies from the village governments.

The title of “bare-foot doctor” was used for about 20 years from 1968 to the 1980s. The maximum number of “bare-foot doctors” added up to more than 1 million in the peak period. At that time, “bare-foot doctors”, as an effective temporary solution for the lack of professional medical service in the under-developed poverty rural areas, were major health service personnel who made a great contribution to the public health care of a large country with a population of some 1 billion.

After the Wenchuan earthquake, professional psychiatrists and psychologists from home and abroad gathered in the disaster areas and actively participated in helping survivors to deal with their mental problems. However, with only 20 000 psychiatrists in total and a shortage of professional psychotherapists in China in general, there were still tremendous obstacles and challenges for quake-victims' rehabilitation since these temporarily working specialists could not stay permanently in the quake-hit zones.

Emerging from indigenous psychological interventions and rehabilitation practice after the earthquake, “bare-foot psychotherapists” embodied unique features as follows.

Firstly, they received initial training of classic psychological theories and techniques.

Correspondence:

Prof. Yanchun Yang

Mental Health Center

West China Hospital

Sichuan University

Chengdu 610041 People's Republic of China

yangyuanhospital@163.com

Secondly, instead of using fixed traditional western approaches, they worked flexibly by choosing consultant theories and patterns according to cultural characteristics.

Thirdly, they did not charge for their service, but instead, the local governments gave them subsidies.

After the Wenchuan earthquake, the application of “bare-foot psychotherapist” turned out to be effective in helping survivors. The following section clarifies the basis for successful application of “bare-foot psychotherapy” in terms of the philosophical thought, features of thinking patterns and psychological characteristics of the quake-victims rooted from the traditional Chinese culture.

The common cognition on life and living by the “bare-foot psychotherapists” and the quake-survivors

Cherish life and accept fate

As a mixture of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, the traditional Chinese culture, with Confucianism as the pillar, has a core value of life supremacy. According to Taoism, human beings should accept fate and comply with the nature. So when confronting death, everyone should calmly accept it instead of being afraid of or hating it. According to Buddhism, all living things have the Buddha-nature and are allowed to enter “nirvana” and then “attain Buddhahood” as long as they practice austerities. At that moment with no difference between being “living” and “dead”, life is said to be permanent, which helps to reduce or get rid of the fear of death [1].

Value family and society and adjust actively to reality

With consanguinity as its core, the traditional Chinese culture system is established upon the concept of “family”, due to which it advocates the Chinese people to enjoy their family relationship. At the same time, the traditional Chinese culture also attaches great importance to human’s sociality. It emphasises individual’s social responsibility, and values and cherishes interpersonal communication and interaction between individuals and the society.

With striving and unremitting spirit as the theme, traditional Chinese culture encourages people to keep an active and optimistic attitude in reality and to appreciate the joy of being alive despite any hardship and agony [2].

“Bare-foot psychotherapists” themselves are also survivors. They had similar traumatic experiences during the earthquake as the patients they are helping. They both share the same traditional Chinese value of cherishing life and accepting fate. They tried to remain optimistic and active after the earthquake and managed to find hope and spiritual sustenance for life via self-regeneration, family and social support. Based on their own experiences, they are able to use the same coping methods to help victims.

Widely trusted in the community and fully aware of local victims’ requirements and the resources available, “bare-foot psychotherapists” are able to communicate with quake-victims in a natural and acceptable way.

Therefore, “bare-foot psychotherapists” shared the same cultural basis with the quake-victims, thanks to which em-

pathy was smoothly aroused, sound counselling relationships were more easily established and explanations were fully and accurately understood.

The Chinese-style thinking pattern and the feasibility of the “bare-foot psychotherapist”

Both psychological and social phenomena are complicated things that need to be analysed, understood and judged by systematic thinking.

Systematic thinking is the process of understanding how things influence one another within a whole. It is not one thing but a set of habits or practices within a framework that is based on the belief that the component parts of a system can be best understood in the context of relationships with each other and with other systems [3].

The traditional Chinese thinking pattern makes it possible for contemporary Chinese people to develop systematic thinking.

The traditional Chinese thinking pattern includes on-the-whole thinking, intuitive thinking, dialectical thinking and so on [4].

On-the-whole thinking, as one of the most important features of the traditional Chinese thinking patterns, requires cognitive subjects to consider cognitive objects as a whole in the context of relationships among its component parts, rather than in isolation. Furthermore, the cognitive subject and object should also be taken as a whole instead of being separated.

It is characterised by typical forms of Tai-chi (太极), Yin-yang (阴阳) theory and the idea of Tian ren he yi (天人合一) which can be traced back to thousands of years ago.

Tai-chi is an abstract concept in Chinese philosophy which is considered as the origin of the universe. Yin and Yang derive from Tai-chi as two opposite sides and work together to form the universe and generate everything to come into being and develop. Yin and Yang exist as a whole.

Tian ren he yi (天人合一) means that human and the nature should be considered as a whole.

Intuitive thinking is quick, direct and instinctive. As the most important idea of the traditional Chinese thought, the idea of Tian ren he yi (天人合一) is obviously intuitive thinking since it humanises nature or naturalises humans illogically. In ancient China, intuitive thinking was highly valued in Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism [5].

Another important role of the traditional Chinese thinking pattern is played by dialectical thinking, which emphasises dependency and conversion of opposite sides. By adopting this pattern, the ancient Chinese people thought that things were related, constantly changing and should be considered as a whole. The most outstanding example is the Yin and Yang Theory [6].

On-the-whole thinking and dialectical thinking are considered as one of the most important foundations of systematic thinking developed by contemporary Chinese people [7].

Owing to China’s contemporary systematic thinking and traditional intuitive thinking, bare-foot psychotherapists can not only analyse the situation in a systematic way,

but also sense the situation in an intuitive way. After a short psychotherapy training, they can be clearly aware of local quake-victims' cognition, affection and behaviour and then according to their different needs, provide effective psychological support and assistance.

Psychological features of the quake-victims and the necessity of the existence of bare-foot psychotherapists

Clinical practice has shown that Chinese people have the following features of their attitudes towards psychological issues. Firstly, they have obvious somatisation (bodily symptoms) [8]. In addition, the Chinese people have strong prejudice against mental disease thus they feel humiliated to admit their mental obstacles. Furthermore, they incorrectly classify psychologically disturbed people as psychos without self-esteem or future. They are so scared to directly face their psychological problems that they avoid talking about it as much as possible, nor to mention going to a therapist for professional help.

After the earthquake, "bare-foot psychotherapists", like "bare-foot doctors", had double identities. On the one hand, they were community or village doctors, public health workers, teachers and village cadres. On the other hand, they also worked as psychotherapists. Therefore they cared about the victims' health and living conditions and their cognition, affection and behaviour and then offered proper help without fee-charging, which was more acceptable to the quake-survivors. In addition, as local people from the disaster areas, "bare-foot psychotherapists" were familiar with the physical and psychological conditions of the individuals, as well as their family and interpersonal relationships, which helped them to identify people with psychological problems and to provide prompt help. This was very important because the Chinese people are too humiliated to admit their psychological problems.

This operation mode of "bare-foot psychotherapy" complies with China's medical and public health service

system, covers all the quake-hit zones and is applicable to the rehabilitation of massive-disaster impacted groups.

The authors of this paper have long-term plans for the development of the "bare-foot psychotherapists". Most of the psychotherapy training conducted so far is focused on application. Therefore, we plan to give "bare-foot psychotherapists" psychological theories and techniques training regularly over a rather long period, in expectation of them growing into professional psychotherapists.

To sum up, by mixing traditional Chinese culture and modern psychological science, "bare-foot psychotherapists" understand, support and help quake-victims to solve their psychological problems according to their special cultural backgrounds. The application of "bare-foot psychotherapists" has proven to be feasible, practical and effective.

Conclusion

Deeply rooted in the traditional Chinese culture, "bare-foot psychotherapy" is a successful example of indigenous psychotherapy. It has promptly and effectively met the psychological needs of victims after the Wenchuan earthquake. Two years after the tragic earthquake, this application of "bare-foot psychotherapy" has proven to be a sound model for post-disaster psychological rehabilitation.

References

- 1 QIAO Xuebin. On the modern value of Bioethics of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. *Journal of HIT*. 2006;8(1):56–8.
- 2 LIU Hengshan. Confucian Living Attitude and Its Modern Value. *Journal of Harbin University*. 2004;25(3):10–2.
- 3 <http://www.answers.com/topic/systems-thinking>.
- 4 DAI Jie. Characteristics and Causes of Traditional Chinese Thinking Pattern. *Journal of Harbin University*. 2004;25(8):44–7.
- 5 HU Huanan, LU Lan. Chinese Traditional Mode of Thinking and Modernization. *Journal of Wuhan University of Technology*. 2007;20 (4):509–13.
- 6 DAI Shenghua. Chinese traditional way of thinking and the its rationality of modernization. *Journal of Hebei Normal University*. 2005;28(5):69–73.
- 7 MIAO Dongsheng. On Systematic Thoughts (3): Combining Whole Thinking with Analysis Thinking. *Journal of systemic dialectics*. 2005;13(1):1–4.
- 8 Kleinman A. Neurasthenia and depression: a study of somatization and culture in China. *Cult Med Psychiatry*. 1982;6(2):117–90.