

Oklahoma Baptist University  
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Applying and Contrasting Systemic Therapy Approaches to Chinese Families in Taiwan

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### **Abstract**

This paper avers that a systems oriented approach to family therapy is consistent with and highly applicable in working with traditional Chinese families seeking family therapy. Though the systemic approach to psychotherapy developed in the West beginning in the mid-twentieth century, it is consistent with an epistemology that is remarkably Eastern in its premises because of its non-linear world-view that dominates Chinese cultural thought, religion and life-style. The application of three Western-developed systemic models of family therapy will be applied to the traditional Chinese family in its cultural context in Taiwan. The three models to be considered are Brief Strategic Family Therapy, Structural Family Therapy, and Intergenerational Family Therapy.

## **Introduction**

Various family therapy approaches can be adapted to and applied to the Chinese family situation, but little research has been directed to the applicability of any specific systemically based psychotherapy model to the Chinese family. This paper will describe, analyze, and apply three systems-oriented approaches to marriage and family therapy that, in the author's opinion, form a good fit with many traditional Chinese families due to the similarity of systemic ideas used in these three therapy approaches with the traditional Chinese family value system. As each of these approaches is applied in the context of the traditional Chinese family, the reader needs to remain cognizant of the fact that there is no one true "traditional Chinese family or culture" and that the application of any therapy approach should only be made after first seeking to develop an understanding of the uniqueness of each family being treated. With this important consideration established as a provisional backdrop, a brief description of Chinese family culture in Taiwan will be attempted. Next, a brief description of Brief Strategic Family Therapy, Structural Family Therapy, and Intergenerational Family Therapy will be provided, followed by a discussion of how each approach can be applied in therapy with traditional Chinese families in Taiwan.

### **Understanding Chinese Family Culture in Taiwan**

#### The traditional Chinese family

The Chinese of Taiwan came predominantly from Fujian Province and Canton Province in China beginning in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Thornton & Chang, 1984); therefore, the traditional Chinese/Taiwanese family has its roots in pre-communist, Mainland Chinese culture. Over the years, the Taiwanese-Chinese have adapted to their new home

environment while largely maintaining many traditional Chinese customs that have developed over the centuries from the Mainland. Western inclined ideas and goods are increasingly common and influential in Taiwanese society, but the general population still robustly embraces the diverse Eastern world-views by which the Chinese have long defined themselves.

### Family structure

M. L. Lee and Sun (1995) state, “For centuries and still remaining today, the family has been the most important unit of social organization in Taiwan, to which the core of cultural values are attached.” Confucian influence has served to buttress what was an already strong family system in Chinese society (Mei, 1967). The family has retained its high standing in Chinese society well into modern time.

The Chinese family structure has traditionally been patriarchal in nature. There has always been a preference for sons as a means of propagating the family name through the generations as well as a means of providing for parents in their later years. Decision-making has long been within the male domain while women have traditionally had few or no rights in Chinese society (Lee and Sun).

The Chinese family has customarily been extended, with three or more generations living in one household, and with the spousal subsystem living with the son’s parents upon marriage. Of Taiwanese couples married before 1958, 92 percent lived with the husband’s parents. In 1994 about 67 percent of newly married couples lived with the husband’s parents (only 3% to 4% of couples lived with the wife’s parents during the same time period) (Lee and Sun). In such situations, the wife’s role generally includes housekeeping activities and responsibility for ancestor worship in addition to

employment outside the home. Traditionally, when a woman married she was generally considered the property of the husband's family, hence the desire for a married couple to bear at least one son as a means of carrying on the family name and providing for the parents in their later years. In the traditional Chinese family the dominant relationship has generally been placed on the parent-child dyad rather than the husband-wife dyad, with the strongest emotional attachment being with the sons (E. Lee, 1996a). Based on Confucian hierarchy of relationships, parents expected respect and filial piety from their children, and parenting techniques have long involved shaming as the primary means of controlling child behavior in Chinese families (Lee, a).

### Religion

Chu (1985) finds that approximately 84 percent of the total population of Taiwan is animist/Buddhist, while 3.5 percent are Protestant or Catholic and 12 percent agnostic. However, it is oversimplified and inaccurate to suggest that the majority of Taiwanese are Buddhist. Lee and Sun explain: "The religion of the majority of people in Taiwan is an amalgam which is in essence a mixture of Confucianism and animism permeated with Taoist elements..." (p. 101). The primary function of religious life in Taiwan revolves around ancestor worship. Lee and Sun explain well the function of ancestor worship:

The observance of ancestor worship is one of the main functions of the family, especially of the sons. Ancestor worship implies that the ancestor is not entirely dead, that his soul continues to live and watches over the life of his descendants. These rites are based on the idea that those who perform them will help both the living and the dead. An ancestor living in the beyond is presumed to be endowed with supernatural power, which he may use to help his descendants. He is

believed to be better off in the beyond through descendents' worship. Ancestor worship in its more primitive forms makes its chief appeal to the peasants and workers; but more sophisticated persons of the educated class are likely to conceive it in a more sublimated form as a 'memoriam'; although they too continue to perform the old elaborate rites... (p. 102)

Therefore, worshipping one's ancestors is a form of protection from harm on the worshiper and his or her family, as well as a request for blessing from the deceased ancestors being worshiped.

Chinese ancestor worship and animism do not imply a moral system, but serve the function of providing familial continuity and structure. Confucianism, on the other hand, provides a way of relating to the daily rules of human relationship in society (e.g. business, family, social relationships). Confucius and his disciples did not attempt to understand or explain the mystical experience of life, but rather focused on the practicalities of human relationships (Mei). Nonetheless, many Chinese revere Confucius and have elevated him to the position of a god. Taoism is a way of relating to the moral, spiritual, or mystical dimensions of life that seek to: "transcend the world of society and everyday life and to reach a higher plane of consciousness" (Capra, 2000). Both Confucianism and Taoism co-evolved through the centuries and have generally, though not always, been viewed as complementary. Taoist thought so overwhelmingly saturates the Chinese world-view that it provides the fabric from which traditional Chinese society is cut. Taoism can serve as a seam by which the Western idea of cybernetics, which is the foundation on which family therapy theory is based, can be integrated into systemic

therapy ideas. Therefore, a brief presentation of Taoist ideas is necessary to enhance a description of the Chinese world-view.

Tao, meaning literally, *the way*, or *path* recognizes that there is an “ultimate reality which underlies and unifies the multiple things and events we observe”(Capra). In the largest and most verbose of the few Taoist texts, the Chuang-Tzu (trans. Maurer, 1982), it is stated thusly: “There are the three terms—‘complete’, ‘all-embracing, ‘the whole’. These names are different, but the reality sought in them is the same: referring to the One thing.” This *One thing*, the *Way* or *Tao*, is the ultimate, indefinable reality of life. Taoism does not attempt to present itself as rational. It began as a mystical philosophy of life (that later integrated with Chinese ancestral worship and Buddhist ideas and became a religion) recognized as *the way* of liberation. It was understood that the Tao was ineffable, and had to be experienced mystically, not rationally, to be grasped. The Tao is to be envisioned as a continuous flow and change that is recognized as the essence of the universe (Hartz, 1993). It is the undertaking of the Chinese mystic (and the systemically oriented family therapist) to recognize these universally occurring patterns and to organize life according to their example.

Tao recognizes the cyclic nature of life. Undoubtedly, the ancient Chinese observed the patterns of the sun, moon and stars as well as the flows of the tide, the changing of the seasons, and the patterns of life. The Chinese acknowledged a truth that Westerners blinded by scientific reductionism (and socio-political and economic stability) often fail to see: whenever a situation develops to its extreme, whether in nature or in society, it will ultimately and naturally circle into its opposite. This concept is most simply envisioned in the symbol of the yin-yang (陰陽), which depicts a whole that is



made of its opposite. Literally, yin means cold and yang means hot. Wang Chung, in A.D. 80 (trans. Needham, 1956) stated: “The yang having reached its climax retreats in favor of the yin; the yin having reached its climax retreats in favor of the yang.” As either the yin or the yang reaches its extreme, it contains in itself the rudiment of its opposite, allowing it to naturally and spontaneously cycle forward (not backward as a pendulum but forward as a circle), or in cybernetic terms, self-regulate toward a balance; what in systems theory is called homeostasis (or in more recent systems vernacular, homeodynamics, morphostasis, or morphogenesis).

Two enduring concepts of Taoism first articulated by the ancient Chinese philosopher Lau-tz that were briefly elucidated above are intertwined with the yin-yang: *wu wei*, and the principle of opposing forces of nature. Wu wei, or *non-action*, suggests that the way to change is not through the inelegance of force, but by refraining from taking action that is out of character with nature. Lau-tz is quoted in the Tao de Ching (Scriptures of the Way) (trans. Welch, 1965) as saying: “By non-action everything can be done.” The Chuang-Tzu explains: “Non-action does not mean doing nothing and keeping silent. Let everything be allowed to do what it naturally does, so that its nature will be satisfied.”

The principle of opposites, understood most clearly through the symbolism of the yin-yang, is a concept relatively unfamiliar in the West, though it suggests a familiarity to

some systemically oriented psychotherapies. It provides a philosophy of change where attaining a thing is reached by beginning with the opposite, just as the Tao of nature reaches an extreme, then naturally cycles forward to its opposite. The Tao De Ching states:

Be bent, and you will remain straight.

Be vacant, and you will remain full.

Be worn, and you will remain new.

#### Recent societal changes affecting Chinese families in Taiwan

For the past approximately 40 years Taiwan has undergone rapid economic development that has surprisingly quickly lifted the island-state out of the third world. Taiwan's rapid industrialization and urbanization have led many young adults to move away from the rural extended family setting to large cities in order to pursue education and work opportunities. Increased economic advancement has led to a cascade of other familial repercussions as well. Among the most notable is an increase in independent thinking among young adults (E. Lee, 1996b), an increase in the divorce rate, marking it as the fastest growing divorce rate in the world in the 1990s (Lee and Sun), and a jump in the number of women in the work force (Parish and Willis, 1993). All of these rapid societal changes (in addition to the devastating earthquake of 1999 and the constant threat of invasion by China over the last five decades) have left the Chinese families of Taiwan searching in all directions for answers to their many stresses that has been brought on by such rapid social change.

### Family therapy with Chinese families

Chinese families are usually reluctant to enter family therapy, believing that family problems are to be kept within, and solved from within, the family. Thus, psychotherapy of any kind is not well accepted; moreover, talk therapies applied in the Chinese context have generally been Western in development and implementation (Ma, 2000). Systemic family therapies, however, provide the framework for a good crossover between Asian worldview and Western psychotherapies.

When Chinese families do participate in therapy it has been suggested that Chinese families respond best to therapies that are solution-focused and present and near future oriented rather than leaning on past experiences (Sue and Zane, 1987). Atkinson, Morten, and Sue, in their book Counseling American Minorities (1989) recommend seven guidelines in working with traditional Chinese families in America: (a) educate the family about the value of therapy, (b) join quickly with the family through the use of compassion and self-disclosure, (c) emphasize specific techniques families can use in improving their relationships and resolving their problems, (d) do a thorough analysis of current environmental concerns, (e) consider intergenerational conflicts, especially those brought on by societal or family structure changes, (f) make therapy time-limited, (g) focus on concrete resolution of specific problems that deal with the family's present and immediate future.

### **Brief Strategic Family Therapy**

#### Overview

Brief Strategic Family Therapy (BSFT), initially developed at the Mental Research Institute, grew out of work by Don Jackson and his colleagues who were

studying human communications (the Palo Alto Group). The goal of MRI was to develop a brief form of therapy based on the previous communications work done at Palo Alto and on family systems concepts of cybernetics. An important innovation of MRI was the concept of looking for ways problems were maintained rather than examining the question of why the problem existed, thus avoiding the need to look deep into family members' past experiences (Weakland, Fisch & Bodin, 1971). A theory was developed that encompasses four points of Brief Strategic Family Therapy (Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch, 1974): (a) problems largely are outgrowths of one's frame of reference, or how one perceives the world, (b) problems develop due to the mishandling of difficult life events, (c) continuing to apply attempted solutions that are ineffective tends to make the problem worse, and (d) effective problem resolution is dependent on the application of new and different solutions that do not replicate the previously unhelpful attempted solutions because they are a different category of solution (known as second order change).

#### Application to Chinese families

Soo-hoo (1999) lists eight characteristics of Brief Strategic Family Therapy that make it especially suited to working with Chinese families. Brief Strategic Family Therapy (is): (a) Time limited, which fits with the mindset of many Chinese that "...views psychotherapy as more like visiting a family physician and getting a specific dose of medication, in the form of expert advise, to solve a problem" (p. 172). (b) Pragmatic and practical. BSFT focuses on problem solving rather than psychological insight, which is consistent with Chinese families' desire to find the practical solution to a problem. (c) Centers on solving specific problems. Rather than focusing on the

processing of emotions, Chinese families generally prefer the “correct” answer for their problem. (d) Focuses on changing interactions as opposed to changing more complex family structures. (e) Focuses on the present and the near future rather than on insight into past intrapsychic conflicts. (f) Emphasizes changing perceptions and ineffective behaviors as opposed to the more Western tradition of plumbing the depths of past experiences to reach intrapsychic resolution. (g) Uses the frame of reference concept, guiding the therapist to base treatment interventions on the client’s cultural and sociopolitical context, and finally, (h) highlights developing behaviorally based new solutions which fits with the traditional Chinese belief that “restraint of strong feelings is a necessary element of maintaining positive mental health” (p. 173).

Many of the above eight characteristics of BSFT are in concordance with Confucian thought that identifies a societal hierarchy based on education/expertise, and emphasizes pragmatism, individual restraint for the good of family and society, and simplicity. Taoist thought is also well represented in the systemically based strategic or paradoxical approaches used in BSFT.

### **Structural Family Therapy**

#### Overview

Minuchin’s structural Family Therapy theory (1974) has three fundamental concepts: structure, sub-systems, and boundaries. Minuchin states that repeated family transactions develop an ingrained structure. Family structure involves a set of covert rules that govern family transactions. A family’s structure is what regulates its daily flow of “information and energy” (Umberger, 1983). Subsystems, or holons, are members who join together to perform various functions. As Minuchin and Fishman (1981) describe it,

the nuclear family consists of the individual, spousal, and sibling subsystems. They explain further that larger sub-groupings are formed by “generation, gender, or task” (p. 16). In addition to familial subsystems, there are holons that extend out from the family including friends, neighbors, employment contacts and so on that interact with and impact the family system. Minuchin explains that families operate according to a continuum of boundaries that separate the subsystems. Boundaries may range from rigid to diffuse. Overly rigid boundaries lead to disengagement from one or more subsystems while overly diffuse boundaries lead to enmeshment (Jung, 1984). Extreme enmeshment or disengagement may lead to the development of symptoms (Ko, 1986). The goal of Structural Family Therapy is to help members change the family structure by altering enmeshed or disengaged boundaries and realigning subsystems so that families are more equipped to solve their problems (Nichols and Schwartz). Minuchin postulates that changing family organization causes family members to experience change. Structural family therapy is meant to create a crisis for the family so that it will eventually move through its stages of development and settle into a more healthy structure. Crisis induction is a key component in opening up the system for change. However, therapy should only affect change to a degree that will not upset the healthy balance of the normal family system. In other words, only the smallest amount of change necessary to make the system functional should be sought. To achieve a degree of family crisis, two primary techniques are proposed: enactments and spontaneous transactions. According to Minuchin and Nichols (1993), “Enactment is the technique by which the therapist asks the family to dance in his presence.” In other words, the family does not just describe the problem, but acts out the conflict in the presence of the therapist so that he or she can

observe the structure of subsystem boundary patterns and intervene based on the family's enactment of the problem. Spontaneous transactions, like enactment, require that the therapist observe the family's troublesome transactions so that the therapist can intervene to highlight the dysfunctional behaviors and push the family to alter those transactions.

Nichols and Schwartz (1995) outline Structural Family Therapy in seven steps: (a) joining and accommodating, (b) working with interactions, (c) developing a tentative diagnosis in the first session, (d) highlighting and modifying interactions, (e) boundary interventions, (f) unbalancing, and challenging the family's assumptions through teaching, information giving and advice.

#### Application to Chinese families

The Western trained family therapist must be aware of the high value that the Chinese individual holds regarding the family. Jung (1984) states:

To serve traditional Chinese in individual therapy is, in some respects, contrary to Chinese cultural values. Individual growth and development are not within the accepted norm of the Chinese culture, for the individual is always responsible to the family... (p. 369)

E. Lee (1976a) concurs with Jung:

Traditional western psychotherapeutic approaches based on the assumptions of individuation, independence, self-disclosure, verbal expression of feelings, and long-term insight therapy may go counter to Asian American values of interdependence, self-control, repression of emotions, and short-term result-oriented solutions. (p. 239)

Lee (1996b) proposes that the reason that many Chinese drop out of therapy due to the expectation that there will be an immediate cure. He states of many Chinese families:

They expect a rapid diagnosis and do not understand the purpose of lengthy evaluation and the apparent lack of treatment in the initial process. They may also get upset with initial interviews that probe into their family backgrounds, which they perceive have nothing to do with the presenting problem. To reveal family secrets to an outsider also evokes a sense of guilt. (p. 258)

The expectation for a rapid diagnosis and a rapid cure are possible using Minuchin's model. Also, by making structural changes in the family's subsystems early on in the therapy process, which is an essential principle of Structural Family Therapy, there is the potential for quick results, which the Chinese expect. Families will tend to return to therapy if they feel they are being helped and if changes are taking place (Jung). In addition, the "Structural model does not encourage probing into family history, which may shame the family, but focuses on changing current dysfunctional family patterns as the method of treatment. "Nonjudgmental listening and neutrality" by the therapist may be viewed by a Chinese family as a lack of interest or a lack of confidence (Lee, 1996b). Structural Family Therapy allows for intensity, shaping competence and unbalancing within the family structure, none of which are neutral or passive techniques, but rather confrontational and authority exhibiting.

Like Brief Strategic Family Therapy, Structural Family Therapy seeks to use the family's strengths. Minuchin and Fishman note: "every family has elements in their own culture which, if understood, can become levers to actualize and expand the family members' behavioral repertory" (p. 262).

The most obvious deficit in conducting Structural Family Therapy with Chinese families is that traditional Chinese husbands and fathers are resistant to attend family sessions. It is difficult, if not impossible, to conduct Structural Family Therapy without the dominant male adult figure present and participating in the sessions (Lee, a).

Ko, in her work with Chinese immigrating from Vietnam to America showed success using the Structural Family Therapy model, but also acknowledges its limitations: "...cultural and family values are difficult to change; the Vietnamese Chinese family emphasis on harmony and paternal family pattern limit the application of Minuchin's structural approach" (p. 27). Ko noted another limitation of the Structural approach being that manipulating and escalating stress to overpower the dominant head of the extended family may result in the family's complete withdrawal from therapy or in the escalation of their problems.

Minuchin encourages creativity in applying his principles and techniques, therefore, there may be imaginative ways of employing Structural Family Therapy with a Chinese family where there is a resistant traditional father figure. One possibility may be to first attempt to meet with the parental subsystem only, which may help the dominant male figure see himself more in control and be free to discuss emotional issues without the sibling subsystem present. Also, from the author's own experience in working with Chinese families in Taiwan, fathers are often willing to be actively involved in helping their children with a clearly identified problem. Jung's experience attests that with most dysfunctional Chinese families, the goal of therapy will not be to change family subsystems, which are usually quite well defined, but to make rigid boundaries between parents and children more flexible so that individuals understand each other better. The

focus on the problem instead of on blaming will also be a valuable asset in using Structural Family Therapy. A challenge for the Western-trained family systems therapist will be to find culturally acceptable means to problem resolution. Utilizing the long-standing and deeply meaningful cultural strengths of Taoist philosophy, Confucian and Buddhist thought and practices, filial piety, holism and interconnectedness in world-view can provide ample opportunity to integrate Structural Family Therapy with the Chinese family.

### **Intergenerational Family Therapy**

#### Overview

Nichols and Schwartz (1995) state that Murray Bowen has developed the most comprehensive theory of human behavior and problems of any approach to family treatment. Originally, Bowen trained as a psychiatrist, and many of his ideas appear to be psychoanalytic in origin; however, through his use of genograms he has opened the way for a new understanding of family therapy theory. Unfortunately, little work has been done in considering application of Bowen's Intergenerational Family Therapy model to the Chinese family.

At the foundation of Bowen's theory are eight interlocking concepts. Differentiation of self is the cornerstone of Intergenerational Family Therapy and has two aspects: intrapsychic and interpersonal differentiation. Intrapsychic differentiation refers to the ability to separate feelings from thinking. Undifferentiated people poorly distinguish thoughts from feelings, often acting impulsively and incapable of objective thinking. Opinions are generally based on feelings rather than rational analysis. Well-differentiated people are able to balance thinking and feeling, capable of both spontaneity

and restraint, as well as the ability to resist emotional impulses. Interpersonal differentiation is the ability to emotionally separate oneself from others in spite of pressure to conform. Undifferentiated people react emotionally to the dictates of family members, or others that remind them of their family. Interpersonally differentiated people are able to take definite stands on issues because they are able to think things through and act on their convictions regardless of the emotional pressure placed upon them. Effort must be exerted to deliberately differentiate oneself from others.

Triangles are generally subsystems involving the interrelation of three people due to the lack of differentiation of the members in what would otherwise be a dyadic relationship. Triangles are likely to develop when there is distance between two people in an emotionally significant relationship such as a marriage or a parent-child relationship. The danger in triangles is that the distance between two people that fail to work through relationship conflict may remain frozen in the triangulated state as a means of anxiety reduction rather than facing the conflictual relationship and working through problems. Bowen states that most family problems are triangular (Bowen, 1985).

Nuclear family emotional process occurs when there is a lack of differentiation in the family of origin, leading to emotional cutoff from parents, which in turn leads to fusion in marriage. Fusion tends to produce one of four following problems: emotional distance, physical or emotional dysfunction, overt marital conflict, or projection of the problem onto one or more children (Nichols and Schwartz).

Family projection process is the process by which parents transmit their immaturity and lack of differentiation to their children, whereas multigenerational transmission process refers to the passing down of one's level of differentiation to one's

children, who in turn marry and pass down their level of differentiation to their children, and so on.

Sibling position plays a role in personality characteristics, Bowen argues, with the first born child be treated more positively by their siblings than subsequent siblings (Boer, 1990).

Emotional cutoff describes the way people manage undifferentiation between generations. Emotional cutoff can manifest itself as moving far away from parents, avoiding certain people, or insulating oneself with the presence of their parties.

Societal emotional process is the effect that society has on families, and the effect that families have on society. Some examples may be the prevalence of crime, divorce, or the neglect of responsibilities in a society as they influence a family's emotional functioning.

The goal of Intergenerational Family Therapy is to increase differentiation of self, whereas detriangling is the key to differentiation. As one removes oneself from triangles, he or she faces the emotional issues that have been previously avoided, and may surreptitiously encourage others in the triangle to do the same.

According to Bowen, and in harmony with systemic principles, change in one triangle will change the entire family system. Therefore, Intergenerational Family Therapy, unlike Structural Family Therapy, indicates that there is value in working with only one person or one couple in the therapy session to bring about systemic change since all patterns of interaction in the family system are interconnected. Actually, Bowen believes it is easier to work with one or two people toward reaching a higher level of differentiation than an entire family system. Bowen's preferred couple for therapy is the

marital couple, because they are the ones around whom most of the triangles revolve.

Though Bowenian therapy does not generally focus on symptoms, it is assumed that various symptoms that have arisen from past undifferentiation will generally self-resolve.

#### Application to Chinese families

The greatest strength of the Intergenerational Family Therapy model as applied to Chinese families is the principle of differentiation. Because most Chinese men are traditionally duty bound to their parents more than their spouse, there is much potential for conflict in the marital dyad of younger couples that are forming increasingly more nuclear family structures due to rapid societal change. Differentiation efforts working with the marital dyad have the potential to resolve much conflict if handled carefully so as not to disrupt or displace the parent-child relationship. Additionally, as stated earlier, many elderly and traditional Chinese will not readily attend family therapy; Intergenerational Family Therapy provides an avenue for positive family change while working with a smaller number of family members. When applied to a Chinese context, Intergenerational Family Therapy may be problematic due to its nominal focus on direct problem resolution, and its dependence on addressing and exploring past life experiences as a means of attaining the goal of differentiation without disrupting family harmony. However, the skillful use of the family genogram in therapy may serve as a means of helping some families appreciate their interconnectedness with past generations and future generations as the family is guided to better understand and apply traditionally Eastern principles. The Intergenerational Family Therapy emphasis on detriangling by encouraging a more observant stance (Atwood & Maltin, 1991) in family relationships is

similar to the Taoist principle of wu-wei, or non-action (Jordan, 1985), and fits with the more acceptable social reserve taught by Confucius and respected by Chinese society.

Also, Intergenerational Family Therapy does not directly address or encourage the expression of emotion, but seeks to develop a balance between emotion and thought, which is congruent with Taoist concepts (Jordan).

### **Discussion**

The three systemically based approaches discussed here have different but unique characteristics that make each of them well suited for application with various Chinese families seeking family therapy treatment. This author postulates that Brief Strategic Family Therapy is best suited to the widest range of families due to its similarity with Confucian emphasis on brevity, and therapist-as-expert mindset, as well as its use of strategic or paradoxical interventions that fit well with common Taoist ideas such as the nature of opposites.

Structural Family Therapy has application to Chinese families for many of the same reasons as Brief Strategic Family Therapy; most notably its potential for brevity in treatment, and therapist-as-expert orientation. Both a strength and weakness of Structural Family Therapy in working with Chinese families is its use of enactments and spontaneous transactions that often necessitate the entire family system, or at least a symptomatic subsystem, to be present for Structural Family Therapy to be effective. When the entire family system or a critical subsystem can routinely attend therapy Structural Family Therapy has great potential to be effective with Chinese families (Ma).

Intergenerational Family Therapy offers a systemic approach that may seem at first glance to be unsuited to many Chinese families. Paradoxically, what makes Bowen's

more in-depth therapy model most applicable to traditional Chinese families is its intergenerational emphasis that resonates with many traditional Chinese family values and widespread cultural emphasis of reverence for ancestors and elders as well as the importance of continuing the family line through descendants. Additionally, Intergenerational Family Therapy does not require the presence of the entire family system to be effective in achieving its goal of differentiation of self, making it a practical approach when some members of a family system are unwilling or unable to attend therapy. Ma notes that most Chinese families generally expect therapy to be a teaching setting, allowing the metaphor of therapist as coach, guide or teacher a helpful one. The obvious drawbacks of Intergenerational Family Therapy for many Chinese families are its dependence upon looking into past family experience, its lack of emphasis on presenting problems, and the theoretical assumption that change may not be quick.

### **Conclusion**

Each of the three systemic therapy approaches discussed has its unique strengths and weaknesses as they are applied to a Chinese setting. Each of the three approaches discussed provides a systemic foundation to which Chinese families can relate and to which Western-trained family therapists can join with Eastern epistemology to provide a synergistic collaboration. It is incumbent upon the therapist to develop an adequate understanding of each family's unique circumstances and cultural belief system, as well as a solid foundation of the overarching host culture's value system before deciding upon which approach is most likely to help the client family attain its treatment goal(s).

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