

*Why
Counseling,
Why Not Shou-
Jing?*

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It is September 21, 1999, a heartbreaking day in Taiwan. Millions of eyes watch crying faces, crumbled buildings, and frantic firemen, and wonder what they can do for the victims of Taiwan's most catastrophic earthquake.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

"Where are we? What can we do?" read the title of a leaflet urging the helping systems to take responsibility for the mental recovery of the victims. In just two or three days, a multitude of psychologists, social workers and people who called themselves "mental healers" poured into the earthquake zone, an area inhabited by Hokkien and Hakka Taiwanese and aboriginal peoples.¹ They came with abundant enthusiasm but left frustrated, under a torrent of criticism.

The reality was that suffering families preferred to take their family members, especially children showing emotional problems, to Taoist *Ji-Tong*,² Buddhist nuns, and monks instead of to the psychotherapists and counselors whom they referred to as "experts."

"Why?" I asked a mother of three children before I accompanied her through a *shou-jing* session.³ She said with a mixture of embarrassment and anger,

"I do not know how to communicate with the experts. He told me that I have some kind of disease in my mind but I think I am OK. And he kept asking me to express my feelings toward the earthquake, but I feel embarrassed

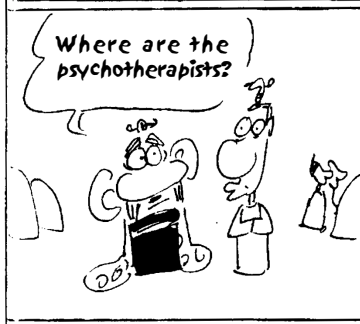
if I tell people my own feelings. But I do really need someone to talk to because I worry about my daughter and sons a lot and I am afraid that the gods will punish us again. [By sending another earthquake.] I went to a Master in the temporary temple and she taught me how to deal with the situation. How to calm my anxieties through worship and helping others. How to accept the grief as an arrangement by the gods. You know that our people have done so many things wrong ... It is always a Master who tells me what to do and I feel much better after I talked to her. And I think my children are going to be OK after the gods chase away the evil."

This woman's case is just one of many. The story became particularly embarrassing to the professionals when the newspapers highlighted the situation by printing a cartoon that portrayed victims running to the temple Masters for healing rather than to the experts. The pressing question that was subsequently discussed among academics was, why do people in need turn to the Masters instead of to university-trained healing professionals? My own question was, are these clinical psychologists actu-

¹ Native Taiwanese of two subcultures and languages, and the aboriginal peoples who preceded the Chinese to Formosa.

² *Ji-Tong* (乩童): Term for a person who conducts Taiwanese alternative therapy rituals to solve a variety of problems, including physical illness, mental problems, family welfare, and so on. The person works through contact with a deity.

³ *Shou-jing* (收驚): A Taiwanese alternative therapeutic rite performed by a man who is given power by a deity (there are thousands of deities in Chinese religions and the man always uses the one who is worshiped in his temple). With some materials, for example, a small cup, rice, child's clothes, and joss sticks, the man dances crazily and has a dialog with the deity, who speaks through him. The purpose of the rite is to determine what is wrong with the client's children and to chase away the evil demon in order to calm the child's spirit.



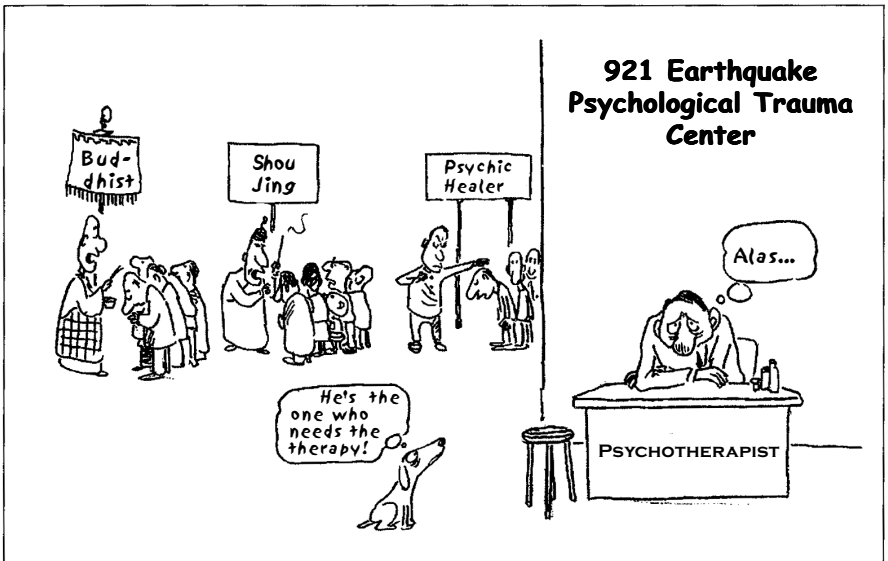
ally aware of what their would-be clients are thinking, and if so, how would they respond to this attitude toward their field?

WHO ARE THESE PEOPLE?

The first question could be rephrased as, why do professional helpers such as psychiatrists, counselors, and clinical psychologists have so much difficulty communicating with those who are suffering and “push” them away to the Masters? Are the professionals not well trained? Are the experts not devoted? Are the helpers not smart enough?

The answer is that the professional practitioners are trained too well in theories that are based on a Western (and middle class white male) worldview while their clients are rooted in a Confucian culture. The strategy they use to heal the suffering, the way they talk to clients and the notions they use to assess the clients are just not right for the clients. They lack a sense of cultural awareness—indeed, an awareness of their own culture.

When the professionals rushed into the disaster zone they tried to treat people using methods that they had learned from their Western theories. As multicultural counseling and therapy (MCT) specialists have pointed out, the appropriate application of therapeutic skills in any setting depends on both cultural awareness and relevant local knowledge. Now we can understand why the helpers were frustrated and headed back feeling helpless themselves.



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Even as some culturally aware professionals try to identify cultural-specific psychopathologies and ways of healing, most of the clinical and counseling practitioners in Taiwan impose a Western worldview on traditional Confucian people. The result is a curious sort of “East meets West” story, but in this case everyone involved is yellow and they still can’t understand each other.

It is the untrained alternative practitioners who are doing a better job. Rooted in their

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understanding of their own culture, Masters employ culture-specific practices such as Zen (禪宗) meditation, *qi-gong* (氣功), spiritual chorus,⁴ and preternatural rituals. These alternative therapies are not only highly popular in the countryside, but are also practiced in the cities. One can take a stroll down the streets of any large, metropolitan Taiwanese city and get a sense of how abundant the temples are.

I had an opportunity to discuss the situation with a Buddhist Master who was preaching at a service I attended. He told me it is his responsibility as a Buddhist to heal the wandering and suffering minds, and that he does more therapy than a professional therapist. He said, “I have read the Sutra that speaks of more than 50 personality types and I know exactly how to soothe the suffering.” This Master holds an American Ph.D., and he tried to convince me that he is better prepared to do counseling through his knowledge of Buddhism than are academically trained experts. I came to admire him as a Master and to follow his guidance, and I became a better counselor because of this experience.

One day, feeling frustrated, I went back to the part of central Taiwan that had suffered the most damage and stayed in the house where I had lived for 10 days during our unsuccessful crisis intervention effort. I was looking for some way to come to terms with the experience. Chatting up a woman who had been injured while climbing out of her swaying building, I realized that she was also hurt psychologically. Tears came to her as she tried so hard to tell me the story of what she had encountered. I asked her if she had ever tried to ask for help. The answer was negative. Pressing the issue, I kept asking her if she realized that there are professional resources she could use to get help for her broken heart. Sobbing, she said yes, she

⁴ Singing melodic Buddhist sutras loudly in order to calm the spirit.

knew of Buddhist rites, Taoist shelters and Protestant churches where she could go. She remembered how much they had done for her friends. I realized that she had no sense whatsoever that professional counselors and therapists in the area could be of any help for her problems. I was saddened not just by her situation, but also by the pitiful contribution of my field to her well being.

Wandering down a street that had been destroyed, I came upon a *Xin-An* (Heart-Peace) sanctuary run by a Buddhist organization.⁵ Women and children were reading the sutras aloud. I found my own peace of mind listening to the chanting of these angels.

I had the opportunity to interview the minister of social welfare for the Taichung District on the one-year anniversary of the earthquake. He admonished the counselors directly: "Counselors and therapists should be less superficially concerned about their own dignity, and get down to earth with the people and their culture."

BACK TO OUR AIR-CONDITIONED OFFICES!

I think I have a good idea about the kinds of experiences people had with the experts and how they came to view them. Now I'm eager for an answer to my second question: Are clinical and counseling psychologists aware of what happened? Unfortunately, instead of taking time for introspection about what their science had failed to do, the professional healers went back to Taipei and conducted numerous conferences. American experts were invited to contribute their knowledge of PTSD, so as usual the focus was on Western approaches without any particular sense of what the victims actually needed or wanted. At one conference, annoyed, I asked a clinical psychologist, "Isn't it our responsibility to integrate West and East and expand our discipline to the global village?" "You're asking for a revolution!" was the reply.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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And none of the professionals seemed fazed by the cartoons that ridiculed them! Some professionals resorted to criticizing their colleagues' techniques, while others simply attributed the victims' complaints to lack of education. A few went so far as to assert that the concept of psychotherapy originated in the modern West and is therefore designed implicitly for wealthy, civilized people.

CONCLUSION

One of the impediments to a culturally-appropriate counseling in Taiwan is the ongoing battle between the clinical and counseling fields over credentialing. Lacking agreement between the parties, lawmakers are unwilling to pass a licensure statute.

So although we Taiwanese think of ourselves as a civilized nation, we still have no authentic and unified accreditation system for mental health practitioners. One result of the unclear status of mental health services in Taiwan is a shortage of therapists and counse-

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lors. Another is that the energy devoted to tribal warfare is lost to the more important project of developing a culturally appropriate science.

As a person who has studied numerous Western counseling theories while at the same time performing years of Zen meditation, I am fully convinced that mental health professionals in Taiwan should pay more attention to their own culture and incorporate local practices, such as mediation, which are right for the Taiwanese. Urbanization and modernization exact a heavy toll on mental life, so it is our duty to develop culture-based counseling methods to help people cope with social change.

If counseling and therapy professionals learn to conceptualize and treat their clients more effectively, perhaps we will feel less burned out and discouraged. Or, we can leave emotional problems to the province of the Masters and their culturally attuned techniques, refined indigenously over centuries, and hide in our air-conditioned university offices writing grant proposals.

⁵ There are several Xin-An (心安) sanctuary sites run by the Buddhist organization, Dharma Drum Mountain (法鼓山), in central Taiwan. They aim to heal people with love and care based on Buddhist principles. The volunteers visit the victims' families frequently and make friends with them so that they know exactly what the families need. They also have a fund to support the families. They are doing things that counselors and psychologists "can't" do and "won't" do.