The Musings of a Family Therapist in Asia When COVID-19 Struck

WAI-YUNG LEE*

In response to the COVID-19 crisis in Asia, a family therapist in Hong Kong shares her experiences and reflections, both personally and professionally from an Eastern lens. From a state of shock and immobilization to moments of contemplation, she highlights her struggle with being caught between her Eastern roots and Western training, which has become more salient in facing COVID-19. While the latter pulls her toward a more problem resolution stance, the former pulls her toward a more accepting position. As a result, her therapy is shaped in such a way that she tends to raise more questions instead of providing answers.

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First, we were shocked, then immobilized, and now we shall begin to contemplate!

THE STATE OF SHOCK

When it had first started, we were too shaken to make sense of what was really happening. We kept saying that never had anything like this happen before! People were in a state of panic, fighting to stock up on masks, disinfectants, and strangely, toilet paper! There was a shortage of toilet paper reported all over the news; it had even become a commodity for robbery. In Hong Kong, with the fight against SARS from 17 years ago still fresh in our memories, we thought we were well prepared to face another virus (Lau, Chan, & Ng, 2020). However, as our busy streets began to look empty and deserted, the feelings of being trapped began to emerge. The borders began to close down, no one can get in or get out easily. We quickly realized that this was happening not only our city, but also in other cities around the globe where even the entire country was closed, sending people into quarantine. Each day, we watched the news to compare which country had the worst number of confirmed cases and deaths. All of a sudden, social distancing became the new norm. To apply the benchmark of 1.5 m between people as recommended by many countries was a close-to-impossible task in an overcrowded city like Hong Kong, where people were practically crammed on top of each other. The Hong Kong Government had introduced many different measures to separate people, including prohibiting gatherings of four people or more at first and then later loosening that to groups of eight. Nonetheless, many restaurants and businesses that were catered to public services were immobilized or subsequently closed. The city which was normally bubbling with life became paralyzed.

*Tsyan Yuk Hospital, Hong Kong City, Hong Kong.
Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Wai-Yung Lee, Tsyan Yuk Hospital, 5/F, 30 Hospital Road, Hong Kong City, Hong Kong. E-mail: wyleeh@hkucc.hku.hk.
We entered into a state of horror that was previously known only in science fiction. There was a remarkable case where after having dinner together to celebrate Chinese New Year, 11 out of 19 family members were confirmed to have been infected with COVID-19. This was like dropping a bombshell on our daily lives, challenging our core cultural value in which the sharing of food was the sharing of love and affection. As for myself, it had been 3 months since I have had my last sit-down dinner with my family and friends. My credit card statements now consisted mostly of a long list of food delivery bills. People were joking that by the time we are finally allowed to leave the house, we would have become so fat that we would not be able to get through the door.

**WATCHING THE WORLD UNRAVEL**

As we stayed home to watch the world unravel itself, I was filled with admiration for colleagues in Shanghai who deserted the comfort of their homes to travel to Wuhan to support the medical team in their desperate efforts to fight the virus, while elsewhere, others were involved in dealing with the local influx of confirmed cases with limited protective resources. As the threat of the virus persisted, most people would agree that it had made them meet their family relationship issues head-on, something they have previously managed to avoid. For some, the lockdown provided new opportunities for renewing connections; for others, the interpersonal friction could be intensified from staying in close proximity for a prolonged period of time. It seemed that the battle against SARS had bonded us together, whereas COVID-19 had set us apart.

In Japan, the term “corona divorce” had become widely used as couples in lockdown grew fed up with each other. Divorce rates in Japan have surged with about 35% of marriages ending in divorce filings during this period (Ryall, 2020). Social media sites soon became a forum for frustrated Japanese wives to vent about their marriage, and in particular, their inconsiderate or demanding husbands. With husbands working from home or having lost their jobs, children home from school, and Japanese authorities recommending that everyone stay home as much as possible, even on the weekends, families had been spending more and more time together and Japanese couples were facing situations they had rarely experienced in the past. Amongst the grievances posted by Japanese wives on Twitter, the following tweet from one wife was particularly revealing,

My husband’s loud voice. The sounding of him coughing and eating. The television is on loudly all day. My husband snoring as he lays in the middle of the living room. I’ve put up with this for 10 days. How many more days will it last? Will my spirit hold?

The same seemed to be true with couples in China, which had seen a sharp increase in the number of divorce petitions in Shanghai (Prasso, 2020). The city of Xian, in central China, and Dazhou, in Sichuan province, both reported record-high numbers of divorce filings in early March, leading to long backlogs at government offices. Shanghai divorce lawyer Steve Li at Gentle & Trust Law Firm says his caseload has increased by 25% since the city’s lockdown eased in mid-March (Prasso, 2020). Many women were quoted to have said,

I can’t stand the family situation. As soon as the government offices reopen, I’m going to file for divorce.

Interestingly, the grievances appeared to be mainly expressed by women. We did not see many reports from men, but the following message from a male Twitter user in Japan suggested that the only way out for him was to say sorry, for lack of a better option.

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“During a quarrel, when it’s with my boss or my wife, I just apologize,” he wrote. “Even if I don’t even remember what I’m apologizing for.”

**OUR WAYS ARE CHANGING**

Many believe that the pandemic will forever change the way we live and work, but the change is already here, it is just that we are still too dumbfounded to grapple with it. Most of the important conferences in Asia had been postponed or canceled. Trainings were either temporarily halted or conducted on the internet. Many therapists, after suspending their practices for a while, resorted to using Zoom or other measures to conduct online consultations. For a family therapist whose job is in the forefront of the family scene, I feel I am also confronted head-on with the many challenges posited by COVID-19. My sense of certainty that has been put to test continuously since my return to the East from the West is now facing an even bigger challenge. The pandemic has created a completely new context for us to view things, questioning our usual way of conceiving and perceiving family relationships. What has been considered abnormal became normal, such as the problem of school refusal for children, which has been a major concern for parents in Asia. Since all schools are closed, staying at home became the most normal thing for children to do. With one of my cases that had been focused on getting a teenager back to school, COVID-19 provided a temporary relief. Instead of putting all their energy on the child, the parents began to switch their attention to the couple relationship, which would have been a therapeutically desirable direction. However, as they started to address this long-neglected area, what they discovered was something even more disastrous that led to the dissolution of the marriage.

In other cases, the family crisis seemed to be subdued in view of the virus. Many couples began to work things out by themselves when they realized that a therapist was not readily available to them. However, as the threat of the virus continued with seemingly no end to it, there appeared to be a new surge of requests for family therapy.

Parents who may originally have enjoyed more time with their children during homeschooling found their patience running thin as the period subsisted. What was initially a positive bonding time for the parent and child have turned into a mutually unbearable struggle.

With a visitation case, although the father gained substantial visitation hours through the court, the mother was successful in preventing him from taking their child into his own home due to a history of suspected domestic violence. As a result, the father and son spent hours on the streets at a time when everyone was asked to stay home, making it impossible for them to form any stable relationship.

Of course, working from home would be a totally different experience if you were staying in a decent apartment as compared to the whole family squeezing into one subdivided flat, which is a housing phenomenon in Hong Kong where one flat is subdivided into several small rooms and rented to many families. Furthermore, if you have no job to go back to, since the economy had been hit hard by the coronavirus, the despair and isolation would be extremely intolerable, not to mention if those who were affected or have died happened to be related to you. Family therapists have to face a wide range of family problems in relation to the virus, something that is beyond what we are familiar with or have prepared for.

Undoubtedly, COVID-19 will leave a giant footprint on planet Earth. In Hong Kong, the impact of the virus is made worst amid the intense socio-political upheaval. People are like living in a pressure cooker, ready to burst at any time, placing the city in a more vulnerable position as compared to other Asian regions.
Fortunately, not all is lost. Some lucky families reported that the lockdown had provided a much-needed opportunity for them to renew their intimacy. We believe many more babies will be conceived during this period, resulting in a generation of “COVID-19 baby boomers” in Asia. Childbirth statistics will later confirm whether this is the case.

ROLE OF THE THERAPIST

As family therapists, we are no longer in a position of observing and guiding from the outside. We are all on the same boat together, sharing the same anxiety and uncertainty, as well as finding hope in the most desperate situation.

Although my training in family therapy was mostly based on models established in the West, my work with Asian families in the past 20 years had been deeply influenced by my exposure to Eastern philosophy. While I can identify many universalities between the two, their applications are in fact very different. These differences can best be understood in the treatment of cancer patients. While Western medicine aims to get rid of the cancer cells even if it is at the cost of killing the patient, Eastern medicine tends to seek coexistence with the cancer rather than get rid of it. It seems that the West privileges clarity and the East embraces ambiguity. This contradiction can also be felt in the way we deal with the pandemic.

Take the idea of social distancing that was intended to stop the spread of the virus for instance, although it was effective in emptying the streets, it created congestion within the homes, which may be responsible for the higher rates of divorce or domestic violence. Ideas that aim to resolve one problem can often create other problems. I am often torn between the Western side of my brain, which pulls me toward active problem resolution and the Eastern side that pulls me toward a more accepting stance on problems. This process has destroyed every ounce of certainty within me.

EAST AND WEST

I used to believe that Asians are masters of conflict avoidance when I first returned to work at the University of Hong Kong (Lee et al., 2013). Now I find denial to be a good tactic sometimes. Why bother with things that you cannot change anyway? Would it not be better to use that energy on something more enjoyable? A quick literature search indicated that most of the articles on Asian families had cited Confucius as an influential figure. However, cultural experts had long considered Asians to be influenced by a mixture of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism (Lee & Cheng, 2017). To put it simply, Confucianism liked to make up rules, Taoism enjoyed breaking them, and the Zen Buddhist suggested that all that the human senses can perceive are mere illusions. If this is true, it would imply that the whole Eastern culture is a combination of contradiction and paradox, as all these major schools hold very different and sometimes contradictory ideas and doctrines.

Peter Fraenkel suggested on his blog that one should read the Tao Te Ching (Laozi & Mitchell, 1988) which is a Taoism scripture outlining the absolute principle underlying the universe, combining within itself the principles of Yin and Yang and signifying the way, or code of behavior, that is in harmony with the natural order. I would like to emphasize that according to the Book of Changes dated in 3rd century BCE or even earlier (Colapinto & Lee, 2017; Wilhelm et al., 1950), Yin and Yang are seen as the core of the universe, which has come into existence to provide stability when the cosmos was in chaos. The principle of Yin and Yang is that all things exist as inseparable and contradictory opposites, which is a fundamental concept in Chinese philosophy and culture in general.
From this perspective, Chinese philosophy is a systemic thinking to begin with. In its core concept, nothing exists in isolation. However, this does not necessarily mean that we are group-oriented. I often find the label, “collectivism”, too unilateral. While it may be true that Eastern culture privileged the sense of belonging to a group, its manifestation is quite diverse in different Asian regions. It seemed that while the Japanese are often found to be loyal to group actions, the Chinese were often known to be defiant toward group norms. The popular Chinese saying, “There are rules from above, there are ways from below” to me implies 3,000 years of practice in perfecting the skill of defeating the larger authority.

There seems to be a paradox where on the one hand, people are tied to collective efforts, and on the other hand, they seek mental withdrawal from the group as the preferred way to cope with relational tension. Again, while Westerners would be more inclined to change the group norm in order to enjoy the group, Easterners would work on one’s inner-capacity so as to tolerate the group pressure. In the old days, people would seek counsel from the high monks in remote areas to relieve anxieties and stress, or they would find solace in poetry or arts. It seems that staying away from people, even when they are your family members, has been a desirable way to save one’s own sanity. In this regard, the social distancing, which was so much resisted by the West does not seem to be received too poorly in Asia. Even in Japan, where people are more known to be group-oriented, hikikomori, or social recluses, has taken a different height during the coronavirus pandemic. It seems that dropping out of reality is seen as a way of soul cleansing before one can deal with the wear and tear of daily life again. From this point of view, lockdown can be a blessing and I wonder if more people may now choose to stay home instead of rejoining the madding crowd.

MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS

As the whole world is looking for ways to cope with the pandemic, many of us in the East turned to Buddhism and mindfulness. Buddhist monks have been playing a very active role in leading their followers through a spiritual process during this difficult time. Ironically, mindfulness, which has always been part of the Buddhism practice, after having taken a round to become a highly popular intervention in the West, has now returned and rebranded as a unique technique by both monks and therapists alike in their teachings (Lee & Cheng, 2017).

Family therapists in Asia had long been trying to find our own cultural identity, but there has been very limited literature on the subject. Asian scholars are often found to question the applicability of the triangulation theory to Asian families at international conferences such as the Asian Academy of Family Therapy’s annual conferences. However, clinicians working with mental health patients are still finding the theory very useful in helping them to understand the dynamics of these client population. Although every therapist agrees with the notion that culture is part of the very important consideration in conducting family therapy in the East, we have yet to study the link between the two more substantially and come up with convincing evidence. As we reflect on how the pandemic is affecting the way we work with families, this may be a good chance for us to review these issues more systematically.

In contrast, there seems to be a trend for Western therapists to adopt Eastern philosophy into their thinking and practice. Buddhism teaching, through its mindfulness practice in particular, appears to have built a strong base in the Western world. Despite their different world views and distinct ways of manifestation, the East and the West are constantly in the process of mutual exchange and interactions. It is expected that the different cultures and philosophical ideas will continue to mix and match in various forms,
giving new shape to couple and family therapy interventions worldwide (Lee & Cheng, 2017).

My Buddhist teacher had also been conducting classes through the internet when the Buddhist centers were closed. As I sat through these deeply introspective sessions, I also used the process to revisit my cultural roots and contemplate on the ways we conduct therapy. Against such backdrop, it is not surprising that my approach to therapy is shaped to embrace uncertainty. I have become much less interested in finding solutions, and instead, like the Buddhist masters, I am learning to ask questions, which I believe would have a better chance to open new possibilities. This actually resonates with some of Sal Minuchin’s ideas in his challenges to certainty, which I also took part in, during his later years (Lee, 2018).

In our struggle with relationship problems during the pandemic, I am more convinced that if people are less certain about their claims, they may realize that what they are doing is not to their benefit, thereby leaving new room for change. I am reminded of the character who was trapped in a sand dune in the Japanese novel, “The Woman in the Dunes” (Teshigahara & Abe, 1966). For years, the man had been preoccupied with only one thought, which was to get out of the dune. When he was finally set free, he realized that there was really no difference whether he was in or out, except that he had wasted all his time and energy on a struggle that has had no real meaning to him. These days, when I get stuck in therapy, I would simply suggest, let us go and drink some tea!

Perhaps what the pandemic has done, is confronting us with the irony of life, of its contradictions and absurdity, and most importantly, its existential anxiety and pain. East or West, perhaps the importance lies in how you live through this unprecedented time and still come out safe and sound, since the virus is not likely to go away anytime soon.

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