Suspense, Empathy, Interpretation, and Formation: A Researcher’s Intersubjectivity Process of Conducting Psychobiography on Master Tai-Xu

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In the recent trend of psychobiography, intersubjective psychobiography research has become a prevalent approach. Such a research approach has shifted its focus in terms of methodology and accentuates the intersubjectivity in narrations due to the influence of narrative paradigm, which effectively facilitate researchers’ self-transformations. This study introduced the researcher’s four-stage process of the intersubjective psychobiography research on Master Tai-Xu: suspense, empathy, interpretation, and formation and established a spiral, progressive learning model. This model can be applied for cultivating Buddhist practitioners and psychological workers as well as assisting them to engage in deep reflection and to form their own appropriate styles of practicing.

Keywords: Master Tai-Xu, psychobiography, intersubjectivity

Introduction

Psychobiography stems from Freud’s study on Leonardo da Vinci. The field of researching psychobiography through psychoanalyses once aroused great attention. Related studies have mainly focused on interpreting the mental state of the biographee of psychobiography yet neglected researchers’ statuses and their interpretation of research. Subsequent researchers, such as Elms (1994), developed more diverse psychobiography analysis methods from broader perspectives (e.g., personality psychology). In terms of such research method involving the separation of subject and object, Erikson (1969) proposed a different approach in a study on Gandhi. From the viewpoint of an anthropologist, he discussed his own experience in the study and compared it with Gandhi’s upbringing in the Indian culture according to his development theory, which initiated his devotion in psychobiography research.

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Kohut, who introduced self-psychology, proposed a viewpoint of empathy as vicarious introspection during the practice of psychoanalysis, which he considered as a distinct characteristic of psychoanalysis. Unlike other human sciences, psychoanalytic science is always conducted based on the information offered by introspection and empathy (Kohut, 1977).

Psychobiography research is influenced by the empathy as vicarious introspection proposed in Kohut’s self-psychology, and with the emphasis on both transference and counter transference in analytical psychology (Papadopoulos, 2006) as well as the trend of postmodernism; I discovered that my own experience was inevitably involved with the objective understanding of Master Tai-Xu while composing his psychobiography.

Dilthey (1991) and Gadamer (1990) indicated the fundamental differences between natural and spiritual sciences and attempted to develop the distinctness of spiritual science. In terms of methodology, conventional psychobiography research adopted the inductive method in natural science, expecting to identify a regular pattern in individual actions, but that approach demonstrated limited effectiveness. Thomé Fang, a Chinese philosopher, considered that the effect of using natural science mechanism in human-related research was limited and that the existence of human should be inspected based on Gestalt psychology because such existence could be classified into various levels (Fang, 1980). Specifically, the discovery of the uniqueness of the biographee of psychobiography mostly depends on researchers’ experience and competence levels.

One perspective that can be used to interpret biographees is how researchers look upon the object of a dialogue (Bruner, 1996), which is precisely the focus of relationship theorists and also how psychobiography researchers evaluate the development of research communities. In the final chapter of Relational Being, Gergen specified his ideas of the development of three potentials: practice, morality, and spirituality; repeatedly mentioned the coconstruction of knowledge and action; and further mentioned the concepts of Indra’s net and interbeing in Buddhism (Gergen, 2009). In addition, researchers should decide the direction of biographical studies; that is, where the discussion on biographees lies and also the relationship between researchers and biographees. The research process of psychobiography involves breaking egocentrism and standing in the shoes of others, which are the work required from researchers to achieve intersubjectivity (Chang, 2019).

This study takes Tai-Xu’s psychobiographical research process as an example to illustrate the practical experience of intersubjectivity.

Master Tai-Xu’s innovative doctrine has a great impact on modern engaged Buddhism, which has led Chinese Buddhism towards more concern for the secular world. This has greatly influenced the new aspect and the vitality of modern Buddhism. The current study shows that after his religious (Zen type) peak experiences, Master Tai-Xu further reflected on the issue of Buddha-Nature and emphasized on Sutra studies for Chinese Buddhism. He proposed the simultaneous propagation of the Eight Schools, in addition to the Buddhist emphasis of religious practices over theory. During that period, Chinese society was at the threshold of critical changes, and there were widespread threats of transforming temples to educational institutes. It was in this context that Master Tai-Xu was forced to convert to the revival of Buddhism, from his original focus on Enlightenment derived from introspection (Hsueh, 2017).

Through conducting Master Tai-Xu’s psychobiography, Hsueh (2017) explored the relationship between personal life experiences and religious practices, and started his self-transformation journey. Further, Hsueh reflected on his own experience based on the process of investigating Master Tai-Xu’s experience and its significance.
Accordingly, this paper elaborates how the researcher, Hsueh, gradually shifted from the conventional biographee centrism to intersubjectivity in which his experience was integrated with materials of the biographee. The following discussion follows the four courses of the research process: suspense, empathy, interpretation, and formation, and conclusions practical to psychobiographical research are proposed at the end.

**Four Courses of Research Process**

Hsueh and Ting (2014) and Hsueh (2017) adopted Carl Jung’s viewpoint of archetype to analyze Master Tai-Xu’s religious archetypes from his biography to discuss the interaction of his religious archetype and his Buddhism viewpoints in different life stages. The analysis started from Tai-Xu’s longing for immortal archetype, followed by Buddha archetype after his enlightenment, then bodhisattva archetype after his mid-aged years. The contents of each archetype affected the evolution of Tai-Xu’s advocacy of the Engagement Buddhism. Also, Tai-Xu’s Buddhist view was profoundly based on his own life and religious experience, and social practice. As a Buddhist practitioner and psychological worker, Hsueh experienced profound self-understanding and self-transformation while dialoguing with Tai-Xu’s biography in the process of research. The self-narrative and self-reflection in Hsueh’s intersubjectivity process are used to explain the four courses of research process as follows.

**Suspense**

In the beginning, Hsueh spent much time establishing a chronicle of Tai-Xu through *The Complete Work of Master Tai-Xu* (Yin, 1978), attempting to list out the major events in his life, yet the analysis was difficult to start. Eventually, Hsueh could only start from his suspense regarding the biographee of the psychobiography to understand how Tai-Xu’s “religious peak experience” influenced himself. Hsueh noted:

> I selected this as an entry point for understanding Tai-Xu because I had also had some religious peak experiences, and—completing narrative coursework in an empathy course—I was reminded of how valuable these experiences were to my life. Shortly before I was to graduate from college, I suddenly felt void, in the sense that I did not know how to proceed in my life after leaving the campus. However, this life crisis was also the point when I realized the infinite possibilities in life. A senior schoolmate in the club later suggested that I apply for graduate school and obtain a teaching position at a junior college. From then on, whenever I needed spiritual support, I chanted the *Diamond Sutra* as well as Mahayana scriptures, mostly *The Universal Door*; I obtained my religious experience at a certain moment. Gaining the unexpected religious experience out of a life crisis, I consolidated my religion belief during the unconscious development of a religious identity but was uncertain about the connotations of such experience.

Accordingly, I initiated my research by examining the enlightenment experience of Tai-Xu. As Gadamer said, a preunderstanding always precedes an understanding; thus, I brought my own religious experience into the study of Tai-Xu’s peak experience and deepened my recognition of Tai-Xu’s religious life in a dialectic process.

> This was my resonance experience with Tai-Xu. (Jan. 28, 2016, Hsueh’s reflective notes)

As Tai-Xu read the sentence in the *Mahaprajnaparamita Sutra*, “All laws are unavailable, even those with too much nirvana”, his body and mind entered *sunyata* (i.e., emptiness). The religious peak experience he acquired deepened his understanding in Buddhism and gave him endless religious motivation. Such an immense power also gave a feeling of surrender. For Tai-Xu, his most urgent demand at that time was to maintain the feeling of emptiness, to enhance his understanding of Buddhist enlightenment, and to coexist with the divine.

To focus on the suspenseful problem in Tai-Xu’s religious experience, Hsueh continued his journey.
Empathy

The structure of a single symbol or symbol (as the basis of language) is subjective, and the psychological process of self-reflection requires subjective subjectivity. It can be said that many documents on empathy are directly related to intersubjectivity (Gillespie, 2007).

In the conversation with literature, three focal points in Tai-Xu’s religious life were observed: internality and externality, the subjectivity of Chinese Buddhism, and different archetypes in life.

When exploring the psychological process of Tai-Xu, Hsueh objectively inspected Tai-Xu’s mental state using the suspension of phenomenology and also continuously sought resources that resonated with Tai-Xu in his own experience. Such process of intersubjectivity gradually enriched his understanding of Tai-Xu.

Furthermore, presenting empathy to the biographee is a dynamic process. When Hsueh was composing the psychobiography of Tai-Xu, he continuously verified whether his understanding of Tai-Xu was appropriate using abundant literature and applied Tai-Xu’s life issues as materials for self-reflection and analyses through research note-taking and group trainings. There were three aspects concluded from Hsueh’s research notes as follows:

**Internality and externality.** Tai-Xu, who had been immersed in sacredness, continued to face choices between internality and externality because the Buddhist group he belonged to was under a challenge (i.e., the struggle for control over religious assets and the Tianting Temple) to which he was compelled to give a response. Moreover, China was seeking salvation during the period, contributing to large changes in its social environment. At that time, Tai-Xu met Monk Huashan, and the debate between them guided him to move toward the external environment.

From the perspective of Chinese Buddhism’s focus on Mahayana scriptures, both *Mahaprajnaparamita Sutra*, which commenced Master Tai-Xu’s religious experience, and the concept of divine intervention in Buddhism enabled him to find corresponding resources to move into society. The facts that Li Zehou observed a prevalent problem in China of how sage hood does not make one king and that Buddhist scriptures discussed how small contributions could benefit the world profoundly explained the reason why Tai-Xu did what he had to do.

As a Buddhist practitioner, Hsueh reflected on his religious experiences and noted:

> As for me, the internal sacredness of religion was intriguing; however, I was forced to turn to externality with the changes in the teaching environment in Taiwan. In Taiwan’s education reform in 2000, higher education became prevalent, and junior colleges were restructured into universities. I was obligated to involve myself in these environmental changes and to participate in the establishment of reform initiatives, yet I also sought internal resources in Buddhist scriptures simultaneously.

> With such an experience of engaging myself in the external environment, I was able to emphasize Tai-Xu’s dilemma between internality and externality rather than understanding it through merely exploring documents of Tai-Xu. The problem of internality and externality stems from sentiment ontology. Once, because I was too involved in religious activities, I encountered a crisis at work; I shared this with a friend with the same interest in Buddhist scriptures at a book club. He responded by explaining how religious belief had also aided me through difficult times, which served as an affirmation of the internality and reliance on faith. (Mar. 26, 2016, Hsueh’s reflective notes)

This was a dialectic process of internality and externality as oppose to a dichotomy of either internality or externality. Additionally, such response gave Hsueh a subtle understanding why Tai-Xu regretted in his later memories that he did not extend his early religious experience.

**Subjectivity of Chinese Buddhism.** Starting on his journey from his religious experience, Master Tai-Xu initially considered that the power of Buddhism originates from the practice of basing theories on real
Hence, he argued that Mahayana, Hinayana, and other factions of Buddhism should maintain equality and harmony as well as communicate actively with and learn from different Buddhist traditions. To comprehend the content of Vajrayana Buddhism, he even accepted an abhiseka of Vajrayana according to the religious tradition to be qualified for access to Vajrayana scriptures.

With the growing reputation of Japanese Vajrayana, Tibetan Buddhism, and Theravada Buddhism, and students’ suggestion that he learn Tibetan Buddhism, Tai-Xu developed a strong sense of crisis in Chinese Buddhism, which inspired him to contemplate the extraordinariness of Chinese Buddhism and how much more it could contribute to the contemporary society. At first, he claimed that Chan was the characteristic style of Chinese Buddhism, but he—in accordance with Chiang Kai-shek’s promotion of the New Life Movement—quickly shifted his focus to the development of a new style of Buddhism appropriate for contemporary society. Examples of well-adapted contemporary Buddhism include Engagement Buddhism and the practice of Bodhisattva Dharma. The Mahayana scriptures of Chinese Buddhism also provided him with theoretical resources.

Hsueh deeply felt the importance of subjectivity in religion. He noted:

Born in the era after the lifting of martial law in Taiwan, I have also encountered the flourishing of Buddhism. Because of my participation in a university religious club, I came into extensive contact with Pure Land Buddhism and Chan; I also had a slight acquaintance with Taoist traditions. In the 1980s, my interest in Tibetan Buddhism grew considerably after its advent in Taiwan; aside from my studies and volunteering work, I spent most of my time after work studying Tibetan Buddhism, which had become a part of my research. Furthermore, the importance of the study of Agama, the origin of Buddhist text, had gradually garnered recognition under the development of Buddhist studies in Taiwan. Accordingly, I became involved in such teaching content. I also gained from the practice of focusing and from mindfulness-based stress reduction training. I attended several Agama courses. However, conflicts in beliefs sometimes occurred as I became immersed in the Theravada, Chinese, and Tibetan Buddhist traditions, so I, as a believer and a researcher, considered it necessary to arrive at a Buddhist viewpoint of my own and established my own subjectivity aside from my attempts to respect and adapt to different traditions. (Jun. 28, 2016, Hsueh’s reflective notes)

A senior classmate once asked me, “What is your own Buddhism?” in an oriental religious course, which encouraged me to explore Master Tai-Xu’s Buddhist plight with uncertainties. This inspired in me that the religious beliefs are not merely a practice of faith but a choice of lifestyle. For Master Tai-Xu, the leader of Buddhism, his religious choice was of great significance to the development of Chinese Buddhism, and for me, to become a Buddhist householder in modern society is equally significant. When I was writing this section, I was deeply troubled by the questions as to how I should regard the biographee and how I should develop new interpretations in the contemporary historical environment. (Jul. 10, 2016, Hsueh’s reflective notes)

Unlimited to religious experience, psychological theory provided Hsueh with further insights into Tai-Xu. **Exploration of different archetypes in life.** As a psychological worker, Hsueh has conducted psychobiography and taught psychology for decades, and developed a professional expectation of introducing psychology into life understanding. This is consistent with the research purpose of psychobiography. When Hsueh was trapped in a pile of Tai-Xu materials, he used Jung’s theory to understand his own life experience and made a breakthrough in Tai-Xu. Empathy, the meaning here, is to use some framework to connect different life experiences. Hsueh noted:

I have intermittently participated in workshops on Jungian psychology and different stages of dream work training. I was said to possess an archetype of urban spiritual seeker during dream sharing; therefore, I decided to examine the biographee of the psychobiography with regard to subconscious. However, the problems of how such examinations should be included in the analysis on the biographee have always been perplexing.

After the 2013 Symposium on Cross-Strait Life Narrative and Psychobiography in Zhanjiang Normal College, the organizer arranged a visit to Hainan. When I entered the viewing platform of the Guanyin of Nanshan, I discovered that the
Guanyin statue has three sides, with each holding a different ritual instrument. This enlightened my thoughts on my research on Tai-Xu: similar to the different sides of the Guanyin, a biographee presented different qualities. As said by Runyun, a statue could be viewed at various angles and all the views of various angles could be integrated into a more complete life image.

In the life of Master Tai-Xu, his encounter with the collective unconscious was no doubt the crucial resource for the exertion of his vitality. He possessed three archetypes throughout his life stages, namely a free immortal with strengths beyond humans, a Buddha mastering the wisdom of the old, and a Bodhisattva with radiance and enlightenment, and they served as the essential source for understanding how Tai-Xu confronted with the collective subconscious and took further actions. (Aug. 13, 2016, Hsueh’s reflective notes)

When using the framework to connect different life experiences, we are already doing interpretation work.

**Interpretation**

Intersubjectivity is based on participatory sense-making, mutual understanding, and interactive construction between subjects through the intentional formation of consciousness. The subject of biography, whether biographee is a living person or a textual material, is what Levinas calls the “other”. The subjectivity of the researcher is deconstructed and regenerated when it encounters the “other”, and the “knowledge” is produced. Thus, interpretation involves not only understanding the biographee, but also a process of self-reflection.

During the exploration of the intersubjective psychobiography, Hsueh noted, “I comprehended not only Gadamer’s basic viewpoints of hermeneutics, such as pre-understanding and fusion of horizons, but also the modernization of Chinese Buddhism through the dialectic process of the study on the biographee” (Sep. 10, 2016, Hsueh’s reflective notes). Hsueh compiled his notes on Buddhism and physical and mental health; he wrote:

Gadamer introduced an interpretation concerning the Bible and laws, and the ethical arguments (derived from Aristotle) gave me an active inspiration: I thought about what makes an admirable modern style of Buddhism when studying Tai-Xu. This viewpoint corresponded to the statement advocated by Tai-Xu in his early time that “Man can enlarge the Way, but the Way cannot enlarge man.” However, I wondered what problems might be aroused by such arrogance.

In Hexagram 42 (yì) of the *Yi Jing*, the concept of proceeding with time is proposed; this notion inspired this psychobiography research. The biographee had faced modern situations; I pondered what were the social meanings of those situations had been at that time. As time passed, new inspirations to the concerns I bore in mind had surfaced along with the random enlightenments or day-to-day practice in my life.

Although internality and externality in Buddhism had long been a focus of dialectics, it remained in the concern of Buddhist developmental history and was somewhat irrelevant to me. However, this year, Master Huiguang mentioned that Prince Siddhartha had been predicted at birth to become the Chakravarti or a Buddha. In the context of dependent origination, I wondered how a person could become the Chakravarti without learning and training. This *koan* also brought me anew inspiration.

I began to compile my notes on Buddhism and physical and mental health. The notes gave me a glimpse of the direction in which a householder could endeavor, and the note-taking process enabled me to gain some learning experiences. Moreover, when my study partner delivering a presentation on *Life Experience*, written by Tang Junyi to record his learning and life experience, I suddenly realized that the content of my notes was part of my accumulated experience that I felt compelled to write down; such written notes document how I, as a modern householder, live in the balance of body and mind.

When I attempted to compile my Buddhist and spiritual experiences while writing my notes on Buddhism and physical and mental health, I was able to put myself in the mindset of Master Tai-Xu when he constructed the theory of the true reality. Through the process of constructing an inclusivity theory of his own, similar to his effort on creating his own faction, he compiled his knowledge of Buddhism and modern life. However, I neglected the critical role of the theory of the true reality in the life of Tai-Xu. (Sep. 28, 2016, Hsueh’s reflective notes)
Formation

The subjectivity of the researcher is not an individual-centered development, but a tendency to develop subjectivity with the “other”, and “becoming others” as the ethical direction of subject practice. We discovered that intersubjective research on elites was conducive to the development of empathy for the life experiences of the biographees as well as concern for matters specific to the biographees’ eras. We discovered that self-analysis and understanding during the research process were also beneficial to the professional development of a psychological worker; this is a value of psychobiography that warrants exploration.

Through conducting psychobiography on Master Tai-Xu, Hsueh had more insight into his fear and attitude of birth, aging, sickness, and death, and became a stronger Buddhist practitioner. His experience sharing can be summarized as follows:

First, a researcher who plans to write psychobiography must spend a considerable amount of time in studying theories of personality. In addition to theories from the perspective of psychoanalysis, all theories that facilitate the researcher’s understanding of individual personalities and of how individuals make decisions in certain scenarios can shed light on the biographee of a psychobiography. For instance, during my exploration of Tai-Xu, I studied some viewpoints within Jungian psychoanalysis; I expected to find an appropriate way of understanding by adopting and practicing Jungian methods.

Second, the type of topic the researcher selects for examining the biographee also reflects the researcher’s individual values as a psychological worker.

Third, to understand the biographee, the researcher must perceive issues facing the biographee because different disciplines have conducted relevant in-depth discussions on such issues. In this research on Master Tai-Xu for instance, I began the exploration from Tai-Xu’s peak experience, and my comprehension of Buddhism, transpersonal psychology, and religious psychology formed the basis of my dialogue with the biographee.

Forth, continuous clarification of dialogues based on biographical data ensures a correct direction of the researcher’s empathy development.

Fifth, the researcher’s bias and misinterpretation toward the biographee can be amended through the discussion and feedback given by psychobiography groups, which is another approach for reaching equitable dialogues in addition to supervision. (Nov. 28, 2016, Hsueh’s reflective notes)

Conclusion

Intersubjective psychobiography research transforms researchers and its readers through the life of the biographee. Psychobiography professionals construct a spiral, progressive learning model through various phases, namely suspense, empathy, interpretation, and formation (Goodson & Gill, 2011), contributing to an emerging type of self-narrative psychobiography research under the narrative paradigm trend. This type of research has shifted its focus in terms of methodology and accentuates the intersubjectivity in narrations due to the influence of the narrative paradigm. This shift greatly assists researchers in self-transformation can be applied for cultivating Buddhist practitioners and psychological workers as well as assisting them to engage in deep reflection and to form their own appropriate styles of practicing.

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