Importing Psychoanalysis to China: The Function of 'Critical Pluralism' as a Container

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Abstract

While Freud maintained that psychoanalysis has no particular "Weltanschauung" we now must acknowledge that the various theoretical schools, whether emphasizing drive, ego, object, or self, come from Western European, North American, and South American analysts whose clinical work is inevitably embedded in their respective cultures. As psychoanalysis makes the cross-cultural journey to China, we must keep open minds in considering which aspects of the 'discoveries' of western psychoanalysis are universal and which are culturally situated. There is an exciting potential for different analytic paradigms, concepts, and experiences to emerge from the work of Chinese analysts and analysands.

In order to maximize this potential and encourage an attitude of openness to new discovery, the author discusses 'critical pluralism' as a container for minimizing the institutional orthodoxy that has fractured psychoanalysis in the West. The analyst operating within critical pluralism sustains an appreciation of the inner logic and usefulness of the full panorama of psychoanalytic theories, without becoming dogmatic about any of them. Bion's work is discussed as a container for analysts considering the nature of their discipline and the theoretical differences between analysts. The sense that analytic theories are better recognized as useful models than as scientific truths is explored for its relevance to critical pluralism and the importation of analysis to Chinese culture.

In the second part of the paper, Freud's delineation of theoretical tenets of psychoanalysis is discussed before attention is turned to its method. The author elaborates the idea that psychoanalysis is first and foremost a method of exploring the psyche, and secondarily a set of theoretical conclusions derived from its method. Keeping this in mind, along with a sense of critical pluralism, will best potentiate the possibility that Chinese analysts working within different historical, cultural, and social forces may generate creative and fresh discoveries.

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It would be a valid observation to say that psycho-analysis cannot 'contain' the mental domain because it is not a 'container' but a 'probe'…
(Bion 1970, p.73)

Bringing Psychoanalysis to China

The IPA-China conference is an exciting event for those of us in psychoanalysis who find great satisfaction in introducing and teaching our history, theory, and technique to those newer to the field. We are accustomed to doing so in our own local institutes and graduate training programs, but it is a particularly momentous occasion to be transmitting psychoanalysis to China across such vast geographic, linguistic, historical and cultural borders.

My aim in this presentation is to put forward some preliminary thoughts which I hope will be useful for Chinese therapists undertaking psychoanalytic training, as well as for the teachers and supervisors guiding this training. For the sake of simplicity, I will use the terms *analyst*, *analysand*, and *psychoanalysis* while acknowledging that this means setting aside for the moment the useful distinctions that have been drawn between psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic therapy (see *IJP*, February 2010 for a recent series of papers on this subject). I also want to also contextualize my remarks by acknowledging that I claim no expert knowledge about Chinese culture, but speak simply as an analyst mindful that cultural preconceptions may be imbedded in analytic theories of human nature, and also mindful of the unfortunate consequences of theoretical factionalism in our institutional history and in our training of candidates (Kernberg, 1996).

The first century of psychoanalysis in the West has seen the development of a wide range of theoretical 'schools' which may be loosely grouped according to their relative emphasis on drive, ego, object, or self (Pine 1990). Each of these theoretical clusters has arisen as analysts struggled in their clinical work to develop useful ways of thinking about the nature of unconscious processes that play out in love, work, and the daily life of civilization and its discontents (Freud, 1930). While Freud maintained that psychoanalysis had no particular "Weltanschauung" of its own (Freud, 1933), bringing psychoanalysis to China now calls for us to acknowledge that the majority of analysts

have been Western Europeans, North Americans, and South Americans deriving their theories from encounters in which both analyst and analysand are embedded in their respective cultures.

As psychoanalysis gains interest in China, we must allow for the possibility that different cultural concepts of family structure, gender roles, and self-other relationships may result in new paradigms, concepts, and experiences emerging from the work of Chinese analysts and analysands. Furthermore, we must be aware that language itself is a significant variable and may have a strong effect on individual perception and experience (Boroditksy 2001, 2009). In short, familiar concepts from western psychoanalysis will in effect be clinically 're-evaluated' for their usefulness and universality.

With this setting as a background, the spirit of this paper is 1) to encourage an analytic attitude of openness to new discovery 2) to encourage a spirit of critical pluralism rather than orthodoxy and 3) to consider the idea that psychoanalysis is first and foremost a setting and process, and secondarily a set of theoretical conclusions. I believe that such an overall analytic attitude will potentiate the best learning atmosphere for Chinese analysts to gradually integrate psychoanalysis as their own discipline rather than as a 'pre-fabricated' import.

Avoiding Psychoanalytic Factionalism

The process of bringing psychoanalysis to China is further complicated by the contemporary state of psychoanalytic pluralism and the long history of debate, beginning with Freud and his followers, about what differentiates psychoanalysis from other forms of treatment. In 1914, Freud wrote a paper summarizing the history of the psychoanalytic movement. Among his other purposes, Freud sought to define what is and what isn't psychoanalysis. I will quote several passages:

> Among the other new factors which were added to the cathartic procedure as a result of my work and which transformed it into psycho-analysis, I may mention in particular the theory of repression and resistance, the recognition of infantile

> sexuality, and the interpreting and exploiting of dreams as a source of knowledge of the unconscious. (Freud, 1914a, p. 15)
>
> It may thus be said that the theory of psycho-analysis is an attempt to account for two striking and unexpected facts of observation which emerge whenever an attempt is made to trace the symptoms of a neurotic back to their sources in his past life: the facts of transference and of resistance. Any line of investigation which recognizes these two facts and takes them as the starting-point of its work has a right to call itself psycho-analysis, even though it arrives at results other than my own. But anyone who takes up other sides of the problem while avoiding these two hypotheses will hardly escape a charge of misappropriation of property by attempted impersonation, if he persists in calling himself a psycho-analyst. (Freud, 1914a, p. 16)

While Freud was writing these passages, his theoretical differences with Stekel, Adler, and Jung had led to schisms that were very much on his mind. In fact, as revealed by Hanns Sachs some 30 years later (Gay, 1988), Freud and his followers had gone so far as form a secret 'Committee' charged with safeguarding the fundamental tenets of psychoanalytic theory as Freud conceived it, namely the existence of repression, the unconscious, and infantile sexuality, the uncovering of which will be met with resistance, and derivatives of which will find expression in dreams and in the transference. In 1913, Freud had celebrated the Committee's formation by giving each of the members (Jones, Ferenczi, Rank, Eitington, Abraham, and, later, Sachs) an ancient intaglio from his personal collection to mount on gold rings similar to the one he himself wore (Jones, 1955, pp. 171-173).

During this same period Freud was in the process of writing a series of papers on technique that laid out his recommendations for establishing the analytic setting and process (1911, 1912a, 1912b, 1913, 1914a, 1914b, 1915). Nonetheless is notable from the quotes above that Freud defined psychoanalysis more by its *discoveries* than its *method of discovery*. This stands in reverse contrast to the philosophy of science in which its defining feature is considered to be its *method* (i.e., testing hypotheses to see if they

could be falsified), *rather than its discoveries* (Popper, 1959). But while science has arrived at a method of testing its propositions, psychoanalysts as a group have found it difficult to establish formal means of evaluating the validity of contrasting propositions and theories. Partially as a consequence, psychoanalysis has often been taken to task by its critics for not being 'scientific' (i.e., Grünbaum, 1984).

In effect, psychoanalytic discourse has tended toward persuasion, argument, and the politics of group identity. Psychoanalytic history is characterized by theoretical differences, which have, at their best, led to generative debate and development (see Blass, 2010 for an excellent discussion) and at their worst, to the flag-waving of institutional factionalism and the familiar slight: 'that's not *real* psychoanalysis'. The late Steve Mitchell recounted the emblematic story of a well-known and innovative psychoanalyst who had taken to placing a gun on the table whenever he presented his work at more traditional institutes. Invariably, someone would asked about the gun, and he would remark pleasantly that it was for use on the first person who, rather than addressing the ideas he was presenting, asked instead whether the ideas were "really psychoanalytic" (1995, p. xxiii).

Looking back perhaps there was a time when what was 'really psychoanalytic' could be clearly stated and agreed upon, but transmitting contemporary psychoanalytic theory and technique to China means importing a broad, sometimes bewildering, panorama of theoretical perspectives from which to shape one's analytic identity. The briefest summary of these would include drive-structural theory, ego-psychology, Kleinian and Middle School object-relations, the work of Bion, the Lacanian reading of Freud, self-psychology, and the evolving American interpersonal, intersubjective, and relational perspectives. How should a student of psychoanalysis sort through these diverse and often conflicting psychoanalytic models? The choices, as Pine (1990) has pointed out, are orthodoxy, eclecticism, or selective integration. Orthodoxy, while offering a purist sense of identity and certainty, necessarily entails a certain blindness to other points of view. Eclecticism, while avoiding purist dogmatism in the name of pragmatism ('whatever works), lacks theoretical rigor. Selective integration, in my view an optimal

goal, offers an appealing ideal model that is neither purist nor eclectic, but the path to genuine theoretical integration is clearly a major challenge for any individual analyst.

Critical Pluralism: A View from Bion's Theory

Selective integration of psychoanalytic theory and technique requires us to immerse ourselves in different approaches over time, putting them to use in the crucible of clinical work, and engaging in the conceptual work of bringing them together (where possible) in some sort of continually evolving 'personal' model. It is best fostered by an institutional training climate which provides a curriculum, teaching, and supervision which can support and sustain a sense of 'critical pluralism'. Strenger (1997) offers a very workable definition of this last term:

> The basic assumption of critical pluralism is that human understanding is intrinsically limited; that no conceptual framework can capture all possible perspectives on reality, human or otherwise, and that the coexistence of competing conceptual frameworks is in itself of enormous value...The voice of critical pluralism as I hear it is the voice of sanity. It tries to avoid the strident qualities of both fanaticism and relativism and tries to make the effort to maintain the capacity of listening and to appreciate the inner logic of alternative positions. (Strenger, 1997, p.127-128)

For the analytic teachers and candidates guided by this ideal in establishing psychoanalytic training in China, theoretical certainty must give way to critical thinking. Furthermore, due to the thorny problems of psychoanalytic epistemology, certainty and critical thinking must allow for a degree of 'not knowing', a state of mind made possible by the *negative capability* that Bion, quoting from a letter written by the poet John Keats, suggests is essential to an analytic state of mind.

> I mean Negative Capability. That is when, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason. (Keats quoted in Bion, 1970, p.125)

Bion's 'meta-view' on psychoanalytic theories as' knowledge' and psychoanalysis as a discipline are worth discussing here. Bion was unique among analytic theorists because he concerned himself not only with the evolution of mental growth in the analysand, but also with issues of mental growth that apply to psychoanalysts as a group as they attempt to grasp the clinical process and generate models of the mind. Said otherwise, Bion implicitly offers not only a psychoanalytic theory of the mind, but also a *theory of psychoanalysts trying to arrive at such theories.* Analyzed by Klein and creatively extending her concepts (i.e. projective identification and PS<>D), Bion's work tends to be closely associated with the Kleinian school. However, in my reading, the implications of the conceptual scaffolding he developed go well beyond Klein, and are entirely consistent with an analytic attitude of critical pluralism. To elaborate this point of view, it will be helpful to summarize some salient aspects of his work.

Bion is well known for recommending that the analyst proceed 'without memory and desire' (1970). In doing so, he extended and operationalized Freud's recommendation that we set aside 'therapeutic ambition' in favor of 'equally-hovering attention' (Freud, 1912). Why would Bion suggest that analysts not be in a hurry to attain certainty? What is the place of 'negative capability' in psychoanalysis and how is it useful to analysts seeking to find an anchor in the complexities of critical pluralism?

Bion's focus was not the drives and structures postulated by Freud, nor the geography of unconscious phantasy traced by Klein, but rather on the difficulties faced in learning from experience. He regards positive mental growth as a life-long process which involves transforming inarticulate aspects of one's own reality to known aspects that get worked-through and processed at ever-evolving levels of abstraction while simultaneously maintaining contact with their emotional roots. In his view, we are fated to search for truth with inadequate equipment, especially because of our own fear of truth and its indifference to us. In short, where Freud and Klein were more concerned with what needs to be known, Bion was interested in the process of 'knowing' in and of itself.

In his earliest formulations, Bion (1962a), begins by reversing the idea that 'thinking' generates 'thoughts', and postulates instead that 'thoughts' already in existence require the

development of a process for ‘thinking’ them (Meltzer, 1978, p. 38). What does he mean by this? In Bion’s terminology, a thought is conceived of as the registration of an infantile frustration. In his later model, ‘O’ , the symbol Bion used to indicate absolute but unknowable reality, presses in upon the infant and is registered as raw experience or ‘beta elements’. These beta elements need be tolerated, symbolized, and processed into something available for mental use. If this does not occur, they become sources of ‘nameless dread’, suitable only for evacuation into others, into the body, or into hallucinosis. When things go well, Bion uses the term ‘reverie’ to designate the mother’s state of receptivity in taking in projections and communications of the infant’s raw beta experience and transforming them into so-called ‘alpha’ elements. These can then be re-ingested by the infant in a more tolerable form. This process of alpha function is the essential relation between what Bion termed ‘container and contained’ (1962b). Through gradual internalization of this repeated sequence, the growing child begins to develop the capacity for its own alpha function, formulating a sense of an internal container which becomes the foundation for tolerating psychic pain and digesting experience for emotional growth. The fact that every mother will have psychological limitations of her own implies that, for each of us, further development of the capacity for reverie, containment, and alpha function will be necessary.

A second crucial opportunity for this growth occurs in psychoanalysis where the patient may gradually internalize the analyst’s capacities. When things go well, the analyst is able to contain that which the patient cannot yet tolerate, and gradually make it available through tolerable, digestible, interpretation. Interpretations by the analyst are mutative not only because of their specific content, but also because they represent and provide an opportunity for the internalization of the analyst’s provision of reverie, containment, and alpha function.

Again, what is most relevant to our theme of critical pluralism is that alpha function and the containing function apply not only to individual development, but also to the process of functioning as analysts, both individually and collectively. The ‘O’ of the clinical situation constantly presses in upon us as we attempt to apprehend and formulate 1) what we think is happening in the analysand’s mind, 2) what we think is happening in the co-created intersubjective mind between us, and 3) and what we think is happening in our minds as we attempt to sustain the analytic function. However, since the psyche

cannot directly be perceived by the senses, and must be filtered through the alpha function of the analyst, as analysts we are always *constructing subjective models rather than discovering objective facts*. Working from within this sensibility, Bion considered the unique and unusual nature of psychoanalysis as a discipline among other disciplines:

> It is as absurd to criticize a piece of psycho-analytic work on the ground that it is 'not scientific' as it is to criticize it because it is 'not religious' or 'not artistic'. It is not any of these things. (Bion, 1970, p. 62)

Alpha function and the containing function are in continual evolution. Bion constructed his Grid (1963) as a graphic way of representing the progressive development of thinking and containing and the manner in which these are employed to approach or evade psychological truth. The Grid, discussed at length in *Elements of Psychoanalysis* (1963), appears to be inspired by the periodic table of elements. Bion envisioned it as a tool for facilitating reflection outside the psychoanalytic session, comparing it to practicing scales rather than particular pieces of music. Many readers of Bion find it to be an unwieldy and troublesome instrument, one which Meltzer considered a 'glorious failure' (1978, p. 70). Nonetheless, I think it is useful for representing the current developmental status of psychoanalytic theories.

The vertical axis of the Grid moves progressively as follows: Beta Element > Alpha Element > Dream Thoughts & Myth > Pre-Conception > Conception > Concept > Scientific Deductive System and > Algebraic Calculus. The horizontal axis represents the manner in which thinking may be used for memory, attention, curiosity, and action. However, Bion places a fulcrum point (column 2) where any element must run the gauntlet of the reality principle. Depending on the level of frustration that is contained here, thinking may or may not be used to obfuscate truth. The struggle between omnipotence and certainty on the one hand, and uncertainty and humility on the other, is fought here. Implicit in Bion's model is the idea that analysts as a group have tended to fight religious battles of certainty rather than tolerate the uncertainty inherent in our theories. Psychoanalytic theories, while aiming toward the status of Scientific Deductive Systems hover somewhere closer to Myth and Concept. As Bion (1962b, 1963, 1965, 1970) has emphasized, psychoanalytic concepts and theories at this point are better recognized as useful models rather than as scientific truths. The degree of

purist, fundamentalist, or factional certainty that has characterized psychoanalytic in-fighting can be viewed as an emotional reaction to the difficulty of tolerating uncertainty in our discipline. My belief is that a posture of critical pluralism in the education, training and institutional life of psychoanalysis in China can provide a structuring container for tolerating a greater degree of uncertainty and humility, and sustaining a creative openness to new discovery.

Psychoanalysis as a Probe: Setting and Process

If we consider the range of contemporary psychoanalytic theories as workable models rather than truths, then it is probable that each of them might uniquely capture some important dimension of psychic life, and that none of them could capture the complexity of the psyche in its entirety. This ought to shift us from away from the certainty of orthodox purism toward the more uncertain, but humble, posture of critical pluralism. This perspective brings us back to the quote from Bion with which I began this paper, one that carries the sensibility that psychoanalysis is first and foremost a setting and process, and secondarily a set of theoretical conclusions.

> It would be a valid observation to say that psycho-analysis cannot 'contain' the mental domain because it is not a 'container' but a 'probe'…(Bion, 1970, p. 73).

I would also like to quote Meltzer at the close of his extensive study of the development of psychoanalysis from Freud, through Klein, to Bion:

> Perhaps it would not be too optimistic to say that Bion's work has broadened the scope of psycho-analysis in the same exponential proportions that Mrs. Klein's work can be seen in retrospect to have done. These elevations of Freud's work to the third power, so to speak, have enabled psycho-analysis to grow from a narrow theory of the neuroses and perversions, marred by overweening ambitions to explain everything, to a scientific method which may prove adequate to investigate and describe everything and explain nothing. (Meltzer, 1978, p. 118)

The conditions for the optimal functioning of this 'investigative probe' begin with a setting consisting of a consulting room, a couch, a consistent schedule, a fee, and appropriate professional and ethical boundaries (Freud 1913, p. 125). As part of this setting the analyst and analysand have, at least consciously, agreed upon a method. Most usually, this consists of the analysand attempting free association, i.e. attempting to speaking as freely and spontaneously as possible, without censorship, and without adhering to such cultural conventions as politeness, appropriate language, or logical, goal-directed conversation.

The analyst will endeavor to set aside therapeutic ambition (Freud, 1912, p. 115) and will attempt to listen with equally hovering attention: "To put it in a formula: he must turn his own unconscious like a receptive organ towards the transmitting unconscious of the patient" (1912, p. 111). The main sources of information upon which to base interpretations will be dreams, free association, parapraxes, repetitions (acting out), transference, and countertransference. The analyst will listen with the goal of identifying resistance, defense, and unconscious derivatives, containing and formulating these privately, and deciding when, and in what form, interpretations of the patient's dynamics are appropriate. The analyst will attempt to carry out this analytic function with relative neutrality and a degree of anonymity, all the while understanding that these too are ideals which can only be approximated by the analyst.

This is the more or less accepted model shared by members of the International Psychoanalytic Association, although different aspects may be privileged from school to school, analyst to analyst. It is recognized that this basic model is an ideal which may be tailored slightly for each analysand, and that, for some analysands, major modifications or 'parameters' (Eissler, 1953) may be necessary.

An indisputable product of Freud's genius was the creation of this setting. As Winnicott (1954) noted, Freud actually created a setting which lends itself to conditions, goals, and uses other than those which he himself could have envisioned. Freud had developed his version of psychoanalysis primarily for analysands who entered the Oedipus phase as whole persons. Klein had made use of the analytic situation to treat

analysands in the who were still in the process of bringing love and hate together and thereby becoming whole persons. Winnicott discovered a way of using the setting with patients who needed to establish a fundamental self before progressing toward the Kleinian and Freudian developmental tasks. I interpret Bion as further envisioning the setting and process as an existential domain in which the patient becomes increasingly able to 'suffer' the givens of reality 'O', including uncertainty, meaninglessness, loneliness, vulnerability, and ultimately death (Yalom, 1980). I have come to think that these various uses of setting and process are not exclusive to different types of analysands, but rather correspond to different strata of psychological development relevant to every analysand at different moments and phases in treatment. Familiarity with the different theoretical idioms within contemporary pluralism enables a greater degree of fluency in speaking with our analysand about these different levels of psychic life.

Psychoanalysis and the Cross-Cultural Journey

To sum up these reflections on bringing psychoanalysis to China, I have aimed to encourage an analytic attitude and educational spirit of openness to the full range of theoretical positions which comprise contemporary psychoanalytic pluralism. I have further elaborated a sensibility that psychoanalysis is first and foremost a method for probing the depths of the psyche, and secondarily a body of models developed from these explorations. I have argued that such an analytic posture will allow not only for the discovery of what we thought we already knew, but also for the possible development of new concepts, even new theoretical models, which may evolve from employment of the 'psychoanalytic probe' in a very different culture from the one in which it originated.

For any analysand, the process of psychoanalysis entails a very different way of approaching oneself. In another contribution (Rather, 2001) I have compared it to a 'cross-cultural journey':

> In entering psychoanalysis, the analysand is invited to make a cross-cultural journey. In his "culture of origin", a high value has been conferred upon rational-linear thought aimed at deliberate focused problem solving. In becoming an

> analysand, he enters a world in which an alternative perspective prevails. Here, the *sine qua non* of local customs and values is a respect for the significance of a wide variety of involuntary phenomena, including dreams, parapraxes, disorderly associative links, gaps in thinking, thought blocking, puns, double-entendre, silences, spontaneous somatic and sensory sensations, non-verbal enactments, and so on. (p. 517)

Because such phenomena arise spontaneously and involuntarily, they are imbued with a quality of otherness, as if they emanated from an internal foreign presence which I have termed 'the Unconscious Other'. As analysands in treatment, as analytic candidates in training, and as analysts bringing psychoanalysis to China, we are called upon to cultivate a collaborative interchange with this Unconscious Other. This is foundation for the "psychoanalytic function of the personality" (Bion, 1962a), that is, the capacity to perceive and make use of psychic reality for the purpose of emotional growth. The capacity to do so varies enormously in the West, and it will be extremely interesting to see in what ways this collaboration, and indeed the whole analytic process, will be impacted by cultural difference as psychoanalysis makes its way to China.

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