

Editorial: The Essence and Elements of Chinese Culture: Implications for cross-cultural competence in social work practice

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At the time of writing this editorial, the movie “Kung Fu Panda” is being screened in the theaters, here in Hong Kong and other parts of the world, receiving good reviews and excellent box office performance in the United States. Chinese panda and Chinese martial arts: Are these significant elements of Chinese culture? What is Chinese culture, or more pointedly, what is the essence of Chinese culture? Books for foreigners who want to do business in the People’s Republic of China inevitably describe a list of do’s and don’ts when dealing with Chinese officials and business executives, including how to greet, how to receive name cards, what gifts are suitable, how to respond when Chinese spit and belch, and various other social situations. An important topic for businessmen—both foreigners and Chinese outside of mainland China—is the mixing of business with pleasure, summed up as booze, cigarettes, karaoke, massage, and women. The article by Yuk King Lau and associates, ‘A resilience perspective on family adjustment to cross-border work arrangements of Hong Kong residents,’ is critical of the negative discourse on cross-border work issues in mainland China. Lau et al. present their study findings on positive adjustments made by families, dealing with various family dynamics and issues, including the threats of second wives and

mistresses. Whilst sexual promiscuity and extra-marital affairs are not peculiar to Chinese, Chinese attitudes toward sex and morality in Hong Kong and mainland China are shaped by historical, economic, political, and cultural patterns that are unique, namely the influence of Confucianism, Neo-Confucianism, socialism, capitalism, materialism, colonialism, and westernization.

In addition to social etiquette and potential business pitfalls, popular books on Chinese culture inevitably discuss *mianzhi* (losing and giving 'face'), *guanxi* (making connections and returning favors), and *fengshui* (attracting good fortunes and dispelling bad fortunes). Confucianism and Taoism are invoked as having great influence on Chinese thoughts, beliefs, and behavior, particularly to do with ethics and morals. Hence, Chinese are said to place great importance on virtues such as *xiao* (filial piety), *zhong* (loyalty), *ren* (benevolence), *ai* (love), *xin* (trust), *yi* (justice), *he* (harmony), and *ping* (peace) (Seligman 1999). Furthermore, Chinese are deemed to have great respect for age, seniority, and authority. Some of these themes are reinforced and idealized in academic literature.

To accentuate the essence of Chinese culture some scholars use the compare and contrast approach. For example, Chinese are said to be collectivists as opposed to western individualists, conflict avoiders as opposed to being forthright and speaking one's mind as westerners do, avoid eye contact unlike the westerners. The article, by Pamela Arnsberger, Xiulan Zhang, Patrick Fox, and Shixun Gui, 'Family caregiving in the Pacific Rim: results of

a survey conducted in California, Shanghai and Beijing,' belongs to this genre of east-west comparative studies. They report on their study of family caregivers, highlighting "universal" characteristics and differences in providing elder care. Whilst recognizing that China is increasingly westernized, the authors suggested that Confucian teaching on filial piety persists.

Knowledge of Chinese culture is not difficult to grasp and can be acquired through reading books and magazines, watching Chinese movies, and visiting greater China. Does it suffice for development of cross-cultural awareness, which social workers, counselors, and psychotherapists are exhorted to acquire, to be effective in the helping process?

Knowledge is just one of many aspects of cultural competence (Dyche & Zayas 2001). Depending on cultural knowledge alone runs the risk of developing stereotypes and should be used more appropriately as the basis for generating hypotheses for work with Chinese clients (Dyche & Zayas). Dean (2001) cautioned about being presumptuous in knowing about another culture and suggested maintaining uncertainty and tentativeness about one's knowledge of another culture. Other aspects of cultural competence include attitudes and skills, such as empathy (Dyche & Zayas), awareness of own cultural identity (Yan & Lam (2000), attentive listening, respectful questioning, curiosity, etc (Dean, 2001). A major challenge is to develop competence in *Putonghua* or Chinese dialects to communicate without the use of translators. The study of languages is not culture-free. The article, by Irene Chung, 'Affective lexicons and

indigenous responses: therapeutic interventions in social work practice with Chinese immigrant elders', goes beyond the linguistic surface to dig into latent expressions of emotions by Chinese-speaking migrant elders and relates therapeutic responses to such culturally determined expressions.

Part of cultural awareness is adopting an overall disposition that literature about culture tends to simplify and generalize and that individuals and ethnic groups within the wider culture do not necessarily imbibe all the characteristics of Chinese culture or adhere to its value and belief system. Some may have developed an international outlook on life. Chinese have varying exposure and experience with foreign cultures, having lived, worked, or studied abroad, whether for short or long period, or have worked for multi-national companies within China. They may, therefore, embrace and be competent in more than one culture, for example, those who are western-educated, or born and bred in foreign lands, and children of mixed ethnic marriages.

To be cross-culturally competent requires more than knowledge of etiquette and acquisition of language. It includes knowing the history of where clients come from. China has a long history of Chinese imperialism, foreign subjugation, Maoism, and in recent decades, an open market economy within a socialist system, modernism, and nationalism. Confucianism itself was not a constant stable force. It was revered in the past, then denigrated as feudalistic, and is being revived (see Pomfret, 2006, for an illuminating and incisive

account of modern China, particularly the insidious effects of Neo-Confucianism). How pervasive is Confucianism's cultural influence on individual Chinese, particularly on Chinese in mainland China versus Chinese in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and other parts of the world?

Furthermore, it is important to recognize how big China is, in terms of geography and demographics, and the implications of its vastness and complexity. China should be considered as a multi-cultural society, comprising 56 major ethnic *nationalities* (terminology used in China), of which the Han Chinese are the majority. The ethnic minorities differ in the extent to which they are assimilated or acculturated into the dominant Han culture and how much they retain their own ethnic identity. Adherence to religions, such as Islam, complicates the issue of Chinese cultural identity. Moreover, ethnic groups do not participate or benefit equally from the rapid economic growth of China, reflecting uneven social economic development across regions, provinces, counties, towns, and villages. The article by Yuanyuan Feng and Monit Cheung, 'Public policies affecting ethnic minorities in China,' address policy questions concerning the rights and interests of ethnic minorities, particularly in the context of geographic mobility across China to Han-dominated areas and of Han Chinese moving to areas populated by minority groups. The authors highlight entrenched policy goals of maintaining national unity and respecting ethnic diversities. Lack of data limit the extent to which they are able to assess whether the goals were achieved successfully.

As social workers, we need to remind ourselves that in being culturally responsive with clients (individuals, groups, communities, and organizations), we should not go to the other extreme and be culture-bound. There are aspects of culture that are oppressive and dehumanizing, for example, placing higher value on sons rather than on daughters or justifying physical abuse as discipline. The article by Dongping Qiao and Yuk-chung Chan, 'Myths of child abuse in China: Findings based on a qualitative study in Beijing,' examines common myths of child abuse, held by Chinese parents in Beijing. In their study, they draw on western concepts and social constructions of child abuse and discuss Chinese cultural influence in shaping parental understanding of child abuse versus child discipline. We need to explore cultural issues with clients, paying attention to cultural bondages, and consider their implications for social functioning.

In conclusion, we need to examine our own cultural lens and how that affects our work (at both practice- and policy-levels) with clients. This is particularly so when we are members of the dominant group in a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-lingual society, as it may affect our capacity to empathize with those belonging to "other" groups.

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