

Can You Hear Me? Can You See Me?

Conducting A Skype Internet Analysis In Chinese

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Today I would like to discuss some of the clinical implications for both patient and analyst of doing a Skype analysis in Chinese over the internet with patients in China. I have a number of patients in China some of whom I have been seeing for four years in three times a week treatment and others in once and twice a week treatment.

Before I begin I would like to make a few very brief comments about culture and its impact on doing this sort of cross cultural analysis. My aim here is not to show that the frame has to be modified due to culture, after all, there are so many aspects of human suffering which are universal, but rather to point to some things that the analyst might be helpfully attuned to. This with the caveat that cultural differences can be generalized but there are very personal meanings to how all of us respond to and have internalized cultural norms.

China's tradition of feudalism and Confucianism penetrate deep into the cultural psyche with a myriad of influences.

Filial piety is a strong ethical and cultural tenant. When talking about ambivalent feelings toward parents the Chinese patient is often burdened by a sense of wrong doing and of violating a fundamental ethical tenant of respecting the parent. This combined with an educational style which my students in the 70's when I was living in Northern China called the Peking Duck method of learning (stuffing knowledge down ones throat and force feeding information with a de-emphasis on open discussion and critical thinking) may make it much harder for our Chinese patients to express dissatisfaction directly toward the analyst.

Many of our patients have been traumatized by the Cultural Revolution which occurred between 1966 and 1977. Some of them, as young children, witnessed their parents being humiliated and worse. The holding environment of a stable society was unavailable for long periods of time and if there was not a strong compensatory family holding as for some of my patients this certainly exacerbated their intra-psychic problems.

During the Cultural Revolution foreigners were referred to as foreign devils. People who had relatives in the US were often accused of spying and were punished. How will this overlay come into the transference? China has truly had a love hate relationship with America and Americans. We have been both devalued and exalted. I also wondered if my patients in China might feel invaded or intruded upon by the West.

China is a society where large extended families are a source of help and support through the adult years and people accomplish goals through networks. Our literature emphasizes separation and individuation whereas Asian societies value interdependence and intergenerational bonding. But in fact our Chinese patients also struggle for a sense of autonomy.

The presentation of self in everyday life also differs. For example, Chinese value humility and often understate their accomplishments. This is not to be confused with lack of confidence.

Presently China is going through radical social and economic changes. Consequently there is a tremendous generation gap. Parents today who grew up during the rigid morality of the Cultural Revolution are raising children in a completely different environment of mores and permissibility than they were raised. This can be both exhilarating and confusing. I would say, though, that a lot of people may have lost their moral and psychological compass.

Now I will begin with the clinical material:

As I prepared to undertake this adventure in cross-cultural, cross-technological, and cross-linguistic analysis the following questions percolated in my mind:

What would it be like conducting psychoanalysis via the internet and in Chinese, not my mother tongue?

What would it feel like analyzing someone who grew up in China and speaking to him when we are neither in the same geographical location nor even in the same time zone –actually day and night are reversed?

Working in Chinese would I understand my patients and would they understand me? Would I be able to express all I wanted to say?

How would talking with someone over a computer and looking at their image on a screen affect my patients, me and the analysis?

Will there be modifications necessary in the analytic process or attitude because of the internet structure of the treatment.

Can I help them?

And later on the question arose: Am I just having too much fun doing this?

These are some of the things that were floating in my mind as I began this analysis.

Can You Hear Me? Can You See Me?

Three times a week shortly before 11:00 PM my time and 11:00 AM his time I turn on my computer and sign onto Skype. After a funny sound like a dog growling I am logged on. I wait for him to call me and at 11:00 sharp I hear the musical ring tone of Skype and a flashing notice that he is calling. We both then turn on our video web cameras. The first thing he asks me is “Can you hear me?” and usually I say “yes” because the sound 7,000 miles away is, more often than not, crystal clear. I then ask him “Can you see me?” because my web cam sometimes takes a while to kick in. “Yes” he says, “I can see you.” Then we begin.

The presenting problems of Wang, a 50 year old divorced professor living in a southern Chinese city, included difficulty sustaining a relationship with a woman, sexual difficulties, feelings of being weak and powerless, conflicts with his son and daughter, inability to feel authentic and inhibitions in work and love. He feels he is often a bystander in life rather than an active participant. He lives alone but visits his parents frequently.

When I first started working with Wang four years ago he sat facing me so that we could look directly at each other while speaking. I thought to myself that this would be quite alright because I worried that given the already built in distance between us that if he laid down and I couldn't see him but only heard a disembodied voice over the computer speakers it would be even harder to get a feel for what is going on. I never told him these thoughts, preferring to wait to see how things would unfold. About 6 weeks after we began he decided he wanted to lie down on a couch and arranged this by having the couch facing me. This way I could see his face while he was speaking. He says he likes lying on the couch and lying down he can have more things come up. This arrangement has been in effect for the entire 4 years excepting two weeks when his rattan reclining chair which is what he uses as a couch was sent in for repairs.

Another Chinese Skype patient of mine in three time weekly treatment for less than a year has resolved this differently although my guess is that within the next few months he too will want to use the couch. For now, though, he finds it more freeing for his flow of thoughts for us to, at the start of each session, briefly see each other on web cam to say hello and then for me to shut my web cam off so that he cannot see me. He sits up and speaks directly into the camera and so, of course, I can see him but he only hears me and doesn't see me staring back at him. At the end of each session I turn my web cam back on so that we can say goodbye both looking at each other.

Early on I had hired a Chinese tutor to meet with me twice a week to go over any language questions that I had. While working I keep my electronic dictionary by my side but I had decided that I wouldn't allow myself more than maybe two interruptions per session with Wang to clarify a language difficulty. I worried that I would interrupt his flow of thoughts. A few months into the treatment when we were talking about working over Skype and not in my first language he said something surprising to me. He said that when I asked him to clarify a word it actually helped him to think more about the meaning of that word. This was particularly true, he said, when it was a feeling word and defining it for me gave him a more specific sense of what he was trying to say. As time went on I had less language questions. Once you get to know a person well it becomes so much easier to understand the language they use. I think in this analysis I also speak less than I ordinarily would which may be a very good thing. Sometimes by the time I get finished formulating in my mind how I want to say what I want to say he has already moved on. With him I am truly an intense listener. However, for the purpose of this presentation I have selected vignettes in which there is more give and take between us.

Unfortunately because of time constraints I am not able to give a detailed case presentation. I can only select a few excerpts through which I hope to give you a feel for this case and for my thinking about it vis-a-vis the particular setting of Skype.

Wang was a child shuttled between two cities and two parents when young and had an early harrowing and tumultuous life partly as a result of the Cultural Revolution. Unusual for China there was no extended family because neither set of grandparents were available. He spent much time alone as a child. He also has vivid recollections of sleeping in bed with his mother. To sleep in the same bed as one's parents is a common Chinese practice. Only in this case because his father was not around for long periods of time it was just him and his mother. He recalls wanting to touch his mothers' body and feeling dirty and criminal.

Around the third week of treatment he has a memory of a story he heard about a child being punished for doing something wrong in school and being put in a dark room. The child's parents don't come to get him for the weekend and when they come on Monday the child is dead because the teachers have forgotten about him. My patient by this time had also told me of his fear of ever doing anything wrong. This is probably my first meaningful interpretation. I say: "I think you may be afraid if you make any mistakes you could die. Have you ever thought that child was you and that the dark is also some dark room inside you where you feel something has died?" He says that the darkness reminds him of his own feelings of depression and that there was no light in his life and that he was so afraid of his father and received so little love.

In another session he says: “I had so many dissatisfactions and complaints as a child but I felt that this was not what a child should feel toward ones parent and I feel unfilial. If I do things according to others desires I feel contemptible but when I satisfy others it gives me a feeling of safety. It’s like being locked in that dark room.” I say: “It is like you are in prison”. He says “I built this prison and as soon as the door opens I feel very afraid. When I am out of it I do not know how to live. I become nervous and want to go back and without people. But I am in conflict because I also want to have relationships, to be cared for and loved.”

I begin to feel alert to references to films, screens and cameras in the patients associations and dreams. I am thinking that they are, in part, references to our Skype screen and to being watched on the screen and to our web cameras. There are many dreams which he tells me over the course of these years and one theme which recurred initially in them was about his things being stolen, including his i.d. and a camera. I suggested to him that they are, in part, references to a fear of his identity being taken away by talking to me.

In the first year of treatment he tells me of a dream which goes like this: “In the West there is a big fire and the wind comes from the South. I put on a mask and watch with cameras and see lots of smoke. I want to see if it is a large disaster or not but I cannot see anything. Everything is burned down. I have to go to a high place.” That’s the dream. I ask him about the fire. He says: “this is a dangerous fire –it is my anger –my inner fire.” I say “I notice the fire comes from the West.” I am thinking when I say this that I am in the West and he is in the East. He laughs because he knows immediately what I am referring to and says: “behind the fire to the West it is also safe.” I say: “so the West is both dangerous and safe.” He laughs again. “I am,” he says, “very ambivalent. I can say everything to you which makes me feel protected but in my unconscious it is very dangerous. I fear I cannot control my anger.”

At another time he said: “I was talking to this girl about how I do not like to have my picture taken. One of my friends said a picture can capture your soul and you can see if a person is happy or not. I feel that I will have my basic desires exposed.”

I say: “Maybe also like Skype. I see you on the computer. Everything can be exposed.”

“You mean this makes me nervous?” he asks

“It seems so”, I say

“Well it has been a while,” he says, “and I still feel nervous when I speak to you. Am I afraid you will see my soul?”

“What do you think,” I ask?

“I think I have a hard time being relaxed.”

Much of the last few years have been spent discussing and understanding with him the multiple meanings and determinants of his weak feelings, what he calls his rabbit feelings. This is a major theme song in this analysis –being weak and helpless. This is a character defense which effects and profoundly constricts his entire life and being. Here is an intelligent, thoughtful and introspective man who can neither work, study nor love to capacity. I can only give you a glimpse here into this very private and unique world we inhabit with each of our patients. During his second year of treatment he begins to talk much more about these rabbit feelings “I am like a little rabbit inside. I think it has to do with being sent away when I was so young, away from my mother.”

One day he says to me: “You know I did not prepare what I will speak to you today so I feel very nervous. I say: “You know you had so much disorder in your life, perhaps you are also afraid of disorder here.” He says: “I used to be afraid of meeting a stranger on the street when I was little. In my heart I feel like I have dangerous fantasies. I say: “I think it makes you feel strong against your fantasies to prepare beforehand.” He says: “I can protect myself and deal with life like that. Like a rabbit – very vigilant.” I say: “A rabbit has to be very careful because there are a lot of animals out there that want to eat him up. “

Later more meanings of the little rabbit appear connected with a feminine feeling and also with his fear of being destructively aggressive. He says: “I only feel confident when I am around someone weaker than I. But this is not real self confidence.” I ask him how he evaluates who is weaker and he says if the person seems more nervous than he. He says there is a photo of him in a rabbit hat as a child and he looks like a little girl. “I don’t feel strong like a man more like a frightened child. When I saw boys playing roughly I thought this is too rough. I am not good enough as a boy. When I am with a woman it feels like 2 rabbits.”

As time goes on he starts to become more explicit about his early desires toward his mother and her body. He says: “I always have a kind of fear when making love. It has to do with my mother and how I had to repress my feelings. And I was afraid that my father would find out. I was so afraid of my father. Chinese relationships with their fathers are not the same as in the West. In the West you talk about killing the father to become a man. In the East we have to be filial and obedient and can’t kill the father. That would be a terrible crime. One must obey and respect.”

A few months later he is talking about how he is afraid of letting love in. I try to translate here a cartoon from the New Yorker I saw a few years ago of a king lying on a couch with his crown on and the analyst sitting behind him asks: “But doesn’t your moat also keep the love out?” I realize I have translated it too literally and it is hard for him to understand. A Chinese colleague of mine suggested that I should have talked about an emperor and maybe the Great Wall. Oh well, by the end I think he got the gist of it. He says: “I know what you are getting at and when I hear that story I do not feel happy. I know I want to protect myself. For safety then the good and the bad both can’t touch me.”

During the second year Wang is beginning to allow himself to become more active and helpful: “Today I felt I could help others. I felt I was overcoming some of my limitations. But I was nervous but I just said I have to do it and just practice and I will get better.” “There is something to that”, I say. I try to say in Chinese “good for you” but can’t find an appropriate translation. He says “In the last session you had asked me what I thought I was afraid of. It is of being abandoned and looked down upon. Last time you said it was me looking down upon myself and thinking these things. I think I understood that I am too strict. OK I do not do it perfectly. Other people will not necessarily think I am useless. I comforted myself. I gave myself strength. Actually some people think I am really pretty hot stuff.” Here we can see some beginnings of internalizing something of me and a lightening of the harsh and critical superego. This man has a very harsh superego masquerading as high standards for himself. In my opinion, Skype or no Skype, a harsh superego is extremely difficult to modify.

His desire to get strength from me is intensifying. In this session in the third year he says:

“Last time we were talking about me not depending on my own strength and always waiting for things to fall into my lap. I am thinking about why I feel I have no strength.” He talks then about longing for my help but feeling that I can’t help much. “I have to depend on myself.” I say: “If you depend on yourself it is lonely but it is safe.” “But”, he says, “My strength is not sufficient. And I feel my wanting help is not realistic. So I am tied up inside.” I say: “You feel neither your strength is enough nor are other peoples including mine enough to help you. It is hard for you to use my strength.” He asks: “Is this relationship too distant? Using a screen and video. When I feel bad,” he says, “the distance feels bigger.” “Do you think,” I ask, “if I were there in your city you would feel better?” “I am not sure,” he says, “but I think if you sat here in the same room with me I would feel more peaceful.” I ask: “Do you think if I was in the same room with you my strength could more easily come to you?” “Yes”, he answers. “If you were by my side. Like a magnetic field. If the magnetic field is too far then it is too weak. A magnetic field can come directly into me. It is better than talking more powerful.” I say: “This is strength without language.”

As this man continues to talk about his early losses, his fantasies, his sense of weakness and his relationship to me he is understanding himself better and asserting himself a bit more. I think what is significant, thus far is how little this Skype analysis differs from an in-person analysis. I think if I had just presented some of these excerpts without letting you know that I was doing this online you might not have guessed. Certainly at times the patient would like me to be closer to him and physically present and he feels the distance. However, struggling to find optimal and comfortable distance in all his relationships is an issue for him.

Certainly there are some things given up doing treatment this way, as being able to have a clearer feel for the mood of the patient as he walks in the room or sits down. It is also sometimes difficult for me to see on the screen if the patient is crying and I have to ask.

I hope, however, you could hear today that the unfolding of this patient's inner life, his wishes, his feelings toward me, all the things we expect in an engaged analysis are occurring. Work with dreams, transference, defense and resistance are all just as alive and well over the computer as they are in the consulting room. I heard one of my colleagues make the comparison to listening to music at the time when people stopped going to live concerts and began listening to them over the phonograph. I think this is an apt metaphor. Listening to music in the new way was certainly a different experience than a live concert but the power of the music was still captured and many more people could be reached. I think the same can be said here.

