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The Disentanglement and Re-embedding of Therapeutic Persons

The ability to examine one's self is a privilege that the modern world currently possesses as a powerful tool for enlightenment. Self-examination and psychotherapy as topics of research and discussion have historically been a part of the western ethos. More specifically, modern understandings, perceptions, and theories of therapy have been built upon the findings of European and American researchers. That is not to say that psychology and therapy have not been researched in various parts of the world. Rather, the western concept of psychology and therapy has been greatly explored and utilized by varying populous for the past two centuries. Particularly, in Li Zhang's ethnographic account titled *Anxious China* (2020), she details the psychological 'inner revolution' unfolding in modern China—a psychotherapy and counseling revolution built upon western ideas and practices previously unknown to many Chinese citizens. In her studies, Zhang analyzes individuals and their varying interactions with psychotherapy and counseling. In chapter five, titled, 'Crafting a Therapeutic Self', she witnesses and records her experience with various middle-class individuals looking to find self-improvement through therapeutic processes. Within the conversations detailed in chapter five of Zhang's book, individuals discussed their anxiety, therapy, fulfillment, social status, and descriptions of what 'the self' means. In the following paragraphs, the objective is to analyze the descriptions

pertaining to how the individuals interact with such therapeutic practices, which allow them to start the process of healing, disentangling, and re-embedding their inner-self. This method of disentangling and re-embedding originates from Zhang's analysis of the individuals of the chapter; the self-reflection that comes from the aforementioned therapeutic method is paramount to the improvement of social life, motivation, future goals, and engagement with their anxiety of such researched persons.

The self-elevation and enlightenment of distressed persons through therapeutic processes are centripetal topics of discussion and analysis in Zhang's ethnographic account. The purpose of therapy may depend on the individual, but there are many common themes that are brought to light and repeated when reading the various accounts recorded by Zhang. Firstly, individuals are shown to utilize therapy as a process of disentangling from a world of family relations, employment, societal normalities, and expectations. The process of disentangling oneself from society is described as allowing for self-improvement and allowing an individual to reflect upon themselves. The term self-improvement may be ambiguous and subjective, but there are several layers to how one is able to yield growth from the self-reflection showcased in the account. Many subjects often utilize therapy in order to aid them in navigating the anxiety created by family relations and work. An important example of this unrelenting anxiety is shown when Zhang records a subject of therapy, stating, "My in-laws think I am just lazy if I need some rest. They also believe that studying psychological counseling is impractical, and a waste of time. I am under so much pressure at work and at home. And I do not have a moment for myself. I am stuck and feeling very lonely" (Zhang 125). There are many concepts to note when analyzing the statements of the in-laws and the subject. As one can ascertain, it seems as if the in-laws are not

knowledgeable of the positive effects of therapeutic processes, and as a result, the pressure that the son-in-law endures feels insurmountable. The subject is entangled in the ever-flowing modern society of working, resting, and repeating. After several therapeutic sessions, Zhang noted that the subject’s “notion of self-work was more sophisticated and dialectic. It first required the undertaking of disentanglement so that the inner self could find a safe space of healing and regain clarity and strength” (Zhang 127). Once a therapeutic individual is able to cultivate an environment of healing, they are able to take a moment to gather themselves—they are able to pause the unforgiving spinning of the planet. An important notion that connects with ‘disentangling’ is the idea of ‘the self’ (ziwo 自我). When utilizing therapy, an individual turns ‘the self’ into an object “of intense inquiry” (Zhang 113). It is important to mention that Zhang also states that “In the Chinese cultural context, ziwo implies at least two layers of meaning—dawo (‘the big self’) and xiao wo (‘the small self’)” (Zhang 120). The ‘small self’ is described as an individual’s desires, as well as the body and mind of that individual. Comparatively, the ‘big self’ is described as one’s obligation to their community, family, and nation. When analyzing the concept of disentangling and re-embedding, the notions pertaining to therapeutic processes become clear. An anxious person must separate their smaller self—their mental health—from the larger, more societally embedded self (their obligations and norms they must concede to). When studying this account in context with the culture of China, it is natural to recognize why more citizens are starting to seek therapeutic processes. An important quote to acknowledge had an individual stating that they “often feel trapped in such tightly knit social bonds and find the situation suffocating because one needs some space to grow” (Zhang 122). It was previously brought to light that ‘Chinse social relationships’ were too ‘entangled’, which

could give rise to a host of problems. The concept of being entangled goes together with the ideas of feeling unfulfilled, anxious, troubled, and in a state of chaos or unrest. Once individuals are able to disentangle, they are gradually able to self-experiment—the opportunity to re-evaluate and observe one's actions through a healthy lens becomes more apparent. It is a common sentiment shared between subjects that therapy is simply a tool or a vessel for examination; therapy does not make anxiety and problems instantly disappear. In essence, the self-work brought upon a person through psychotherapy is paramount for the growth and further fulfillment of themselves. The term ‘self-work’ is perhaps an excellent way to put the studied therapeutic methods into perspective. Establishing that one is performing ‘self-work’ invokes the idea that one possesses skills in order to actively improve themselves. Once an individual acquires the necessary tools for disentanglement—and once they are willing—they are able to re-embed themselves into the social nexus, using the same methods within their daily lives. The results of these therapeutic processes are unequivocally varied, but patients generally note their sense of fulfillment and happiness. The informants of Zhang shared similar sentiments of having “positive effects of therapeutic self-work on their family relations and social lives” (Zhang 128). An important notion was created in the chapter; therapeutic Chinese citizens share a desire to cultivate a better self and improve well-being within the social nexus of a boisterous era of fast economic growth and social aspiration. There is less emphasis on the desire to change the broader social processes, rather, the improvement of selfhood has become a distinctive movement in middle-class Chinese society. Within psychotherapy, distressed persons are able to pause for a moment, reflect upon themselves, and re-enter relationships with new clarity.

In summary, the fast-paced environment of an economically successful society is stressful—to say the least. Work can become extremely demanding, mentally taxing, and a consistent stressor. The modern capitalistic world of constant work, family relations, and societal obligations is unforgiving and often leaves people feeling like they are on the brink of imploding. Being entangled in relationships and obligations is a common feeling many people share—a feeling of chaos and blur, (huntn 混沌). In chapter five of Zhang's ethnographic account, she describes the captivating process of disentangling and re-embedding. Through the utilization of psychotherapy, individuals are able to take a moment (disentangle) and work on themself through a newly acquired therapeutic lens. After acquiring these tools to create a healthy environment of 'self-work', people are able to invest in themself and craft an improved mental state. When capable, therapeutic persons may enter the world once again (re-embed), and create a positive change in their actions/reactions to events in their lives. Self-evaluation and disentangling from the world may be disturbing for many, but it is quite possible to say that self-improvement is a necessary product of such methods. The modern world is very fortunate to have access to the tool of psychotherapy, as it is a tool that within itself holds the key to an enlightened, more clairvoyant self.

Works Cited

Zhang, Li. *Anxious China: Inner Revolution and Politics of Psychotherapy*. 1st ed., University of California Press, 2020.