

# FREUD'S CHINA CONNECTION

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**Abstract** Freud made several references to Chinese culture and language throughout his work, to support his ideas in a variety of ways. However, a recently discovered letter from him to a Chinese intellectual who had expressed an interest in his use of Chinese prompts speculation about the extent to which Freud understood the culture and the language. The traditional Chinese practice of footbinding would appear not to be explained by his theory of fetishism, for example. As well, his use of the supposed ambiguity of the Chinese language to support his theory of dream interpretation is misapplied, but this may be because the question of how ambiguity is removed in the Chinese language is still a subject of debate.

## Introduction

Throughout his vast and varied works, Freud made several references to Chinese language, culture, and history. This was not unusual for a polymath of his stature; he often displayed his erudition in his writing, particularly in the *Introductory Lectures* and *New Introductory Lectures* (Freud, 1916; 1933) written for a general public upon whom he was keen to impress the credibility of his ideas.

A survey of these references reveals that he used the word 'Chinese' in several ways to different ends: (i) as a metaphor to embellish certain conceptual points; (ii) in a phrase with pejorative connotations for emotional catharsis; (iii) in a description of a cultural practice as an exemplar of his theory of fetishism; and (iv) variously as a referent to the language itself (Guttman, 1984). This latter use was the most significant because Freud wanted to draw parallels between the interpretation of Chinese characters and syllables from their context and how analysts interpret their analysands' dreams. To do so he drew upon the expertise of (western) linguists to lend authority to his theory of dreams, which he wanted to protect from potential criticism.

That he might have overreached himself in some of these examples is

the theme of this paper. As a preliminary I also suggest that this challenge to Freud's uses of Chinese may well have occurred to another years before—the one Chinese intellectual who corresponded with him.

### Freud's Chinese Correspondent

In 1929, while on a trip to Germany, the dissident Chinese intellectual Zhang Shizhao<sup>1</sup> (章士釗) wrote to Sigmund Freud. Although the letter has never been found, Freud's rather formal reply suggests its contents:

27th May 1929

Hochgeehrter Herr Professor,

Ich bin überaus erfreut durch Ihre Absicht, in welcher Art immer Sie sie ausführen wollen, sei es dass Sie die Kenntnis der Psychoanalyse in Ihrem Heimatlande—China—anbahnen, sei es dass Sie uns Beiträge für unsere Zeitschrift *Imago* geben, in denen Sie unsere Vermutungen über archaische Ausdrucksformen am material Ihrer Sprache messen. Was ich in den Vorlesungen aus dem Chinesischen anführte, war aus einem Artikel der Encyclop. Britannica (11th edit) genommen.

In vorzüglicher Hochachtung, Ihr Freud

[Most esteemed Professor,

In whatever way you wish to carry out your intention, whether it is by paving the way for the development of psychoanalysis in your homeland—China—or by contributions to our journal *Imago* in which you would judge against your own language our conjectures about the nature of archaic modes of expression, I will be extremely pleased. What I quoted in my lectures from the Chinese, was taken from an article in the Encyclopedia Britannica (11th edition).

Very respectfully,

Yours Freud]<sup>2</sup>

Zhang was interested in psychoanalysis at the time and had been working a couple of years earlier on a translation of Freud's *Autobiography*. He may have been making overtures to Freud about the possibility of disseminating his works in China through translations, but the focus of the reply suggests he is curious about Freud's understanding of Chinese, and was intending to write an article for *Imago* testing his assumptions. The word 'conjecture' (*Vermutungen*), preceded by the pronoun 'our', in the letter suggests that Freud may have been trying to ward off potential criticism of his explanation of how classical Chinese functions as a system of expression. Although in this letter he claims he is only guessing, he wrote much more confidently elsewhere about forms of expression in ancient languages, and used them

as analogies to the 'indefiniteness' of dreams in order to substantiate his theory of dream interpretation.

As it happened, Zhang's article(s) for *Imago* never materialised. He returned to China the following year, to take up a position as professor of literature at Northeastern University in Mukden (now Shenyang) and published his translation of the *Autobiography* a few months later.

Since the original letter is lost, Zhang's 'criticisms' can only be surmised. Was he curious about how much Freud knew Chinese language? As a native speaker of Chinese, was he reading Freud against his own understanding of the language and challenging his linguistic knowledge? Perhaps like many Chinese he was puzzled by the selective borrowing by a foreigner of exotic anecdotes from his culture. Were these for the edification of western readers, to embellish psychoanalytic concepts or to demonstrate their universal application? These questions prompt a re-examination of Freud's allusions to Chinese, not only because such allusions reveal the creative side of his thinking and his imaginative flair in writing, but also because they raise questions about his understanding of Chinese, and of language in general. These questions are particularly pertinent to his essay on fetishism and his theory of dreams.

### Freud's Chinese Metaphors

When Freud writes in the *Studies on Hysteria* that we '. . . may think at this point of a Chinese puzzle' (Breuer & Freud, 1895:291) he is introducing a metaphor of hidden objects lying behind or inside visible ones to demonstrate the difficulties an analyst experiences in unravelling the thread of a patient's discourse when trying to get to a memory—a process which the patient may resist.

A metaphor of Chinese history surfaces in the section on 'Infantile material' in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud, 1900) in which Freud returns to his earlier analysis of his dream of a botanical monograph. Here he insists that associations of seemingly indifferent events of the day before, and of childhood memories recalled during analysis, can determine the manifest content of dreams. He associates the monograph's plant to a favourite flower/food—artichoke—justifying the connection by the similarity of the action of the pulling apart of the plant's and the book's leaves. This is done leaf by leaf like 'the piecemeal dismemberment of the Chinese Empire' (1900:191)—a reference to events at the time of the first publication of this work (1899) when foreign intervention in Peking was threatening to reduce China's power. This act of tearing is already given in the artichoke as metaphor and is repeated in the Chinese metaphor. Its inclusion, given the ferocity with which Freud alludes to the current events (the phrase—'leaf-by-leaf'—'ringing in the ears like the piecemeal dismemberment . . .') suggests that stripping away is an important aspect of his dream. But Freud seems to think the childhood memory of book learning to which it is linked

is only a screen memory of his later love of books. This he derives from his association to 'bookworm' which suggests a devouring of books, a kind of destruction through avaricious need for learning, anticipated in the childish act of destroying by tearing. Its association to the latent meaning of Freud's dream—his desire to be recognised for his paper on cocaine—seems obscure, due in part to his refusal to supply further details of the analysis.

Some sixteen years later, when he was writing, still with some bitterness, about Adler's defection (*On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement*, 1914) Freud injected a note of sarcasm into his account of Adler's decision to form another school. Lamenting the name Adler temporarily adopted for his breakaway group, the 'Society for Free Psychoanalysis', he worries, on behalf of a public not familiar with the intricacies of analysis, that the formation of a different school might cause as much confusion in their eyes as Europeans experience 'in detecting the difference between two Chinese faces' (1914:57). Here the pejorative epithet as metaphor serves to underscore Freud's view of outsiders' ignorance and, by implication, inability, to make what for him would be an essential discrimination.

### Freud's Chinese Social Practice as Fetishism

At the time he wrote his essay, *Fetishism* (1927), Freud was looking for examples from case material and elsewhere to support his theory of what takes place psychically in the small male child upon realising the fact of sexual difference. Here, and in later versions of his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, (1905) Freud argued that the fetish object becomes the substitute for the mother's penis, the absence of which the small child can't bring himself to acknowledge.

Confronting this difference sets up two contradictory ideas: the 'unwelcome perception' that the mother lacks a penis and the 'force of the counterwish' that she have one. These conflicting ideas are compromised by primary-process thought which invests the fetish with its power to ward off the threat of castration by its reassuring presence as a phallic substitute. Both the idea and the fear of castration are dealt with, according to Freud, by the twin processes of disavowal (*Verleugnung*) of the idea, and repression (*Verdrangung*) of the affect. The little boy's eyes are averted from the traumatising scene of the mother's genitals to a neutral object which is then invested with the memory of these events.

This object's new-found status can lead to either of two outcomes: the fetish may be revered, or it can be the target for some hostility. This, says Freud, is because the fetishist is caught in a conflict between disavowing the fact of castration and acknowledging it. When disavowing predominates, and there is a concomitant strong paternal identification, there may result a tendency to re-enact the castrating process. Freud cites first an example

of a pervert who cuts female hair, and then follows this with what he thinks is another example—the Chinese practice of footbinding:

Another variant, which is also parallel to fetishism in social psychology, might be seen in the Chinese custom of mutilating the female foot and revering it like a fetish after it has been mutilated. It seems as though the Chinese male wants to thank the woman for having submitted to being castrated. (1927:157)

In other words, the Chinese males' aggressive act is a symbolically displaced form of re-castration—the result of an over-identification with their fathers. But this explanation would appear to contradict Freud's earlier claim in his essay that fetish objects are a substitute for the memory of the woman having no penis. If this is so, how can the means of achieving this substitution (of the fetish for the penis) involve an activity (i.e. castration), the denial of which is the underlying motive in the first place?

On his own view, woman is already castrated so the process of fetishising a part of her body cannot take place by an act of castration. Rather it is the child's realisation of his 'horror' having been perpetrated, obtained in the primal witnessing of the mother's genitals, that trigger it.

However, on Freud's account these conflicting tendencies in the Chinese males' psyche of denying and affirming the fact of castration rest more heavily with denial and paternal identification and consequently with a desire to castrate again. But his use of the crushing of the bones of the female foot as an exemplar of this process is misplaced, for the theory would predict that the aggressive act be directed to the site of the initial castration—to that part of the body which serves as a memory of the missing penis: the *deformed* (i.e. already crushed) foot and not to the pre-fetishised part of the body (the unbound foot). One may wish to argue that the unbound foot is already a fetish, as it is with some western foot fetishists, but Freud is here explaining away a cultural phenomenon, not an individual psychopathology.

### Freud's Use of Chinese Language

In his references to the Chinese language and the way it supposedly functions, Freud wanted to be able to make assertions about the importance of the contextual grounding of language, and to use these to bolster his theory of dreams. In accordance with the wisdom of western linguists of his day, Chinese and Egyptian were regarded as 'primitive' languages which, in their written form, were thought to express ideas directly in pictures. From this premise Freud was curious to understand how combinations of such pictographic forms expressed complex ideas, and how potential contradictions and ambiguities were dealt with. The extent of their expressiveness was a theme he elaborated in his descriptions of the process of dreaming, and he returned to it several times throughout his written work.

We first glimpse it in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) itself. First appearing in 1899, the theory was radically different from earlier ones, especially in its identifying of symbols. Freud's thesis was that the reported dream is a censored text, the true meaning of which is given in the dream's latent content as revealed by analysis. Clues to this meaning lay in the dream's manifest content as symbolised forms of expression. For Freud what is crucial is that symbols do not bear a fixed meaning, no matter how obscure, to the things they stand for, but rather may vary with the dreamer and his or her unconscious intentions. Thus the same fragment in one dream may symbolise something very different in the dream of another, or in the same dreamer on another occasion. This makes the interpretation of meaning in the manifest content dependent upon uncovering, by association, the context in which its events are embedded:

... as with Chinese script, the correct interpretation can only be arrived at on each occasion from the context (1900:353).

But how does context illuminate symbolic meaning? Freud first propounded his ideas on this subject in his essay *The Antithetical Meaning of Primal Words* (1910). His fascination is with words which lose their meaning when paired with their opposite, and with words which mean one thing in isolation and another in combination with others, '... as occasionally happens in Chinese' (p. 157).

Freud is here referring to a distinctive feature of Chinese, in which two characters with different meanings can provide a third meaning when combined into one character (e.g. 'girl'—*nu* 女 and 'boy'—*zi* 子 make 'good'—*hao* 好). This, Freud suggests, is in contrast, to Egyptian, where combinations of two symbols take on the meaning of one of the symbols but mask the meaning of the other. His authority for this observation on ancient Egyptian is the German philologist Karl Abel. Where two written symbols in a compound can take either meaning, the correct one is given in written form by what subsequently follows pictorially; in speech, it was assumed by Abel, by gesture. As with Chinese, the written form of ancient Egyptian consists of phonetic signs and determinative ones. It is the latter which give the clue to the meaning, the former to the way the sign is to be pronounced.

Freud uses the notion of linguistic contraries to draw analogies with how dreams present contradictory ideas in the manifest dream, and make them appear as a unity, and with how they can display the opposite, displaced or overdetailed manifestations of ideas in the latent dream. Although he acknowledged that reversals can occur in spoken as well as written forms, he was reluctant to draw analogies of sound reversal with the dreaming process. Although children often reported reversing names in dreams he assumed they were derived 'from a factor of deeper origin' (1910:161). For Freud it was *images* which were reversed in dreams. Thus a knowledge of languages of images (which he assumed ancient Chinese and Egyptian to be) should prove helpful in translating the language of dreams.

He returned to this theme in the *Introductory Lectures* (Freud, 1916). Writing for a general audience and putting psychoanalysis on display, he was anxious to defend his theory of dream interpretation against charges of arbitrariness. It would seem a reasonable question to ask how, given that the true wish (or wishes) remain hidden from the dreamer him or herself, the analyst can know he has hit upon the correct one(s) through analysis.

Freud's answer is that dreams *do* bear an 'indefiniteness' of meaning—his many descriptions of dreams point time and again to the inconsistencies between events, the reversals of narrative order, their seemingly logical incongruities, and of course the complex relations they bear to their ultimate meanings: the secret wishes which lie hidden in the latent content which can only be revealed through analysis. Dream fragments or events are evidently open to several meanings.

But indefiniteness is also a feature of languages, which have evolved ways and means of removing potential ambiguities in their structures. In all cases the decision as to which of two or more possible meanings is the intended one 'is left to the hearer's understanding and this is guided by the context' (1916:231). As an example in support of his claim Freud cites a Chinese proverb, made up of four characters, which translates as: 'little what see much what wonderful'<sup>3</sup> (p. 231) and which he suggests can mean either 'the less someone has seen the more he finds to wonder at' or 'there is much to wonder at for him who has seen little' (p. 231) which have the same essential meaning, differing only grammatically. This is evidence, he says, that indefiniteness need not necessarily lead to ambiguity. His example is lifted from an account of the Chinese language in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Giles & Giles, 1911) and it is interesting to read in that text that the authors suggest that it is impossible to tell from the characters themselves whether they should be read as adjectives or verbs, and that each phrase be 'interpreted on its own merits, by the logic of context and the application of common sense' (p. 221). This led Freud to conclude that:

In spite of this indefiniteness we have been assured that the Chinese language is quite an excellent vehicle for the expression of thought. So indefiniteness need not lead to ambiguity. (1916:231).

However, the rules for the contextual grounding of meaning in Chinese are not by any means specified in Giles & Giles, although they do pinpoint some of the problems in trying to ascertain the meaning of even simple compounds of two characters. As they say (above), it depends upon the application of common sense. This leaves open the fundamental questions of interpretation and the rules that seemingly apply in any particular instance. This uncertainty is brushed aside by Freud's faith in the authority of the Giles's for providing the assurance that Chinese, in its written form, is excellently equipped for expressing thought. But, as with dreaming, how this occurs is something that we are still trying to uncover.

However, Freud does appear sensitive to the difficulties that an uncritical

appropriation of the linguistic model for dream analysis might bring. He was quick to check any undue optimism that all meanings of dreams can be fathomed. This he did by drawing a *contrast* between language and dreams, asserting a general principle that all languages are:

fundamentally intended for communication, that is to say, they are always by whatever method and with whatever assistance, meant to be understood (1916:231)

Dreams, by contrast, are *not* vehicles for communication; they are meant to remain 'ununderstood'. This provides the necessary defense for the theory in that 'we must not be surprised . . . if . . . a number of ambiguities and obscurities in dreams remain undecided' (1925:130).

An explanation of Freud's use of Chinese and Egyptian, and not any other language, would be that, to him, reading the prevailing view of western sinologists and linguists at the time, they were 'picture based'; that is, they derive their meaning from a correspondence between the shape of the character and its referent, rather than through an intermediary phonetic stage. This idea has been challenged in recent years (see DeFrancis, 1984; Norman, 1988) so that western linguists are now of the opinion that Chinese may be as phonetically based as alphabetic languages. The current view is that meaning is mediated through a phonetic stage—that part of each character which gives the clue to how it sounds makes understanding possible from the context of sounds in which the character is embedded. Thus the analogy to pictures, in which meaning might be decided by the sequence of their images, breaks down.

It would appear from his writing that Freud saw a literal similarity between fragments and images of dreams and the formation of compound characters. Western linguistic authority has had a long tradition of trying to fathom the rules by which meaning was extracted from Chinese language and there was a deeply held belief (see above) that the early language had been primarily pictographic. Freud wanted to be able to draw upon this for the parallel formation of a 'dream syntax' in order to substantiate (and authorise) his belief that analysts' interpretations of their patients' dreams were not arbitrary. In laying out the analogies between Chinese and dreams he may be judged to have been only partly successful.

To be sure, the conveying of a single concept by each individual character has a parallel in dreams in the single 'image' fragment, event or idea recalled by the dreamer from his or her manifest dream. And, when two characters are fused into one producing a new compound with a meaning wholly different from either one standing alone (see 'girl + boy = good' example above), or when two or more characters together form a complex comprising the meanings of the individual characters—as happens, for example, in linguistic borrowing (e.g. 昇降機 —*sheng jiang ji*—'rise-descend-machine'—elevator)—there are further parallels to the dreaming state.

These examples lend credence to a system which can juxtapose two



seemingly mutually incompatible images in the manifest content (e.g. that 'I am flying' and that 'I am watching myself fly') which is a commonly reported feature of dreams. They are also suggestive of *condensation*, whereby two latent ideas become manifestly fused into one, and of the turning of ideas into their instinctual opposites, the hidden wish producing an opposing idea for safe exhibition in the manifest dream.

Freud also alludes to the way Chinese avoids ambiguity in speech by the introduction of tones and by the dyadic combination of sounds. Tones are regular modulations of the voice whereby different inflections can be imparted to the same sounds, and their effect overall is to increase the number of syllables present in the language. There are approximately four hundred syllables, each of which could potentially be pronounced with up to four tones in Mandarin (*putonghua*), and up to nine in Cantonese; the actual number in each case falls short of the total possible. But in each case the actual number of distinct tonal sounds then amounts to only a fraction of the number of characters, which means that in many cases one sound has to stand for several of them.

Ambiguities in speech can be avoided in a number of ways, commonly by the pairing of sounds where, in written form, one character would suffice. For example, *ge* (哥) means 'elder brother' but in speaking the sound alone would be ambiguous and therefore it is either duplicated (*ge ge*—哥哥) or prefixed with *da* (大) to make *da ge* (大哥), 'big'. However, examples such as these display no obvious parallels to dream processes.

Context would appear to be a more determining factor in the interpretation of Chinese than in English and many other languages, and even today psycholinguistic studies are trying to evaluate the extent to which this is so. This is necessitated not only by the variability in meaning of individual characters, but also by the lack of clearly marked boundaries when they occur in combinations. As well, Chinese words do not usually contain explicitly marked syntactic information and the structure of Chinese sentences is often paratactic, requiring a greater interpretative effort on the part of the reader/hearer. Syntactic factors may play a less significant role in understanding Chinese; more crucial may be semantic and pragmatic factors (Chen, 1992).

## Conclusions

The failure of Zhang Shizhao to write his intended *Imago* piece means we shall never know what reservations he may have had about Freud's borrowing of Chinese cultural anecdotes as metaphors of psychological processing. Freud put these metaphors to multifarious purposes and in some cases, as in his elaboration of fetishism, these did not map on to his theories as well as he may have assumed. His optimism over the possibilities of explaining dream analysis by recourse to examples from Chinese and Egyptian was misplaced. This is not to say that how written Chinese is

deconstructed in the heads of its speakers and readers is now well understood. Indeed it is an ongoing debate. However, Freud's attempt to explain the inherent indeterminacy of dreams as an analogue of the interpretation of ambiguity in ancient languages was overly ambitious.

Perhaps Zhang was aware of the problems and, either out of respect for Freud, or because he saw the difficulties in trying to compose an alternative account, may have decided to let his reservations lie fallow. In trying to reconstruct these criticisms now I have been struck by the fact that the plausibility of this project rests on the interpretation of key words in Freud's letter which are indefinite in their meaning. The attempt to resolve their ambiguity is a process akin to what Freud, in his references to Chinese, would appear to have been attempting when he sought to explain his patients' dreams. In both situations, in the absence of further evidence, or higher authority, a certain indefiniteness must always remain.

### Acknowledgements

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### Notes

- (1) The phoneticisations of Chinese in this paper are Putonghua and are romanised according to the pinyin system.
- (2) Freud's letter first appeared as a photographic reprint of the original in a preface to Zhang Shizhao's translation of *Selbstdarstellung* (1930). The letter was not translated into Chinese until many years later and appears in Yu Feng Gao's *Psychoanalysis and Modern Chinese Novels* (1987). It has since appeared in English in Zhang Jingyuan's 1989 doctoral thesis from the University of Cornell, *Sigmund Freud and Modern Chinese Literature (1919-1949)*. The translation in this paper is from the German photoprint.
- (3) This is inaccurately translated in the German. Freud uses the word *wunderbar* (wonderful, with connotations of 'marvellous' in German) for the Chinese term *guai*, when the usual translation is 'strange' or 'unusual'. The Giles's hover between the literal translation 'strange' and 'wondrous' (wondering at). The proverb *shao jian duo guai* (少見多怪), however, has a more negative connotation than is perhaps suggested by Giles. Its meaning is more that things seem remarkable only when glimpsed rather than when examined in detail. To the Giles's error Strachey (the editor of the *Standard Edition*) supplies one of his own by retranslating *guai* into English as 'wonderful', calqued on Freud's *wunderbar*.

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