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WHEN WEST MEETS EAST

TRAINING INFANT OBSERVERS IN CHINA, TRANSFORMATIONS”

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*...That I looked at them with my living eyes.  
That they looked at me with their living eyes.  
That we embraced.  
That we began to learn each other's language...*

–Muriel Rukeyser<sup>i</sup>

Excerpt from “The Hostages,” from the anthology *Breaking Open*, Random House 1973.

In my previous paper on the transformations<sup>ii</sup> that take place during psychoanalytic psychotherapy with groups of mothers and babies and mothers and toddlers, I presented detailed material that shows how babies can transform their mothers; how mothers can transform their babies, and how mothers transformed each other.

In the course of working with these groups I also witnessed a profound transformation in the minds of the participating therapists and also in my mind as the group supervisor.

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I believe that a similar transformational experience takes place when teaching psychoanalytic ideas to students.

In this paper I would like to tell you about the transformation I experienced while teaching Psychoanalytic Infant Observation in Beijing, China. I was teaching to colleagues that started observing families with infants that belong to a different culture than my own.

It was a bit accidental that in 2009, I was asked to do a year of infant observation with Chinese students by the Washington Baltimore Center for Psychoanalysis, where I am a training and supervising analyst. The students were part of the Chinese American Psychoanalytic Alliance (CAPA), USA). All the seminars were to be conducted via Skype. We only did a year for CAPA. Once they finished the first-year observation we continue privately.

Honestly, I had never been particularly convinced of the value of this type of experience. I believed that seminar leaders and students must be together in the same room. You might say I felt that being together was essential to metaphorically allow us to smell the babies' bodies; that is, to feel deeply connected – teacher and students – where primitive anxieties could be evoked and explored together. But I decided to try. I asked, however, that the students at least be together in the same room for the seminars. They all agreed.

While the students were looking for babies to observe, I sent them the first chapter in *Closely Observed Infants* pages (7-21) by Margaret Rustin (1989) Duckworth, editorial. A couple of months later, they discovered with great excitement that this was the only book on infant observation that had been translated into Mandarin.

And so, I launched this new experience.

At the beginning, I felt the students were too silent during the seminars, perhaps a bit too distant and definitively uncertain in what they were getting into. I felt a strong and tempting impulse to “extract” more from them. But I resisted.

On their own, the students decided to meet one hour before we began our seminar in order to read a series of published papers that I sent them from the reading list of our two 3  
year Infant and Young Child Observation Program in Washington DC at the Washington School of Psychiatry. Whenever the material from the observations was difficult to digest for the observer, the group acted as a container for each other and they helped me to contain them.

When the silence became too prolonged, I told them to talk among themselves in Mandarin for about 5 to 10 minutes. Their behavior changed radically. They turned into an invigorated group talking non-stop. Sometimes, I decided to stop the video and only listen to the audio to appreciate the "music" of their voices.

I then asked them to translate their comments and ideas into English. Sometimes it took them a while to articulate their "musical chatting" in Chinese into articulated ideas in English they felt they could or wished to share with me. Sometimes they said very little and then I would joke, "Come on!! Tell me the rest!!!"

I had already done this when we read a paper together, but here it was definitely a fantastic opportunity for all of us to start understanding our differences not only in language but also in the more mysterious aspects of each other.

Weeks went by, and I discovered that my Chinese students were able to locate babies to observe much faster than my Washington, DC students. We met weekly with a 12-13-hour time-difference between us. So, while I was just waking up and beginning my day, they were tired and anxious to present their observations after a long day at work.

The fact that we were together – in our shared space – was fundamental.

Another event made a big difference in developing our capacity to work together. I had the good fortune of having one of the seminar members visit Washington, D.C. After her visit I experienced that our relationship became slowly deeper and more "real". I felt that we both acquired a third dimension that was not possible through Skype.

This entire experience has been extremely rich and powerful for me. From the very beginning, I knew it was not my intention to "preach" to them about the experience of infant observation or try to "colonize" them. There was at that time no infant observation program

in Continental China. I had the privilege of introducing a new way of seeing the world of mothers and infants that could only be possible through embarking on this journey of discovery together. While very interested in their culture, I was ignorant of it and we both had to learn to listen to each other and to be emotionally attuned.

I was anxious, because even though I was an experienced teacher of infant observation it was clear that there was much I had to learn about my students, I felt a bit lonely, similar to entering a new analytic encounter where we, both – patient and analyst – feel we know so little about each other and the mystery of the psychoanalytic process.

Here, there was also the added issue that all of us would be working in English and not in our mother's tongue – Mandarin for them and Spanish for me. As I repeated many times, "We are all foreigners here." Looking back, I think there were more barriers than language; I had a lot to learn about new ways of bringing up infants as well as many social and cultural differences.

I was teaching students whose parents and/or grandparents lived during the Cultural Revolution, when psychoanalysis was forbidden in China and clinicians (along with teachers, intellectuals and thinkers in general) were sent to labor camps to be "reeducated".

My students were born in-between the Cultural Revolution and the 1979 institution of the one-child policy (formally abolished in 2015). All of the families they were observing were one-child families. The reason for these changes were primarily financial, as the elderly live longer now and, thus, more children are needed to take care of them, relieving the Government of this huge burden in the process.

One thing that I did not know is that losing your only child marks the parent as a "Shidu" (a childless person) in contemporary Chinese culture. Depression in this population is common. There are a million "Shidus" now in China. Not only does grief take over their lives, but also their old age is endangered by the lack of descendants.

I read in a Spanish newspaper – El Pais – that Shidus go to weekly meetings to sing together and help each other mourn and heal. Tragically, most of these parents lost their children

when they were past child-bearing age. I do wonder how the one-child policy shift will affect the observations and the life of Chinese families in general.

China has been a very close-knit society Bott Spillius<sup>iii</sup>, E. 1957.” *Family and Social Network.*” (Taylor and Francis Ltd). wrote extensively on this subject. There is a long history of relying on your family and not confiding in strangers when you have an emotional problem. Sharing psychic pain with those outside the family is considered extremely shameful. Thus, I understood, early on, that the students were embarking on a path that went against centuries of Chinese culture.

As our time together went on, I saw them becoming more comfortable with the idea of “not knowing;”, the idea of thinking and deciding for themselves rather than expecting me, as their teacher, to provide the answers.

The student’s level of deference to the teacher was almost intimidating to me and I had to try several ways to “soften” them so we could move from the idea of my lecturing them to a true, interactive workshop. A colleague shared with me the following quote about Chinese culture: "A teacher is a powerful person who nurtures the scholar and punishes him, but above all understands his need for being cared for. The teacher assumes the task of a fatherly object and frequently retains this position lifelong: “Once a teacher, forever your father.”

A few months after they began their observations, they started to self-reflect about their own emotional reactions during the observations. This, I felt, was a new opening. I, too, noticed and had to hold back my own impulses to be critical. An example: my reaction to what I considered premature toilet training.

Most of the babies in the infant observation group did not wear diapers. Instead, they wore underpants with a hole at the back so that the excrement would fall on the floor. Parents and grandparents never reprimanded the babies/toddlers and the center of attention was never the toilet training; it was expected that in this way, the child would naturally become

toilet-trained. However, the Chinese expected infants to be trained at a much earlier age than in the West, between two and three years old.

Some weeks later, I received a package from Beijing with two pairs of underpants – one for a boy and one for a girl – with a hole in the back. Since I had never heard of these garments, the students generously sent me a "present for me to see" how cute they are!

At that time, I was not convinced about the possibility of early sphincter control, due to the experience of an American observer,<sup>iv</sup> who observed a mother trained in a system called "Elimination-Communication." In that particular observation – and I do not want to generalize – we noticed how disconnected this mother was from her baby. It appeared to us that everything the mother looked for in her baby had to do with the baby's sphincters; that is, how her newborn was communicating his desires to urinate and defecate. As the observation went on, we painfully watched a significant deterioration from a curious, connected, object-seeking baby into a baby that hardly held his gaze. In this observation, we found a mother that could not see her son; the infant never felt seen.

However, I eventually realized that the Chinese model my students were observing was very different.

Grandparents have an enormous power over the parents and grandchild's upbringing. Usually grandparents moved into the parental home before the baby was born. Mother and baby spent a month together but after that time it is common for the grandparents to take over as most mothers go back to work. This has been slowly changing as some mothers stay longer with their babies.

I self-reflect: "Chinese parents have taken care of their babies for centuries in this way and I had to work very hard not to jump in and be harshly critical" I had to listen to my students and see the infant they were presenting.

In this new experience I also had to be open-minded and have the internal freedom to explore my own reactions as they were exploring theirs. We follow the infant that was

presented, the group reactions to the observations presented and my trying to find meaning. This was a new eye opener for them and for me.

I felt that I had to be creative and try new ways to build trust. In the West, my students started giving each observation a name i.e.: "Comings and goings" for example. I thought of asking my Chinese students to tell a story about each observation. That was work in progress that was never consummated, sadly for me, as I wanted to know more about the stories of family life in China.

Some of my Chinese students' questions about doing the infant observation were the same as my students in the West. For instance, they shared the concern about "confidentiality" within the group and in relation to the families as well as the sense of "intruding" into families at a time when they were so vulnerable.

The difference was the mindset that each group had at the beginning of their journey and how I experienced the student's transformations through their work and interactions with each other and me.

With the Chinese students, there was a parallel process going on: they were becoming infant-observers pioneers in their country, in tandem with our group from the Washington School of Psychiatry, as we pioneered the creation of an infant-observation program in the USA.

Since starting this project, I became more and more interested in Chinese culture. My site visit to Beijing helped me to feel a part of their world more than I could have expected.

I enjoyed going to parks and watching grandparents exercise while the children played in the background. I saw a grandmother dancing to Chinese music from a boombox. I approached her and she invited me to dance. I stayed for 45 minutes with a trans-generational group of women and felt accepted and part of them. It was wonderful see mothers, grandmothers and children dancing together. It was hard for me to leave.

I watched entire families on a weekend sitting on a sidewalk, in a corner, having lunch, babies, toddlers, parents and grandparents, they were truly enjoying the experience. I have never seen anything like this before and I was intrigued by how fast I felt comfortable and natural among these new experiences. Learning about their everyday life helped me understand my students better. I became so much more aware of anything "Chinese" around me.

In the past couple of years, I discovered Chinese film director Zhang Yimou<sup>v</sup> who made several films with his actress partner Gong LI<sup>vi</sup>. I learnt vividly how the authoritarian regime of Mao Zedong<sup>vii</sup> impacted in such tragic way the lives of my students and their parents and grandparents. This attack on thinkers, teachers, intellectuals and free-thinkers impacted me as I reflected that the work we were doing with the infant observation program was freeing the students and also the families more and more through the power of psychoanalytic thinking. This filmmaker and this great actress showed in each movie the pain of Chinese people during these years that promoted a terror about thinking. It occurred to me that the fact that I came from Argentina, a country that went through terror and persecution, perhaps made me a bit better equipped to understand the Chinese experience in this time.

In recent years, our Chinese students began teaching infant observation, first only in Beijing and then in other parts of China. As I have continued to work with the newly minted seminar leaders of their own infant observation seminars., I have noticed a pattern in their reports of having difficulty with helping their own students to sustain and be well-positioned in their role as observers, focusing on the baby and maintaining a consistent atmosphere during the observations.

Trying to understand these difficulties I thought of Jose Bleger's<sup>viii</sup> ideas about the frame. He was an Argentinean psychoanalyst that wrote a brilliant paper "Psychoanalysis of the analytic frame" Bleger, J. (1967) *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.*,48:511-519. In this paper, he describes the frame as the structure where the most primitive parts of the personality are projected, creating the frame as a container of the necessary symbiotic Mother-Infant space that would promote psychic growth in the infant.



When the frame is challenged either by the patient or the student/analyst, this containing function breaks down and the process is interrupted. The consequence of this is the triggering of psychotic anxieties in the analytic process but also in the relationship between the observer and the family. We have witnessed families dropping out from an infant observation project after the boundaries of the frame were severed.

I think that part of the difficulty in keeping the frame and being focused on the baby is due to the family constellation, i.e. the number of relatives living in the family home. My impression is that in these extended families, everybody "wants a piece" of this infant and the presence of the observer creates a host of concerns and challenges that are not present in observations where the parent and child are the sole subjects.

Through acquiring a reflective mind, I saw them change and incorporate a new way of positioning themselves as they were going through their own infant-observation training. I truly believe they did an incredible piece of work becoming open minded, curious and tolerating ignorance without going fast to the pre-packaged solutions of others.

Regarding language and all the meanings associated with their symbolic functions, I decided to tell them the story of my own analysis in London, which was conducted in English. One day, I went to my session and told my analyst, "I think I finally feel understood." She asked me why? I said that I had dreamed in English, my unconscious has been transformed and now we are talking the same language.

We now talk the same language – maybe I will dream in Chinese now. I shall now share some vignettes with you that show part of the cultural differences – as well – as the similarities- between West and East.

### *Vignettes*

#### *Report Group 1.*

## **Setting**

*“In our group, what worries me the most are boundaries issues that I have already reported in our previous presentations.*

*Although this is the second year for the observer, she keeps initiating activities with the family. For example, the observer offered the family to pick them up with her car and give them a lift home if they told her that they had to do errands before the observation time.*

*The observer changes the observation time according to her schedule and can only averagely keep one observation per month on time.*

*It seems that the family is becoming very anxious with her erratic presence. The observer expressed anxiety that the observations may “bring some badness to the baby”.*

*In the weekly seminar, we carefully tried to help her explored this anxiety, her identifications with the baby and with the mother and hoped that this would help her to understand such powerful feelings.*

*During a seminar she said that her anxiety might derive from her feelings towards her own child. No possible further comment was made.*

*What frustrates me is that she still keeps acting out and more than anything else is that “there is no baby” in our discussions.*

*I am aware of my anger towards her during her presentations. I also believe that other members express their anger by falling into a deep silence. I feel regrets of not having handle her difficulties from the very beginning when she lost her first family. There is always in the seminar leaders an extreme ambivalence between trying to help the observer work through and understand the meaning of her acting out or be more authoritarian and “order her to stop!!”*

*I am worried that in the case she continues without any capacity for insight about her behavior and she feels unable to work through her inconsistency and acting out in general she may lose this family just a the end of her training. She would not graduate for the poor quality of her observations and poor attendance”.*

“I myself tried to work through with the seminar leaders their own difficulties to “bring 1 the baby back,” in the presence of their fears of upsetting and “damaging the observer.” I thought that their anger was a mixture of their own frustration and the fantasy of not “catching” the observer’s fears of “damaging the baby” earlier on in the process.

After this supervision that was so extremely difficult for all the teachers involved, I thought of these lines:

*“Everything that irritates us about others can lead us to an understanding of ourselves.” — Carl Jung<sup>ix</sup>.*

## **Report Group 2**

### ***Thinking together***

*“We have five members in our Infant Observation Seminar. Three of them bring wonderful observations, they write what they saw in sequence and in detail, they reflect what and why they had some feelings or fantasies during the observation hour. With these three students, we feel they are developing the right mindset for becoming “a neutral observer and an active thinker”. During the seminars we try to pay attention to the Infant, but they also bring enough information for us to have the feeling of the family dynamics.*

*In the same group we have two students that bring much less details and confused sequences.*

*Besides their difficulties in “observing” what makes us feel anxious is their inability to keep the setting required for these observations and their difficulties in reflecting about the impact of the observations on themselves.*

*One of them reported that she felt very attracted by the baby’s older sister, a 3-year girl. In the report, she tells us that she played games with the girl and discussed about the grandmother that takes care of the children. She was extremely happy when as she was leaving the girl gave her a nice goodbye.*

*As time went on she never mentioned the observed baby.*

*The seminar leaders and the group members tried to talk about the “absent baby” and surprise the group when she responded that she felt “silly sitting observing a sleeping baby”.*

*It is not that we do not explore her difficulties in positioning herself in the observer's role or that we do not remind her about "observing the infant". However, this seems to repeat itself over and over.*

*Another interesting point during the above observation was that the grandfather asked the little sister why she didn't give ice cream to the baby. The girl said: "He has no teeth and can't walk; how can he eat the ice cream?" Then the observer told the girl: "yeah, but you had planned to bring one to him, right?" The girl nodded.*

*We asked the observer why she asked this question to the girl. She explained that she wanted to clear the air for the girl. We wanted to help her "go deeper" and reflect about it, but she refused. In the whole session, when we touched any part related to the setting or to herself, she refused to go with us. Sometimes she said: "Ha? I don't think I break the setting. I think I can play with the girl because she is not my observing baby." Sometimes she said: "I still need to digest things you are talking." Sometimes she just said: "Let's move on". She seems unable to sit on feelings and ideas and reflect.*

*We asked her why she pays so much attention to the girl. She said: "I think she is very, very cute!" This observer has also a sister in her original family. We think that her behavior might have some links with herself. We tried to remind her, such as: "Maybe in this session, you bring your own experience into the observation" or "Do you think you identify yourself as others?" But she seemed not to understand the questions.*

*We don't know whether we should order her to do it correctly or whether there is still hope for her to change her mindset. This would require a phenomenal transformation and we feel a bit hopeless with her. We feel like hammering a nail on a hard surface".*

In this vignette, the idea of "damaging the girl" or having to protect the girl, connected to the ideas in previous vignette as to how the presence of a "stranger could be toxic" in such an endogamic culture.

As I was reading these vignettes from my then-students, now teachers, of Infant Observation, I felt very touched by their own capacity for growth and the honesty in their presentations.

The war between “ordering” or “waiting and hoping for a change,” and the possibility of acquiring a mind on their own (versus being told what to do), became part and parcel of many supervisions during their own observations as well as of their students.

### ***Report Group 3***

#### ***Observers observed.***

#### ***Technology and the inclusion of a third eye.***

*“The family observed wanted a written report of the observations. The observer explained that they do not give reports but that she was open to discuss any time in the future if they did not remember some milestones or details that she would be glad to help. This conversation created quite a lot of anxiety as the observer had clarified this issue with the parents from the beginning of the observations.*

*In one of the Supervisions she told us that at the end of the two-year observation she found out that the parents have videotaped her observations.*

*My gut reaction was in disbelief. The student did not mind or got paranoid as she said that “she was positioned as an observer and had nothing to worry about” but she felt spied and had a bad headache all day.*

There were several comments in the vignettes about the presence of surveillance cameras in Chinese homes. One teacher told us that in some families, parents’ videotape everything that goes on in the home with the baby.

Another teacher told the group that there are preschool and daycare centers that connect the parents through streaming video, so the parents can see their children any time they want and call the school if there is anything that upsets them.

For many Westerners, myself included, this is such a new experience. Together, we explored their feeling about these issues. There was an agreement that the observer should be told in advance if the family were making video recording. We also discussed the possibility of asking the family to turn off the camera during the observations, reckoning that if they open their home to the observer, they should trust her/his character.

I hope that these vignettes will illustrate some of the new situations with which observers are confronted. Although these stories reflect China in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we can assume that many of these challenges will affect our colleagues in the future,

## FINAL COMMENTS

In a New Yorker article Evan Osnos in: Letter from China. January 10,2011 (page 56-57).  
“Meet Dr Freud. Does Psychoanalysis have a future in an authoritarian State? noted:  
”I started coming to China fifteen years ago, and, until recently, I had never heard anyone mention a therapist. The concept of discussing private troubles and emotions with a stranger runs counter to some powerful Chinese beliefs about the virtues of “eating bitterness” and the perils of “disasters that come from the mouth.” For most of Chinese history, mental illness carried a stigma of weakness so intense that the siblings of a disturbed person could have trouble finding a spouse”.

I thought that this idea is similar to one of the observers when she says that the family is concerned that she can “bring something bad to the baby.”

Dr Saporta. In “Freud goes to China”. The Alonso Center for Psychodynamic Studies. Vol 9 No 1. 2011. “teaching Psychoanalysis in a different culture. A dialogue” (page 3)

Notes: “The Chinese have always taken what they need from the West and discarded the rest. But when teaching psychoanalysis and psychotherapy it is better to make this process explicit in conversation, as characterizes the ideals of the psychoanalytic approach. To allow the other to become more fully themselves, instead of more like us, we must bring to the process a sensibility for how culture can make the clients’ experience different from ours, often in ways that are beyond articulation“

Psychoanalysis is a way of thinking about human beings, and a clinical practice, as a tool to cure, and a research tool for the mind. Teaching psychoanalytic infant observation connects the observer with their earliest memories, that according to Freud<sup>x</sup>, we try to “forget” as a way of avoiding psychic pain. This creates unconscious conflicts that can only be addressed in analytic treatment.

Roy Muir, Md describes in his wonderful work on early intervention “Watch, Wait and Wonder” how infantile patterns repeat themselves unconsciously in a natural way. One tends to take the same path that we introjected as children from our parent’s upbringing. He says that taking a different path is a “very up hill road” that requires a long, some times painful effort. Being different than our parents is very hard and I believe that it also applies to coming from a “different” culture as the one our parents and the political circumstances imposed on you.

In my experience, my work with my Chinese students helped me to be capable of, as Winnicott<sup>xi</sup> would say, “playing” with them. It allowed me and them to, as Bion<sup>xii</sup> would describe, be comfortably “ignorant” and capable of abandoning grandiosity. Writing this paper has taken me to the times when I became acquainted to this experiential process.

I find myself thinking about how Esther Bick<sup>xiii</sup> would feel knowing how far her ideas are appreciated, thought and understood. I wish this work to be an homage to her perseverance and intellectual courage.

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I would like to thank Sharon Alperovitz and Heather Frank for helping in the editorial process.

## REFERENCES

<sup>i</sup> Muriel Rukeyser was an American poet and political activist, best known for her poems about equality, feminism and social justice.

<sup>ii</sup> “Observing mutual transformations working with Mother-Infants and Mothers-Toddlers.” 2013. Published in *Controversies* Dec 2013. In col with Megan Telfair and Margaret Tilghman.

<sup>iii</sup> Elizabeth Spillius As an anthropologist she did pioneering work on the social structure of families in London’s East End, and later she studied kinship patterns on the island of Tonga. As an analyst in the British Society of Psychoanalysis her qualities of lucid intelligence and non-judgmental curiosity made her the leading scholar of the work of Melanie Klein.

<sup>iv</sup> I thank Mimi Blasiak for allowing me to use her observation. Case presented at the International Conference of Infant Observation, Buenos Aires 2008.

<sup>v</sup> Zhang Yimou; born 2 April 1950) is a Chinese film director, producer, writer and actor, and former cinematographer. He is counted amongst the [Fifth Generation](#) of Chinese filmmakers, having made his directorial debut in 1987 with *Red Sorghum*.

<sup>vi</sup> Gong Li (born 31 December 1965) is a Singaporean-Chinese actress. She first came to international prominence through her close collaboration with Chinese director [Zhang Yimou](#)

<sup>vii</sup> Mao Zedong or Mao Tse-tung; December 26, 1893 – September 9, 1976), also known as Chairman Mao, was a Chinese communist revolutionary, poet, political theorist and founding father of the

People's Republic of China, which he governed as the Chairman of the Communist Party of China from its establishment in 1949, until his death in 1976



<sup>viii</sup> José Bleger (1923–1972) was an Argentine Psychiatrist and Psychoanalyst. One of the Pioneers of South American Psychoanalysis. In the “The Pioneers of Psychoanalysis in South America”

Routledge 2015. Editors Nydia Lisman Pieczanski and Alberto Pieczanski.

<sup>ix</sup> Carl Young was a Swiss Psychologist, born 26<sup>th</sup> July 1875, Died June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1961.

<sup>x</sup> Sigmund Freud (May 6, 1856 to September 23, 1939) was an Austrian neurologist who developed psychoanalysis.

<sup>xi</sup> Donald Woods Winnicott: “Playing and Reality” 1971. Chapter 1.

<sup>xii</sup> Bion, Wilfred. (1958) “On arrogance” *Int. J. Psychoanalysis* 39, 144-146.

<sup>xiii</sup> Esther Bick, née Esteza Lifza Wander (1902-1983), born in Przemysl, Poland, was a child psychoanalyst who had a profound influence on the development of child psychotherapy in England. She is known for developing the method of Psychoanalytic Infant Observation.