



After Freud Meets Confucius: Learning to be Human and the Search for the True Self

Responding to a sense of calling in 2003, Dr. Danny Yeung, long-time IFL Associate and Senior Faculty and Chair of International Development of the AEDP Institute, has been teaching AEDP in China since 2005. Danny founded the AEDP training program in Hong Kong and has also been teaching at the Shanghai Mental Health Center since 2014. He has sought to integrate his training in western psychotherapy with classical Chinese philosophy.

Robert Bellah's classic *Habits of the Heart* (1985) claimed: "...the therapeutically inclined defenders of expressive and utilitarian individualism [pose a] challenge. In asserting a radical pluralism and the uniqueness of each individual, they conclude that there is no moral ground and therefore no public relevance of morality...."

Are we, as therapists, guilty as charged?

Are we expressive and utilitarian individualists at heart who inflict upon our naïvely trusting clients a cultural meme that sees no relevance of morality in social life?

Furthermore, Christopher Lasch, in *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), passionately critiqued the current therapeutic and post-religious climate as one that breeds narcissists and fosters cults of authenticity.

In response to Bellah and Lasch's critique, I am proposing a way of working in the post-Freudian therapeutic tradition developed by Diana Fosha and her colleagues and integrating this with the Confucian understanding of what it means to be human. Rooted in the practice of "ultimate self-transformation as a communal act and as a faithful dialogical response to the transcendent," this ultimate act of transformation results in the emergence of a true self.

The Confucian true self is an open system, not an isolated individual. It is a selfhood situated in the centre of relationships characterized by reciprocal interactions between parental love and children's filial respect. Filial piety, a cherished Confucian value, is a spontaneous and natural expression of human sensitivity and sympathetic flow.

Ultimately, it is a Confucian ideal to "form one body with Heaven, Earth, and the myriad of things" that is a near mystical union or integration with the ecological and spiritual worlds.

A true self informed by Confucian sensibility, far from being an egoistic and anthropocentric narcissist, is deeply empathic, relational, ecological, and spiritual.

In seeking to integrate the Eastern and the Western understandings of being human, I have had the blessing of witnessing clients, after deeply moving sessions involving resolutions of life-long traumas, express things like:

"This is the first time, I feel myself deep inside and express my feelings to you without disguise. I feel myself and I feel my existence!"

Another one had this to say:

"I feel a sense of safety and security, a sense of peace and calm, that I can wholly be me!"

This is not a narcissistic egoistic statement, rather the expression of a human self that has moral sensibility.

I conclude this reflection on the therapeutic encounter with a poem by the Confucian poet saint Du Fu. Using the metaphor of rain as the activating ingredient in the growth of blooming flowers, the imagery exemplifies the self as it transforms into its fullness, fostered through a soul-to-soul meeting and a human-to-human encounter with the therapist.

by Dr. Danny Yeung

Welcome Rain on a Spring Night

The good rain knows its season,

When spring arrives, it brings life.

It follows the wind secretly into the night,

And moistens all things softly, without sound.

On the country road, the clouds are all black,

On a riverboat, a single fire bright.

At dawn one sees this place now red and wet,

The flowers are heavy in the brocade city.

Du Fu (712 – 770 AD) was a prominent Chinese poet of the Tang dynasty. He is frequently called the greatest of the Chinese poets.



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