



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**EXPLORING THE USE OF
FEMINIST THERAPY CONCEPTS
IN COUNSELLING MALAYSIAN CHINESE WOMEN**

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EXPLORING THE USE OF
FEMINIST THERAPY CONCEPTS
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by

CHONG PIT FONG

Project presented to the Faculty of Educational Studies,
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
ACKNOWLEDGMENT	ii
LIST OF TABLES	vi
ABSTRACT	vii
ABSTRAK	ix
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	1
Background of the Study	1
Deficits of Counselling	3
Feminism and Feminist Therapy	5
Sex-role Stereotypes	7
Status of Women in the Malaysian Chinese Community	8
Statement of the Problem	11
Research Questions	13
Objectives of the Study	14
Significance of the Study	15
Definitions of Terms	16
Feminism	16
Feminist Therapy	16
Feminist Therapist	17
Conventional Counselling	17
Malaysian Chinese Community	17
Empowering	18
2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE	19
Introduction	19
Woman Psychology	19
Feminist Therapy	29
Sex-role Stereotypes	38
Masculine Mystique	44
Feminist Therapy and Cross-culture	46
Chinese Women	47
Conclusion and Rationale	51
3 METHODOLOGY	53
Introduction	53

	PAGE
Research Design.....	53
Sampling.....	54
Background of Red Dust Vision.....	54
Background of the Counsellor.....	55
Sample Size.....	56
Themes Identification and Categorisation.....	58
Multivariate Analysis.....	61
Inference.....	64
Conclusion.....	65
4 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS.....	66
Introduction.....	66
Results.....	66
Philosophical Assumptions.....	68
Self-directed.....	68
Belief System.....	69
Reciprocal Determinism.....	69
The Personal Is Political.....	70
Egalitarian Relationship.....	71
Problem Conceptualisation.....	73
Power Relations.....	73
Sex-role Stereotypes.....	75
Irrational Thinking.....	76
Learned Thought and Behaviour.....	77
Intervention Strategies.....	78
Selecting Strategies.....	79
Anger Validation.....	80
Consciousness Raising.....	81
Assertive Training.....	81
Cognitive Intervention.....	83
Relabeling.....	84
Elements that Differentiate Feminist Therapy from Conventional Counselling.....	85
The Personal Is Political.....	86
Egalitarian.....	86
Empowerment.....	87
Examining the Potential Applicability of Feminist Therapy in the Malaysian Chinese Community.....	88
Conclusion.....	99

	PAGE
5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION	101
Introduction	101
Discussion	101
Integration of Conventional Counselling and Feminist Therapy	103
The Effects of Sex-role Stereotypes on Women in the Malaysian Chinese Community	106
Conclusion	113
Limitations of the Study	114
Implications of the Study	115
Recommendation for Further Study	115
 BIBLIOGRAPHY	 117
 APENDICES	 123
Case One	124
Case Two	144
Case Three	154
Case Four	164
Case Five	174
Case Six	179
Case Seven	188
Case Eight	191
Case Nine	193
Case Ten	198
Case Eleven	204
Case Twelve	210
 VITA	 215

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE		PAGE
1	Categorisation	59
2	Themes Identification and Categorisation in Feminist Therapy	62
3	The Applicability and Efficacy of Feminist Therapy	63
4	Themes in Feminist Therapy	67
5	Results of Applicability and Efficacy of Feminist Therapy	89

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**Exploring the Use of Feminist Therapy Concepts
in Counselling Malaysian Chinese Women**

by

Chong Pit Fong

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Supervisor : Puan Halijah Mohd.

Faculty : Faculty of Educational Studies

The purpose of this study is to examine the role of feminist therapy in empowering women in the Malaysian Chinese community. This study is divided into two parts. First, to examine feminist therapy philosophical assumptions, problem conceptualizations and intervention strategies, elements differentiating feminist therapy from conventional counselling and possibilities of reconciling the two are also examined. Second, applicability of feminist therapy in Malaysian Chinese community is also studied. In addition, effects of sex-role stereotypes and related gendered beliefs affecting women in the Chinese community are also explored.

Content analysis on twelve cases by a counsellor from Red Dust Counselling centre was used in this research to identify themes of feminist therapy and also to examine how power relations and sex-role stereotypes could be employed to conceptualise clients' problems.

The main conclusions of the study are as follows:

- 1) Chinese women with some degree of feminist identity development (FID) are receptive to feminist therapy;
- 2) feminist therapy is equally applicable to male clients;
- 3) the issue of power relations is beyond gender - man can also be victimized.
- 4) whenever there is power inequality in a family, domestic violence such as spouse battering and incestuous relationships can occur.
- 5) sex-role stereotypes is a major root cause of women problems and emotional distress.

The findings showed the importance of conceptualizing woman problems in the Chinese community by applying feminist therapy.

Abstrak projek yang dikemukakan kepada Fakulti Pengajian Pendidikan Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi sebahagian syarat bagi mendapatkan Ijazah Master Sains.

**Meninjau Penggunaan Konsep Terapi Feminist
dalam Memberi Kaunseling kepada Wanita Cina Malaysia.**

oleh

Chong Pit Fong

Mac 1999

Penyelia: Puan Halijah Mohd.

Fakulti : Fakulti Pengajian Pendidikan

Kajian ini dijalankan untuk mengkaji peranan terapi feminist dalam memberi kuasa kepada wanita dalam masyarakat Cina Malaysia. Kajian ini terbahagi kepada dua bahagian. Bahagian pertama mengkaji pegangan falsafah terapis feminist, bagaimana terapis feminist mengkonsepsi masalah serta teknik-teknik intervensinya.

Di samping itu, unsur-unsur yang membezakan terapi feminist daripada kaunseling konvensional serta potensi untuk mengintegrasikan kedua-dua terapi ini juga dikaji. Dalam bahagian kedua, potensi kegunaan terapi feminist dalam konteks masyarakat Cina Malaysia telah ditinjau. Selain itu, kesan-kesan stereotaip jantina terhadap kaum wanita dalam masyarakat Cina juga ditinjau.

Kaedah analisis kandungan telah digunakan untuk mengenalpasti tema-tema utama terapi feminis serta meneliti bagaimana hubungan kuasa dan stereotaip jantina digunakan untuk mengkonsepsi masalah . Dua belas kes kaunseling dari *Red Dust Vision*, Petaling jaya telah dijadikan bahan utama untuk dianalisis.

Keputusan-keputusan utama kajian adalah seperti berikut:

- 1) wanita Cina yang ada kesedaran dalam perkembangan identiti feminis (feminist identity development) akan lebih terbuka kepada terapi feminis;
- 2) terapi feminis juga boleh digunakan untuk membantu klien lelaki;
- 3) isu hubungan kuasa adalah melampaui jantina - lelaki juga boleh ditindas;
- 4) jika wujudnya hubungan kuasa yang tidak seimbang dalam keluarga, keganasan domestik seperti kes memukul isteri / suami dan perhubungan sumbang kadim akan berlaku;
- 5) stereotaip jantina adalah punca utama yang menyebabkan masalah dan kecelaruan emosi kaum wanita.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background of The Study

Malaysia has developed into an affluent and sophisticated society since its Independence in 1957. While materialistic achievements are very much improved, there is an increasing demand for the helping profession including counselling to develop to cope with the rising multifaceted social problems and issues in the society.

While counselling in Malaysia has existed since 1960s (Tan, 1987), counselling as a field of helping profession only begins to gain its social and academic recognition in the mid 1970s. With the Education Ministry's stipulation that all secondary schools should have a full time counsellor, and with the introduction and passing of the 1997 Counsellors Act, today the importance of counselling in Malaysia is fully recognised.

Counselling theories and techniques that are familiar and accepted in Malaysia include psychoanalysis, behavioural approach, person-centred approach, gestalt therapy, rational-emotive-therapy, reality therapy and transactional analysis. While the wisdom and popularity of these theories and techniques are appreciated and widely followed in Malaysia, in the West however, there has been a growing criticism against mainstream psychology since 1970s. And the above counselling approaches have been described as traditional counselling (McWhirter, McWhirter

& Loya, 1997: 124). There is an increasing demand for alternate views in psychotherapy and counselling, one of which is the emergence of feminist therapy.

Feminist therapy is a Western phenomenon which exists as a result of women's liberation movement of the 1960s (Worell & Remer, 1992: 89). Conventional theories have been criticised by feminist therapists as being either gender biased, gender insensitive or sex-stereotyped (Enns, 1997).

According to feminist therapy, mainstream psychology fails to reflect the reality of women because it is predominately man's psychology. Besides, women problems have been conceptualised as individual problems and external forces such as political, economical, cultural and social factors constraining women are overlooked (Worell & Premer, 1992). Feminist therapy seeks to provide an alternate approach to enhance women's emotional well-being, with a new perspective for understanding women and their problems.

Women seek counselling help more often than men in the Malaysian Chinese community. According to the Malaysia Chinese Association counselling bureau report (1998), women constitute 95% of its clientele. In Agape counselling centre Kuala Lumpur, women constitute more than 75% of its clientele in the year 1998. In the same year, women constitute about 85% of its clientele in Red Dust Vision, Petaling Jaya.

These figures provide a valid ground to conduct a study to ascertain whether a women-centred model such as feminist therapy, can best serve the interests of women in the Malaysian Chinese community. If the answer is affirmative, to what extent is feminist counselling applicable in the Malaysian

Chinese community, and in what ways can feminist therapy be reconciled with conventional counselling?

Deficits of Conventional Counselling

From the stand point of feminist therapy, conventional approaches in counselling focus on individual as the locus of problem. This pattern of focus deflects attention away from the role of societal conditions in generating the problems (Worell & Remer, 1992).

The presumption underlying most form of treatment in conventional approaches is that what is wrong lies within the individual and that external conditions do not need to be addressed or modified. Conventional approaches see as their task in helping clients adjust to their circumstances rather than transforming those circumstances that contribute to and are part of the problem.

For example, counsellors in a conventional system may view a female client's stress as an individual problem of lacking coping skills, and overlook some external factors such as the gender inequality in marriage or the work place which contribute towards her stress. Hence, such counsellors may content themselves with merely teaching the client techniques such as relaxation, meditation or communication skills to deal with the problem.

According to Greenspan (1993), conventional counselling system carries certain myths that are detrimental to women's growth and liberation. "It is all in your head" is a myth that implies that personal reality is essentially determined by what is within a person's mind. This is termed as the myth of "intrapsychic

determinism”; causes of emotional problems are ascribed to disorders or diseases of internal psychic mechanism which are said to be rooted in the unconscious psychic conflicts engendered in early childhood as in Freudian approach.

Humanist psychology such as Rogerian therapy holds that clients are self-directed and have the potentiality for self-actualisation. Gestalt approach also emphasises the sole responsibility that a person holds for his/her own life.

The idea and preposition that: you are responsible for your own reality - not society, not the environment, not the task, but you as a person right now - this is reflective of the myth that “it is all in your head”. It will adversely affect clients of humanist therapy who blame themselves for lacking total control over their lives (Greenspan, 1993).

This myth has seriously overlooked the relationship between the individual and the societal forces which can be the irritants to the problems. Women are specially vulnerable to this myth since women, more than men tend to see their problems as emotionally based (Greenspan, 1993: 16).

Another myth is “The medical model of psychopathology” which sees human emotional pains in our society as a medical problem and that they can be cured in the same way that physical problems can: through medical means. An individual’s problem is pathologized and treated medically, this may be an over simplification of the actual problem which is not caused within but outside the psychic mechanisms of the individual (Greenspan, 1993: 21).

For instance, a woman is simply labelled as a ‘depressive’ client and is referred to a psychiatrist for treatment in which medication will most likely be given. This pattern of diagnosis has the danger of neglecting the environmental

root cause which triggered the problem; it could be the economic pressure which deprives her of stable psychological health, or the cultural myth such as she must continue to give birth until a boy is born that constraints her. Issues such as gender inequality and reproductive rights are not dealt with in conventional counselling.

Although conventional approaches have its best intention in helping woman clients, it nonetheless leaves a space for feminist therapy to intervene and address women's cries and problems from a less patriarchal perspective. Feminist therapy seeks to develop as a new paradigm for understanding and solving woman problems.

Feminism and Feminist therapy

Feminist therapy is a by-product of massive women movement in the West. It has existed as an approach to counselling since the early 1970s (Enns, 1997: 5). Despite its 20 years history, feminist therapy is often described as difficult to define (Ballou & Gabalac, 1985). The complexities of defining feminist therapy are mainly due to the reality that feminist therapy, unlike conventional approaches, is not founded by any specific person, theoretical position, or set of techniques (Brown & Brodsky, 1992: 29). Feminist therapy is distinguished more by its philosophical assumptions of feminism than by any set of techniques (Rawlings & Carter, 1977 in Enns & Hackett, 1990).

It must be stressed that there are various feminist viewpoints instead of one monolithic "Feminism." A dictionary meaning of feminism states: "the theory of



the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes; organised activity on behalf of women's rights and interest" (Webster's, 1990: 456).

There are several feminist perspectives which attempt to describe woman oppression, to explain its causes and consequences, and to prescribe strategies for women's liberation (Tong, 1989). For example, liberal feminism views women oppression as unfair discrimination, while Marxist feminism sees women oppression as resulting from a class system. Radical feminism believes that women oppression is the fundamental oppression, and socialist feminism looks at the inseparability of gender, class, and race oppression. What all the different feminist perspectives have in common, then, is the belief that women are discriminated against on the basis of gender (Peterat & Fairbank, 1993).

Despite the different versions, feminism at least shares two common themes. First, it places a high value on women, considering women as worthy of study in their own right, not just in comparison with men. Second, feminism recognises the need for social change on behalf of women (Greenspan, 1993).

Feminism is political in nature. It is directed at changing existing power relations between men and women in society. In all areas of their lives, the family, education, welfare, work place, politics, culture and also leisure, individuals are governed by power relations. This power relations determine who does what and for whom, what we are and what we might become (Weedon, 1987, in Pinkus, 1996).

Consequentially, feminists have vigorously critiqued mainstream therapeutic practices for promoting the power relations through reinforcing stereotypical notions of women as wives and mothers, and evaluates women's

personality and conceptualise their problems through the male's frame of reference.

Feminist therapy therefore unlike conventional counselling, seeks to empower women through therapeutic relationship in counselling by dealing with issues such as sex role stereotypes, power relations, with the ultimate goal of striving to achieve political, economic, and social equality in society (Rawlings & Carter, 1977 in Enns & Hackett, 1990).

Sex Role Stereotypes

One major theme in feminist therapy is the concern of sex-role stereotyping which is construed as a potent factor in shaping women's emotional well-being and growth.

Sex role stereotyping is a set of beliefs about the nature of women and men. It does not describe how women and men actually differ, but how society thinks they do (Rothblum & Franks, 1983: 4).

According to feminist therapists, sex role stereotyping can have harmful effects on the lives of many women. For instance, stereotypes about women's passivity and dependence might lead to depression in stressful situations. Agoraphobia, or fear of leaving the home or mixing around, may be the result of stereotypes and conflicts concerning women's rigid roles as housewives (Rothblum & Franks, 1983: 6).

According to Hafner (1986: 17), sex role stereotypes are so deeply ingrained in reality and so widely and unconsciously accepted by men and women

that it is difficult for many people to recognise that their use is questionable or problematic. Women are generally regarded as patient, self-sacrificing, warm, affectionate, and responsive to the emotional needs of others. The over-emphasising of feminine sex-role stereotyping has proven to be psychologically detrimental.

Feminist therapists therefore suggest sex- role analysis as a vehicle for sex-role change and personal growth (Rawlings & Carter, 1977 in Rothblum & Franks, 1983).

Status of Women In the Malaysian Chinese Community

A report titled “Innovations and Reforms in the Chinese Community” has been published in 1998 by the Federation of Chinese Association, Malaysia in which the status and dilemmas of women in the Malaysian Chinese community were, together with other issues, were studied.

According to this report, Chinese women today receive higher degree of social recognition than women of past generations. With advanced education and exposure, they overall enjoy improved income with better career choice. Their capability, potential and contribution have generally received wider respect and recognition by society (IRCC, 1998: 7-8).

The report has outlined some problems threatening women and awaiting solutions, namely domestic violence, divorce, missing girls, abandonment of babies, child abuse, in-law’s conflict and superstition (IRCC, 1998: 2-4).

One major dilemma faced by women in the Chinese community today as revealed in the report is adjustment problem due to the rapid societal change. Examples of dilemmas are seen in marital difficulties: the difficult choice between marriage and divorce, marriage and cohabitation, marriage and single, and marriage and career. The constant battle between daughter and mother-in-laws is also a nasty dilemma met by many women in the Chinese community (IRCC, 1998: 10).

The report as a whole shows a genuine and enthusiastic attempt on the part of the leaders in the Chinese Community to try to understand and solve the problems faced by women. However, the study is not without deficit and this by itself may be seen as a revelation of patriarchal values and norms pervasive in the Chinese community .

Among the few deficits are the omission of adultery, sexual crimes such as rape, incest and harassment; such issues have long haunted women and yet not mentioned in the report. Adultery is common and pervasive in the Chinese community. According to the Malaysian Chinese Association, adultery constitutes about 75% of the total cases addressed in 1998 by its counselling bureau. Red Dust Vision has in total received about 80% of such cases in the same year.

Sexual offences, in particular rape have never ceased to threaten women of all ages (and races). With the rising rate of rape and incest in the Chinese community, to miss out such issues in the report is like turning a blind eye to the pain and hidden suffering of women.

Such omissions can be seen as a subtle avoidance on the part of the Chinese guilds (woman wings) of infringing the interest of patriarchal system in

the Chinese community. Besides, some solutions suggested in the report seem to lead women to conform and adapt to the traditional sex-role.

Some vivid examples include the following remarks:

- 1) mother and daughter in-laws must not have conflicts if not the man they love will suffer;
- 2) to stay single or to cohabit is not to be encouraged because it is abnormal;
- 3) women should continue to put on make ups after marriage if they want to gain the respect and love of their husbands and children. Appropriate attires will help them gain social recognition and status;
- 4) career women should concern themselves with the influences of their foreign domestic maids over their children (IRCC, 1998: 9-13).

The above proposed solutions have the effect of reinforcing some myths found in gender relations. Female sex-role stereotyping is enhanced. For example, women are expected to be tied down with marriage in order to be seen as normal individuals. Their roles as wives and mothers should be prioritised before their personal growth. Besides, their acceptance by significant others and recognition by the society depend not on their personal worth but on the appearance of their beauty and body. Further, they are also assumed to be ignorant or mute in issues concerning power relations.

The above scenarios show that women in the Chinese Community by and large are still submissive to the patriarchal norms. Socio-economic conditions which also attribute to woman problems are not dealt with in the report. Whatever wrong and fault that occurred either in family or society, women are primarily to

be held responsible. This is victim blaming and it constraints woman growth and liberation.

From the foregoing discussion, it can be seen that it may be necessary to seek a new paradigm in the Chinese community to understand and solve women's dilemmas. There is a need to examine whether feminist therapy can serve as a vehicle for helping women, and whether the women in the Chinese Community are receptive to this alternative approach.

Statement of the Problem

Glidden and Tracey (1989: 54-62) conducted a study on woman perception of personal versus socio-cultural counselling intervention. Personal counselling intervention refers to conventional counselling (i.e. focus on intrapsychic mechanisms) while socio-cultural counselling intervention means feminist therapy (i.e. focus on society's unrealistic expectations of women).

The findings showed that women with non-traditional sex-role attitudes (especially those with highly non-traditional sex-role attitudes) preferred the personal interventions. Women with traditional sex-role attitudes on the other hand preferred the socio-cultural intervention.

The results of the study call for discussion in depth as to whether there is a desirability for Chinese woman clients to have access to feminist therapy since Chinese women in Malaysia by and large are with traditional sex-role attitudes.

Feminism is a Western phenomenon. Therefore it remains to be argued whether its philosophical assumptions and theories are applicable in the Malaysian Chinese society which is deeply influenced by the teachings of Confucius.

Conventional counselling in particular person-centred counselling and cognitive-behavioural approaches are popular in Malaysia. The interventions of such approaches focus primarily on personal locus of control. Feminist therapy on the other hand is a relatively new model which relies on social-cultural intervention. Hence, the need to see to what extent the two different categories of approaches are reconcilable.

Research Questions

Based on the above discussion, this study endeavours to answer the following questions:

1. What are the feminist therapist's philosophical assumptions, problem conceptualisation and intervention strategies?
2. What are the elements that differentiate feminist therapy from conventional counselling?
3. Whether feminist therapy is applicable to women in the Malaysian Chinese community ?
4. What are the effects of feminist therapy on women in the Malaysian Chinese community?
5. Whether feminist therapy and conventional counselling are reconcilable?

Objectives of the Study

Many feminist studies in the West have shown that feminist therapy work well with women. Feminist therapists use intervention strategies different from conventional counselling, offering a new perspective in conceptualising woman problems, and provide non-traditional sex-role typed choices for woman clients. Research and studies showed that women can be empowered and can gain therapeutic effects through this approach (Worell & Remer, 1992).

From the above analysis, this study therefore has the following objectives:

1. To examine the effects of sex-role stereotypes on women in the Malaysian Chinese Community;
2. To ascertain the potential applicability of feminist therapy in the Malaysian Chinese community;
3. To compare and contrast feminist therapy and conventional counselling in helping women in the Malaysian Chinese community;
4. To examine the possibility of reconciling feminist therapy and conventional counselling.