



Narrative therapy, Buddhism, Taoism and Chinese medicine: An interview with Ming Li

Interviewed by David Denborough



Ming Li M.D. is an associate professor in the Department of Psychology, Beijing Forestry University. He earned his Medical Doctorate Degree in 2007 from Beijing University of Chinese Medicine, specialising in Eastern Psychology. In 2003 he graduated from East Shandong University with a Master of Applied Psychology, specialising in narrative therapy. He has published papers and books on narrative therapy in China, and organised many narrative workshops and conferences in collaboration with Dulwich Centre. Ming has worked for the people in Sichuan, Yushu, Yiliang and Yingjiang after the series of earthquakes since 2008, and for the people in Zhouqu after the mudflow in 2010. During the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, he organised an online psychological volunteer project which has served over 50,000 people nationally and internationally together with 3,000 volunteers. Ming can be contacted by email at: limingxinli@bjfu.edu.cn

Abstract

Ming Li is a narrative practitioner in Beijing, China, with an interest in the resonances he sees between some narrative ideas and practices, and those of Buddhism, Taoism and other aspects of Chinese culture, history and medicine. In an interview with David Denborough, Ming draws on multiple domains of knowledge and experience to describe some of the congruencies and points of difference he has noticed, and to explain what draws him to using a narrative practice approach in his own context.

Key words: *Taoism; Buddhism; Confucianism; China; Religion; Narrative practice*

- David: You make connections and distinctions between narrative ideas and Buddhism, between narrative practice and Taoism, and between narrative practice and other aspects of Chinese culture, history and medicine. Those are three big topics. I'd be interested in your thoughts on any one of them.
- Ming: Let's start with Buddhism. Buddhism is very influential in Chinese culture. There are many different schools and approaches, but they all agree on one thing and that is detachment. The idea is to not attach your self-identity to any encounter you have in your life. No matter if it is a good or bad thing – your title, your profession, your wealth, even your body. The basic practice in Buddhism is to train your mind to be detached from objects, like fame, or a name, or a problem or even an achievement. If you have a big achievement, a Buddhist teacher will encourage you to be careful because you shouldn't be defined by this achievement. If you are struggling with hardship, your teacher will remind you that this is something happening to you; it's not you. We don't call this externalisation, we call it a detached mind: to be an observer of your life. To cultivate this state of mind we retain an awareness that everything is subjective and changes in time. We observe this process of change: where does it start, how does it grow or get smaller and how does it disappear? Within this process of change we refer to four steps: birth, growth, withering and death.
- David: Of any phenomena?
- Ming: Yes, all phenomena, including achievement. Wealth comes and goes. Money grows and withers, and then we become ourselves again, without the distraction of wealth. That is the Buddhist teaching. At first, it may be easy to separate yourself from a new experience, but if you are not mindful enough you gradually mix yourself with what you're struggling with. For example, if I have a car accident I may know how to deal with the accident, but wonder more and more why it happened to me and not to someone else. I may wonder whether I did something wrong or am not a good person. If I'm not mindful enough, my 'self' becomes defined by that event. Buddhist teachers will remind us to be careful when we encounter any hardship or achievement not to become attached to the happening. This provides a connection between narrative ideas and Buddhism.
- David: I wonder if you could say something about both what is resonant between Buddhist ideas and narrative practice, and any distinctions or differences?
- Ming: One parallel is the space between an event and how we story that event, which I call a narrative space. Before we talk about an event, first we need to establish that space. If we think about externalisation, when we work with people who are struggling with hardships they have already attached to that problem, so that is their realm of life and they are very familiar with that connectedness. Many people believe they *are* the problem. Buddhism is akin to a preventive practice before that connection is made. If you already have a concept of detachment, then the connection is not so easily or automatically made. Of course, it can still happen but not so easily. In Western cultures it's possibly more a process of recognising the problem and then solving the problem, which isn't preventive thinking. So, there's a difference.
- David: That's very interesting.
- Ming: Taoism is a religion and a philosophy – actually, a way of life in China. It is a local religion and very influential. The two most influential scholars in Taoism are Lao Tzu and Zhuang Zhou. Both were sensitive to the naming process and are very careful about this. The first line of *Tao Te Ching* by Lao Tzu says that 'a name that can be named is not the eternal name, and the Tao that can be talked about is not the eternal Tao'. This means that certainly we can use names, words and conceptions to give structure to our phenomenological world, our mind and our perception of reality, but we must be very careful because these are not eternal or final names. Every perception can have 10,000 names. For instance, what is now called a piece of art may, in

the future, become called a cultural relic. Taking time into consideration, everything is subjected to different names. In China everyone has many names.

David: Like the exercise you had us do.

Ming: Yes. At birth, children are given a name that is not very good because Taoists believe that before the age of seven you are only trying to introduce yourself to a family tree but are not yet a member of the family tree. In the past, very often young children would die so only after seven or eight years would the family have a naming ceremony and name the child according to the family tradition. They would use one word to indicate the child's generation, next would be a formal name that is used in schools and universities. Around adolescence they may choose a name for themselves. I didn't want to do that – I have my own name! But many do. And then in school, students have nicknames for one another. Every name has a story, or many stories. In narrative practice, I sometimes ask people to review their names from the first one to the last one. This is not just about their names, but about their lives and their life stories. They may see the expectations of their family, their own expectations of their lives, etcetera. Taoist philosophy and psychology are more ecologically concerned and concerned about the universe. But if we apply this idea to humanity or human life, we find a clear link between narrative ideas and Taoist psychology. In postmodernist psychology, we are very careful of the words we use to describe a person. It's not just a word, it's a context. If a person said 'I'm depressed' but you didn't talk about their story you'd never know that their experience of depression was not as defined by a dictionary or the DSM. It's something different. The importance of professional attention being localised to that person: that is very Taoist. Taoism never presumes to know how the world goes.

David: Okay, fantastic.

Ming: Traditional Chinese Medicine is very different from Western conventional medicine because it's very deeply

culturally bonded and you can see that in the prescriptions. Nowadays, you see prescriptions that are just about herbs, but when I read case materials from the past, I see very creative lines, such as 'a spoon of kindness' or maybe of persistence and some exercise. Things like that. So, it's a kind of healing lifestyle. Also, even when the traditional Chinese medical doctor uses herbs, they have a metaphor of a king and his attendants – generals, soldiers and guards. They compare the most important herb in the prescription to the king. It's very storied, with a metaphorical structure. This reminds me of the Team of Life metaphor. It's a team of medicine. Along with the herbal prescription, you will be given advice on how to relate to people and how to keep your mind peaceful, otherwise the medicine will not work. It's very holistic. So, traditional Chinese medicine is very open to other factors of health, not only medicine. If we combine narrative practice with Chinese medicine, a traditional Chinese medical doctor doesn't just prescribe herbs, but will have long conversations with their patients to hear the story of the sickness. Because, for some people, becoming sick creates a tragedy for the family, such as a husband who is the sole wage-earner.

David: So, traditional Chinese medicine is more interested in the meaning and the broader implications of being sick?

Ming: Chinese medicine also uses personification of the disease, which makes it easier for the person and the disease to be separated and to deal with it. Sometimes, they will compare diseases with soldiers coming and leaving, which is easier for the patient to understand. A lot of stories like that.

David: I could see yesterday, when we spoke with the person about narrative nursing, how the very strong resonance between that broader tradition within Chinese medicine of personification and exploration of meaning and not separating physical health from all other realms of health, would make that possible.

Ming: There is a school of thought that emphasises the name and the position of

a person, the two lines of existence. One is what you are called: your name, your rank in the government. The other is your position – your moral position. You may have a good position but don't morally live up to that position, which is not a good thing. We believe you need to cultivate and live up to your moral position. This idea is also applied in the family. Many Western psychologists believe that Chinese families are not structured, and don't have proper boundaries around, say, what a mother's or father's role is. But this is not true, because they don't understand Confucianism, which is about structure. Every child is born into the family with a natural rank or position.

David: If they are the first born or the second born, that sort of thing?

Ming: Yes, the birth order is one thing, and another is who you are the son or grandson of. In this big family, no person can claim 'this is my child'. Everyone has a certain relationship to that child and their right to say so. The child also has their own voice and there is an important ceremony to invite them to speak out. At 100 days, friends and family members are invited to gather together and ask the small baby to grab things like an abacus, book, anything as a symbol of their future career.

David: Really, at 100 days?

Ming: Yes, if they grab a book people will say, 'Oh he will become a professor'. This is a story that is told again and again: 'When you were young, you grabbed a book'. This has some influence over their idea of the kind of a person they are. At every important step there will be a ceremony. We have a lot of ceremonies to hear their voice and need to be aware of those rituals.

David: These are rituals within Confucianist thinking that promote the voice of the person, but in the context of their positions and multiple relationships – multi-generational relationships?

Ming: And everybody has a chance to say something, but there is a process.

David: So, the complexities and richness of Confucianist thinking influence how you practise narrative practice? I could see how both of those would be relevant.

Ming: As I mentioned, my father is a traditional Chinese medical doctor. When I was young, my family had a lot of ancient books and I read a lot. I also noticed in Chinese culture that when we work with a person who's encountering mental problems, we have to make it relational rather than just working with just one person. Otherwise, even though there may be the chance of some change in the therapeutic setting, things will go back to how they were when returning to the family because relationships are so influential in people's lives. In relationship, because of everyone's multiple positions and the multiple expectations of others, we must be very mindful when we speak. For example, if you say something well, that isn't because the word or phrase is inherently correct; it's because you spoke in the right way for that person at that time. You need to contextualise. This is how I bring Confucianism into practice, with the need to be sensitive to relationships. I may say something in a helpful way for my child, but the same word may not be appropriate when speaking to my parents. The word is correct, but we need to take care of different social positions when we speak to people.

David: I'm also interested to hear you speak about how the histories of a place influence resonances with narrative practice and how it is used, which is a very broad question. China has a long history, and I wonder if there are any things about this particular moment in Chinese history that mean that some aspects of narrative practice might have a different resonance, or parts that don't fit at this particular time in Chinese history?

Ming: At this moment in the history of China, generally speaking, we are quite Westernised. We are importing ideas and lifestyles from the West, especially America. Within the last 10 or 15 years, psychology has developed very fast – too fast to be digested. We have swallowed Western ideas of individualism, modernisation,

urbanisation – all those things. Gradually, we make more and more money, but feel more and more isolated. This is especially in the cities where people find work but lose their original family bond. So, when they encounter some hardship, they are unable to deal with it collectively, as they did before. Maybe 15 or 20 years ago, the birth of a baby meant the whole family would come and tell you how to deal with this small thing. But now, we have to deal with this by ourselves. If we have struggles, we attend a service whose modality is likely to be from the United States or other Western country. Conflicts arise, which is not good, but we have no other options. Narrative ideas and practices, although from English-speaking culture, respect local culture. So, it is very important for the direction or orientation and development of Chinese psychology, where the dominant approach is currently psychoanalysis. I don't mean that psychoanalysis isn't good, but it is very deeply rooted in Western European culture, and for Chinese people the analytical ideas can sometimes seem intrusive. Many of the ideas are actually very old, even for Western people, but they have travelled to China because there was a need for something. Urbanisation, modernisation and loss of connection created a vacancy and these ideas stepped in.

David: They stepped into the vacancy.

Ming: Yes, so I feel there's a danger for this culture. Because we will gradually feel it's natural to hate our parents, but with narrative practice we can build that connection. We can say, well, maybe things didn't work well with your parents and you have some not good memories of them, but we can look to other perspectives of that relationship. Maybe we cannot define our relationship with our parents just by those negative memories. Almost every family has complexities, the negative and the positive. But in China, we see many books about harm and trauma from the family of origin. We need to have more books talking about the nurturing side of families of origin to balance this.

David: Not pathologising history, but diverse histories.

Ming: Yes, with narrative practice, especially after talking with our parents about what happened when we were young, we may find that they did their best. Then the relationship will be different, and we can try to rebuild that relationship with parents, with the past, with history, with the ancient sages and with their stories. When we talk about the ancient sages in story, we rebuild the connection with them.

David: Beautiful. Thank you, Ming.



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