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What Can We Learn From the Chinese Covid-19 Crisis?

Summary:

The Coronavirus outbreak is taking pandemic proportions. This event, which brings together scientists the world over, also raises questions for psychoanalysts. It raises questions about the body as a given, existing before any considerations of its psychic condition. We believe psychoanalysts must rise to the challenge and tell us what this predominant status of the body can teach us.

Monique Lauret, member of the European Foundation of Psychoanalysis (EFP), who has been working in China for many years and speaks Chinese, provides us with a reading of the manner in which Chinese officials dealt with this outbreak. Not only from a political perspective, as is often done, but in light of the age-old culture of the Middle Kingdom. We therefore submit this initial text to psychoanalysts, for reflection.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE CHINESE COVID-19 CRISIS?

Things never go as they should, there's always some unforeseen factor to which one has to adapt, and which frustrates the original direction of the will.

As human beings, we must deal with the unexpected in the body, with illness and death – these real events which arise out of nowhere, which strike and remind us that we are mortal. The fantasy of total control underlying the ideological project of science comes into conflict with this uncontrollable reality of the mystery of the living, a reality the Western world, with its totalitarian utopia, tends to deny.

The emergence of a new virus in China, in a highly symbolic city in the centre of the country, Wuhan, created, in view of the risk of a pandemic, a global movement made up of archaic fears, the fear of death, panic, and primitive defense reactions like withdrawal and rejection of the other, bringing back all the forms of racist hate that marked not too distant periods of history. The awakening of the dragon encountered an obstacle, but there is a lesson to learn from the way the Chinese people faced this trial. China's strong response was to implement an ancient form of recourse to traditional tools of public health, the ordering of quarantine in the affected part of the country, at the risk of stopping economic production and inflicting suffering upon the population having to bear these measures of isolation, in order to contain the start of the epidemic. The measures seem to have been successful. The point of equilibrium where the tendency to exponential growth of the disease is reversed has perhaps been reached, like in the alternating movement of yin and yang. Chinese thinking is cyclical, not like the linear thinking of the Western world which underlies the present technological development. In addition, it is interesting to note that the Chinese word for isolation, *geli*, ??, which combines two characters, "to divide" and "remote" is translated in the West as

“confinement”, a term widely used in the nuclear field and in biology, in scientific discourse. In times of hardship, the Chinese subject folds, bends like a reed, but does not break. His internal strength comes from the sedimentation of a Confucian and Taoist thought entrenched for two thousand years, which sees man as part of the world and his society, and not primarily as an individual, as the Western perspective sees him. The Confucian *ren* denoting “good human feeling” is based on the idea that man only becomes human in his relation to others: this is the supreme virtue. For the peoples of the Western world, who venerate scientific omnipotence in the service of globalisation, the awakening will likely be more painful. But it could also be interesting if it will provide the possibility of bringing into question the globalisation of excess, based on greed and quick profit, contemptuous of the ethical conditions of the social contract between human beings, in disregard of a planet devastated by its own choices.

I have been teaching French psychoanalysis in China for ten years, with several colleagues, to train Chinese therapists. I worked in Wuhan for four years. China made the necessary investments in the improvement of its mental health system, just as it recently invested in the rapid construction of hospitals during the epidemic. What I saw over the past ten years is tremendous development and great openness to French know-how. Will France make the necessary investments to save its hospitals from dilapidation and be able to handle this health crisis? While the West, dominated by a techno-scientific ideology with a narrow focus on the rational, the theoretical and the bureaucratic – resembling regression –, is closed to the unconscious dimension and to psychoanalysis, China opens its doors to it, increasing the number of training centres in the cities, the number of treatment centres, the creation of housing in green spaces, and international conferences. There is an unexpected passage between Chinese thought and psychoanalysis, two currents of thought concerned with maintaining the human dimension in man; they are the focus of my research. The East and the West respond differently to them. Psychoanalysis is a living system of thought, in constant transformation, which China embraces, contrary to the Western world whose idea of progress today involves a hollowing-out of thought, the subordination of the human to profit-dominated, machine-centred, rational thought. What we lose in the West, and what the Chinese gain, can teach us in return, in a circular movement, something about the human condition in the world.

Translated from the French by Agnès Jacob

Bio:

Monique Lauret is psychiatrist, psychoanalyst. Member of the Société de Psychanalyse Freudienne (SPF) and of the European Foundation of Psychoanalysis.

Residing in Toulouse, she teaches and conducts training in psychoanalysis, in France, in Europe and in China. Her research interests include ethics-related questions, societal questions and the transmission of psychoanalysis. Author of *L'énigme de la pulsion de mort* (Paris: Puf, 2014), currently being translated in Chinese by The Commercial Press, Beijing ; *Lectures du rêve* (Paris: Puf, 2011), Chinese translation: ?? , The Commercial Press, Beijing, 2015, and *Trauma, Temps, Histoire* (sous la dir.) (Paris: Ed. Champ social, 2016).