

## INVITED COMMENTARY

# UNIVERSALITY AND CULTURAL SPECIFICITY IN OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY PRACTICE: FROM HONG KONG TO ASIA

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## Introduction

With globalization, the contemporary economic-driven and consumption-oriented modern (and to a large extent, the Western) culture has acculturated into the local cultures, though it may be at a different pace in different societies in Asia. Universality of occupational therapy practice also takes place through internationalization of professional theories, clinical practice and standards of care, as well as education, despite the differences in cultural value, socio-political system, health belief and health care structure among the Asian countries.

The core philosophy and beliefs, as well as the assumptions, that have been adopted by occupational therapy emerged and developed in the Western, European and Judo-Christian socio-cultural contexts. Contemporary occupational therapy practice is infused with values, beliefs, and social norms of the societies from which they originated. Thus, occupational therapy is often perceived in the Asian region as part of a Western medical and health care practice paradigm, which is perceived to be different from the Eastern health philosophies and belief systems. Despite the fact that the introduction of occupational therapy practice to Asia has benefited the local population, it often creates dissonance and tension in clinical practice and confusion among the local practitioners when putting forward the professional core values and beliefs in practice.

Asian occupational therapists have struggled to find ways to apply the knowledge and skills that they have learned to

their local practice contexts. Iwama (2003) postulated that by reflecting on these experiences and paying attention to the diverse histories and cultures of the Asia-Pacific region, valuable elements and lessons concerning more meaningful and effective occupational therapy are possible. The merits of such reflection and adaptation of occupational therapy in the region have the potential to go beyond resolving incongruities in practice and shed new light on the development of occupational therapy globally.

Hong Kong, with 95% of its population of Chinese origin, has a unique culture of its own after 150 years of colonial rule by the British (Yau, 2003a). Nevertheless, although the Chinese culture is varied among different Chinese groups within mainland China and overseas, there are still some common threads that hold it together that reflect the "Chineseness." The interplay of Taoism and Confucianism has influenced the Chinese culture over the past 3,000 years. The balance of *yin* and *yang* in achieving ideal health and life is well described in Taoist philosophy, while the emphasis on harmonious relationship, family solidarity and one's personhood is also well articulated in the Confucian teachings.

To follow on the early discussion led by Iwama (2003) and Kondo (2004) on Eastern ontology and epistemology, and using the Hong Kong experience as an example, this paper aims to facilitate further discussion on the introduction of both universal and culture-specific theories of occupation and occupational therapy practice in Asia.

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## The Interplay of Taoism and Confucianism in Creating a Unique Health and Wellness Paradigm

The *yin* and *yang* analogy is unique to the Chinese culture, and it is rich in symbolic meanings. The *yin* and *yang* concept is different from the western dichotomy of good and evil; virtue is declared, labelled and promoted, whilst evil is stigmatized, suppressed, ignored and disposed of. *Yin* and *yang* are believed by the Chinese to be the primogenital elements from which the universe was evolved; they are endowed with innumerable qualities (Veith, 1992).

From the viewpoint of Taoism, with the *yin* and *yang* concepts as its foundation, being active and confrontational will get one nowhere, except for more disputes, disharmonies and even wars. Everyone has a role to play in the society. As in the *yin* and *yang* analogy, each role is interdependent and complements the other. Without thefts and criminals, we do not need a law enforcer. Without greed, there is no need to accumulate worldly fortune. Without something being labelled as bad, how can we define the good and its value? One needs the other to make a complete whole. But that does not mean one can take over the other. The *yin* and *yang* concept tells us that as one side swings to the extreme, it will lead to the creation of the antagonistic component that will trigger the balance mechanism, and the new emerging component may start off the next evolving and balancing process, and so on (Yau, 2003b).

Although the *yin* and *yang* model is not perfect and is unable to explain all phenomena derived from the current research data, it provides a unique Chinese perspective, because the *yin* and *yang* nosology has been incorporated into traditional Chinese medicine. The Chinese, like other cultural groups, have their own unique set of well-developed concepts of health that systematically evolved through history. In Polgar's view (1962, 1968), many cultural or ethnic groups see health as a near perfect or "asymptote" state. It is also an ideal condition that humans seek but are never able to achieve. For a long time, the Chinese have seen health as a multifaceted or multidimensional concept. The traditional Chinese concept of health is integrated as a part of the foundation of a human being's value system. This value system is not only applicable to daily living, but also represents a cosmic view of the interplay between heaven (nature), earth (self), and humans (others) (Yau, 2003b). It emphasizes the importance of maintaining harmonies across the three systems and within the subsystems that contribute to the development of personhood: (1) harmony with nature, including time and space; (2) harmony with self, internally and externally; and (3) harmony in social relationships, including people on earth and in the supernatural world.

In other words, illness will occur when there is imbalance or disharmony within and across these systems. The development of one's personality or character will also be affected. Therefore, striving for harmony with nature and humans means that one should not only try to achieve an ideal health state, but should also adopt this as the ultimate goal of one's personal development.

On the other hand, the characteristics of the Chinese commonly described in the literature, i.e. patience, pragmatism, avoidance of open confrontation and strong preference for harmony, can be understood through Taoism in that there is no urgency for change, as change will eventually come when things become extreme. Therefore, it is important to prepare the self and cultivate our minds to pass through time and preserve health to the fullest extent.

On the contrary, Confucianism, acting as an antagonist to Taoism, plays a very important role in cultivating our minds, as well as shaping and sustaining the achievement-oriented value system among the Chinese. Although the characteristics considered as defining personhood show considerable variations across cultures in accordance with variations in core values, world views and with the environments of daily living, Armstrong & Fitzgerald (1996) saw that there are two general types of recurring characteristics: attributes and achievements. Attributes relate to the physical and mental abilities that a person needs to carry out daily functions and socially expected roles. The ability to fulfil one's role as son/daughter, husband/wife, or worker/student is important in the Chinese context; it affects one's identity and value as a social person.

Achievement is based on the person's productivity and sociability, which mean a great deal, particularly in adulthood. That the person is able to earn an income, and to connect with and be interdependent on others are important aspects of being a culturally and socially competent adult. The typical Chinese definition of a fully "capable" person is the ability to complete the life tasks as mentioned in the Confucian classic literature, i.e. *xūshēn*, *qíjiā*, *zhìquó*, *píngtiānxià*, and "cultivate yourself, have a family with children, govern the nation, and rule the world". In a modern interpretation: be educated, marry and set up a family, develop a career, and excel in one's work. This is the ideal personhood that the ancient scholars believed one should seek after. Perhaps in a patriarchal society like that in mainland China and Hong Kong, the expectation is greater on a man than a woman (Yau, 2003c). Tang (1992) summed up the ideal personhood as the one who shows self-restraint, is in control of his emotions, places his family's needs above his own, recognizes and fulfils the duties of his role within the family, and pursues knowledge to the best of his ability with the goal of developing his character.

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