Symptomatic Icons Used by Han Chinese and Tibetan People Appearing in Sandplay Scenes Their Religious/Cultural Symbolism

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This study analyzed the meanings of diverse symbols that appeared in sandtrays made by Han Chinese and Zang (Tibetan) people. A total of three sessions of sandplay therapy at a rate of one per week were implemented with each Chinese and Tibetan participant between June 27 and August 19, 2012. The counseling cases of sixty-four participants in the study (34 Chinese, 30 Tibetan) and a total of 184 sandtrays (104 Chinese, 80 Tibetan) were collected. The data was classified by age and ethnicity and the symbolic icons used by the participants were classified into five categories by comparing quotations and photos of the sandtrays from the therapy sessions. Through this data, the cultural and religious differences between Chinese and Tibetans that appeared in sandplay scenes were examined. According to the results, preferred symbolic icons varied according to age and cultural background.

Keywords Chinese, Tibetan, Symbol, Culture, Religion

INTRODUCTION

Chinese cultural history is well known for persevering viability possessed from long ago and fusion with new development. Perception of traditional culture changes and new values come to the fore along with changes of times identically in all countries. The situation in China is not exceptional. However, even if values vary with changes of times, the traditional consciousness of culture that has been formed and passed down over many years cannot completely disappear. Traditional thoughts that are unconsciously latent and flow through races’ blood vessels always form the deepest psychological bases of individual races regardless of changes of times. Many religions have been formed or brought into China to impact on the spiritual lives of its people. Not only ancestor worship, which can be said to be a primitive religion, but also the three representative religions of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, as well as other religions such as Lamaism, Catholicism, Christianity, and Islam. Therefore, the religious landscape in China can be said to be quite complex and the influences exerted by these religions on Chinese culture are not insignificant (何晓明 & 曹流, 2007).

Understanding the Chinese people’s diverse cultural symbolism in terms of these religious influences and examining their meanings are important. In that sense, this study is intended to examine the influences of religions expressed through the symbolic icons of two ethnicities that belong to one country but have different cultural backgrounds.

In China the Han people are the most widely distributed and account for the majority of the country’s population of 1.3 billion to the extent that all Chinese people are often thought by foreigners to be Han, and indeed they can be said to be the principal people group that has dominated Chinese history and cultivated its culture (Seon, 2007). However, the ethnic landscape of China is more complex than foreigners realize and many minorities are maintaining their cultures with tenacity. Historically, though, Ti...
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This study was intended to enable Tibetan people to actively pursue a religious spirit and Chinese people, who are experiencing rapid cultural changes, to connect with their self and reveal their unconsciousness through opportunities for the free expressions of their emotions. These symbolic expressions are profound expressions that will reveal things from the sub-consciousness in concrete and observable forms and thereby provide opportunities for deeper understanding of the inner side of people affected by cultural and environmental changes.

Sandplay therapy stimulates people’s primitive sense for creative activities through sandtrays. The sand that constitutes sandtrays can be regarded as the earth and water can be regarded as a substance that harmonizes well with the earth. These natural substances can encourage people’s creativity. Sandplay therapy is a non-linguistic psychological and emotional therapy that enables effective communication for those who struggle to articulate their emotions verbally. Sandtrays are ‘in-between spaces’ in which clients’ lives are developed and exposed. Ammann (1994) stated, “these ‘in-between spaces’ in which conscious and unconscious materials can be spread and integrated to make concrete things are spaces between the client and the therapist. They are spaces where the therapist’s and the client’s unconsciousness and consciousness meet with each other and interact with each other.” Clients can approach their deepest emotions in their sandtrays.

Previous studies have examined the symbolic icons that appear in sandplay therapy. Jeon (2009) found in a study with an infant, child, and teenager that symbolic images of animals were expressed differently in sandplay therapy according to age, while Lee (2010) grasped the universal characteristics of the use of symbolic icons in sandtrays according to children’s age and sex.

Sandplay therapy involves making works that are visually exposed, and it can be said to be a process of analysis of the contents of the works. Although there may be some differences among individuals, the symbolic icons that appear in this process tend to have universal characteristics. Oh (2011) and Kang (2012) advised that various scenes, themes, and symbolic icons that appeared in sandplay therapy were important means for therapists to understand their clients. Kim (2012) suggested that various symbolic icons used in sandplay therapy have more meanings than the meaning of simple symbolic icons and that those symbolic icons are important in that they reflect clients’ psychology in the process through which they are embodied. Symbols are expressions that contain deep internal forces that are perceived by us but cannot be completely contained in our speech, which emerge from our unconsciousness. In particular, the characteristics owned by symbolic icons may vary according to culture or religion.

This study relates to diverse symbolic expressions that appear in sandplay therapy scenes made by Chinese and Tibetan people. The meanings of these symbols. It intends to find common features and differences between two ethnicities in one country with different cultural backgrounds and examine how their cultural and religious symbolism is expressed.

In this study, 1) the characteristics of symbolic icons appearing in sandplay therapy scenes made by Chinese and Tibetan people of different ages will be examined along with 2) the characteristics of cultural and religious symbolism appearing in sandplay therapy scenes made by Chinese and Tibetan people.

STUDY METHOD

Study Participants

This study was conducted with a total of sixty-four participants consisting of thirty-four Han Chinese residing in an inland region of China and thirty Zang (Tibetan) people residing in the Tibet region. The ages and ethnicities of the subjects that participated in the study are as shown in Table 1.

Study Tools

To examine the cultural and religious symbolism of Chinese and Tibetan people appearing in the sandplay therapy scenes of the study participants, sandplay therapy sets were composed and used. The sandplay therapy sets used in this study were composed of water as well as many symbolic icons as seen in the categories presented in Table 2.

Study Procedure

In this study, a total of three sessions of counseling at a rate of one per week were implemented on each Chinese and Tibetan participant between June 27 and August 19, 2012 and the counseling cases of sixty-four study subjects (34 Chinese, 30 Tibetan) and a total of 184 sandtrays (104 Chinese, 80 Tibetan) were collected.

Table 1. Classification of study participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjects</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Han Chinese</td>
<td>Zang Tibetan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10s</td>
<td>12 [32 boxes]</td>
<td>11 [32 boxes]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-30s</td>
<td>12 [41 boxes]</td>
<td>15 [38 boxes]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-50s</td>
<td>10 [31 boxes]</td>
<td>4 [10 boxes]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>34 [104 boxes]</td>
<td>30 [80 boxes]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Classification of the types of symbolic icons in sandplay therapy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Natural world</td>
<td>Wild animals, domestic animals, sea creatures, snakes, insects, dinosaurs, birds, plants, natural objects/minerals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myth and religion</td>
<td>Figures in myths and fairy tales, Buddha, property gods, Christian figures, imaginary creatures, sacred places, religious architecture, pharaoh, skeleton/cemetery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society and culture</td>
<td>Special occupation, people, lama, soldier, newly married couple, pirate, Indian, tools and weapons, foods, liquor, ship, buildings, special purpose car, aircraft, vehicle, representative buildings, defense/borderline, furniture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td>Sea, mountain, snowy mountain, stony mountain, volcano, lake, river, forest, grassland, island, desert, star-land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>Religion, social life, natural world, war, love, love for one’s family members, environmental destruction/pillage, death, peace, asceticism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

lected through the counseling. The collected data was classified by age and ethnicity and symbolic icons used by the participants were classified according to the classification suggested by Mifford and Wilkinson (2008) by comparing quotations and photos of the sandtrays from the therapy sessions. The classified categories were finally classified into five categories as shown in Table 2 through discussion with five experts in sandplay therapy clinics. During the primary analysis of the symbolic icons appearing in individual sandtrays, many symbolic icons of the same types used in sandtrays were classified into one type. The secondary analysis was conducted on those cultural and religious symbolic icons that showed large differences in usage among the age groups of the study subjects out of the five categories of symbolic icons classified through the primary analysis. The study subjects’ religions were examined and the results indicated that all of the Chinese people, except for one who had no religion, and all of the Tibetan people identified as Buddhists.

The data obtained in different categories was compared through frequency analysis by category (t = number of symbolic icons actually used/total number of people). Preferred symbolic icons were subdivided by culture and religion and the resultant data was analyzed.

**CONCLUSION**

The Characteristics of Symbolic Icons Appearing in Sandplay Therapy Scenes according to the Ages of Chinese and Tibetan People Are as Follows

Different preferred symbolic icons were show according to ages and cultures.

First, the participants in their teens were examined and the results indicated that symbolic icons in the category ‘natural world’ were more frequently used by the Chinese participants. The Chinese participants more frequently used symbolic icons in the category ‘region,’ except for ‘grassland.’ The Chinese participants in their teens showed a selection rate of 0% for ‘grassland.’ In the category ‘region,’ the Chinese participants were observed to mainly use ‘social life,’ ‘myth/fairy tale worlds,’ ‘war,’ ‘love for one’s family members,’ ‘environmental destruction,’ ‘death,’ and ‘peace’ while Tibetan participants were observed to mainly use ‘religion,’ ‘natural world,’ and ‘asceticism.’ The Chinese participants were observed to be more dynamic in their use of symbolic icons compared to the Tibetan participants.

Second, according to the results of examination of the participants in their 20s and 30s, Tibetan participants used symbolic icons in the category ‘natural world’ more frequently, except for ‘natural objects/minerals.’ In the category ‘myth and religion,’ the Chinese participants showed a selection rate of 0.0% for ‘sacred places’ and selection rates not exceeding 10.0% for all other symbolic icons. The Tibetan participants mainly used ‘Buddha,’ ‘Christian figures,’ ‘imaginary creatures,’ and ‘sacred places.’ In the category ‘society and culture’ category, the Chinese participants mainly used ‘newly married couple,’ ‘foods,’ ‘ship,’ ‘buildings,’ ‘borderline,’ and ‘furniture,’ and the Tibetan participants mainly used ‘people,’ ‘vehicle,’ ‘lama,’ and ‘tools and weapons.’ In the category ‘region,’ the Chinese participants were observed to mainly use ‘sea’ and the Tibetan participants were observed to mainly use ‘mountain,’ ‘snowy mountain,’ ‘river,’ and ‘forest.’ In the category ‘subject,’ the Chinese participants were observed to mainly use ‘love’ and ‘love for one’s family members’ and the Tibetan study subjects were observed to mainly use ‘religion,’ ‘social life,’ ‘natural world,’ ‘peace,’ and ‘asceticism.’

Third, according to the results of examination of the participants in their 40s and 50s, in the category ‘natural world,’ the Chinese participants mainly used ‘domestic animals,’ ‘sea creatures,’ ‘plants,’ and ‘natural objects/minerals,’ and the Tibetan participants mainly used ‘wild animals,’ ‘plants,’ and ‘snakes.’ The Chinese participants hardly selected symbolic icons in the category ‘myth and religion,’ except for ‘Buddha/property gods.’ The Tibetan participants mainly used ‘figures in myths and fairy tales,’ ‘Buddha,’ ‘Christian figures,’ ‘imaginary creatures,’ and ‘sacred places.’ In the category ‘society and culture,’ the Chinese partici-
pants mainly used ‘people,’ ‘tools and weapons,’ ‘ship,’ ‘buildings,’ ‘vehicle,’ and ‘border line,’ and the Tibetan participants mainly used ‘people’ and ‘lama.’ The Chinese participants hardly used symbolic icons in the category ‘region,’ while the Tibetan participants mainly used ‘mountain,’ ‘snowy mountain,’ ‘river,’ ‘forest,’ and ‘grassland.’ In the category ‘subject,’ the Chinese participants mainly used ‘social life’ and ‘love for one’s family members;’ and the Tibetan participants mainly used ‘religion,’ ‘social life,’ ‘natural world,’ ‘peace,’ ‘death,’ and ‘asceticism.’ The Chinese participants in their 40s and 50s were observed to be more dynamic in their use of symbolic icons compared to the Chinese participants in their 40s and 50s.

The Characteristics of the Cultural and Religious Symbolism of Chinese and Tibetan People Appearing in Sandplay Therapy Scenes Are as Follows

Comparison by Category

In the category ‘natural world,’ the Chinese participants mainly used ‘domestic animals,’ ‘sea creature,’ ‘plants,’ and ‘natural objects/minerals;’ and the Tibetan participants mainly used ‘wild animals’ and ‘plants.’ In the category ‘myth and religion,’ the Chinese participants mainly used ‘figures in myths and fairy tales’ and ‘skeleton/cemetery,’ and the Tibetan participants mainly used ‘Buddha’ and ‘sacred places.’ In the category ‘society and culture,’ the Chinese participants mainly used ‘people,’ ‘tools and weapons,’ ‘foods,’ ‘ship,’ ‘buildings,’ ‘vehicle,’ ‘border line,’ and ‘furniture,’ and the Tibetan participants mainly used ‘people’ and ‘lama.’ In the category ‘region,’ the Chinese participants were observed to mainly use ‘sea’ and the Tibetan study subjects were observed to mainly use ‘mountain,’ ‘snowy mountain,’ ‘river,’ and ‘forest.’

In the category ‘subject,’ the Chinese participants were shown to mainly use ‘social life,’ ‘myth/fairy tale worlds,’ ‘war,’ ‘love,’ ‘love for one’s family members,’ and ‘environmental destruction’ and the Tibetan study subjects were observed to mainly use ‘religion,’ ‘natural world,’ ‘peace,’ and ‘asceticism.’ The Chinese participants mainly used those symbolic icons that show relationships while the Tibetan participants mainly used those symbolic icons that show faith.

Characteristics of Chinese People

According to the sandtrays and quotations from Chinese participants in their teens, academic stress was regarded to be their major stress. However, unusually, although Chinese participants in their teens expressed that study was most important; their sandtrays did not indicate it. Although they consciously expressed that they were under severe stress, they tended to naturally avoid stress unconsciously. At least 90% of Chinese participants in their teens reported that snakes were animals that protect forests and snakes were not shown to be evil beings in the Chinese people’s collective unconsciousness. The subjects ‘social life,’ and ‘myth/fairy tale worlds’ appeared the most frequently in quotations from Chinese participants in their teens. Mythical subjects are plots used by people to describe and explain the worlds of spirit that move along the higher level of the integration of individualization of the worlds of spirit. This may be attributable to the fact that Chinese participants in their teens are in environments with more cultural benefits and access and read more books than do Tibetan participants in their teens. Chinese participants in their 20s and 30s showed the subject ‘love’ the most frequently, and this was consistent with Erikson’s psychosocial developmental stage in which achieving intimacy in relationships with spouses or others is an important task.

Chinese participants in their 40s and 50s hardly selected symbolic icons in the category ‘myth and religion,’ except for ‘Buddha/property gods’ (29.0%). They showed the subject ‘love for one’s family members’ the most frequently. This means that they had children whom they raised and educated and thus were committed to the cultivation of their next generation. A tendency to first select those symbolic icons that could be expressed from the participants’ daily life appeared when the participants were making sandtrays. Chinese people showed a tendency to first use buildings and furniture, which are those symbolic icons that were frequently seen in their daily urban life.

Characteristics of Tibetan People

‘Study/books’ were the most important among the subjects that appeared in sandtrays made by Tibetan participants in their teens and snakes appeared as scary beings in 100% of the sandtrays. Tibetan people who are afraid of nature perceive snakes as scary beings that symbolize the force and indestructibility of nature. Animals appeared as friends and sacred beings for Tibetan participants, who expressed feral instincts more frequently. Tibetan participants in their 20s and 30s showed the subject ‘religion’ the most frequently followed by the subject ‘peace.’ Tibetan participants in their 40s and 50s frequently used the symbolic icon ‘mountains,’ in particular, snowy mountains. This is because Tibetan people regard snowy mountains as sacred places that are the final destinations of pilgrimages. In addition, their preference for forests was shown to be similarly high at 50%. The symbolic icon forest means asceticism and the symbolic icon ‘river’ is also associated with asceticism. Rivers that are a god’s gift flowing down from sacred snowy mountains are places that mean asceticism. Tibetan participants in their 40s and 50s regarded these symbolic icons as the most important things to the extent that their lives seemed to have been composed only of asceticism.

The results of the study described above indicate that preferred symbolic icons vary according to age and culture. When all the symbolic icons used were examined, the Chinese participants in their teens appeared to be more dynamic than Tibetan partic-
Participants in their teens and the Tibetan participants in their 40s and 50s appeared to be more dynamic than Chinese participants in their 40s and 50s. An important factor as to why Tibetan people experience anxiety and stress less frequently than Chinese people is the religious influence on Tibetan people. In particular, subject preference in the adolescence of Chinese and Tibetan peoples was observed to be different from that at the beginning of their adulthood. According to Erikson’s psychosocial development stages, Tibetan people can be considered to be rapidly entering into senescence from adulthood.

Thus far, the cultural and religious symbolism of Chinese and Tibetan people was analyzed and classified through their use of symbolic icons. Understanding symbolic expressions is an important method of understanding the inner side of people. Symbols have existed in all eras and civilizations. They appeared first in wall paintings in caves in the Old Stone Age and have developed together with civilization thereafter. They are a means to bring about therapeutic effects in psychological therapy. To understand the diverse psychological characteristics of people, not only domestic studies but also studies on people from different cultures and ethnicities are necessary. We hope that many follow-up studies will be conducted after this paper so that more consistent standards for comparison can be made.

“Symbols still vigorously speak to us and talk to our intelligence, emotions, and spirit. Studies of symbols are studies of mankind per se” (Fontana, 2002).

REFERENCES


