

# **HISTORY OF NATIONS, CULTURES & RELIGIONS**

## **Systemic Constellation Work and Social Trauma in China**

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### **Background**

*Fung started to study Systemic Constellation Work (SCW) around the year 2000, and it became a full time profession in 2005. For more than 10 years, SCW has been struggling to grow in China. As a pioneer of SCW in China, he has found clients with all kinds of issues coming to him for help: problems between men and women, parenting issues, trans-generational family issues, emotional issues, physical symptoms, money and wealth, career and organisational issues. He has personally facilitated more than more ten thousand SCW cases. Trauma, of course, no matter whether it is from personal experience or inherited from family or social system across generations, plays a central role in many cases.*

*Fung has developed a unique way of working with SCW and also with trauma due to his own personal background, as well as adapting the work within China's political, social and cultural context. Studying business and working in corporations for many years before coming to the field of SCW, enabled him to utilise many concepts taken from business systems to explain how SCW was functioning. The Chinese government rules society with a kind of benevolent dictatorship; political ideology is still strongly upheld and strict control is posed over society. Working in China necessitates the invention of a language which the government can accept. The social context is quite different from the West; for example, abortion is legitimate as a form of birth control. Chinese people born into the culture of Taoism and Confucianism, find it easier to grasp the ideas behind SCW by drawing parallels with these traditional teachings.*

*In this paper, he will illustrate what's mentioned above step by step. The structure of Part I will be organised under the two following main headings:*

- 1. Sources of trauma commonly found in China*
- 2. SCW in the Chinese context*

## **Part I**

### **Sources of Trauma commonly found in China**

Social trauma can be defined as a substantial portion of population suffering from a collective traumatic event, the effect of which may last for several generations (Sotero, 2006). In my experience facilitating SCW, I have discovered two major sources of collective or social trauma in China. One source is obviously historical, while the other is widespread and ongoing. No matter what the sources are, they are related to an event, movement or policy on a national level. These events affect people on a personal, family and social level. Against such a background, there are not only victims, but also perpetrators or associated groups involved, who share joint responsibility. These complex interwoven features of social trauma always make it interesting to explore.

### **Historical sources of social trauma in China**

Chinese modern history has been characterised by chaos and change, revolution and reform, sometimes exciting but also tragic, and never peaceful. Some of the major historical events that have led to massive social trauma include: war, political revolution, great famine and the compulsory one-child policy.

#### **Wars**

The contemporary wars in China with massive casualties were usually civil wars, except for the Sino-Japanese war in World War II. Ongoing wars continued from the time of the collapse of the 1911 Manchurian Qing Dynasty to the establishment of the People's Republic of China by communists in 1949. There were wars between Kuomintang and war lords, and deadly fighting between Kuomintang (also known as the Nationalist Party or the National People's Party, the Kuomintang governed all or part of mainland China from 1928 to 1949 and subsequently ruled Taiwan under Chiang Kai-shek and his successors for most of the time since then.)<sup>1</sup> and the Communist Party. Then China engaged to varying degrees in some external wars such as the Korean War (1950), Sino-Indian War (1960), and the Vietnam War (1970, 1979). There are no accurate statistics of casualties for those wars, but the numbers are estimated at tens of million people. For example, Japanese soldiers massacred 300,000 Chinese people in one single Nanking city (Chang, 2012).

However, the cases of clients coming to me for SCW don't stop there; sometimes the influence of war from the 19<sup>th</sup> century still remains. Some clients' cases date back to

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<sup>1</sup> Downloaded from: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Nationalist-Party-Chinese-political-party>

The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom rebellion from 1850-1864 when it is estimated that half of the cities in China were destroyed and it cost 20 to 30 million lives (Westad, 2003). One typical case was with a client who was aware of her complete numbness to people around her; she didn't feel any loving connection to anyone. Although her parents were nice to her, she couldn't feel their love. A constellation to look at the source of her numbness revealed that her ancestors seven generations before had been involved in this war. Occasionally, the influence of war can go back even further. One of my clients who had suffered from serious depression when she came to me, was a descendant of Genghis Khan.

In all these wars, tens of millions people died, either as perpetrators or victims. Practically every family was affected in one way or another. Mass migration was not uncommon (e.g. more than 80% of the local population of Hong Kong today originate from mainland China); family members often became separated as a result of the different political systems of mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan – a frequent theme in constellations.

## **Political Revolution**

Political revolutions during early communist rule were quite well known in the world. Revolutions involved a number of massive movements to eradicate the “enemies of the people.” Landlords, capitalists, Kuomintang military officers and party officials, traitors, intellectuals, different voices within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) were on the ‘eradication’ list. Many revolutionary political movements occurred between the 1950s and mid-1970s. Public humiliation, torture, labour camp re-education, the death sentence and prosecution by suspicion were common. The notorious Cultural Revolution affected Chinese society in profound ways. There are no official figures for the number of casualties but only estimates from various officials or scholars. It is estimated about 500,000 people were killed, another half a million were injured, whilst the number of people prosecuted amounted to 27 million (Walder & Su, 2003) . A Chinese Marshal Ye Jianying who actually arrested the Gang of Four and put the Cultural Revolution to an end, estimated roughly the same figure, but added another fact that more than 100 million people were affected by the movement. More destructively, people were encouraged to betray their relatives because of their political stance: parents, brothers and sisters, partners. This effectively destroyed the basic trust between human beings. The motto of the Cultural Revolution was to “break four former ways of being,” i.e. breaking former thought processes, former culture, former customs and former habits. Effectively the result was devastating: everyone became the target of the revolution. For example, women's hair was cut, old men's beards were shaved, old buildings were torn down, old books were burnt, monuments were smashed, capitalists were prosecuted etc.

Interestingly, this movement was not a direct, compulsory command from any top leader but mostly the bottom-up, self-organised collective forces that responded to the so-called supreme instructions of Chairman Mao. Massive numbers of people were engaging in perpetrator behaviours, believing they were being loyal to Chairman Mao. At the same time, huge numbers were suffering from the movement, losing their property, their career, their loved ones, their dignity, their trust in people and even

their lives.

## **The Great Famine after the Great Leap Forward**

The Great Famine happened around 1959-1961 immediately after the Great Leap Forward drove the whole economy of China to a dead end. The original purpose of the movement was to transform the country's agricultural economy into an industrial economy in order to catch up with the development of the West. Most of the agricultural labour force were instructed to produce iron and steel. Such simplistic thinking resulted in the production of large quantities of poor quality steel and iron; at the same time, those same farmers were neglecting to harvest their crops. Needless to say, the consequence was an insufficient food supply for the people and this turned into the tragic Great Famine later on. The Great Famine could have been avoided if the political ideals had not been imposed so radically during the Great Leap Forward (Kung & Lin, 2003). The number of people who starved to death amounted to 30 million – equivalent to 5% of the total population of China at that time.

However, the real situation experienced by people was much more terrible than this figure. On the Chinese internet, it was easy to find horrifying stories during the Great Famine. People first consumed the agricultural food, then they went to eat every living creature they could find – roots, tree bark and some types of soil (Kwan Yin Tu) were all served as food. Many people, sometimes the whole family, committed suicide or starved to death. Cannibalism was not uncommon (Zhou, 2012) and there were many reports of families who would exchange their children in order to eat. Some parents committed suicide so their children could feed on their dead bodies. Others killed their dying children, ate them and then killed themselves. One of my students told me that he came across a report by the police department in his home town in Hunan Province. He said the report showed more than 1800 cases of selling human flesh in one city during that period. In my SCW, there have been many traumatic cases related to the Great Famine and cannibalism. Off-spring of the Great Famine survivors usually show serious emotional problems, depression, numbness to relationship and stomach complaints.

## **Abortion**

China implemented the one-child policy to control population growth in 1979. In the early 1980s, the policy was stringently enforced and the induced abortion rate was as high as 56.07% among married women aged 20-49 years old (Wang, 2014). In 2000s, it has reached its lowest level (18.04%) due to the fact that the government has been relaxing the policy. In 2016, the government formally announced the introduction of the two-children policy. China's population structure has changed substantially as a result and it will become an ageing society with insufficient children to support the social welfare programmes. Cultural preference for males effectively led to a boy to girl ratio of 120:100 in 2005 (Edlund, Li et al., 2013). The combined effect will cost Chinese society in a huge way; it will slow down the 'miraculous' growth; men will find it difficult to find a marriage partner. Furthermore, a study showed that with a 1% increase in the men to women ratio, the number of crimes will increase by 3.7%

(Edlund, Li et al., 2013). It is generally believed that the Chinese government will let go of the birth control policy soon.

Again, hard statistics don't give us any true feeling about the situation. In my SCW cases, less than 20% of women do not have abortions. According to Chinese internet news, there are still 13 million abortions annually in the country.

Hellinger used to say abortion meant the end of the couple relationship (Hellinger, Weber et al. 1998, Hellinger, 2001). From my observation and experience, the situation is much more complicated in China. When I scrutinise abortions case by case, it reveals different dynamics specific to each family. Abortion cases can be categorised into: compulsory, controversial, voluntary and systemic.

Compulsory abortion refers to cases where the government family planning agents captured pregnant women to abort their child by force. This is extremely traumatic for women and they are usually full of anger and hatred towards those family planning officers. They mourn for their children and take them deeply in their heart, not letting them go. But there is no obvious ill-effect on the couple's relationship in these instances.

Controversial abortion usually happens if the parents are communist party members who need to set an example for people to follow, or for people who may face heavy penalties that threaten their livelihood, losing their property and career prospects. This situation usually happens in poor areas of China where people are faced with hard choices. For example, if a communist party member had a second child, he or she may be demoted, find it impossible to get promotion, or even get fired. There were some extreme cases with tragic outcomes. One participant in one of my workshops shared his story: he was serving as a family planning officer in a remote area of China. That area was famous for its poverty status and birth control was stringently enforced there. There was a poor family who gave birth to a second child secretly, but somebody reported them to the family planning agency. He and his colleagues went to deal with the case. The usual practice in that area was that if an additional child was found, either the family would pay a heavy fine or their house would be torn down. The family was so poor that they could not afford the fine. The father held the newborn baby in his hands and begged for mercy, but in vain. He told the officers to wait and went inside his house. A few minutes later, he came out with blank eyes and a dead baby in his hand. That participant, as the family planning officer at that time, could not take it anymore; he quit his job and tortured himself thereafter with guilt and shame.

Voluntary abortion is linked to a more liberal attitude towards sexuality. In the first 40 years of Communist rule, the government eradicated the social problems of prostitution, drugs and gangster activities. Society was strictly controlled, with a kind of religious, idealistic or dogmatic discipline. Sex was considered taboo and talk about it in public was forbidden. The Open-Door Policy has brought with it a more open attitude to sex, and various forms of sexual relationship are now very common, including one-night stands, temporary partners, affairs and second wives. Many children resulting from such sexual acts have been aborted. In the case of married couples, voluntary abortion is associated with the economic pressure of raising a child. The cost of living in Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen, particularly property

prices, are comparable to metropolitan cities like New York, London and Tokyo. Many couples prefer to concentrate all their economic resources on one child, but as Hellinger predicts, they easily end up divorced.

Systemic abortions are usually driven by an unconscious drive of atonement. This applied to large numbers of abortions from single women with no explanation. One lady told me in my workshop that she had aborted more than twenty children! After checking her family history and doing a constellation, we found nothing related to her family of origin, but everything was pointing to an influence from her present family. Then she told me her husband was a policy officer during his day shift, and he controlled prostitutes at night. Her constellation clearly showed that she knew the truth, but didn't stop him. Those prostitutes had a lot of abortions because they rarely used contraception. Her abortions were an atonement for those aborted children. Another student of mine, worked as a medical doctor for just seven days. As apprentice to a new doctor, she was assigned to carry out induced abortion surgery in the first week of her medical career. Each day she aborted one baby, and she quit the job a week later full of pain and guilt. Later in her life, she aborted seven of her own children.

## **Ongoing Trauma**

### **Early Separation and 'Left-Behind Children'**

Early separation of children from their parents is also a very important issue for those aged over 40. The interrupted reaching-out movement is often a main focus in a workshop, probably related to the political movements and the social system up to the 1970s. Under Mao's socialist system, jobs were assigned by the State and people could be sent anywhere according to the state's requirement. During the Cultural Revolution, many students, intellectuals, officials and others were sent to rural areas, remote provinces and labour-educational camps. Even before that, people could not migrate freely according to their own wishes, but had to accept the party's assignment. Many parents had to move away from their home towns to find work, leaving their children with grandparents or adopted families. In urban areas of China, this phenomenon was common.

The situation may have worsened due to economic development that meant adult parents or fathers needed to find higher paid jobs in the cities. Typically children are staying with their grandparents or relatives. These children are referred to as: 'Left-behind Children' (LBC) and in 2010 the number amounted to over 60 million (段成荣, 吕利丹 et al., 2014). This group of children attracted a substantial amount of attention from society and the government have since changed their policy, enabling parents to bring their children more easily to cities. In the past, this was difficult for there was a Resident Registration System in China that prevented people from being able to move freely within the country. Previously, if rural parents worked in cities their children were unable to go to school in those cities due to the system prevailing at the time. The Chinese government has since changed the system to make it easier for parents to bring children with them. However, there is research showing that 'left-

behind children' with absent fathers, are less happy, have a lower degree of attachment to their parents, and have less satisfactory relationships with their school teachers compared to normal children. (李晓巍 and 刘艳 2013).

From the perspective of SCW, this 'interrupted reaching-out movement' could have a profound effect on these children's future relationships and psychological well-being.

## **Caesarean Sections and Episiotomies**

The issue of women who have had Caesarean sections and episiotomies exhibiting the symptoms of post-partum PTSD has not received enough attention within the field of SCW.

Caesarean section is a medical procedure that helps mother to deliver the baby in the case of difficult birth. But there is an increasing trend worldwide for caesareans to be given automatically (Betrán, Ye et al., 2016) and it is becoming a 'normal' procedure in many countries. China is among those countries with the highest rate. Country-level and provincial level hospital caesarean delivery rates were 46% and 68% respectively in 2007. (Wang and Hesketh, 2017)

The long-term risks and costs are still unclear and there is a report showing that 20% of women suffer from PTSD as a result of their experience of caesarean delivery. This amounts to 37% of all PTSD cases related to traumatic delivery.

Episiotomy is another medical procedure to help mothers who give birth vaginally. One study showed that 50% of mothers had had an episiotomy in an Australian hospital in 2007 (De Souza, Dwyer et al., 2015), while in a hospital in China that figure was 70%. (Wang and Hesketh, 2017)

From my own experience, many women are suffering post-partum PTSD without any awareness of it and it is closely related to the symptoms of post-partum depression in many SCW cases. My female clients report constant pain from the wounds, sleep deprivation, difficulties with breast-feeding (insufficient breast milk), emotional fluctuation, quarrels with their husband or mother-in-law, distorted beliefs that no-one cares about them, significant reduction of sexual activity, and deterioration of the couple relationship after a caesarean or episiotomy, especially from the first-born child. From a Chinese medical perspective, the artificial wounds created by caesareans and episiotomies are at very important energy centres. Wounds effectively cut off the circulation of energy (Qi) leading to long-term health problems. It has become a standard procedure now for me to ask about the mode of delivery when clients come with couple relationship issues.

The good news is that the negative effects seem to be becoming recognised within the Chinese medical field. Unnecessary caesareans and episiotomies are now discouraged and caesarean delivery rates at the county-level and provincial-level hospitals have recently decreased to 32% and 44% respectively.

## SCW within the Chinese Context

Working with SCW in China is a challenge that comes not only from the complexity of the issues, but also taking the political, professional and societal context into account.

SCW entered China around 2002: a local NLP trainer Valent Lee introduced Bert Hellinger into Hong Kong and China. Hellinger then went to China for the next two years. Then he was banned from entering China for ten years. Although his work had a phenomenal effect in China, he also drew a lot of criticism from the psychological field, and from many people. They equated SCW with superstition and religious mystery. He was classified by the Chinese government as a prominent religious figure. This is definitely a result of China's political reality. Chinese government is still ruled by the communist party and it has transformed into a more open, inclusive and tolerant party with the main objective being that of the ethnic renaissance of Chinese culture and tradition which used to have such a strong influence on the world. President Xi's proposition for "One Belt, One Road" (**This needs an explanatory note at the end please**) is basically to re-establish the old glory days of the 'Silk Road' when China was a strong empire historically.

Compared to Mao's period of rule, the present government's policies are much more open and humanistic. However, there are still strong controls in place to maintain social order in a harmonious way. One part of that control is sticking to a certain ideology. One of the key ideologies is called the 'Scientific Development View', which effectively means moving away from mysterious ideas and teachings. Another strongly held form of control is closely monitoring any activities that may attract a huge crowd, of course including any prominent figures who may be seen as idols by the public.

Frankly speaking, allowing SCW to continue in China is a miracle. As one of the pioneers of SCW facilitation in China, I did a tremendous amount of work in the past to keep SCW alive. I was invited to meet with a senior officer of the Chinese Special Police Department responsible for religious control some years ago. The Department actually reports to the National Security Bureau that is equivalent to the KGB in what was USSR. The officer was a participant in my workshop and his agents had actually investigated my workshop before he came. He set out three bottom lines for working in China:

- 1) Don't attract too many people
- 2) Don't earn too much money
- 3) Don't get involved in cults, religion or sexual activities

You may now imagine the risk of working in China. For those foreign facilitators, the worst result would be to be banned from entering China. But for Chinese facilitators, it is a matter of maybe losing our career, or being sentenced to jail. Doing SCW in China as a Chinese facilitator, I have been walking this tight-rope.

Another factor is related to the development of people in the helping professions. If



the professional standard of psychotherapy of developed countries was applied to China now, then at least 99% plus so-called professionals would be unqualified. In China, the reality is that anybody can enrol on a course and attend a qualification certificate examination to become a licensed psychotherapist recognised by the state after three months' study of written materials. The examination is a multiple-choice paper, plus an oral interview. Most licensed psychotherapists never practise after the examination. The implication is that when I designed SCW training, I had to assume that the people who came to learn SCW possessed zero knowledge of psychology. At the same time, psychological academics are certainly not fans of SCW. To work within the political paradigm, and also within their 'scientific paradigm', they cannot teach SCW in their own classroom. Some of the top psychotherapists do use some SCW work, but they just study mainly Hellinger's books, and try it out themselves. There's no formal training for them. One of my students owns her psychological institution which is one of those recognised by the authorities as being able to offer a valid psychotherapist qualification study and examination. She was invited to speak at a psychotherapeutic conference. When she delivered her speech, she did a quick survey and realised that one third of the attendants of the conference had either been to one of my workshops or read my book. Most of them used SCW techniques in their sessions and found it worked well. But when she asked if they were willing to recognise SCW as part of psychotherapy, nobody raised their hand. Staying within the boundary of 'political and professional conscience' is the safe option for them.

The third factor is the awareness the general public has of SCW. At this moment, SCW is growing fast, but less than 1% of the population has heard of it. For those who do get in touch to ask for a constellation, the chances of them coming across a facilitator with a solid training is low. There are perhaps hundreds of so-called facilitators working in China, but most of them may just have experienced a one-day workshop and then they begin to run workshops themselves. The market is filled with various bizarre forms of 'constellation', e.g. inviting the ghosts of ancestors to possess bodies, performing strange rituals, calling for gods' help etc. I guess this happens everywhere. These facilitators share one common characteristic: they all claim themselves to be the 'sole apprentice', 'true successor' of Bert Hellinger. The mysterious power of SCW is used as the core attraction to the public who have no idea about the work. Those 'fake' constellations effectively confuse the public, giving SCW a bad name in many cases.

### ***Editor's Note:***

*Lap Fung has facilitated and taught constellation work extensively and is responsible for the development of several techniques which have in part allowed systems constellation work to grow in China's unique environment. We are grateful to him for his willingness to contribute such an in-depth summary of some of his work and to do this justice, we have decided to publish his findings in two parts. Part II will appear in issue 33 of TKF and will outline his development of alternate ways of framing SCW for China, introduce his findings on the treatment of trauma and provide an interesting summary of SCW from a Taoist perspective, and more.*

### ***Note:***

<sup>1</sup>*Downloaded from: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Nationalist-Party-Chinese-political-party>.*

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*His style of working is characterised by clear structure and procedures, systematic and all-round coverage. He is now integrating more traditional Chinese cultures (e.g. five elements, Yi Jing and holographic ideas) into his work.*

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