

Child of the Full Moon

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About the Author

Gerald Schoenewolf, Ph.D. is a New York State licensed psychologist who has practiced psychotherapy for over 33 years. He has authored 25 professional articles and 13 books on psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. His books include *101 Common Therapeutic Blunders*, *The Art of Hating*, *Counterresistance* and *Psychotherapy with People in the Arts*. He has also written and directed two feature films— *Therapy* and *Brooklyn Nights*. He lives in the Pennsylvania Poconos with his wife, Julia.

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Should a therapist make a house visit, or does this change the therapeutic framework in such a way as to make it unworkable or unethical? This paper describes such a visit and the use of a therapeutic joining technique in order to break an impasse, which eventually revealed the lies that lurked under a family's dysfunction.

A while back I received a telephone call from a man who said he was having problems with his daughter. He had a heavy accent and at first it was difficult for me to understand him. However, eventually I found out he was Chinese and had been born in Taiwan. He did not know if a Western psychotherapist could help him, but he wanted to try. I told him I knew of some Chinese psychotherapists, but he said he was not interested in a Chinese psychotherapist. "They will look down on me for having problems. That is how the Chinese are," he said. He made an appointment to come to my office the next day, and he arrived about fifteen minutes early, accompanied by a teen-aged boy whom he introduced as his son.

"She doesn't speak to me," the father said in a tone of exasperation and confusion. He was a short, thin man in his 50s, but looked younger. "I don't know what to do. She's acting strange."

"How is she strange?" I asked.

“She doesn’t leave the house anymore. She got fired from her job one year ago, and after she was fired she called me and asked if she can live with me. Well, what could I do? She says she no longer has money to pay for rent. So, even though my girlfriend was with me at the time, I couldn’t say no. So my daughter moved in and my girlfriend moved back to her apartment. Do you understand?”

I said I understood and asked for some background information. He told me that the girl’s mother had died of a heart attack when the girl was 14. She had been acting strange ever since, and now, at 22, she never left the house and was suspicious of everybody. Only once in the last few months had she gone outside, and that was to attend a cousin’s wedding. At one point during the reception, the father had introduced her to one of his friends, and again she had “acted strange.” “When I introduced her as my daughter, she screamed, ‘I’m not your daughter!’ Then I looked around and she was suddenly gone.”

“Why do you think she says you’re not her father?” I asked.

“I don’t know. She mentioned a few times that I gave my son, Xiao, better treatment than her. Maybe that’s why.”

“It’s true,” Xiao suddenly spoke up. He was thin like his father, but a few inches taller, and he had a thoughtful expression. “He did give me better treatment. He bought me a car, and was paying my way through college before

I dropped out.”

“It’s the Chinese tradition,” the father interspersed.

“Also, I was mean to her,” the son added. “Her name’s Yueliang. It means moon. She was named Yueliang because she was born on the night of the full moon. In China there’s a saying that if you’re born during the full moon you’ll be crazy. When we were younger I used to tease her and tell her she would be crazy. I used to call her feng chuang, which means crazy. I was very mean.”

“It sounds like there’s a lot going on in the family,” I said. “Perhaps the three of you should come in for a session—she and the two of you.”

“She won’t go anywhere,” the father said, shaking his head.

“She won’t come,” the son agreed.

“Then how can I work with her?” I asked, as much to myself as to them. We all looked at one another for a moment. “All right,” I finally said. “I guess I’ll have to go to her.”

Though I had never made a house call before in my twenty years of practicing as a psychotherapist, I recognized that in the present circumstance there seemed to be no other way, so I arranged a house visit for the following week. I made an instant assessment of the situation and decided that the

daughter might be suffering from agoraphobia or paranoia. Therefore, I told the father and son it would be best if she were not told that I was coming to visit her, but rather that I was there to mediate a conflict between the father and son. We would elicit her help in working through this conflict that had become evident during this initial consultation—his spoiling of his son and the son's resentment of it. I hoped that when we began to discuss these things, Yueliang would join in and eventually we would get her to open up.

I had come to the decision to use this method of joining Yueliang's resistance because of another case I had read about. Milton Erickson (Haley, 1991) had pioneered the use of paradoxical interventions in treating patients, and one of his cases seemed similar to this one. A mother had come to Erickson to complain about her daughter because she never left the house. She was a high school student, but refused to go to school. Instead, she would stay home every day and sulk in her room. When her mother asked why she wouldn't go to school, she kept mentioning her feet. "What about your feet?" her mother inquired. She was convinced her feet were too large and other students would make fun of them. The mother cried and pleaded for Erickson to help. So he came upon a plan. She said he would visit their home on the pretext of caring for the mother, so as not to arouse the daughter's suspicion. The mother would pretend she was ill and have her daughter send for a doctor—Erickson. On the day of the visit, Erickson was led into the bedroom by the daughter and he observed that her feet weren't large at all. They were normal-

sized feet. He approached the mother's bed and held his hand on her forehead, then asked the daughter to fetch him a bowl of hot water. When the daughter returned with the bowl of hot water, she stood behind him waiting for his further instructions. At that point he had decided on his intervention. He accidentally (on purpose) backed up and stepped very hard on one of her feet. She screamed, and he yelled, "Why don't they grow those things large enough for somebody to see them?" The daughter ran, mortified, out of the room.

As Erickson said good-bye, the mother whispered to him, "Aren't you going to talk to my daughter?"

"I already did."

The next week the mother called Erickson to tell him in a delighted and surprised voice that her daughter had returned to school. She was completely over her phobia about her feet and in a good mood.

Erickson is not the only person to use paradoxical methods in psychotherapy. Rosen (1962) Liang (1971) and Spotnitz (1976) have used them effectively with schizophrenic patients. Over the years I had learned that you can't use any one method with all patients. Each patient requires his or her own type of therapy, based on the circumstances. My training was in psychoanalysis, but psychoanalysis actually works with only a minority of patients. Generally it must be combined with cognitive or behavioral work, and

sometimes not used at all. Patients with phobias, such as Erickson's patient, do not usually respond to psychoanalytic therapy. Behavioral interventions have been shown by research to work better with them. Therefore, since Yueliang seemed to also suffer from a phobia, I was convinced a behavioral approach was best.

On the day of the appointment I took the N train to Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, pondering the ins and outs of professional conduct. Even though I had made a decision based on research, I still had doubts. I was asking myself, "Is it ethical nowadays for a therapist to make housecalls? Am I being too manipulative by deceiving her? Will this even work? Does therapy ever work at all?" In an age in which the validity of psychotherapy was increasingly being questioned, when therapists were being accused of sexual misconduct and inducing dependence in their patients for financial gain, when the treatment of emotional disorders was becoming more and more a matter of genetics and biology and medicine, I wondered if I really knew what I was doing.

"Maybe I should give up doing therapy, and become a medical technician," I thought, having heard of recent openings in that profession. "I should do something simple, something uncontroversial, so I wouldn't have to question the efficacy of my profession and defend it from the constant criticisms of a society that seems intent on doing away with it."

I emerged from the subway feeling somewhat subdued by these winsome thoughts and zigzagged through five blocks of a run-down neighborhood. When I got to the address I had written down, Xiao was waiting for me. He waved excitedly and came forth, shaking my hand.

“She’s up there,” he said. “She doesn’t know you’re coming. She’s in the kitchen in her robe.”

“In her robe? Won’t she feel embarrassed to have me there if she’s not properly dressed?”

“No, not at all. It is an Asian custom to wear pajamas in the house, and to receive guests like that. It’s normal. Don’t worry.”

We walked up two flights of stairs and entered the apartment. The father, still exuding the same eager and solemn manner, firmly shook my hand. He opened the door wide to let us in to the railroad apartment, and I saw that he was indeed wearing pajamas and slippers. As I walked in, I could see the daughter out of the corner of my eyes. She was on the thin side, and she wore thick-lensed glasses. Her pupils bulged through the lenses as she looked at us. I glanced at her and turned away, not wanting to convey that she was of interest to me, nor wanting her to think I was staring at her bedroom attire. She was indeed clad in a light blue terrycloth robe, which she pulled tight as I glance at her.

“Yueliang, this is a doctor. He’s come to see Dad,” Xiao said.

“That’s right,” the father said.

She said nothing, just kept glancing suspiciously, her eyes bulging at me as we set some chairs up in the living room. We sat on three of the chairs and looked at each other. There was another chair, a wooden rocking chair, placed on the other side of the circle. We looked all looked at that chair. Then we looked at each other again. We did not look at Yueliang, but we could feel her looking at us.

“So,” I said. “Mr. Liu, you told me that you have been having trouble with your son, Xiao?”

“Yes,” he answered, on cue. “We have had trouble for a few years. I think I must have spoiled him.”

“You did,” Xiao said.”

“He was very wild.”

We continued to focus on their relationship for a few minutes. After a while I looked around at Yueliang, who was still staring.

“Why don’t you join us?” I said. “Your father and brother are trying to work

out a problem. Maybe you can help.”

“Who are you?” she asked. Unlike her father and brothers, she spoke without a Chinese accent. I had been told she had studied at Hunter College.

“I’m a psychotherapist.”

“He’s a psychotherapist,” Xiao said, nodding emphatically.

“Does he want some tea? How come you haven’t offered him some tea? Why is everybody acting so strange?”

“Who’s acting strange?” Xiao said, strangely.

“Did you want some tea?” she said directly to me.

“No, thanks.”

“I didn’t know psychotherapists visited people’s houses.”

“They usually don’t.”

“Are you a legitimate psychotherapist?”

“Yes, I’m legitimate. Come join us.”

“I don’t think you’re legitimate. You’re not a legitimate psychotherapist. Legitimate psychotherapists don’t make house calls.”

“I assure you I’m legitimate.”

“Come sit down, Yueliang,” Xiao said. “He’s a real psychotherapist. He is real. He came here to help.”

She hesitated, then arose with a sulky, suspicious glare and slowly meandered toward us. Her father moved the rocker forward for her to sit on. But she did not sit on it right away. Instead she stood by it.

“How do I know you’re a legitimate psychotherapist?” she asked.

“Here’s my card?” I took a card out of my wallet and reached it toward her.

“Anybody can print up a card.”

“Then how can I prove it?”

“Show me your license.”

“I don’t have it with me.” But I’ll tell you what. You can call the American Psychological Association and ask if I’m a member.”

“What’s their number?”

“It’s in Washington. You can call information.”

“I’ll call them later. But even if you’re a member of some organization, you can still be a quack.”

This interrogation about my legitimacy went on for five minutes. Both Xiao and Mr. Liu tried to vouch for my legitimacy, but to no avail. Nothing would satisfy her. Finally, having answered all her questions as best I could, there was a moment of silence and she sat down in the rocking chair. But she did not sit back and rock in the chair. She sat on the edge and kept her eyes on whoever was speaking as if waiting for that person to say something incriminating. I resumed talking with the father and son, asking them things about their relationship. They each spoke about their relationship while she sat upright, seeming to hover above all of us, her legs folded, her fingers folded, and her eyes unblinking.

After a while, I turned the conversation to Yueliang. “What about your daughter, Mr. Liu? Do you think there’s a problem between you and Yueliang?”

“Of course,” he replied, looking only at me and not at her. “She doesn’t speak to me. She says I’m not her father.”

“Is that right?” I asked her. “You’re not speaking to him?”

“That’s right. I don’t talk to him, because he’s a liar. He treats me like a second-class citizen.”

“Do you think he favors your brother?”

“Of course! Everybody knows that.”

“Would you like to try to resolve your problem with your father?”

Yueliang suddenly began to laugh. She sat back in her chair and looked at me and let out a long laugh, not without some bitterness. Mr. Liu and Xiao laughed too, but their laughter had a hint of confusion to it. Then she stopped laughing.

“I thought you came here to do therapy—or whatever it is you do. I thought you came to talk with my father and brother? Why are you here?” she asked. Her eyes were bulging again through the lenses. Then she got back onto the legitimacy thing. “I don’t think you’re legitimate,” she repeated. Then she turned to Xiao. “How did you find out about him?”

“It doesn’t matter, Yueliang. He’s here.”

“It does matter. I know him,” she said, glaring at her father. “He always

goes to Chinese doctors. Why a Caucasian doctor this time?”

“It doesn’t matter, Yueliang. Why were you laughing before? Why were you laughing when the doctor asked about your problem with Dad?”

“He always goes to Chinese doctors. As long as I have known him he goes to Chinese doctors. Not just Chinese doctors. They have to be from Taiwan. He is very particular about doctors. You know how he is about doctors, Xiao. This is all very strange.” She looked around at all of us. “Why did he call this Caucasian doctor? How did you find him?”

“They found me because I put an ad in a Chinese newspaper,” I couldn’t help but blurt out.

“You advertise in a newspaper?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Why do you advertise? Legitimate psychotherapists don’t advertise in newspapers.”

“He advertised!” Xiao snapped. “Why did you laugh when he asked about your relationship with Dad?”

“This is all very strange,” she said.

She was like a bulldog with a bone. Once it was in her teeth, she wouldn't let go. Fortunately, the tea kettle began to hum after a while. She got up to pour herself a cup of tea and asked again if any of us wanted any. We all said and watched her pour her tea and waited with bated breath for her to return. She had a thin body, but her movements were strong and I had the feeling that she would be able to handle herself in a fight much better than her father and brother. She sat down on the rocker and carefully placed her tea on the coffee table. Only when she was sure the tea was safely settled on the table, did she look up at me. She looked at me and at her brother and father and pulled her blue terrycloth robe tightly around her thin body.

As she looked at me with her probing eyes, I began to feel a bit uncomfortable, like I was overdressed. I wondered if I should ask them if they had an extra set of pajamas so that I could fit in better. I self-consciously loosened my tie and tried to smile.

“Anyway,” she said at last, in a matter-of-fact voice, “he is not my father.”

“Ah,” the father spoke up at once with annoyance. “You see?”

“Why do you think he's not your father?” I asked.

“I don’t think he’s not my father. I know so.”

“That’s ridiculous!” he yelled. “I’m your father! Why do you go around saying such things! It is very hurtful for you to go around saying such things. This is what she said at the wedding. Why do you say such things? Who else is your father?”

“You think that’s hurtful? You think what I did was hurtful? How about lying,” Yueliang said. For the first time she raised her voice. “Is it hurtful to lie?”

“What lie?” her father asked.

“You know what lie.”

“No, I don’t know what lie.”

“You lied to me all my life.”

“What are you talking about?”

“He’s your father,” Xiao said.

“No, that’s a lie. It’s a lie,” she said to me. “That’s what I was told all my life. But it’s a lie. I found out the truth after our mother died.”

“It is the truth. I don’t know what you found out. It is the truth.”

“I always suspected that something was wrong, that I was adopted or something. I always suspected it as long as I can remember,” she said. Her eyes were no longer bulging now. They were smaller now and sad and she was rocking slowly in her chair. “But whenever I asked my mother or him about it, they would laugh and tell me I was being ridiculous, and they’d deny it just like now. They kept saying I was crazy because of when I was born, under the full moon, but I’m not crazy. After she died, I looked through my mother’s trunk and found some letters.”

“What?” the father yelled. “You shouldn’t do that. Who gave you permission to look through her trunk?”

“It was my job to straighten things out. I’m the only one who cleans up around here. If I don’t clean up, nobody does. Certainly not Xiao. He never picks up a thing.”

“Nobody said to read her letters,” the father shouted.

“If you’re going to yell, I’m leaving.”

“I will yell if I want to. I am your father!”

“No, you’re not!”

Yueliang jumped up and walked across the room. The robe wafted in the

afternoon air and trailed behind her like a flag of retreat. She disappeared into the back bedroom, slamming the door behind her. We looked at one another. The room suddenly felt empty without her presence, as if some central spark had been extinguished.

“She’s right,” I told the father in a voice loud enough to be heard in the next room. “If this is how you usually communicate with her, then it’s understandable why she no longer speaks to you. She was trying to say how she feels and you yelled at her to shut her down. Yueliang,” I said, turning to the closed door. “Is this how he usually speaks to you?”

The door opened and she came back out again. “That’s exactly how he speaks to me.” She began walking around in the kitchen, moving pots around on the stove, washing the counter, straightening the table. “That’s all he does is yell at me like I’m some animal.”

“So what did you find in the trunk, Yueliang?” I asked. “Tell us about the letters.”

“No. He will just yell at me again.”

“He won’t yell. Tell her you won’t yell.”

The father had fallen silent. He was looking off, vacantly.

“He won’t yell,” I said again. “What about the letters. Come back and sit down and tell us about the letters.”

She finally returned. She stood for a minute to study her father. He still sat gazing off. It was as if gear had snapped inside him. She sat down on the rocker and began to speak in a soft voice and there was more hurt than anger now. “I found some letters my mother had written to my grandmother when she was young, in her 20s. She wrote that she had gotten pregnant and the man didn’t want to marry her. She didn’t know what to do. Then in another letter she wrote that she found another man who wanted to marry her, so she married him.” She pointed at her father. “He was in love with her, she said, and was willing to marry her and pretend the child—me—was his. And they kept pretending. She kept pretending until the day she died. I’m an illegitimate child, and that’s the bottom line, as you Caucasians say. That’s how he has always treated me, like an illegitimate child. Like I’m a crazy, illegitimate child. But I’m not crazy. I see things very clearly. I see through their lies.”

The father and son were looking down at the floor. I asked the father if this were true.

He finally came out of his daze. “Yes, it’s true. But I always loved her. I was a good father. She has no right...”

He broke into sobs. The son put his arm around the father. Yueliang

stared from one to the other. Her eyes were no longer sad; they were calm and peaceful.

I decided that my work was finished for the moment and stood up to leave. "It looks like you might have more things to talk about. It might be good if you could all come to my office to talk some more. Maybe next week."

"Yes, I think so," the father said.

"I'll think about it," Yueliang said.

I walked down the two flights of stairs and heard somebody calling me. It was the father. He hurried down the stairs and handed me a check.

"How do you think it went?" he asked. He was excited and cheerful, as if he had just won a small lottery.

"I think it went well. The communication has opened up again. What do you think?"

"Yes, I think so. I think we may talk now. Thank you. Maybe we'll come to your office next week."

I called the father a few weeks later and he said that things were better. "She goes out now. We talk. It's OK. It's normal." As he told me this, I could see

Yueliang in my mind's eye, sitting in her blue robe in the kitchen, with a full yellow moon peering from the window behind her. I imagined a small tear magnified through the lenses of her glasses, and for a moment I allowed myself to feel pretty good about being a therapist.

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