

## Introduction

Zhimian therapy is an indigenous humanistic-existential therapy originally developed by Chinese psychologist Dr. Xuefu Wang based on the legacy of modern Chinese writer Lu Xun. Believing in the transformative power of literature, Zhimian therapy places the metaphoric language (metaphors, idioms, fables) at the center of its healing process. The present study seeks to clarify Zhimian's use of metaphors comparing to other therapies that also utilize metaphors. Two examples will be presented to illustrate Zhimian's approach to metaphors.

### The metaphor and its usage in psychotherapy

The word metaphor originated in the Greek meta herein, which literally means "to carry over". A metaphor provides words for complicated subjective experiences so that they can be processed and communicated (Fine, Pollio, & Simpkinson, 1973).

The therapeutic usage of metaphor was especially recognized in two approaches: Psychoanalytic therapy and Eriksonian hypnotherapy. Freud (1965) noted that metaphors share the same symbolism nature with unconscious ideation. Dream can be seen as metaphor generated by the unconsciousness. Eriksonian hypnotherapy also capitalizes metaphor's connection to unconscious mind and uses it for hypnosis. For the hyponastic purpose, Eriksonian therapists typically leave the metaphor unexplained to allow it to take effects instead of trying to reveal its unconscious.

Zhimian therapy's usage of metaphor is distinct from the Psychoanalytic and the Eriksonian approaches in three ways: a) metaphor functions as a cognitive framework in the conscious mind; b) Zhimian has a set of therapist-generated metaphors; c) Zhimian therapy includes metaphors designed for the therapist and client.

### Iron House: a metaphor for the therapist

The Iron House is a core metaphor in Zhimian Therapy as it illustrated Zhimian's basic understanding of psychological symptom and the process of healing. As readers are going to see, the intended audience of this metaphor is primarily therapists rather than clients.

The metaphor serves as a roadmap, influencing the process of therapy by structuring the therapist's cognition and attitude.

Zhimian proposed that the nature of the psychological disorder is an irrational fear of life or some aspects of life. Zhimian recognizes the self-preserving function of psychological symptoms and grasp it with Lu Xun's famous metaphor of "iron house".

A client who suffered from symptoms resembles a person lives in an ironclad house with no window or door. While the iron house (symptoms) provides a feeling of security, its resident is isolated from the world and will eventually become suffocated.

Zhimian describes its process of curing as bringing the individual out of his/her iron house, which includes three aspects:

First is to invite the individual to come out of his/her iron house. Therapist perseveringly encourage the client to step out of the secured house and explore other possibilities in his/her life. Despite client's initial unwillingness or incapacity of responding, the invitation from the therapist is essential as it instills caring and hope.

Second is to explore the inner structure of the iron house. Zhimian therapists encourage the client to build his/her narrative about his/her psychological difficulty instead of solely relying on the diagnostic labels. The narrative is typically biased and serves to justify the existence of the iron house. After learning the client's narrative, the therapist moves on to challenging it. Little by little, the therapist reveals the irrational component of the client's narrative to the point that the client can no longer justify the avoidance. Just like a person cannot hide in a dismantled house.

The third aspect is to build a road from the iron house to real life before expelling the client out of it. This is critical for clients who have been hiding in the iron house for years. Zhimian therapists emphasize on helping clients to gain/regain social functions so that they do not need to build a new house (develop new symptoms) when they leave the old one.

### The fable of a donkey: a metaphor for the client

Zhimian (直面) means "directly facing reality." It encourages people to give up avoidance coping and to face reality, which takes tremendous courage. Zhimian reframes a famous Chinese fable to cultivate the courage in the client.

An English translation of the fable is presented as follows:

*A place called Qian did not have any donkey until a shipped to the region. However, there was not much use of the donkey, so he left the animal at the foot of a hill.*

*In time a tiger saw it. Having never seen a donkey before, the tiger was impressed by its size and thought it was a divine creature, so it remained very cautious in coming nearer to the donkey.*

*One day, the donkey brayed. The terrified tiger fled in horror, fearing that the donkey was going to bite him. However, as the tiger observed further, it did not seem to have any other special powers. Over time, the tiger became accustomed to the bray of the donkey and came closer to the donkey, it flirted with the donkey and bumped into it. The donkey was greatly enraged and kicked the tiger. The tiger rejoiced, thinking: "The donkey's tricks are merely these!" Then the tiger roared and pounced on the donkey and ate the donkey's entire flesh.*

Zhimian encourages clients to learn from the tiger. Although the tiger was intimidated by the fearful unknown creature, it summons up the courage to repeatedly explore the truth of the reality until it achieves the truth. Wang (2016) stated that this story described the healing process of Zhimian.

By reframing a familiar story, Zhimian seeks to induce a new cognitive schema that the client may apply to other aspects of his/her life. Metaphor is more graspable and memorable than theory or concepts, it can be easily integrated to client's conceptual network and takes long-term effect. Its richness and ambiguity also allow the client to discover their personal meanings from the story in the future.

## References

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