

**Peggy Chan, M.Ed, RSW.**  
**Teaching and Learning Bowen theory in the local cultural context - Resources and challenges**



This presenter will discuss ways of addressing this issue through her experience of learning and teaching Bowen theory in her local Chinese cultural context. Resources and challenges will also be identified.

Dr. Bowen deemed that the family is an emotional system governed by automatic, instinctual emotional forces that are common to other forms of life. These emotional forces are biological and have their evolutionary roots, and transcend cultural differences.

However, when introduced to learners of the non-Euro-American culture, the issue of whether Bowen theory is applicable and relevant often comes up, and may affect the learners' openness to learn the theory. This presenter will discuss ways of addressing this issue through her experience of learning and teaching Bowen theory in her local Chinese cultural context. Resources and challenges will also be identified.

It is found that affirming the relevance of Bowen theory to the Chinese culture through the following means promotes the learner's sense of familiarity with and acceptance of the theory.

### 1. The use of language –

Research into Chinese literature and writings reveals a very rich pool of idioms and descriptions of emotional processes as depicted by Bowen theory.

e.g. “Though fed with the same kind of rice, one hundred kinds of different people were reared” – This describes the variation of functioning for people within the same context or for people receiving seemingly

“similar” treatment. This echoes Dr. Michael Kerr’s video on “Why do Siblings turn out so differently?”

The prevalence of these descriptions in the Chinese language shows that the emotional processes have always been a part of our relationship systems with others, despite the difference in culture.

### 2. The use of historical figures and folklores –

Sharing with the learners about how the historical figures manage the forces of togetherness and separateness, and the dilemma in the efforts to maintain a self in the

midst of family loyalty can make the theory come to life and be more easily understood by the learners.

3. The use of societal events to illustrate the emotional processes, and the interplay of the two life forces in the society can enhance the learners’ deeper understanding of the society’s emotional functioning.

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#### 4. Drawing on commonalities and parallels –

Bowen theory looks at human functioning and how the relationship system impacts on its member reciprocally, and that symptoms are a reflection of disorder of the whole system. Chinese medicine is health care based on the wholistic and systemic concept, that disease is a reflection of the body imbalance. The Chinese medicine model bears some resemblance to Dr. Kerr's unidisease model.

5. By highlighting that Bowen theory is about studying how people vary in their functioning and about managing self, it clarifies that it is not about advancing one's individual interests at the expense of the common good. Differentiation is about being thoughtful and emotionally separate which in turn will benefit the larger group that the person is in.

Challenges include dealing with the learners' disappointment that the Bowen theory is not a 'technique-oriented' approach and that the Bowen theory does not favour the use of empathy