

“The Woman who cannot sleep:
A Narrative Research of an Insomnia Middle-age Women in Taiwan”

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Xing knows that I care about how she sleeps. She started to talk of her situation whenever I greeted her.

"Ahh, it is the same old problem. I went to my friend's place for tea last night. We chatted and chatted and I was back home around one o'clock and I was still not able to sleep. It's no good to take drug all the time. People have to rely on their own body to heal. Dr. Lin had advised me before that if drug didn't help my symptom, then it's all up to me to decide, to look after myself..."

"You had better not to talk about money with my husband. No other conversation may continue with the topic of money. Whenever money becomes the topic, my husband will say anything bad, something like cursing my natal family to die, or something like that we go out being smashed by a car. Don't you think those cursed words are immoral? How can a person curse his own elders? I told him to save grace not talking immoral, and that you'd get punishment for cursing the elders and can't live long life?"

Xing's face flushed into red when telling her story. She turned her eyes up and did not look at me. For several times Xing blinked her eyes and touched the corner of her left eye, but with no tears dropping down. This is a story that Xing told me when I met her last time, although she repeats these words most times that we meet. Xing did not look my eyes. I started to recognize a kind of face and body expression of her. It happens when she expresses

injustice emotions. Then, there are minutes of silence, a silent protest.

Xing is a pseudo-name I give to a patient throughout this article. The current study is a work in progress that aims to examine the social experience of insomnia sufferers in the Taichung city where my fieldwork has been conducted. I see insomnia as mixed with personal and social conditions. It is commonly accepted among medical anthropologists that cultural belief and norms channel illness and patient lives. Moreover, to achieve this goal, I follow Arthur's Kleinman's model (1988), that chronic illness can only be comprehensive when we put into perspective the stories patients tell about their personal lives. Narrative reflects narrator's psychological as well as social processes and social role. I present Xing's case to illustrate insomnia as symptom of personal and social expectations and through it examine the cultural conditions of gender in Taiwan.

Stories as Lived Experiences

Xing had come to Tzu-En Chinese Medicine Clinic, located at Taichung City in central Taiwan, for insomnia problem beginning from April 2010. Dr. Lin, the chief physician taking care of Xing's problem, was connected with a friend of mine and introduced me to her in August. I go to Tzu-En Chinese Medicine Clinic with the aim particularly to inquiring why city people would want to use traditional medical practices to solve their problems. I have been to Tzu-En Chinese Medicine Clinic almost every Wednesday morning to meet Xing since August. With the acknowledgment of Dr. Lin, I sit, as the patients do, waiting on the line for appointment, which allows me to observe and talk with Xing and other patients in an easy and informal way.

The clinic opens at nine o'clock in the morning. Many patients come to the door even at seven to be able to see the doctor because Dr. Lin only takes 20 patients each morning, 10 of which being advance arranged, the rest 10 of which being reserved for the day queue. The patients almost spend half of the day for queuing and waiting to see the doctor, giving me

plenty of time to have a chat with the patients.

I first met with Xing in a morning of September after talking to her on the phone the day before. Dr. Lin had told her I would do some interview about her insomnia experience. On the phone conversation I introduced myself and expressed my wish meeting and speaking with her. In reply, she told me she would arrive at the clinic at eight the next day. I arrived at the clinic on time only to see four people already lining up in front the shut door. Actually there was no real line because any person arrived and then signed up, writing down name, birth, appointment time on a small piece of paper. As soon as the door opened at nine, the assistant called the patients in order according to the paper people had signed on in sequence. In waiting, Xing and I stood in the arcade after brief self-introduction. Without hesitation, she started to talking about her situation.

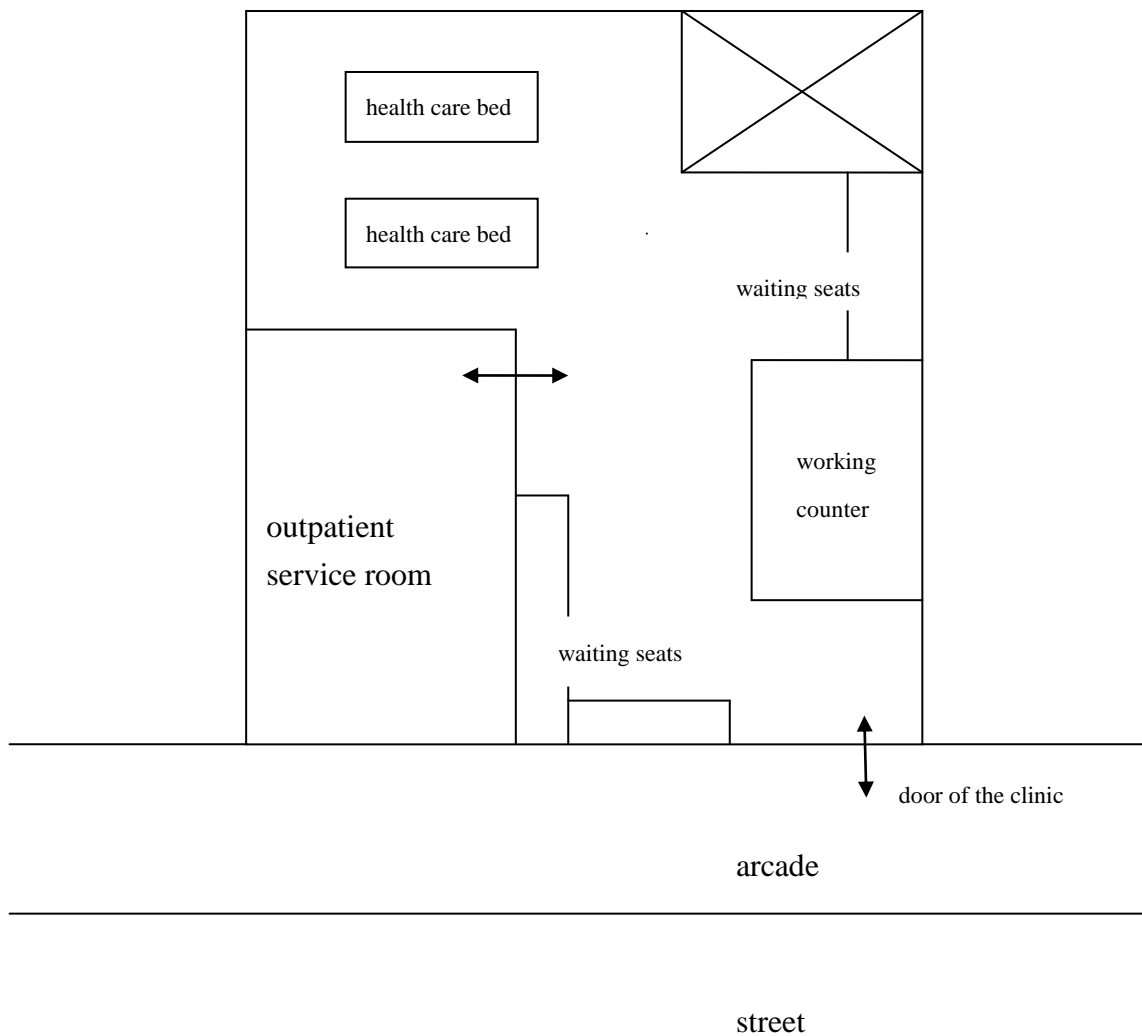
"I have not been able to sleep well for more than ten years. It was not a big problem initially and I didn't care too much about it, I just left it as it was. It got worse probably three years ago. I shouted while I was sleeping to the point that my family was frightened. My niece used to live in my house and we shared a room. She or my daughter sometimes would wake me up. But after I was awoken, I could not remember anything. They asked me if I had a nightmare, but I couldn't recall anything."

I asked Xing if she started seeing a doctor three years ago. She replied not until April 2010 did she start to see Dr. Lin regularly. Are there reasons she might have thought of that made her sleeping worse, I went on asking? She said,

"My husband retired three year ago. And it was at this time when he found that I took money to my natal family and lend it to my younger brother. He was very angry. He was so angry that he swore at me all the time since then. He also went to my younger brother demanding the money back. But my younger brother was not able to return the money. He then swore at me and forbade my contacting natal family. I miss my mother very much. She is old and not very healthy. I haven't seen her since then, not even been able to talk to her on the

phone." With those words her face turned taut, pouting her mouth at one time, and holding a long breath out from the nose at the other time.

Our conversation was suspended for a moment when Dr. Lin's assistant opened the door at nine. We all went into the waiting room. Xing guided me to the health care area, not a spacious area, with only two health care beds. Dr. Lin does not use it often. Frequent patients all know it and they sit there when the waiting room is crowded.



Plane of Tzu-En Chinese Medicine Clinic

Xing sat on a health care bed and asked me sit next to her, feeling comfortable being able to continue her story:

"Don't you feel this world is unfair to women? I take care of his parents, which is taken for granted. But what about my parents? I married him when I was twenty. Thirty years already! I have worked in this family for thirty years, as a laborious cow, a horse. Don't I deserve the money incurred from all of my labor?"

Even at the health care area we could see more people coming in the clinic. The assistant looked very busy, taking phone call after phone call, then inputting appointment data. Xing went to the assistant from time to time because she wanted to know what the register numbers were for her, while making appointment for her son and her friends next week. Our conversation was thus interrupted repeatedly and was over when it was Xing's turn for outpatient service.

I was quite surprised that Xing told so much her story to me during the first time we met. In the following two months, I went to Tzu-En Chinese Medicine Clinic every Wednesday to particularly listen to and record her stories. Following Arthur Kleinman's mini-ethnography approach, I was able to construct Xing's life story.

Xing is 48 years old now. Her young life was pretty tough, beginning from her father's death from a construction accident when she was 11, and her mother was only 29. With only husband's family to rely on, her mother had to bring her four children back to Kaoshoung, where her husband's extended family lived, with Xing's grandparents and two uncles sharing one compound. Being the eldest child, Xing quickly learnt even when she was in junior high school that she had to work hard to survive and to shoulder her mother's burden. She was able to get a job of sewing luggage cases at a luggage case factory run by her uncles. But even as close kin as uncles were, Xing had endured hard times:

"My uncle was always very harsh to me. If I did not work well, he swore at me or beat me. I remember he once asked me to downtown Kaoshoung city to collect money. He

told me if I couldn't get the payment of the delivered goods, then I was not allowed to go home. I rode a bicycle to downtown in the morning to the shopkeeper who owed the money. He saw me and told me to be back with the message that my uncle should come by himself instead. I was young and I didn't know what to do. The only thing I knew is that the consequence would be awful if I could not have collected the payment back. I had no idea what to say with the shopkeeper. All I could do was begging and begging. The shopkeeper ignored me and I can only stand there. I had been standing there for the entire day, till the daytime turning to darkness. Probably the shopkeeper had pity for me. He waved to me inside the house and gave me the money. I was so happy and kept saying thanks to the shopkeeper as if I was praying to Bodhisattva. My mind was like blanked and as soon as I walked out of the shop, I saw a bus and jumped in without a thought all way home. Only when I was off the bus did I recall my bicycle was still in Kaoshoung city." Xing spoke this story with smile and her face was soft. She wagged her head when she said she was stupid.

I thought Xing would have hated her uncle. But she did not. On the contrary, she is grateful. Xing believes she was well trained by her uncle to the degree that she is very confident about what she was capable of doing. She said when she left one job, she was always appreciated by her bosses. A boss once said to Xing that she is able to work equal as three people combined do. She learnt to be responsible so people could rely on her. Also she'd get the job done as long as the order was clear.

Xing met her husband at another luggage case factory. Xing was a worker while her future husband, twelve years older than her, was the foreman of the production line. Xing said her husband appreciated her skilled work. And finally they got married when she was twenty. After marriage, she was able to study in an evening high school on promise by her father-in-law that she could study and finish school. But her father-in-law didn't keep the promise. She had to drop out of school soon and instead occupied herself in housekeeping and babies. Xing now runs two snack stalls around a cram school area. She and her husband look after

one stall, selling rice rolls, while her son and daughter look after another. The stalls open from four in the afternoon and close at seven in the evening, but lot of preparations start from morning. They are busy and can only take a day off on Sunday.

Cultural Construction of Illness

When I was writing down Xing's stories, I felt like I had entered into another world, a world that I couldn't predict when I started the field work., a world that I didn't pay attention to, but it is not far from me. My emotion was full of empathy and suddenly felt uneasy digesting what I saw. As a beginner in Anthropology, I am not sure if I should hide my feelings. For advice, I talked to my mother, an experienced counselor, "I don't like this story. I dislike getting to see those stories reflect what woman is expected to be." Attentively listening to me, one sentence of my mother really spoke to m heart, "you are there to learn the truth only when you keep the right distance."

As Collier once suggests, "In societies without classes and estate, where kinship organizes people's rights and obligations, marriage, as the basis of kinship, organizes social inequality. In such societies, disputes between men over rights to women are endemic" (Collier 1988: Vii). This summary of marriage and women's role in kinship couldn't be more pertinently found in the stories told by Xing. Men and women's roles are so sharply divided with women always demanded of family's obligations. Male's dominance really affected Xing's daily lives. Xing once described her father-in-law was very difficult to serve that he got angry easily. He often ejected Xing when he was upset. On the other hand, female's role in family is restricted in chores and caring. Xing cooks for the family. Before her father-in-law died, she had to cook three meals and three times of refreshment a day, making her working in the kitchen all the day with no rest. In the name of kinship, Xing, as a daughter, wife and mother, has to work and serve the need of "family", such as job of cooking, housekeeping, raising children, working in the factory, working in the rice rolls stall, etc.. In

the case that woman has not fulfilled the tasks and job she is supposed to do, the males threat to eject her out of the family. Xing mentioned her husband saying to her" why are you still in this family? You still want to murder my properties, don't you?"

With male's dominance in family, not just Xing, but all women in the family can only have inferior roles. Women among the extended family, including Xing herself, Xing's mother, Xing's mother-in-law, have something in common that they were subordinate to the family and the male members. Because Xing's mother-in-law was a child bride, her husband was very rude to her, for example, talking to her in a lordly and contemptuous manner, insulting and shouting at her in front of people, to the effect that she was merely a person with no voice. Probably imitating, Xing said, her husband always used the same abusive words to her. Her husband must have thought that if his mother could take what his father had done to her, then why cannot Xing take what he says to her?

When Xing's father died and her family moved back to live with her father's extended family, Xing's mother lost autonomy. The sovereign right of the compound house belonged to Xing's uncles. To use's Ortner's words, "woman's consciousness—her membership, as it were, in culture—is evidenced in part by the very fact that she accepts her own devaluation and take culture's point of view" (1996a: 30). Although it is not a new notion in anthropology knowledge about gender role, I am shocked to find the reality in modern Taiwan.

Therefore when Xing took money, supposed to be at the discretion of the male head whatever it comes from, back to her natal family, her act was against the patriarchy rules. Her husband subsequent verbal and sometimes physical abuse turned out to be the origin of her nightmare resulting in her sufferings. In very general terms, echoing again Ortner's suggestion, "male power relations, often grounded in violence and threats of violence, had to be at the heart of understanding gender inequality" (1996b: 176).

Step by step, through insomnia illness narratives given by Xing, I've found a door to

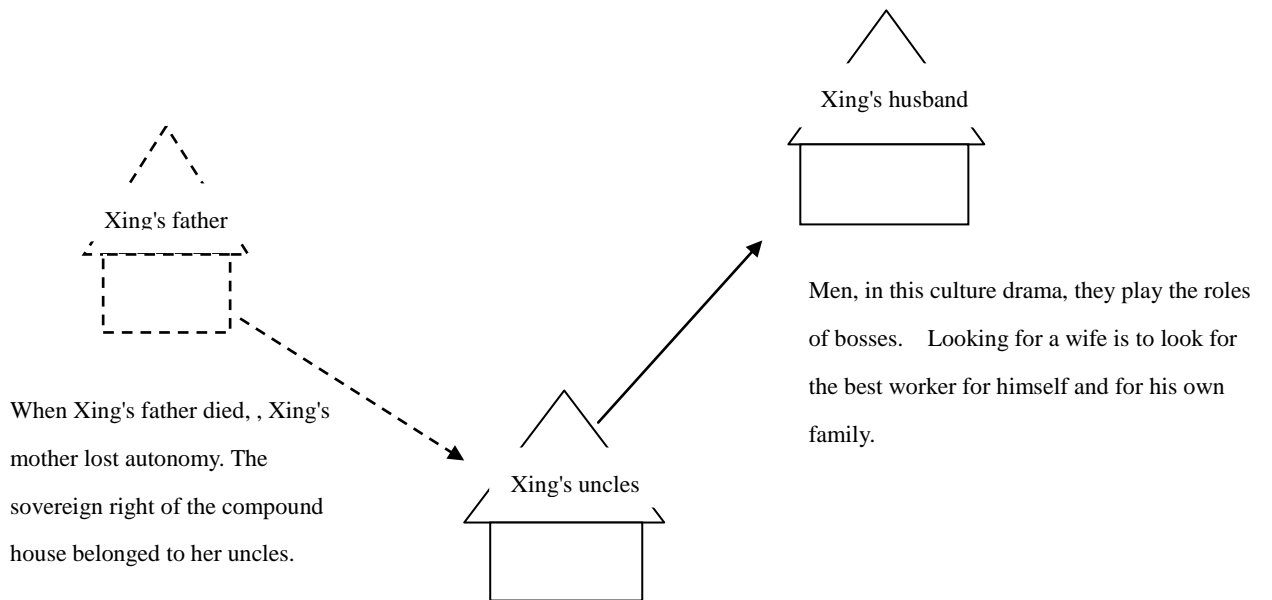
enter human's psychological and social world. Doctors are trained to focus on physical and physiological complaints, the disease, while I am totally open to perceive patients' narratives, their illness. This means insomnia patients' illness narratives may naturally disclose the cultural map of a patient's situation. And my findings support the idea that chronic illness as social experience, long held and claimed by cultural-oriented medical anthropologists, the most influential of which being Kleinman (1988, 1995). Kleinman's famous proposal of "illness as narrative" has suggested that chronic illness has to be viewed as occupying an interpersonal space, a world of situated space that connected moral status with bodily status, family with afflicted person. In other words, to understand lived experience is to "fill in the map of the *social course of disease*" (Kleinman 1995: 171).

A new health concept is more and more accepted that illness is not our enemy, but our friends and teachers. The disease is with a purpose, a destination. It is not only about symptoms being cured, but also about self transformation (Dahlke & Dethlefsen, 2002: 122). Xing's insomnia highlights the women's difficulties in this society. It speaks of a woman's dilemma. On the one hand, Xing never complains about hard working, but she does feel unfair that she is always an outsider and non person among family even contributing so much to it. She is now standing still at the doorway and preparing to move, either to withdraw or to walk away. I've noticed that the word "divorce" is difficult to come out from Xing's mouth. She has fulfilled almost the tasks what the society demands of good and ideal woman, as daughter, wife, mother. But divorcing from a husband and without a family may be too much to handle for Xing now, which is certainly at root of her sleeplessness. Night after night, she struggles with the various social expectations of woman *bodily*. Insomnia speaks to her and her doctor, but only when we understand the social lives she has had, can we speak back to insomnia.

← working hard for men and family

Men	Women
Boss	Worker
Master	Outsider
person	Non person

threat to eject women out of the family →



Conclusion

It is my first try of illness narratives research of insomnia. I am surprised to see even in one case study how much we can fill in the map of the *social course of disease*. Narrative reflects narrator's psychological as well as social processes and social role. We see how endemic disputes between men over rights to women are. We learn how these conflicts can become the root of sleeplessness.

Insomnia has become a serious public health problem in Taiwan. According to statistic data, Taiwanese spend over 1,000 billion Taiwan dollars (about 32 billion USD.) each year on solving insomnia problem. Public health report also shows that insomnia is getting worse and troubles all ages of people, among them middle age women mostly disturbed. In this article, I aim to explore the underlying dimensions beyond patients' sleeping problem. I think they have pretty much to do with the societal milieu, especially in the case of middle age women. Taking cue from the eminent medical anthropologist Arthur Kleinman's idea, I specifically look into patient's narrative in that illness narrative combines the social and the personal, the body and the mind. Kleinman's insights, among others, inspire researchers focusing on patients' explanatory model, within which women's self values accommodate, also contradict, the culture ideals. With mini-ethnography in mind, in Kleinman's model, this article reconstructs a middle-age female patient's illness narratives based upon a research conducted in the third biggest city in Taiwan, Taichung. Narrative analysis would reveal that the prevalent insomnia is in fact a symptom of contemporary gender ideal in Taiwan and its discontent.

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