

MAO ZEDONG AND SUICIDE TRIGGERED BY SOCIAL PREDICAMENT

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ABSTRACT. *Background.* It is popularly believed that all suicide is the result of mental disorder. We have proposed the concept of “predicament suicide” – suggesting that suicide represents escape from intolerable circumstance, and while mental disorder may be one trigger, there are many others, such as social and economic difficulties. *Objective.* With a view to extending our understanding we explored thinking on this subject by Mao Zedong, one of the most influential figures of the 20th century. *Conclusions.* Mao strenuously held that suicide is caused by the social environment/society – he was particularly concerned with oppression and institutionalized disadvantage, which he sought to correct via revolution. His belief that “A person’s suicide is determined entirely by circumstances” corresponds precisely with the concept of “predicament suicide.”

Keywords: suicide; suicide prevention; women

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Introduction

For much of the last two millennia, in the West, suicide has been considered a religious/legal matter – completers were considered to have surrendered to Satan, their bodies were buried in unmarked graves and their estates confiscated by the state. For much of the last two centuries, suicide has been considered a result of mental disorder, with medical treatment forming the basis of management and prevention. Emil Durkheim (1951) was alone in expressing the view that suicide is sociological matter – occurring when individuals who were insufficiently integrated into society. Our group proposed the concept of “predicament suicide” (Pridmore, 2009) – suggesting that suicide represents an escape from intolerable circumstances, from which there are no other escape options. We hold that while untreated or unresponsive mental disorder may be one trigger of suicide, other adverse social/economic circumstances can also trigger this response.

With a view to better understanding suicide we have studied suicide in the West from mythological times (Pridmore and Majeed, 2011) to the present. Here, we extend our knowledge of this topic by examining the thinking of a leading Eastern revolutionary.

Mao Zedong

Mao Zedong (1893–1976) was a world political figure for much of the 20th century (Karl, 2010). He was a founder of the Chinese Communist Party (1921), Party Chairman (1945) and a founder and leader of the People’s Republic of China (1949).

Mao was born in the village of Shaoshan in the Hunan province (central China), the son of a peasant. From an early age he was a prodigious reader with an interest in national reformers and revolutionaries. His schooling was interrupted, when he was 13 years of age his father had him leave school and return to work on a farm. Then, at 18 years, Mao left home to continue his education in Chengsha (the capital of Hunan).

It is of interest that when he was 14 years, Mao’s father arranged for him to marry a female 6 years his senior. This person was to provide labour for the family, until Mao was mature and assume these responsibilities – a peasant-class match, typical of the time. However, Mao refused to participate and the marriage was never consummated.

In the early 20th Century (and before), 90% of women were illiterate and ill-equipped to respond to their lack of rights in marriage, business and politics. Nevertheless, the introductory tremors of revolution could be felt across the country.

In 1919, Mao was in Beijing during the May Fourth Movement, a period of cultural and political upheaval, protest marches and strikes, which were triggered by decisions at the Treaty of Versailles. Some traditionally Chinese territory was awarded to Japan, and Chinese activists protested their governments inability protect national possessions. These events greatly influenced future political and social

leaders. (The May Fourth Movement is also used in a broader sense to refer to the period 1915–21; alternatively called the New Culture Movement.)

Miss Zhao Wuzhen (Chao Wu-chen), of Changsha, performed public suicide in 1919. Mao's response to this event was influenced by his social and political philosophy, and his revolutionary aspirations.

Miss Zhao Wuzhen

Miss Zhao (Karl, 2010; Witke, 1967) of Changsha was 21 years of age and engaged to marry a widower, Wu Feng-lin of Kantzuyuan. The marriage had been arranged by her parents and a matchmaker. Miss Zhao met Mr Wu only briefly, but found him ugly and unappealing. In spite of her reticence, her family would not agree to cancellation or a delay of the wedding ceremony.

On the day of the wedding (November 14, 1919) Miss Zhao was placed in a locked bridal sedan chair, to be carried to the home of her groom. As the chair was raised, she took out a concealed dagger, cut her throat. She was taken to one hospital, but because there were no female doctors available, her parents insisted on taking her to a second, and by the time they arrived she was dead.

Mao's Response

Arising from this event, Mao wrote nine articles in quick succession for the Changsha daily newspaper *Dagongbao* (Ta Kung Pao). These are available through source books, we predominantly used *The Ethics of Suicide Digital Archive* (Archive Librarian, 2015), supplemented by *Women in Republican China: A Sourcebook* (Lan and Fong, 1999). The following extracts appear under the original headlines.

“Miss Zhao's Suicide” (November 16)

Mao wrote, “A person's suicide is determined entirely by circumstances” and “however much Miss Zhao sought life, there was no way for her to go on living.” He found fault with Miss Zhao's family, Mr Wu's family and “Chinese society.” He made the political statement “The background to this incident is the rottenness of the marriage system, the darkness of the social system, in which there can be no independent ideas or views, and no freedom of choice in love.”

“The Question of Miss Zhao's Personality” (November 18)

Mao stated that Miss Zhao had no personality of her own, because she had no free will. However, he proposed, that “death is preferable to the absence of freedom” and her personality “gushed forth suddenly, shining bright and luminous” when she killed herself. He made the political statement, “All parents who are like the parents of Miss Zhao should be put in prison.”

“The Marriage Question” (November 19)

After referring to “blood splattering the city of Changsha” he advised, “The policy of letting parents arrange everything should absolutely be repudiated.”

“The Evils of Society and Miss Zhao” (November 21)

Mao’s earlier comments had been criticised by another journalist who found that “The action of Miss Zhao was a weak and negative action.” Mao responded that he agreed, but then reverted to his earlier position, “In the end, however, I cannot let society off,” and “The ‘cause’ of her death, to one degree or another, indisputably did come from outside of herself, from society.” He also stated, “We must understand that the parents’ family and the fiancé’s family are guilty of a crime, but the source of their crime lies in society” and “culpability was transmitted to them by society.”

“Concerning the Incident of Miss Zhao’s Suicide” (November 21)

Mao blamed Confucian doctrine for the low status of women, and sought to detail the differences between the genders. He claimed the imbalance in power should be redressed by women not marrying until physically mature, being well educated, and well prepared “for the living expenses after childbirth.”

“Against Suicide” (November 23)

Mao stated, “my attitude toward suicide is to reject it”, and gave reasons. Next, he addressed the question of why suicide occurs – “If society in a certain place leaves more people in despair, then there will be more suicides. If society in a certain place leaves fewer people in despair, then there will be fewer suicides in that society.” He also identified “loss of hope.”

Discussion

In this study we explore Mao’s understanding of the triggers of suicide. Our interest and expertise is psychological rather than political. Accordingly, we avoid historical/political commentary, but acknowledge evidence of feudal oppression of females in all the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature.

Mao apparently had little formal training in the social sciences (details of his school studies are unavailable). However, he had a strong interest and was well self-educated in human nature/response, politics and reform. He was intelligent and skilled in managing people. Given he was one of the 20th century’s most influential people, his views are worthy of consideration.

The material presented here comes from before he described himself as a Marxist (1920), but is consistent with views he expressed later in life (Lan and Fong, 1999). We need to be cautious that as a politician, Mao may have overstated his beliefs to further his political agenda (win approval and influence over others). However, the emancipation of all the people of China was consistently central to

his revolutionary philosophy (even if the results of his efforts were not always beneficial to them).

Mao's repeatedly stated his belief that suicide was a consequence of individuals being placed in impossible circumstances. For example, "A person's suicide is determined entirely by circumstances" (November 16) and "The 'cause' of her death... indisputably did come... from society" (November 21). He was particularly concerned, while writing these articles, with the difficulties faced by disadvantaged females and the need for women's liberation. However, he also made the general statements, "If one's environment or poor treatment causes one's hopes to be repeatedly frustrated and turn into disappointment and loss of hope, then one will invariably seek death" (November 23).

Mao's position on the "cause" of suicide corresponds precisely with the concept of "predicament suicide" (Pridmore, 2009). It also bears some relationship to the concepts of Emile Durkheim who argued that with inadequate social integration, the individual was primed and may be moved to suicide by relatively minor events (Durkheim, 1951).

Witke (1967: 141) observed that Mao did not consider the possibility of Miss Zhao suffering a mental disorder, he "analysed the phenomenon of suicide in such a way that the motive was always traceable to society." We do not have a clear understanding of Mao's attitude to mental disorder as a trigger of suicide, however, as we have no examples of his assessment of the responses of a clearly mentally disordered individual. What we do have, is his statement of belief that socio-cultural predicaments may trigger suicide.

Suicide is impossible to predict in a particular individual. Whatever the predicament, be it bereavement, employment, illness, or hopelessness of some other origin, one individual may contemplate suicide while others may not. Mao's emphasis on blaming society for suicidal behaviour is not misplaced – a well-supported social infrastructure (with health, social and economic policies) and a caring society can help individuals to resolve their predicament(s) rather than suffer and die in isolation. Based on the notion that suicide is a "social" problem, using a grassroots approach, the second author (SS) encouraged selected communities to take ownership of suicide prevention, with successful results (Shahtahmasebi, 2013).

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