

The Mad Genius Controversy: Does the East Differ from the West?

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The mad genius controversy was briefly reviewed through examining the evidence from early biographical studies to more recent systematic studies with clinical diagnoses. The connection between creativity and depression was then examined in terms of the characteristics of disturbance in mood, irrationality, and cognitive processes typical of both creative individuals and individuals afflicted with manic-depressive disorders. The observation that there were few reports on eminent creative individuals in Chinese society afflicted with debilitating psychiatric conditions is discussed in the light of an alternative interpretation of the creativity-depression connection among Chinese poets in Chinese history.

There is an age-old belief in Western civilizations that genius and madness are intimately associated. The history of the idea has been traced by numerous scholars, and evidence for and against the idea has generated a continuing controversy (e.g., Albert, 1992; Becker, 1978; Hershman & Lieb, 1988; Ludwig, 1995; Murray, 1989; Rothenberg, 1990; Shaw & Runco, 1994; Simonton, 1994). Aristotle, for example, wrote that, "Those who have become eminent in philosophy, politics, poetry, and the arts have all had tendencies toward melancholia" (see Simonton, 1994, p. 284). Seneca was said to quote Aristotle and expressed this notion in *De tranquillitate animi* as "*nullum magnum ingenium sine mixtura dementiae*" ("no great genius has ever existed without some touch of madness"; see Kessel, 1989). However, the meanings ascribed to *ingenium* or to *dementia* are likely not precisely those that are translated persuasively into genius and madness today. Nonetheless, historical and biographical data of great men and women in Western countries have been the subject of numerous studies (e.g., Hershman & Lieb, 1988; Ludwig, 1995, 1998; Simonton,

1994). In sharp contrast, in Chinese history, systematic studies and even references made to the notion of the mad genius are rare, if not almost nonexistent. It is therefore of great interest to examine through a historical overview how related biographical studies in Western countries and recent empirical evidence regarding the mad genius controversy bear on the connection between creativity and depression among eminent creative people in the Chinese context.

The Mad Genius: A Historical Overview

Perhaps, one of the earliest associations between genius and madness in Western literature can be dated to the 16th century in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (see Kessel, 1989).

*The lunatic, the lover and the poet
Are of imagination all compact.*

Thus, the connection appeared to be that the lunatic was hallucinated, the lover frantic, and the poet exhibited frenzy. It has to be noted that Shakespeare's reference to imagination at that time was novel. The 1600s and 1700s witnessed the dethroning of reason as the major attribute of greatness and the replacement with originality and imagination. Consequently, the modern idea of the genius was born with this change, resulting in the artist replacing the sage as the great man.

Nonetheless, it was the poets, essayists, and philosophers of the 1700s and 1800s who emphasized the connection. Kessel (1989) quoted numerous, including the following writers who supported this connection. For example, Dryden's couplet in *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681) is well known.

*Great wits are sure to madness near allied
And thin partitions do their bounds divide.*

Pascal also expressed the same notion and suggested that madness was inherent in great wits: "Great wit is charged with madness just as is great defect." Lamartine in a century and a half later explained, "Genius carries in itself a principle of destruction, of death, of madness, as the fruit carries in itself the worm." He referred to "This illness that we call genius." Thus, various writers in the 17th and 18th century have paraphrased the mad genius beliefs or sentiments in their fiction or through self-scrutiny.

The notion of the mad genius became more firmly endorsed in the mid-1800s. Under the influence of Darwin's evolution theory and the revolutionary unrest of the period, genius came to be regarded as a mental disorder, one often ascribed to congenital neuropathology. Lombroso, in his 1891 classic *Genio e follia (The Man of Genius)*, affirmed that genius could be linked with "degenerative psychosis," especially that of the "epileptic group" (see Simonton, 1994). Similar judgments were also made by psychiatrists and psychologists of the time. The writings of Galton and Kretschmer as described by Kessel (1989) are illustrative.

Galton regarded genius as a natural ability. He devoted his book *Hereditary Genius*, which appeared in 1869, to the proposition supported with evidence that genius runs in the family. He further addressed the problem of the relationship of genius to insanity in the second edition: "If genius means a sense of inspiration, or of rushes of ideas from apparently supernatural sources, or of an inordinate and burning desire to accomplish any particular end, it is perilously near to the voice heard by the insane, to their delirious tendencies or to their monomanias" (Galton, 1892, p. x, quoted in Kessel, 1989).

Among psychiatrists, Kretschmer in his book *Geniale Menschen (Men of Genius)* also invoked evolutionary and degenerative concepts, but he went further to consider genius less exclusively in relation to psychoses as had been up to the time, and more in relation to neuroses and personality disorders. For example, he stressed that "the psychopathic component" to be "an indispensable catalyst perhaps, for every form of genius" (Kretschmer, 1931, p. 20, quoted in Kessel, 1989). Indeed, genius has become associated with the debilitating extremes of mental illness (psychosis, depression or psychopathy) rather than the milder hypomania and more reflective, philosophical melancholia.

In summary, Lombroso, Galton, and Kretschmer, among other scholars, have each produced categories of great men and women who had shown mental abnormalities, accompanied by brief supporting biographies. While they listed a large number of great individuals suffering from psychiatric conditions, they could not discount that there were a far greater number of sane great individuals (Simonton, 1994).

A Closer Look at the Connection: Some Biographical Studies

Acceptance of the ideas of the madness-genius association persisted into

the 20th century until the data of Terman (1925) suggested that people of high ability exhibited lower incidence of mental illness and adjustment disorders than the average people. Specifically, Terman's colleague, Cox (1926), studied biographical data of 300 most eminent people from 1450 onward. Most seemed to have had high intelligence and great force of character, but they were no different from normal people in emotional balance and control at least up to the age of 27.

Around the same time, Freud was formulating his psychoanalytic concepts and theories in Vienna. Unlike other psychiatrists, Freud saw creative genius as a sign of neurosis and believed that early childhood experiences, rather than genetic endowment, determined the development of mad genius. Freud also analyzed literary works and the lives of eminent creative people, as he believed that great works of art and literature contained universal psychological truths (see Storr, 1989). Thus, the genetic link between madness and genius was questioned.

Other biographical studies also yielded data contradictory to the mad-genius connection (see Claridge, 1992; Kessel, 1989; Simonton, 1994). Notably, Ellis (1926) reported, in his biographical study of 1,030 British men and women of genius, that he found only 4.2% had mental disorders, including senile dementia. Juda (1949) studied 294 acknowledged geniuses (113 artists and 181 scientists and statesmen) from German-speaking countries since 1650. She examined extensive biographical and autobiographical data, and consulted medical records about the probands and their relatives. She found that 4.8% of the artists and 4.0% of the scientists and statesmen suffered from functional psychoses. For artists, they were all schizophrenics or indeterminate, and for scientists, they were all manic-depressives. The figures were higher than the expectancy rate in the general population, which might be underestimated, since these notables' lives have been submitted to greater scrutiny than ordinary people. Psychopathy (including neurotic conditions in the continental usage) was however found in 27% of the artists, and 19% of the scientists and statesmen, against an expected general rate of 10 to 12%. In summary, the findings supported that the rates of mental disorders for geniuses were not higher than a comparison group of professional people.

Creativity and Mental Health: A Positive Link

Apart from the findings militating against the madness-genius connection, the stereotype was also constantly plagued by a paradox that implied

creating and appreciating would both be acts of insanity. Simonton (1994) quoted Macaclay as one who aptly captured this paradox in his remark, "Perhaps no person can be a poet, or can even enjoy poetry, without a certain unsoundness of mind." It was not until the advent of humanistic psychology in the 1960s that this popular view of mad genius was challenged. Humanistic psychologists saw creativity as a supreme form of mental health. Maslow (1970), for example, explicitly described the attributes of the self-actualizers as similar to those of the creative personality. The humanistic position thus avoids the paradox that plagues the mad-genius stereotype.

Notwithstanding that creativity, greatness and genius are equated with self-actualizers for the humanists, the perennial mad-genius controversy is far from being resolved. It is not easy to discount the sizable number of pathological notables in the annals of history. From biographies and autobiographies, these names can even be inferred to fall into principal diagnostic categories such as schizophrenia, mood disorders, and personality disorders (Simonton, 1994). Yet, it is recognized that posthumous diagnosis based on biographical data offers shaky ground for scientific conclusion. The relationship between genius and madness or between creativity and mental health thus requires more rigorous studies on people, especially eminent people, with clinical diagnoses.

Recent Evidence: Studies with Clinical Diagnosis

Accumulating data on eminent people with clinical diagnoses have indicated that creativity or creative output and mood disorders especially of the bipolar types may be related. The evidence largely comes from studies of writers, poets, and artists (e.g., Akiskal & Akiskal, 1988; Andreasen, 1987, 1988; Andreasen & Canter, 1974; Jamison, 1989, 1990; Ludwig, 1994; Post, 1994, 1996; Richards, 1981, 1989, 1994). The studies of Andreasen and Jamison are illustrative.

Andreasen (1988), for example, used a structured interviewing procedure to compare the mental illness position of 30 members of a creative writers' workshop at the University of Iowa with those of control subjects matched for gender, age and education status. She found an extremely high occurrence of mood disorders and alcoholism among the writers. Eighty percent of the writers suffered at least one episode of major depression, mania or hypomania, and 43% reported a history of hypomania or mania as compared with 30% and 10% of the control professionals,

respectively. There was also a substantially higher prevalence of mood disorders and creativity in the writers' first-degree relatives.

Jamison (1989), in another study, interviewed a sample of 47 contemporary English writers and artists whose awards marked them as the most eminent in their fields. She found that 38% of the total sample had histories of treatment for mood disorders. Poets were most likely to require medication for mood disorders (33%), and were the only ones to require medical intervention for mania (17%). Thus, 50% of the poets were either treated with drugs or hospitalized for mood disorders. One-third of the writers and artists reported histories of severe mood swings, and one quarter reported histories of elated mood states. Almost all (89%) reported having experienced intense, creative episodes characterized by increases in enthusiasm, energy, self-confidence, speed of mental associations, fluency of thoughts, mood, and sense of well-being, sharing many features with clinical hypomania.

In both studies by these investigators and their colleagues, the typical mood elevation associated with increased creative productivity was the milder or hypomanic "high." These findings were consistent with the conclusion drawn from studies of Richards (1994) that greater creativity was found in persons with milder forms of bipolar disorders such as cyclothymia, and in normal first-degree relatives.

Mood Disturbance, Irrationality, and Cognitive Processes

Given that the link between creativity and mood disorders, especially bipolar disorders, has received empirical support, it becomes a question of how the two are related. The age-old notion that creativity or greatness predisposes one toward madness is now increasingly rejected. For example, Esquirol, a psychiatrist in the 19th century, in his book *Des Maladies Mentales*, refuted Dryden's generalization and proffered an explanation for the instances when genius did become insane: "Dryden has said that man of genius and madman are very close to one another. If that means that men who have a very active or a very disordered imagination, who have very exalted or very mercurial ideas, present analogies with madness, then it is correct; but if it is that great intelligence predisposes to madness, then it is wrong" (Esquirol, 1845, p. 41, quoted in Kessel, 1989).

Neihart (1998) summarized three characteristics common to highly creative production and madness. These characteristics are disturbance of mood, certain types of thinking or cognitive processes, and the tolerance of

irrationality. Regarding mood disturbance, the studies of Jamison (1990) were revealing, providing an explanation for the fluctuating nature of creative output in some creative individuals. Specifically, creative people were found to have periods of creative productivity, and these periods were preceded by an elevated mood, suggesting that certain types of mood might open up thought to allow for greater creativity. On the other hand, depression might slow the pace, put thoughts and feelings into perspectives, and eliminate excess or irrelevant ideas to increase focus and allow structuring of new ideas.

In comparing the cognitive processes of creative people and the psychotics (including depressives and maniacs), creativity has been linked with primitive or regressive forms of thinking (e.g., Arieti, 1976; Koestler, 1975). Artistic creativity and inspiration might require access to these irrational sources that could be relatively mood incongruent and state independent, and mood swings might lead to heightened creative capacity through effects on affective integration and motivation for creative risk-taking (Richards, 1994). With the tolerance for irrationality, the cognitive or thought processes typical of schizophrenia, mania or hypomania and creativity were conceptual overinclusiveness (Andreasen, 1988), the fluency, rapidity, and flexibility of thought, and the ability to combine ideas and categories of thought to form new and original connections. Rothenberg (1988, 1990) interpreted these types of cognitive processes as translogical thinking. Specifically, translogical thinking refers to a type of conceptualizing in which the thinking process transcends the common modes of ordinary logical thinking. It involves janusian and homospatial processes. Janusian thinking is a conscious process of combining paradoxical or antagonistic objects into a single entity, and homospatial process involves superimposing or bringing together multiple, discrete objects, and is the essence of good metaphor. Rothenberg (1990) stated that janusian thinking tends to occur in the beginning stages of creative work when ideas are generated, and homospatial thinking characterizes the development of creative ideas.

Thus, it appears that the potential for creativity is enhanced by the types of cognitive processes that occur with the mental state of mood swings. Claridge (1998), for example, argued that both cyclothymic temperament and schizophrenic thought processes might be relevant to creativity, the former providing the energy and color to new work, and the latter stimulating the innovative associations between different areas that characterized much artistic and perhaps scientific thought. Perhaps,

creative individuals in their creative processes need to cross and re-cross the line between rational and irrational thoughts, moving alternatively, for example, between a self-conscious reflective experience of self and a nonreflective narrative improvisation as reported by fiction writers (Doyle, 1998). What prevents healthy creative individuals from breaking down mentally is their ego strength, which together with their high intellect helps maintain good control over their thought processes.

The Mad Genius Controversy in the Chinese Context

The above overview thus reveals that the age-old mad-genius controversy is far from being completely resolved, and although the mystery of the connection between creativity and depression has been slowly unraveled, many questions remain unanswered. While there are multiple ways to interpret the relationship between creative achievement and mood disturbances, it appears puzzling to find that there have been few references made in Chinese history regarding mental illnesses of eminent Chinese artists as those reported for Western artists in Western countries. One might speculate that a number of reasons contribute to the scant reference to mad geniuses in Chinese society.

First, few Chinese writers wrote biographies or autobiographies. Even if they did, the protagonists would most likely be presented in favorable light. Thus, there is relatively little valid information about the mental health of eminent Chinese artists and their relatives from biographical data. Like studies in Western countries, investigators perhaps have to rely on studying the subpopulation of Chinese artists such as writers, poets, and visual artists and their creative products that might provide insight into their inner world of thoughts and emotions.

Second, the conception of mental illness was very different in traditional Chinese medicine. One might suggest that the diagnostic scheme for mental disorders was so different in China that mood disorders especially the bipolar types were not identified. Yet, Tseng (1973) has traced the development of Chinese concepts of different mental disorders by reviewing their descriptions and recommended treatments in historical medical documents. For example, mental disorders were described in an ancient Chinese medical text attributable to Huang Ti (c. 2674 B.C.), though historians now believed that the text was written around 700 B.C. The following passage refers to manic-depressive disorders:

The person suffering from excited insanity feels sad, eating and sleeping less; he then becomes grandiose, feeling that he is smart and noble, talking and scolding day and night, singing, behaving strangely, seeing strange things, hearing strange voices, believing that he can see devil or gods.... (p. 570)

However, even with good recognition of the symptoms of the above diagnostic category of mental disorders, traditional Chinese medicine was based on the belief that illnesses and disorders reflected an imbalance between positive (*yang*) and negative (*yin*) forces, and restoring balance would restore physical and mental health. Thus, for treatment purposes, it might be more useful to learn of the extent of imbalance as reflected in the severity of the manifested symptoms rather than the nature and types of symptoms.

Third, given that a broadened conception of madness or depression needs to be taken, it might be more inconceivable for the Chinese to think of a mad Li Bai (Li Po in some translation; the Tang poet) than for the English to think of a mad Shakespeare. Becker (1978), for example, suggested that the notion of mad genius has been used to provide recognition of the special status and the freedom of conventional restraints for the artists in Western countries. In contrast, in Chinese society, a genius could not be conceived as mad, and within artistic circles, deviant and bizarre behaviors and extremes in mood were somehow normal. Thus, Li Bai could boast that he was a master swordsman who killed several men in his teens, tossed away a fortune on a whim, resorted to heavy drinking, and yet felt a sense of grandeur and self-importance. For example, Li Bai wrote about his manic or hypomanic state but ended with an abrupt turn to a reference to depressed mood in his most famous poem "Bring in the Wine." (The English translation of this and other Chinese poems quoted in this paper are the author's translation, as different sources and translated versions consulted are found to be too literal, archaic and somewhat unsatisfactory.)

*For satisfaction in life
Enjoy yourself to the full,
And never let a golden goblet
Be empty under the moon.
Heaven grants me talents,
And be put to use they must.
Away a thousand in gold I toss,
Come right back to me they will I trust.*

...

*Take my dappled horse,
And my furs that worth a fortune,
Call in the boy,
To trade them for lovely wine,
Together we resolve our grief of all eternity.*

It has to be noted that, among Chinese poets, disturbance in mood appeared to be common and perfectly acceptable. Famous couplets from different poets on sadness, grief and depression can be readily quoted. For example, Li Bai wrote in "A Parting Banquet for the Collator Shu-yun at the Hsieh Tiao Lodge in Hsuan-chou":

*I draw out my dagger to cut the waters,
And the waters keep on flowing.
I raise my goblet to resolve my grief,
But grief keeps me grieving.*

It is said that this famous couplet describing the enduring nature of grief and depression has no match except the equally vivid ones from Li Yu (the emperor-poet who lost his kingdom), and from Li Ching-chao (the famous woman poet). Li Yu's lines in "Yu mei-jen" describe the grief in terms of its immense quantity.

*How much grief, you ask, can be harbored in my breast?
Just like the rivers in spring flowing eastward without rest!*

And Li Ching-chao's lines from "Spring in Wu-ling" describe the heaviness of grief.

*I heard that spring in Twin Rivers is still beautiful,
I hope to take a boat there,
But I am afraid I will never reach Twin Rivers in my little boat,
Laden with the sorrow I bear.*

Interpreting the Creativity-Depression Connection among Chinese Poets

Assuming that mood disturbances were not uncommon among Chinese artists, underreporting of affliction with mental disorders perhaps could not completely account for the scant mention of the link between creativity and depression in Chinese history. It was said that traditional Chinese society, with its central authority supported by a powerful bureaucracy did not foster creativity and discouraged the spread of new ideas

(Csikszentmihalyi, 1998). Although this might not mean that Chinese artists were less creative, creativity and creative products as well as their recognition could not be divorced from the cultural context (see Gardner, 1999; Sternberg, 2000). From a slightly different perspective, the bureaucratic system also tended to overvalue literary abilities in government officials, and thus many creative young men who vowed to climb the social and political ladder and serve the country but were not talented in literary abilities would be turned away. It was no surprise that only a selected few were allowed to enter the system, but many more young and educated people were denied entry to the government system, felt rejected, frustrated, and even depressed. While dissatisfaction and depression could be prevalent, creative individuals might attribute their failure to the injustice of the system, countering the impact of failure and depression. Alternatively, these individuals who were denied entry to the government system might exhibit their creativity in ways more oriented toward progressive improvements of the existing system rather than toward revolutionary modifications of the system (see Cropley, 2000). Thus, whether creativity manifested in different forms was less readily recognized or the impact of depression was reduced in the Chinese context, both would result in weakening the perceived link between creativity and depression.

The association between creativity and depression can also be interpreted in multiple other ways in the Chinese context. The conjecture that creative individuals were more prone to depression could not be ruled out. For example, Burton in the 17th century proclaimed, "all poets are mad." Wordsworth also wrote about the fate of poets (see Jamison, 1990, p. 333),

*We poets in our youth begin in gladness
But thereof come in the end despondency and madness*

However, it was also plausible that sensitive individuals were more attracted to creative activities of a domain that were considered desirable by the field in society at the specific time. Thus, in the Tang dynasty, especially the High Tang period, poetry was the desirable domain of creative activities. It is said that in the known collection of 49,000 poems by some 2,200 poets in the Tang dynasty, a sizable number of these poems refer to sadness, sorrow, grief and depression. Assuming that poetry is an individual's way of addressing the world, the poet's artistic expression could thus be a means to self-understanding, emotional stability, and

resolution of conflict. Viewed in this manner, the artistic endeavors might help contribute to mental health rather than disintegration.

Considering the healing qualities of poetic creations and the interpersonal locus of mood disturbance in Chinese poets, it is of great interest to contrast one of the last poems of Lord Byron with the last poem of Li Bai. It can be interpreted that Lord Byron focused more on individual values (see Jamison, 1993, p. 184).

*If thou regret thy Youth, why live?
The land of honourable Death
Is here:— up to the Field, and give
Away thy Breath!
Seek out — less often sought than found —
A Soldier's Grave, for thee the best;
Then look around, and choose thy Ground,
And take thy Rest!*

In contrast, Li Bai compared himself with the Great Bird and lamented that his talents to serve his countrymen were unrecognized.

*The Great Bird flew
Shaking the world's edge with wingbeats,
Then in mid-sky
His might failed him.
His aura would linger
For myriad ages,
He roamed to Fu-sang
Where his left sleeve was caught.
People got the news,
And pass it on —
Now that Confucius has passed away,
Who is there to weep for him?*

In summary, reinterpreting the creativity-depression connection in this Chinese context, creativity was less likely to predispose Chinese poets to depression. Rather, for Chinese poets, especially for those with positive self-efficacy like Li Bai, intrapsychic conflicts were externalized, and the poetic creations might help heal the artists, whose work in turn would be healing to others.

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