

What about my anxious spleen? Rethinking medicine, health and illness through Traditional Chinese Medicine
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‘Shabby’ might have been my first thought upon seeing the parlor. Not exactly the description I would have had in mind for the place I was supposed to put the faith of my health in. This Traditional Chinese Medicine (hereafter TCM) establishment had been in business for almost two decades and was locally renowned. However, juxtaposing its esteemed reputation was its modest reality. The practice was based in a small shop in the midst of a busy, metropolitan area of Hong Kong, Mong Kok – literally ‘bustling corner’. A nondescript, old shop that looked almost lost, adjacent to imposing buildings that flaunted modernity. It is made all the more peculiar with its stubborn traditional make and muted shades that contrasted the sharp, metallic colors of the city.

My first encounter was unplanned. I had twisted my ankle and under the zealous encouragement of my elder relatives, went to see a TCM practitioner. I had always gone to Western practices but became curious as to why they were so convinced. Inside the parlor, instead of sterilized white walls, the room was plastered with various posters that ranged from seemingly unrelated ancient philosophical calligraphy to unfamiliar depictions of the human anatomy. The waiting room which was also the treatment room was packed with a surprising variety of people. Most were presumably local and little care was taken to ensure each patient’s privacy. Visitors ranged from a group of construction workers to an office lady. Everyone patiently waited for their turn.

What I had come to know about legitimate medical practices –proudly framed certificates, white lab coats, a preoccupied receptionist – were thrown out. The only bit of ‘modern technology’ was a tiny, boxy television broadcasting the local drama. The establishment was marginally acknowledged by the state and their only presence on the internet is the digits of their TCM registration number. Their only form of advertisement was through word of mouth. What then, made this establishment credible? Why would I place something as important as my health in a place that lacked medical professionalism in every sense that I have come to know? Hong Kong boasts of its health services being at the

forefront of biomedicine progress (Chung et al., 2007). Why then, would there be need for any alternatives, much less ones that have almost no scientific footing or international recognition?

I decided to base my project on TCM in the context of Hong Kong, where I have lived my whole life as it destabilized what I thought I knew and my experiences of medicine, health and illness. I became aware of how naturally I assume what is valid and what is not. In this, I had hoped to explore how concepts such as health and illness are built upon a social basis just as much as a scientific one; furthermore, what medical practices are and what made them legitimate?

Methodology:

TCM is a difficult topic of study with its pluralistic nature and infinite variations (Koo, 1987). Being so broad, it is hard to gauge and realistically represent public opinions on it. Thus the scope of my paper is limited to the people I found in the parlour that treated my ankle. After my initial encounter I went back five more times in the course of two weeks. I met more TCM users with their surprisingly high influx of customers – many also returned, which provided continuity to my research. There are many types of TCM establishment; this one in particular most closely identifies as the Chinese counterpart of a ‘general practitioner’ of Western medicine and was also connected to an herbs shop. TCM is very basically defined as medical practices that share a common philosophical and theoretical framework deriving from China more than 2,000 years ago (Ember and Ember, 2004). The cornerstone being that Qi¹ (an energy) is the foundation of all mental and physical processes and the two opposing forces of Yin and Yang governs the internal balance of the body and essentially, health (ibid).

Interviews were conducted in the form of conversation rather than structured questionnaires. I attempted to limit my input and facilitation to particular ideas and mostly encouraged expansions on open questions I asked. Mostly, I prompted informants to talk about what they knew or what interested them and tried to make conversations take their own course. I did however attempt to get opinions on Western medicine for contrast. As I

¹ To preserve the meaning of certain concepts of TCM, I will retain the original Chinese words. See Appendix A for a brief summary of the main concepts I will refer to.

was also a patient and a local that spoke the language, I had hoped to get a closer insight of the realities and opinions of TCM. Most conversations were thus in Cantonese and rather than fixating on direct translations, the interviews here are more like my interpretations of what my informants wanted to convey in English. For privacy reasons the names in this paper have been changed.

Naturalisation of legitimacy and medical concepts:

It appeared that both the legitimization of health institutions and their truth came very naturally to me. It is exactly this that Foucault (1973) attempts to deconstruct, analyzing the dominant medical discourse that holds the power of defining normality and deviances. They construct the vocabulary of which medical needs are defined. Foucault (ibid) rejected that power is a property that can be owned; instead it exists as relationships and is constantly changing. These social dynamics are vital in the production of truth and it is complex, multidimensional and often contradictory. In the context of medicine, these relationships are molded by social institutions like hospitals and establish norms and values like what is correct, incorrect, healthy and sick (Foucault et al., 1988).

While Foucault's account questions Western medicine's claims of truth it does not necessitate the rejection of it. Instead, it is complicating our conception of truth. Medicine is not just about the biology of the body – the truth is inexorably intertwined and moulded with power and knowledge (ibid). It is the veil that determines how we 'see' the world. In this, he alludes to a more subtle coercion not through threat or physical but through manipulating our own rationality – determining what is 'alternative' or 'normal'. Biomedical discourses become especially potent when, being omnipresent in every part of our daily life, gain the ability to prompt one to internalize concepts and their configuration of knowledge. Such influences are exerted so naturally that they conceal the mechanics of the meticulous construction of ideas such as biomedicine whereby the only legitimate healthcare is scientific. Foucault (1973) regards this as one of the main devices of social control. Indeed, it seems that this concentration of power and centralization of information is essential for social planning in Hong Kong, where much of life is structured around what health institutions claim to be true.

While the predominant practices may appear all-pervasive and predominant, resistance is not always ineffective (Turner, 1995). TCM becomes valuable in its ability to challenge the monopoly of medicine and its claims to demarcate life. It can be empowering and a means to oppose knowledge in the medical encounter; especially medicalization, which is a process where increasingly more aspects of human existence are reframed as medical issues allowing medical influence over wider spheres of life (Foucault 1973).

Contextualizing Hong Kong:

Since medicine is rooted in the socio-cultural structures of society, it reflects their patterns of values and institution and becomes a kind of record of social change. Thus it is necessary to understand Hong Kong's context to further analyze its medical systems.

Hong Kong was a British colony but returned sovereignty to China in 1997 (Chung et al., 2007). During colonial rule, there was a non-interventionist approach towards TCM but there was also minimal governmental attention to its growth (ibid). Western medicine became the only officially recognized and most heavily funded form of medicine where it has then flourished to become many citizens' only legitimate source of healthcare (Farquhar, 1994). The role of TCM as a part of the Hong Kong healthcare system was not formally recognized until the handover to China – which was largely an effort to establish China's cultural presence (ibid).

Despite its importance in restoring the 'Chinese identity' after British rule, regulations and funding for TCM were still limited in contrast to biomedicine practices. Until 1999, TCM only needed a business registration to practice with no standardized medical assessment (ibid). This contributed to the immense variations of standards and to some extent, the 'bad press' of TCM being an unreliable health source. It was easy for frauds or unqualified individuals to practice what they called TCM. Such conceptions still linger despite that professional standards are now more strictly regulated by the Chinese Medicine Council. There are currently 6561 registered TCM practitioners in Hong Kong ('Registered Chinese Medicine Practitioners', 2013) – so it is still very accessible. However its existence is still dubious to many and its image as alternative and unconventional continues to be

perpetuated. It is even often publicized as an 'exotic' practice by tourism institutions (Chung et al., 2007). So while TCM is valued as a significant part of the Chinese cultural identity, biomedicine is still seemingly inexorably the primary source of healthcare in Hong Kong.

Why use 'alternative'? The unavoidable comparison with 'orthodox' medicine:

Amongst my informants, the use of TCM varied. Some were at one end of the spectrum, using it only in desperation when nothing else worked; to the other end, where TCM was the principal source of healthcare whenever possible. The middle-ground was large, many in particular used TCM as a substitute or supplement for certain fields of medicine where they found biomedicine lacking – or when TCM was a cheaper alternative.

Despite this, everyone seemed to acknowledge the usefulness of Western medicine in specific situations, for instance during an emergency. An informant had told me 'if you lose a limb and go to a Chinese practitioner, they would just send you to a doctor. Anything immediate like that, they cannot do much. However, they have certain specialities that draw people. Like bone-setting was evolved in martial arts establishments centuries ago. They have perfected very specialized healing for things just like that [gestures to my ankle].' 72 year old Bak however, was the one exception. He insisted no emergencies would exist in the first place if you adhered to TCM in its entirety. He held a notable dislike of foreign influence from his experience of war in China and appeared to be quite old fashioned; a pattern that emerged amongst the elder and more nationalistic informants.

In all my discussions, there was an unavoidable comparison with orthodox medicine with its immovable presence – after a while I realized it was not necessary to prompt it in conversation as it came up almost automatically every time. All informants cited some degree of disillusionment in biomedicine, lending in their reasoning for using TCM. The spectrum of disenchantment was also wide from Bak who argued biomedicine contradicted life to Nancy, a housewife who merely disliked the feel of stethoscopes which she reported, 'felt too unnatural'.

There were three particularly prominent aspects that were criticised which provided a nice basis for comparison:

- i. Diagnosis
- ii. Treatment methods
- iii. General philosophical/religious/theoretical principles

- i. Diagnosis:

Western medicine tends to compartmentalize in its clinical approach. Li, a student was telling me: 'they study patients as sections rather than holistically which is understandable due to time and financial constraints.' Indeed, it appears the aim for biomedicine was to locate the disease, isolate it and treat it, with diagnosis based on symptoms. Tang was interestingly a nurse who worked in a community hospital but used TCM to stay healthy. She too, noticed a 'symptoms checklist' where physicians would try and fit patients into a generic category of illness – 'just like forcing a size 5 foot in a size 4.5.' Another informant had told me 'the process seems all very mechanic – I'm just patient number 105; another person before they can get off work.' The biomedical reliance on technology often also facilitates this compartmentalization as machines are constructed to specialize in specific areas.

Wong, the practitioner that treated me had said TCM uses a holistic approach, encompassing other dimensions of life as it believes everything is interrelated –the mind, body and spirit. 'I assess you as a whole – not just your ankle. I want to know your emotions, habits and so forth in search for imbalances.' She said she never uses technology for diagnosis, just her senses. She had felt the blockage of Qi between my joints and said that was the cause of my pain – however, further internal imbalances also contributed to my discomfort. 'This means there's a unique diagnosis and treatment for everyone since the imbalances for everyone is always different.' So while Western medicine tends to isolate the

disease (ibid), TCM strives to scrutinize the problem from every angle to understand the immediate implications but also what other systems could be disturbed too.

ii. Treatment methods:

As diagnosis for biomedicine is often based on symptoms, treatment is usually aimed at controlling symptoms – and may neglect underlying problems. Attempts to eliminate or suppress diseases also are very isolated where its effects on other parts of the body appear ignored. Li had said that it is quite normal for patients to take pills the doctor prescribes for things like a headache to stop the pain without actually knowing the underlying causes. ‘When it props up again, they go in for more pills. It’s more like a quick fix – which I suppose is needed for hectic city lives.’

Many others also referred to this dependence on the philosophy that there is ‘a pill for every ill’. Tang said it was frustrating – ‘pills for fever, pills for allergy, sugar pills if nothing’s actually wrong. They think it would be strange to leave without medication – like there wasn’t a problem or it cannot be healed.’ It seems because of the categorization of illness, it comes very naturally that there ought to be a category of cure for each one to complete the equation of health.

Contrasting the Western practice’s reliance on external powers to cure (Lock and Nguyen, 2010), TCM aims to strengthen existing positive forces. Although medication can be efficacious and necessary in many cases, TCM attempts to fulfil the body’s potential as much as possible to cure its own diseases. Treatment is also always directed at the root of problems, even if it means a slow and tedious healing process – most treatments need at least a month to start effect. Again, technology-use is limited where natural treatments are preferred – from herbs to diet changes and massages. Tang observed that using such remedies often limit the side-effects, ‘sometimes it gets so ridiculous in Western medicine. A pill is used to counter the side effect of the pill that counters the side effect of another pill.’

iii. Philosophical/religious/theoretical principles:

Their different approaches stems from the different foundations they are built on. The Western representation of the human anatomy frequently serves as the primary metaphor through which the public thinks about their bodies – even for the people I interviewed. This perception relies on the visible structure (Koo, 1987). The body through TCM conception conversely has little to do with anatomical entities but more on the functional structures and system. For example, the biomedicine perceives each organ to be independent and can be treated in isolation; emotions too, are confined and controlled by the brain (ibid). TCM however, sees all organs as inexorably intertwined where everything must be balanced. Each organ as conventionally known is knotted to other structures and related to an emotion which must be in equilibrium for wellbeing (Holland, 1999). ‘For example joy in the heart and anxiety in the spleen’ as Wong illustrated.

This view of the body as an interrelated web of systems explains why approaches must be holistic. Biomedicine defines health as the absence of disease and disease as the deviation from normal functioning in regards to specific parts of the body (Lock and Nguyen, 2010). TCM however, conceives health as a balance of opposing forces in the body. Disease is then the presence of disruptive forces in the body – a disharmony, for example in emotions or Qi. Usually there are multiple agents playing on that imbalance. Wong told me ‘every treatment we give is personalized, what the West thinks as “syndromes” are often actually multi-dimensional and different for everyone.’ Wong’s assistant added ‘a robot can do Western medicine but only humans can do Chinese medicine.’ Again, a larger criticism of the West can be seen reflected in these discourses.

In asking about his heretical views, Bak had exclaimed ‘It is hogwash! The obsession with calculable evidence - scientific proof. Medicine – no, life doesn’t work that way! You want evidence? The blatant proof is how at 72 I’m still thriving! I take care of myself under the philosophy of Chinese medicine - I don’t need an external tube to pump life into me. Yet those arrogant, lab-coat wearing officials are too blinded by their narrow ideas of truth.

They think science can fully explain life.’ Not everyone was as vehement as Bak nor did everyone passionately believe in the non-scientific concepts of Qi. However, he was not alone in thinking that the scientific groundings of biomedicine cannot fully encompass the world. Dao, the shop herbalist, commented: ‘Western medicine is based on shiny technology and science; Oriental medicine however flourishes on a philosophical foundation. Most people don’t understand the concept that health is more than the absence of illness and that true healing transcends the immediate problem.’

I had asked Wong how she compared her practice to Western ones and she explained “I do not think of us as a Chinese equivalent to a Western clinic. People come to us when in sickness or in health. We enforce a certain way of life and of seeing the world; living in harmony with the world and with oneself. Rather than treating diseases, I would say our work is to cultivate life.’ This came as a novel conception of healthcare for me. ‘Why are you surprised? Chinese medicine is based on Taoism you know. Tao literally means the way”” she pointed out. While TCM and biomedicine may share a common goal and many of my informants saw them as complementary, some like Wong saw them as dissimilar fundamentally – being different practices altogether.

Conclusion:

Perhaps the aims of this paper were a bit ambitious and I was only able to scratch the surface of the wealth of possible research here. However, despite the limited sample and the small section of TCM that was focused on, the social constructs that are easily internalized become evident. Despite the devotion to TCM seen in some of my informants, characters like Bak are still in the minority in relation to Hong Kong’s population and TCM is often still not accepted in its entirety; even I still have my reservations. However this can be seen as due to the cultural-historical context as it would not be outrageous to speculate that in the arguably more nationalistic mainland China, TCM is more approved of. This paper was not an attempt to eradicate biomedicine in any way but I feel it is important to understand the power relations that medicine is embedded in and their implications when unchallenged. The role of the medical body thus becomes clearly more than merely healing sicknesses. They are the authority that shapes definitions and experiences of health – very much

influenced by socio-political interests. It is able to determine knowledge that occupies both the micro and macro levels of life. While alternative medicine itself may also be subjected as a means of political control; for example TCM as an anti-colonial practice – its comparative scrutiny allows the monopoly of orthodox healthcare to be challenged. It can help undermine what has been so naturalized – from Western models of anatomy to a disease-orientated approach of healing and clinical modes of knowing. It allows us to see that these entities are actively, creatively and constantly negotiated and reproduced. The demarcation of health and illness are culturally-specific and meticulously crafted. Alternative medicine can then be a means of resistance to the discourses established by biomedicine and what they dictate as legitimate.

However, Chinese medicine and Western medicine are by no means mutually exclusive or static. They are constantly changing with the onset of modernity and especially now, the division between them is increasingly blurring with the rising popularity of integrated practices. Nonetheless, in leaving a narrow-minded conception of truth behind, medical horizons can be expanded and reconceptualised. This deconstruction of conventional forms of authority allows the understanding that medicine is not an unchanging, absolute truth about the biology of the body and that presumed universal concepts can in fact be just as 'exotic' or 'arbitrary' – likened to how an 'anxious spleen' might seem outside of its context.

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Appendix A

Summary of the basic concepts of TCM as explained to me by Wong:

Qi (氣): is the energy or circulating life force that fills the universe; it is the basis of most Chinese philosophy and medicine.

Yin Yang (陰陽): Refers to opposing forces that are interconnected and interdependent and they exist eternally in every aspect of life.

Bone-setting (跌打): A branch of TCM that stems from martial arts and specializes in the treatment of trauma and injuries such as sprains and fractures.

Taoism (道教): literally meaning 'teaching of the way' is a philosophical and religious tradition that advocates balance, naturalism, simplicity and harmony.