

TCM MAIN STORY

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OUTPOST EXCHANGE

“Maintaining order rather than correcting disorder is the ultimate principle of wisdom. To cure disease after it has appeared is like digging a well when one already feels thirsty, or forging weapons after the war has already begun.”

--From the *Nei Jing*, a Chinese medical classic, written in 2 B.C.

For thousands of years, billions of people have lived by the health advice in this classic Chinese medicine text. The concepts of maintaining order--or balance--and acting preventatively are two main tenets of Traditional Chinese Medicine.

In the West, these ancient ideas are new to our modern culture. A relatively recent import, Traditional Chinese Medicine was first brought to the U.S. in the 1970's. Although it is a complete and separate medical system, most Americans know only components of that system. Acupuncture is perhaps the most widely recognized modality and the most accepted by the Western medical establishment. Others may be aware of a form of physical exercise called Tai Chi. Most everyone has heard the words “holistic” and “preventative” applied to some forms of medicine. The ubiquitous, “body, mind and spirit” has become a catch-phrase, and many people use the words *yin* and *yang* to describe complementary opposites, perhaps unaware of their etymology.

These modalities and concepts are all inherent in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), which has five branches, including acupuncture, herbology, dietetics, massage (*tui na*) and energetics (*qi gong* and *tai chi*). Although each branch is a system unto itself, it is all the parts together that comprise TCM. As TCM views the body as a whole, and the body as a microcosm of the universe that surrounds us, so TCM itself is a holograph, with inseparable parts that are links in a circular chain.

This approach can be mystifying—and confounding—to the Western mindset, particularly the Western *medical* mindset, which is very linear, cause and effect oriented.

TCM and Western Medicine Philosophies

One way to explain Traditional Chinese Medicine is to compare and contrast it in the context of Western philosophy and medicine.

Not so long ago (especially by Chinese standards!), Western and Eastern philosophies weren't so dissimilar. Both were rooted in nature, man's role as an integral part of nature, and the circle of life. In the seventeenth century, however, French mathematician Rene Descartes ushered in the Western scientific revolution, which became the basis for modern medicine. Departing from the natural viewpoint, Descartes considered the world

and everything in it to be a machine, including the human body. He also separated the mind from the body.

Astronomer and mathematician Isaac Newton picked up on the mechanistic view, creating fixed and absolute physical laws, which became the laws of nature, under which most of the Western world still operates. This includes the belief that everything can be described objectively and that all physical reactions have a physical cause, such as a soccer ball moving because it's kicked. This orderly view of the world provides comfort to those who prefer to see the world as solid and unchanging, with clear, definite rules to govern its functioning. "Perhaps unaware that many logical systems of knowledge exist, most Westerners consider this to be the only valid way of understanding the world," writes Harriet Beinfield, L.Ac., author of the seminal book on Chinese medicine, "Between Heaven and Earth."

In this model, Western doctors function in the role of mechanic to the body-machine. They perform routine maintenance, but more often intervene to implement emergency repairs, removing parts or treating them in isolation. Western medicine generally reacts to disease and crisis, rather than working proactively to promote wellness.

Machines are best understood and can be best serviced on a mass scale when they are all the same. Thus, the Western medicine desire to standardize diseases, diagnoses and treatments. "When people are like machines, modern medicine becomes obliged to keep the machine running," writes Beinfield. "Its purpose is defined as avoiding death rather than enriching life."

This objective, one-size-fits-all, mechanistic view of humans and our diseases has led to a system of health care that many are beginning to find too impersonal and disempowering. Thus the rising interest in alternative medical models, including TCM. "TCM is coming in such full force right now because it's so needed. Western medicine has become very removed from the patient," said Christopher Rasmussen, M.D., a Milwaukee anesthesiologist who also has a master's of Chinese Medicine from Five Branches Institute in Santa Cruz, CA. Rasmussen knows of what he speaks: he is part of a rare, but growing, breed of Western medical doctors who have gone on to study TCM in-depth. "TCM brings you right back in touch with the patient. Half of healing someone is giving them a little nurturing." He wryly states that the "biggest single difference between Western and Chinese medicine is that people *like* coming to a TCM practitioner."

In contrast to the Western model, TCM mirrors the logic of quantum physics, which suggests that the universe is an integrated whole; a vast web of interacting, interweaving probabilities. Life occurs in the cycle of nature, which is one unified system (the *Tao*) that has polar and complementary aspects of *yin* and *yang*: earth and heaven, winter and summer, night and day, cold and hot, wet and dry, inner and outer. The opposites need to be in balance to create an ideal state. Because we are a hologram of the universe, this same interplay of complementary polarities goes on in our body. Imbalances in these polarities may occur as a result of such things as stress, poor diet, trauma, environmental

influences, heredity, overwork, and emotional disturbances. The goal is to restore balance of *yin* and *yang*—and thus, health—with TCM modalities.

As a microcosm of nature, human beings are viewed as a garden to be nurtured, and the physician the gardener, whose role is to cultivate life. “TCM looks at people like an environment. We plant, nourish, cultivate and support health,” said Art Turo Rapkin, O.M.D., owner of the Kindo Center in Shorewood, TCM practitioner for 18 years and one of only a few Oriental Medicine Doctors in Wisconsin. Rapkin points out that in the past, Chinese doctors were held in low regard if they had too many chronically sick patients and that doctors were paid only as long as patients stayed healthy. Thus, the concepts of preventative medicine and improved quality of life inherent in TCM, which are major differentiators from the Western approach.

Qi is at the heart of Chinese medicine and is perhaps the most difficult element for Westerners to grasp. It is the invisible life force that defines life itself. Without it, we are dead. *Qi* cannot be measured, quantified, seen or isolated, so in the Occidental medical model, it can't exist. But it is the basis of health from the Chinese perspective. “Like fresh air, healthy *qi* [pronounced “chee”] moves freely; like stale air, stagnant *qi* is heavy, oppressive, constrictive and congestive,” writes Beinfield.

This life force moves on pathways or channels throughout the body, known as *meridians*. The meridians are the river beds for the river of *qi* that courses through the body to nourish and irrigate the organ systems. An obstruction in the flow of *qi* results in stagnation and eventual illness of some form. The simple explanation of the TCM modalities is that they work to optimize the flow of *qi* in the body.

TCM Diagnosis and Syndromes Vs. Diseases

A TCM diagnosis is made based on a detailed history and an evaluation of the patient's tongue and pulse. TCM practitioners view it as diagnosing a disharmony or an imbalance—what is called a syndrome—versus a disease. While Western medicine offers one diagnosis for a set of symptoms, TCM may have upwards of eight or 10 diagnoses for the same set of symptoms. By further subdividing the diagnosis in this way, TCM practitioners can get more precise with the treatment and thus affect more successful outcomes.

This is where the art of TCM comes into play and where most practitioners derive the fun of the practice. “It's like being a detective: you're searching for the root cause and then working to change the lifestyle, which changes the whole health profile,” stated William Dunbar, PhD, who trained in China, has been a TCM practitioner since 1981 and currently is the president of the Midwest College of Oriental Medicine in Racine. “It's ‘Where's Waldo?’, ‘What's wrong with this picture?’”

Dunbar offers the Western diagnosis of a migraine headache as an example. “The TCM practitioner would ask more questions: ‘Is it on one side of the head? Do you get nauseous? Do you need to sit in a dark room?’ I'd then look at the pulse and tongue. Based on what I saw and heard, the TCM diagnosis might be Rising Liver Fire.”

Besides having a poetic name, this specific diagnosis indicates a syndrome for which there are a multitude of treatment options in TCM.

“Western medicine has only eight-10 drug options to treat a cluster migraine. It’s finite. With TCM, there are infinite combinations of acupuncture points, herbs, tui na massage techniques, energetic exercises and dietary changes” to treat any given syndrome. “You can truly customize the treatment to the patient,” he added. “This gives you an incredible freedom to design a treatment for exactly what’s going on in the patient’s life.”

Rather than treating symptoms with pharmaceutical drugs, which may mask the underlying problem, TCM seeks to unravel the mystery of the symptoms, identify the root cause and thus fix the problem at its genesis with a customized treatment plan.

Rasmussen gives another illustrative example. A patient with ringing in the ears might be diagnosed with tinnitus, for which there is no Western remedy. The fact that the patient might also have a toothache or a cracked tooth, no sex drive and an aching back would be a seemingly unrelated string of separate complaints that wouldn’t add up to anything in the Western medicine model. But in TCM, Rasmussen points out that this is a pattern of kidney qi/yang deficiency. “With TCM, you can treat a medley of symptoms that no one would realize are related,” he said. “What I like best about TCM is that with all these strange symptoms, there’s something in TCM that correlates,” he said. “The kind of stuff that would drive Western physicians insane and lead the patient to be called a malingerer is what TCM treats well.”

Rasmussen shared a short list of “symptoms that drive Western medicine practitioners mad”: the body that “hurts all over;” vague fatigue; insomnia; headaches; back and shoulder tension; PMS. “What I love about TCM is you’re not a nut if you have symptoms that don’t show up with Western medicine tests. When I was practicing [Western] medicine, these would be symptoms that you’d ignore as a doctor. Now when I get a whole list of complaints, that’s the best.”

Those who have “no hope or have lost hope with Western medicine” are typical users of alternative medicine and comprise a large portion of the practice of Xipang Zhou, O.M.D., L.Ac. Born and educated in China, Zhou has both the Western medicine knowledge and extensive TCM training typical of a modern Chinese medical school graduate. He deftly interchanges TCM systems, depending on the nature of the problem. For musculoskeletal issues, he focuses more on *tui na* massage techniques; for neuroskeletal complaints, acupuncture is the first line of treatment. If the issue is internal, such as digestion or allergies, he uses more herbals and incorporates some acupuncture or massage. For most patients regardless of issues, he includes dietary advice and often energetic—*qi gong*—exercises. “TCM is beyond acupuncture. It’s a holistic philosophy,” he stated. He points out that Chinese medicine has been practiced and been working for one-quarter of the world’s population for millennia. “If it’s not truth, it wouldn’t have stayed for thousands of years.”

Far from throwing the baby out with the bath water, Zhou, Rasmussen, Dunbar and others believe there is a role for both medical systems to play in the West, as they do in China. Western medicine is the best option for acute emergency illnesses, infectious diseases and surgical care. TCM does best with prevention, maintenance, chronic illnesses and acute pain. Together, the two models perhaps comprise a good balance of medical *yin* and *yang*.

TCM HISTORY SIDEBAR

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History of TCM

Like the country itself, TCM has a complex and exotic history that goes back perhaps as far as eight millennia or more. Unraveling the origins of TCM can be as challenging as understanding the philosophy.

The earliest practitioners of healing are said by some to have been the Wu, shamanic practitioners who were usually women. According to taosanctuary.org, “Their methods involved exorcism and trance states that were used to formulate healing ceremonies and rituals. Speculation exists that the exorcism methods of shaking spears and burning incense and aromatic woods formed the basis for the later development of acupuncture and moxibustion.” The Wu are believed to be the forerunners of later Taoist healing practitioners.

Tribal shamans and holy men who lived as hermits in the mountains of China as early as 3500 B.C. practiced what was called the “Way of Long Life.” This regimen included a diet based on herbs and other plants, kung-fu exercises and special breathing techniques that were thought to improve vitality and life expectancy.

The philosophy of Taoism includes the principle of nature as a model for the ideal life, a belief that was incorporated into Chinese medicine. Other evolutionary roots of Chinese medicine are believed to have come from the Eight Branches of the Tao Healing Arts, particularly the branches of meditation/self cultivation and Qi Gong/Kung Fu/Tai Chi Chuan. These first branches were considered to be the most subtle and therefore the most powerful, as they are practiced on a personal level, and thus believed to have unlimited potential.

But what is TCM today is not the result of an unbroken chain of evolution and improvements. There were a series of “golden ages” of medicine in China as well as some darker times. According to the Gale Encyclopedia of Alternative Medicine, the first medical treatises date from the Han dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 220). The first medical school was established in A.D. 629. Chinese medicine flourished again under the Song (A.D. 960-1279) and Ming (A.D. 1368-1644) dynasties, with the establishment of more medical schools, standardized curricula, and the recording of traditional herbal prescriptions.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, China opened for the first time to the West, which led to the establishment of Western-style medical schools in Shanghai and other major cities. Western medicine and industrial technology became associated with progress. By the 1940’s traditional medical institutions in China had been replaced by Western schools and traditional medicine had gone out of vogue in favor of Western practices. But in 1949, another golden age ensued. The Chinese revolution, which began that year, created

a dire need for doctors and the half million traditional physicians were called upon and thus regained their stature with the medical establishment. The country experienced a resurgence of national pride and therefore a desire to assert its own culture, including traditional medicine. It was mandated that traditional Chinese training would be incorporated into most modern medical schools.

During the Communist regime's Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), much of the ancient texts were destroyed. Some assert that during this time Chinese medicine was watered down for social and political reasons and that what today **is known in the West and practiced in modern day China as TCM is, in fact,** not truly traditional medicine.

Since about 1989, Chinese medicine has been experiencing another growth spurt, with extensive research being conducted in China and elsewhere and the rapid dissemination of TCM to other parts of the world. Today in China, both traditional and Western forms of medicine are learned in medical school and both are practiced alongside each other.