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A systems science for modern complexity

The case for post-pandemic Chinese medicine

We live in extraordinary times. The outbreak of the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 has put healthcare systems and political institutions across the world to the test. In its wake, we are called upon to reassess our habitual ways of being. As practitioners of Chinese medicine, it is also appropriate that we critically examine the state of our profession.

By Justin Penoyer
and Joshua Park

Edited by Daniel Schrier

IT IS OUR consensus that Chinese medicine is too often construed as simply another set of non-pharmaceutical interventions, removed from the conceptual context in which they arose. The limitations of this approach were apparent even before the pandemic, but they have now become impossible to ignore: if we define our profession primarily as “herbalists” or “acupuncturists” in the sense of technicians who work with liquid medicines and needles, then what happens if we are forced to close our clinic doors, even temporarily? Should we define ourselves most by the modalities that we use, or by the way in which we use them?

We believe this presents an unprecedented opportunity for us to ask ourselves: what is

Chinese medicine, and what can it offer a world beset by interlocking social, ecological and medical crises?

And perhaps more personally, what can we, as Chinese medicine clinicians, possibly do in response to problems that seem overwhelming and global in reach?

To answer these questions, we return to the canonical source text of Chinese medicine, the *Huangdi Neijing* 黄帝内经 in a line of inquiry that can help us to situate our practice of Chinese medicine in a meaningful context both individually and in society. This has tangible implications for the clinic, for practice management, and for communicating the value of our perspective with other medical professionals and the general public.

The *Neijing* presents a medical model of political-medical-ecological holism that merges the systems of legality, health and seasonality into a “profoundly holistic,



The Lantern is a journal of Chinese medicine and its related fields with an emphasis on the traditional view and its relevance to clinic. Our aim is to encourage access to the vast resources in this tradition of preserving and restoring health, whether via translations of works of past centuries or observations from our own generation working with these techniques. The techniques are many, but the traditional perspective of the human as an integral part, indeed a reflection, of the social, meteorological and cosmic matrix remains one. We wish to foster that view.



comprehensive healing art”¹. These matters are viewed as inseparable, and that “the root of the problem is the same for the individual as for society.”² As such, it represents a whole-systems approach uniquely suited to confronting the challenges of medical case management in an age of social and environmental fragmentation, climate change and pandemics. We can understand its applicability to our time when we consider its origins. The *Nèijīng* was composed during the mid to late Warring States Period (475–221 BCE). Against the prevailing theories of their day, the authors declared that human reason could observe and predict natural laws that were true regardless of time, space and supernatural influence.

Contrary to the magical and shamanic practices of the Warring States period, they proposed that the universe was governed by secularised laws of ecology and legality (*fǎ* 法), that could be understood and predicted using a system of correspondences wherein all phenomena were categorised as belonging to yin or yang. The intent was to empower one’s ability to exert influence over health by

making comprehensible all matters that one could face.

Central to this cosmology is the concept that the individual human body, the body politic and the environment are of one unit governed by the same set of laws, mapped via the correspondences of yin-yang and five-phases doctrines. This union of the individual and society, and of the human and ecological realms, is a theme that runs throughout the *Nèijīng*.

The functioning of the organ systems of the human body are likened to a bureaucracy in Chapter 8 of the *Sùwèn* 素問, while the channel system is associated with bodies of water in Chapter 12 of the *Língshū* 靈樞. The practice of medicine was regarded as inseparable from the concept of governance; for example, the Chinese character *zhì* 治, meaning both “to govern” and “to cure,” is composed of the water radical *shuǐ* 氵 and the phonetic *tái* 台, meaning terrace or platform; the literal meaning of the character is “to manage water.” Implicitly, treatment is understood to order the body in the same way that order is brought to bear in the socio-political sphere or when managing irrigation over a landscape.

Both body and State are subject to the same laws observable in the patterns of weather and the positions of the stars. The human body reflects the body politic, and both mirror a larger ecological body in which they are embedded. This worldview can be described as a hologram or fractal; the State, the individual and the environment are three dimensions of the same holographic structure—that of dynamic interchange between the Five Periods and Six Qi, known as the doctrine of *wǔyùn liùqì* 五運六氣. The doctrine of the mutual correspondence between the human being and the natural world was later known as *Tiān rén hé yī* 天人合一, and it provides the basis on which Chinese medicine is constructed.

Out of this understanding emerges a conception that can be summarised as “health is resilience, and resilience comes from order.” *Zhì*, governance-order-health, results when the movements of the human body accord with the rhythmic changes of yin and yang in the natural world, such as the four seasons. Disruptions to these periodic transformations can occur from environmental factors

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1. Unschuld (2016), p. 11.

2. Rosenberg (2018), p. 28.

(overexposure or unseasonable climatic influences), psychological factors (an unbalanced emotional dynamic), or stemming from lifestyle (activity inappropriate to the four seasons). Healing interventions—herbs, acupoints, or words—are designed to realign human physiology to the natural cycles in which they are embedded.

The mutual correspondences between the individual, sociality and ecology that are contained within the *Nèijīng* offer a sophisticated understanding of human health and the factors contributing to disease. The intrusion of environmental influences (*liù qì* 六氣), psychological influences, and the effects of the social and political environment (later designated *nèiyīn* 內因, *wàiyīn* 外因 and *bù nèi wàiyīn* 不內外因) represent a comprehensive model of physiology and pathomechanics that anticipate biopsychosocial models of health and disease by nearly two millennia.

Chinese medicine is a relational science of systematic correspondence, integration, and order. The *Nèijīng*'s attention to pattern (*zhèng* 証) and interactions across interdependent, complex systems are increasingly seen as an effective means to construct a bridge between Chinese and Western medicine.³ There is a pressing need for such a unified conception of the human body, and the social systems and ecologies in which it is embedded. We propose a fundamental reorientation to our profession along this awareness. The emergence of covid-19 and its dissemination across the globe showcases the compound interactions between environment, social systems and human bodies that can ignite a crisis if not well managed. Climate change and the corresponding increase of infectious diseases, extreme weather events and social and political disruption suggest that the pandemic is likely just the first of more trials to come.

Beyond covid-19, there is growing awareness that long-term health management in the modern world requires learning how to live in a way that is mentally, emotionally and physically adaptive to a planet that is increasingly extreme in terms of environmental degradation and socio-political disharmony. Overwork, fear, anger and anxiety are familiar experiences in our

patient base. Emotional taxation and chronic disease are ranked as causative factors for a generational health abnormality in the US that outranks both the Great Depression and World War II. “Deaths of despair” from opioids, alcohol and suicide represent an emerging global health crisis and will continue to be major health issues even after covid-19 has been resolved.

Human behaviour created our modern dilemma, and changing our behaviour is the only way out. What we need today, as individuals and a society, are fewer silos and more systematic correspondence. This is what makes the authentic transmission of the classics both timely and crucial. The medical model of political-medical-ecological holism represented in the *Huángdì Nèijīng* is characterised by a therapeutic optimism that empowers the individual and society with an ability to make sense of and take action upon the means of health and illness via adherence to natural law and the correspondences of yin-yang and five-phase doctrines. With such knowledge we may instruct patients and inform society how to navigate their environment in a manner that is interconnected, sustainable and meaningful.

Much like the authors of the *Nèijīng*, we, too, must challenge what had been self-evident and reembody our human experience in the empirical laws of nature. Not of materialism, which seeks to demote nature to the realms of genetics and chemistry, but the patterns of flow that dictate health, seasonality, governance and morality.

We believe that our place is on the front line, both during the current pandemic and in future challenges. The problems that confront the world today—pandemics, climate change, resource depletion, economic disruption—require whole systems approaches and whole systems solutions.

Chinese medicine has a history of integrative clinical practice to draw precedent, but it requires that we engage with the classical texts of our medicine, not as a mere academic exercise but as providing a micro-macro hierarchy of actionable principles. These can not only guide us to restore health in the clinic, but also to restore health to our societies so they can adapt to the challenges of the century ahead.

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³ Scheid (2014).