Chinese Health Care Today: Combining Times, Cultures, and Knowledge

Astrid Montucla

Background
As a French and Finnish Pre-med student majoring in Chinese, I own a special interest for the cultural aspect of health care. How do medical systems differ between cultures? Coming from Tahiti, French Polynesia, where physicians only practice Western medicine but no Tahitian Traditional Medicine, I have come to wonder how the Chinese medical system combines its Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) with the Western Medicine (WM).

Objectives / Research Questions
• How do doctors and patients respond to the Westernization of medical practices in China?
• How much importance the Chinese traditional medicine still has in Chinese society?
• How does the level of trust of a patient towards Western medicine impacts his/her experience of healing?

Methods
As I wanted a study abroad experience that would fulfill my medical objectives, I discussed with Professor Helen Shen (my UI Chinese language professor) the possibility of shadowing medical practitioners while studying Chinese in China. Her contact, Professor Gao, Vice-Head of the School of Chinese Language and Culture at the Tianjin University of Technology organized the shadowing experience:
Twice a week for 90 minutes, I shadowed Doctor Pang at Tianjin University of Technology’s Clinic, visited one big hospital on average accompanied by a Chinese teacher, and walked around by myself in surrounding hospitals during weekends.

In Chinese hospitals, Western and Chinese Medicines are like the Yin and the Yang: complementary.

TCM’s and WM’s approach to healing: Distinctions...

A TCM doctor usually starts with evaluating the balance in the heart, the liver, the spleen, the lungs and the kidneys, and enquires about the food consumed before the illness. Those TCM practices obviously contrast with WM Chinese doctors’ methods that are similar to the ones used in the US.

Pharmacies sell both WM and TCM as most WM doctors prescribe a mix of both.

To Chinese medical practitioners I spoke with, WM is seen mainly as rational while TCM is seen as more sensitive, more “in tune” with and respectful of the body’s balance. For example, a WM approach to a headache is to take ibuprofen without searching a reason for the headache. A TCM approach would recommend laying down or drinking more tea to rehydrate.

Chinese physicians see to TCM and WM as intrinsic while patients seem to consider them as working side by side. I believe that doctors are able to make deep scientific connections between both medicines, that is why this trend is observed.

A matter of trust
Discussing trust in TCM and WM was not easy as the concept of trust in a type of medicine did not seem relevant to my Chinese interlocutors. On the other hand, trust in the doctor seemed crucial. Chinese parents teach their child to trust their physician as much as they trust parents and spouses. Doing so is literally “put down the heart” (be reassured) and reach mental rest, beneficial to healing. In China, just like in America, patients use the Internet to understand their illness or disease but rarely question the physician, except if they feel financially abused.

“Western medicine is used to treat illnesses while Chinese medicine helps improving the quality of life.” (WM Doctor)

“TCM heals deeply by re-establishing balance while WM heals superficially by suppressing the symptoms.” (Chinese Proverb)

And Similarities...
Both TCM and WM doctors use modern technology to analyze patient problems and to develop prescriptions.
• The architecture of TCM and WM hospitals is the same.
• Both doctors put an emphasis on preventative care, health promotion, and health education.
• Because of the high number of patients, confidentiality is non-existent for non-fatal diseases.
• In both WM and TCM hospitals, doctors are extremely busy. An OGHryn sees 50 patients between 8 am and 12 pm.

Like a Chinese patient...
When I got a cold one day, I decided to put myself in the shoes of a Chinese patient at the Tianjin University of Chinese Traditional Medicine. After waiting in the registration line for half an hour (scheduling an appointment is not common in China) with my friend Fei Gu and Zhou, a UI student from Tianjin, I chose to see an expert for 13.50 (US$2) instead of a regular TCM doctor for 65 (US$11) to give my hope that the exam would be thorough.

Wang was sent surprisingly to the geriatric department for overweight patients and never figured out why. In any event, in the doctor’s office, seated on a little footstool and surrounded by five other patients, I described my symptoms to an intern who also took my pulse with the fingers and examined the color of my tongue. He recorded my symptoms on my TCM Health Notebook. When asked whether I wanted a blood test, I replied that drugs would be enough, puzzled to be asked about such a test in a TCM hospital.

Impact/ Future Plans
• In 3 years, I hope to go back to Tianjin for my final project that will finish my Master of Public Health (UI Undergrad to Grad Program) that I intend to get in 2018.
• I discovered that although globalization influences China’s medical system, the latter has efficiently combined its cultural approach to medicine with the Western on. I hope other developing countries will manage to do the same and that I will contribute to this process when I work for WHO.

Acknowledgements:
This study couldn’t have succeeded without the generous support of a Stanley Scholarship and a CLAS Scholarship. Many thanks to Professor Shen, Professor Pang, Doctor Willard, and Fei Gu Zhou (‘15) for their precious help.