Chinese Medicine From The Classics: A Beginner’s Guide

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This work also serves as a profound rebuttal to those who would seek to divorce modern ‘medical acupuncture’ from its roots in Chinese culture and philosophy. As Elisabeth Rochat de la Vallée says in her foreword, ‘Chinese medicine can be used and practiced by non-Chinese people, and it can continue to evolve throughout the world – but to build a firm foundation for this [true understanding of its roots, of its vision of life, health and disease and disorder is absolutely necessary].’

The benefits of learning the basics through a study of the classical sources become immediately apparent: difficulties are resolved, unclear thoughts, and confused confusions rendered clear. When one’s understanding of the concept of qi, say, begins from its contextual position within Daqing cosmology, many of the western translational problems simply drop away. Qì need no longer be ‘energy’, ‘functionality’ or ‘informational patterning’; it is simply the movement generated through the interactions of heaven and earth, yin and yang; a kind of intermediary between form and formlessness.

Similarly, the author’s close attention to the ideographic etymology of Chinese characters allows us to trace the subtle evolution of its concepts, rather than settle for bastardised translations shorn of contextual resonance. Learning that the classical meaning of the character zong means ‘a kind of clan gathering of the ancestors’, for example, gives us a present clarity to its variant interpretations as ‘ancestral’, ‘central’ or ‘gathering’ qi. Moreover, that its various qualities can all be described with a single character has practical, not merely conceptual implications and suggests a functional connection between the involvement of ancestral ‘source’ qi, its ‘guardian’, together with qi from food and air, and their ‘gathering’ in the central sea of qi in the chest. It suggests, in short, that the conceptual unity of classical Chinese thought might correlate with a genuine unity in the wider world.

To take another example, we might compare the kind of understanding that results from rote learning that ‘the lungs control the skin’ with the insight that emerges from the author’s account, rooted as it is in the fundamental movements of the wu xing.

‘Whereas the sour taste gathers, and has a balancing effect on the expansive nature of the wood qi, the pungent qi of the lungs diffuses - balancing this contractive effect against the metal. In that double action, the lungs press down, but also diffuse the qi to the surface of the skin and the body hair. The lung qi is therefore responsible for the quality of the skin, its ability to act as a barrier, but also as an interlocutor in the skin’s perspective.’

It is a rich irony that, in trying to inject ‘clarity’ and ‘rationality’ into TCM by remoulding it in the image of western medicine, the result has often been to generate confusion and textual fragmentation where before there was simplicity and organic unity.

Perhaps in deference to the structure of the Su Wen, this guide adopts the cosmological evolutions in its own form, beginning with the notions of dao, yin and yang, before moving on to the xu xing, fuxing, fu and seven emotions. Far from being a stylistic affectation, however, this structure allows the inner sense and profundity of the philosophy to unfold. Each section is perfectly placed to build upon the understanding and ideas established in Daqing cosmology, many of the western translational problems simply drop away. Qì need no longer be ‘energy’, ‘functionality’ or ‘informational patterning’, with so much richness within its pages, there is still space for occasional agreeable divergences into issues such as ancient agriculture, modern medical research, environmental parables and the therapeutic uses of MDMA.

As we have come to expect from Monkey Press, this is also a beautifully produced book. The well-paced type is interspersed with elegant illustrations, vibrant calligraphy by Qu Lei Lei, and reproductions of details from classical medical manuscripts and architectural artefacts. As with the structure of the text, the unity of form and function seems to point back towards the conceptual unity underlying the practice of Chinese medicine; just as the multiple interpretations of a concept are contained in a single character, just as the different elements fold back into yin, yang and dao, just as the ‘ten thousand things’ have their origin in the unity one.

To sincerely engage with Chinese medicine is to be humble in the face of a greater understanding - it is to give due respect to the idea that the universe as a whole may be more unified than our modern western cosmology allows us to perceive. It is possible to practise Chinese medicine in a purely empirical fashion, of course, without paying attention to the metaphysical background of its development or inquiring into how this masterful technology of physiological intervention was approved and evolved. But to be uninformed in the source of its genius, to lack curiosity into what higher unity of understanding might have been involved in extracting its methods and mechanisms, is to relegate the philosophical nature, certainly a gross misperception of its nature.

In that quiet way, Sandra Hill’s work is a powerful and convincing curative for the pitfalls that lie as a clear and concrete introduction to the medicine. It is to be hoped that it becomes the standard text for all new students of the art.

What many folks considering having acupuncture may not fully appreciate is that in addition to providing an effective treatment, an appointee with an acupuncturist generally entails spending a considerable amount of time with an extensively trained healthcare professional. This aspect of acupuncture treatment really should not be overlooked. While treatment from an acupuncturist is not intended to replace care from the GP, our comprehensive training in figuring out how seemingly separate symptoms fit together - how disagreeing problems are linked to mood problems, how poor sleep and hormone imbalance are related and so on - as well as the extra time we have with our patients makes us uniquely positioned to pick up where the GP leaves off and to help patients get better.

Please don’t get me wrong; my colleagues and I have the utmost respect for GPs and the excellent care they provide, indeed, I’m married to one. But the reality of the trade-offs of having a world-class health care system that’s free for the patient may not fully appreciate is that in addition to providing an effective treatment, an appointee with an acupuncturist generally entails spending a considerable amount of time with an extensively trained healthcare professional. This aspect of acupuncture treatment really should not be overlooked. While treatment from an acupuncturist is not intended to replace care from the GP, our comprehensive training in figuring out how seemingly separate symptoms fit together - how disagreeing problems are linked to mood problems, how poor sleep and hormone imbalance are related and so on - as well as the extra time we have with our patients makes us uniquely positioned to pick up where the GP leaves off and to help patients get better.

... because I have had the opportunity to uncover more of the patient’s story than the GP could in a ten-minute consultation - I can help the patient signpost the GP in a potentially more helpful direction.
In Chinese medical theory, there are three things that are essential to sustaining human life: Jing, Qi, and Shen. They are called the “Three Treasures,” and each one contributes to the overall health and wellbeing of the body. While yin and yang can be understood as the underlying idea of Chinese medicine, there are several other important systems that make up the foundation of Chinese medical theory. After yin and yang, the 5 Phase theory (sometimes called “The history of Chinese medicine begins about the second century BC because there are no clear records of medical techniques that are older in China. There exist written descriptions about disease from the Shang Dynasty era (1600-1046 BC), but there isn’t a record of their medical techniques. The first clear medical treatise is the Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon. In the text, the use of moxibustion or acupuncture to manipulate the Yin and Yang are described in ways similar to that practiced nowadays. This and later texts covered a variety of techniques based on traditional physical concepts, but now traditional medicine has a secondary role in China compared to Western medicine. Similar Ancient Medical Practices and Ideas. Could it...