

Narrative and the Evolution of Qi

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ABSTRACT

This offering forms part of a larger group of contributions on qualitative or naturalistic inquiry into Chinese medicine ideas and practice. In Chinese medicine, the clinical encounter may be understood as an occasion when matters of the mind and body are articulated and understood as patterns of qi. What is remarkable is how an encounter may be read as an engagement with universal myths, metaphors and symbols situated within a body of medical knowledge called Chinese medicine. Amplifying the patient's narrative, it is argued, enriches our understanding how qi manifests in the body, offering an insight into states of being. In this paper the idea of the case study, typically used as a way of exploring Chinese medicine ideas, is broadened in scope suggesting that practitioners go beyond the usual inclusion of signs and symptoms and incorporate the narration of everyday life experience as a way of enriching our understanding of Chinese medicine ideas.

KEYWORDS Chinese medicine, narrative, qi, case study, lived experience.

Introduction

This paper is situated in the context of accessing and apprehending Chinese medicine ideas in a contemporary Western context with special attention given to ways in which we understand what is generally referred to as the clinical encounter. As this paper will argue, by amplifying the narration of self, the clinical encounter, re-construed as the narration of self might also be viewed as a contemporary re-enactment and reproduction of Chinese medicine ideas.¹⁻² A perspective of this kind furnishes practitioners with an additional route to apprehending Chinese medicine ideas, enriching our understanding of the phenomena³ of lived experience. The fundamental premise may be stated: that the Chinese medicine encounter encourages narration of self and at the same time is able to include and make sense of lived experience.

A foundational setting

Suggesting a view of this kind necessarily returns attention to some of the theoretical and philosophical foundations of Chinese medicine. Considered as a medical and human endeavour, Chinese medical ideas are supported by creation myths⁴⁻⁶ such as the immanent and transcendent Dao, the creation of yin yang and the presence of a universal force said to animate all life and the many ways in which this force is spoken about. Replete with symbol and metaphor the language of Chinese medicine not only offers an account of how things came into being but how ideas, human relationships and institutions remain and change in human life. When we construe any medicine as a human endeavour we cannot avoid the process of attaching meaning to states of health. Not to use metaphor and symbol as a way of understanding medical concerns and, indeed, the human condition is a linguistic impossibility.⁷⁻⁹

The symbolic expression of such creations myths has pervaded throughout many aspects of Chinese life: in science,¹⁰ historical analysis,¹¹ art,¹² literature¹³ and politics.¹⁴ In relation to medicine,

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all living things, a consequence of the union of yin yang reflected the universe and nature's patterns within. Knowing about nature's cycles meant that one could apprehend how heaven and earth are said to be present in the human body. By comprehending the unceasing flow of qi, whatever the context, an individual was especially placed to begin to understand the human body and as importantly, our being¹⁵ in the world. An important received message from such a paradigm view suggests that if we are subject to the forces of creation, sickness and disease may be taken as humanity's interference with or lack of understanding of the constantly shifting harmony of forces of nature. The 'enemy' to be feared is not nature but our insensitivity to nature at work within us.

Chinese medicine and its supporting ideology propose an explanation of continuity, transformation and change in the world while simultaneously containing elements of mystery. Deeply embedded within nature's cycles, humanity reflected the process of transformation and change. Recognising transformation and change as the unceasing movement of qi offers human beings the opportunity to know about self, mind, body¹⁷ and the human condition. In a strong sense, Chinese medicine offers an eloquent response to fundamental human questions such as why am I here, how do I live my life, what am I meant to do? Indeed, a medicine of this kind alludes to the idea that medicine is more than repairing the body. Arguably, more importantly, it speaks about restoring the person, re-familiarising them with natural forces at work. Chinese medicine proposes a theory of knowing the world and at the same time also provides a set of ideas on how to be in the world.¹⁸⁻²¹

Engaging with and understanding qi need not be taken only as occurring in the clinical encounter. Practitioners have recourse to a text that represents a personal conversation between two mythical characters. Known as the *Nei Jing*, this text is considered a practitioner's 'first text' and belongs to one particular tradition which gives emphasis to experiencing qi through practice and through a literary approach to medicine.²² Unlike contemporary medical texts, the *Nei Jing* reads like a story where two people engage in conversation about medicine and life. The two mythical characters are the emperor Huang Di and his master physician Qi Bo. Revered as a canonical text, their conversation may be read as being set in 'a time before time'. In reading sources of this kind, the student practitioner is afforded a different means of absorbing Chinese medicine ideas. Said to contain a revealed wisdom, Huang Di and Qi Bo's conversation offers the would-be physician a path to understanding and accommodating the relationship between medical knowledge and practice. Invited to immerse oneself in and behind the words, the willing reader would be transformed by the experience offering them a deeper understanding on how being in the world and medicine are related.

Such philosophical ideas provide a basis for developing a clinical gaze²³ that unreservedly acknowledges the life world of a client, allowing the practitioner to make sense of lived experience. In doing so, Chinese medicine articulates a praxis that embraces the mind and body whilst also having profound implications on the sphere of transaction between 'self' and 'other'.

Accepting that human beings are little universes imbued with qi, we rely on language²⁴ to explain and describe our world of experience. Whether the language invoked is 'scientific' or 'ordinary' the bridge with which people share and transmit ideas and experience is language: by giving voice to the voiceless, you have got to find a language.²⁵ Language makes possible the notion and experience of self-awareness. The language of Chinese medicine in particular is 'ordinary' and 'scientific'. Ideas such as qi, yin yang or *wu xing* theory are simultaneously simple and scientific. What is being suggested is that Chinese medicine supplies a language and ideas that are simple; speak clearly and at the same time point to deeper significance and meaning on states of being.

Not unlike our presence in the world: qi comes and goes, in different times and places, is held to be a constant, and always changing regardless of the context in which it is explored. Our being in the world: ideas, thoughts, expression, feelings, values and behaviours can be similarly construed.

Narrative

The section that follows gives attention to and explores the significance of story-telling or narrative in the clinical encounter.²⁶ The narrative underscores the importance of attaching meaning to expressing ideas as a way of conveying practitioners into the client's world of experience. Why give attention to story? Not unlike the *Nei Jing* conversation, people have a predilection to telling stories. Chevalier puts it as, '... I think that we're wired, our DNA tells us to tell stories. We tell stories all the time about everything and I think we do it because the world is a kind of a crazy chaotic place. Sometimes stories, we're trying to make sense of the world a little bit, trying to bring some order to it'.²⁷

Engaging in story helps us to '... remember the past, turn life into language and disclose ourselves and others the truth of our experiences'.²⁸ In the clinical encounter, the body ceases to be an object in need of repair and perceived as an embodied self in a unique life-world. The expressive body, taken as qi with form, is construed as retaining all the necessary resources to create change. By placing emphasis on the client's lived story, the client is afforded a centrality not usually experienced in a bio-medical setting. Change is identified as symptom relief but also as a way of recognising that people are able to re-create new and different narratives of self. This does not suggest that we consider

Chinese medicine principally as a 'talking cure'. Rather, that the symbolic reality expressed in story-telling informs practitioners of the coming and going of qi and, in turn, supplies practitioners with knowledge of how to engage qi, stimulate bodily repair and restore their being. The notion of narrative is perceived as an evolving reflection of self and that Chinese medicine ideas provide a route to understanding states of being.

What is being suggested is that for Westerners, knowing qi can be witnessed and experienced through story-telling and talk. Chinese medicine knowledge, expressed through the power of symbols and imagery permits practitioner and client to understand the body and mind as qi in motion. Understanding qi as *shen* for instance, is an exceptionally important route to apprehending states of being.²⁹

Exploring narrative from differing historical, social and linguistic cultural contexts provides an important path in the acquisition of Chinese medicine knowledge. Two quite different stories are offered, one not immediately recognisable as medical in orientation and nor are they both representative of a traditional Chinese medicine case study.³⁰⁻² The purpose in selecting the following examples is to demonstrate a number of important recurring ideas linked to the transmission of Chinese medicine knowledge in a contemporary Western context:

- Firstly, apprehending and experiencing qi provides an ontological and epistemological approach to understanding the human condition.
- The interpretation of Chinese medicine ideas from a contemporary Western perspective.
- That Chinese medicine ideas may be accessed and apprehended not only anywhere and at anytime but with anyone.
- That ideas from different places and time can have relevance and meaning in other social contexts.
- That qi is an especially useful code and method with which practitioners apprehend the illness experience or states of being.
- Finally, descriptions of self and being in the world, confers access to understanding the natural movements of qi.

Rembrandt: The return of the prodigal son

The following story is not from a Chinese medicine encounter. There is no practitioner and there is no patient. However, we are listening to an individual recounting how one's decisions and reflections on a life lived affects one's sense of being in the world and how one relates to others. Significantly, some of the themes within the story may be understood from a Chinese medicine perspective. The narrative develops the idea of the search for meaning and spiritual transcendence as the narrator moves between and through symbol. The narrative is

presented both as and through a work of art, not unlike the creation of Chinese characters. The narrative serves to illustrate the presence of Chinese medicine ideas and symbols contained in the experiences of everyday life, albeit about fundamental human concerns.

The story recounts what may be understood as an authentic, indeed spiritual experience, stimulated by the symbolic meanings associated with three main figures represented in a painting. The content of the painting is Western in origin, depicting a biblical scene. The purpose for including a 'case study' of this kind is to suggest that although the medical ideas are far removed from the cultural origins of the depiction they may still be applicable in different cultural settings. The painting is Rembrandt's *The Return of The Prodigal Son* (Figure 1). Nouwen³³ is the storyteller who locates himself in the meaning of returning home as the prodigal son. Indeed, Nouwen likens himself not only to the two sons and the father, but also to aspects of Rembrandt's life. He notes that at the time of painting, Rembrandt was close to death, suggestive of Rembrandt's final approach home and to his 'father', and as Nouwen suggested, back to his origins. Nouwen happened to be on his personal journey back 'home'. Nouwen's transformative experience is located and moves between the meaning of the narrative in the painting and the painter.

Nouwen wrote:

Moving my eyes from the repentant son to the compassionate father, I see that the glittering light reflecting from golden chains, helmets, candles, and hidden lamps has died out and been replaced by the inner light of old age. It is the movement from the glory that seduces one into an ever greater search for wealth and popularity to the glory that is hidden in the human soul and surpasses death.³⁴

Eventually, Nouwen states:

...Both sons in me can gradually be transformed into the compassionate father. This transformation leads me to the fulfillment of the deepest desire of my restless heart. Because what greater joy can there be for me than to stretch out my tired arms and let my hands rest in a blessing on the shoulders of my home-coming children.³⁵

Nouwen's story and Rembrandt's work is symbolic of birth, death and rebirth: a healing that goes to the core of being human, expressed as one returning home after having experienced the world away from home. Like the mythological basis of New Year celebrations or the symbolic meaning of the Crucifixion, both of which mark a new beginning, the search is a yearning for renewal in returning. Reconciliation with one's origins and past is a central theme. For Nouwen his sense of homecoming and renewal is to become and understand what it means to be a compassionate father, a way of saying he is returning home, to his origins.

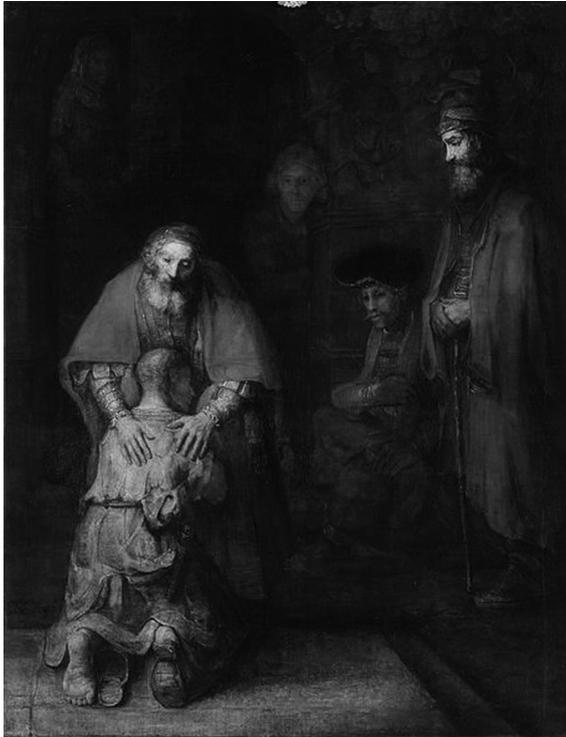


FIGURE 1 Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, c. 1661–1669.⁴⁰

Important questions arise in terms of how and in what ways can Chinese medicine ideas such as *wu xing* be applied to understand human issues such as wisdom, return to one's origins, acceptance, reconciliation with others and self, finding peace and being at home. Indeed, one challenge would be to work through this depiction by invoking a *wu xing* analysis.

In Chinese medicine terms, Connelly³⁶ addresses similar issues when she writes on 'homing': the sense of returning home, of being at home in oneself, being reconciled with others, understanding ones origins, caring for others or indeed how one wishes to be cared for by others. As Connelly suggests, and perhaps not unlike Li Dong Yuan's thesis, our illness as lived experience occurs on earth. Treatment, for instance, is designed to touch the 'Earth' within a person. Much of our illnesses have to do with how we live on earth and how we treat our earth. Connelly explores and elaborates on the various meanings of home and earth. Earth is said to be the place on which one's life is enacted. One's personal sense of health and the potential of what one may become are to pass through time and reconnect with nature's forces allowing for previously unknown but knowable possibilities. Like the symbols of Heaven, *tian* 天, and Earth, *tu* 土, representing the totality of the cosmos, the experience of suffering associated with being on

Earth is placed in a relationship with things away from earth, alluding to the idea of the mysteries of Heaven. Healing, reconciliation, attainment of knowledge and experiencing the way of Heaven is seen as representing the prodigal son's departure and return home to his origins.³⁷ It is a story of leaving and returning and discovering the 'source' or as Eliade suggests, to a place where the purpose, '...is not to conserve the memory ... but to transport the patient to where that event is in process of accomplishment – namely, to the dawn of Time...'.³⁸

However, true to the nature of story, telling the way is not a singular path, rather it is pointed to through the discourse. Chinese medicine like poetry or art remakes reality, offering a way to recreate language and meaning. Chinese medicine can make the strange familiar. At the same time, Chinese medicine can also make the familiar strange. The realm of metaphor links the client's narrative and bodily felt experiences adds to the significance and meaning of Chinese medicine ideas. For the practitioner, the story raises the question of how and what way could acupuncture support and enrich a prodigal son's return home? Meaning is revealed, understood and communicated between client and practitioner or between storyteller and willing listener.

Ambrosia

In the following case study, there is a practitioner and a client and the symptom pattern now looks more like a contemporary Chinese medicine description. Ambrosia is a plump, round faced forty-three year old woman who moved into the area some three years ago. She arrived on time after leaving work, wearing light brown slacks, low heeled leather shoes and orange-brown top. She had thin straight hair, no make-up and silver-looking earrings. Having asked why she was presenting for acupuncture Ambrosia paused a while, went into thought and then offered three reasons in order of importance: 'being possessed by consuming lethargy, always feeling the cold, and having too much weight'. As she spoke of her symptoms there seemed to be a strong plaintive cry in her voice, particularly when she referred to her unbroken tiredness.

What impressed the practitioner from the first meeting was the manner in which she identified and spoke of the issues which concerned her, clearly indicating how deeply connected they were to her sense of well being. Though the pattern diagnosis was that of a kidney-spleen *yang xu*, emphasis will be given to Ambrosia's story and revelations about the self during the course of her acupuncture treatments. In other words, the focus will be how Ambrosia spoke of her state of being which is taken, at the same time, as part of the pattern kidney-spleen *yang xu*.

For Ambrosia, there was a deep feeling of desperation about being constantly tired. At times, she was so tired that on returning from work she felt like going straight to bed. She did

this from time to time. Large chunks of her weekends were spent sleeping. Yet somehow, Ambrosia managed to present another face to the world at large. From her perspective, the way she presented herself at work gave little or no indication that she was exhausted, really wanted to go home or stop what she was doing. At home, the situation was much the same. She did her best not to appear exhausted and at the same time was ready to give a helping hand at home. This was also a way of trying to convince herself that she was not tired and worn out.

Ambrosia managed to go on, in her work and at home. Outwardly, she gave signs of managing her life with sufficient energy and confidence. Inwardly, Ambrosia was utterly exhausted and desperately wanted to know why all this was happening to her. In her mind, she was doing all the right things: was living a not particularly stressful lifestyle, ate the right foods, enjoyed her time at work and at home and had a loving family.

Inwardly, she stated that her exhaustion seemed to 'consume the very core of being Ambrosia'. Two important issues emerged for Ambrosia. Firstly, that she was losing confidence in herself and at the same time becoming quite fearful. What made it worse was that she could not name her fears. Rather, her fear was deep seated. When she experienced intense bouts of fear her body trembled from the inside, she went cold, felt tired, sleepy and eventually urinated a lot. She also wanted to avoid social contact. So intense was her fear, Ambrosia described it as 'the dark night of my heart and soul'.

Ambrosia's fear of 'losing it', as she put it, brought her to the point of losing faith, not faith as in religious belief but losing faith in the experience of confidence. Ambrosia's sense of purpose and drive that gave substance to her life seemed to be vanishing right through her. She did contemplate suicide but decided against it because the courage to be outweighed the desire to yield to her despair.

In many ways, her illness happened to be a watershed. Reflecting on her condition Ambrosia now views the fear and suffering connected with her lethargy as the first step to affirming herself in spite of the fear of not being at peace. Connected with this realisation went the sense that 'others have also gone through a similar crisis and I can proceed even if it is very dark and full of fear'. For Ambrosia, her illness also gave new meaning to trusting and having a sincerity that gives substance to being a solitary individual. As her symptoms improved, she made the comment that she was better able 'to bear things from below'. Indeed, her definition of suffering was 'to bear things from below', suggestive of the idea that she felt more supported and grounded.

Connected to 'bearing things from below' Ambrosia recounted that she was able to resolve a long standing hurt. Some three years ago, she had a falling out with a close friend. They

had not spoken since that time and as far as Ambrosia was concerned, the situation was irresolvable. About a day after the fifth treatment, Ambrosia rang her estranged friend and within a 40 minute phone call, what she saw as an impossible situation was now resolved. That her sense of alienation was beginning to change while her other symptoms were improving was a stunning revelation for Ambrosia. Even though she was scared about making the call Ambrosia felt confident. It was a strange feeling for her.

And what about her severe exhaustion? She is still tired and did reduce her weight. However, and as importantly, Ambrosia is able to do the sort of things she was previously not doing: go on outings on the weekend, stay up with her children and partner and have people over for dinner. For Ambrosia life seemed to have purpose and motives became clearer as if fuelled by a 'refining fire'. One of her parting comments was, 'It's OK to be fearful as long as your faith stays a nose length in front.'

Conclusion

In this paper, the evolution of qi was presented as 'case studies'. However, the notion of the case study was enlarged to mean not only the usual qi patterns described in contemporary Chinese medicine texts but also to understand everyday life experiences as studies of qi. Listening to a person narrate the self confers passage to qi and indeed can occur anywhere and anytime because qi 'speaks for itself'. In a strong sense, reading a book, a poem, gazing at works of art, making peace with another, coming to terms with being an individual can transform one's sense of being and one ceases to feel mediocre, accidental or mortal.³⁹ What is being alluded to is that any person prepared to work with qi will experience qi and that stories provide a special route to understanding Chinese medicine ideas.

Understanding the cosmos and one's connection with external forces allows people to become embedded into universal themes. Access to Chinese medicine ideas through the therapeutic encounter convey practitioners into ways of exploring fundamental human concerns, recognised as an intimate and fluctuating relationship between mind and body. Apprehending the fluctuations of qi for instance are passages to understanding an inner world of amplifying the domain of the spirit. Chinese medicine may be construed first as a way of repairing the body but also as a way of affirming life, often alluding to other dimensions of awareness and thought and the potential to understand humanity's place in the universe.

For practitioners, to apprehend Chinese medicine knowledge requires one to absorb and experience qi, which is central to everyday life. Giving attention to another's story during the therapeutic encounter may be considered as a passage to understanding everyday life because qi is at the centre of things.

In this way, the experience returns the person to an inward vision, achieving a deeper sense of reality. A fundamental tenet of Chinese medicine thinking is if people focus their attention on the cosmos 'living' within the body and keep the mind 'tuned' one discovers another natural home. This natural home offers people a way of realising a universal cosmological principal, which practitioners recognise as qi. The proposition is that Chinese medicine is fundamentally the study of the evolution of qi and that how we structure a life lived may be read as qi. Thus gazing at works of art, reading a book, how we spend our time alone and in relationship or in the clinical setting all offer a route to apprehending Chinese medicine ideas. And, in particular the Chinese medicine setting offers a way of including and understanding lived experience.

Clinical Commentary

This paper offers a different and additional view to understanding Chinese medicine ideas and their application. It proposes that in addition to the more usual inclusion of signs and symptoms practitioners give attention and listen to aspects of a client's everyday life as a way of understanding patterns of qi. This offering also suggests that Chinese medicine ideas supply the necessary structures to achieve this end. Insofar as research endeavours that aim to explore the efficacy of acupuncture for instance the paper strongly alludes to the idea that large aspects of the lived experience of clients need to be included in Chinese medicine research endeavours.

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