

Abstract

While modern medicine considers the human body as a biological system that can be studied in the same objective manner as other physical objects, Chinese medicine has a fundamentally different worldview. Chinese medicine views the human body, not simply as a biological system, but as a holistic microcosm, whose health depends on maintaining harmonious function at the level of internal microcosm and in relation to wider context understood as parallel macrocosm. Without denying the success of natural science, philosophers have developed alternative epistemological conceptions that aim to better capture the nature of knowledge specifically related to human phenomena. Wilhelm Dilthey draws a distinction between understanding () and explanation () as the specific form of knowing in human and natural sciences respectively. In contrast to positivistic knowledge of natural sciences, knowledge in human sciences is essentially in nature, knowledge that involves interpretation and understanding that takes into account variant contexts and perspectives. The hermeneutic conception offers a promising framework for understanding the nature of Chinese medicine and explaining the role of Chinese medical classics.

Keywords: Chinese medicine, Hermeneutics, Philosophy

components of Chinese medicine such as acupuncture and cupping therapy have even been adopted to a certain extent by practitioners of modern medicine and have gained in popularity.³ A

more in-depth investigation into the nature of Chinese medical knowledge has to be undertaken in order to understand how such knowledge differs from the scientific knowledge of modern medicine.

Modern Medicine and the Worldview of Natural Science

Modern medical science, as part of natural science, has succeeded in persuading people that it provides privileged access to objective truth and that it describes objective reality. It is perceived to be trans-cultural and universally applicable. The medicines produced under the paradigms of modern medical science are claimed to be effective in curing particular diseases regardless who is treated. Biomedical research

viewing scientific development as “the piecemeal process by which these items [i.e. facts, theories and methods] have been added, singly and in combination, to the ever growing stockpile that

activities of scientific research are not as “objective” and “rational” as they appear to be. The results of these allegedly objective but in fact biased scientific researches were thought to constitute the “truth” that represents objective reality out there in the physical world. The search for truth is a central theme of Western tradition that has been leading the development of Western culture since Ancient Greece. Although natural science, as an area of inquiry, constantly emphasizes its “objectivity” and “universality,” it inevitably works under specific presuppositions. Although it is not explicitly stated, there is actually a metaphysical assumption of realism in modern science. It presupposes that there is a reality out there to be investigated and discovered. Natural science’s strong abilities in prediction and manipulation lead to the thought that it can grasp the “objective truth” – the only sort of truth worthy of the name due to its correspondence to objective reality. This realist view, however, is being challenged

when the existing agreements within science encounter other agreements from other communities, the procedures of justification should be determined by the unforced agreement of the communities. In this sense, what truth is is determined by which idea turns out to be better at the moment, and the truth is always open to challenges from new evidence and arguments. These challenges provide

concepts extending for more than two thousand years. New ideas were developed or introduced from outside and adopted by authors of medical texts, while at the same time older views continued to have their practitioners and clients (1985, 5).

The intracultural diversity of Chinese medicine reveals a completely different attitude towards medicine when compared with modern medicine. Unschuld has constructed a conceptual framework to illustrate the system of Chinese medical knowledge. He proposes that there is a durable paradigmatic core with a “soft coating” of therapeutic knowledge in the system of Chinese medicine (1985, 7-8). The durable core of Chinese medicine, which consists of two paradigms, namely “the paradigm of cause-and-effect relations between corresponding phenomena” and “the paradigm of cause-and-effect relations between non-corresponding phenomena”, basically welcomes any kinds of solution to health care problems. Although the two paradigms are fundamental in Chinese medicine, they are not exclusive to Chinese medical system. On the other hand, the soft coating of medical knowledge, which is flexible and subject to frequent modification, refers to the “health care-related concepts that have changed over time” (Unschuld, 1985, 9).

The relation between the paradigmatic core and the soft coating can be demonstrated by an example given by Unschuld: the durable core “contains the knowledge that there exist other-than-human beings that may influence human life,” whereas “the soft coating may identify these beings as permanently evil and malevolent” or “as capable of delivering both harm and cure)” (1985, 9).

Further,

The soft coating also includes perceptions of the functions and structure of the organism as well as the formulation of behavioural norms designed for the prevention and treatment of illness. These behavioural norms include those which, if violated, may create conditions activating any of the basic causative principles (1985, 9).

After analysing the history of ideas in Chinese medicine, Unschuld suggests that, unlike modern medicine, the basic validity of therapeutic concepts in Chinese medicine is primarily social and the efficacy of specific therapeutic concepts seems to be of secondary significance (1985, 12). However, even though the soft coating of medical knowledge changes with sociopolitical ideology, the non-dominating conceptual systems of health care are not totally eliminated from the field. Rather, these systems “survive in social groups that continue to follow a consistent sociopolitical ideology” (1985, 13). So, how could this be possible? Unschuld’s suggestion of the practitioner’s and patient’s eclectic and syncretic nature in Chinese medicine may be a hint to the answer. He says,

The eclectic and syncretic nature of patient and practitioner utilization of available ideas and tangible primary resources in pluralistic health care settings of complex societies is partly a result of the healer’s striving for secondary resources, that is, remuneration, and of the patients’ desire to maintain or regain health by all means. Eclectic and syncretic health care behavior are, thus mainly goal oriented, not cognition based (1985, 14).

In short, the philosophy of Chinese medicine is to leave room for the patients and practitioners to look for the best possible solution for an individual.

natural sciences () respectively.⁵ Natural sciences take a detached stance towards their objects, resulting in positive knowledge about external causal relationships and mechanistic explanation of objectifiable phenomena. Applying this natural scientific model to the study of human phenomena, however, fails to take the essentially socio-historical and cultural nature of human existence into proper account. According to Dilthey, human sciences have to acknowledge the interpretive or perspectivistic nature of their studies, in which understanding is achieved through a communicative and participatory exploration of human phenomena in view of their specific, culturally situated “nexus of life” ().⁶ In contrast to positivistic knowledge of natural sciences, knowledge in human sciences is essentially in nature, knowledge that involves interpretation and understanding that takes into account variant contexts and perspectives. This approach of interpretation with the distinction of understanding and explanation is later reformulated by Karl-Otto Apel with the name of

behavioural explanation in the process of psychoanalysis, which cannot be used without translating “the language of psychological and sociological ‘explanations’ into the language of a deepened self-understanding that transforms their motivational structure and thereby robs the ‘explanation’ of its foundation” (Apel, 1980, 71). Thus, there is a working of _____ in the process of psychoanalysis which helps to form its _____. Apel considers this a dialectical mediation of _____ and _____, which he calls “the critique of ideology” (1980, 72) – for ideology refers to a transcendental framework of what things mean and what it is like, the dialectical mediation of _____ and _____ is constantly analyzing and assessing that transcendental framework. It somehow indicates that _____ and _____ can be understood as two ends of a line and form a kind of spectrum, in which natural sciences are more inclined to _____ while human sciences are closer to _____.

Apel

Therefore, cannot be achieved by distancing from the “objects to be studied.” Rather, we have to go into the total situation in order to understand human sciences. This is a typical antipositivistic view. The tenets of positivism include, as Wright indicates, the idea of the unity of scientific method and “the view that the exact natural sciences, in particular mathematical physics, set a methodological idea or standard which measures the degree of development and perfection of all the other sciences, including the humanities” (1971, 4). The positivists believe that the world should be explained by general laws, which presuppose causal relationship in explanations. Positivism even assumes that there are general laws of nature, including “human nature”. However, to antipositivists, there is a methodological dichotomy of and

in Chinese medicine. This process of constant can be visualized as we imagine
numerous Chinese medical practitioners consulting and reinterpreting the classical texts relative

hermeneutically. A key reason for the success of this hermeneutic process in Chinese medicine is that it favours *pragmatism* rather than *idealism*. With a pragmatic approach to restoring balance within a patient's body, different approaches to treatment of patients sharing similar symptoms could be considered equally effective, as long as they proved effective in each case. The system of Chinese medicine does not exclude any knowledge as long as it could be beneficial to the well-being of individuals. As a result, an intracultural diversity of Chinese medical knowledge is formed. When the interpreters, i.e. the Chinese medical practitioners, work with the patients, their historicity are included in the process of diagnosis and treatment. Meanwhile, what the interpreters have learned in the process of trying to heal the patients reciprocally informs the historicity of the interpreters. Thus, the dialectical mediation of *pragmatism* and *idealism* is integral to the healing process within Chinese medicine.

Classical texts such as *Suwen* play a vital role in this hermeneutic circle. They provide interrelating theories that are rich enough for *pragmatism* to operate. It is fascinating that even though laws and theories may be taken as *idealism* in nature, Chinese medical theory, as a knowledge about human body, functions side by side with the pragmatic approach in Chinese medicine that makes Chinese medical knowledge, as a whole, closer to *pragmatism* in nature. The basic tenet of the *Suwen*, for example, is to act aptly to maintain health and to act aptly to help to restore the good order of the body when there are signs of abnormality. As in the first chapter of the *Suwen*, when *Huangdi* asked *Qibo* why the people of high antiquity had long and healthy lives, *Qibo* answered:

The people of high antiquity, those who knew the Way,
they modeled [their behaviour] on yin and yang and they complied with the arts and the calculations.

[Their] eating and drinking was moderate.

[Their] rising and resting had regularity.

They did not tax [themselves] with meaningless work.⁷

From this passage, it is apparent that the vitally important thing to do to achieve a long and healthy life, as told in the , is to act aptly. Eating, drinking, rising, resting, and working are all essential in our lives, but it is crucial not to overdo these. So, what exactly does “aptly” mean?

includes some explanations that are subject to further interpretation. The interpreters’ attempts are sometimes recorded in a systematic manner as commentary on the classical texts; and many of the times incorporated in the process of diagnosis and treatment on individual level.

The high tolerance of diversity in Chinese medicine results in a common phenomenon that could not be acceptable in the modern medicine paradigm; it is, a

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