

East/West

Synopsis

Examination of the differences between Eastern and Western thought as revealed by cognitive science; and how these differences help to explain the different viewpoints of Western and Eastern medicine; and the particular challenge that is faced in understanding Eastern medicine.

East and West

Some of the differences between Chinese medicine and Western medicine are rooted deeply in differences in worldview and thought that have predominated and still do in these cultures. To complicate matters modern Traditional Chinese Medicine does not necessarily reflect that Eastern perspective. Part of the problem may be that what is commonly seen as the Eastern world view is not necessarily an absolute reality. I have long thought that it might be an idealization. But the work of researchers does suggest that it is part of the predominant cognitive processes of Easterners.

Eastern and Western worldview and thought have had differing emphasis. ‘The Geography of Thought’ by Richard E. Nisbett explores the differences in cognitive processes between East and West. In particular the tendency in the West (Greco-Roman) tradition is to identify the world as made of discrete objects with intrinsic properties. In the East there is a greater emphasis on relations between things and context.

‘Eastern’	‘Western’
Relations and Context	Discrete Objects with Intrinsic properties
Cyclical processes	Linear processes
Contradictions are tolerated and welcomed	Aristotelian logic ‘A’ or ‘not A’
Syncretic	Thesis, antithesis - synthesis

The Western tradition of the four elements identifies four substances (discrete objects) with certain properties. The Greeks also theorized that the world was made of smaller discrete objects called atoms with their own intrinsic properties. Hence the modern idea of elements is a direct development from these early ideas. If one wanted to update the concept of Elements it would be apparent that one could make a correlation with the four states of matter – solid, liquid, gaseous, plasma (I digress).

The Chinese postulated five entities that were dynamic activities; either phases of a complete cycle, and thus less strongly delineated (symbolized by circle), or forces. Wu Yun – ‘Circuit

Phases’ (Porkert), Wu Hsing ‘Evolutive Phases’ (Porkert), Elemental Phases (MaoShing Ni), Processes (Nisbett).

The distinction between an emphasis on linear processes and cyclical is also characteristic of West and East.

The Eastern perspective is harder to convey in words. I have used the word substance above to convey the difference between the Western and Eastern view of the elements. Nisbett uses the word substances from a different perspective to highlight the opposite point. He suggests that when a Westerner looks at a tree they see ‘tree’, but in the Eastern viewpoint see s substance Wood; i.e. an idea that links this tree to all other trees. Two different contexts for the word substance to convey a different point; we run into examples of this often in Chinese medicine and it often leads to arguments even when people are in agreement but don’t realize it because of the language they use.

Differentiation of Syndromes is a practical application of these Eastern principles especially the contextual principle. No one piece of information is considered as definitive in a diagnosis. Syndromes are collections of signs and symptoms and any sign of symptom could be part of multiple patterns. So in principle no one item is enough to make a deduction.

‘Five Element’ also strongly emphasizes the relational and contextual nature of signs and symptoms. We can further examine the attributes or associations and differentiate the two viewpoints.

Table – Heiner Fruehauf

<p>‘CCM’</p> <p>Communicates through symbols which contain and correlate multiple layers of meaning</p> <p>Preserves the lunar element of complexity and “obscuring” mystery that defies exacting definition (wuwei maxim: “do not define categorically”)</p>	<p>“TCM’</p> <p>Communicates through words and terms which refer to narrowly defined contents</p> <p>Demystifies and demythologizes the traditional record by “illuminating” aspects of lunar ambivalence, and by creating “clear and simple” textbook definitions (youwei maxim: “define as firmly and precisely as possible”)</p>
---	---

We can characterize the left side as the ‘finger pointing at the moon’ idea, or ‘the map is not the territory’.

Attributes and associations range from some fairly precise to metaphorical and indeed many can be interpreted more in either mode. For example in the common idea of the tissues the idea of

‘sinews’ with Wood and ‘flesh’ with Earth are not considered to be anatomical distinctions. Rather ‘sinews’ is the functional aspect of muscles, tendons, ligaments, and flesh is more the anatomical tissues, including muscles, fat, skin. Phlegm denotes a greater range of possible meaning (such as in the traditional Western usage of phlegmatic) than the more limited term mucous.

We can also look at the Chinese medicine view of the whole body.

Table - Heiner Fruehauf

CCM	TCM
Views body as field (traditional zang/xiang theory: zang/fu are primarily viewed as functional systems)	Views body as materiality (influence of modern anatomy: zang/fu are primarily viewed as structural organs)

Or the individual entities (organs). Manfred Porkert does not use the distinction of CCM and TCM but he does tend to work from primary information and so his viewpoint does fit more with the CCM viewpoint.

Table - Manfred Porkert – Orbisconography

CCM	TCM
Orb or Official 1. Functional system (not completely congruent with the anatomical structure in some cases quite distinct) 2. Non-localised	Organ or Zang Fu An organic structure (i.e. a discrete object with intrinsic properties)

We shall discuss later that Twelve Officials is more aligned to the orbisconographic viewpoint.

Five Phases to some extent illustrates the difference between the Eastern and Western modes, but also blends the two.

Five Phases have two main components.

1. Relations: the Sheng and Ke cycles. Illustrating the greater emphasis placed on the relation between the phases than the properties of individual phases
2. The attributes or associations

In accord with the Eastern perspective there is greater emphasis is on the relations of the phases. For example, rather than place a condition within a phase it is more commonly a relation of

phases. For example, sleep disturbances, palpitations as Shao Yin disharmony (Kidney and Heart not harmonized) rather than as Heart.

One way of approaching this is that identifying a particular phase is ‘what’ is happening. For example: Liver Qi Stagnation is what is happening. The relational mode is addressing the question ‘why’ is it happening. Perhaps there is Liver Qi Stagnation because there is Lu Qi Deficiency – Metal is failing to regulate Wood.

The body itself can be viewed differently in the discrete object versus relational mode.

Table - After Heiner Fruehauf – I have modified Fruehauf’s headings.

‘Eastern’ – Relational/Contextual	‘Western’ - Discrete object
Body is treated as a microcosm that follows macrocosmic laws and is continually informed by macrocosmic influences (totality of cosmic/calendric/ seasonal patterns created by conjunctions of sun, moon, and stars)	Body is treated as an independent entity

East and West

There is a common idea that East and West have different modes of thought. I believed that this was something of an idealization. Indeed Edward De Bono in the Mechanism of Mind has shown that some of the tendency that we might identify as the more Western is innate trait of the human brain. But recent research in cognitive science seems to support this idea of real difference as true even in the modern era. In particular The Geography of Thought by Nisbett describes Eastern and Western cognitive processes. We could summarize the difference:

In particular the tendency in the West (Greco-Roman) tradition is to identify the world as made of discrete objects with intrinsic properties. In the East there is a greater emphasis on relations between things and context.

Even the most Conservative or pragmatic of Eastern traditions Confucianism emphasizes relations, and principles that were intended to be natural, not just conformity for its own sake.

The simplest example is Yin/Yang theory. Many Western traditions have a theory of dualism, it is an idea that figured strongly in Zoroastrianism and was inherited by Christianity. Edward de Bono demonstrated that this tendency to form categories and to polarization of these categories is intrinsic. It reached extremes in the Gnostic traditions, and their successors such as the Cathars. But in the East the concept of the duality of the universe is balanced by a concept of the ultimate unity of these two forces the Tao and their inter-relational nature. This belief system has been appropriately described as dualistic-monism.

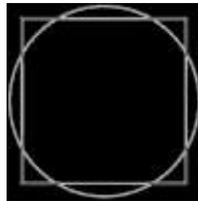
In the West we often credit or blame people for more than they are strictly responsible for, and so we often refer to Descartes when discussing a fundamental dualism in Western thought. After the enlightenment the areas known as natural philosophy has started to become science, and was in conflict with the church, and so gradually the areas of spirit and science came to be seen as separate. Descartes articulated ideas that are seen as central to this separation. Some of this may have been political, an attempt to placate the church, but rightly or wrongly this division in thought has become identified with Descartes. In traditional Eastern thought the worlds of the mundane and natural world are not separable from the philosophical and spiritual realm.

Another simple example of this difference is another crucial traditional theory: the Graeco-Roman tradition of four elements that have largely been rendered redundant by the modern scientific identification of elements, and indeed their subdivision into atoms (as originally theorized by the Greeks). The Chinese tradition may well have started with much the same idea, but the five elements of Chinese tradition became thought of as five processes with a greater emphasis on their relations and their cyclical aspects¹. So much so that the very term element is questioned and other suggestions are ‘Phase’, ‘Evolutive Phase’, or ‘Elemental Phase’. Also in

¹ Even the difference in numbers is significant. Four is thought of as an Earthly number, the world is foursquare. Five is thought of as a Heavenly number, closer to the whole and undivided.

five elements theory there are associations of many things that can be seen as quintuple, and there is a great tendency to see these as five separate things, but the idea of association is less cut and dried than that. Like the seasons which although four (or five) do not abruptly go from one to another – hence the term a phase. Modern TCM has largely de-emphasized the theory of five elements (Kaphchuk) but many Westerners have been attracted by the very principles and hence the two main approaches to Chinese medicine are often distinguished by the emphasis placed on this theory.

It is common to talk of Aristotelian logic or dialectics as representing a fundamental basis of Western thought. This is of course not solely to be laid at the feet of Aristotle any more than Descartes is to blame for the division between spirit and matter. It is not customary in the mainstream of Western/Graeco-Roman tradition of thought to simply accept a contradiction, and not strive to (re)solve it. This has become what is known as dialectics and is commonly described as a hypothesis which is matched by an antithesis. In accord with Aristelian logic these cannot both be correct, so either one or other is wrong, or they are both incomplete and a synthesis of the two is correct. Eastern syncretic thinking does not see a need to go through this process, different models or explanations are accepted as valid even if they do not appear to be reconcilable. Accepting apparent contradictions is a seeming paradox that is understood both in the East and West (in more esoteric groups) as ‘squaring the circle’.



These differences in thought represent the basis of the struggle many face in coming to understand Chinese medicine and Eastern thought in general in its Classical Expression – to accept the apparent contradictory ideas as equally valid, as not exclusive, but also to accept their integrity and not try to square off the circle or sand off the corner of the square. At the same time this does not mean that anything goes, there is Critical Thinking² in Eastern thought also.

² Critical Thinking usually refers to the Western logic and reasoning.

Traditional and Classical Chinese Medicine

The modern received teachings of Chinese medicine are called Traditional Chinese Medicine. The Chinese medicine described in the Classics differs in some respects philosophically and technically, hence the term Classical Chinese medicine as descriptive of ideas and practice as described in the Classic texts. Heiner Fruehauf has done a good job of contrasting the differences. Although he does state clearly that these are not to be considered rigid categories it is almost inevitable that readers tend to not hear these statements as such, and there is a tendency to get defensive about the criticism implied in these statements.

I prefer to think of Heiner Fruehauf’s statements as not TCM v CCM, but as a spectrum of ideas within Chinese medicine, which can often be characterized as the more philosophical and idealistic versus the more pragmatic and technical. In each category individual practitioners will have different understandings and practice.

Indeed I would suggest that no one can operate purely in the philosophical and ideal realm we all have to make some compromise with the pragmatic. Those in the CCM realm often have a certain perception of superiority that is unwarranted often ideas are understood intellectually more than in practice, whereas those in the TCM realm often believe that the theories and practice of the CCM folk is something of Western manufacture, and that theirs is the real Chinese medicine. I do not think that it would be bad if both groups have their bubbles burst!

<p>CCM</p> <p>Views body as field</p> <p>(traditional zang/xiang theory: zang/fu are primarily viewed as functional systems)</p>	<p>TCM</p> <p>Views body as materiality</p> <p>(influence of modern anatomy: zang/fu are primarily viewed as structural organs)</p>
--	---

One underlying theme of the modern Traditional Chinese Medicine is that it is closer to Western thought. To take one example the received concept of Zang-Fu theory identifies eleven viscera and bowels and their functions. What could be described as the Classical recognizes that these are functions rather than anatomic structures. Porkert has articulated strongly the discrepancy between these ideas, and he has coined the term ‘orb’ to refer to these entities (Porkert 107). I believe that Larre’s description is actually the more balanced understanding. Larre uses term official which is also favoured by J. R. Worsley.

The naming of organs to designate the large apparatuses located in the major cavities of the human body is rather unfortunate, for it is not a question **merely** of the anatomical connotation which the names imply.

All the ideograms used in Chinese medicine in connection with the body's workings describe mechanisms and functions. These mechanisms **usually unfold in certain regions of the body** whose **anatomical location makes us think of their specific Western names**. However, adjustment of name and location **does not always strictly coincide**, for the functions attributed to an organ are not limited to a topographical region, and they extend far beyond the area in question. The heart for example, by controlling the circulation, commands the entire vascular system the thus the total vitality of the body. Also the mechanisms subsumed by the designation of 'spleen' carry their affects to the extremity of the body.

(Larre 158)

Most importantly the Twelve Officials are an interdependent ensemble, this is known as the Twelve Officials theory. It should be noted that Zang-Fu theory is the predominant terms found in the Classics, and the basis of twelve officials theory is largely found in Chapter 8 of the Su Wen. And so Zang-Fu theory is not a later invention and modern. But the Twelve Officials theory represents the more idealistic or philosophical ideas. But because it is a fairly isolated section of the Classic texts it also is not necessarily recognized as a crucial part of Classical Chinese medicine. It is however, a crucial part of Five Element theory and practice.