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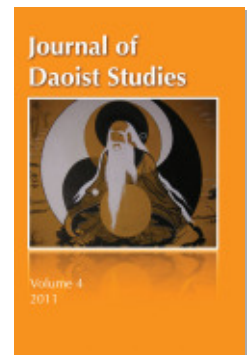
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Infusing Chinese Medicine with Spirit

Daoism, Shamanism, & Chinese Medicine in the Modern World

MARY KAY RYAN

Chinese medicine as it is developing in the modern world and particularly in the so-called West is engaged in a debate over the place that spirituality will play in its practice. On the one hand are those who bemoan the exclusion of “spirituality” from our medicine (e.g. Jarrett 2000), while others work diligently to create something they call a “modern secular Chinese medicine” (Lake and Flaws 2001, ch. 2, 37). Succinctly put, the latter view states: “In contemporary professional Chinese medicine, spirit is nothing other than a certain quantity of heart *qi*. Thus the concept of spirit in Chinese medicine is not ‘spiritual’ in any conventional religious sense” (Lake and Flaws 2001, 17).

In this paper, I will make a fourfold argument:

- that spirituality has always been and should still be a deeply intrinsic part of medicine and that therefore Chinese medicine does indeed need to consider some kind of spiritual content if it is not to be subsumed wholesale into the materialist worldview of the mainstream medical system;
- that Daoism should probably contribute the largest part of that spirituality
- that to do so, it may have to consider remaking itself in some sense to appeal to a much wider world audience;
- and that shamanic practices might be able to offer a method that could make Daoism more accessible outside its native China.

Spirituality

In order to talk about Chinese medicine, Daoism, and shamanism, all large subjects in and of themselves, let us define some terms first. What for instance is “spirituality?” Under the rubric of Chinese medicine and alternative medicine in general in the twentieth century, the term has come to be defined as almost coterminous with the emotions.¹¹² This is a rather odd development, given that in most spiritual systems, especially those with a mystical bent, the emotions are seen as problematic in spiritual pursuits and can be things that have a tendency to “get in the way of” spiritual development (see Walsh 1999).

Another irony is that the model of the emotions being grafted onto Chinese medicine as “spirituality” usually comes from various versions of Western psychology, which in turn is based on individualist ideas of the person totally antithetical to ones held historically in Chinese and Asian cultures. Asian cultures have tended to embed the person in a variety of contexts, both social and natural, rather than seeing people as autonomous “free agents” who have an individual identity outside their socially defined roles.¹¹³ That is another topic entirely, but for our purposes here, it is important to comment on another discordant aspect of this marriage between Chinese medicine and psychology.

Western psychology (or at least that of the 19th and early 20th centuries) derived from a scientific and materialist worldview—that is, one that sees causality as linear and mechanical, where meaning derives from matter and not the reverse and where “what you see is what you get.” There is no “invisible world” behind or prior to the material one. This is, of course, the opposite to the most basic belief of almost all spiri-

¹¹² The Worsley School of Chinese medicine probably began this trend, but it has continued among other well respected practitioners such as Jeremy Ross.

¹¹³ It could be argued that Daoism and other spiritual traditions from Asia counterbalance this highly socialized view of the person: they provide a somewhat socially acceptable space in which to explore one’s identity. But it is equally notable that this “identity” relates to the universe, the spirit world, destiny writ large, and so on, rather than to highly personalized ego-structures or histories. Indeed, Asian philosophies are highly suspicious of individual ego-based identity and mostly see this aspect of the person as problematic.

tual systems which either see spirit as preceding matter or at least as related in some kind of highly complex interconnected and inter-creating dance of the two.

In other words, here I do not equate spirituality with the emotions. Instead I take it to imply the following:

- that there is an animating or vital principle that gives life to physical form;

- that the human being has an immaterial, intelligent and sentient aspect which not only animates him or her but whose presence provides a larger meaning and connectedness to our existence;¹¹⁴

- that aside from this kind of animating force within physical form, incorporeal and immaterial Beings can and do exist in both the everyday physical world as well as other "dimensions;"¹¹⁵

- that knowledge of and interaction with and between all of the above give meaning to life;

- and that the harmonious relationships within and between the physical and all other Worlds is important to well being for all concerned.

Often all of the above come along with mythological systems, stories and beings that act as guides, maps and access points to connection with the spiritual and physical worlds

Finally, spiritual systems include ethical, moral, value, and sometimes even social systems thought to be necessary for harmony among all Beings and Worlds and within human and physical life.

Put succinctly, spirituality consists of those experiences, beliefs, practices, ethical commitments, and understandings that deal with the nature of existence and that which creates, sustains, and gives meaning to life. Topics that are in turn included within spirituality include:

¹¹⁴ Beliefs about the nature of this animating principle vary in spiritual systems. In Daoism and other ancient spiritualities, it is not only not unique to human beings but infuses all of creation, including things often defined as "inanimate" today: rocks, mountains, rivers, and the earth itself.

¹¹⁵ The word "dimensions" is anachronistic and more familiar to modern science or science fiction than to most spirituality systems. The "other realms" or "other worlds" are seen to exist so surely that their separateness or distance from the everyday world is always a matter of speculation, an ongoing mystery to contemplate and experience rather than solve.

Origins and Terminations: Where did we and all of this come from and where is it going

Ultimate Reality: What is the nature of these bigger and “more real” realities” and how do I access them? With what senses or in what states can they be reached and how do I attain these?

The Nature of Life: Why am I and everything else here? What is the purpose that I and the world around me are suppose to serve?

Good and Not-Good (aka “evil”): As humans we perceive that there is “bad” and “good.” But is this indeed so? In either case, what is the nature of this bad or good. Can I, and how can I, make sure that what happens to me is mostly “good?” How can I know the Good and contribute to it. And conversely, how can I avoid contributing to the bad, no matter how unwittingly?

Cause and Effect: What brings things into Being, animates them, both in the past and at every minute. How does this work and how may I best work within this reality?

Paranormal Reality and Experience, i.e., the experience of non-ordinary states of Being: What is the nature of such experiences. Should I access these. If so, to what end and how is this done?

Medicine

All of these issues relate directly to medicine both philosophically by virtue of being about the nature of well-being in a general sense and concretely by offering answers to the questions we face most acutely when in a state of ill health. They encompass issues of birth, death, meaning, connections to things larger than one’s self, and the efficacy thereof, the reasons and causes of suffering, the way one judges the quality of life, the ways one can influence life, applications to deities or other means of intervention for assistance in misfortune and ill health, the ability to avoid misfortune as well as illness, deterioration and even death.

In short, they attempt to address or assist with the most basic questions about life and death, health and illness:

Why me? Why now? What can I do to avoid suffering and sickness? How can I be happy? How can I enjoy life? How can I have enough energy to do the things I need to do?

Throughout human history, all medical systems from Ayurveda through Tibetan medicine, Tibh unani (Greco-Arabic medicine), Christian and Buddhist monastic medicines to polytheistic, animistic pagan medicine have considered the intimate connection between physical and spiritual health and have included this within their medical thought and interventions. Only modern biomedicine has tried to separate human health from these larger spiritual worlds and questions.

Modern Chinese medicine as currently configured, too, has a rudimentary, nascent, or implied spirituality inasmuch as it asserts an energetic explanation of health and disease, seeing life as the product of energetic rather than purely mechanical processes. To be sure, this energetic vision can be and is understood in a variety of ways. Approaches to the topic can be as mundane as asking a patient how their "energy" is, which means the practitioner is asking whether you can get through your day and perform your usual tasks. Or it can be somewhat more nuanced as in, "your energy is in disorder due to your unhealthy lifestyle or emotions." Or it can be quite esoteric in implication as in, "the energy in your house or of those around you is making you sick."

But modern, secular Chinese medicine is much more likely to come in on the mundane end of this spectrum and the esoteric ends are fairly undeveloped in terms of diagnosis or treatment in the Chinese medicine we are learning today.¹¹⁶ In general a person who goes to a TCM practitioner is likely to get a diagnosis of a spleen-*qi* deficiency, i.e., not enough energy to digest your food and get through your day. The question then is, whether to a woman who has just had her fourth miscarriage, or a man who has suffered from debilitating migraine headaches for his entire adult life or who is being controlled by his own severe depression, the explanation of spleen-*qi* deficiency or liver-yang rising is that much more spiritually satisfying or helpful than failing progesterone levels or vascular constrictions. To what extent does it offer meaning and comfort to someone who is suffering to tell them that they have been eating too much sugar, having too much sex or are giving in to their anger too much.

¹¹⁶ Some Chinese medicine schools in the United States go so far as to consider eliminating the concept of *qi* entirely from their curriculum as an outdated and unscientific concept unnecessary to "successful practice."

To be sure, these kinds of explanations offer something since they allow for some input and a modicum of control. But without being connected to something larger like, for instance, an idea of what energy is, how it moves in the body, how it moves through the universe and how that connects us to all that is, modern Chinese medicine runs the risk of being every bit as disconnected, dry, uninspired, and spiritually bereft as Western biomedicine.

In summary, then, spirituality is much larger than emotions. It is, and has been throughout the millennia, deeply connected to all medical systems. We need to think about how to re-introduce something of the kind into modern Chinese medicine. We must prevent its wholesale excision from it.

Any major spirituality system (or religions) could be a part of medicine as each of them addresses the kinds of questions listed above. In a highly multi-cultural milieu as increasingly prevalent in many modern Western countries, it makes most sense to work within the spirituality that is most meaningful to a particular patient. Perhaps we should have classes on world religions in TCM curricula so that practitioners are better equipped to do exactly that. Indeed, elsewhere I have argued that even an avowed atheist's "spirituality" can be addressed—albeit in a secular, scientific, and/or political manner. In any case, the answer to "Why me?" "Why now?" will vary depending the larger spiritual meaning system in which the patient is embedded.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ There is a tendency to try and homogenize the world's religious systems into one with statements like, "It's all one god," or "There are different paths, but they are all going up the same mountain." Of course, at one level that is much more mystical and rarified than perhaps most people are operating at, these statements have some truth. But when dealing with real life, on the ground suffering, they are not usually very helpful. Usually it is best to elicit how the patient understands the meaning, implications, causes and outcomes of their suffering, rather than obscuring these with statements that can at least be trite and at the worst, offensive. See Prother 2010.

Daoism

For practitioners the most obvious spirituality to include as a part of Chinese medicine would seem to be Daoism, the Grandmother Spirit of Chinese medicine. Daoism has answers, practices, and philosophical stands on all the above questions. Many Daoist techniques are directly related to health and longevity. But, aside from some qigong practices and programs that have been sporadically included in Chinese medical training, a few Western practitioners, some ordained priests, and the occasional temple, Daoism as a religious and spiritual system has not been available as an option for Westerners outside of China.¹¹⁸

There are multiple reasons for this. For one, Daoism has remained a marginal religion contained and confined largely to China. It has been appreciated outside that milieu only in the most esoteric, philosophical terms. Lots of people know of the *Daode jing*. Very few have actually read it. Even fewer know or even consider what it might mean. Hardly anyone realizes that Daoism is a complete religion with its own venerable history, canons, ritual systems, spiritual techniques, monastic traditions, priesthoods, women followers, and so on. Daoism has made its way into Western culture in a typically Daoist—surreptitious—way. Everybody knows the phrase “May the Force be with you” and what a Jedi Master is. But only very few realize that Lucas patterned both the phrase and the figure directly on Daoist masters, martial artists, and sorcery. Many people have heard of yin and yang and maybe even of *qi*. But very few know the word Daoism, let alone that it is an extant religion. When I use the term, most people say: “Is that some kind of Chinese thing?”

Some of the problems lie with Daoism itself. As it has come down to us, it is almost totally embedded in Chinese culture. Also, it is by nature secretive, exclusive, inaccessible, esoteric, and thus inadvertently elitist—just plain difficult to access or even find a place to practice. Until very recently, Daoism has not developed an even a mildly proselytizing sys-

¹¹⁸ It is interesting to note that there are probably many more Buddhist practitioners of Chinese medicine than Daoist ones. Perhaps the answers to this phenomenon will become clear below.

tem. Unlike Buddhism, which has tried to share its messages in some kind of universalized form, Daoism does not seem to want new adherents, especially outside its culture of origin.¹¹⁹

I myself tried to find a Daoist sect or group in the United States that I could “join.” The only things I found were “Daoist” martial arts studios and a couple of people claiming to be ordained Daoist priests, most of them thousands of miles away and when approached, clearly more interested in minions for the founder than in new Daoists.

Shamanism

So, then, what does shamanism have to do with this? Shamanism is really not an “ism” at all, nor is it a religion. The word describes a set of techniques employed to access spiritual understanding, states, and realities. As such it can appear in any religious system, although it has tended to stay primarily within cultures that are animistic, polytheistic and religiously tolerant and pluralistic.¹²⁰

In general, shamanically based systems assert that:

- all entities, whether animate or otherwise, are imbued with a life force, vital energy, consciousness, soul, spirit or some other ethereal or immaterial substance that transcends the laws of classical physics;
- each member of this cosmos is a participant in the life energy that holds the world together;
- there is a “web of life” in which all things are interdependent and interconnected

¹¹⁹ This is clearly changing. International conferences on Daoism are now being held outside *and* inside China. More importantly they are beginning to combine a scholarly academic interest in Daoism with an experiential interest as well thanks to organizers like Livia Kohn. Although these developments are encouraging, they are still somewhat nascent, and more can be done.

¹²⁰ Shamanism is usually distinguished from other “altered states” religions in that its most basic defining characteristics are soul flight to the spirit world and an almost total focus on social and individual healing. For a discussion of the differences between shamanic practice and other spiritual practices such as Yoga, Buddhist meditation and so on, see Walsh 2007, Pt. VII.

—there is a cause and effect relationship between different dimensions, forces and entities of the Cosmos

—and human beings are endowed with abilities that allow them to See these realities, interact with and within them and effect them for the common good of all (Moss and Corbin 2008, 27-31).

Almost all of these statements could be made in almost the exact form about Daoism in its many historical guises.

In fact, despite the antipathy that Daoists have had for shamans—probably due in part to the two groups competing for the same constituency more than deeply different approaches to the spirit world and spiritual practice—Daoism and shamanistic practices have much in common. Indeed, to any shamanic practitioner, Daoism looks like a very formally organized shamanic style religion.

Common Points

What, then, do shamanism and Daoism have in common? These are but a few examples of the many.

Both have their historical roots in Chinese folk religion.

The founder of the first Daoist religious sect was taught by shamans.¹²¹

The Daoist division of heaven, earth, and humanity closely resembles the shamanic division of upper, middle and lower worlds.¹²²

The role of Daoist organizations is to help create and maintain harmony and constructive communication among the worlds and beings, exactly as do shamans

Daoists and shamans have been feared by those in power who used that power to take people down the wrong roads.

¹²¹ Zhang Daoling, the founder of the first Celestial Masters sect of Daoism, by some legends was thought to have been taught by "the Queen Mother of the West, a direct learning from the Spirit world but is also thought to have studied with Sichuan shamans where he learned to "go into trance" and received his first revelation.

¹²² A clear example is the Great Peace movement, the earliest Daoist sect. See Hendrischke 2006.

Daoists in ancient times were often in opposition to the government and were feared by those in power for both the spiritual power that they had, but also for the power over the hearts and minds of the people. Shamans have also sided with the common people and have suffered the same kind of persecution from people in power.

Daoist schools are often based on “visions and revelations” which are obtained in practices that closely resemble shamanic journeys.¹²³

Daoist scriptures come directly from the spirit world.¹²⁴

Shamanism is usually not part of a literate tradition, but shamans take their information directly from the spirit world.

Daoists and shamans both heal, leave their physical bodies, travel to the stars, visit the spirit world, and have many supra-normal abilities, which they gain by amassing energy through various exercises.

Daoist exercise and martial arts moves have their roots in shamanic dances (see Despeux 1989).

Daoism and shamanistic religions believe in a great unifying ultimate while being simultaneously polytheistic, beliefs that are not seen as mutually exclusive.

Daoism embraces both multiple deities as well as the Great Ultimate (Taiji), which is the universe itself. Shamanic practitioners experience these realities in their journeys as well.

Shamans and Daoist priests work for the good of their communities with information and techniques received from the spirit world.

Shamans and trained Daoists can use energy to effect the material world.

Daoism as well as shamanism have powerful women practitioners who on occasion rise to positions of power and influence. Both emphasize “equality for women” on the world stage.

Perhaps most importantly, Daoism is a religion that is based in both earth and heaven, thus uniting these two arenas which are the basis of

¹²³ For example, the Shangqing revelations, where the medium Yang Xi connected to Lady Wei Huacun and other denizens of the otherworld. See Miller 2008; Bokenkamp 2008.

¹²⁴ According to Isabelle Robinet, the word *jing* for “scripture” in its most ancient form implies a “channeled” document (1993, 21-25).

contention between some of the world's religions.¹²⁵ There is a world-wide movement to reintegrate earth and physicality back into religion. Shamanism embraces it strongly; Daoism could contribute a great deal to it as well.

These are some similarities. However, today there is a glaring difference between shamanism and Daoism. Whereas Daoism is virtually unknown outside of China except by a fairly small, well educated and relatively peripheral groups of people worldwide, shamanism as an approach to spirituality is a rising star internationally, actively expanding on a all fronts (see Tedlock 2005, ch. 19). Shamanic techniques are being taught and shared on every continent, between cultures as disparate as the Scottish Highlanders and West-African Yoruba. Shamanistic abilities, far from being the property of an elite, are seen as abilities intrinsic to every human being. If one wants to look into or study shamanic practice, one simply goes on the Internet and easily finds hundreds of teachers available throughout the world. Readily accessible foundations¹⁸ and multiple journals¹⁹ provide information to those interested in pursuing this spiritual practice.¹²⁶

Yet, despite this stunning success as a spiritual practice, shamanism is anarchistic and based on small groups of practitioners. It can apparently be practiced by anyone anywhere. It has no centralized structure but is based on a loose set of approaches, tendencies, and different ideas

¹²⁵ The world's monotheistic religions, in some of their incarnations, eschew "the world," calling it the "home of the enemy" and not the proper place for humankind, which is heaven. Whereas the growing Wiccan movement embraces an earth-based spirituality and is thus set in direct contradistinction to many Christian facets, Daoism and shamanism find this dichotomy as somewhat odd. Both exist. Both are part of spiritual reality. Both can be accessed, traveled to, or reached within. Both have lessons and wisdom to teach.

¹²⁶ Among foundations, the most important is probably the Foundation for Shamanic Studies, run by Michael Harner and Sandra Ingerman. They have helped to spearhead and support international resurgence. Another is the Society for Shamanic Practitioners; see www.shamansociety.org. Among journals, see *Shaman's Drum* and *Shaman: The Journal for the International Society for Shamanistic Research*.

of how to proceed. Despite this, there is an amazing continuity among practitioners as to what constitutes legitimate shamanic practice.¹²⁷

Humanity in Crisis

If pursued with caution and a deep respect for Daoism as it already exists in the world, shamanic practice may offer a framework in which those outside of China can start to access the Dao in all its richness directly.

It can make a major contribution to the world today, especially if it comes to re-infuse Chinese medicine with a vibrant spirit via shamanic practice on a worldwide stage. We as humans are at a major cross-road today, in a veritable crisis. As Winona LaDuke, the Native American, Anishanabee activist and former vice presidential candidate back has said: "Our elders told us many years ago, that we would come to a fork in the road where either we could choose the Green Road or the Dark Road. And if we did not choose the Green Road, we would not survive."

This is where we are now. The dark and light sides of the force are lined up on either side, trying to influence which road we will take. Will we continue in our heartless, bellicose, avaricious, power-mad, consumer-driven, materialistic, earth-destroying, path? Or will we move toward a sustainable, life affirming, just, peaceful, and earth-loving one?

Many spiritual systems today address this crisis, looking to see how to reconnect people to the natural world, to the earth, to all creatures, and to each other so that we may change paths and embrace survival. Native American spirituality states this over and over. Reawakened shamanism states this. Indigenous African spiritual systems say it. Throughout Latin America, India, Europe, and the United States, spiritual systems are being born or resurrected that emphasize reconnecting with our deepest selves and with the living natural world in order to create a lasting, peaceful, and sustainable life for humanity.

¹²⁷ In contrast to this, in the academic world there is an amazing discontinuity of what constitutes shamanic practice. Scholars are busy arguing who is and is not a "shaman," a debate which has had almost no effect on the popular international movement

Up until recently the most active Asian spiritual system in this conversation has been Buddhism. It brought to bear its emphasis on overcoming the striving, selfish, angst-ridden, insecure ego and replacing it with a universalized compassion and inner peace, from which we can then create the world we want..

Daoism as one of the worlds oldest religions honoring nature, energy, and the universe has profound insights to offer—not just to Chinese medicine, but humanity at large. And this is not merely the Daoism of the *Daode jing*. Rather, the biggest contribution has to come from the whole of the Daoist religious world, especially since it created one of the earliest articulated environmental and social visions—Great Peace. But to do that it will have to come out of the closet, let itself be unleashed, and find ways to connect to the larger world beyond China.

Shamanic Exploration

Daoism is the logical choice for the unfolding of spirituality in Chinese medicine and for working together with contemporary shamanism. In what ways, then, can shamanic practice contribute to a Daoism that is available and useful to Chinese medicine practitioners or patients when appropriate? I can best answer that by saying what has come to light for me and my shamanic co-practitioners. We have undertaken numerous shamanic journeys searching for more information on the spirituality of Chinese medicine. Doing so, we have quite often encountered beings and information secretly contained within lineages. When this has happened the message has clearly been "Keep Out!" Outsiders should not enter here. We have respected this and continue to do so.

At the same time we have also been introduced to many wonderful things including inspirational holographic demonstrations of the intricate workings of yin and yang, ways to experience the five phases more palpable, vibrant and three dimensional forms. The whole energetic system of points and channels of Chinese medicine has been made available to us as a living, visual, and transformational dance. We have had insights shown about how pulse diagnosis can occur in a deeper way. We have learned that connecting with a larger energetic cosmos and especially with spirits of the earth, we can access information on, and a wider context, of Chinese energetics. We have even been shown acupuncture-

like systems as they have existed in places other than China in ancient times. We have come to understand the deeper connectedness to “all that is” that the system can afford us. We have been shown spiritual disharmonies as causes of illness that go well beyond the secular Chinese medicine commonly taught.

This may all sound odd and highly esoteric and perhaps even more incomprehensible and inaccessible than Daoism. Nor does it immediately provide a clearer picture of a spirituality for Chinese medicine. This is because “to be shown” Chinese medicine by the spirit world is an experience that cannot be easily expressed in words. Indeed, it is profound precisely because it is an experiential visual, sensual, auditory, and inspirational learning experience rather than something gleaned only from books and human teachers.

A new Daoist religion with deities, beliefs, ritual, and so on would not serve our purpose. Nor should we stop academic-style training for practitioners of Chinese medicine. But there is a great deal of merit in having direct access to the spirit of Chinese medicine and Daoism through shamanic practice. For me, even after thirty years of practice, it has brought Chinese medicine alive in many amazing new ways. I firmly believe that the practice of shamanism—especially as it connects with traditional Daoist techniques and vision—can be of great service to students, practitioners, and even some recipients of Chinese medicine.

Shamanism as a world-wide system that is easily accessible provides a unique practical way of learning Daoism in the modern world. It can bring concrete techniques to bear on our understanding of what traditional practitioners underwent, how they viewed their universe, and what their ultimate goals were. The Daoist cosmos and that of Chinese medicine is accessible from anywhere—with the right techniques and proper guidance spirituality can be just around the corner.

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