

The identity of a new profession: Examining the aegis of Traditional Chinese Medicine

Brenda Le¹, Darren Tellier¹

¹Faculty of Health and Community Studies, MacEwan University

Introduction

- In Canada, the rapidly growing practices of acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine have become professionalised under the banner of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) in recent decades¹.
- Canadian sources of information^{2,3} define TCM as a catch-all term representing the medical theories and practices developed over thousands of years in China.
- Yet, scholars in the United States⁴, United Kingdom⁵, Australia⁶ and China⁷ document that TCM refers to a political construct which originated in mid-20th century China.
- They suggest that TCM is an “invented tradition” that is different from how Chinese medicine was practiced in the ancient times.

Objectives

Our study investigates:

1. the historical precedents leading up to the formal creation of TCM, and
2. how this relates to education, practice and regulation of this new profession in Canada.

Methods

- Qualitative semi-structured interviews
- White and grey literature search to identify potential participants
- Interviews conducted through phone, e-mail, video chat or in-person
- Thematic analysis using NVivo software
- MacEwan Research Ethics Board approval

41 Potential participants contacted

12 Participants interviewed

Sample characteristics:
Located in the United States,
Canada, and China

- Practitioners
- Historians
- Sinologists
- Translators
- Policymakers
- Medical anthropologists
- Disciples of famous masters

Findings

1800s

Over the past 2,000 years, a vast and diverse body of knowledge has accumulated in Chinese medicine.

1911

Sun Yat-Sen ends the Chinese monarchy. Pushing to modernize the nation, he proposes to abolish Chinese medicine.



Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sun_Yat-sen

1953-1963: Formalization of “Tradition”

- Severe shortage of Western medicine resources
- Mao revisits Chinese medicine
- To align with communist ideals, Chinese medicine is standardized, simplified, and hybridized with Western scientific thinking.
- Many Chinese medical lineages and traditions are omitted
- New hybrid medicine is officially coined “Traditional Chinese Medicine” (TCM), to distinguish it from modern Western medicine.

1978

China initiates an “open door” policy to reconnect with the world, enabling the exportation of TCM.

The making of Traditional Chinese Medicine in the 20th century

1830s

Missionaries introduce Western medicine to China.



Source: http://library.vcu.edu/online-exhibition/s/nic_21_china/teachings/misson_work_medicine/medical_mission_work_med_cross_001a.html

1949

Mao Zedong leads the communist party. He deems Chinese medicine quackery and seeks to eliminate it.



Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/richardfisher/54518326/>

1956

Formal TCM colleges mark the start of institutionalized learning. This departs from the tradition of knowledge transmission from master to disciple.

1968-1983

To address a rural health disparity, thousands of farmers underwent 3-6 months of medical training. Known as “barefoot doctors”, they provided basic health care in the countryside.



Source: <https://chinanews.com/health/barefoot-doctor/>

1 TCM is distinctly modern

- Participants in the US associated TCM with the standardization of Chinese medicine in the 1950s and 60s.
- Those in Canada and China tended to use TCM as an umbrella term to represent the entire field.

2 TCM is one style of Chinese medicine

Characteristics of TCM:

a) TCM is influenced by Western medicine

- Chinese medicine is symbolic language for functional concepts
- TCM looks at Chinese medicine through a scientific, materialistic lens
- Results in superficial understanding of Chinese medicine concepts

b) TCM is centered on organ theory

- Zang-Fu (organ) theory used in herbs
- Channel theory used in acupuncture
- Many other thought systems in Chinese medicine, e.g. 5 elements, 6 stages
- Standardization made organ theory the default framework for all therapies

c) TCM often lacks context

- Standardization creates educational efficiencies, but undervalues contextual knowledge that enables practitioners to adaptively interpret and apply concepts
- Relies on memorized protocols that lack a detailed explanation behind their use

“There are certainly lots of achievements and benefits for China that came out of the TCM system, but we have a different history in the West. Standardization makes things simpler and easier to test, but in the clinic, we are losing lots of options. And that's tragic.”

- Heiner Fruehauf, PhD, LAc

Conclusions

- TCM is a standardized version of Chinese medicine created 60 years ago amid political turmoil.
- TCM served an important historical purpose, but many aspects of it are not suitable for the health care landscape of modern-day Canada.
- TCM remains (at least in Canada) a generic catch-all term for the entire field of Chinese medicine.
- The misconception that TCM is representative of the entirety of Chinese medicine has concrete consequences as provinces move forward with educational and regulatory decisions on TCM.
- There is an urgent need to increase awareness of what TCM is (and what it is best suited to do within a healthcare system) in order to promote transparent and robust dialogue surrounding this new profession.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all interview participants for their contribution to this project. We would also like to acknowledge the MacEwan Undergraduate Student Research Initiative for funding this project.

References

1. Esmail N. Complementary and alternative medicine in Canada: Trends in use and public attitudes, 1997-2006. Vancouver, B.C. Fraser Institute; 2007.
2. Alberta Association of Acupuncturists and Traditional Chinese Medical Doctors. The basics of TCM. <https://aaatcmd.ca/tcm-basics/>. November 22, 2015. Accessed April 1, 2019.
3. Government of Ontario. Newsroom: McQuinty government regulating Traditional Chinese Medicine. <https://news.ontario.ca/archive/en/2005/12/07/McQuinty-Government-Regulating-Traditional-Chinese-Medicine.html>. December 7, 2005. Accessed April 1, 2019.
4. Fruehauf H. Science, politics, and the making of “TCM”: Chinese medicine in crisis. *Journal of Chinese Medicine*. 1999; (61):6-14.
5. Hsu E. The history of Chinese medicine in the People's Republic of China and its globalization. *East Asian Science, Technology and Society: An International Journal*. 2008;2:465-484.
6. Chang R. *Chinese medicine masquerading as Yi: A case of Chinese self-colonisation*. Maninriver Press; 2015.
7. Liu L. *Sikao Zhongyi* 思考中医 (Contemplating Chinese medicine). Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe; 2003.