

Dueling Needles: Reflections on the Politics of Medical Models

By Leon Hammer, M.D.

First published in the American J. of Acupuncture Vol. 19, No. 3, 1991

Abstract: The author presents and discusses current controversies regarding what constitutes "real" Chinese medicine and whether its practitioners should be trained in Western medical science. He has examined the historical roots of Chinese medicine and found them to be many and varied. He concludes the current diverse forms of the Chinese healing art all have validity and need to be integrated. As a whole, Chinese medicine is a complete model in itself, with a different view of reality from Western medicine; it is not dependent on the latter for its effectiveness and credibility.

Throughout my professional life I have watched what I now have come to understand as a ubiquitous characteristic of human behavior. Beginning with my training as a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst I have observed the fractionating of professions and disciplines into competing enclaves of beliefs completely discrediting each other, using the most vicious damaging verbal abuse and underhanded power tactics to accomplish their mission.

The problem has always been the need of highly gifted and unbelievably insecure people to acquire power over the minds and hearts of followers and achieve immortality that seems even more important to humans than survival. *Ideas become not simply models of reality but reality itself.*

And even more painfully they become "my reality" as if any of us can say he or she knows whence cometh our knowledge. Freud and even more ferociously his faithful followers ravaged Jung, Adler, Rank, and later Silverberg, Horney, Fromm, Fromm-Reichmann, Groddeck and a long list of others who deviated from the straight and narrow and had fresh perspectives. Even Ferenczi, a most loyal son and creative innovator, was despoiled by his mentor which broke his heart and probably killed him prematurely. Such sensitivity so necessary in a great healer such as Ferenczi is obviously too great for survival in the brutal arena of power politics.

For some time I have been watching the same deplorable scenario unfold in the practice of the Chinese Healing Art-Science. I deliberately use the latter term to avoid the complete nonsense which has unfolded concerning the terms Chinese medicine, acupuncture, meridian acupuncture and so on.

Throughout the millennia, each of these terms has been used by different people in different parts of China to mean something different. At one time the term Chinese Medicine was all encompassing and included 'the eight limbs'; acupuncture, herbology, massage, nutrition, exercise, counseling and the use of the I Jing, moxibustion, and cupping, herbal baths and gua sha. The same term, 'Chinese Medicine', to many people means only the use of herbs, equating 'medicine' with something taken internally. To others Chinese Medicine means a series of concepts such as the Wu Xing (Five Elements) and the Eight Principles. Acupuncture has likewise had many meanings from the simple translation of the insertion of needles to complicated concepts such as those represented by the Vietnamese school and the vast variety of distinctly different Japanese schools which I am told number approximately one hundred and thirty five apart even from the Kampo herbal tradition.

According to my teacher Dr. John Shen who has been practicing sixty years since his apprenticeship in Shanghai in the nineteen thirties, every city, village and clan, as well as the

Imperial Court and various philosophical schools in China had their own often startlingly distinct variety of this healing art. At one time I counted twenty-five discrete methods of diagnosis and treatment within my own files gathered over the past twenty years. China spawned the richest variety of healing methodologies ever recorded in the history of medicine. Westerners stationed in the various parts of China over the centuries as either clerics, diplomats or merchants each brought back with them a tiny fragment of this endless multiplicity of this great healing tradition, which they naturally assumed was the totality.

Followers, as with those of Freud mentioned above, dug in around their tiny enclave of information to insist that theirs was the true 'traditional' medicine and that all others were less traditional and inferior. They have done this and continue to do so, still ignorant of the true nature of the other disciplines that are no less traditional and true. Only in America have some students rebelled and sought a cross-fertilization of approaches. And since each aspect has something special to offer, some of us have tried to bring as much of it together to meld with our own unique nature for an art-science, which may be ultimately more beneficial to our patients. Where one approach may not work another might. This has been my experience.

The debate about the nature and content of this elusive healing-art-science has been enormously complicated since nineteen forty-nine. I was informed by a Chinese practitioner, born after nineteen forty-nine, that "we threw out all of that other garbage". The garbage to which this person referred included endless valuable material on all from the myriad sources which have existed in China since antiquity. They left out and forbade the practice and teaching of all of the indications for the points recorded in books I have from pre-Mao days which involved emotion, the mind, except in the most limited sense (Yin and Yang insanity for example), and the spirit of human nature (without which what do we really have left?).

The following quote from my book¹ has been corroborated by many sources both before and after the event. "On my way to the Beijing airport at the end of a three-months stay, a Chinese doctor (quite old) explained to me that in the early nineteen-sixties, responding to a drive by the World Health Organization to encourage the use and spread of indigenous health systems, the Chinese government brought together a group of acceptable Chinese physicians and ordered them to create 'Traditional Chinese Medicine' so that under the auspices of that organization, it could be taught to the Chinese people and to foreigners. Thus ended the practice of 'following' a master for years in relative servitude, and the thousands of blossoms on the tree of this medicine fell away until only one was left (TCM). *Anyone in the West who believes they have the "real" Chinese Medicine is living in a dangerous world of fantasy.*"

TCM has become mistakenly identified as the Chinese Healing Art-Science rather than as a twentieth century materialistic frankly Marxist version of it. I have studied it assiduously because it has so much to offer. But it is only one small part of that great heritage which is uniquely Chinese. This legacy was in a dynamic state of flux since its inception and allowed not only for diversification according to the need of the time and place but to constant change. One can read the Nei Jing about the development of the different methods in dissimilar parts of China, to get the flavor of what I mean. This was written twenty-two hundred years ago and the process of adaptation and variation has not ceased to this day.

The development of acupuncture in this country has been slow and painful. Until recently the Chinese community was unwilling and/or unable to assist Americans in learning this work. Working in the back of herb stores in all of the great Chinatowns in this country were hundreds of the diverse practitioners of this great heritage who could have passed it on to Americans eager to learn the rich tapestry of their art. I know from personal experience that they

would mostly not do so even to those Americans who learned their language. I was one of a handful of the few fortunate ones who found a Chinese master [Dr. Shen] who was willing to teach me even with the massive language barrier. Dr. So in Boston with whom I was briefly acquainted was another who was willing to teach.

Consider the commitment of those who persisted and roamed the earth for this knowledge. I know many who were turned away, forced finally to travel to the Orient or Europe. They are now the pioneers of the Chinese Healing Art-Science in this country who have earned the right to lead and who have eventually returned to form their own schools here. These have grown steadily and painfully over the years into institutions which in the short period of three years produce a cadre of people, many of whom come to acupuncture with a rich background in the Western medical arts and healing, with basic entry level skills in the Chinese Healing Art-Science, and who are committed to growing and developing in the field. I am impressed from traveling around the country to teach or to site review schools with the love for this medicine and dedication to learning and expanding.

Each of us in this field is struggling to understand and integrate the incomplete information we have harvested, to ask questions and find a way to get answers. This includes the teachers as well as the students. Thinking about reality, about what we are told and observe, in the thought forms of Chinese Medicine is a lifelong quest for everyone including the Chinese people raised since World War II. It is a lifelong challenge for everyone and we must open ourselves for insight and understanding from wherever we can get it.

It is much easier to slip into the easy road of thinking in the understandably familiar Western thought forms. There are, I am told, now in China some forty thousand as yet unexamined books and papers on this traditionⁱⁱ and certainly not translated. Think of how little we all know. Let us not settle for the easy way and surrender this quest of total understanding as some are presently suggesting simply because it is difficult and coming slowly. Yes, let us use what we know and understand at any one point of our development, but let us not be discouraged from the exciting and rich adventure of exploring and mastering the totality. Humility and a dedicated perseverance, not perfection, is enough for the moment.

There is an entirely separate field of controversy engendered by the combination of Chinese medicine and Western medicine in China during the past forty years in which the former has become only a shadow of the latterⁱⁱⁱ. The struggle for power between the two factions is well known in the Chinese community in the West as well as in China, but the latter is a police state in which such an admission would be dangerous. The debate becomes extremely confused by the Western scientific exploration of the physiologic effects of inserting needles and the pharmacology of herbs both in China and in this country.

The argument assumes several shapes. One is that Western diagnostic formulations are superior to the ancient ones and that everyone studying the Chinese healing arts must master and practice these techniques. As a Western physician it would be easy for me to embrace this position, that the two must be combined, that the diagnostic formulations of Western medicine dominate the picture, and be done with it. What after all do I personally, apart from integrity, have to lose?

The second is that it is dangerous to insert needles unless one has made an extensive study of Western anatomy, physiology and pathology. The last is that Western science is so superior to what one learned colleague referred to as the ancient "proto-science" that the only acceptable application of this medicine would be in terms of Western research into hormones

such as endorphins or according to the distribution of the nervous system according to Western neuro-physiology.

It is with trepidation that I take on these assertions. So powerful is the need of human beings for a powerful mythology that conquered people all over the earth gave up their deities to worship in the Western tradition simply because our weapons were superior to theirs, so therefore must our gods be also be greater.

Western science is awesome to the average person and especially to the average physician and occupies that mythological niche of infallibility in their psyches. They who know little of what has been on the cutting edge of science since Max Plank, Neils Bohr, Einstein, Heisenberg and other physicists revolutionized the world of science into a sea of probabilities, chaos and uncertainty are under the spell of the certainty and predictability of the Western linear science of Newton and Bacon. They are not yet aware of how fragile science has found itself in the realm of reality and how tenuous is their mythology.

Our incredible ecological mess is built partially around our belief that whatever mistakes we make will be solved by science. The terrible and benevolent God of the Old Testament is modern technology; it will almost destroy and then miraculously save us. How can one engage in a debate about such dominant religious beliefs? How can one make it clear that a model of reality, whether it be Chinese medicine or Western science is only a model which is trying to explain what is there and not the reality itself? How can one open minds to Einstein's statement of 1938 in which he said "Physical concepts are free creations of the human mind, and are not, however it may seem, uniquely determined by the external world. In our endeavor to understand reality we are somewhat like a man trying to understand the mechanism of a closed watch. He sees the face and the moving hands, even hears it ticking, but he has no way of opening the case. If he is ingenious he may form some picture of a mechanism which could be responsible for all the things he observes, but he may never be quite sure his picture is the only one which could explain his observations. He will never be able to compare his picture with the real mechanism and he cannot even imagine the possibility of the meaning of such a comparison."^{iv}

Western science and the Chinese Healing Art-Science are two different pictures of a mechanism which could be responsible for all we observe. Having been on both sides of this conceptual fence I am in a position to say that each explains and deals better on a practical level with different pieces of what is being observed. It is no small thing that, by comparison to its Western counterpart, Chinese Healing Art-Science is far better equipped to assess the process of disease, including the earliest stages, and is therefore far superior as a preventive medicine.

I am not clever enough to know how all of this will play itself out on a conceptual and experimental level in the years ahead. I am quite certain that those whose minds are fixed in one position, or the other, know even less. I am dedicated to both models, and I intend to work towards giving both ways of explaining reality an equal opportunity to be available to a suffering mankind at least until the day that God announces the answer directly to us thus settling the matter once and for all. No one is sufficiently all-knowing at this point to justify standing in the way of either discipline in its pure forms.

The Chinese Healing Art-Science stands on its own as does Western science. It has been as careful to avoid damage to its clients as any medicine in history and the facts are that the majority of reports of damage due to needles comes from the very part of the world where each practitioner has been extensively trained in Western anatomy, physiology and pathology. Though dire pronouncements concerning the mistakes made in this country are on record by those

experienced with the forensic aspects of acupuncture, no statistics have been supplied even on request.

I am in favor of the cross fertilization of the two paradigms, for knowledge is in itself of great value especially when one practices and communicates in a culture dominated by one of the two models. I am against the requirement of knowing the essentials of Western medicine in order to be certified in acupuncture because this creates the notion that the Chinese model does not stand on its own. Having practiced both medicines I believe that all one needs is sufficient information to know which is indicated in any given situation and to make the appropriate referral. One does not need a mastery of the basic sciences of Western medicine to practice acupuncture safely or adequately. I am not in favor of that knowledge used as club to intimidate those whose position in the power structure of health delivery services is clearly at a disadvantage.

Finally I should like to comment on two other aspects of human nature that are tragically involved here. First is the intolerance for differences that has characterized our existence over the millennia. A glance at the ethnic strife burgeoning in the world in our time speaks for itself. People are afraid of that with which they are not familiar and this is a factor in the internecine struggles in the Chinese Healing Art-Science now.

Second and most important is the human ego, which always seeks to protect itself against the deflation that is an inherent risk in all the unpredictable encounters in life. I have documented over the years that people espouse that which they do the best and impugn that which they do least well as being inferior. The damage comes when the ego says "my way which works for me is the only way for everyone, and all other ways are false". People, I have noticed, who cannot master the 'pulse' derogate it and push forward that piece of the puzzle which fits them best. People who have only superficially studied the Chinese system will find that the Western model using the nervous system with which they are intimately familiar works better for them than using the Chinese channel system which they then malign. TCM schools denigrate the Wu Xing (Five Element) school which does the same in return; both attack Western medicine which returns the compliment, and so it goes on and on.

Quoting again from the introduction to my book, "I wish to register my regret at the divisions in Western acupuncture which are appearing more frequently and with greater vehemence with each passing year. Each approach to this subject came to the West by way of a person who had available to him or her the translation of only one fragment of the total picture of a medicine as variegated as China itself. Even if we had the sense to recognize this and accept each fragment as legitimate, it would take centuries of research to capture the entire fabric of this rich and valuable heritage".

Can the lamb lie down with the wolf? Can we beat our swords into plowshares? The answer is yes, but only with humility, patience, good will, tolerance for differences and the desire to learn from those differences rather than control or obliterate them. Can it be done? Of course. The choice is ours.

ⁱ Hammer, L.I. *Dragon Rises, Red Bird Flies*. New York, Station Hill Press, 1990, p.xxiv, xxiii.

ⁱⁱ Ku, Su Liang: Personal communication, 1990.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sivin, N.: Traditional Medicine in Contemporary China. *American Journal of Acupuncture*, 1990; 18 (4): 337. Reflections on the situation in the People's Republic of China, 1987. *American Journal of Acupuncture*, 1990: 18 (4): 341-343.

^{iv} Einstein, A., Infeld, L.: *The Evolution of Physics*. New York, Simon and Schuster, 1938, p.31