

Correlative reasoning in Chinese medicine and its potency of making present

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In contemporary Traditional Chinese Medicine a maxim commonly used in the context of therapeutics, *zhi bing qiu ben* (when treating a disorder, seek its roots), has increasingly been replaced with one mentioned in the context of diagnostics, *shen zheng qiu yin* (when examining the distinguishing pattern, seek its cause). This paper focuses on the notion of “Seeking *ben*-roots”, and how pre-modern Chinese medical texts explain therapeutic efficaciousness. It does so by working “backwards”, from fieldwork findings to the ancient texts. This required taking some hurdles.

First, notions of causation in modern medicine are multiple and varied. For one, there is Hume’s billiard ball as metaphor for a mechanistic understanding of a contiguous, temporally sequenced cause-effect relation, then there is Pasteur’s micro-organism as a trope for specific causes of disease, but this metaphor and trope has more recently been questioned by researchers who pointed to causal webs and risk factors.

Second, anthropologists interested in causation studied rather different aspects of medical practice: W.H. R. Rivers demonstrated that therapeutic interventions of the Australian Aborigines were perfectly rational if one studied their beliefs about illness causation; Evans-Pritchard posed the moral question “why me?”; and Gilbert Lewis was interested in epistemology: the “cause-effect” relations of “magic”. This anthropological and medical research relocated the discussion of causation into the practical domain; but, as Andres Zempleni emphasized, its practical relevance made it no less complex a problem.

Third, in Chinese studies “correlative thinking” is still not well understood. Some scholars make sense of it in terms of sympathetic magic between microcosm and macrocosm. Others place it on an evolutionary trajectory, sandwiched between magical and rational thinking. However, do correlative thinkers, like bad statisticians, really impute causality into correlations? Or, are they actually, like shamans, intending to solve the problem of the patient’s unstable self through what Ernesto de Martino in his phenomenological approach to magic called the “redemption of presence”? The Chinese scholar-physicians speak of “resonance” (*ganying*), they reason about treatment in a roundabout way, they consider this subtle, and such polite indirectness in their reasoning seems to have appealed to patients in the upper social strata. However, this sociological explanation still begs the question of why “seeking the roots” and bringing about “resonances” should be potent and (therapeutically) effective.