

National Medicine Day and the Scientific Reformation of Traditional Chinese Medicine in Hong Kong's 1950s

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Abstract

National Medicine Day was once widely celebrated by practitioners of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), but it is now hardly recognized in the public sphere, and few practitioners are aware of the festival, let alone its origin and significance. Thanks to a group of traditional festival enthusiasts who promoted the celebration of National Medicine Day, we are once again reminded of the history of the near-abolition and developmental predicament of TCM. This article discusses how TCM practitioners in the 1950s voiced their requests and made suggestions for revolutionizing TCM through celebrating National Medicine Day in Hong Kong.

Keywords: Chinese medicine practitioners, Chinese physicians, Hong Kong, National Medicine, National Medicine Day, scientification, TCM, Traditional Chinese medicine.

Introduction

In 2008, a group of traditional festival enthusiasts promoted via the internet the celebration of March 17 as “National Medicine Day,”² establishing a website for “The First National Medicine and Internet Culture Festival, 2008” (Baijia Meiti 2008) This group urged the Chinese people to organize a massive annual festival that honors “national medicine” as a means of strengthening Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). Today, National Medicine Day is hardly recognized in the public sphere, and few TCM practitioners are aware of the festival, let alone its origin and significance.

As TCM faced a developmental predicament in 1950s Hong Kong, National Medicine Day became a way for TCM practitioners to appeal to the public on behalf of their cause. Focusing on the commemoration of National Medicine Day, this article discusses how through National Medicine Day, TCM practitioners in the 1950s voiced their requests and made suggestions for revolutionizing Traditional Chinese Medicine.

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² The term *guo yi* (national medicine) has two meanings: (1) Chinese people associate it with Chinese medicine, and (2) it can also refer to practitioners of Chinese medicine. *Guo yi jie* (National Medicine Festival) should embrace these two meanings. For more information about the origin of this term and relevant discussions, please refer to Lei Hsiang-lin, 1990, *When Chinese Medicine Encountered the State, 1910-1949*, unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Chicago.

The Origin of National Medicine Day

After the completion of the Northern Expedition in 1929, the Nationalist government of China set up its capital in Nanjing. Yu Yan (a.k.a. Yu Yunxiu 1879–1954), who had studied Western medicine in Japan, put forward the legendary proposition to abolish old medicine at a conference held by the Central Health Department of the Nanjing government in February 1929. Modeled on the scheme used in the Japanese Meiji Restoration, this proposal aimed to abolish TCM completely, as Yu Yan believed that TCM theories were nothing more than metaphysics. In his eyes, they were non-scientific and therefore warranted total abolition. Some concrete policies in the proposal included:

“Old physicians” would be able to continue their business after registering at and obtaining licenses from the Health Department; Registered physicians would be able to continue their business only after receiving supplementary education, with the exception of physicians over 50 years old who had practiced for more than 20 years.

To the TCM profession, the most disturbing aspect of this proposal was the registration of “old physicians,” which was to last only until the end of the 1930s. Teaching in old medicine institutes was prohibited, as was advertising the services of old physicians. It was anticipated that TCM would be eliminated within several decades.

The proposition’s announcement shook the entire TCM field. It not only endangered the profession of traditional physicians and the associated traditional herb industry, but also, if its aims were met, could spell the end of TCM altogether. In Shanghai, physicians and herb traders united in an attempt to halt the passing of the proposition. TCM groups called for a meeting in Shanghai on 17 March of all TCM practitioners across the nation to discuss possible countermeasures. Due to the magnitude of the problem, provincial representatives from across China arrived in Shanghai on the day of the meeting. The TCM groups voiced the opinion that TCM—as the quintessence of Chinese culture, and being concerned with the health of each individual person—should not be abandoned, and that the intrusion of Western medicine should be resisted. They made a resolution to send a petition group to Nanjing to present their demands for: 1) abolishing Yu Yan’s proposition; 2) including TCM schools in the education system; and 3) authorizing the establishment of provincial TCM schools. It was also decided at this meeting to designate 17 March as National Medicine Day, commemorating the union of all TCM professionals.

The resolution immediately stirred up great enthusiasm across all TCM groups, as well as generating a growing body of public opinion. In December, the Nanjing government decided, under the order of Chiang Kai-shek, to rescind the proposed abolition of TCM. As a result, the agitation finally subsided.³

³ For more information, please refer to: Chen Cun Ren. 2000. “Yin yuan shi dai sheng huo shi” [An Anecdotal History during the Silver Dollar Era.] *Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe*, pp 111–140. In 1954, Chen Cun Ren’s “San yi qi guo yi jie zhi you lai” [The Origin of the National Medicine Day March 17] and Chen Yu’s “Ji nian guo yi jie zhi ci” [Commemoration Speech on the National Medicine Day] were published in *Zhongguo xin yi yao*, Vol. 3. (1954: 22–23). Croizier (1968) explained the historical impact of the issue concerning the abolition of TCM from a culturally nationalistic viewpoint. Lei (1990: 100) on the other hand, testified that the modern history of Chinese medicine began on March 17, 1929, when Chinese doctors as a group encountered the first modern Chinese state.

These are the origins of National Medicine Day, which commemorates the historical struggle of TCM practitioners in negotiating their social position, recalls the controversy over TCM's survival, and represents solidarity within the field. It was only thanks to the union of all TCM professionals that the Nationalist government rescinded the abolishment proposal – a victory that was particularly significant, as it was achieved at a time when the profession was under tremendous pressure from the influences of western medicine, and was often criticized as being unscientific and detrimental to the development of modern medicine in China. These criticisms were certainly harsh on TCM practitioners, heirs to a tradition that had guarded their fellow citizens' health for thousands of years, and considered as the very essence of the nation. Even so, from this incident onward, TCM could not escape the inevitability of scientific reform and its integration with Western medicine (Croizier 1968: 230; Andrews 1997: 142–143).

In 1949, Mao Zedong began to support the assertion of TCM's status and its consolidation into Western medicine. All major cities were to have their own TCM universities, and practitioners had to also learn Western medicine; likewise, Western physicians had to learn TCM (Taylor 2005). Unlike this policy in Mainland China, Western medicine had dominated the medical system in Hong Kong, then a British colony, since the Second World War (WWII). Officially, TCM was marginalized in Hong Kong society, and was not given much respect or administrative support (Chao, 2006). Nevertheless, it remained a highly popular medical approach among the people of Hong Kong, and from WWII to the 1960s, 17 March became the day when Hong Kong TCM practitioners called for solidarity in fighting for their rights. As such, National Medicine Day has carried a special meaning for TCM practitioners in Hong Kong.

All national festivals are meant to be celebrated annually. On the day of a festival, social groups gather and commemorate the history, rituals, and customs of the special occasion. The group associated with the festival, which must belong to a specific profession, such as medical doctors, lawyers, workers, or veterans, selectively choose to honor certain parts of their collective memory. This can encourage further action, as such celebrations reassert and strengthen participants' self-identity, while also encouraging them to fight for the group's collective benefit. Festivals are symbolic: their true objective is to remind people of the meaning behind the festival. Also, a festival is an occasion for participants to express their wishes and demands for the future. Originally, National Medicine Day celebrated the successful obliteration of the proposition to abolish TCM. However, in later National Medicine Day celebrations, this original meaning was overshadowed by other motivations. As a result of TCM's lack of governmental recognition, it became a day for TCM practitioners in Hong Kong to fight for their rights and to reform their own profession. In other words, National Medicine Day became a day for TCM practitioners to reflect on the future of their profession.

National Medicine Day and the Discussion on Scientific Reformation of TCM in Hong Kong

History plays an important role in the various descriptions of National Medicine Day, and to trace the origin of the celebration is to illuminate its meaning. During the 1950s, this meant retracing history back to the TCM abolition proposition itself.

Some practitioners have described National Medicine Day on March 17 as “a day to commemorate the humiliating threat of TCM's abolishment” (Z. Wei 1955: 1); others

have said it is “a day to commemorate TCM’s fight for its legal status” (ZJ Fan 1954: 17). Both Chen Wen Hu (1953) in “The Inscription for 1953 National Medicine Day,” and Li Yao Yu (1956), in “My Sigh for National Medicine Day,” spent half of their articles discussing the history of the abolition of TCM.

For TCM practitioners in Hong Kong in particular, 17 March reminded them of the predicament faced by their predecessors. The public’s cries opposing the abolition of TCM would not, in itself, be enough. The real root of the problem lay in convincing the Hong Kong government to grant legal status to TCM.

Traditional Chinese medicine was the official, legal, medical system in China for many centuries, and during this time it was the primary system used for protecting people’s health. However, the arrival of Western medicine in the early twentieth century threatened TCM’s status, particularly in Hong Kong. Prior to 1949, TCM still played an important role in the overall Hong Kong medical system, but when the government of Hong Kong began pouring capital into training physicians in Western medicine and building Western-style hospitals, the marginalization of TCM physicians began. The government adopted a laissez-faire policy on TCM, and while it did not go so far as to prohibit practitioners from treating patients, it did not provide any assistance or regulatory support (Lee 1974; Koo 1998). As a result, a rather bizarre situation existed in Hong Kong in the 1950s: on the one hand, because the majority of Hong Kong’s population were Chinese who still relied on TCM treatments if they fell ill, plenty of TCM services, such as acupuncture, trauma-healing, and herbal-healing, were available in Hong Kong. On the other hand, TCM treatments were not included in the government-recognized medical system, and TCM physicians had no resources made available to them in order to provide training for their apprentices. In addition, TCM physicians were not granted the title “doctor” because they were officially viewed as mere “herb dealers”.⁴ In terms of status, TCM physicians and Western medical doctors were worlds apart. In such a discriminatory environment, TCM physicians in Hong Kong felt most disfavored, and took advantage of National Medicine Day to express their discontent.

In 1955, Wei Yan published an article entitled “Warning to TCM” in the journal *New Medicine of China*, putting forward four predicaments faced by TCM (Y. Wei, 1955:1):

- 1) the abovementioned lack of support and regulation from Hong Kong’s colonial government;
- 2) the loss of patients to western physicians;
- 3) the rising price of medical herbs, which led to the decline of the Chinese herb industry; and
- 4) the uneven quality among Chinese physicians, some of whom were duping patients into paying extra.

As Wei Yan pointed out, a variety of factors have led to the decline of TCM. A lack of proper training and institutions for TCM practitioners has challenged their ability to

⁴ Practitioners of Chinese medicine in Hong Kong can be classified into three groups: (1) general practitioners of Chinese medicine, who treat all kinds of illnesses, mainly by prescribing herbs and other medicinal materials; (2) acupuncturists, who specialize in the treatment of illness by inserting needles into certain points of the body; and (3) bone-setters, specializing in the treatment of fractures, dislocations, sprains and strains (Lee 1980: 351).

provide comprehensive TCM education. In addition, the physicians did not enjoy high social esteem, which discouraged young people from joining the profession, a point that seemed futile for TCM practitioners to argue. If one asked why TCM practitioners were regarded this way, the inevitable response often echoed the rationale Yu Yunxiu had put forward in his proposition to abolish TCM: traditional Chinese medicine is not science.

Yu Yunxiu began his attack on TCM with *Huangdi Neijing* (“The Yellow Emperor’s Medicine Classic,” Zhou Chun Cai 1999), believing the Classic and its empty theories had wrongly comprehended human anatomy. In his opinion, beliefs such as *Yin-yang*, the five elements, the five *zang*-organs and six *fu*-organs, and the twelve *jing-mai* were all imagined and fictitious. He completely denounced TCM theories and suggested that all herbal effects were accidental.

To scientifically reform TCM was the main theme in all scholarly articles commemorating National Medicine Day, and the writers believed that only science could improve its value. Z. Wei (1955: 1) mentioned in his “Thoughts on National Medicine Day” that:

National Medicine Day is when all of our colleagues around the world gather to remember the time when national medicine was being humiliated and nearly abandoned. Every year we have to cry for the promotion of national medicine and a scientific reform for it.

Fan Zhao Jin (1954) has pointed out that TCM was founded on experience, and therefore experimentally grounded. It had proven to be effective, so its existence was worthy. Its impressive development was a result of the lack of scientific knowledge in the past. Fan Zhao Jin, therefore, believed that TCM should be further investigated, organized, explained, and proven by scientific theories, comparing TCM’s thousands of years of experience with scientific theory in order to achieve a scientific reform of the ancient knowledge (Z. Fan 1954: 17). Huang (1954), in “Due Call for Commemoration of the National Medicine Day,” pointed out that some of TCM’s theories were indeed metaphysical, especially concepts like *Yin-yang* and the five elements. While celebrating National Medicine Day, he believed, one should also acknowledge the direction of the latest trends by explaining TCM with scientific theories (Huang 1954: 18). Li Yao Yu (1956: 8) shared this view of following the contemporary trend. He believed that a scientific reformation of TCM was an up-to-date solution.

The abovementioned articles on National Medicine Day, suggesting a scientific reformation for TCM, were published in two TCM journals in Hong Kong, both of which were established by TCM physicians during the fifties and sixties. The first, which was initially published in 1951 by the Modern TCM Institute (*Xiandai zhongyiyao xueyuan*), was the *Present-day Chinese Medicine Journal* (*Xiandai zhongyiyao*). Edited by Chen Julin, a famous impeller of the scientific transformation of Chinese medicine in Hong Kong, publication of this journal continued for a decade, and although it finally ceased due to the limited number of readers, it was nonetheless a significant attempt to promote TCM’s scientific reform. Articles published in the journal covered both TCM and Western medicine, theories and remedies, clinical studies and interviews, drugs and acupuncture, and other topics. The *Present-day Chinese Medicine Journal* marketed itself as “an all-inclusive journal on TCM’s scientific reform” and “a progressive journal that helps build modern TCM! The only concourse for TCM news inside and outside of China! The

voice that speaks on behalf of all TCM professionals!” From this subtitle, its intention is obvious.

Zhang Gongrang (1904–1981) founded the second journal, *Chinese New Medicine*, in 1954, and worked as its chief editor. With a mission to provide “a comprehensive and interesting reading of Chinese and Western medicine,” the magazine was a reflection of Zhang’s desire to unify the two schools of medicine. After studying at Peking University and Peking Union Medical College Hospital, Zhang graduated from the Medical School of Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou. He spent the rest of his life attempting to bring together Chinese and Western medicine (Ren Mianzhi 1998: 28–31) believing that each school of medicine could provide compensation for the inadequacies of the other. Furthermore, he felt that Western doctors wished to find a substitute for Western medicine in TCM, and Chinese physicians in turn, thirsted for new medical knowledge. He also viewed the “scientification” of TCM as a must, in order to “to preserve and further develop what is considered precious; to abandon the unworthy. Having the two unified, the outcome will be of greater benefit and glory” (Zhang 1952).

The above two publications provided a voice for Chinese physicians to express and share their views, in addition to embracing National Medicine Day as a chance to advocate the further scientification of TCM.

Opinion having been consolidated, the “scientification” of TCM refers to the reviewing of established doctrines and prescriptions, the abandonment of the unreasonable and inapplicable, and the analysis of the content of Chinese medicine in terms of physiology and the concepts of Western medicine. Then, it refers to carrying out clinical experiments for prescriptions, with an emphasis on promoting those that are most effective. These definitions of “scientification” do not differ greatly from those first proposed in the 1930s by Lu Yuanlei and Tan Cizhong (Zhen 1995: 436–440). During that time, Chinese physicians were still teaching by word-of-mouth, and had not received training in Western medicine or its scientific methods, such as chemistry or physiology. Therefore, in an effort to assess Chinese medicine appropriately, the approach needed to be refined.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it can be seen that by the 1950s in Hong Kong, more than twenty years after Yu Yunxiu abandoned his attempt to abolish TCM, National Medicine Day had become the memorial festival that Chinese physicians felt bound to celebrate. The festival not only reminded people of the history of the near-abolition of TCM, but also gathered forces for its reformation and the promotion of its scientification. Therefore, the meaning of the festival lay not only in paying tribute to the masters’ efforts to preserve TCM, but also in the opportunity to promote TCM’s reformation. National Medicine Day reminded Chinese physicians of the historical attempt at abolition, but it also called on physicians to collaborate.

Yet the most interesting thing is that TCM’s biggest enemy was not the government, nor Western medicine, but its own long history. In the long development of TCM, a concern for metaphysics was included, which eventually made it difficult to integrate with science. Today, the scientific transformation of TCM is needed if the social status of its physicians is to be enhanced. However, to date, the physicians who have vigorously pursued this status have so far been unable to prove, or even explain with substantial

examples, the science behind TCM; thus, the “scientification of TCM” remains more a slogan than anything else.

Now that Chinese physicians in Hong Kong have gained a much stronger legal status (K.W. Fan 2008; Chiu, Ko and Lee 2005), National Medicine Day is not as important as before. Interestingly enough, Chinese physicians in California still celebrate the festival annually (CRI Online 1997; Xinhuanet Online 2006). Activities such as free medical treatments, conferences, and exhibitions are held, and the festival helps to boost the physicians’ and organizations’ sense of belonging. Chinese physicians in California are experiencing a similar stumbling block that TCM practitioners experienced in the 50s. Physicians and acupuncturists in the States have turned the festival into an opportunity to express their requests, to connect practitioners for better development of Chinese medicine in the States, and to protect their own legal status. Although National Medicine Day is no longer enthusiastically celebrated now that TCM has been granted official status in mainland China and Hong Kong, as the festival also happens to mark the day TCM practitioners acquired legal rights in the States, it goes some way to explaining the important role the festival played in unifying Chinese physicians in their pursuit of improved rights in 1950s Hong Kong.

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