

Panel 21: Body Wholes, Body Parts: A Cultural History of the Body in Chinese Medicine (PANEL)

Panel Organisers: Dr. Marta E. Hanson, Johns Hopkins University & Chang Chia-feng, National Taiwan University

We encounter the human body as metaphor for the body politic and the social body when we read about the “head” of state or the “members” of any “organ”ization. The body has been and remains a useful tool for conceptualizing and understanding aspects of human society and experience. The body as a bureaucracy in Han China, as a mountain or even the cosmos in Taoist religion, as inhabited by spirits in meditative practices, and imbalanced by emotions in Chinese medicine have all been well documented and studied. Discourses on the Chinese medical body have also revealed various aspects of a culture coming to terms with difference, conflict, and tensions in society writ large. Yet how various “body parts” have played a role in Chinese medical thought and have changed in meaning over time has not yet been systematically examined. The proposal is to bring together several scholars who are working on various aspects of the body in Chinese medicine—Bones, Eyes and the Gate of Life, Blood, Nerves, and Hands—and examine three key questions regarding body parts in Chinese culture. What is the range of meanings associated with each body part garnered from medical and non-medical sources, how have these various meanings and cultural interpretations changed over time, and what do they reveal about Chinese interpretations of society as well as the human body within specific individuals, texts, and historical milieus. The change of focus from body as metaphor and the whole body to body parts in Chinese medical history opens up an entirely new lens for examining the fascinating history of the imagination of the body in human history generally.

Participants and abstracts:

21.01 On Human Bones

By Chang Che-chia, Academia Sinica

Compared to other specialties, the lack of textual sources has made osteology in Chinese medicine difficult to study. Bones are doubtless an important part in human body for any civilization. Although the traditional Chinese medicine does not grant bones a significant theoretical role like organs, blood, or qi do, still, they are considered as the deepest parts of the body, thus the essence of the energy, marrow, is preserved in the bones, and the virulent poison will also reflect on the surfaces of bones. For this reason, the interests toward osteology are shared by the practitioner, osteopathy, nourishing-life specialists (yangshengjia), and forensic examiners. In this study, I would like to cut in by observing these three aspects and see how their ideas complement one another to construct a full scale picture of Chinese medical ideas toward bones.

21.02 The Eyes and Mingmen in Traditional Chinese Medicine in the Ming

By Chang Chia-Feng, National Taiwan University

This paper discusses the ideas and significance of the Eyes and mingmen (the gate of life) in traditional Chinese medicine in the Ming Dynasty (1328-1644). Mingmen was first mentioned in two medical classics, Huangdi neijing and Lingsu, which were at least dated back to the Han dynasty (206

BC-220AD). It was simply another name for eyes. Later medical generations used mingmen to indicate different parts of the body. At least eight kinds of mingmen were found in various medical texts. Although physicians held various opinions about the position, nature of mingmen and its relationship with other visceral systems and circulation tracks in the body, from the Jin and Yuan periods onwards, they mainly viewed mingmen as the origin of the body and life. It also continued its association with the Eyes. Many Ming physicians further developed this idea, and formed a new theoretic and therapeutic principle in their practice. This group of physicians were called the wenbu xuepai (warm and replenish medical school), and were popular after the mid-Ming periods. This paper focuses on the changing understanding of the relation between Mingmen “Gate of Fate” and the Eyes in Classical Chinese medical discourse revealing a specifically Chinese imagination of the body.

21.03 The Discourse of Nerves and the Modern Transformation of the Chinese Body

By Hugh Shapiro, University of Nevada, Reno

By focusing on the rise of a discourse of nerves in modern China, I aim to show that the integration of biomedical ideas with medical practice in China was based, in the formative years, on shared intuitions regarding how the body works. To this end, I connect the notion of nervous weakness (neurasthenia, shenjing shuairuo) to the radical transformations of physical and psychic distress in modern China. I argue that the roots of neurasthenia in China and in the West go deeper than the problem of modernity. True, modernity’s alleged pathology constituted the principal etiology of the disorder, as popularized by the elector-therapist, George M. Beard, in the 1870s. Doctors in the United States and Europe, then in Russia and Japan, then in China pondered the stress of modern life, observing that its destructive rage sapped brain and nerve. From this perspective, the spread of neurasthenia to China can be seen as one aspect of the spread of modernity to China. Yet I propose another way of thinking about neurasthenia. The sources for its prevalence in China and in the West, I argue, are rooted in shared intuitions about depletion and about the brain’s connection to sexuality, and specifically the kidney. This resonant idea about depletion also helps explain the longevity and ubiquity in twentieth-century China of what was originally the foreign idea of nervousness.

21.04 Hands as Medium for Memory and Therapy

By Marta Hanson, Johns Hopkins University

When medical authors included diagrams of hands with characters inscribed on them, the hand itself became a tu —diagram—that represented knowledge in a form more concrete, succinct, visual, and kinesthetic, than the written or spoken word could possibly be. Illustrations of hands as tu may also be read as traces in elite medical texts of a broader popular practice in Chinese culture whereby the hands were used as a means for intervening, learning, calculating, diagnosing, interpreting, confirming, and measuring. In medical texts, we find the hands presented as powerful agents for exorcising demons, as diagnostic tools for determining the illnesses of infants, as surfaces for therapeutic intervention, as a microcosm of the cosmos, as a gauge of distance between points on the body, and, finally, as mnemonic instruments. This paper will examine the hand as medium for both memory and healing as instructive and transformative, as mnemonic tool and medium for intervention in Chinese medicine.