

A Brief Conversation on Language and Medicine

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Wellness Directory, 2005

Yesterday I was looking out the window at the big hawthorn tree dancing in the wind. It looked like part of a moving Chinese landscape painting which, in turn, reminded me of my good friend from medical school, Chen. Together we would take the train down to explore Chinatown, usually ending up in some obscure herb pharmacy where her fluent Mandarin would gain us access to the old herbalist's prized stash of cordyceps, fritillaria, or ginseng. Not an hour later the phone rang and it was Chen, stuck in Los Angeles traffic, using up her weekday minutes before they vanished at midnight.

"I get it. I make the grade because that small electronic device of yours has a plan that programs you to contact your old friends once a month."

"Don't give me a hard time, Bai Pa. I'm a 21st Century Taoist and more L.A. than you need to know, and I'm stuck here in the concrete jungle, while you're breathing fresh air and gazing at a beautiful landscape."

"How does she know?" I thought, as I watched the hawthorn swaying in a gust. "You're right Chen, as usual. It's always great to hear from you. You *could* move to the country, too, you know. I miss our philosophical arguments – I mean, discussions. And I miss my translator. Sometimes it feels so strange practicing this medicine without speaking or reading Chinese."

"Bai Pa, don't worry about that. You'll never be Chinese and you're too old to learn five thousand characters. That's okay. Just know the difference between Chinese medicine and Western science. Then you'll know the difference between Chinese and English."

"What do you mean, Chen?"

"Chinese medicine is like the Chinese language. Bio-medicine is like English ... and French, German, Latin, etc. Bai Pa, describe what we do, you know, as practitioners."

"Um...well, we look for imbalances, we diagnose using an almost poetic, yet workable description of the whole person. We use a system that is based on the interdependent qualities of nature – the same concepts used by Chinese philosophers for millennia to explain nature and the universe."

"Good," Chen said. "See, you don't need to read Chinese. Just remember to practice the medicine and not something in between. And remember to take the time to carefully observe nature. That will serve you best."

"Thanks! That's good advice from the fifth lane of the Ventura Freeway," I said. We both laughed.

"Don't rub it in," she said. "Wait, you're not finished. What does western medicine do?"

I settled back in my chair and took a deep breath. Chen was working me, just like in the old days studying for the Boards. "Okay. It strives to isolate, categorize, and control or destroy diseases or pathogens. It considers them to be well-defined, self-contained phenomena. It uses a system of mutually exclusive opposites (unlike Yin-Yang) based on Aristotle's Law of Contradiction. It takes details out of nature and looks at them through a microscope. It is analytical, reductionist, and linear, whereas Chinese medicine is more holistic and circular. Chen, how many free minutes do you have, anyway?"

"Okay, good. So, Chinese medicine is just like the Chinese characters. They must be taken in context, holistically. They are pictures, drawings, natural landscapes. Unlike your Greco-Roman system, the Chinese language retains a strong connection to the natural world, just as Chinese medicine fits into, and is part of, a holistic, nature-based way of seeing the world – a way that is, of course, informed by the language itself."

“Alright, I’m with you, I think. English is not pictographic, multi-dimensional, or holistic, like Chinese. Then what is it? How do the words I’m using right now on the phone differ from pictures and how does that difference relate to the world of nature or to western medicine for that matter?”

“Good question, Bai Pa! Your alphabet is the result of a progressive abstraction of linguistic meaning that started out with nature-based pictures, just like Chinese. As you evolved and your thinking became more conceptual and subtle, you wanted to say things that had no direct visual or natural association. You slowly switched over to a phonetic system whose symbols represent our vocal sounds. The Chinese did it, too, but only partially. You went all the way! By the time the Phoenicians carried this new language technology to Greece via the Aramaeans the transformation was complete: The Greek name referred to the man-made letter with no reference back to a natural pictographic antecedent.”

“I see. So Plato was able to write down his teacher’s famous ideals of justice, virtue, beauty, etc. – which are conceptual, intellectual and not nature-based.”

“Bravo! You’ve been taking your Ginkgo, Bai Pa! Plato and his Socrates brought you this new way of abstract, detached thinking using the non-pictographic alphabet that moved away from the natural world and into the world of the analytical, human mind. You could say they launched western critical thought, which then engendered the western scientific tradition and its medicine along with it.”

“You blow me away, Chen. How does the fourth daughter of a Chinese restaurateur from Encino come up with these things?”

“Lots of books on tape and traffic jams, Bai Pa.”

“Right! ... But now I really want to learn Chinese or else I’ll be stuck in Plato’s prison.

“Don’t worry, Bai Pa. Just do your Qi Gong, spend time out in nature, observe the ten thousand things without thinking too many of your words. You’ll be okay. Hey, my battery’s dying. Gotta go! I’m coming up in the spring. ‘ love you. Bye.”

“Wait!” She was gone. My head was spinning. The wind had died and the hawthorn tree stood still, as if waiting for me to sit under it. Spring, “wood time,” wasn’t so far away. I sighed and then absent-mindedly reached for Red Pine’s translation of the *Taoteching*.