

Bio

Yi Yang was a trained acupuncturist in China and is a PhD student in the history department of UCL working on the oral history of a transnational modern branch of acupuncture — Five Elements Acupuncture -- which emerged in England in the 1970s and was introduced to China in the last decade. Yi's doctoral thesis uses this cross-cultural reinvention of acupuncture as a case to examine the meaning of “authenticity” in the contemporary globalising, pluralist medical context.

Title

An alternative ‘personalised’ medicine: Five-Element Acupuncture in the late 1960s-80s Britain

Abstract

In the height of ‘modernity’ in the twentieth century, the notion of orthodox medicine developed around what constituted the mainstream, powerful scientific biomedicine and what was not. In this dichotomy, Chinese traditional and/or indigenous medical knowledge was regarded as an ‘alternative’, which not only implied a sense of challenge but also posed a threat to the science-based orthodox medicine. This enemy of science, however, attracted many young Britons from the late 1960s to the 80s — whom we might call members of the Counterculture and the New Age movement— who questioned and challenged what they saw as fundamentally Eurocentric industrialised science and rationalism. Traditional Chinese medicine together with its acupuncture techniques and its ancient philosophies seemed to offer members of this group what they could not find in the orthodox biomedical industry which treated human bodies as if they were a machine on the principle of scientific reductionism. By contrast, acupuncture appeared as a humanistic and personalised alternative option of healthcare, with an emphasis on the holism of the body, mind and spirit.

This paper examines the history Five-Element Acupuncture—a British reinterpretation of Chinese medicine that became prevailing in the Anglophone world—as a form of alternative medicine deployed by those seeking alternative lifestyles. It also sheds light on how this alternative medicine negotiated the boundaries between science and culture on the one hand, and modernity and tradition on the other. Using oral history interviews with the members of the Counterculture and the New Age—some of whom embarked on a career of Five-Element acupuncturists—this paper shows the (re)invention and (re)construction of a Chinese medical tradition in the British society in the late twentieth century, a process in which alternative values of anti-establishment and personalised holistic healthcare were embedded.