Most modern clinicians find that a majority of their patients suffer from the symptom complex generally referred to as “stress.” Emotional stress, however, is usually regarded as a confounding rather than a causative factor in pathophysiology. This assessment is contrary to the tenets of classical Chinese medicine, which originally regarded emotional imbalance as a spiritual affliction of primary significance. While ancient Chinese philosophy considered emotional sensibility as our greatest asset in the process of fulfilling human destiny, it also regarded human temperaments as our greatest liability due to vast pathogenetic potential.

While Western medicine has encountered psychosomatic theory in the 20th century, the subtle and non-quantifiable nature of the emotions continues to be viewed as a nebulous factor by the purveyors of materialist science. The result is that modern physicians generally ignore or simply medicate symptoms of stress, depression, or anxiety. This bias has affected how institutionalized Chinese medicine views the topic of the emotions today. While the contemporary brand of Chinese medicine, exported by the People’s Republic of China under the trade name “TCM,” acknowledges that the treatment of non-local and non-structural symptoms belongs to its therapeutic domain, textbook TCM theory lacks both a cohesive and in-depth approach to the nature and dynamics of human feelings.

Through a review of relevant ancient sources, this essay intends to heighten awareness about the original complexity and significance that classical Chinese medicine bestowed on the subject of the emotions. Written more than 2,000 years ago, many of the texts cited below remind us that most diseases in urban human beings are caused by emotional stress. This is pertinent clinical advice that more than ever applies to the realities of contemporary Chinese medicine practice.

The Relationship of Body and Spirit

“I believe that there are two different human methodologies of knowing: one is time oriented, and the other is space oriented.”¹ Thus begins an analysis of the differences between Chinese medicine and modern science by the contemporary philosopher Liu Changlin. He
It is no accident that the modern Chinese term for psycho-somatic medicine is *xingshen bingxue*, literally the science of how (primary) physical form and (secondary) spirit relate in the disease forming process.
The physical body—yes, you need to work with it when your eyes cannot perceive, by asking where the discomfort is and by palpating the channels ... *Shen*, on the other hand, yes *shen*—in order to diagnose on this level you need not be focused on what the patient tells you. Your eyes see the invisible, your heart is open, and your intuitive sensing is front and center. All of a sudden, then, the subtle truth will reveal itself to you, without being able to put your experience into words, seeing while everybody else does not; as if the night turns bright for you alone while everybody else remains in the dark, like the invisible hand of the wind moving the clouds. That is why it is called *shen*, mysterious.8

An exemplary doctor, therefore, “follows the tenets of ancient times, experiences their magic in the present, keeps the inner eye on the subtle and mysterious, and stays connected to the realm of the unlimited--what the pack does not see is what the excellent physician values; ... that is why the superior physician works with the invisible sprouts when grasping *qi*, while the inferior physician is mired in the realm of what has already become manifest, thereby contributing to the decline of the body.”9 The priorities of a classical Chinese medicine practitioner are thus summarized as follows: “One, treat the spirit; two, know how to nourish the physical body; three, know the true transmission of herbal medicine; four, work with the large and small types of needles; and five, know how to diagnose the state of *qi* and blood in the *fu* and *zang* organs.”10

Between Heaven and Earth: Human Destiny and the Heart

In 1174, the Song dynasty scholar-physician Chen Yan recapped three general causes for disease (*sanyin*) that still serve as a model for Chinese medical pathogenesis:

The first category is called internal causes, referring to the seven emotions (*qiqing*) that emerge from the organ systems inside and then reflect as structural pathology in the body’s outer regions; the next is called external causes, referring to the six excessive weather influences (*liuyin*) that invade the channel and collaterals from the outside and in due course end up lodging in the organ systems; the last is called not internal not external causes, referring to injuries to the vital force from eating too little or too much food, or by bites from tigers, wolves, and poisonous insects, as well as accidents involving weapons, drowning, and the like.11

While Chen’s work generally gets credited with the introduction of “the theory of the three causes,” the characterization of emotional versus non-emotional pathology is as old as the Chinese notion of disease itself. Beginning with the earliest medical texts, two Chinese characters are generally used to describe the concept of disease, namely *ji* and *bing*. An early dictionary defines *ji* as “an acute disease that arises when alien *qi* strikes a person from outside.”12 In contrast, the more common term *bing* is described as “a more severe and complex disease”13 that “is attached to a person’s righteous *qi* inside the body.”14 On the most literal level, *bing* means “affliction of the heart.” It consists of a combination of the disease radical (originally a pictogram of a bedridden person) and the heavenly stem *bing*, which is associated with the phase element fire and the heart organ. Together, the complete character signifies a situation where somebody has become physically ill due to mental, emotional, or spiritual causes.15
Despite this unequivocal portrayal of the leading role of *shen* and its pivotal part in the disease forming process, contemporary TCM has banished the role of the emotions to the historical archives of Chinese medicine, along with many other aspects of classical Chinese medicine that do not mesh with the ideology of Marxist materialist science. Consequently, many modern Chinese medical practitioners tend to pay more attention to viruses and bacteria than to emotional stress as causative factors of disease.

In contrast to this recent development, all eminent physicians of the past agreed that only animals and enlightened sages are capable of escaping the influence of the emotions, while the average human being is susceptible to their pathogenetic potential. The 18th century physician Xu Dachun once remarked: “The treatment of humans should differ from that of animals, because animal diseases are rarely caused by emotional factors, but by wind, cold, and food related problems.” As if augmenting this statement, Miu Xiyong pointed out in 1625: “In very ancient antiquity, human illness was primarily caused by the six excessive weather patterns rather than the seven emotions. Today, the situation is quite different—the seven emotional influences are severe and the five desires run deep.” In addition to distinguishing the complexities of the human spirit from other living things, this remarkable 2nd century statement makes reference to a little known fact: in the early stages of Chinese medicine the heart was alternately classified as the earth organ, not the fire organ that it is exclusively described as today. From the perspective of Chinese cosmology, it seems only appropriate that the heart—the “empty vessel” and container of *shen*—was first described as an earthen receptacle. Similar to the story of creation that appears in the Old Testament as well as other ancient traditions, Chinese mythology conveys that humans were first made from clay: “People say that when Heaven and earth opened and unfolded, humankind did not yet exist. Nü Gua [the creatrix] kneaded yellow earth and fashioned human beings.” The human condition, therefore, is metaphorically described as the state of having an earthen heart, which in its healthy state is capable of containing the fire of spirit, including the emotions and their potentially troublesome ramifications.

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