

Tending the Wind – Chapter 10  
Chinese Medicine – Part 2  
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All forms of medicine evolve in relation to their culture of origin, influenced by language, lifestyle, beliefs, geography, and social structure. Traditional Chinese Medicine is no exception. Cultural influences are not often addressed when discussing Western medicine with Western audiences; a shared cultural experience provides common ground. Eastern culture is sufficiently different, however, that at least a basic introduction is essential to understanding TCM, beginning with its language – the imagery of Chinese characters. (The romanization of characters into letter-words using the latin alphabet is a relatively recent invention to indicate Mandarin pronunciation. Most notable among the romanization systems are Wade-Giles, still popular in Taiwan and some academic circles, and the newer international standard called Pinyin. This is why readers will often see “the Way” written as both Tao and Dào. This article series will use Pinyin, including the tone indicators. Note that many Pinyin words are combined into one, as in the two options for the legendary Yellow Emperor: Huáng Dì and Huángdì.)\*

The earliest recognizable Chinese characters date back to the oracle bone writings of the Shāng Dynasty (1765-1122 B.C.); shamans drew these characters to record their divinations, gleaned from interpreting the cracks that appeared on the surface of a heated ox scapula or tortoise shell. (There are also Neolithic pottery markings dating to roughly 4000 B.C. but their form cannot be directly linked to the lineage of Chinese characters.) Characters were first carved onto bones or shells, then metals during the bronze age; they later appeared in ink on bamboo, then silk, and finally paper.

The original characters were pictographs that could be quite complicated. They were first simplified and systematized during the Qín Dynasty (221-207 B.C.) to reduce complexity while improving phonetic and semantic information. Once ink brush became the norm and new inconsistencies arose, characters were standardized again during the Later Hàn Dynasty (25-220 A.D.) in an etymological dictionary, the *Shūowén Jiězhì*. This dictionary, written shortly after the invention of paper, explains the logic of the characters and describes six types: pictographs, ideographs, logical aggregates, phonetic complexes, associative transformations, and borrowings. Pictographs and ideographs are the basis for all the other types.

A *pictograph* is a character whose shape alludes to its meaning. For example, the character for “tree” looks very much like a tree. An *ideograph* uses simple strokes to express abstract ideas; the image for “one” is a single horizontal line. *Logical aggregates* combine the meanings of different pictographs and/or ideographs to create a new meaning; the character for “fan” combines an image of a half-door with an image of feathers. *Phonetic complexes* use one character to provide the meaning and another to provide the spoken sound (though the latter often adds further meaning as well). *Associative transformations* extend the meaning of a character to a related concept. *Borrowings* use a character with the same sound as a spoken word that doesn’t have its own character but does have its own unique meaning.

The fact that Chinese words are composed of pictures rather than letters is extremely significant. Pictures are much more open to interpretation. In Western courses on Chinese medicine, students are given one or two English definitions for a word whose Chinese character suggests a panoply of different interpretations, nuances, and feelings depending on the context and the reader. English words have no way of translating these possibilities (nor do many Western readers want such a subjective reality). But this is precisely the beauty of Chinese writing. In his translation of the *Book of Changes*, an ancient textual oracle describing the inherent processes of life’s transformations, Alfred Huang says of Chinese characters: “They do not connect in the same way that English speakers think of words as doing. There is no tense, gender, plural, article, preposition or

punctuation, and quite often no subject or object. The beauty of this ancient language, and of the [*Book of Changes*], is that it merely presents pictures and lets the reader's own imagination resonate with the scene. Translating these 'sentences' into proper English is impossible without seriously limiting the wealth of possible meanings."

This view of language is in keeping with the Daoist view of reality. (Daoist philosophy emerged during the Zhōu Dynasty, 1121-222 B.C., and was given formal expression in the *Dào Dé Jīng* written sometime before 300 B.C.) The world is not comprised of clear-cut distinctions and does not support permanent definitions. Reality is porous and fluid, involving a continual process of co-creative transformation. Although we make distinctions between things, we must remember that things are constantly shifting relative to each other, their environment, and the observer. In describing how the sage views distinctions, the Daoist philosopher Zhuāngzǐ writes: "He too recognizes a 'this,' but a 'this' which is also 'that,' a 'that' which is also 'this.' His 'that' has both a right and a wrong in it; his 'this' too has both a right and a wrong in it. So, in fact, does he still have a 'this' and a 'that'? Or does he in fact no longer have a 'this' and a 'that'? A state in which 'this' and 'that' no longer find their opposites is called the hinge of the Way. When the hinge is fitted into the socket, it can respond endlessly... The sage embraces things. Ordinary men discriminate among them and parade their discriminations before others. So I say, those who discriminate fail to see."

Historically, written characters represented much more than just a system of communication in China. Legend states that the first characters were the eight trigrams (the basis of the *Book of Changes*) which describe the natural cycles of the universe and allude to the secrets of creation. The trigrams, said to have appeared to one of China's original kings of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium B.C. (Fú Xī or Huáng Dì depending on the source), are regarded by many Chinese as the very foundation of their mathematics, medicine, cosmology, fēng shuǐ, and divination. The mysteries of writing are thus said to have a close connection with the natural as well as the supernatural. The inherent power believed to exist in written characters resulted in fine calligraphy over the centuries that often fetched higher prices than painting.

The understanding of Chinese characters as allusions rather than definitions can greatly aid our explorations into Chinese medicine. Terms translated as "energy" and "mind" take on new dimensions when we allow ourselves the freedom to experience the imagery of the original characters without limiting ourselves to fixed English definitions. This imagery was severely restricted by the Communist effort at simplification during the 1950s. In the view of many scholars, their new characters, while reducing complexity, did nothing to improve phonetic or semantic content and lost much of the original meaning. It follows that this loss would translate into any English versions of modernized texts. Also due to Communist influence, medical training focused more on the material aspects of Chinese medicine, purging reference to more philosophical and esoteric concepts. While this loss has made Chinese medicine more palatable to Western doctors, it ultimately robs us of options.

Before moving on to the philosophical foundations of TCM, I'll leave you with this thought from Zhuāngzǐ: "Words exist because of meaning; once you've got the meaning, you can forget the words. Where can I find a man who has forgotten words so I can have a word with him?"

\*Please see the website <http://zhongwen.com/> for information about written Chinese characters. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pinyin> for information on the Pinyin romanization system.