

Narrative Medicine Under the Guidance of Traditional Chinese Medicine Theory

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Abstract

This paper is an exploration into the practice of narrative medicine in the clinical setting guided by the theory and approaches of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). By adopting the theory of TCM, the author attempted to provide the patients with systematic treatment from the perspective of society-psychology-biology under the guidance of both the unity of Heaven and Man, and the unity of *Xing* (Body) and *Shen* (Mind/Spirit) through his clinical practice. Guided by *yin-yang* and *Wu Xing* (Five Elements) theory and focusing on the social relations of the patients for any possible relationships between patients' social, psychological and biological state, the author took the patients' emotion management as a point of departure and helped the patients recover both physically and psychologically by promoting positive transformation in patients' social, psychological, and biological state. A clinical case was provided at the end of this paper to demonstrate how the above theory was put into practice. Narrative medicine under the guidance of TCM theory can supplement modern medical humanity practices as well as extend the scope of modern medical treatment from the perspective of the unity of Heaven and Man, by enriching the content of narrative medicine, and promoting the medical model from biological medical model toward social-psychological-biological model.

Keywords: Emotion management; Medical model; Narrative medicine; Traditional Chinese medicine

1 Introduction

In 2001, Rita Charon, a physician at Columbia University in the United States, proposed narrative medicine, believing that narrative medicine is the “medicine practiced with narrative competence,” and narrative ability refers to “the ability to recognize, absorb, interpret and act on the stories and plights of others.”¹ Since 2011, narrative medicine has been systematically introduced into China by Professor Guo Liping (郭莉萍) from the School of Medical Humanities of Peking University, emphasizing that the essence of narrative is to treat patients as a whole “person.”^{2,3} The core of narrative medicine emphasizes the relationship between people in the course of the illnesses, including the relationship between physicians and patients, self, colleagues, and society. In the medical process, narrative medicine complements the lack of attention to the social and psychological state of

patients in biomedicine. By adopting narrative methods, narrative medicine adjusts the social, psychological, and physiological state of patients that may affect the trend and course of the illnesses, and implements comprehensive intervention for the diseases from the perspective of biology-psychology-society.

When examining traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) with the concept and method of narrative medicine, there is much in common between the diagnosis, treatment and operation method of TCM and narrative medicine. As far back as 2000 years ago, the classic on the theoretical basis of TCM, *Huang Di Nei Jing* (《黄帝内经》 *The Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic*), including *Su Wen* (《素问》 *Basic Questions*)⁴ and *Ling Shu* (《灵枢》 *The Spiritual Pivot*)⁵, has regarded the concern and research on the social and psychological state of patients emphasized by narrative medicine as an indispensable accomplishments for doctors to practice medicine. For example, according to *Su Wen Shu Wu Guo Lun* (《素问·疏五过论》 *Basic Questions: Discussion on the Five Frequently Made Diagnostic Errors*), if a doctor does not know the social and psychological background of the patient and disregard the following five situations of the patient, including 1. vicissitudes of patient's life; 2. changes in patient's diet and emotion; 3. normal and abnormal changes of the patient's illness; 4. vicissitudes of patient's professional life; 5. grief, fear, joy, and anger of the patient, then the doctor's medical skills are far from being proficient. Just as the text puts it: “The five errors mentioned above are all caused by doctor's unfamiliarity with the theory of medicine and unawareness of human affairs.” The psychosocial state which induced

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the disease is commonly known as “human affairs” (人事) in *The Yellow Emperor's Internal Classic*, which is of great significance and value to the diagnosis and treatment of diseases. In *Su Wen Zhu Zhi Jiao Lun* (《素问·著至教论》 *Basic Questions: Discussion on the Abstruse and Profound Theory of Medicine*), it is said that “The so-called *Dao* (道) is related to the heavens in the upper, the earth in the lower and human beings in the middle. That is why it can last forever.” It suggests that to understand the truth of life, the knowledge of astronomy, geography, and human affairs is requisite. Only in this way can we keep healthy for a long time (Fig. 1).



Figure 1 Huang Di Nei Jing (The Yellow Emperor's Internal Classic) (source from: <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1665959397418034106&wfr=spider&for=pc>).

Then how does TCM carry out narration in medical treatment?

2 The exploration of the social, psychological, and biological origin of diseases by using TCM theory under the guidance of the thought of the unity of heaven and man in TCM

2.1 The thought of the unity of heaven and man in TCM

TCM believes that man originates from nature and is one of the things in the universe. Man and nature are inextricably linked with each other and are inseparable. Heaven and man, or nature and human affairs are interlinked and unified. As is stated in *Su Wen Sheng Qi Tong Tian Lun* (《素问·生气通天论》 *Basic Questions: Discussion on the Interrelationship between Life and Nature*): “From ancient times it has been thought that the root of life is closely bound up with the heaven and this root is Yin and Yang. All those within the heaven and the earth as well as the *Liu He* (六合 Six Directions) are interrelated with *Tian Qi* (天气 Heaven-Qi), such as things in the *Jiu Zhou* (九州 Nine Geographical Divisions), the *Jiu Qiao* (九窍 Nine Orifices in the human body), the *Wu Zang* (五脏 Five Internal Organs), and the *Shier Jie* (十二节 Twelve Joints).” Zhuang Zi's *Qi Wu Lun* (《齐物论》 *Homogeneous Theory*) says: “Heaven and earth

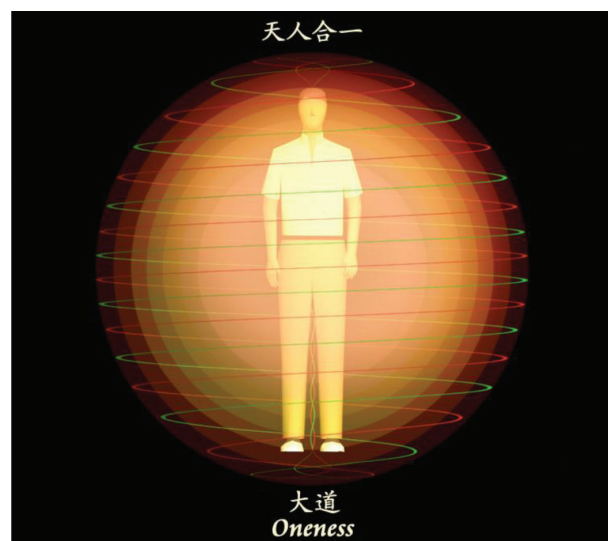


Figure 2 Harmony between nature and human beings, “Heaven and earth coexist with me, and all things and me are united into one” (source from: http://www.360doc.com/content/12/0121/07/4310958_178774087.shtml).

coexist with me, and all things and me are united into one” (Fig. 2). Man and all things in nature are composed of Qi. Based on different attributes of Qi of all things, TCM further divided Qi into the Qi of Yin, Yang and Five Elements, whose theory is then adopted to establish a universal relationship between man and all things. Additionally, TCM systematically classifies the social environment, natural environment, psychological state of human-being and human body based on Yin Yang and Five Elements theory, and established theoretical links between their interactions and impacts to detect the law of their interaction and transformation. *Ling Shu Sui Lu* (《灵枢·岁露》 *The Spiritual Pivot: Discussion on Abnormal Wind and Rain in a Year*) says: “The human body is inextricably linked to the heaven and the earth and corresponds to the sun and the moon.” The thought of understanding, absorbing, interpreting, and intervening with the illness from the perspective of biology-psychology-society forms the theoretical basis of practising narrative medicine in TCM. Wang⁶ in the modern times used the thought of Yin Yang and Five Elements to adjust people's psychological state through narrative methods, enabling them to better adapt to society and improve their emotional state. As a result, the symptoms of some patients were relieved.

2.2 Yin Yang theory of TCM

TCM believes that the world is material, and the world is the unity of Yin and Yang which are also opposed to each other. The interaction between Yin and Yang contributes to and promotes the occurrence, development, and changes of things. *Su Wen Yin Yang Ying Xiang Da Lun* (《素问·阴阳应象大论》 *Basic Questions: Major Discussion on the Theory of Yin Yang and the Corresponding Relationships among all the Things in Nature*) states that: “Yin and

Table 1 Classification of Yin Yang attributes of natural things

Attributes	Yang	Yin
Space (location)	Up Exterior Left South Heaven	Down Interior Right North Earth
Time	Day	Night
Season	Spring Summer	Autumn Winter
Temperature	Warm Hot	Cool Cold
Humidity	Dry	Humid
Weight	Light	Heavy
Trait	Clear	Muddy
Brightness	Bright	Dim
Motion	Transformation of Qi Rising Dynamic Active Hyperfunctional	Constitution of Form Declining Static Inhibitory Hypofunctional

Yang serve as the *Dao* (道 Law) of the heaven and the earth, the fundamental principle of all things, the parents of change, the beginning of birth and death and the storehouse of *Shen Ming* (神明 God).” As a unique theoretical tool of TCM, the holistic view of Yin and Yang is widely used to interpret the time, space, nature and state of the natural environment, the vital movement of the human body, the causes and pathological changes of diseases, and to guide the methods of disease diagnosis and prevention. Therefore, it has become an important part of the theoretical system of TCM (Table 1).

2.3 Five elements theory of TCM

TCM believes that everything in the universe is composed of five basic substances: wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. The development and changes of various things and phenomena in nature are the results of the continuous movement and interaction of these five substances. By applying the Five Elements theory, TCM interprets the occurrence, development, changes of and interactions between the human body and everything in the universe (Fig. 3). *Su Wen Zang Qi Fa Shi Lun* (《素问·脏气法时论》 Basic Questions: Discussion on the Association of the Zang-Qi with the Four Seasons) says: “The *Wu Xing* (五行 Five Elements) is composed of *Jin* (金 Metal), *Mu* (木 Wood), *Shui* (水 Water), *Huo* (火 Fire), and *Tu* (土 Earth), the rising and declining changes of which are helpful for making prognosis, judging success and failure of the treatment, understanding Qi of the Five Zang Organs (五脏 Five Internal Organs), ascertaining the time when a disease becomes alleviated or worsened, and foretelling the date of impending death.” By using the holistic view of the Five Elements, and the five directions of spatial structure, the five seasons of time structure, the social relations and the five internal organs of the human body as the basic framework, TCM summarizes various things and phenomena in nature and society, as well as the physiological and pathological phenomena of the human body according to their attributes, so as to establish the Five Elements structure system, which is used to interpret the unity of the human body with natural and social environments. Based on the theory above, the interpretation, diagnosis and treatment of diseases can be conducted through the guidance of the attributes of the Five Elements and the

relationship between the Five Elements (Wood generates Fire, Fire generates Earth, Earth generates Metal, Metal generates Water, Water generates Wood; Wood restrains Earth, Earth restrains Water, Water restrains Fire, Fire restrains Earth, and Earth restrains Wood)⁷ (Table 2).

3 The application of TCM theory to patient's emotion management guided by the thought of the unity of *Xing* (形 Body) and *Shen* (神 Mind/Spirit) in TCM

TCM holds that man is the unity of *Xing* and *Shen*. *Xing* is the residence of *Shen*, and *Shen* is the master of *Xing*. *Xing*, including muscles, blood vessels, muscles and bones, viscera, and other tissues and organs, is the material basis and *Shen* refers to emotion, consciousness, thinking, and etc. On the one hand, *Shen* exists with *Xing*; on the other hand, *Xing* relies on *Shen* to be regulated and controlled. The two are interdependent, interactive, and inseparable. Therefore, in clinical practice, solely focusing on physical health and ignoring mental health comes to nothing but empty talk while solely focusing on mental adjustment and disregarding physiological laws will also impede the final recovery of mental disorder. Only by attaching equal importance to *Xing* and *Shen*, cultivating *Xing* to promote a mental health, and adjusting *Shen* to promote physical health, can we finally arrive at the ideal healthy state described in *Su Wen Shang Gu Tian Zhen Lun* (《素问·上古天真论》 Basic Questions: Ancient Ideas on How to Preserve Natural Healthy Energy): “A desirable harmony between *Shen* and *Xing* leads to good health and a long life.”

3.1 The body is the residence of *Shen* (神 Mind/Spirit)

TCM believes that *Xing* is the residence of *Shen*, which produces conscious activities, as well as emotional activities, as is suggested in *Su Wen Xuan Ming Wu Qi* (《素问·宣明五气》 Basic Questions: Discussion on Elucidation of Five-Qi): “The heart stores *Shen* (神 Spirit); the lung stores *Po* (魄 Corporeal-Soul); the liver stores *Hun* (魂 Ethereal-Soul); the spleen stores *Yi* (意 Thinking); and the kidney stores *Zhi* (志 Consciousness).” According to *Su Wen Tian Yuan Ji Da Lun* (《素问·天元纪大论》 Basic Questions: Discussion on the Law of Motions

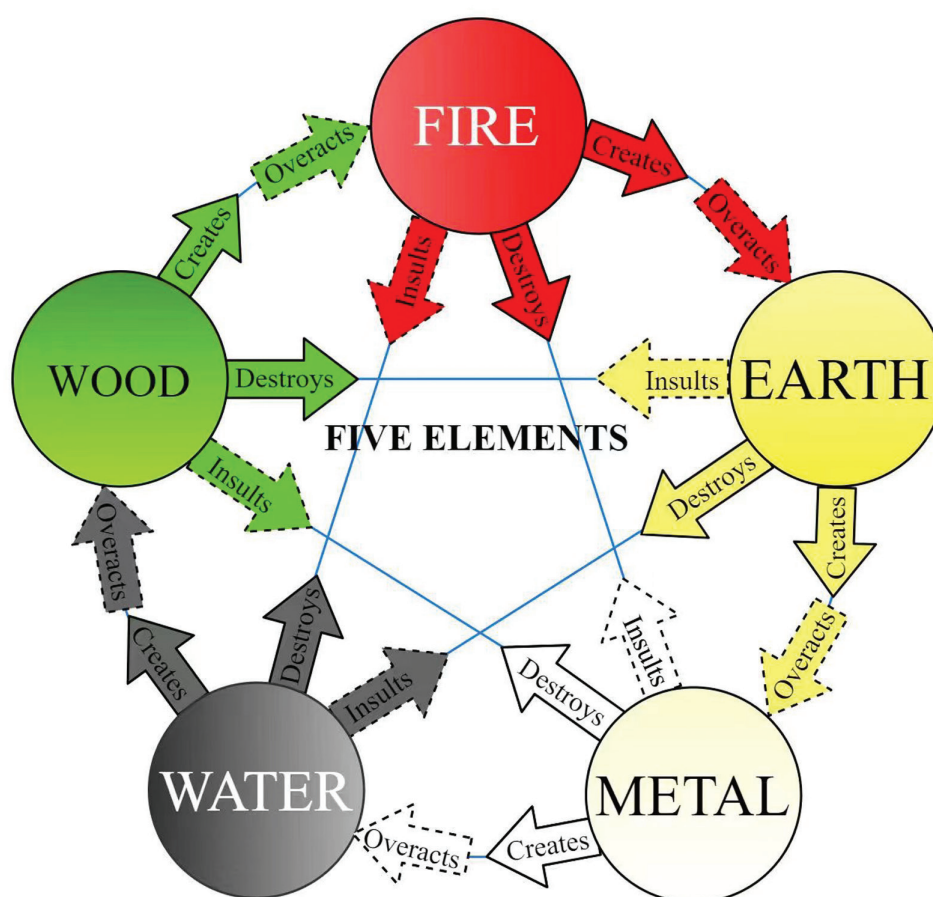


Figure 3 Cycles of generation and control of the Five Elements (source from: designed by the author.).

Table 2 The relationship of Five Elements in nature, society, and human body

Nature	Five colors	Blue-green	Red	Yellow	White	Black
	Five flavors	Sour	Bitter	Sweet	Spicy	Salty
	Five Qi	Wind	Heat	Humid	Dry	Cold
	Five directions	East	South	Middle	West	North
	Five seasons	Spring	Summer	Long Summer	Autumn	Winter
Society	Function	Distribute softness	Demonstrate conspicuously	Wet and hot	Clean	Cold
	Transformation	Vigorous	Luxuriant	Abundant	Shrinking	Peaceful
	Administration	Stretching and rising	Bright	Quiet	Strong and prompt	Piercing cold
	Five elements	Wood	Fire	Earth	Metal	Water
	Five internal organs	Liver	Heart	Spleen	Lung	Kidney
Human body	Five hollow organs	Gallbladder	Small intestine	Stomach	Large intestine	Bladder
	Five sense organs	Eye	Tongue	Mouth	Nose	Ear
	Five body constituents	Tendon	Vessel	Muscle	Skin	Bone
	Five emotions	Anger	Joy	Contemplation	Sadness	Fear
	Five voices	Call	Laugh	Sing	Cry	Groan

and Changes in Nature): “People’s Five Internal Organs transform the Five Qi to generate the emotions of joy, anger, contemplation, anxiety, and fear.”

When the internal organs of the human body are in disorder, people’s *Shen* (神 Mind) will be affected, even threatening one’s life. In clinical practice, there are frequent cases of mental disorders due to visceral diseases. Patients with high fever may easily get deranged and patients with intestinal obstruction often talk nonsense. Severe myocardial infarction can also lead to nervousness, restlessness, or

even death. For example, in *Ling Shu Xie Ke* (《灵枢·邪客》 *The Spiritual Pivot: Invasion of Pathogenic Factors*), it is said that: “The heart is the dominator of the Five Internal Organs and the Six Hollow Organs, and the residence of *Shen*. The heart is vital and cannot bear the invasion of *Xie* (邪 Evil), which, when entering the heart, can damage it, resulting in the fading of *Shen* and eventual death of the patient.”

Through the adjustment of people’s tangible Qi, blood and viscera, patient’s *Shen* can be restored. In

clinical practice, effective treatment of the disease may also contribute to the gradual recovery and stabilization of patient's *Shen*. According to *Ling Shu Ping Ren Jue Gu* (《灵枢·平人绝谷》 *The Spiritual Pivot: Fasting in Healthy People*): “When Qi can move upward and downward, the Five Zang Organs are stable and the blood vessels are smooth, *Shen* is vigorous.” In *Su Wen Liu Jie Zang Xiang Lun* (《素问·六节藏象论》 *Basic Questions: Discussion on Six-Plus-Six System and the Manifestations of the Viscera*), it is also said that: “The harmony of *Zang Qi* (脏气 Visceral Qi) ensures the production of *Jin Ye* (津液 Body Fluid) and *Shen*.”

3.2 *Shen* (神 Mind/Spirit) is the master of *Xing* (形 Body)

TCM believes that people's *Shen* is the master of *Xing*. Pathological changes of *Shen* may lead to corresponding body changes, resulting in slow recovery of disease or even death.

In clinical practice, patients with a mental disorder suffer from a much slower recovery as compared with those without a mental disorder. According to *Su Wen Tang Ye Lao Li Lun* (《素问·汤液醪醴论》 *Basic Questions: Discussion on Decoction and Wine*): “Insatiable avarice and excessive anxiety lead to decay of *Shen* (神 Spirit), scantiness of *Rong* (荣 Nutrient-Qi), and dysfunction of *Wei* (卫 Defensive-Qi), which is why *Shen* is lost and disease is not cured.”

Patients with mental despair are often prone to critical illness while patients with mental stability are more likely to have a turnaround to recovery. *Ling Shu Tian Nian* (《灵枢·天年》 *The Spiritual Pivot: Life Span*) therefore says: “Loss of *Shen* will lead to death while preservation of *Shen* will guarantee life.”

Patients with a clear mind and strong will tend to have healthy viscera while those with a weak mind are likely to suffer from viscera disorder. It is also said in *Su Wen Ling Lan Mi Dian Lun* (《素问·灵兰秘典论》 *Basic Questions: Discussion on the Secret Canons Stored in Royal Library*): “If the monarch (the heart) is wise (normal in functions), then the subordinates (the other organs) will be peaceful (normal in function). Abidance by this rule to practice *Yang Sheng* (养生 Cultivating Health) will enable one to avoid any suffering all through his or her life. To use this rule to govern a country, the country will be prosperous. If the monarch (the heart) is not wise (abnormal in function), all the 12 organs will be in danger and cannot function well, inevitably resulting in severe damage of the body. To use such a way to practice *Yangsheng*, the body will be greatly damaged.”

3.3 *Shen* (神 Mind/Spirit) is vital to physical health

When comparing *Shen* and *Xing*, TCM attaches more importance to *Shen*. It emphasizes the important role of governing and adjusting *Shen* in promoting physical health. *Su Wen Bao Ming Quan Xing Lun* (《素问·宝

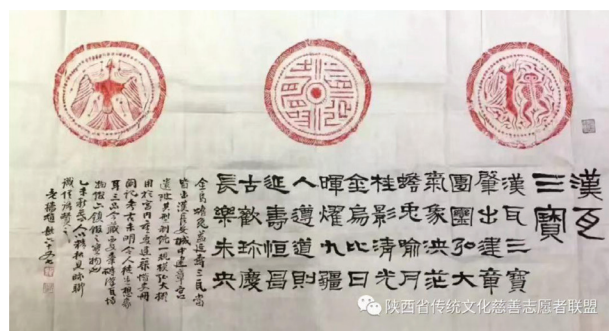


Figure 4 Three precious tiles from the Han Dynasty, representing the harmony between men and nature, indicating fortune and luck for the people. (source from: <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/rf-VFi7hfqXFHUUUVU8uMNA>)

命全形论》 *Basic Questions: Discussion on Preserving Health and Life*) says: “The first is to govern spirit, the second is to know how to promote health...” (Fig. 4).

Because *Shen* governs the body, treating *Shen* could promote health by regulating mental activities. *Ling Shu Ben Zang* (《灵枢·本脏》 *The Spiritual Pivot: The Viscera as the Foundation of Human Beings*) says: “The emotions and mind function to control the spirit, astringe the *Hun* (魂 Ethereal Soul) and the *Po* (魄 Corporeal Soul), adjust coldness and warmth and regulate emotional changes... When the emotion, and mind are in harmony, the spirit will be concentrated, the *Hun* and the *Po* will not disperse, anger and vexation will not take place, and the Five Zang Organs will not be attacked by *Xie*.”

Strong immunity of the body, good health, and long life may be achieved solely by managing one's emotion, keeping a peace of mind and adjusting to the environment. According to *Su Wen Sheng Qi Tong Tian Lun* (《素问·生气通天论》 *Basic Questions: Discussion on the Interrelationship between Life and Nature*): “If Qi from Heaven is fresh and clear, then it enables people to maintain a cheerful and peaceful mood. Following the progress of the *Tian Qi* (天气 Heaven Qi) fortifies the *Yang Qi* and in this case even if there is *Zei Xie* (贼邪 Thief-Evil) around, it cannot hurt the body.” *Ling Shu Ben Shen* (《灵枢·本神》 *The Spiritual Pivot: Basic State of Spirit*) says: “So the sages cultivate their health by means of adapting themselves to cold and heat, balancing joy and anger, maintaining a regular daily life, adjusting Yin and Yang, and regulating sturdiness and softness. In such a way they are able to avoid being attacked by *Xie* (邪 Evil) and live a long life.”

4 The management of patients' emotion is vital to narrative medicine practice in TCM

4.1 Paying attention to patients' emotions can help the doctor to collect, record, analyze, and understand disease stories

TCM believes that emotion is an important pathogenic factor. Emotion originates from the functional movement

of *Zang Fu* organs (脏腑 Viscera organs) in physiology, from individual preferences and value judgment in psychology, and from the role taking and stimulation of events in society. TCM applies the theory of yin-yang and Five Elements to combine the emotions of anger, happiness, worry, and fear generated by the five *Zang* organs with a number of factors at social, psychological, and physiological levels of the disease. They include Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter in time, East, South, Middle, West, and North in space, long, sharp, square, thin, and round in shape, blue-green, red, yellow, white, and black in color, sour, bitter, sweet, spicy, and salty in taste, foul, scorched, fragrant, fishy, and rotting in smell, growth, transformation, and preservation in change, liver, heart, spleen, lung, kidney of *Zang Fu* (脏腑 Viscera) and etc, internally and systematically connecting these seemingly scattered and irrelevant things. So *Zang Fu* theory, diagnosis theory, TCM odor theory, *Jing Luo* (经络), and acupoint theory from TCM are all used by TCM doctors to give systematic diagnosis and treatment of the disease. Therefore, emotional manifestation of patients with many complex diseases may be considered as a clue for those doctors who treat the diseases by managing patients' emotion as a point of departure.

4.2 Paying attention to patients' emotions can enable doctors to respond to disease-induced pain more effectively and reduce doctor-patient contradictions

The disease-induced pain is closely related to the patient's emotions. By paying attention to patients' emotions, the doctors can respond to patients' pain more effectively and can quickly establish trustworthy relationships with their patients. After years of professional thinking and clinical practice, we found that patients' bad mood is not only an early symptom of the disease, but also an important reference and basis for the diagnosis and treatment of the disease, a display of the patient's real demands and desires, and an important indicator for the doctors to treat the patients. Therefore, by understanding patients' emotions we can effectively respond to patients' pain, enhance patients' sense of respect, boost patients' trust in the doctors, and eventually reduce doctor-patient contradictions, conflicts, and disputes.

4.3 Paying attention to patients' emotions is the key to improve the curative effect of the treatment

In clinical practice, if the doctors can feel, pay close attention to, record, and finally guide and adjust the patients' emotions, the patients will be inspired and encouraged. It will eventually lead to their better recovery. *Su Wen Tang Ye Lao Li Lun* (《素问·汤液醪醴论》 Basic Questions: Discussion on Decoction and Wine) says: "Declination of *Jing Shen* (精神 Spirit) and distraction of *Yi Zhi* (意志 Mind) make the diseases incurable." As a clinician, responding to patients' pain, understanding the

story behind the disease, and giving patients appropriate empathy and encouragement are of great significance to the effective treatment and rehabilitation of the disease. It is the key for carrying out narrative medical treatment and implementing comprehensive social, psychological, and physiological treatment in TCM.

In summary, narrative medical practice under the guidance of TCM theory can supplement medical humanities study in China, enrich the content of narrative medicine, and further improve the medical model. Since the establishment of the theoretical system of TCM, it has been recognized that the emergence of diseases is not only a physiological problem of the patients, but also the problem of the people from the social and psychological perspective. When medicine overemphasizes technology, the social and psychological state of patients may easily be ignored. It would lead to poor management of patients' emotions, unsatisfactory curative effect of the treatment, or even potential doctor-patient contradictions. In carrying out narrative medical treatment under the guidance of TCM theory, we found that the effective treatment relies both on the superb skills of doctors, and on the care, psychological and social guidance for the patients. Only by recognizing these factors can we help make positive changes in the social, psychological, and physiological state of patients, and finally obtain satisfactory treatment results. In this process, the doctor's professional skills and personality can also be improved. Just as Han Qide (韩启德), an academican of the Chinese Academy of Science, said, medicine was an effort to respond to the pain of others.⁸ He also argued that the value of medicine should be judged by both objective and subjective criteria, so doctors should treat not only the disease but also the patient's heart.⁹

5 A case from clinical practice: the unhappiness of the patient with abdominal pain

On a summer day of 8 years ago,¹⁰ after a day of outpatient service, I hurried to the ward to see a young patient. On the way, I reviewed the patient's case.

The patient was a 28-year-old female doctoral candidate who was admitted to the hospital two weeks ago due to intense and persistent pain in the lower abdomen. She received a series of examinations such as a blood test, B-ultrasound, magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), laparoscopic exploration and liver biopsy, but no abnormalities could be found. The digestive department, hematology department, endocrinology department, neurology department, and psychiatric department were all invited here for consultation. Her illness was once suspected to be ischemic colitis, porphyria, ectopic pregnancy, corpus luteum rupture, small bowel torsion and other diseases, but they were all excluded eventually. In other words, so far, the girl's symptom still persisted

while the cause was unclear. It was in this case that the girl's friend thought of TCM.

It is worth mentioning that in our hospital, which is dominated by Western medicine, various departments still trust TCM and support beneficial attempts of TCM treatment. Therefore, after receiving the consultation invitation, I went to the ward to find out.

Abdominal pain is common among patients in TCM departments. TCM has a unique understanding of the abdominal pain with unclear cause. On my way, I tried to understand why a girl about to get her doctor's degree would suddenly suffer from such a strange disease.

When I came to the ward, no sooner had I entered the door than I saw an emaciated girl lying on the hospital bed, with her face being dark and livid. TCM believes that the dark and livid face means the patient is mostly in the state of liver depression and blood stasis.¹¹ Beside her bed, an old woman was helping to clean up sundries and the urine in the patient's urine bag. I introduced myself to the patient: "I'm a doctor from the Department of Traditional Chinese Medicine. Your friend entrusted me to see you and look things over." She nodded blandly.

I began to check her pulse and conduct a physical examination for her. The patient's tongue coating had a white, greasy, and dull color and her pulse was weak and thready. After inquiry, I learned that the patient had frequent acupuncture-like pain in the left lower abdomen, which was severe and unbearable. The pain would transfer to the upper abdomen and her long confinement to bed might also have caused her frequent lumbosacral pain. After hospitalization, the patient had poor appetite (mostly liquid food) and constipation.

I judged that the girl's abdominal pain might have been caused by the invasion of liver Qi to the spleen. TCM believes that the liver system is a mechanism for regulating emotion and relieving Qi and excessive emotion will lead to liver Qi disorder, stagnation of Qi and blood in the abdomen, which results in severe abdominal pain. Since the disorder of liver Qi is mostly due to the fact that patients have encountered a poignant predicament, I tried to communicate with the girl to find the social and psychological causes of her illness.

I told the girl: "TCM believes that the pain in the abdomen is often caused by depression. Did you experience anything unhappy a month before your sickness? If you can recall anything like this, it may help us figure out the cause and decide on the follow-up treatment."

The girl pondered a little, hesitated, and then whispered: "In fact, there is no big deal, but there is one thing that really bothers me."

I looked into the girl's eyes, smiled and said, "In fact, the things that make people sick may be those trivial things. You might as well tell me."

The girl said: "I am going to obtain my doctor's degree next year and my supervisor had initially agreed to let me write an article, which was later given to another student to be written for publication. This article is very

important for my graduation. The more I think about it, the more depressed I am. Since then, I've had abdominal pain. Besides, my boyfriend is abroad. He knows that I am ill and hospitalized, but never says he'll come back to see me, which also makes me unhappy."

According to previous experience, patients with a long course of disease can't fully recover if they simply take medicine without the adjustment of negative emotions. How can I find a breakthrough to comfort the girl and help regulate her bad emotions? When I saw the old woman beside the girl's bed, an idea suddenly came to my mind.

"Who is this old lady? How old is she?"

The girl answered: "She's my mother. She's going to be 70. My mother gave birth to me very late and I'm the youngest in our family."

I continued: "In my opinion, as a 70-year-old woman, it must be very hard for her to take care of you in the hospital. You know, she is tired and worried about you. You're going on to your thirties, so you can't just agonize over your own pain and ignore the pain you brought to your family."

The girl said: "My mother has been worried a lot about me these days, but she tends to keep things to herself. She just keeps helping me pack up things. What you said really makes me realize how selfish I am." As she talked, I could clearly see tears in her eyes. According to TCM, sadness dissipates Qi. If the patient can realize that it is hard for her mother to take care of her, then it will be easy to help her jump out of her predicaments and give the problem a second thought.

"Don't worry, traditional Chinese medicine believes that your disease is caused by the invasion of liver depression into the spleen. I'll prescribe some drugs to soothe your liver and regulate Qi, as well as promote blood circulation and relieve pain. If you feel guilty, just say sorry to your mother, and your Qi may dissipate and you will recover soon!" Patients who are seriously ill in bed often immerse themselves in hesitation and indecision, so conveying confidence to them is very important for their recovery.

Hearing these words, the girl's eyes reddened. She nodded her head, pursed her chapped lips, and said firmly, "OK!"

Then I prescribed three doses of *Da Chai Hu Tang* (大柴胡汤 Major Bupleurum Decoction),¹² which is a classic prescription of TCM for the treatment of acute abdominal pain caused by liver Qi stagnation. Three days later, the girl came for a follow-up visit and told me that her abdominal pain disappeared. The doctor in charge of the ward agreed that she could go home. She also told me that after I left that day, she apologized to her mother and shed tears for her stubbornness. She told me that, miraculously, her abdominal pain was relieved that night, and after taking the medicine, most of the symptoms of abdominal pain were relieved the next day. After taking three doses of the medicine, she's got neither severe abdominal pain nor constipation, with only fatigue being left.

I told her to take some medicine that can supplement Qi and activate blood circulation, do some moderate exercises and try to gradually change her wayward temper. In the follow-up visit one week later, she totally recovered and her abdominal pain did not recur.

By using the diagnostic and treatment techniques of TCM, it is recognized that negative emotions can lead to the onset of abdominal pain in patients with anger, which is generated by the liver. Therefore, to cure the disease, it is necessary to dissolve the anger generated by the liver. TCM believes that sadness emotions generated by the lungs can dissolve anger generated by the liver. In TCM, it is called *Jin Ke Mu* (金克木 Metal restrains Wood), meaning the sad state of the lungs can regulate the angry state of the liver.¹³ Under the guidance of TCM theory, we as doctors choose drugs that can soothe the liver and regulate Qi to eliminate the state of liver depression and Qi stagnation in patients. On the other hand, by using the patient's emotions as clues, we can find the people and events that have influenced their emotions through the patient's narrative, as a result, we may guide the patient to self-mediation, enabling the lungs to generate sad emotions to eliminate liver anger.

6 Conclusion

The above case demonstrates the fact that when facing complex diseases, TCM theory can help doctors pay attention to the patient's spirit, focus on the patient's emotions, and use emotions as clues to carry out narrative communication and treatment. As a result, TCM can help clarify the diagnostic results of the disease and improve the treatment effect. According to the Five Elements Theory of TCM, diseases caused by excessive sadness can be resolved by guiding the patients to joyful emotions, which is known as *Huo Ke Jin* (火克金 Fire restrains Metal); Diseases caused by fear can be resolved by guiding patients to delve deeper into thinking, which is *Tu Ke Shui* (土克水 Earth restrains Water). Conclusively, TCM has practical significance for narrative medicine practice in clinical setting. In addition, as patients are people with rich emotions, narrative medicine is also urgently needed. As suggested by Academician Han at the 2nd China Medical Humanities Conference in August 2018,¹⁴ medical humanities is an indispensable part of clinical practice and different patients with the same disease have different stories. Therefore, medical staff should first learn to listen to patients' stories, feel their suffering, integrate into their lives, empathize and resonate with them, transform their feelings into expressions specific to the medical staff, and then make use of those expressions to affect their patients.

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Ethical approval

This study does not contain any studies with human or animal subjects performed by the author.

Author contributions

WANG Chunyong did the research, wrote, and reviewed the paper.

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