

# Rituals in Traditional Chinese Medicine: Taking a Case of Infertility as an Example

Jian Liang

**Abstract**—Ritual is one of the most classic research topics in the field of Anthropology, and rituals have close connection with medical practice. However, the research on this topic from the experience of Traditional Chinese Medicine is limited. This paper presents the whole story that a patient suffering from infertility got cured by a doctor of Traditional Chinese Medicine(TCM) and finally became a mother. With the detailed description of each medical practice, including pulse-taking, traditional Chinese herb therapy, and postpartum confinement, this paper analyzes the ritualized elements in the whole process, interprets how ritual play a role in the practice of TCM, and points out ritual's essential significance in contributing to human's well being and adjusting the relationships between individual and the world.

**Index Terms**—Medical anthropology, ritual, traditional Chinese medicine.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Although modern medicine has become prevalent with far-reaching influence all over the world, in a complex society there would be a medical pluralism systems with several medical sub-systems, like traditional ethnomedicine, folk medicine, and modern medicine, coexisting with each other.[ 1 ] Rituals or ritualized elements have close relationship with traditional medicine systems and they are universally present in traditional medical practices in various cultures and areas. In the view of scientism and modern knowledge, modern medicine is considered to be standard and advanced, while traditional medicine is often thought to be fallacious and backward [ 2 ], so rituals' value and necessity in medical practice have also been cast doubt. However, this perspective is biased, and the truth is that because of the prominent curative effects, nowadays in China there are still many patients are willing to turn to TCM or other ethnomedical approaches for help when they need medical healing or daily health care. And actually, during the medical process, even both the patients and doctors are unconscious, rituals or ritualized elements can play an essential role.

As a classic research topic in Anthropology, ritual has been well-studied since last century, and in the branch of Medical Anthropology, there have been a series of researches on ritual practices in different national medicine systems around the world. However, the ritual study on Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is still limited. TCM is a classic medical system that has been practiced and proved to be highly

effective in China for more than 2000 years. It is a medical system with abundant cultural context. In fact, Rituals elements are applied widely in TCM, and the diagnostic and healing process of TCM are quite ritualized. Therefore, this paper intends to take a case of infertility cured with an approach of TCM as an example to show how ritualized elements are applied in TCM, and analyze how they work in the curing process, trying to providing new research experience from TCM to the field of ritual study in medical anthropology.

## II. A CASE OF RITUAL PRACTICES IN TCM

Ms. Gu was 32 years old when she made the first visit to the TCM doctor for her infertility on October 11th 2011, as she had not taken any contraception measures after she got married 8 years ago but failed to get pregnant. In life, she was irritable and easy to get anxious, and sometimes felt depressed in mind. She had suffered from menstrual irregularities for a rather long time. Before menstruation, she usually had a distending pain in the breast and sagging distention in the lower abdomen, while during the period she would feel great pain in her abdomen. She had done Fallopian Tube Dredging, which was an operation of Modern Medicine, however the infertility continued to exist. She also had done a series of Gynecological examinations of Modern Medicine, but the result had shown that there had not been any organic lesion. Therefore, Ms. Gu decided turn to TCM doctors for help.

After Ms. Gu just made clear what she came for, the first thing the doctor did was putting three fingers on three specific points of her wrists, to feel the pulse of both the right wrist and the left wrist. That was a unique diagnostic method in TCM called pulse-taking. On patient's left hand, doctor's index finger, middle finger and ring finger feel the health condition of the patient's Xin(heart), Gan(liver) and Shen(kidney) in sequence, and for patients' right hand, they feel the condition of patient's Fei(lung), Pi(spleen) and Shen/Mingmen(kidney). (When modern clinical medicine began to spread to China, liver was translated to Gan in Chinese, while the traditional Chinese concept of Gan has been translated into liver in English. Although they are called the same names in habit, actually they are different medical concepts generated from different cultural perspectives.) So every position on the two wrists is related to an internal organ. The doctor will collect the information from a series of aspects, such as the rates, strength, depth, fluency, and tension of the pulse, which are all signs of the patient's physical condition and can implicate special clinical meanings. If there is something wrong or not work well in a certain organ, then the pulse on the connected point would be different to the normal. So according to the variation of

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patient's pulse, the doctor can tell where the problem is located [3]. According to the pulse-taking, Ms. Gu's pulse condition was stringy pulse, and combining with her symptoms of irritation and anxiety and mental state of depression, the doctor considered that the reason for Ms. Gu's infertility was "Gan(liver) Depression and subsequent stagnation of Qi" (Qi is a concept in Chinese philosophy. It is considered to be the most basic substance to compose human's body and govern all kinds of live activities.). In accordance with the cause, the doctor of TCM prescribed a herb recipe on the basic of a classic anagraph named "Kai Yu Zhong Yu Tang" [4] for Ms. Gu, and instructed her to follow the recipe twice everyday at specific time. Ms. Gu adhered to the recipe and returned to visit the doctor to adjust the recipe according to the changes of her body condition every week. One year later she successfully conceived a baby. After the baby's birth, Ms. Gu experienced a traditional Chinese ritual named "Confinement in Childbirth", through which she finally transformed to the role of mother.

### III. ANALYSIS FOR THE CASE

The story of curing the infertility and turning to be a mother that Ms. Gu experienced can serve as a typical example which shows how ritual and ritual elements work in medical practice. Followings are specific analysis for the rituals in the case.

#### A. *Ritual of Pulse-Taking*

##### 1) *Detailed description*

For the pulse-taking, there were some specific rules for both Ms. Gu and the doctor to follow. To begin with, the pulse-taking was took place in a rather isolated space away from the external circumstance to avoid disturbance, which could cause influence to Ms. Gu and be reflected on the status of her pulsing. Secondly, Ms. Gu was supposed to adjust her state and try to stay in calm as usual. Before the pulse-taking, Ms. Gu were told to have a rest for at least ten minutes after she hurried to the hospital and arrived at the clinic room tiredly and breathlessly, and also she were instructed to regulate her mind state to avoid being too excited and nervous, because the momentary stimulated status physically or mentally would both accelerate the pulsing and falsify the result of pulse-taking. Thirdly, for the doctor, a standard set of action in the ritual of pulse-taking includes finding the specific three points on the wrist according to the anatomical structure of radius, closing his eyes to get away from the surrounding circumstance, forget other issues and make himself totally concentrated on the pulsing of the patient, and then feeling the rate of Ms. Gu's pulsing by comparing it with his own breathing rate. For the pulse-taking on each wrist should last for a duration of at least 50-pulse long.

During the pulse-taking ritual, the sacred object [5] is Ms. Gus pulse state, with the concentration of both the doctor and the patient Ms. Gu. The ritual created an quite and isolated environment that was only shared by the participants of the patient and the doctor, which can lead them to transcend the particular surroundings at the moment. And the pulse feeling passed form the Ms. Gus body to the doctor's mind could generate a state of communitas[6] in which the

original opposing structure between the doctor and the patient can be deconstructed and a close connection with the two sides could be built. Because through the ritual of pulse-taking, the doctor can get to know the physical condition from a strange person that he has never met or has no information before, and simultaneously, for the patient Ms. Gu, she could establish a trust and reliance with the doctor that she had never got along with. The ritual of pulse-taking was so essential that despite the lower accuracy of doctor's diagnosis, there would also be some problems in the terms of the doctor-patient relationship if there is no pulse-taking ritual in TCM, which can negatively influence the patient's attitude and behavior in the curing process.

##### 2) *Further Interviews*

On this topic, two further interviews have been made with people who had seen TCM doctors before, but didn't have a satisfying experience on pulse-taking. Reporter A said, once he had a headache and met a doctor who did the pulse-taking too quick and random, as the doctor only felt the pulse for only about 10 seconds. In this case, reporter A thought the doctor couldn't know about the actual physical condition of his body, and even felt doubtful to the professionalism of the doctor suspecting that the doctor might lack the mastery in the method of pulse-taking at all. As a result, he felt it hard to believe the doctor and decided not to follow the medical recipe prescribed by the doctor, so it was a failed curing experience in the end. From this case, it can be proved that not only is pule-taking a formalized action in the process of diagnosis of TCM, but also it is an essential ritual through which the trust and reliance between the patients and the doctor could be established. In addition, the patient's attitude and behaviour reflection to the doctor's curing advice can be shaped by the quality of the pulse-taking ritual. Therefore, the pulse-taking ritual is a key element to construct a favorable patient-doctor relationship and facilitate an good cooperation between the two sides.

For Reporter B, she has a problem of poor appetite. At first she chose to see a doctor of TCM online because she thought it could be more convenient and time-saving. However, she could only be diagnosed in the way of inquiry with the photos of physical examination report, as the pulse-taking couldn't be realized on the Internet. The doctor on the Internet was famous but she felt that his medicine was not as helpful as expected. Two months later, one of his neighbor introduced her to see another doctor of TCM in a local hospital, in which the pulse-taking is available. Although the medical recipe was very similar to the former one, Reporter B held that this time the medicine seemed to work more effectively, and she felt much better after the healing. According to Reporter B, in the process of pulse-taking, she felt that herself became the focused object, in other words, it was herself that was been paid attention to instead of the illness or the report of physical examination. The touch of pulse-taking served as a media of communication between the doctor and herself, and it made her feel a perceptible solicitude from the doctor. From this case, it shows that pulse-taking is not just an mechanical academic method used by the doctor of TCM, it also plays a role as a ritual shared with the doctor and patient, which offers them an occasion for a silent communication and interaction between each other. Furthermore, compared with

materialistic medical examinations and diagnosis, the ritual of pulse-taking can provide the patients with a sense of humanistic concern, which can play a role like placebo during the curing process, helping the patients relieve the pain of illness from a mental perspective.

### *B. Symbolical Herb Therapy*

#### *3) General principle of Chinese herb therapy*

In religious and folk beliefs of different culture systems around the world, rituals can work as an approach through which people could communicate with the supernatural or magical forces that control the world and influence their well-being. In Chinese people's World View, it is the system of Five Elements [7] including Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal and Water, that composes the world, and the interactive relationship of generation and restriction among the five elements is the basic principle that controls the nature. On top of that, Five elements serve as a classification system of objects' basic properties. Everything in the world can be categorized into one of the five types. At the same time, because of the belief that human and nature is a unity [7], which means human is an internal part of the nature, human body is thought as a microcosm of the universe. Therefore, it is convinced that the physical and mental health of human are in charge of the power of Five Elements. Precisely, every organ or system in body is classified to one of the five categories, and every kind of diseases can be regarded as a specific tape of disorder of the Five Elements in the body. So the principle of Traditional Chinese doctors' curing methods is to regulate the relationships of the five elements and rebuild the balance and harmony among them.

Herb Therapy is one of the most important methods used by doctors of TCM. Every kind of herbs is highly symbolic with its Five-elements property. Corresponding to a specific patient with his or her disorder at the moment, a particular herb recipe composed by a number of herbs can be designed by the doctor. In the recipe, every herb has its functional role, and cooperates with each other helping the body adjust the relationship of Five Elements, so that the therapeutic effect is supposed to be realized. Therefore, for Chinese people, when they body and mind are in disorder, taking the herb recipe everyday on time according to the doctor's advice is a special ritual, through which the patients can communicate with the force of Five Elements that controls the nature, and coordinates the balance among them.

#### *4) The herb recipe in Ms. Gu's case*

Return to the case of Ms. Gu's infertility, in the view of TCM, one of the most important explanations for the causes of infertility is that the door of the uterus is closed. Furthermore, the reason for the "door" to be closed is the disorder among the Five Elements. To be precise, in Ms. Gu's case, her work was so stressful work that she experienced too much mental tension and a gloomy mood. In the theory of TCM, the organ of Gan (liver) governs regulating, which includes being responsible for regulating emotion. When there is too much bad mood, there would be a problem for Gan. According to the Five-elements theory, Gan corresponds to Wood in property. And due to the interacting relationship among the five elements, Wood restricts Earth. Especially when there is a problem for Wood, it would

over-restrain Earth. And the organ of Pi (spleen) belongs to Earth in property, so the stagnation of Gan (liver) will lead to abnormal running of Pi (spleen). Pi is located in abdomen, and its disorder will badly influence the abdomen as a whole, including Ren Channel and Dai Channel, two essential Meridians that are located in abdomen and closely related to uterus. Therefore, the poor work of Ren Channel and Dai Channel results in the "closed door" of uterus and it is impossible for Ms. Gu to conceive a baby [4]. To solve her problem of infertility, the key is to open the door of uterus by regulating the disorder between Wood-Gan (liver) and Earth-Pi (spleen). According to such principle, the doctor prescribed a herb recipe for her, the medicines of which include

Danggui, Baishao,  
Baizhu, Fuling,  
Xiangfu,  
Tianhuafen, Danpi

The structure of the recipe is highly organized and symbolic. Danggui and Baishao are the "monarch drug" that has the highest importance in this recipe, they work on the organ of Gan (liver). The Baizhu and Fuling are called "ministerial drug" in this recipe and they are the second important drugs in the recipe. They work on the internal organ of Pi (spleen). Xiangfu is the "assistant drug" in this case, the function of which is to facilitate the blood circulation and nutrients conveying, and stimulate organs function. At last, Tianhuafen and Danpi can play a role of envoy drug, which help the effect of the recipe reach the uterus and other parts that are responsible for pregnancy.

From this case it can be seen that with each herb symbolizing a kind of Five Elements in nature, a Chinese herb recipe functions by helping the patient coordinate the disorder among the Five Elements in body's organs and rebuild the harmony among them. Through the ritual of applying traditional Chinese herb therapy, the patients are linked to nature, and using the force of nature, especially the force of Five-elements, to help them cure disease and recover their health.

### *C. Confinement in Childbirth*

There is a classic belief in TCM that superior doctors cure diseases before they happen, which means eliminating possible pathogenic factors before they had led to diseases. To prevent puerperal disease physically and mentally, TCM doctor instructed Ms. Gu to follow a traditional ritual named confinement in Childbirth after she successfully conceived a baby and gave birth. With the earliest documented record in the book "The Book of Rites" written in the Western Han Dynasty, the practice of confinement in childbirth has a long history of more than 2000 years. More or less with the common knowledge of TCM, Chinese people believe that if this ritual is not performed by the new mother, there would remain lots of root causes of diseases for her, which will gradually appear with age increasing.

In Chinese, this ritual is called "Zuo Yue Zi", which literally means resting in bed for a month. To practice this ritual, there are a series of taboos for new mothers to avoid, as well as various requirements for them to follow. To be precise, after the baby's birth, Ms. Gu were supposed neither to get out of her bed for three days, nor to go outside her

home in a month, in order to avoid being exposed to wind and cold, because in the theory of TCM women body will turn to Yin from Yang, and become weak and cold due to the consumption of Qi and blood after giving birth. For the same reason, Ms.Gu was required to wear more clothes than usual to keep warm. Besides, she were not allowed to perform any labor, otherwise she would be even weaker so that it will lead to uterine prolapse. Particularly, Ms'Gu had to avoid touching cold water, because it was believed that cold-evil, which means pathogenic factors of cold, will get into her body through the cold water, causing the disease of rheumatic arthritis. The same was true when it comes to the term of diet. Ms. Gu was suggested not to eat raw food, iced food, or food with cold or cool property[8], such as pear and watermelon. However, food that were rich in nutrition or have warm property were recommended for her to eat, such as porridge and fermented glutinous rice soup with egg drops. (There is a theory in TCM that considers food and medicine are homologous, and classifies the properties of all kinds of food and medicine into four categories, including cold, hot, warm, and cool. The classification is not decided by the temperature of the food or medicine, but the effect they will bring to human' s body after they have been taken in. ) What is more, strangers were not allowed to enter Ms. Gu's room, to avoid bring disease to the infant. Only patients who were responsible to take care of Ms.Gu could come in, like her mother, mother in law and her husband.

With all of these serious requirements and restrictions, Ms. Gu stayed in a relatively isolated space, and put herself in a special status that are totally different from her ordinary life. And it is in this one-month period that Ms.Gu recovered her physical condition, adjusted her mental state, did physical preparations, and eventually achieved the transformation to a real mother. Otherwise, without the practice of confinement in childbirth, it is believed that there would be more possibility to leave physical and mental diseases, like infirmity and postnatal depression. Therefore, confinement in childbirth is a rite of passage[9], through which women can safely and healthily realize a special transition in her own life stages, as well as the role reversal in her family organization. It also provides the new mother with a grace period, with which she can adapt to a serious of duties and obligations brought by her new status.What is more, there are many interactions between the new mother and her family in the ritual of confinement in childbirth. The meticulous care for the new mother is a kind of soundless solicitude and consolation. So confinement in childbirth is also a ritual to express the appreciation and love to the new mother, as well as the welcome to the baby's birth.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

With the case of Ms.Gu, a patient who once suffered from infertility, turned to TCM doctor for cure, and finally became a real mother, it can be seen that the practice of TCM is abundant with rituals. The pulse-taking can bring patient and the doctor to transcend the particular surroundings at the moment and enter a state of communitas, where the original opposing structure between the doctor and the patient disappears, and contribute to building a relationship of trust and reliance between the two sides. On the other hand, it also offer a sense of humanistic concern for the patient and

working as a placebo, providing a mental relief to the pain of illness in some degree. Taking Chinese herbs recipe is a ritual that helps patients obtain connections with nature, and use the force of nature to adjust the unbalance and disorder in his or her body with highly symbolical herbs. The practice of confinement in childbirth is a ritual of passage that help new mothers to achieve the transition in different life stages and family roles. It is also a ritual that creates a special situation for emotions like love, caring, and gratitude to flow and be expressed in a family.

In a nutshell, rituals elements play a very essential role in disease curing and preventing, and contribute to patients' physical and mental well-being. Meanwhile, besides the medial value, rituals also have substantial effects on connecting and adjusting the interaction and relationships between doctors and patients, humans and nature, different live stages, and those of an individual in his or her family.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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In the future, Miss Liang plans to pursue further study in the field of cultural anthropology and medical anthropology.