SU-WEN, THE BASIS OF CHINESE MEDICINE*

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MORE than a year ago my dear friend, Prof. A. E. Haydon of the University of Chicago, called my attention to a book which was as unknown to me as it doubtless is to most of my medical and scientific readers. The work in question is entitled "Histoire des Croyances religieuses et des opinions philosophique en Chine depuis l'origine, jusqu' à nos jours," by L. Wieger, S.J., published in 1917.[1] Here is found a summary of a previously untranslated work, the "Su-wen," by an unknown author upon which there are extant numerous Chinese commentaries.

My translation, for which I received some valuable suggestions from Miss E. F. Dexter of this University, was subsequently submitted to M. Wieger, who has most graciously consented to its publication and has explained to me several obscure references.

The Translation

I attribute to this period (the first of the Han dynasty) the analysis of the *Su-wen*, Simple Questions, because the style of this work does not at all permit us to place earlier the edition which has come to us, and because it certainly existed under this form at this epoch. But its contents are older. It sums up the experimental, physiological knowledge of all the centuries which preceded, for it systematizes it in one chapter, the nineteenth, which is of the greatest interest for the history of Chinese doctrines. This chapter is certainly later than Lao-tsze, beginning of the fifth century; but I estimate that its outline was prior to the end of the fourth century. For the system of five agents, upon which it rests its theories, is still the system of reciprocal production of agents by one another, not the system of the destruction of agents by one another introduced by Tseon-yen in the fourth century.

The setting of the *Su-wen* is rather original. The emperor Hoangti puts very well formulated questions to the savants of his retinue, K'i-pai and others, which they elucidate. It is pure fiction, of course, but gives the book more clearness and a certain vivacity. The following is the résumé of the system of which the relationship with the Taoist philosophy is apparent.

All that is arises from a primordial Being without form or figure, invisible and impalpable. The Being when in this condition is called by the unknown editor

* Read before the Seminar in Medical History of the University of Wisconsin.

[1] The following translation is made from this edition, pp. 313–317. A second edition (1922) of this work has now appeared, but the chapter in question has been changed only in respect to its pagination, which is now 305–309.

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of the *Su-wen*, the Mystery. By its infusion into the first matter, *K'i*, it produces all the beings. All hold from it their vital spirit, shen, ling, shen-ling or chen-ling. Besides this vital spirit, man, who is made of the quintessence of matter, holds of the Mystery his intelligence, *chih*. Hence the aphorisms: "All being is made of matter containing spirit" and "The condensation of the matter and its animation by spirit, makes the being." The spirit, that is the vital spirit, is the participation of each being in the soul of the world and is not a separate soul.

The median space, between the heaven above and the earth below, is the theater of communication of the being, by the primordial Being, to the inferior beings . . . The *Su-wen* calls this median space The Great Void. It is the hollow of the bellows[2] of *Lao-tsze*.

In this median space, turn two superposed wheels, one above the other, in the opposite direction. The nine principal constellations and the seven celestial bodies (sun, moon and five planets) are the metronome which regulates this double gyration.

The upper wheel, turning to the left, is that of the celestial influence *yin-yang*. These two alternative modalities, activity and passivity, light and darkness, heat and cold, expansion and contraction, masculinity and femininity, rigidity and flexibility, we have long recognized. But in the *Su-wen* each is subdivided into three parts. This subdivision is to play henceforth an immense rôle in Chinese speculations. We show here the famous graphic scheme of this gyration.[3] The two points of opposite color signify that each modality contains within itself the germ of its opposite, which will succeed to it; but this we shall pass over.

[2] M. Wieger's letter states: "Of the (cosmic) bellows. Lao-tze compares the cosmos to a smith's bellows, two boards and a bag of leather. Heaven and Earth are the two acting boards. The hollow bag, between them, breathes *life*, producing all livings."

[3] See appendix 1, Celestial Wheel.

The two tears, swollen at the head, decreasing at the middle, drawn out at the tail, symbolize the cycle of the two modalities. One sees that to the head of each corresponds the tail of the other and that, the two decreasing, median parts are intermediary. The three parts of each modality are designated, in the *Su-wen*, by the terms apogee, diminution, termination; and consequently the treatise speaks of the three *yin* and of the three *yang*.

Now the upper, celestial wheel has six sectors, the *yin*-agopee, the *yin*-decreasing, the *yin*-disappearing; the *yang*-apogee, the *yang*-decreasing, and the *yang*-disappearing. On passing by the inferior lower wheel each of these sectors influences it, according to its quality and its degree; to the sectors *yang* of the wheel correspond an effect, more or less great, of life, of activity, of power; to the sectors *yin* correspond an effect, more or less strong, of depression, of decadence, of death.

The inferior, terrestrial wheel, turning to the right, has five sectors corresponding to the five natural agents disposed in the order of reciprocal production; vegetable substance, fire, earth, metallic substance, water. It presents successively these five sectors to the influence of the six sectors of the celestial wheel. The cycle is thirty years. That is to say that, every thirty years, the respective position of the two wheels has returned to the point of departure and the movement recommences.

The two wheels are further divided each into 360 degrees, corresponding to the 360 days of the year (*sic*), and the art of calculating in advance what degree of the superior wheel shall influence, on a given day, what degree of the inferior wheel, constitutes the transcendental science of numbers. There are tables subdivided into hours. These are the tables which have served for twenty centuries to calculate in China the destinies of men, the chances of success of enterprises, and so forth.

See there, says the *Su-wen*, the transcendental machine; reminiscence of the method

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of cosmic weaving of Lao-tze; the mechanism from which everything emerges and into which everything returns.

After this theory of the universal macrocosm the editor of the *Su-wen* goes on to explain to us the human microcosm. I shall permit him to speak of this at length, because these theories have been but little or not at all modified up to the present and are still the foundations of Chinese physiology and psychology.

In its inactive state the universal principle is imperceptible. In its active state it becomes perceptible through its action. It is in man the cause of the condensation of his body, his vital spirit. When the vital spirit leaves the body, the latter will be dissipated.

The wheel of the three *yin* and of the three *yang* act upon the human microcosm as upon the universal macrocosm. Man presents to its action his five viscera through which he participates in the five natural, terrestrial agents.

The *heart*, which presides over the formation of the blood, over the circulation, over the animal heat, partakes of the agent fire. It responds to the influx of heat, to the orientation south, to the color red. That which has a bitter taste nourishes it. Its emanation is affection. Too much bitterness injures the heart, too much affection exhausts it. The heart is the seat of the vital spirit, of the prince of the organism. From it comes the impalpable vitality and consequently all activity.

The *liver*, which presides over the well-being of the tendons, is bilobed like the dicotyledinous grains; it contains the vegetable agent. It responds to the influx wind, to the orientation east, to the color blue green. That which has an acid (*aigre*) taste nourishes it. Its emanation is repulsion. Too much acidity injures the liver; exaggerated antipathy exhausts it. The liver is the seat of the aerial soul, which directs the internal distribution of the breath.

The *lungs*, a double bellows with twenty-four tubes, presides over the maintenance of the skin and of the hair. They partake of the agent metal. They respond to the influx dryness, to the orientation west, to the color white. That which has a sharp (*acre*) taste nourishes them. Their emanation is gravity. Too much sharpness injures the lungs. Pushed as far as melancholy, the gravity exhausts them. The lungs are the seat of the spermatic soul, which directs the interior distribution of this absorbed material, which, uniting with the breath emanating from the aerial soul (liver), is assimilated and repairs in proportion all the organism.

The *spleen*, which presides over the maintenance of the flesh is suspended as by a pedicle to the middle of the vertebral column; it partakes of the element earth. It responds to the influx humidity, to the orientation center, to the color yellow. That which has a sweet taste nourishes it. Its emanation is reflection. Too much sugar injures it, too much reflection exhausts it. The spleen is the seat of intelligence and of the will. It characterizes the temperament.

The *kidney*, double organ, presides over the formation of the bones and of their marrow and especially over the maintenance of the brain which is the marrow of the cranium. It partakes of the agent water. It responds to the influx cold, to the orientation north, to the color black. That which has a salty taste nourishes it. Its emanation is prudence. Too much salt damages the kidney. Pushed to irresolution and scrupulousness, prudence exhausts it. The kidney is the seat of the fecundating sperm. From it comes all procreation.

By means of tables of 360 degrees, one calculates the action of the superior, celestial wheel upon the inferior wheel of the five agents, represented in man by his five viscera. The exact date and the numbers of his birth being given one can calculate from them the ups and downs of his entire life, and the end of this life. What words are these of the artists who make these calculations!

To these principles presented at length in the *Su-wen*, are added practical treatises,

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dietetic and therapeutic. All disease is considered to come from the disorder of the function of a viscus. To determine the sick viscus, a single means is employed, the examination of the pulse. The principal characteristics of the pulse, slowness, rapidity, force, weakness and others, are described. *A priori*, always in view of features of correspondence with the five natural agents, each variety of pulse is thought to indicate that a special organ is affected. There could be nothing less scientific, more fantastic, more empty. Not even a trace of empiricism, of rudimentary experiment. Nothing but the six celestial influences, the five terrestrial agents and the rotation of the sectors. Be it said in passing, that it is for this reason that medicine is placed, in the classification of Chinese sciences, side by side with divination;[4] the two arts being equally based upon conjecture and calculation. As soon as the sick organ has been found, there follow at once the dietetic consequences. If the heart is affected, it is because the patient has abused hot and bitter foods; it is necessary to deprive him of these from then on. If the kidney is affected, then probably he has used cold and salty foods to excess; he ought to abstain from them henceforth and so forth. These correspondences have been sufficiently indicated above. Hence the scrupulous care of each Chinaman whose health is not good, in the choice of his food, care which degenerates into hypochondriacal mania in a number of citizens of this nation. If only their dietetic rules were worth something, but no! The rotation of the six and of the five, as the formula says. One does not get away from that.

Finally let us speak of therapeutics. Here I call attention to an important fact. Before the Christian era the Chinese did not recognize and did not use medicaments properly speaking. That which tradition reports, that the legendary emperor, Shennung, "tasted the hundred herbs," ought to be understood as referring to vegetables susceptible of being employed as food, which were determined with more care when the agricultural life succeeded the nomadic. They knew some violent poisons, arsenic and nux vomica for example; and they made use of these to produce, in cases judged to be desperate, not a curative result, measured and graduated, but a terrible shock, a heroic reaction, which they believed could sometimes restore to equilibrium the distracted organism. The *Su-wen* makes allusion to this practice. Now when the Chinese have many drugs, the ancient, aforesaid system is still employed. I have seen a typical case of it. A girl was afflicted with melancholy mania. The local physicians had not been able to cure her. A traveling physician passes. The relatives of the girl ask him for a consultation. He says: this disease is inveterate; it has struck deep roots; there is only one chance of dislodging it, that is to say *the attack of poison*. I have the drug desired but I do not at all guarantee the result. It is for you to decide. In two hours your daughter will be cured or dead. The relatives asked that the attempt be made. Two hours later the girl was dead.

So then in ancient times there were no medicaments properly so called, but a unique proceeding, believed to heal all ills, comparable to the theories presented above, namely, the famous Chinese acupuncture. Antiquity knows only this. The invention probably dates from primitivity, for the needles were for a long time of flint. Here is the theory of acupuncture . . . Every malady is a visceral disorder. A viscus either does not secrete its emanation, or does not secrete enough of it or retains it instead of circulating it. In a word paralysis of the organ, bad work . . . Now, what does one do to the ox when he draws badly? One gives him a blow with a goad. The Chinese acupuncture is nothing else. One pricks the recalcitrant organ. The *Su-wen* gives the instructions for these *direct* pricks

[4] When Shih-huang-ti of the Ch'in dynasty (immediate predecessors of Han) burned the books of the reactionary literati, he spared those on divination and medicine.

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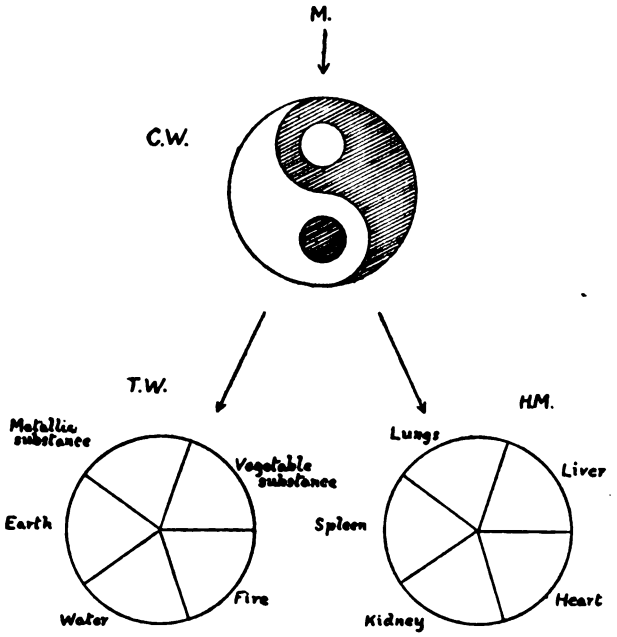
but it also indicates rather well the inconveniences and the dangers of the method, if one uses the needle too violently, if one pricks ever so little to the side, and so forth. The direct prick should be reserved as the attack by poison for desperate cases, when there is nothing to lose. In ordinary cases it is better to practice *indirect* acupuncture.

With an arbitrariness still worse than that which presided at the interpretation of the varieties of the pulse, the Chinese artists divide the cutaneous surface of the entire body into a number of districts, each of which has a special name and is believed to correspond, it is not stated why, to a definite viscus. One pricks such a part to put such a viscus in operation, according to the chart of the human body. For example the pulse having denounced the heart as the author of the disorder, one pricks a certain region of the back, which corresponds to the heart, according to the theory. The heart frisks with pain, recovers itself and sets to work to distribute as it ought, through all the body, the blood and the vital spirit. If its functioning still leaves something to be desired one pricks the place again, and so forth. A simple system, as is seen, and above all inexpensive. All the ancients were thus pricked and healed by the power of nature, the imagination satisfied by the blows of the needle received.

I terminate this chapter with one observation. The *Su-wen* recognizes the circulation of the blood. Probably it was known to the Chinese very much earlier. But it is not right for us to say that they discovered it twenty centuries before W. Harvey. For their knowledge of the circulation of the blood in the human microcosm was intuitive, not experimental, conjectured at the suggestion of the circulation of the vital principle in the universal macrocosm, in which they believed. They divined the fact but they never verified it. If they knew that the heart pressed the blood into the arteries, nevertheless the capillary network, the venous channels for return, the action of the valves, was all unknown to them. During more than twenty centuries the *bow* of the divined circulation did not even present itself to their minds. The *yin-yang* circled about, the five agents did the same, the blood the same. That was all . . . Too much reflection exhausts the spleen, as we have seen.

APPENDIX I

Attempted diagrammatic representation of the essentials of the macrocosm and microcosm as described in the Su-wen.



DIAGRAMMATIC REPRESENTATION OF THE ESSENTIALS OF THE MACROCOSM AND MICROCOSM AS DESCRIBED IN THE SU-WEN.

M.: the metronome, composed of the nine constellations and the seven celestial bodies, which regulates the turning of the wheels.

C. W.: the celestial wheel, which, standing above and rotating to the left, passes T. W. and H. M. It is composed of two modalities, *yin* (activity, light, heat, expansion, masculinity, rigidity), and *yang* (passivity, darkness, cold, contraction, femininity, flexibility) and its circumference is divided into 360 degrees. Each modality is divided into three parts, apogee, decreasing, disappearing.

T. W.: the terrestrial or macrocosmic wheel, rotating below, is divided into five sectors corresponding to the five natural agents: fire, vegetable substance, metallic substance, earth and water: and its circumference is divided into 360 degrees;

H. M.: the human microcosm with its five organs. heart, liver, lungs, spleen and kidney; corresponding to the five natural agents and like them affected by the nearest part of the celestial wheel.

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Through fanciful analogies the pulse informs us in sickness of the organ affected. It is then, apparently, possible to counteract the effects upon the microcosm, of the celestial wheel of the three *yin* and the three *yang*, by acupuncture (direct or indirect) or the attack of poison.

That part of the diagram which represents the celestial wheel is from Wieger: the rest has been added by the author.

APPENDIX II

Tabular view of the functions and characteristics of the five bodily organs according to the Su-wen.[5]

	Heart	Liver	Lungs	Spleen	Kidney
Presides over.....	Blood and its movement; animal heat	The tendons	Skin and hair	The flesh	Bones and marrow
Partakes of the agent.....	Fire	Vegetable substance	Metals	Earth	Water
Responds to influx of.....	Heat	Wind	Dryness	Humidity	Cold
Orientation.....	South	East	West	Center	North
Color.....	Red	Blue green	White	Yellow	Black
Nourished or injured by..	Bitter	Sour	Sharp	Sweet	Salty substance
Emanation is	Affection	Repulsion	Gravity	Intelligence and will	Fecundating sperm
Seat of.....	Vital spirit	Aerial soul	Spermatic soul	Characterizes the temperament	Procreation
	Produces activity	Distributes breath			

[5] Arranged by P. M. D.

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