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The *Qi* That Got Lost in Translation:
Traditional Chinese Medicine, Humour and Healing

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This chapter argues that there is a physical basis for humour according to traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), in which humour — that is, those funny stories or jokes that make one break into smiles or laughter — is linked with the emotion of happiness or joy. This makes humour a function of the operations of what I will call the "endogenous heart",[1] and I will outline why this should be so in TCM and explore the clinical consequences that flow from conceptualizing humour in this way. To some extent, such an understanding of humour may be compared with European theories in classical and medieval times of the four "humours" constituting the human body (yellow bile, blood, phlegm and black bile, which correlate with the four elements of fire, air, water and earth respectively). This Western notion of the four elements is comparable to the *wu xing* 五行 (five elements) of TCM — *mu* 木 (wood), *huo* 火 (fire), *tu* 土 (earth), *jin* 金 (metal) and *shui* 水 (water) — in the sense that in both philosophical systems the elements constitute the ultimate roots of all natural things.[2]

In making such a comparison, there is a risk of confusing the various meanings of the English word "humour", which then included not only the four cardinal humours of the body determining temperament but also the mental or temperamental states themselves, and now extends to the more general meaning of funny things and the experience of them. In the case of Chinese medical theory and the role of humour in maintaining good health, there is an additional confusion that derives from poor translation of Chinese terms involving *qi* 氣, which can be identified as "the circulating life force whose existence and properties are the basis of much of Chinese philosophy and medicine".[3] Accurate translation of this key term is essential, I believe, to grasping the

essence of the connection between *qi* and humour and its role in TCM therapies.

Chinese medical healing emphasizes the need for balance between different types of *qi*, a balance that must vary according to season and environment. Although Western medicine now accepts the prevalence of affective as well as physical disorders, and Western psychology has turned at last from a preoccupation with negative affect to study hedonics or positive psychology,[4] these discoveries were anticipated centuries ago in China, where good humour and happiness have always been considered a requisite for the maintenance of good health. Such an approach suggests that laughter may indeed be good — perhaps the best — medicine. Good humour in the affective and bodily senses depends upon balance or equanimity, a state that is usually described in Chinese as *xin ping qi he* 心平氣和 or *xin he qi ping* 心和氣平 — that is, having a calm mood, being quiet in mind, having a peaceful disposition, having one's heart feel lighter, etc.[5] Although there are many such phrases in English that are roughly equivalent in meaning, if we analyse the original Chinese phrase, we can see that in each instance the word *qi* "got lost in the process of translation" and the translators have universally failed to understand the importance of *qi* in the TCM theory of human physiology.

To take one specific example, John DeFrancis translates *xin ping qi he* into a human ontology of someone "being even-tempered and good-humoured",[6] overlooking the role of *qi* in determining such bodily health and humour. Qi, together with the *yin* and *yang* 陰陽, the five elements/agents/phases and the eight trigrams of the *Book of changes* 八挂易經,[7] animates both our human bodies and the bodies of the universe around us. All these Chinese concepts carry complex metaphoric allusions that resist easy translation. Following the work of Leibniz (to be discussed below), they have sometimes been presented by European scholars as if they were scientific theories; in practice, however, they constitute the framework of TCM treatments and invoke notions of balance, opening up manifold possibilities for therapeutic intervention designed to redress imbalance.

In its earliest usage, *qi* referred to floating clouds, the breath and the atmosphere between heaven and earth. Chinese origin stories relate how the universe emerged from cosmological confusion when the

bright, light *yang qi* ascended to become Heaven, and the thick, heavy *yin qi* descended to become Earth. Properly understood, therefore, *qi* is the origin of the entire universe. The chapter "Disquisition on astrology" (Tianwen xun 天文訓) in the second-century BCE work of philosophy *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (which blends Confucian, Daoist and Legalist thought) states:

> In the beginning, nothing had physical shape, and the first spontaneous formations were the continua of space and time. Out of these were produced the original *qi*.[8]

In the Song dynasty, Neo-Confucianism[9] drew on the Confucian classics as well as early texts such as the *Huainanzi* to formulate a cosmogony predicated on the "Dichotomy of principle", contrasting *li* 理 and *qi*; this in turn gave way to a new vitalist ontology that emerged in the seventeenth century. Founded on materiality and the actualities of life, this new way of thinking gave rise to a vitalism centred upon *qi*, which came to dominate the century's thinking and created a monistic philosophy of *qi* that "stressed the vivid, immediate and ultimate completion of a concrete and dynamic life expressed in terms of *Qi* (material force) and *Qi* (concrete things and implements)".[10] These views have prevailed since that time, at least among theoreticians of TCM. Dai Zhen 戴震 (1724–77), one of the main proponents of this new philosophical school, identified *qi* with the *dao* 道, contending that:

> *Dao* is like movement (*xing* 行). The evolutionary operations (*hua* 化) of the Ether (*qi*) produce and reproduce without pause. That is why this process is called the *Dao*.[11]

This new philosophy had found an early resonance in the practice of medicine and helped innovate the *Wen bing* (Warm febrile diseases) school of medicine founded by Wu Youxing 吳有性 (c. 1580–1660). In *Wen yi lun* 瘟疫論, first published in 1642, Wu stated that *qi* is "a boat with oars (i.e. a vessel) that moves and transports fire",[12] and elaborated this material nature of the *qi*:

> Things or matter are products of the transformation (*hua* 化)[13] of *qi*, while *qi* is a resultant product of changes in things. Hence we can say that *qi* is matter while matter is *qi*. Knowing that *qi* can put matter into order (*zhi* 治)[14] then we know that matter can put *qi* into order. Matter or things that put *qi* into order are referred to as *yaowu* 藥物 [medicinal] matter.[15]

From this simple, irreductionist understanding of medicinal matter, or *yaowu*, derive routine therapeutic practices designed to move and transform a patient's *qi*. From the larger "natureworld" of Heaven-Earth (*tiandi* 天地) and its five locales (north, south, east, west and centre) flow the movements[16] of the five elements (wood, fire, earth, metal, water) and their five transformations and changes (birth [breeding and growth], growth, transformation, harvest and storing). These in turn generate the five seasons (spring, summer, long summer, autumn and winter) and the five *qi* (cold, heat, dryness, damp and wind).[17] Since the human world and the nature world are of one *qi*,[18] the human world arouses (*gan* 感) and responds to (*ying* 應)[19] the five *qi* from Heaven. The *qi* presence is thus something to be "felt", and TCM practitioners who have been trained to feel its presence can detect its movement in their own bodies as well as in other "bodies". The practitioners embody the *qi* and thus the *qi* can assume life as a balancing tool. "Sensing" its presence in their own bodies and its "projection" into ordinary medical tools such as the acupuncture needle or herbs, practitioners help other bodies feel and be aware of the presence of their own *qi*, thus assisting them to put their own disharmonious *qi* into balance and creating an environment for good humour in body and affect.

On the basis of information from European missionaries in China, the philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Leibniz (l646–1716) put forward a commentary emphasizing the subtle nature of *qi*. He equated it with "ether" or "matter in its original form", and thus afforded *qi* a place in Western reasoning. He wrote:

> It seems that this *qi*, or this primitive air, truly corresponds to matter, just as it corresponds to the instrument of the first principle, which moves matter; just as the artisan moves his instrument, producing things. This *qi* is called air, and for us could be called ether [in original translation spelt AETHER] because matter in its original form is completely fluid, without bonds or solidity, without any interstices and without limits which could distinguish parts of it from the other. In sum, this matter (*qi*) is the most subtle one can imagine.[20]

In TCM practice, *qi* needs to be understood as an ontological entity that is enacted or performed. In clinical encounters, *qi* is performed to differentiate between clinical patterns and to associate the appropriate

yaowu. The natural body (which is alive and full of *qi*) is enacted in practices that are a natural part of the whole body. The medical treatments and materials include acupuncture, traditional Chinese massage (*tuina* 推拿), food therapy (*shiliao* 食療), the use of *materia medica*, emotional counter-therapy and *qi* exercises, such as *qigong* 氣功 and tai chi (*taijiquan* 太極拳). The varied *qi* motions of individual *yaowu*, or of a group of them collected in a standardized formula known as a *fang* 方, are chosen to fit the clinical pattern of imbalance or disequilibrium in the uneasy body of the patient. *Qi* exercises, Chinese herbal medicine, acupuncture and emotional counter-therapy all act in the same way to rebalance the *qi*. Emotional counter-therapy realizes its medicinal objective by using one of the seven recognized emotions to counter-balance any extreme emotion that manifests clinically as an abnormal flow of *qi*. The concepts and rationale behind this line of therapy will be dealt with in more detail below, but here it is enough to say that in this way correct balance and good humour can be restored and the patient's bodily ailments will benefit from such treatment.

One Western authority, Joseph Needham, has referred to the *qi* as the "doctrine of pneuma" and concluded that it evolved during the thirteenth century to mean:

> all forms of matter, from the most condensed to the most tenuous; in ancient China it referred rather to subtle matter (comprising what we should now think of as gases and vapours, radioactive emanations, radiant energy, etc.) and invisible biological influences (including nerve influences, hormonal actions, infection and contagion). In medical thought *qi* was something like a vital force in living mind–body organisms, acted upon favourably or unfavourably by other *qi* from the environment, but also itself sometimes capable of spontaneous malfunction.[21]

His description underlines the wide scope of *qi* as it affects body, mind and mood (or humour), for both good and bad.

As an ontological entity, *qi* animates the human body in four directional states of orientation: upwards, downwards, inwards and outwards. In this way, the normal distribution, circulation and metabolism of not only the body's *qi*, but also blood, thin and thick body fluids, spirit, refined *qi* and so on can all be ensured. If this animating *qi* flow is disrupted, then bad humour, illnesses and disease may

result. Yanhua Zhang, who has collected material about contemporary mainland practice in *qi* treatments, describes the process as follows:

> What is central about *qi* is what it does — its functions. They are summarized as promoting human physiological activities, keeping up the body's temperature, defending the body from invasion of "heteropathic *qi*", reinforcing and conserving the vital substance of the body, and transforming bodily substances. Normal functions are achieved through orderly motions of *qi* characterized as moving up, going down, coming in and going out. The dynamic balance is upset if certain *qi* is supposed to go up but goes down instead, or if certain *qi* moves too fast or too slow. For example, the heart *qi* goes down, while the kidney *qi* is going up. The liver *qi* spreads out while the lung *qi* clears downward. When the movement is obstructed, the result is the disordered *qi* mechanism, such as stagnation, congestion, blockage, and closure of *qi*, which lead to all kinds of somatic and psychological symptoms.[22]

The impact of *qi* upon mental and mood states is also noted by Ma Zhongxue, who claims that changes in human emotional/affective states exert significant influence upon the various endogenous organ-systems.[23] As indicated at the outset of this chapter, by the endogenous heart I mean not only the physical heart but also its animating forces that generate emotions. It is best conceptualized as the internal, metaphoric equivalent of the "exogenous fire element" (*huo xing* 火行) within the human body. As we shall see, other organs besides the heart can also be termed endogenous.[24]

On the other hand, the endogenous organ-systems also function in synchronicity with the rhythms of growth and decline as well as the rise and fall of the *yin* and *yang* energies and the cycle of the four seasons. Hence the harm that emotion/affect can inflict will depend on variations in the flow of the temporal rhythm. Generally speaking, during any specific season, when a particular emotion/affect is generated from a specific endogenous organ-system, the flow of *qi* and blood towards this inner organ will thrive and thus emotion will not harm that organ — but it may sometimes harm the organ that it "restrains", resulting in what is known as a deficient clinical pattern. For instance, when an emotion/affect emerges from one endogenous organ-system that can be "overcome" by another, the second organ

is said to be "easily bullied". Even when the emotion/affect occurs in an inner organ that cannot actually be overcome by another, the latter will still bully the former, producing injury to both. For example, happiness is the emotional aspiration of the heart and the heart is the "son" of the liver/wood element (which can thus be bullied by the heart). Thus, when a person is "injured" by being excessively happy during the spring season, clinical symptoms emerge whereby the heart *qi* slackens in its flow, together with manifestations of liver–blood depletion and deficiency. Other temporally related emotional changes involving different inner organs will follow a similar logic, which offers practitioners valuable insights into the treatment and adjustment not only of physical ailments, but also of emotional instabilities. Emotion is in fact the key. As the Japanese philosopher Yuasa Yasuo observed: "Eastern medicine's theory of the body takes emotion as the flow of *qi*."[25] The schema in Figure 3.1 provides help in visualizing these complex interactions.

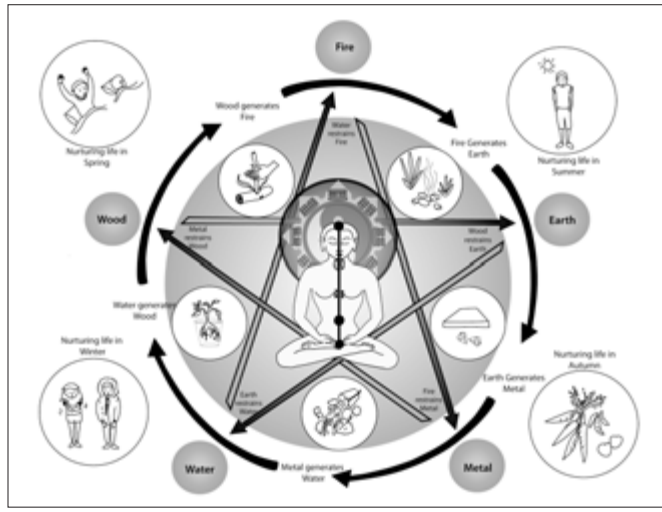

Figure 3.1 Temporally related emotional changes involving different inner organs of the body, shown in a diagrammatic representation of "Nature according to the five elements". Artwork by Ana Marikit Tiquia, based on conceptualizations widely used in TCM.

As positive psychology continues its investigations into positive mood and affect and what supports them, perhaps we may see a reappraisal of the ancient but fruitful concepts outlined above. For TCM, human emotions are conceived of as generated from the five endogenous visceral organs. When emoting, however, an experiential response to given stimuli may be disproportionate or excessive in terms of affect. If so, this can interfere with the normal operation of the *qi* flow and therefore cause illness. As Nathan Sivin points out, this has been understood since the foundations of TCM:

> Abnormal emotion could affect *qi* functions, as [detailed] in a tractate on the causes of pain in the Basic Question of the Inner Canon of the Yellow Lord: "I know that all medical disorders arise from the *qi*. Anger *nu* 怒 makes the *qi* rise; joy *xi* 喜 relaxes it; sorrow *bei* 悲 dissipates it; fear *kong* 恐 makes it go down; cold contracts it; heat makes it leak out; fright *jing* 驚 makes its motion chaotic; exhaustion consumes it; worry *si* 思 congeals it." The results are physical; for instance, "Anger reverses the flow of the *qi*. When it is extreme (the patient) will vomit blood or void 'rice-in-liquid' diarrhoea."[26]

Thus the story behind TCM is a composite one, integrating a number of ways of capturing the concept of balance. Together, these methods sensitively detect imbalance and provide a framework for recommendations to restore balance.[27] In TCM, health is defined as a balance between the *yin* and the *yang*, and a healthy body is one where there is balance between body and mind, as well as between the human body and the body of the environment. Health means having a life free from discomfort, pain and suffering, which are seen as indices on a scale of deviation from balance. The ideology of health-as-balance is actually enshrined in the character for medicine, *yi* 醫, as well as in the character for balance, *ping* 平. *Ping* means free expansion on all sides, level-headed or tranquil. Thus a balanced and healthy person is referred to as a *ping ren* 平人, level-headed, calm and in harmony with themselves and the world around. Such a person enjoys freedom from extremes and deviations. When the balance of *yin* and *yang* is disrupted, dis-ease (*bing* 病) and its clinical patterns emerge. In TCM, therefore, the general therapeutic approach to clinical patterns of imbalance is to restore the balance (*yi ping wei qi* 以平為期). Parallel to the recognition

of health as balance and illness as imbalance is the utilization of the balancing attributes (therapeutic action or *gong xiao* 功效) of thousands of TCM remedies.

TCM identifies the seven emotions of happiness, anger, worry, pensiveness, sadness, fear and terror as normal human spiritual expressions. As described above, under certain circumstances sudden emotional fluctuations that exceed the normal sphere of control — such as being too angry, too sad, too terrified and so on — can affect the circulation of *qi* and will eventually affect the normal functioning of the endogenous organs and the acu-tract system of the body. The acu-tracts (*jingmai* 經脈) are the pathways (*lujing* 路經) of *qi* transformations, originating from the visceral or hollow organs.[28] Excessive anger, for example, makes the *qi* surge upwards; excessive worry depresses its flow; too much joy or happiness (as discussed above) slows its circulation; excessive grief dispels it; excessive pensiveness makes it coalesce into a knot and cause obstruction; fear makes it descend dramatically; while terror or fright creates chaotic *qi* movement. Extreme anger can affect the endogenous liver organ-system as it may make the liver *qi* rise dramatically, bringing about a clinical pattern with symptoms of chest congestion, pain, congestion along the flanks of the body, dizziness and loss of appetite. Grief or extreme sadness can affect the normal functioning of the endogenous lung system — which, in addition to respiratory functions, is also responsible for the circulation of *qi* all over the body. Extreme sadness can thus bring about a clinical pattern with symptoms of lack of energy, discomfort in breathing and coughing.

Other examples of emotional imbalance include extreme worry and inescapable pensiveness, which can harm the spleen system responsible for the transformation and transportation of food. Constant brooding and worrying cause "idleness of the stomach", another recognizable clinical pattern characterized by loss of appetite. Excessive fright can affect the normal functioning of the kidney system, which in TCM is considered to be responsible for reproduction, regeneration and excretion of body waste. Excessive fright also often leads to general weakness all over the body, and sometimes to stool and urine incontinence — a phenomenon known in TCM as "fright bringing about the downward movement of the *qi*". Terror can likewise

affect the normal functioning of the heart system that houses the spirit, causing a loss of tranquillity and leading to nervous disorders. Although happiness is the manifestation of pleasant feelings that are beneficial to the body, in extremes it too can be harmful to the heart system, as it can lead to disturbance and loss of tranquillity, sleep and even appetite.

To address clinical patterns brought about by such extremes of emotions, TCM naturally prescribes careful balancing. Since the *qi* dramatically surges upwards in the body as a result of anger, the countering emotional therapy of grief is used to dispel it. Excessive worry will lead to a depressed or trapped *qi*; hence happiness is prescribed to facilitate the *qi*'s smoother flow. Excessive grief and sadness that dispel *qi* can be rectified by the emotion of pensiveness or reflection, which knots the flow of *qi* in order to restore harmony. Excessive pensiveness and brooding over a particular problem can obstruct the free flow of *qi* by stagnating it, so the counter-balancing emotion of anger, which moves the *qi* upwards and dispels any *qi* obstruction, is used. Finally, fright, which causes the *qi* to move in chaotic directions, can be balanced by the emotion of worry, which traps and depresses the *qi*.[29]

In the case of the emotion of happiness or joy (thus humour), TCM practitioners such as Yang Yongxuan 杨永璇 (1901–81) have taken the view that this cannot possibly harm the endogenous heart. Thus they privilege the emotion of happiness above the other six emotions. Yang based his views on the Ming dynasty scholar Yang Jizhou 杨继洲 (1522–1620), author of the acupuncture classic *Zhenjiu dacheng* 針灸大成 (The compendium of acupuncture and moxibustion), first published in 1601, who said, "People who are happy suffer from less illness because their *qi* flows harmoniously and in a relaxed manner along the acu-tracts" — that is, they come to have a balance of heart and mind and a *qi* (*yang*) and blood (*yin*) that flow in harmony with the world around them (*xin he qi ping* 心和氣平).[30] When dealing with clients whose endogenous organs had been harmed by excessive emotional stimulus, on the other hand, Yang would guide them patiently and systematically, while consoling and helping them see what was right and sensible. He took the view that it was right to "humour them [*yi yan xi zhi* 以言戲之] so that they can smile through their tears [*po ti wei xiao* 破涕為笑]",[31] and

he related jokes to such patients to help restore the right flow of *qi*. As Needham puts it:

> When one feels naturally happy, and free from self-seeking and upsetting personal desires or greedy ambitions, then the salutary *qi* of necessity responds and follows. Vitality thus guarding from within, how can diseases originate?[32]

This explanation of the practical functioning of *qi* serves to demonstrate how, in TCM, humour in both its bodily and emotional senses can be seen as linked to the presence or absence of good health. It also shows how, according to classical Chinese medical theory, good humour (in the modern Western sense) is a natural effect of the alignment of emotions and seasons, which if absent should be restored. Such views are shared by most TCM authorities, even if their own clinical practices of emotional counter-therapy may differ from those of Yang Yongxuan. When the balance of emotions has been disturbed due to endogenous or exogenous factors, humour and its accompanying laughter can and do have a therapeutic function, serving to ease the flow of *qi* in the body. Perhaps in laughter and humour, then, we can hope to find a rapprochement between ancient and modern approaches to health and positive mood.