Experienced Efficacy and Experimented Efficacy: The Westernization of Chinese Medicine through the Eyes of a Practitioner

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Abstract

The last two decades have seen the legislation and institutionalization of Chinese medicine in Hong Kong. This study examines the transformation wrought by these changes through the life story of a practitioner of Chinese medicine, in his sixties, who claims to be a zǔchuán zhōngyī (祖傳中醫, literally “inherited Chinese medicine practitioner”), meaning that the practice has been handed down from generation to generation in the family. Drawing on oral history and archival research, the article shows how this practitioner has been marginalized by globally dominant Western medicine, and by the institutionalization of his profession, and how he employs different strategies to continue to practice Chinese medicine in a wet market. His experiences provide a lens to explore how Chinese medicine has been institutionalized under the Western biomedicine framework, and how marginalized practitioners negotiate for space to continue traditional practices outside the mainstream of modernized, scientized “traditional Chinese medicine” (TCM). The dynamics between Western medicine and Chinese medicine lead to a consideration of some broader issues of globalization and health.

Keywords

Chinese medicine – experienced efficacy – experimented efficacy – globalization and health – institutionalization of medical practices
Introduction: The Imposition of a Regulatory Regime on Chinese Medicine

Hong Kong is well known as a place where East meets West. What happens when Chinese medicine meets Western medicine? In his 2014 policy address the then chief executive of Hong Kong announced a plan to build the first inpatient Chinese medicine hospital in Hong Kong, to be privately run. The aim was to synthesize the best of Western and Chinese medicine. However, his plan was met with strong opposition from Chinese medicine practitioners in Hong Kong. Sixty practitioners signed a petition claiming that the model would only create a pseudo-Chinese medicine hospital (Housenews n.d.). This can be understood as a manifestation of the resistance of Chinese medicine practitioners in Hong Kong to the institutionalization of their profession that occurred over the last two decades. Through the experiences of a conventional Chinese medicine practitioner in Hong Kong, this article examines the current effect of “modernizing Chinese medicine” under a Western model, and the strategies used by traditional practitioners to cope with increasing challenges in order to survive. It further elucidates how this alternative survival mode is made possible by Hong Kong’s unique history of medical regulation as well as a negotiated understanding of the efficacy of Chinese medicine. The broader issue of the globalization of Western medicine will also be discussed.

To comprehend better why Chinese medicine practitioners objected to a Chinese medicine hospital, it is necessary to trace the history of Chinese medicine in contemporary China and in Hong Kong, and the impact of institutionalization on Chinese medicine practitioners. The development of Chinese medicine in modern China, according to Volker Scheid and Sean Hsiang-lin Lei (2014, 245), can be divided into six periods.

1911–1948 During the Republican Period, the Nationalist Party (Guomindang) intends to abolish the practice of traditional Chinese medicine. In response, Chinese medicine practitioners ally to protest against the state’s oppressive regulation and endeavor to be included in the emerging national system of health care and education in modern China.

1949–1953 Following the establishment of China as a communist state, the Communist Party attempts to assimilate Chinese medicine into a biomedically dominated health care system administered by state-controlled institutions.