The identity of a new profession: Examining the aegis of Traditional Chinese Medicine

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Introduction
In Canada, the rapidly growing practices of acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine have become professionalized under the banner of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) in recent decades. Canadian sources of information define TCM as a catch-all term representing the medical theories and practices developed over thousands of years in China.

Yet, scholars in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia and China document that TCM refers to a political construct which originated in mid-20th century China.

They suggest that TCM is an "invented tradition" that is different from how Chinese medicine was practiced in the ancient times.

Objectives
Our study investigates:
1. the historical precedents leading up to the formal creation of TCM, and
2. how this relates to education, practice and regulation of this new profession in Canada.

Methods
- Qualitative semi-structured interviews
- White and grey literature search to identify potential participants
- Interviews conducted through phone, e-mail, video chat or in-person
- Thematic analysis using NVivo software
- MacEwan Research Ethics Board approval

Findings

1800s
Over the past 2,000 years, a vast and diverse body of knowledge has accumulated in Chinese medicine.

1911
Sun Yat-Sen ends the Chinese monarchy. Pushing to modernize the nation, he proposes to abolish Chinese medicine.

1930s
Missionaries introduce Western medicine to China.

1949
Mao Zedong leads the communist party. He deems Chinese medicine quackery and seeks to eliminate it.

1956
Formal TCM colleges mark the start of institutionalized learning. This departure from the tradition of knowledge transmission from master to disciple.

1968-1983
To address a rural health disparity, thousands of farmers underwent 3-6 months of medical training. Known as "barefoot doctors", they provided basic health care in the countryside.

1978
China initiates an "open door" policy to reconnect with the world, enabling the exportation of TCM.

Findings

1. TCM is distinctly modern
- Participants in the US associate TCM with the standardization of Chinese medicine in the 1950s and 1960s.
- Those in Canada and China tended to use TCM as an umbrella term to represent the entire field.

2. TCM is one style of Chinese medicine
- Characteristics of TCM:
  a) TCM is influenced by Western medicine
     - Chinese medicine is symbolic language for functional concepts
     - TCM looks at Chinese medicine through a scientific, materialistic lens
     - Results in superficial understanding of Chinese medicine concepts
  b) TCM is centered on organ theory
     - Zang-Fu (organ) theory used in herbs
     - Channel theory used in acupuncture
     - Many other thought systems in Chinese medicine, e.g. 5 elements, 6 stages
     - Standardization made organ theory the default framework for all therapies
  c) TCM often lacks context
     - Standardization creates educational efficiencies, but undervalues contextual knowledge that enables practitioners to adaptively interpret and apply concepts
     - Relies on memorized protocols that lack a detailed explanation behind their use

Conclusions

- TCM is a standardized version of Chinese medicine created 60 years ago amidst political turmoil.
- TCM served an important historical purpose, but many aspects of it are not suitable for the healthcare landscape of modern-day Canada.
- TCM remains (at least in Canada) a generic catch-all term for the entire field of Chinese medicine.
- The misconception that TCM is representative of the entirety of Chinese medicine has concrete consequences as provinces move forward with educational and regulatory decisions on TCM.
- There is an urgent need to increase awareness of what TCM is (and what it is best suited to do within a healthcare system) in order to promote transparent and robust dialogue surrounding this new profession.

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References