

## Final Transcript

### Introduction

**Daniel:** Leading up to the recording of this episode, Richie and I both took some time to record our conversations with our moms on the topic of TCM. For us second-generation Chinese immigrants, TCM has been a significant part of our lives and both our moms have played a huge role in incorporating its practices in our daily habits.

**Daniel:** What would you say was your cultural background and prior experience with TCM before this show?

**Richie:** Having been born and raised in Vancouver, I would say my identity is pretty firmly rooted in that Chinese-Canadian culture mix. In school and with friends I grew up pretty Western and integrated into Western society, but home life for the most part was pretty distinctly Chinese, and that's something that I've been learning to appreciate more as I get older.

**Daniel:** I'm the same as you where I've grown up in a mix of Chinese and Western culture. My parents initially migrated to Los Angeles in the US before settling down here in Vancouver. I've also moved back to Beijing, my family's home town, for 5 years. During that time, I was in contact with TCM a lot while seeking treatment for my sleepwalking and asthma.

**Richie:** What were you expecting to get out of the interviews with our parents?

**Daniel:** I've had conversations with our parents on specific instances, but never had a formal sitdown conversation to how she viewed TCM in conjunction with Western medicine. I was really looking forward to learning how my mom and I view TCM differently, and which aspects in our lives we have disagreements on.

**Richie:** Absolutely, I think in particular I was really interested to see how TCM has affected her health over the years and how Western medicine has played a role in between all of that as well.

**Richie:** Okay! I think first and foremost before we dive into this, we should try to establish what Traditional Chinese Medicine is. My mom explains it in terms I understand by contrasting it with Western medicine. [Clip]

**Richie:** Here, she explains that TCM focuses more on finding the underlying cause of your symptoms rather than just treating your illness with medication like Western medicine tends to do

**Daniel:** Yea, my mom said something similar. [Clip]

**Daniel:** Here, my mom describe the intake procedure of modern hospitals that many are familiar with. The doctor or nurse would ask you a few questions, then have your bloodwork done and possibly some more tests. They would diagnose you based on the anomalies displayed on your charts, but if there aren't significant variations, they would say you're fine. TCM fills this gap where you have areas of discomfort, but not to an extent that requires urgent care. Many issues, such as mild insomnia, diarrhea, acne, from the lens of TCM can be attributed to abnormalities in one's digestive track.

### Skepticism of TCM

[Clip]

**Daniel:** That was my mom roasting me for being too impatient with the methods of TCM, the same clip from the beginning of the podcast.

**Richie:** Oh yeah, my mom said something similar to me as well. [Clip]

**Richie:** she says that my brothers and I wouldn't trust it even if she taught it to us because of the fact that we grew up here in Canada so obviously we'd trust Western medicine more. Overall I'd say she's correct because there are just some things about TCM that she tries to tell me that I have a hard time believing.

**Richie:** For instance, she tells me that I should be drinking at least 2L of water a day, which on its own is something that I agree with, but then there are these added stipulations about how the water has to be filtered, boiled, warm, and can't be water that's been left overnight even if it's covered and in a bottle. I'm a little skeptical about how much of that filtering and boiling is necessary, given that we have some of the cleanest water in the world here in Vancouver, but I'd understand if we lived somewhere with harder water. The temperature of the water and how old it is are also things that I haven't seen much research backing up and aren't what I'd imagine to be particularly important. Do you have any examples that are similar to that?

**Daniel:** I think a lot of our skepticism comes from our Western upbringing. I visited a TCM hospital a few times while I was in China. It was a large single-storied building. You get a strong whiff of an amalgamation of herbal scents the moment you walk through the entrance. The first thing you see is a large wall dedicated to drawers of various herbal medicine ingredients. There must have been a couple hundred drawers that pharmacists were sifting through when fulfilling prescriptions. It was an unusual sight to see.

**Richie:** What we see in both of our experiences is that a lot of our skepticism is rooted in a Western framework and understanding of what medicine should be. Notions that it should be supported by empirical research or more generally, just be accepted by Western society. For our parents, they mention that empirical evidence is important but comes secondary to the long and rich history of TCM. [Clip]

**Richie:** She says that TCM has been around for much longer than Western medicine, and how people would gather grasses and other herbs to treat illness.

**Daniel:** TCM usually lacks this empirical evidence because it is very much an oral tradition. It has always been passed down through generations by incorporating the teachings through everyday applications. For people who aren't familiar with the ways of TCM, being diagnosed with some form of excess after the doctor looks at your tongue and feels your pulse for half a minute seems kind of bogus.

**Richie:** That's true, it has been more noticeable for us second-generation Chinese immigrants because a lot of the things we are taught in TCM practices goes against the lifestyle in the West. It's commonplace to be served ice water after sitting down at a Western restaurant for example compared to being served hot tea at a Chinese restaurant.

**Daniel:** For sure, this is similar to what my mom said. [Clip]

**Daniel:** In that clip, my mom was talking about how TCM is much more focused on one's lifestyle so it affects more parts of your life than Western medicine. Western medicine mostly appears in the form of drugs and pills that you only take when you feel ill.

**Daniel:** Growing up, it seemed like my parents could always slap on a yeet hay or cold energy label to anything that we eat. Chips, yeet hay; anything fried, yeet hay; green tea? That's cold. The labels almost seemed random and felt like an excuse for not letting us eat something. But talking to other fellow Chinese immigrants, there is consistency. So how did they know? How did our parent learn about this?

### TCM integration into daily life

**Daniel:** For our moms, TCM has always been a part of their lives. Concepts like the Six Excesses and Seven Emotions have been incorporated in their vocabulary since a very young age. [Clip]

**Richie:** Again, here we see the oral tradition of TCM being passed down across generations and society, TCM knowledge is something that is never explicitly taught in schools but rather throughout one's childhood, from family members, and from day-to-day living in a society where it has been interwoven into the culture.

**Daniel:** For Chinese-Canadians, early education still holds true, but it is often faced with more doubt and skepticism because of the lack of everyday culture that upholds it. Practices are still typically enforced by parents, but their children go through the motions with slightly more hesitance due to contradictions with many Western norms.

**Richie:** For sure, my mom has also mentioned how despite the fact that Chinese-Canadians born here might not openly listen or trust teachings of TCM, many parents will still try to

incorporate TCM through the food that we eat, so that we still have experience with it throughout our diet. [Clip]

**Richie:** She explains that the health effects of doing so is meant for our benefit, and she uses the examples of herbal teas and soups that are meant to condition our bodies and get rid of excess heat or wetness, this idea of removing excess and keeping things in balance also extends to ordinary everyday meals as well.

**Daniel:** There is a lot of overlap between this concept of 食疗 shiliao (food therapy) and Western nutritional science. [Clip]

**Daniel:** Here, my mom talks about how she sees the intersection of TCM and Western medicine. She explains that there are actually many similarities between tcm theory and Western nutrition science. Many supplements that people take are created using technologies of Western medicine to extract nutrients from traditional Chinese medicinal plants. Ginseng, saffron, tea extracts, just to name a few, are all commonly used for various health benefits. Efferth et al.'s study also raises examples where extraction from medicinal plants have been used to complement other drug-based treatment. The ultimate goal of both streams of theory is to perform preventative care and "treat" illnesses before they arise as visible symptoms.

**Richie:** It's clear from these examples that this blanket term 'TCM' is not only often conceptualized as a pseudo-science, but is also much more reductive than we may think. Traditional Chinese medicine pertains to much more than just medical treatment, for many it is a way of life that involves one's diet, bodily practices, emotional wellbeing, and more. These all have profound, but often invisible impacts on our day-to-day lives. The parts of TCM that we find ourselves skeptical about are the pieces that have yet to find acceptance in Western society—things like birds nest soup, gua sha scraping, or moxibustion (the act of burning dried mugwort on parts of your body to improve Qi flow), are all examples of TCM practices that haven't yet been supported with much research and additionally, would likely elicit questionable or unwanted reactions from people here, which can make young asian Canadians shameful of their heritage.

**Daniel:** Indeed, many TCM practices have actually been appropriated into Western culture or have a Western equivalent of such that one may not even realize that their actions are rooted in TCM knowledge. Ginger candies, Vicks as alternative for Tiger Balm, herbal teas, yarrow, plantain, hawthorn or haw flakes, are just a few examples of the slow influence of TCM practices into Western society.

### **Moments of Growth**

**Richie:** So what is it that made you interested in this topic in the first place?

**Daniel:** TCM lies at the intersection of personal healthcare and Chinese culture. ACAM 320B has demonstrated how the two are actually very interconnected

**Richie:** It's been really cathartic for me to realize and be affirmed that my lived experiences as an Asian-Canadian does in fact have inherent value. That the mysterious ointments rubbed on me as a child are actually common practice in TCM and contribute to the unique experiences of the Chinese diaspora in Western society that are worth studying

**Daniel:** So up to now, what sort of takeaways did you get from your conversation with your mom?

**Richie:** I think I have better understanding of her perspective now, especially because of recent examples of me moving home since the pandemic started. I've been eating healthier and have noticed that I've been biting my tongue less often. What about you?

**Daniel:** That's interesting, I have asthma due to my allergies and my mom always tells me to soak my feet and eat ginger but I've never fully committed to her recommendations.

**Richie:** It's interesting that across both our examples, we see that we don't necessarily disagree with the outcomes of such a practice, but more so that we don't have the long term commitment to see through to experience the proclaimed effects.

**Daniel:** Something else to note is how unwavering our parents are in their beliefs despite our resistance against it, they won't allow the credibility and institution of Western medicine sway their faith in TCM, even if many theories have not yet been proven through empirical evidence, again because of the longevity of the practice that gives it an extra layer of credibility that 2nd generation Chinese immigrants don't completely agree with.

**Richie:** That's true, if anything, our parents have shown us that *it is* possible to live here in Canada while practicing and successfully combining both systems of medicine together into one cohesive lifestyle, our parents actually went into some detail about how they manage to juggle the two and when they decide to go to which doctor for their ailments.

[Clip]

**Richie:** Here, she explains how she will go to a Western doctor for infections or if she needs immediate relief, but will go to Eastern doctors if it's something that isn't quite diagnosable or just a general feeling of unwellness.

**Daniel:** These differences in Western vs TCM treatment, in urgent vs long term subtle issues, are supported by Tian's article, where she describes how the West is good at getting rid of sickness but TCM is good for treating chronic symptoms show that the two treatments aren't actually at odds with each other and don't conflict as much as one might think. Tian and Efferth et al. also both address in their studies how TCM and herbal remedies can combat the development of drug resistance from the prolonged administration of chemical drugs. Efferth et

al.'s study in particular also raises examples where medicinal plants improved the efficacy of drugs in cancer treatment.

### Moving Forward

[Clip]

**Richie:** I think there's validity in what my mom is saying, people can't simply rely on one system, and that by working together, the overall benefit of combining both systems would greatly improve people's health. I can definitely see a future in which TCM theories and Western medicine co-exists.

[Clip]

**Daniel:** And like my mom is saying, in many ways, we have been trending towards this already. Treatments such as massage therapy and acupuncture fall under the branch of Complementary and Alternative medicine. I remember back during the 2016 Olympics, many news headlines covered the purple dots on Michael Phelps' body, which obviously comes from cupping in TCM. It seems that many of the alternative care treatment methods that have been adopted first are all treatments that present a more immediate effect. Perhaps TCM methodologies that focus on long-term healing in more subtle method will take longer to translate over and longer for people in Western societies to buy in.

**Richie:** More importantly, both of our moms agree that TCM has been a net benefit for first-gen immigrants moving to Western societies. To many immigrants, TCM is not just a way of viewing health, but also a vital part of their culture and heritage. For the average person who doesn't study TCM, it can be hard to recognize that fact.

**Daniel:** Some have also argued that TCM's slow but steady journey to wide acceptance has to do with anti-Asian racism. As Tian pointed out in her article "Where West Meets East", some have accused Western medical researchers for not taking TCM methodologies seriously. When I asked my mom for her thoughts on it, this is what she said:

[Clip]

**Daniel:** From my mom's point of view, prejudice and discrimination are *not* significant factors for TCM's slow integration into Western society. Ultimately she also relates it to culture, which takes time to fully migrate to another continent, especially when Chinese people are still a minority in Canada. To her, this is why second generation Chinese immigrants like Richie and I are skeptical about believing all the claims of TCM despite its long history. As more Chinese immigrants come to the West, TCM practices will progress from a distinct cultural practice to the living norm.

**Richie:** Another factor in the future promotion of TCM is to understand its methods in the framework of Western medicine. We've established that there is significant overlap and adoption between TCM and Western nutritional science, and now, fields like systems biology offer a new holistic approach in biomedical research to understand the complex interactions between ingredients that compose TCM preparations. To reference systems biologist Jan van-der Greef from Tian's article from this course: "The major challenge of the integration of TCM and modern medicine is the translation from 'TCM experience and concepts' into 'biochemical and biological means' that Western scientists can understand". Many TCM compounds are still shrouded in mystery and have unknown mechanism through which they operate, the grounding and discovery of such mechanisms through systems biology and newly developed phenotyping technologies can bring both medicinal systems closer together and cement TCMs role in the realm of Western medicine.

### Closing words

**Daniel:** My takeaway from our conversations is that we should not look at TCM as an inherent contradiction to the findings of Western medicine. There is space for both systems to work together in harmony so that the eventual benefits are more than the sum of its parts. While we do have skepticism in specific claims and find it difficult to grasp theories like the 6 excesses, there are increasingly more areas where TCM and Western medicine overlap, specifically within nutrition science, a very new area of study.

**Richie:** The interface between second generation Chinese-Canadians and their immigrant parents through the lens of TCM is often wrought with resistance and frustration, these disagreements are a result of structures in the dominant society that make younger generations skeptical and possibly ashamed of trusting TCM, despite the fact that many practices already have a Western equivalent or have been adopted entirely. Additionally, TCM is much more than just a medicine, it is a lifestyle, a culture, and has to do with your mental wellbeing as much as your physical; many Chinese children born here only have experience with a small portion of the deep and historical practice thanks to parents that work to pass on TCM knowledge through diet and food. As our generation come into maturity, these experiences can serve as a useful foundation from which we can learn more about the intricacies of the practice, and like our parents, find a balance between the two systems so that we may come to reap the benefits of both.

[Clip]

**Daniel:** You've probably heard of the concept of "Qi" in TCM. "Qi" directly translates to "breath" or "air" in English, but its meaning in TCM is closer to energy. What my mom said just now can be translated to "We only have one breath in our lives". It plays on the dual meaning of the character "Qi". The saying emphasizes that we have only one body, one *energy* body that we must take care of it in order to stay healthy. We should take care of our body not by treating it when ill, but by maintaining our health and preventing illness from arising in the first place.





**Works Cited**

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