

# Editorial

Daniel Maxwell

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‘As the sap rises in the trees and the lambs gambol in dew-kissed meadows, our Liver qi begins its springtime ascent...’ Had enough yet? Trawl through the online presence of Chinese medicine in the West and you find a curious aesthetic. You know the tone ... images of candles, balancing stones and bamboo groves, talk of energy, healing journeys and ‘becoming yourself’. Never mind Orientalising, we love to sentimentalise, schmalzify and spa-ify traditional East Asian medicine.

The irony is that for Chinese medicine, historically speaking, this is something of a departure. Chinese medicine was not born of a bucolic idyll, but from suffering – the blood, guts and pestilence of war, the devastation of grim epidemics and the myriad afflictions of ageing. Yet by the time it arrives on many websites, it has been cleansed with an aromatherapy wet-wipe and wrapped in a fluffy white bathrobe. Similar distortions afflict other East Asian practices (I once attended a taiji class in which the silk pyjama-clad teacher put on Chinese music and made us dance with red balloons). Biomedicine is not marketed this way; it is permitted seriousness, intellectual dignity, technicality. Chinese medicine is expected to soothe aesthetically before it heals clinically. Internal contradictions and historical ruptures are ignored. In the process, a sophisticated, rigorous medical tradition is reduced to an aesthetic mood-board to satisfy affluent wellness consumers alienated from industrial life and hungry for escape. Of course, the more the internet is pebble-dashed with this aesthetic, the more our AI models feed on it and perpetuate it.

That said, let us not throw the yinyang out with the Himalayan-salted bathwater. Nature and metaphor have always been vital to our medicine. In fact, while writing this, a blog post dropped into my inbox about the profound nature writings of Huáng Yuányù (<https://tinyurl.com/mvmw9hdy>). The author, Sharon Weizenbaum, describes Huáng’s work as ‘beautifully agricultural’, capturing a crucial distinction between the exquisitely utilitarian way that traditional East Asian medicine has always reflected the underlying patterns of nature and the universe, and the aforementioned online Orientalist pastoral guff. Pity the poor patient who walks into a clinic where that difference is not understood. 家  
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