

2013 Basham Medal Lecture by Vivienne Lo: “An Archaeology of Medical Time”

In a 2005 editorial in *Asian Medicine* I commented on Lawrence Cohen’s depiction of ICTAM as an “epistemological carnival” with tragicomic dimensions.¹ He had no faith in the possibility of dialogue between practitioners, historians, anthropologists, and social scientists, and he took no pleasure in the carnival. Seven years later we still face the challenge of interdisciplinarity, of the often surreal post—or antimodern performance of speaking in tongues. But I believe that we are better at it. We are more committed to understanding the process by which historical and anthropological research, situated within single academic disciplines that exercise an economy of method, can sit side by side with reflections about clinical practice or stories from the lab about the chemical constitution of herbal medicines. The sum is so definitely more than its parts. And I do believe that this is not the least because so many of our members are now practitioners as well as academics—so that tragicomic, interdisciplinary dialogue is the stuff of our day-to-day internal negotiations with and between ourselves.

What I’d like to talk about is precisely one interdisciplinary conversation that goes on in my head, and the voices that torment and inspire me—that is, how does academic inspiration come from practice? How do historical perspectives derive from the clinical encounter or from noticing what happens in my daily taiji 太極 and sword form practices, from breathing in a certain way, or manipulating the acupuncture needle? As a practitioner turned academic, rather than the other way around, I used to be embarrassed to admit the degree to which hands-on experience has shaped my academic method. Senior historians have instructed me to write everything in the third person, to stop writing “I”—but then I realized there were proper ways to frame affective practice, such as the academic interpretation of feelings evoked in techniques that assume links with the past. In anthropology that would be called becoming the “participant observer.” “Participant observer” is really a descriptor of people who are anthropologists first and foremost, and who become practitioners second. However, it made me feel better to know that getting your hands dirty could be a proper academic method.

Early contact with what have become my abiding historical interests began with random exposure to the effects of the globalization of the martial arts: the opening sequences of the 1960s series *The Avengers*, with Emma Peel in her black leather catsuit striking unforgettable defensive poses, or that time when I hid behind a telephone box in Waterloo station in order to disown my Chinese father, who was doing some tennis player’s version of the Bear Walk along the platform. At twelve years old my father introduced me to an Australian ballet dancer and taiji teacher, and she in turn introduced me to the acupuncture college—and so it went on. Fifty

¹ Lo 2005, 253.

years after those first encounters, a lifetime of working on the imagination of qi, in one way or another, has shaped my academic gaze on the primary sources, no better or worse than if I had spent those years just reading books.

Unpalatable historical discontinuities were thrown up for me by the translation of techniques for fighting and self-cultivation into London schools of taiji, karate, and yoga and in the transmission of Chinese medicine and massage in the UK schools within which I trained. Their radical reinventions and imaginations of the past all serve as a warning to those searching for historical authenticity in contemporary expressions of Asian body traditions. But these discontinuities do not necessarily render the modern expressions of these traditions meaningless. Often, they are necessary modifications to meet contemporary needs, and the belief in authenticity is a very powerful part of the therapy. These experiences all piqued my interest and represented challenges of personal and professional identity which served to create passion in my work.

The thing that I want to talk about, beginning from my own experience, is an hermeneutics of time: finding ways of reading medical time, space and time, sensing time. So, my title is “An Archaeology of Medical Time,” with apologies to Michel Foucault, who used the term “archaeology” in his titles as a way of breaking down perceived continuities in historical narratives, as an archaeology of the present. For me the title is a more literal and pedestrian starting point since I will present a few archaeological sources that tell us about the deep-time development of spatiotemporal ideas about medicine: the circulation of qi and the reversals of time in alchemy. I could equally have spoken about medical divination or the resonances of fortune-telling in medical etiology.

We can find in the archaeological sources constructions of medical time related to the seasonal, calendrical, celestial, dynastic, and cyclical, a sense of time that crosses successive incarnations, and indications of the extratemporal. But I also want to dig deep into the experience of time in practice, in my own experience, and examine how that has shaped how I look at the sources from the ancient past. The result for me has been one of increasing strangeness, of past practices suddenly becoming as unfamiliar and as distant as “a foreign country,”² but also of the familiarity that one experiences in an instant when the meaning of a textual record becomes clear and present or the past purposes of an object unfurl before one’s eyes. These latter are the processes involved in Collapsing Time. What I mean is that academic inspiration for me often comes from a moment of recognition, when something almost palpable slips into my consciousness and enters the realms of articulation. These moments typically feel like the same moment and come with a level of clarity and sensory quietude that defies time. They feel like other distinctive

² Hartley (1953) 1997, 5.

experiences that slow down my experience of time, and they make me question how we have been taught to think about the passage of time in lineal terms. Mostly spontaneous, these experiences are stimulated by sounds and odours that I have heard and smelled over and over again in my life, or that reconnect me with childhood, linking moments in parallel time until they feel like one and the same moment: by birdsong, the sound of children playing or rolling thunder, or the smell of fresh rain. They are also stimulated by conscious repetitive actions like the movements and meditations of *taiji*, which I must now have practiced daily for forty-five years; or the magical feeling of having stimulated the right acupuncture point or completed a good massage and spontaneously generated a sort of sensorium of well-being that is often shared with the patient. An elusive sense that is without reference to past or future, beyond memory or imagination.

Judy Farquhar suggested once that I look at the work of Nadia Seremetakis. Seremetakis had spoken of the attempts made by scholars working on the senses and anthropology of everyday life to articulate the social aesthetics that are “embedded in, and inherited from, an autonomous network of object relations and prior sensory exchanges.” She was speaking here of “perception and memory as material culture in modernity”;³ but I suggest that we can also extend her approach to recover the intimate experiences of the past, that there are creative ways in which we can triangulate our present with the material culture and textual evidence of the past. Whether we are concerned with individuals or communities, the social aesthetics of our everyday lives are radically different from the social aesthetics of those who inhabited the practices of the same name in the past. Yet, in order to come to any kind of historical narrative, we all assume some level of familiarity. In fact, whether self-consciously or not, historians inevitably employ their personal and collective experience in order to tell their stories effectively, whatever their professed subdiscipline may be.

In this enterprise, cultural memory, or the cultural-ever-present that inhabits our bodies, becomes an asset, rather than a hindrance, to the making of history. We can appreciate the sensory experiences that are immanent within the old things and techniques that remain in the detritus of tradition around us, in the particular environments associated with the practices of great longevity and transcultural resonance. We might re-create the past as if recollecting personal memories. Collapsing Time is as if, once again, we are awakening to the sound of birdsong, smelling grass after rain or the rank odour of city streets, feeling a pulse, childbirth, the head aching; it is as if the repetition of events serves suddenly to confuse and collapse our personal time.

Beyond “imagining” or “envisaging” the past, if we engage all our faculties with the historical method and nurture a new kind of historical self, we have a chance of

³ Seremetakis 1994, 6.

sensing other peoples' lives without the gross distortions of our contemporary lens, without falling into teleological traps. If we explicitly acknowledge the limitations of attempting histories which use our own embodied experience and self-consciously analyze the evidence at hand, there is a powerful tool in the making. At its simplest, it is impossible to translate an ancient text that describes a therapeutic exercise without re-creating that exercise in our minds, if not with our bodies—and if it is possible to perform the exercise, in what ways do we experience it differently? From touching and holding the fearsome surgical instruments contained in a premodern acupuncture kit, I might know something more about the practitioner's purpose and the patients' experience than I can ever glean from texts. Similarly, I can also apprehend the differences between the work of medical practitioners in the Han dynasty—the pain involved in their lancing of boils and in the petty surgery that is a core element of the earliest texts on acupuncture method—and the subtle, relative painlessness of my work moving qi with fine steel needles as an acupuncturist in twentieth-century London. Of course, this manipulation of the feelings of familiarity works better for some subjects than others. And, because of my personal history, I have found it works best with understanding the records of self-cultivation in early China, because they evoke the sensory realms in ways that I can recognize.

The rest of this presentation grapples with tensions between the universal and the particular aspects of the human experience of time: the cyclical body time evident in early Chinese medical and alchemical manuscripts, the experience of feeling immortal, of time as a harbinger of biological death. We have to question the tyranny of conventional historiography. Histories dominated by the progressive Christian account from the year 0 to the Second Coming locate lineal time in a modern West, emblematic of progress and modernity; and simultaneously contrast Asian models as cyclical, based on dynastic and reign periods, cycles of rebirth and seasonal time. We only have to factor in the millenarian beliefs in early Daoist practice, to take just one example of lineal time in Chinese thought, or, conversely, the calendrical cycles of the European world to demonstrate contingencies of time both East and West.⁴

Four tombs along and in the hinterland of the Yangzi valley, closed in the second century BCE, contained texts and artifacts testifying to a variety of early Chinese conceptions of body-time: Mawangdui 馬王堆 tomb 3, in modern Changsha (capital of Hunan Province); Zhangjiashan 張家山 tomb 247, north of the Yangzi River, closed eighteen years earlier than the Mawangdui tomb; and two tombs in modern Sichuan—one at Yongxing 永興, Shuangbaoshan 雙包山, and the other (the most recent) at the Tianhui 天回 tomb site at Laoguan Shan 老官山, in the suburbs of the city of Chengdu. These tombs have yielded the earliest treatises on the manipulation of qi, the stuff that powered the universe in early Chinese thought, and that became the physiological essence of a newly defined medical body in the early empire when

⁴ Geertz 1966; Goody 2006, 13–25.

these manuscripts were buried. But more importantly for my purposes today, the tomb manuscripts describe early imperial experiments with cultivating a subtle body, to cure ailments but also to strengthen and make it live as long as Heaven and Earth by refining the body's *qi*, its *jing* 精 (the finest *qi*, a term indistinguishable from the word "semen"), and its spirits. Here one of the manuscripts from the Mawangdui tomb finishes with the earliest Chinese illustration of the vulva, a map for the manipulation of women, their *jing*, and their emotions for the benefit of male longevity (fig. 1),⁵ a sexual practice grasping at the transcendence of biological time through the maintenance of a light and supple body and the avoidance of physical deterioration. Self-cultivation practices of the early Chinese empire also included breathing and movement, as represented here in a silk manuscript on therapeutic exercise (fig. 2), along with drug taking, diet, and the deportment described in seasonal time for refining noble bodies, resolving undignified excesses of emotion, and simultaneously harmonizing the polarities of yin and yang. Herein I experienced the joy of discovering the earliest extant representation of my father's embarrassing Bear Walk. The aims of these early Chinese techniques were concerned with resisting death and generally defying lineal time. I have written extensively, if not obsessively, about how, through these techniques, the micromanagement of the inner sensory world was, and still is, aimed at stimulating a sensory acuity, an altered state known as a "brilliance of the spirits" (*shenming* 神明), a feeling of being absolutely alive, consistent in my interpretation with sensing immortality.

The records of all these practices are embedded in culturally specific codes that require feats of philology and linguistic expertise to interpret. In this enterprise I have a deep academic debt, in particular to the brilliance and diligence of Ma Jixing 馬繼興, Donald Harper, Christopher Cullen, Michael Loewe, Mark Lewis, and all those Sinologists who have trained me. At the same time, in reading these texts and in order to recognize elements of the practices they record, I have had to engage all my cultural memory and experience of forms of self-cultivation: of breathing, "riding the tiger" in taiji, drinking green tea, orgasm, breathing in the early-morning rays of the sun, and the cooling effects of feeling *qi* flowing like water downward through my body. Elements of arcane ancient texts on self-cultivation are suddenly rendered tangible, as if remembering other people's experience as one's own, with the same clarity of the eternal ever-present elicited by simple repetitive human experiences in one's own lifetime, as well as across lifetimes. I am also indebted to my mother, who at sixty-five years old, lying on her hospital bed paralyzed after a stroke, said, "Vivienne, if I don't try to move, I feel sixteen!" Of course she did. Lying there—quiet and calm in bed and in this case even with an absence of feeling in some parts of the body—was a daily event, like listening to birdsong or the sound of children playing. She could access her immortal body, essential to any form of healing. Six

⁵ The assumption was that secretions attendant on female orgasm would benefit the health of the male partner. See Lo and Re'em 2018.

weeks later she walked out of Saint Thomas Hospital and went on to live another twenty years.

An autopsy of the mother of one noble (Xin Zhui 辛追, or Lady Dai), who had been buried with his medical texts at the Mawangdui tomb site, revealed that her internal organs were full of the mercury and lead that she had ingested throughout her lifetime. Unlike my mother's technique, her method was certainly detrimental to her long-term health. She had ingested substances that I suspect had a psychoactive effect that blinded people to their long term degenerative consequences. The toxic effects of feeling immortal in the present might well have radically reduced her life-span and that of the many nobles who died from ingesting immortality drugs in the succeeding centuries. Ironically, Lady Dai's elixir taking, along with the unique conditions of the Hunan earth and the tomb structures themselves, may well have effectively embalmed her corpse.

Longevity and immortality practices included both physical and breathing exercises, as well as the consumption of mineral drugs in techniques that came to be known as refining the golden elixir. Ingesting immortality drugs reached a peak in the centuries between Han and Tang, when the practice has been linked to the premature deaths of numerous literati, including some emperors, as well as ordinary folk who could afford the expensive preparations.⁶

These elixir takers played with the cyclical notion of time in Chinese external alchemy—the reversals of time sought in refining the elixirs of life in the crucible and in the consumption of the longevity drugs thus obtained. It was under the Tang rulers, and with the slow realization of the toxic effects of cinnabar, lead, and arsenic, that alchemy was divided into two distinct sets of practices—inner and outer alchemy—with a new concentration on the techniques of inner alchemy in some sects of Daoist religion. Inner alchemy focused on refining the body's essences through the medium of meditating on internal body deities and animals that represented the constellations. Essential in the new practice was the Infant of Immortality, the Inner Child resident below the navel, who represented the adepts' intention to “return to the source,” effectively to return to the eternal present of a childhood perception of time and to escape mortality.⁷

The inner alchemical practices generated centuries of stunning charts of the microcosm within, charts that represent the interface between the alchemical and medical traditions. They are also associated with more theoretical charts of cosmogenesis, with accounts of a world spontaneously generated by the unceasing interaction of yin and yang, where there was no lasting identification of a creator or of progressive time (although early descriptions suggest that

⁶ Needham and Ho 1970.

⁷ Fava 2018; Lo and Wang 2012.

Tai Yi 太乙 had been thought of as a creator deity) or, therefore, of a human or cosmic terminus.⁸ These are images that continue to have traction with contemporary global audiences and with many of my students. Their evocation of “holistic” bodies and the body “ecologic,” in Elisabeth Hsu’s terminology, seems to retain meaning.⁹ What meanings are newly made in the academic worlds of the Anthropocene, where many search for inspiration in philosophies which have de-centred the human? Or in what Joseph Needham coined as the “organismic” universe of early China? And what do modern commentators choose to ignore about the past? All this requires careful and sustained analysis.¹⁰ Bizarrely, the earliest extant version of one of the charts of cosmogenesis, the “Taiji tu” 太極圖, was copied in Rashīd al-Dīn’s scriptorium in the first decades of the fourteenth century, in late medieval Tabriz, northern Persia, as part of his translation and interpretation of tomes of Chinese medical texts on physiology and the pulse. As a Jewish-born convert to Islam and a physician trained in the Galenic tradition as received through the Islamic medical world, he was intolerant of the Daoist pantheon of internal body gods and the Infant of Immortality, which he did not reproduce in the chart.¹¹ Monotheistic by birth and conversion, he inserted Allah, as Creator, into the descriptions of cosmogenesis as illustrated in the chart (fig. 3). While he was disturbing the cyclical time of Chinese cosmogenesis with the insertion of a creator, he was fascinated by the way that cyclical formulations of the circulation of qi had been modelled in the Chinese context on the diurnal movement of heavenly bodies. He translated *qi* as “blood” (*khun*), enhancing a tradition of imagining the circulation of blood that seems to have been current previously in Hebrew medical literature. This same model of blood circulation common to pan-Eurasian astromedical cultures also inspired William Harvey in the seventeenth century.

Joseph Needham famously made many grand claims about the impact of Asian science and philosophy on the European world: from gunpowder and printing technologies to the revolutionary theories of eighteenth-century French thinkers and the structure of the British civil service. But in truth we do not know much about the flow of knowledge as it travelled around Asia and the Middle East, about the strong possibility that Chinese alchemical ideas were available to those involved in the development of Sufi mystical practice, or about the impact of Chinese anatomy when it was encountered in Byzantium in the fourteenth century, just before the better-known anatomical innovations of the Renaissance. It is certain that myriad connections remain to be uncovered in Chinese and Indian Tantric reversals of time in inner alchemical practice, in the substances and, possibly, the ideas that were available to physicians such as Garcia de Orta (1501?–1568) in Bombay and on the maritime routes west

⁸Despeux 2018.

⁹Hsu 2007.

¹⁰Scheid 2016.

¹¹Berlekamp, Lo, and Wang 2015.

from India and perhaps were available to influence the sixteenth century occult practice and experimentation of Paracelsus.

On the maritime routes, the first missionary and naval physicians and surgeons confronted with Chinese and Japanese medical culture in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Michael Boym, Kaempfer, de Bondt) tended to look into the mirror and see only those elements of Chinese practice that were an enhancement of their own expertise: pulse taking, for example, or theories of wind (flatus). And it was almost simultaneously that the likes of Fludd (d. 1637) and then the Theosophists were reading treatises about Chinese philosophy, and East Asian ideas began to permeate the collective European consciousness—quite literally. Key figures in the development of nineteenth—and twentieth-century science, such as C. G. Jung in his reflections on the yin reactions of the unconscious self, read translations of philosophical treatises directly associated with the practices of Chinese inner alchemy.¹² Determining what they made of them and how they used them in their practice requires a consideration of evidence that only a network of people working across very different historical periods and linguistic fields can ever hope to produce.

It is only with deeper-situated cross-cultural histories that the subtle distinctions between the transmission and the universality of medical knowledge and practice can reasonably be teased out. With inner alchemy the differences of context are obvious to see. To a practicing acupuncturist in twenty-first century China, the more elaborate alchemical images of the body are as senseless and distracting to effective practice as they were to the unfortunate Rashīd al-Dīn in the fourteenth century, whose execution on charges of heresy testifies to how dangerous a territory the work of a translator might be. In his case, abstracting the medical ideas underwrote their plasticity and their relevance in a complex northern Persian environment. For me, my translation method approximates Eugene Nida’s “dynamic equivalence” inasmuch as I am looking for equivalent responses in myself that are elicited through mimicking practice that I have either read about or received through teacher transmission.¹³ Our abilities to recognize the experiences of ancient practitioners are so severely constrained by language and context that if we don’t hone those bodily skills that collapse time and build empathy with the authors whom we translate, we will surely lose a critical element of the historian’s toolkit. Of course, some activities elicit more translatable responses than others, and we are lucky in the arts of Asian self-cultivation to have the surviving records of practice and experiences such as those detailed above to play with. Many of us in IASTAM have discovered the effects of repetitive exercises, daily regimens like prescribed forms of sleeping and eating, breath meditation, and orgasm. We are lucky to have chosen phenomena recorded in the past that are theoretically re-creatable, and our own practice renders that

¹² Wilhelm 1931, 85.

¹³ Nida and Taber 1982.

past partially comprehensible despite its embedding in arcane language and culturally specific procedures.

To those historians who truly believe in the possibility of objective accounts of what happened in the past, I suggest that using the affective self as an instrument of academic/historical inquiry is an uncomfortable reality that you need to come to grips with. For me, in the archaeology of medical time, what holds true across the ages is the use of the body, its inner sensory world, and physiological experience as a crucible for self-experimentation. But just because an experience is universal, it doesn't mean that it's identical, so that the crucibles and their products represent infinite potential for transformation.

Each historian thus produces something new. This is my story and my history, delivered on the assumption that it contains sufficient elements of collective experience to speak to an audience beyond myself. The future of the history of medicine, indeed of medicine itself, surely must eschew simple articulations of a redundant Oriental mysticism counterposed to a modern science. Histories of the substances, ideas, illustrations, and, in this case, the practice of manipulating time as a personal, collective, and academic pursuit provide a context for resisting the tyranny of a present located in lineal time and feed into important innovations that have the power to shape the future. The history of medical time is, in this way, fundamentally political: the stories above have been told by many others as they relate to the ritual cultivation of the body of the Chinese ruler according to calendrical time, the seasonal regimen of ancient elite bodies, the qi practices of the Falun Gong, which are out of sync with the Chinese government, and, conversely, the profoundly conformist socialist practice of elderly and not particularly elite Chinese, still stepping out of time to defy the aging process. These politics of body-time are still there in the economics of contemporary self-care and in taking the time to look after yourself when the state has no resources left to help. They were there, ironically, when I saved the state money and took "alternative" and gendered journeys through my own life cycles when I chose home births for my children, and they will still be there as I touch the limits of this lifetime, hopefully still in my own bed, where I can hear the infants cry and the birdsong in the morning once again.

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