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When Health was Freed from Fate: Some Thoughts on the Liberating Potential of Early Chinese Medicine*

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European medicine has but one cultural task. The cultural task of European medicine is liberation. Liberation of one's length of life, and of one's quality of life, from the impact of powers that lie outside of one's own control. To this day, medicine has not been able to fulfil its cultural task. It has come a long way and it has achieved victories along this way—victories over those forces that see little if any benefit in pursuing liberation of one's length of life and of one's quality of life.

When I speak of medicine, I refer to an ideology that emerged out of earlier non-medical forms of health care in the Eastern Mediterranean in the sixth to fifth century BC, and a few centuries later in China. Medicine as a completely new approach to interpreting health and illness was built on a completely new world view. This new world view itself was built on a credo that may be phrased in three sentences. First, laws of nature exist that are valid independently of time, space and person. Second, humans are able, through long-term investigation, to unveil and recognize these laws. Third, once these laws have been unveiled and recognized they are sufficient to explain all dynamics within the universe.

To be sure, no one—when medicine was postulated in ancient China and the Eastern Mediterranean more than two millennia ago—no one could “see” natural laws. All available evidence for Greece suggests that

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a growing awareness of the utility of laws in society was extended to a vision of all of nature following laws, and we speak of laws of nature today. One cannot see laws of nature. One can only see a few regularities. Nature itself does not offer any hints at laws of nature. In ancient Greece, the importance of laws in society grew out of an intellectual movement that strove to liberate the polis from the arbitrariness of monarchic and despotic government. Ancient Greek medicine was simply one—albeit a most important one—cultural arena in which a *zeitgeist* of the sixth and fifth century bore long-lasting fruit. This *zeitgeist* surfaced not only in the legal reforms initiated by Solon and Drakon. It is most obvious in ancient Greek drama, where the plays written by Aischylos and Euripides evidenced the move of human existence away from the arbitrariness of the gods to a self-defined event. Tragedy, that is, to be maneuvered into a situation where all ways out mean destruction, Euripides told his audiences, can be replaced by self-dependent planning. It was Friedrich Nietzsche who saw the liberation of man from what he called “the world’s will”, that is, the rise of individualism, as the beginning of a life-long chess game where personal shrewdness was recommended as the foundation of one’s personal success.¹

Greek medicine took individualism into the arena of personal health care. The founders of Greek medicine accepted the belief in the existence of laws of nature, in the ability of humans to unveil these laws of nature, and in the sufficiency of these laws to explain all phenomena in the universe. They extended the exclusive validity of this explanatory paradigm to the phenomena of health and illness, and offered their followers a long-term perspective towards achieving health and a long life independent of the whims and unforeseeable interventions of third parties. European medicine, to repeat my opening words, has but this one cultural task, that is, liberation of one’s length of life, and of one’s quality of life, from the impact of powers that lie outside of human control. The outstanding protagonist of this endeavour, Socrates, paid a high price for acknowledging that we have to begin our search for knowledge completely anew. The custodians of the old theocratic world view saw his confession “One thing I know: that I know nothing!” as blasphemy and put him to death. And yet, the message of liberation, once set in the world, developed its own dynamics and has continued on its way to this day. Even our current debates about reproductive cloning, stem cell research, and pre-natal diagnosis are nothing but the most recent signs of an ongoing antagonism between those forces that wish to free human life from the inherited burden of illness and early death, on the one side, and

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music*, New York: Dover Publications, 1995.

their opponents who prefer to see human life forever imbedded in what Nietzsche called the “one force of Life”, “the primordial essence itself”, “the exuberant fecundity of the world’s will.”

Why, when I wish to speak about Chinese medicine, this detour to ancient Greece? We cannot help but see ancient Greek medicine as the first to emerge of two medical traditions in the sense I described above, with China following suit only two or three centuries later. On a meta-level we may state that Chinese medicine, like its predecessor in the Eastern Mediterranean, rested on a triple credo: First, laws of nature exist that are valid independently of time, space and persons. We encounter this credo in the doctrines of Five Agents and *yin-yang*, now commonly called doctrines of systematic correspondences. All evidence suggests that the course of nature expressed in the doctrines of Five Agents and *yin-yang* was understood by the founders of Chinese medicine as following a law-like regularity independent of time, space and persons. Second, humans are able to recognize these laws. In fact, the authors of the early texts of the new medicine in China exhorted their readers to follow the laws of nature. In contrast to Greek medicine, though, we see no Socratic attitude. The knowledge was available already. One was simply required to accept it and pursue one’s life in accordance with it. Third, these laws are sufficient to explain all dynamics within the universe. Medicine in China from its beginning made it quite clear that the Five Agents and *yin-yang* doctrines sufficed to achieve the desired results. Age-old alternative explanatory models, such as the belief in demons and spirits, were explicitly rejected, when they were not simply neglected.

Given these obvious parallels between the paradigmatic foundations of Greek and Chinese medicine, one may wonder whether, in addition, Chinese medicine paralleled Greek medicine in the latter’s central cultural task of liberation. Chinese medicine, like Greek medicine, offered humans the perspective to act as self-dependent individuals, and to shape the quality and length of one’s life independent of any third party intervention. The question to be asked is, therefore, whether the obvious promise of individualism in health care tied in with a larger social dynamic, that is, whether the promise of individualism in health care reflected a larger quest for liberation in society, as was the case in Greek medicine.

To be sure, the proponents of polis government reforms who attempted to replace the arbitrariness of bad rulers by the neutral reliability of laws had no counterparts in Chinese society—with the exception of early Daoists, one may say. The small, self-sufficient community envisaged as an ideal in *Daode jing* 道德經 (Classic of the Way and its Power) 80 does not explicitly include or exclude a ruler, but we may assume that the lack of writing, of transportation, of a military propagated in *Daode*

jing 80 entailed a governing structure of “the small state” far from the reality of the Chinese empire after 221 BC.

Chinese medicine’s earliest sources may possibly date as far back as the Han (206 BC-220 AD) dynasty. They reflect without any doubt the governing structures of the united empire. Unlike Greek medicine with its explicit rejection of a “monarchia”, early Chinese medicine shows no traces of a quest for a social or individual organism that knows how to overcome a crisis by itself. The only outright political structural metaphor one encounters in the *Huangdi neijing suwen* 黃帝內經素問 (Huang Di’s Inner Classic: Pure Questions) is that of a hierarchy with the heart as the ruler and the remaining organs being assigned all sorts of important bureaucratic positions. Nothing stated in the *Suwen* on physiology and pathology can be legitimated by observations of the living or dead human body. The model image the authors of the early medical texts depicted of the human body existed somewhere apart from the human body. Hence we need to search in the social environment of the founders of Chinese medicine to understand their medicine.

In that environment there was hardly anybody who would have advocated the replacement of the emperor by democratic self-governing bodies. The Mohists, as the first to propose a public governance ethic, proposed a government with a virtuous ruler, supported by a hierarchy of appointed officials, at the top of a centralized, bureaucratically administered state. Confucius never aimed at eliminating the monarchic ruling system; he strove to form the enlightened ruler. Legalists, too, offered no program for democratic self-governing. That is, if we interpret Greek medicine as an extension of the quest for liberation from monarchic rule in society to the realm of health care, we see no parallel in Han dynasty China, not to speak of subsequent times.

And yet, returning to the argument that the model image of the body lay outside the human body, we cannot but assume that the message of individuals being responsible for their own life is but a projection of a message that had originated in society elsewhere. If it is not liberation from the arbitrariness of monarchic rule, whose, or what type of, social message, we may ask, was transmitted by Chinese medicine?

A key concept to be examined here is that of fate. After all, it is human fate medicine is concerned with, and Greek medicine transferred the power over one’s fate from the gods to the health conscious individual (and, where necessary, to his/her physician). The Chinese term for “fate” is *ming* 命, and it should be worthwhile to examine the *Huangdi neijing suwen*, the most telling text of early Chinese medical literature, for its treatment of *ming*, “fate”. The entire text of the *Suwen* comprises 1866 different characters in 81,210 positions. As one might expect, a grammatical particle, *zhi* 之, heads the list with 1,766 occurrences. Positions 3 and 4,

too, are filled by grammatical particles. However, at position two we already encounter a technical term, *qi* 氣, i.e., vapor, with 1,803 occurrences; the character for “illness”, “disease”, *bing* 病, is not far behind at position 11, with 1,003 occurrences. The character *ming* appears in the *Suwen* 58 times. It conveys different meanings, including “order”, “to name; to call”, “to determine”, and, relevant here, “fate” and “life”. We have identified the use of *ming* 12 times with the meaning of “fate”/“life”. “Fate”, such a small number of occurrences appears to inform us, was not the focal point of discussion in the *Suwen*. This is all the more true if we realize that these twelve occurrences are limited to 9 treatises. Considering that the *Suwen* consists of about 360 different text pieces that may have been authored by tens of authors, we may assume that only a very few of them considered *ming*, “fate”, worth mentioning. The fact is, the *Suwen* deals with “fate” on two levels, one explicit and one implicit.

Let us discuss the explicit level first. The message conveyed here is straightforward: *Ming* serves to denote the concept of a lifespan that commences as a natural event through the joining of *yin* and *yang*. And this joining of *yin* and *yang* required, as presumably any reader of the Mawangdui manuscripts and other such texts was aware of, the joining of a male and a female. Hence the *Suwen* speaks of heaven as father and earth as mother. The unknown author of this passage equates *ming* with *sheng* 生, “life”, when he concludes:

Man receives his life from the earth;
His fate depends on heaven.
When heaven and earth combine their *qi*,
That is called ‘Man’.

If someone is able to correspond to the four seasons,
Heaven and earth are his father and mother.
If he knows the myriad beings,
One calls him Son of Heaven.²

This statement could hardly be more sober. It includes no hint at any dependence on parents, more distant ancestors, not to mention spirits or gods. The text redefines the concept of “Son of Heaven”. Heaven is not a god-like entity; heaven is the father to which belongs a mother, and this is earth. Heaven and earth symbolize man’s natural environment, and nothing else. But by paralleling *ming* with *sheng*, the former is redefined too: as fate is life granted by the normal working of nature. This life should be

² *Huangdi neijing suwen* 黄帝内经素问 (Huang Di’s Inner Classic: Pure Questions) 5 (*Baoming quanxing lun* 宝命全形论), Beijing: Renmin weisheng chubanshe, 1963, fifth printing 1983, p. 159.

treasured, as the title of *Suwen* 25, suggests, lest its length is cut and man dies an early death. Three passages, two in *Suwen* 27 and one in *Suwen* 70, may have been written by three different authors. Nevertheless, they use an identical phrase, *jue ren chang ming* 絕人長命, "interrupts man's long life", to express a commonly held idea: the eternal antagonism between good and bad, proper and evil, orthodoxy and heterodoxy, true and false expressed in philosophy, morality and ethics with the characters *zheng* 正 and *zhen* 真 versus *xie* 邪, determines the length and quality of individual human life as much as it shapes the quality of social interaction. Hence we read in *Suwen* 25: those who "consider evil as true" (*yi xie wei zhen* 以邪爲真) they will "interrupt a person's long life" (*jue ren chang ming* 絕人長命). A later commentary explains: "they release evil to attack the proper" (*shi xie gong zheng* 釋邪攻正). Similarly, in *Suwen* 70, a simple message reads that one must not invite evil and lose what is proper lest "one interrupts man's long life" (*wu zhi xie wu shi zheng jue ren chang ming* 無致邪無失正絕人長命).

In another context, i.e., *Suwen* treatises 1, 3, and 5, one author or several authors use the phrase *shou ming* 壽命, "long life" or simply "lifespan". *Suwen* 1 recounts a hierarchy of true men, accomplished men, sages and exemplary men. By their lifestyles, in harmony with nature, all were able to achieve longevity, or to "add to their lifespan" (*yi qi shou ming* 益其壽命). Similarly, *Suwen* 3 advises: "If this [*qi* of heaven] is offended repeatedly, then evil *qi* harms man. This is the basis of one's longevity." Finally, in *Suwen* 5, one learns that the sages, acting on the basis of "no intervention", reached a "lifespan/longevity without limit".

Before we come to a conclusion, we should look at a third conceptual variation of *ming* in the *Suwen*, that is *tian ming* 天命, commonly translated as "mandate of heaven". The passages quoted above on the notion of *chang ming* and *shou ming* suggest that it is entirely an individual's own responsibility whether he/she can enjoy a full lifespan, i.e., a long life. The length and quality of life do not depend on some invisible power's whims, and they do not depend on a course of nature that man is unable to influence. To the contrary, man is depicted as having the choice to lead a health-conscious life, for which he/she will be rewarded accordingly. The notion of a "mandate" implies that the recipient is more a passive beneficiary of someone else's favors than an active moulder of his/her own existence. If the mandate is granted by heaven, then heaven may be seen as a metaphysical force with power over human fate. The famous quote in the *Lunyu* 論語 (Analects), *si sheng you ming, fu gui zai tian* 死生有命, 富貴在天, is usually interpreted with this meaning: "Life and

death are fate; whether one is rich and noble lies with heaven."³ *Suwen* 3 and 74 may not have been written by the same author; yet they express an identical view: "If the Way is carefully observed as the law [demands], the mandate of heaven will last long,"⁴ and "If the Way is carefully observed as the Law [demands], one will achieve a myriad cures in a myriad cases treated. *Qi* and blood will achieve a proper balance, and the mandate of heaven will last long."⁵ The second quote is simply an extension of the first. The passage in *Suwen* 3 is clearly a general political statement added by the editors of the *Suwen* at the end of *Suwen* 3 to the preceding text written by someone else. The passage quoted from *Suwen* 74, too, was attached as a general remark to an older discourse. However, in this statement the editors took pains to point out that what is true in everyday life and ethics is also true of one's individual health and the success of medical practitioners. That is, those who follow the Way are rewarded with long life. The term "mandate of heaven" is redefined here. Man has the chance and potential to mould his individual existence. All it takes is to live in accordance with *dao* 道, the Way, and to follow *fa* 法, the models set by the ancients, or, more recently, Law.

Apparently, the *Suwen* editor[s] explicitly sided here with a tendency to move away from the attribution of individual fate to heaven to an emphasis on the self-dependence of man. The latter view is expressed in Tao Hongjing's 陶弘景 (456-536) famous quote from the *Xianjing* 仙經, "Classic of the Immortals":

我命在我不在天，但愚人不能知此道為生命之要，所以致百病風邪者，皆由恣意極情，故虛損生也。

Ming is transferred here to the responsibility of man. It has lost the meaning of "mandate". One may still speak of "fate", but it is man himself who decides the quality and length of this "fate". *Ming* is neutralized here to *sheng* "life" or "existence", and man is in control. Hence the passage may be read as:

For my life I am responsible myself; [its quality and length are] not decided by heaven. Stupid people do not know that this is the essential doctrine of life.

³ *Lunyu* 论语 (Analects) 12.5 (*Yanyuan* 颜渊), in: Liu Juntian 刘俊田 and Lin Song 林松 (eds.), *Sishu quanyi* 四书全译 (The Four Scriptures: A Complete Translation), Guiyang: Guizhou renmin chubanshe, 1991, p. 230.

⁴ *Huangdi neijing suwen* 黄帝内经素问 3 (*Sheng qi tong tian lun* 生气通天论), 1983, p. 22.

⁵ *Huangdi neijing suwen* 黄帝内经素问 74 (*Zhi zhen yao da lun* 至真要大论), 1983, p. 546.

Therefore, when the wind-evil causes them to suffer from all types of illnesses, this can always be traced to their immoderate behaviour and the intemperance of their desires. As a result, they experience depletion which is detrimental to their life.⁶

This, then, is the explicit treatment of fate in the *Suwen*. The implicit treatment is much broader; in fact, the entire *Suwen* implicitly conveys a message of human self-dependence by teaching how to prevent and treat illness. The *Suwen* certainly acknowledges no metaphysical agency that punishes man for reasons that lie outside of his own reach. Man should know how to adapt to the rules, we may also say laws, of nature. If he leads a life in accordance with these rules or laws, he will live a long life.

We asked ourselves at the start whether the obvious promise of individual responsibility for one's quality and length of life in Chinese medicine tied in with a larger social dynamic, that is, whether the promise of individualism in health care reflected a larger quest for liberation in society, as was the case in Greek medicine. We know that at least early Daoists despised of rulers; in fact the very notion of a state was anathema to them. The state with its norms and laws appeared to them as nothing but an instrument in the hands of ambitious, ruthless rulers.⁷ But the intransigence of early Daoist writers was a stance of the past by the time the early texts of Chinese medicine were compiled. We may safely conclude that unlike Greece, China knew no broad social movement away from autocratic rule that could have formed Chinese medicine. The ideology of self-dependence apparent in the *Suwen* focusses on heaven, not on secular rulers. It is situated between the *Lunyu* statement attributing life and death, wealth and nobility to the workings of heaven, and the post-Han emphasis, expressed by, among others, Tao Hongjing, on man's personal responsibility.

It may be worthwhile to remain with this issue for a few lines. We assume that the editing of the *Suwen* occurred during the later Han dynasty at the earliest. It may have been that late that the editors of the *Suwen* brought together numerous short pieces of earlier writings, some of them possibly dating from the second and first centuries BC, arranged them according to criteria we no longer are able to discern, superimposed dia-

⁶ *Yangxing yanming lu* 養性延命錄 (Records of How to Extend Life by Nourishing One's Nature), (*Jiao jie* 教戒), in *Daozang* 道藏 (Collected Works on the Dao) *Dongshen bu fangfa lei* 洞神部方法類 17, Wanfenglou, Shanghai, 1926 (Photoreprint of the Ming-Dynasty Zhengtong reign Daozang edition).

⁷ Heiner Roetz, *Die chinesische Ethik der Achsenzeit: Eine Rekonstruktion unter dem Aspekt des Durchbruchs zu postkonventionellem Denken*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1992, p. 401.

logue structures, and added brief remarks conveying general messages at the beginning and end of some of them. This may have been the time when in another cultural arena Chinese intellectuals with a very different worldview attempted to free man from a fate impacting the length and quality of his life, a fate that was called “received burden”, *cheng fu* 承負. In the words of Michel Strickmann, this is

a seemingly indigenous Chinese form of otherworldly retribution in which the sins of the fathers are visited upon their descendants. [It is] first attested to in a large and problematic scripture, the Book of the Great Peace (*T'ai-p'ing ching*). This proto-Taoist or para-Taoist work seems to have come into being during the first or second century C.E., although the text as we now have it is the result of reediting and expansion carried out in the sixth and again in the ninth centuries.⁸

The sections describing “received burden” are commonly identified as the oldest stratum of the text, that is, they seem to be contemporaneous with the late Han era editing of the *Suwen*.

The notion of “received (or: inherited) burden” is of interest to us here because it points to a concept exactly opposite to the message of self-dependence conveyed by the *Suwen*. The worldview documented in the *Tai ping jing* 太平經 sees heaven and earth not as neutral natural environments but as moral agencies. They impose catastrophies on mankind for wrongs committed by some person, quite distinct from the innocent sufferers of harvest failure or dreadful illness. In this worldview, man is punished, that is, the quality and length of his life are impacted, by forces outside of the reach of the individual sufferer. Man has no chance to lead a self-dependent life untouched by the sins and wrongs of his contemporaries or forefathers. Illness is a form of otherworldly retribution that sees a person not as an individual but as a member of either a synchronic society or a diachronic lineage. One’s length and quality of life is, in this view, determined not so much by one’s own behaviour but by one’s ties to the present and/or to the past. One’s own behaviour may in turn impact the length and quality of the life of a distant descendant.⁹

The concept of *cheng fu* is one of at least two alternatives to a simpler and possibly older understanding of retribution. In *Daode jing* 79 it is stated “the Way of heaven knows no kin. It always sides with the good people.” This has been interpreted as a hint at heaven’s intention to re-

⁸ Michel Strickmann, *Chinese Magical Medicine*, ed. by Bernard Faure, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002, p. 40.

⁹ *Ibid.*

ward the good and punish the bad. However, as the author(s) of the *Taiping jing* realized: “some humans take great pains to behave well, but they are met by disaster nevertheless. Others willfully act badly, and still they are favored and call themselves exemplary ones. That is not correct.”¹⁰ The concept of *cheng fu* serves at least two ends. First, it exonerates sufferers from the burden of being responsible themselves for the misfortune that has come upon them. Second, by identifying the burden of suffering as “inherited”, the concept of *cheng fu* solves the contradiction that is obvious when the apparently innocent suffer from illness or other types of disaster.

The *Taiping jing* not only introduces the concept of “received/inherited burden”, it also advises its readers on how to rid themselves of a punishment they do not deserve. What is the prescription recommended? “The best way is to guard the One. If one guards the One over a long time, heaven will sympathize with him.”¹¹ The ingredients of this prescription of “guarding the One”, *shou yi* 守一, are specified as follows: “To others, to practice humaneness and confer kindness is meritorious—if this is done without seeking benefits. The same applies to loyalty and filial piety. For oneself, if one persistently focusses on one’s spirit and loves it like a baby, how could disaster dare to strike?”¹² Elsewhere the *Taiping jing* confirms: “[Your] fate as a human very much lies with your own body. Of what use is it to take great pains to look up to heaven? If one does not clean one’s body oneself, who else should clean it? If one does not love one’s body oneself, who else should love it? If one does not bring one’s body to perfection oneself, who else should bring it to perfection? If one does not concern oneself with one’s body, who else should be concerned with it? If one does not care for one’s body oneself, who else should care for it?”, and further on: “the myriad ends of the Dao of heaven, man is able to achieve them himself.”¹³ In other words, man should clean himself, should love himself, should bring himself to perfection, should be concerned with himself, and should be responsible for himself. That is, it is one’s very own behaviour that guarantees happiness or ends in disaster. Such reasoning may have informed Ge Hong 葛洪 (284-363 or 283-343), when he wrote the line that was later, as we have seen above, taken up by Tao Hongjing again: 我命在我不在天, that is,

¹⁰ Wang Ming 王明 (ed.), *Taiping jing hejiao* 太平经合校 (Collation of *Taiping jing* Editions), Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960, p. 22.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 60, 55.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 743.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 339.

“for my life I am responsible myself; [its quality and length are] not decided by heaven.”¹⁴

The wealth of ancient Chinese sources on man’s entanglement with fate cannot be reflected upon here in more than just a few facets. In his book *Chinese Magical Medicine*, Michel Strickmann has traced various attempts of ancient Daoists to free man, and that is, his health, from an unconditional burden inherited from past generations. “Illness,” it was assumed by presumably all these intellectuals, “had its principle source in the world of the dead.”¹⁵ We witness the emergence of a broad range of measures to help humans dissociate themselves from what was seen, at least by some, as unjustified suffering for the wrongs committed by others. While some parties continued to acknowledge the impact of the world of the dead on the life of the living, and sought to develop strategies for how the latter could mitigate the severity of such fate, others denied the existence of such “inherited burden” altogether and redefined man’s position as free from any metaphysical ties.

By proposing a behaviour centring around humaneness and kindness, loyalty and piety in one’s relations with others, and meditation in one’s relation with one’s own spirit, the advocates of a strategy of “guarding the One” expressed their belief in the existence of a metaphysical moral agency watching over the conduct of humans, and sending appropriate reward or punishment. The concept of such a moral agency has taken numerous shapes in early Chinese medical history. Confucians, Mohists and Daoists alike have in one way or another resorted to the notion of retribution from powers other than secular forces. There is no point in addressing more details or facets of this concept here. The point is that, as we have seen in the approach recommended in the *Taiping jing*, a widespread agreement existed that it is morality in one’s behaviour that serves best to placate the moral concerns of the metaphysical observers. When the early Mohists believed that Confucians retreated from their belief in the mechanism of retribution, they argued quite cynically that such beliefs should be upheld if only for the purpose of having the people live in fear of punishment by forces from whose surveillance no one is able to escape.

However, moral categories such as humaneness and kindness, loyalty and piety are ill-defined. Confucius was confronted by his disciples with numerous situations where it was not at all clear which of two possible alternative behaviours was truly a sign of humaneness, kindness, loyalty

¹⁴ Wang Ming 王明 (ed.), *Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi* 抱朴子内篇校释 (Annotated Collation of *Baopuzi neipian*) 16 (Huangbai 黄白), Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1988, p. 287.

¹⁵ Michel Strickmann (2002), p. 3.

and piety. The Confucian *Analects* demonstrate the difficulties of defining unambiguous criteria of behaviour, and by admitting that since even the Master himself was not always certain of his activities it was obvious that the common people had almost no chance to escape the wrath of whoever watched over their behaviour. To understand the role of Chinese medicine in the attempts of some philosophers to free man and his health altogether from fate in the sense of being impacted by metaphysical powers, we need to search for an alternative prescription offering guidelines much more robust than an appeal to show humaneness and kindness, loyalty and filial piety.

Having discussed *ming* earlier, we now turn to the concepts of *tian* 天 and *fa* 法. To understand the relevance of *fa* in the context of this discussion, we could start at many points. All social philosophies, whether Confucian, Mohist, Daoist, Legalist and eventually Buddhist, in some way or another appropriated and idiosyncratically redefined *fa* along the lines of their respective interpretation of man as a social being, and of the measures required to maintain an acceptable level of social harmony. The argumentation of the Mohists may serve our purposes best; “they formulated China’s first explicit ethical and political theories and advanced the world’s earliest form of consequentialism.”¹⁶ Mohism represents the ideology of a self-conscious craft or artisan class that sought to reform the established political order.¹⁷ Artisans use well-defined standards and models to achieve perfect results of their work. Hence it is no wonder that in the Mohist writings we encounter the exact opposite to the soft criteria for “good” behaviour proposed by the authors of the *Taiping jing*.

In the words of Chris Fraser, “[T]he early Mohists hoped to develop objective moral standards by which to unify society and achieve social order. Part of their solution was to develop a theory of *fa* (models, standards) that explained how to judge distinctions (*bian* 辨) between *shi* 是 (this, right) and *fei* 非 (not-this, wrong). The core idea was to identify clear, objective *fa* (models) to serve as paradigms for pattern recognition or analogical extension. Things relevantly similar to, or “matching” (*zhong* 中), the *fa* would be *shi* (right, this); otherwise, they would be *fei* (wrong, not-this).” The Mohists, like other contemporary schools, held that “heaven rewards those who obey its intention and punishes those who defy it, hence people should strive to be humane and do what is right.”¹⁸ To be sure what is right, they set out

¹⁶ Chris Fraser, “Mohism”, in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2007 Edition), URL: <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2007/entries/mohism/>>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

to find ... objectively justified standards by which to unify morality. The search for objective moral standards by which to guide action and reform society lies at the heart of the Mohist project. As Mo Di put it, 'those in the world who perform any task cannot work without models (*fa*) and standards.' As this passage indicates, the Mohists regard *fa* as similar to tools used to guide and check the performance of skilled tasks, such as sawing a square corner or drawing a straight line. *Fa* are objective, reliable and easy to use, so that with minimal training anyone can employ them to perform a task or check the results. The Mohists propose that we can find such a standard by considering the attitudes of an ideally impartial, benevolent, and reliable moral agent: [that is] *Tian* 天 (heaven, nature, sky), whom they revere as a personal god.¹⁹

Over time, some intellectuals must have seen the difficulties facing attempts at reconciling a quest for objective standards with the requirement that these are moral standards. Diverging from a main-stream conviction that found its supporters throughout centuries to come, one group of philosophers appears to have gradually dissociated the meaning of *fa* from its moral connotations. The Mohists themselves seem to have abandoned

the idea of grounding ethics or social norms in "Heaven's intention" (*tian zhi* 天志). Intuitively, this move would seem to push Mohist ethics toward a form of pragmatic consequentialism: the proper standards for *shi/fei* distinctions would be whatever tends to promote human welfare in practice.²⁰

Not only the concept of *fa* but also the concept of *tian* was redefined, from personal god to little more than simply a natural environmental phenomenon. Undoubtedly, "the Mohists regarded *fa* primarily not as principles or rules, but as different types of models used to guide the performance of norm-governed activities."

The purpose of doing right rather than wrong, as seen by the Mohists (and others), is to achieve social order. "What is right for the individual is

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Chris Fraser, "Mohist Canons", in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2007 Edition)*, URL: <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2007/entries/mohist-canons/>>.

determined by whatever *dao* is operative in society.”²¹ Understandably, such ideals have been interpreted as a “nearly complete absence of individualism in Mohist thought. ... Individuals who desire to do what is right will simply come to view society’s goals as right.” If the understanding of *fa* had ended here, a medicine as documented in the *Suwen* could not have been developed. In the *Suwen*, as in some non-medical philosophical contexts, *fa* was given a meaning of “law”, or, one might say, of “standards” visible in nature and society dissociated from the ethical precepts designed to guarantee social harmony. To follow these *fa* was by no means seen as contributing to social order. A life in accordance with the *fa* as proposed in the *Suwen* is meant to guarantee the realisation of only one vision, that is, the individual’s intention to live a long and healthy life.

The *Suwen*, and early Chinese medicine in general, knows no moral standards. It uses the same terms as the literature offering moral advice, but it conveys a unique message not found anywhere else. This is the message of personal health achievable through a lifestyle that must obey the laws of nature but is freed from the moral imperatives of the various social ideologies. Chinese medicine offers straightforward advice on how to eat and drink, when to rest and rise, and how to redirect the flow of *qi* and blood in cases of blockage, the penetration of evil, etc. The authors of the *Suwen* must have been surrounded by texts and teachings of Mohists, Confucianists, Daoists, Legalists, and possibly already of the Buddhists. And yet, one notes with surprise, they carefully avoided all moral value terms so widely appropriated by the competing social ideologies. The creators of medicine, and this is evidenced most obviously in texts such as the *Suwen*, were not interested in a social goal. The medicine they designed is meant to pursue a purely individual end, that is, the best possible quality and the longest possible duration of individual life.

²¹ Chris Fraser, “Mohism”, in Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2007 Edition), URL: <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2007/entries/mohism/>>.