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Recommended Citation

Hassan, Amir, "Chinese Medicine in Uganda: Health, Wealth, and Globalization" (2017). *Spring 2017*. 49.
https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/wushta_spr2017/49

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CHINESE MEDICINE IN UGANDA: HEALTH, WEALTH, AND GLOBALIZATION

Amir Hassan

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In the last few decades, the globalization of Chinese medicine has altered health infrastructures and access to treatment in African countries. While the proliferation of Chinese medicine clinics and pharmaceutical drugs has broadened available therapeutic itineraries by supplementing local and biomedical healing centers, media sources in Uganda have recently raised concerns about “Tianshi” clinics and their illusory advertisements promising panaceas for incurable illnesses. This project is based on research that explores the presence of Chinese medicines and physicians and other imported treatments in urban, peri-urban, and rural sites in Uganda. It also contextualizes the broader implications of the extension of China's soft power globally with the desire to seek out such services within pre-existing understandings of health and disease, social structures that promote the Tianshi model for medicine distribution, and the pursuit of economic mobility. I employ in-depth interviews, informal conversations, community mapping activities, and participant observation in order to construct an ethnography of community perceptions about Chinese medicine in Uganda. Research findings suggest that Ugandans, dissatisfied with other therapeutic regimes, may view Chinese therapy as more accessible and compatible to local notions of health and illness than biomedicine. The commercial structure of Tianshi clinics—allowing one to sell Chinese medicines without prior medical education or professional experience—also offers patients and entrepreneurs the promise of economic mobility and social prestige. The consumption and sale of Chinese medicine lie at the nexus of social and class-based aspirations that motivate Ugandan individuals to enter into entrepreneurial professions, broaden social networks, and improve health outcomes. The use, sale, and imaginations of Chinese medicines can also be understood as the interplay between local agency in navigating a pluralistic system of healing and global processes of China's ongoing political and economic relationship with Uganda.