Cultural interpretation on Xiang thinking of Traditional Chinese Medicine

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Abstract

Though the analysis on the characteristics of Xiang thinking and the cultural background of its formation, it is believed that Xiang thinking is not only an art of logic and thinking with the natural holistic view but also represents the most important cognitive patterns concerning knowledge system of Traditional Chinese Medicine, and even it is the soul of Traditional Chinese Medicine culture. Therefore, a new viewpoint has been proposed that it is necessary to adhere to Xiang thinking with the study of Xiang as a core procedure and to seek for breakthrough for academic innovation in the cognitive process of Xiang with efforts.

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Key words: Medicine, Chinese traditional; Xiang thinking; Academic innovation

INTRODUCTION

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and Western Medicine originated from different cultural backgrounds, one in the eastern and the other western. Due to the differences of cultural values and cognitive patterns between China and the west, cognitions and behavioral patterns on health and disease between the two sides differ, thus forming two different kinds of medicine and health knowledge systems. The most important and featured cognitive process of TCM is Xiang thinking.

Xiang Thinking, An Art of Logic and Thinking with the Natural Holistic View

Concept is people’s understanding of the nature of things, showing a clear boundary prescription. The basic unit and form of modern logical thinking is concept, which requires people to firstly identify the concept during the process of thinking and mutual communication. Otherwise, the process is hard to continue. The Eastern scientific and cultural knowledge system has adopted the comparatively vague Xiang concept as the most basic unit of thinking in the cognitive patterns, which not only completely avoids the strict provisions of boundary in a concept, but also places unit of thinking in frequent variation, showing certain relativity. For example, A is positive with respect to B, but maybe negative with respect to C. This requires that in the cognitive process, we must pay attention to understand the specific environment, background and relationship of the cognitive object. In other words, positioning must be identified in the context of the object. This is hard to be understood by people who are confined by the perspective of material structure to think. Based on the observation of symptoms demonstrated by the human body, Xiang thinking in TCM is a thinking method that applies reasoning patterns such as association, metaphor, comparison, symbolism, analogy, Yin and Yang and the five elements in the deduction, thus reckoning and analyzing the physiological and pathological states in human body. In this think-
In the thinking process, the core is to analyze Xiang and conclude to various syndromes (Zheng), that is, to identify syndrome (Zheng) for the diagnosis and treatment based on an overall analysis of the illness and the patient's conditions. Hence, the core of such diagnosis and treatment is to perceive, understand and treat Xiang. For Xiang thinking of TCM in the thinking process, in order to speculate and analyze changes within the human body, subjective ideas of the physicians are inevitable. Therefore, the word in Book of the Later: Han A History of Guo Yu are often mentioned when speaking of the thinking pattern of TCM, "what medicine deals with is understanding", which was abbreviated as "medicine is understanding". The "medicine" only refers to TCM; the understanding means to perceive and understand, so that people think TCM is hard to be expressed in words but only can be understood, leading to an abstruse and vague definition of TCM.

It is thus clear that in addition to understand, it also indicates conception, thoughts, imagines and originality. It means when diagnosing the complex and volatile diseases, TCM physicians not only can satisfy the collection and simple analysis of data and facts such as symptoms and physical signs, but also need to think and understand in the exact condition of disease. TCM physicians should analyze clinical facts and data with the creativity and imagination, and innovatively propose and implement flexible treatment programs. This process actually increases the subjectivity considerably. TCM physicians are required to perceive and feel from their heart. Obviously, certain originality is ensured in the process, and keeps a gap with the direct and simple reflections of facts. Thus, this pattern of thinking is regarded as artistic.

**Xiang Thinking, Soul of TCM Culture**

**Ideological background of Xiang thinking in TCM**

No medical knowledge system is formed solely based on theories. In addition to substantial clinical practices, it is also influenced by different social cultures, ideological and cognitive patterns. Through chaos caused by wars in ancient China, ancient people definitely have chances to observer internal organs, muscles and bones. Anatomical records can be clearly found in Huang Di Nei Jing. Thus, why TCM research still selected the core of Xiang rather than the research pattern on the basis of anatomy? This is mainly attributed to the impact of holistic view of harmony between the heaven and human, vitality theory and time perception in ancient China on TCM.

The three factors present the inseparability from different aspects. Nothing can be casually divided, so do the matter and me. The subject and object make a unified unitary. Thus, various symptoms, forms and functional states presented by the object can be dynamically perceived from a macro aspect and wholly, i.e., to master Xiang. Meanwhile, the non-artificially controlled natural symptoms were recorded, described, analyzed and understood from the aspect of relationship background. When embodied in the thinking pattern and academic research of Chinese, it equals to the underscoring of the integrity, forming the cognitive basis of the generation of holistic view.

**Long-term clinical practices of Xiang thinking in TCM**

Cognitive finding: ancient TCM physicians found in the long-term clinical practices that when lesions were formed due to the dysfunctions of internal organs, Qi and blood as well as channels and collaterals of the human body, a symptom or a group of associated and concurrent symptoms would occur accordingly. After the disappearance of these symptoms, normal physiological functions can be recovered. Thus, a corresponding relation between physiological and pathological signs and between internal and external signs can be directly found and concluded from the human body. In this way, the Xiang thinking pattern of governing exterior to infer interior was created, and its practical value and validity have been verified.

Conclusions of disease controlling: it is not enough to understand the association between the interior changes and the surface signs. TCM physicians need to regulate and control organism at the pathological state through the collection of pathological signs, hence achieving the goal of diagnosis and treatment. Through substantial human experiments and observations, Chinese ancient physicians discovered that when patients presented a certain symptom or a group of symptoms (patterns of syndrome), these symptoms can be eliminated by the administration of one kind of medicine or a set of medicine (prescriptions). Ultimately, TCM doctors summed up the corresponding relation between medicine and symptom or pattern of syndrome. Unlike the analysis of curative effect mechanism of drug in modern pharmacology, it achieved a huge success in practice. Through the mastering of Xiang, the medicine corresponding to symptoms is used to regulate the abnormal disease status in an organism, and achieves satisfied and even magical effect.

**Main object of Xiang thinking in academic system of TCM**

Either TCM or Western Medicine cannot be an absolutely independent and pure technology, which inevitably is influenced by different cultural backgrounds, concepts and thinking patterns and so on. In recent years, China and the academia became aware of the importance of "to develop TCM from the perspective of culture" because this involves the strategic thinking and decision-making. However, what is culture and TCM culture? This answer varies. So far, hundreds of definitions on culture with certain influence have been
INSPRIATION OF XIANG THINKING ON ACADEMIC INNOVATION OF TCM

One of the fundamental differences between TCM and Western Medicine is the cognitive process. The basis of Western Medicine is the anatomy based on material substance. TCM centers on Xi, and enables the cognitive process of objective materials from perspectives of the integrity, relationship and background. Specifically, the understanding of human physiology and pathology in TCM is not based on the direct evidence of material substance, but builds up an indirect system related with the material substance: a system of Zang- and Fu-organs, channels, Qi and blood. The core of this system is Xi. The concept of Zang- and Fu-organs in TCM includes organs in the body and physiological and pathological symptoms. Hence, Zang- and Fu-organs can be more accurately regarded as hidden Xi. The objective existence and clinically exact effects of channels, but material substances were not found through dozens of years of efforts. In fact, channels, Zang- and Fu-organs and Qi and blood are one kind of Xi, which are indirectly correlated with material substances. Hence, it is inevitably hard to success to explore channels from the aspect of material substances. This is also the root reason for the frequent failures of the verification and research of TCM from the aspect of material structure with the assistance of Western science ideology and apparatus since the 20th century. The right way is to make the research based on Xi.

The use of tools is an important symbol of human civilization progress. Characteristics of TCM identify its orientation of human, and basically neglect the application of tools in the clinical diagnosis and treatment in TCM. However, this does not indicate that TCM does not need tools, or medical equipment that can improve the ability of diagnosis and treatment based on an overall analysis of the illness and the patient’s condition. In the recent dozens of years, the research and development of biomedical equipment of TCM showed a problem of directionality. It would be ideal to invent a set of medical equipment for the diagnosis and treatment based on syndrome differentiation, so that after the logging of related clinical symptoms and data, the symptoms such as deficiency of liver-Yin and kidney-Yin or incoordination between the spleen and the stomach can be determined. If this can be realized, the TCM can be truly modernized.

Through the above analysis, it is found that different cultures will inevitably form different medical thoughts and cognitive processes. And the formation of any specific knowledge is closely related with the corresponding cultural background. Under the impact of holistic view of harmony between the heaven and human, vitality theory and time perception in ancient China on TCM, the cognitive patterns of inseparability with the holistic view and the core of Xi formed in TCM. Undoubtedly, Xi thinking formed the most important element in 3 major cores of TCM culture, also the soul of TCM culture. Thus, a profound perception is obtained in this research that Xi thinking must be held in the academic research of TCM. With the center of Xi, breakthroughs for academic innovation should be found in the cognitive process of Xi, which would the right way for the academic development of TCM.

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