

Feeling the Qi: Authenticity, Translation, and Textuality in California Chinese Medical Education

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Abstract

This poster demonstrates some of the multiple voices participating in the semiotic structuring of “authenticity” in the context of California Chinese medical education. Texts and teachers differ in their representations of “real knowledge,” and students, who do not learn Chinese, are guided to interact with their books in various ways. Some teachers, for example, invoke the authenticity and authority of Chinese source texts over poor English translations. Other teachers invoke the importance of embodied experience over any textual source. The students are thus left with an ambiguous sense of what constitutes authenticity in Chinese medicine. They navigate this ambiguity over time, forging their own ideas about authentic knowledge in Chinese Medicine, through interaction, embodied experience, and deeply moral engagement with the material.

Cultural Context: The Power of Authenticity in California

Spirituality and the quest for authentic self



This is the powerful moral ideal that has come down to us. It accords crucial moral importance to a kind of contact with myself, with my own inner nature.

(Taylor 1991: 29)

While not all Californians are necessarily seeking their authentic spiritual self, authenticity as a cultural trope definitely affects us all.



The Search for Real Chinese Medicine in California

California students are often attracted to Chinese medicine as an authentic spiritual path, a path that leads to deeper self-knowledge, awareness, and personal transformation.

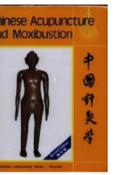
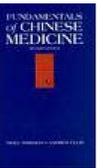
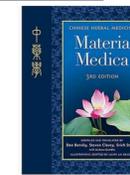


Chinese medicine is likewise seen as a natural, ancient form of medicine, uncorrupted by modernity.



Many students in California also see Chinese medicine as an authentic science of the body, a perfect complement to biomedicine.

Multiple Translations: Finding The Authentic Language Of Chinese Medicine



The students for the most part do not study Chinese, so what is the authentic way to translate Chinese medicine?

The textbooks all represent Chinese medicine in different ways, and the translators all have strong opinions regarding the authentic language of the medicine. Everybody is seeking to represent Chinese medicine authentically, but the way they choose to do so differs.

- Some authors argue for a standardized “source-oriented” translation that conveys precisely what the classical Chinese authors meant. They claim, furthermore, that Western “alternative health-care values” predispose students and practitioners to ignore precise terminology (Wiseman 2000).

- Others resist the idea that there could ever be standards in a medicine that is constantly changing, that must change to fit the cultural context in California (Beinfeld & Korngold 2001).

- Still others argue for a scientific translation of Chinese medicine (Xie 2003).

Clearly, this debate over authenticity and translation is intimately linked to debates over authority. Which book or translator is right? How are students guided to relate to such different representations?

What Happens in the Classroom?

During class time, interaction with teachers and peers offers opportunities to learn what type of textual information is authentic.



Video Clip 1:
Only the Chinese Book

For example, in one instance, one of the students asks a question about how to treat a condition, “rheum,” that he has never heard of before. This is the students’ third quarter in a four-year program, and they have just been introduced to the concept of rheum as a category of illness. None of their primary textbooks include it as a category. Their teacher, who is Chinese, argues that it is a core concept in the Chinese texts, and that they should therefore know it. In so doing, he invokes the authority and the authenticity of the Chinese texts above and beyond the English texts that the students use.



Video Clip 2:
The Words Get in The Way

In another class, after the students have just felt the pulse for the first time, the teacher encourages the students to focus first on the experience, and only then to turn towards the language of the textbooks. In so doing, she invokes the authority and authenticity of experience above and beyond any texts.

Ultimately, the students must trust themselves to navigate through the material:

Interview Clip 1: From the horse's mouth

(1st year student, 1st quarter)

S=Student; R=Researcher

- 01 S: Um (.6)
 02 I am inclined to find Maciocia more credible (.)
 03 **because (1.2) the language is good English**
 ((laughs sharply))
 04 Um-but I'm also inclined to find CAM more credible
 05 **because (.6) it's coming from (.) the horse's mouth,**
 06 you know, ah (1.2).
 07 So they both have (.4) their merits,
 08 and they're both questionable.
 09 R: mm-hmm
 10 And ultimately, **because I'm the one who's going to be in charge of my own practice,**
 11 I just need to learn what I can learn from both of them?
 12 R: mm-hmm
 13 and incorporate them into my own understanding (.) as much of it
 14 as I can in a way that doesn't cause me to have brain hemorrhage.

Much of this depends on their own emotional embodied connection to the text. As one student's comment reveals, this is a very intimate relationship:

Interview Clip 2: CAM is seducing me

(1st year student, 3rd quarter)

S=Student; R=Researcher

- 01 S: I feel like **Maciocia's raping me**
 02 R: That's big.
 03 S: Whereas **CAM is seducing me.**

It also depends a great deal on their moral engagement with the material, especially in terms of the quest to understand Chinese medicine through the self.

Interview Clip 3: It's dangerous

(1st year student, 2nd quarter, interview)

S=Student; R=Researcher

- 01 S: I mean, I um (1.2)
 ((sighs))
 02 I mean, what I said before about, you know,
 03 that you could have all this information?
 04 **but if you don't understand it, it's useless.**
 05 I mean it's—I think it's almost worse than useless.
 06 Like if you tried to apply this information without (.) having like a real (.)
 07 R: Right
 08 S: **Physical-energetic understanding of what it means,**
 09 like it's dangerous—
 10 R: Uh-huh
 11 S: It's like it's—it's wrong—
 12 **it reflects a serious shen disturbance on your own part**
 ((laughs))
 13 if you're even trying to do that, you know?
 14 R: Yeah.
 15 S: So um (.4) so yeah, I mean, you have to be,
 16 **you have to cultivate some sort of—**
 17 R: Mm-hmm
 18 S: **Meditative understanding of yourself.**

There is also an awareness, especially later in the program, that all sources of information matter, that interaction at all levels is equally important for the formation of students' ideas about what knowledge is “real.” In the words of one 2nd year student:

Interview Clip 4: One piece of a much larger picture

(2nd year student, 5th interview)

- 01 I'm finding (0.4) that the word “text” for me?
 02 No- doesn't mean the book (0.4) anymore.
 03 **Text- the book is a text, what I'm hearing from the teacher is a text=**
 04 **the books that the teachers write are texts=**
 05 **the conversations that are happening around me are texts (.)**
 06 **and they all (.) are influencing my understanding of what I need to be doing**
 07 as a practitioner? In the future? (3.0)
 08 So the text - in quotes, he's making with his fingers (1.8)
 09 as referring to Maciocia or CAM or whatever is-
 10 it's like nothing. It's meaningless.
 11 **It's one piece of a much larger picture.**

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Preliminary Conclusions and Questions to Consider

- The translation of Chinese medicine into a California context involves multiple, divergent voices, all vying to represent Chinese medicine through various lenses.
- Students learning Chinese medicine must rely upon their interactions with teachers, texts, and peers; their embodied experiences; and their moral engagement with the material to construct their own sense of authentic knowledge.
- This raises several questions regarding authenticity and meaning in California Chinese medicine. For example, is it possible to honor students' need for authentic experience at the same time as respecting the need for accurate translations? What are accurate translations and for whom? Finally, at what point does a students' experience become more authentic or authoritative than the book?

