
A CHANCE OF FREEDOM—UNREQUIRED

The history of Chinese medicine as an independent system of thoughts and practices ended sometime in the twentieth century. Today, Chinese medicine is no more a living tradition than is the society of imperial China, with whose rise and descent it was inextricably linked. Nonetheless, in China and abroad at the beginning of the twenty-first century, numerous activities continue to upgrade, utilize, or reprocess the residues of Chinese medicine. It would be naïve to assume that Chinese medicine can survive as an artifact in a social and cultural environment based upon entirely different worldviews than those that first stimulated its rise two millennia ago. Its historical chapter closed, historians are now challenged to evaluate Chinese medicine as a cultural product documented in countless textual and material sources. As there is only one other medical tradition whose unbroken development can be traced from antiquity to the present—European medicine, now known as Western medicine—it is only natural that an evaluation of the one requires a comparison with the other. This is all the more true because one has expired while the other continues on with increasing strength.

The Chinese and European medical traditions originally developed at separate ends of the Eurasian continent, and their early histories largely unfolded in isolation. Still, the beginnings of Chinese medicine are closely connected to the beginnings of medicine in the Eastern Mediterranean, although not necessarily in a tangible sense. While it is tempting to trace this or that development in Han dynasty China to something similar separated by only three centuries in time in ancient Greece, there is no hard evidence allowing us to view the rise of
medicine in Greek culture as a precondition for the somewhat later restructuring of health care in China. Nevertheless, the two events are closely associated because of an apparent similarity in the ancient Greek and Chinese approaches to nature, and in Greek and Chinese ideas about the origin of illness and the best way to prevent or cure it. Unfortunately, little has been written that can help us to clarify the many differences and parallels between early Greek and Chinese medicine. Much more scrutiny would be required to penetrate the surface and advance to the core of the underlying ideologies. The approach chosen here is to leave the health care function of Greek and Chinese medicine alone and focus on a deeper layer, that is, on their cultural significances. In fact, the therapeutic function of Greek and Chinese medicine may simply be a veil behind which the real message of medicine is to be discovered.

I have focused elsewhere on the origins of basic notions of the “healthy” and “sick” organism in early Greek and Chinese medicine. Apparently, at no time were such notions legitimated by the expressive power of the organism itself. Historical evidence suggests that the image of the body has its model outside of the body. Neither the theories proposed and tested on human patients in Greek and Chinese antiquity, nor modern notions of, for example, immunology, have their origins in clinical observations or scientific experiments. The origin of such basic notions rather lies in their plausibility. They are plausible, and thus acceptable to many, because they are projections onto the human organism of experiences or ideals of order and crisis in humankind’s environment. That is to say, in the history of both Greek/European and Chinese medicine, basic theories of health and illness were metaphors originating in human fears of disorder and chaos as well as from visions of peace and stability. While these theories are mostly understood as attempts at understanding and successfully preventing or healing human disease, their deeper rationale is to be seen in their expression of human concern over order and disorder in general. Presumably, it is difficult to simultaneously harbor in one’s subconsciousness antagonistic understandings of order and crisis. This reality seems to explain why over two millennia of medical history, every fundamental change in the interpretation of health and illness was preceded by fundamental changes in the understanding of order and disorder in the social and natural environment. One may conclude that without such changes in experience and vision, the dynamics of medical history would have lacked their motivating force.

Later, I will probe the ideologies underlying Greek and Chinese
medicine from a related and yet somewhat different angle. An observation such as “the image of the body has its model outside of the body” equally applies to both Greek and Chinese medicine. At first glance this may come as a surprise, given the apparent differences between cognitive dynamics in Greek/European and Chinese civilizations, but medicine, we need to realize, reflects the deeper strata of human consciousness. These may be universal strata. Medicine is a cultural reaction by humankind to what is perceived as an existential threat: the limitation of daily routines by illness, suffering, and the risk of early death. Medicine’s therapeutic function is to guarantee that such impediments are prevented, or cured if they cannot not be prevented, and that death does not come early but at a time when it is considered inevitable.

Inevitability is the key concept here, and who is to decide which events in human existence are inevitable? Do we have the right to decide when we are to die, and how well, in what fashion, and how long we may live? With this we approach another meaning of medicine; that is, its quest for existential self-determination. Through medicine, humankind attempts to control the quality and duration of earthly existence. Medicine becomes a cultural tool to shift power over human existence from the numinous to humanity itself. This is certainly true for ancient Greek and European medicine; the question we wish to ask and discuss here is whether this is also true for Chinese medicine.

A brief glance at ancient Greece may recall the sociopolitical message underlying the beginnings of European medicine. A quote from Homer’s *Iliad* offers a hint: “That god was Apollo, son of Zeus and Leto. Angry with Agamemnon, he cast plague down onto the troops—deadly infectious evil.” This is what intelligent people were convinced of in early times: Apollo was angry with Agamemnon who had mistreated Achilles, a darling of the gods. Eventually, Apollo sent a plague and countless people on earth died. In the Homeric view, an individual had no control over the quality and length of his or her existence. Homer’s epic leaves us no doubt: people may acquire technical skills to heal a wound received on the battle field or elsewhere, for example, but they have no control over disease and the moment of death. These were decided by the gods, and the gods decided independently of humans. Some individuals may have traced longevity to their own merits, but one could never be sure what fate had in store. To those who died from the plague cast down by Apollo it did not really matter whether they were good or bad. Their end appeared based on pure arbitrariness.
Not much later, beginning in the sixth century B.C., views had changed. Possibly stimulated by the confrontation with oriental realities of despotism in Ionia, some intellectuals in ancient Greece had developed a new worldview with an outlook that promised emancipation from the whims of despots, monarchs, oligarchs, tyrants—and gods. The key to these changes lay in the introduction of formal laws, nomoi, to structure social existence, and, most important, permit a self-organization of the citizens of political structures. The names of Dracon and Solon are remembered because they symbolize the trend toward early European democracy. The citizens of the early poleis sought to shed despotism, to establish a society free from the rule and arbitrariness of tyrants and monarchs. This freedom was achieved through the introduction of social laws. With their introduction, the citizens of the Greek polis had acquired a standard to measure behavior and to solve social crises by themselves, without patriarchal intervention by aristocrats or other powerful figures. The subsequent sequence of events appears to have been that the concept of laws for social stability was expanded by some philosophers to embrace what was considered an eternal stability—that is, an eternal regularity of processes—in the entire universe. Inevitably, in the same manner that the introduction of laws in society resulted in the deposition of the aristocrats, the belief in natural laws as the basis of all dynamics in nature resulted in the loss of the gods’ power. Common to both social and natural laws is an assertion that events are predictable. Where events are predictable because they are ruled by law, life can be planned—independent of the whims and arbitrariness of secular or celestial authoritarian powers, be they monarchs or gods.

Aeschylus and Euripides are witnesses to the rise of this new worldview. Their dramas are still worth our attention because they were the first to raise the question of an individual’s responsibility for the course of his or her own life. How much of what we experience and must bear in life is fate set by the gods? To what extent do people contribute to their own circumstances through their own behavior? This is, as Nietzsche observed, the rise of the tragedy. Tragedy signals a shift from heteronomy to autonomy. Aeschylus and Euripides asked their audiences to consider situations where the gods had forced humans to knowingly commit a wrong, and the humans faced retribution as if they had themselves been responsible. These plays marked a transition. Eventually, the nomoi were seen not only as helpful in achieving stability and predictability in society, but also as useful in
explaining the stability of the universe and in predicting future events with certainty. A growing segment of the polis intellectual elite accepted a threefold credo—yes, a credo that implicitly began “I believe,” because there was no way to prove it:

First, natural laws exist independent of time, space, and persons—be they humans or numinous.
Second, humanity is able to recognize these laws.
Third, once they have been recognized, these natural laws suffice to understand, explain, and eventually manipulate at will all natural dynamics.

This credo left and still leaves no room for gods or, later, one God. This credo offered increasing autonomy to humankind once we had set out to find and use the natural laws. It was the onset of an irresolvable contradiction between science and religion, and hence it is no wonder that Socrates paid for his acceptance of this credo with his life. He and his Ionian philosophical masters placed themselves at the beginning of an entirely new cognitive culture. Socrates was perfectly aware that he and his fellows had to start from zero. The dictum ascribed to him, “I know that I know nothing,” may be reread, isolated from its original context, as an exhortation to realize the threefold credo identified above. His opponents were equally aware that this was the signal for a slow but inevitable weakening of an old ideology that was not prepared to grant humankind self-determination, but was forced from then on to defend existential heteronomy.

Greek medicine, in its essence, involved the application of a quest for existential autonomy to the human experience of illness and the risk of early death. Greek medicine was the logical extension of the threefold credo to humanity’s desire to determine the length and the quality of our own existence. This, then, is the cultural message of Greek and European medicine. It emerged out of the beginnings of a democratic mentality in Europe. In the polis society, citizens strove to control their political and everyday life independent of the whims and arbitrariness of the aristocrats. In a broader realm it was gradually understood that, for example, thunder and lightning, harvests and pests originated from conditions ruled by natural laws, not by gods. As in society as a whole, those who abide with the laws will survive in nature. Laws may, it appears, put pressure on people to behave in a certain way. However, laws are required to limit or even end autocratic arbi-
trariness. As early an author as Cicero considered it meaningful to emphasize the liberating potential of the concept of laws when he stated: “We are servants of the laws so that we can be free.”

The belief in laws, whether social or natural, contradicted a belief in an autocratic order. Each man could decide for himself, and was therefore responsible for, the course of his life. Medicine emerged as an additional cultural tool to grant freedom to each and every individual. Epilepsy was not a sacred disease cast upon humanity by the gods, as earlier generations of experts had insisted. Its etiology rested, as the anonymous author of a Hippocratic text of the same title noted, in pathological dynamics independent of numinous intervention. Medicine promises to free us from such heteronomous intervention; medicine offers instead secular explanations of all physiological, pathological, and etiological dynamics. Once humankind, presumably after an extended period of research, has laid open these dynamics, we will be able to decide the length and the quality of our lives for ourselves.

Naturally, for the entire two and a half millennia that have since passed, and despite impressive results of biomedical research, such as computer tomography and antibiotics, cloning and prenatal diagnosis, the guardians of human heteronomy have not been silenced in their opposition to the advances of European medicine. Each major turning point has evoked their squeals. Their opposition to vaccination in the nineteenth century and stem cell research more recently are but two examples where humans striving to exploit these scientific avenues are denied existential self-determination on the grounds of a morality that is nothing but a thinly disguised acceptance of the rule of numinous powers beyond the reach of humans. To conclude this brief view on the origins and nature of medicine in ancient Greece and Europe, the antagonism between democratic ideals of individual autonomy and authoritarian principles underlying heteronomy that has characterized European political history for two and a half thousand years finds its parallel in the contradiction between medicine and religion. It is now worthwhile to turn our eyes to China, and ask ourselves whether Chinese medicine, besides its task of curing pain, lesions, and functional losses, was also built on a cultural message.

As we began our recollection of the Greek/European history of health care with a quote from the Iliad (ca. seventh or sixth century b.c.), the Shu jing (Book of History), presumably from the second half of the first millennium B.C., may be an appropriate source to examine the earliest traces of Chinese health care. An entry reads:
The king has an illness ... Duke Zhou voiced a prayer: “Your descendant so-and-so is afflicted with a severe nüe-disease. If it is you, the three kings, who bear responsibility for your great son vis-à-vis heaven, then accept me, Dan, in his place.” “The king will not suffer harm. I, unworthy son, have been able to obtain a new mandate from the three kings.” . . . The following morning the king was healed.

This is not the earliest evidence of existential heteronomy in ancient China. The oracle bones of the Shang dynasty preceding the Zhou era inform us of the dependency of the living on the goodwill of the dead. An elaborate communication system was installed to learn the origins of ancestral wrath and to initiate appropriate action to reestablish harmony between the two communities. The anecdote just quoted from the Book of History is remarkable insofar as it provides us with additional specifics. While the oracle bones helped the living to address their individual ancestors—that is, they acted in a family relationship—the Book of History quote offers evidence of a different setting. Apparently, tian (heaven) was an institution that could be approached like a ruler and that was open to changing its will. While the severe nature of the king’s disease at first gave his court every reason to envisage his death, life was extended after Duke Zhou intervened and offered himself as a substitute. Life is fate (ming), or to use the Greek term: moira. On earth we may pray and beg, and if one is lucky, heaven will reconsider a fatal decision. Actually, Mengzi and other philosophers granted humanity a certain margin of self-determination and responsible action within the bounds of the more general and loosely knotted web-work of tian ming, the fate ruled by heaven. The ideal social being, the junzi, was admonished to cultivate himself and enhance responsible action to make full use of the options left by tian ming. This is by no means different from what people experienced in the daily life of a feudal society. They were led to behave well, but in the end it was the arbitrariness and the whims of rulers who decided whether or not an individual could enjoy the full span of his or her life or not. Heteronomy was the fundamental social principle underlying the relationships of ruler and ruled on earth, and also of a supposed ruler in heaven and those ruled by him on earth. As the Mawangdui health care manuscripts, so admirably translated by Don Harper, show, in addition to ancestors and heaven, there was a third agency that claimed heteronomy over human life. At some time during the Warring States period humans came to recognize the existence of spirits who were not their personal ancestors. Rather, a huge population of demons was now seen to exist. Their origins and
family ties with the living, if they had any, remained unknown. Unlike the ancestors whose wrath appeared to be provoked by misbehavior of their descendants, the demons were universally malicious, and they were always prepared to harm any unprotected humans. From today's perspective we may interpret this everlasting threat as a projection of Warring States experiences on the relationship between the living and unseen spiritual forces. All morals appeared to have lost their binding force among human competitors for power, and the same was assumed to characterize the relationship between humankind and the world of the demons. Demonstration, and if necessary, execution of power, was required to deal with demons. They did not feel obliged to morality or laws, and they would not listen to appeals from their victims.

If this scenario was not frightening enough, yet another possibly even more horrifying certainty arose. We can only surmise the extent of mutual distrust that the Warring States period sowed—a state of mind that may have persisted for many centuries to come. Distrust marked not only the relationship with strangers; distrust was also the dominant attitude even within families, in particular between generations. This is the only possible explanation for a feeling of dependency on the ancestral spiritual world that developed at some time around the Han dynasty and was then transmitted to following generations. The image humans have of the spiritual world always has its model in the reality of the secular world. Hence when Chinese intellectuals came to believe in a dependency on the wrongdoings of their ancestors up to the ninth generation, the model of such a notion must be sought in the relationships between human generations on earth.

This was different from the notion of ancestral wrath apparent in the oracle bones. In the new view, the living had no chance to escape the detrimental effects of their ancestors’ bad deeds. No one was seen as a self-determined individual capable of designing the length and quality of his or her life on the basis of personal behavior, but as a link in a chain of generations. There was no way out of it. Deceased humans were confronted in the afterworld with the misdeeds they had committed during their life, and their descendants suffered from the allegations and punishments the sinners were exposed to in hell. Perhaps we may reinterpret the age-old Chinese emphasis on one’s “good name” as a constant reminder of one’s obligations beyond this life. The living may have felt compelled to live a morally impeccable life, but they themselves were not promised any benefit from it. Theoretically, if nine subsequent generations led an impeccable life, the
tenth generation would be spared the consequences of their ancestors' wrongdoings. As such a positive development was rather hypothetical, endless suffering of all existing and future generations was to be expected.

One can hardly imagine a higher degree of heteronomy than is expressed in this worldview. Humans were at their secular rulers' mercy, and they were at mercy of their ancestors, of heaven, of countless demons, and of an otherworldly bureaucracy reacting to the former wrongdoings of their clientele, now in hell. Daoism has been recognized by Michel Strickman as an ideology that attempted to break this dependency, at least partially. The approach chosen was one of power and struggle, together with a recognition of certain natural phenomena that we might consider as tied to natural laws possibly beyond the influence of numinous forces. Much research will be required to trace the development towards an increasing existential autonomy step by step over a formative period that may have lasted from the third century B.C. to the fourth century A.D. Within this long period all the elements emerged that formed Chinese health care until the end of the imperial era. As in Europe, one faction of the intellectual elite chose to neglect the numinous entirely; we shall return to their worldview later on. Daoists constituted the most prominent group among those of the intellectual elite who saw no reason to discontinue their belief in the existence of innumerable types of demons, ghosts, spirits, and gods. In fact, Daoist writers and visionaries perceived a universe of numinous beings that paralleled in size and structure the world of the living. Naturally, one might be tempted to say, both worlds were characterized by the same intensity of hierarchical relations, of the use of force, and of general distrust. The quest for harmonious social relations, for a morality guided by a doctrine of the mean, for humanness (ren), and appropriateness of one's behavior in relation to others (yi), as well as the strong emphasis placed on family bonding expressed in a concept such as xiao (filial piety), so prominently emphasized in Confucian writings, should tell us that all of this was lacking in the reality of Chinese social life. This lack, in turn, gave rise to a desperate longing to which the various social doctrines of ancient China each reacted in its own way.

The path that the Daoists chose was certainly not homogeneous. Nevertheless, a few basic patterns may be discerned. The world of the dead was considered to be populated by forces that constitute hell and heaven. One of the strategies of early Daoism consisted of associating everything bad in human life, especially illness, with forces in
hell, and to enlist the help of a celestial bureaucracy to keep the evil of the underworld at bay. The living needed to be freed from the burdens placed on them by their ancestors and by the bureaucracy of the underworld intent on making entire lineages of up to nine generations accountable for past wrongs. Daoism recognized all this and identified positive forces in a celestial bureaucracy that would be willing to help humans escape their plight. The question was how to stimulate the good numinous powers to help humans fight the malevolent numinous forces. Numerous apotropaic techniques were introduced to achieve this end. Basically, they all served to demonstrate power by creating alliances of the living with higher forces. Written amulets, incantations, and ritual movements were at the center of such strategies, reflecting a projection of interhuman power plays onto the world of the numinous. But there was more to it. By the end of the Zhou dynasty, Chinese observers had come to believe that certain natural phenomena had a recurrent nature whose regularity lay beyond the reach of human or numinous power. In particular the so-called *qi* came to play a most decisive role. If humans and their celestial allies were able to act in accordance with specific constellations of climatic *qi*, they should be in a position to ward off any evil. It was a fight for existence all the time, but there was also a notion of a regularity beyond the secular and the numinous world that could be used by the knowledgeable to achieve their particular ends. One of the texts in which this knowledge culminated is the *Qi men dun jia*, “The extraordinary ones, the gate and the hidden shield,” of possibly the third or fourth century A.D. Known today as a strategy manual that suggests successful moves in both military and social conflicts, it initially may have offered a basis for exploiting numinous forces to achieve the ends of the living. The techniques described almost two millennia ago have not lost their appeal among large segments of the Chinese population and they will appeal to future generations as long as daily life is considered to be a fight, and as long as in the absence of solidarity, distrust is the basic attitude toward one’s fellow human beings. In this social context, the techniques of the *Qi men dun jia* and other such manuals have helped humans to solve personal problems believed to be caused by numinous forces. For example, a patient may approach a priest because of what he or she considers an immoral desire. The priest is consulted because the “patient” is considered to be in the grip of a demon named “immoral desire.” The belief in existential heteronomy suggests that this demon must be exorcised. The patient who suffers from an “immoral desire” is not believed to
change his or her mind out of his or her own will. Rather, the priest needs to enlist specific numinous forces and will take into consideration certain days and hours of the day where a natural qi is present to support his approach. He will then write an amulet or voice a spell that is an order and that demands the spirit of “immoral desire” to leave his victim, otherwise he will be crushed by a superior force.

Countless variations of this type of thinking could be listed here. The creativity of Chinese intellectuals and practitioners’ records has generated a most impressive range of related strategies and techniques over the past two millennia. Returning to the issue of existential heteronomy versus existential self-determination, we may conclude that the Daoists have striven to provide humans with more autonomy. As they acknowledged the existence of good and evil numinous forces, they resorted to a struggle and appealed to power relationships to free the living, at least to a certain degree, from the existential plight inflicted upon them by their otherworldly enemies. If the spirits of the ancestors could be placated by the living, demons had to be fought. People caught in this worldview had no alternatives to achieve at least partial sovereignty over the quality and length of their lives. The Chinese version of Buddhism should be mentioned here, as it came to share with Daoism the belief in a densely populated world of demons and gods to be approached by spells and other apotropaic techniques. In contrast to Daoism though, Buddhism offered hope of a better life in a distant future and promised humans an existence increasingly free of suffering. Eventually even a state of wu bing, “being free of disease,” as the early Chinese translation of the Indian concept of nirvana went, was promised an individual who followed the path of the Buddha’s morality.

It is here that we turn our eyes to a radically different worldview that has not received sufficient attention in Chinese cognitive historiography. Similar to ancient Greece, beginning with the final phase of the Warring States period (the fourth to third centuries B.C.), the necessity of social legislation to ensure a harmonious society led some intellectuals to believe that the regularity of certain natural phenomena must also be based on laws. This belief came to be expressed in the yinyang and Five Phases (now termed Five Agents) doctrines. In ancient Greece an analytical approach appeared early on and came to dominate culture. This approach sought to determine the smallest element in the building of the world and attempted to understand the full picture based on such arguments. In China, however, the opposite view prevailed: the aim was to view as many relations among
things as possible and to understand each individual item and its role in the universe from and as functions within these relations. The yin-yang and Five Agents doctrines focused on the classifications and relations of the myriad things, but they conveyed the same general message as science in ancient Europe: there are laws that persist irrespective of time, space, and human or numinous beings. This is the first credo underlying the evolution of European science, and it is also the credo at the beginning of Chinese natural science. The second credo, that we are able to recognize these laws, and the third credo, that to know these laws is sufficient to understand the universe and manipulate it at will, were also at the basis of Chinese science.

What were the implications of this new worldview for human existential autonomy? It may be worthwhile to take a closer look at the two Chinese concepts in question, ming and fa. The base meaning of ming is “an order.” An individual on earth follows an order, perhaps issued by heaven. Ming has also been translated as “mandate.” People also have a mandate to live, and hence ming has also been translated as “life.” Human existence, this term suggests, is heteronomous. Some numinous entity issues a mandate, and may recall it again. The question is: who is this numinous entity in whose hands human life rests? An early answer was given in the Lun yu, considered to be records of the teachings of Confucius. Here we read: “Death and life are fate (ming), and it depends on heaven whether someone accumulates wealth and reaches a noble status.”9 This is a straightforward statement. It flatly denies humans autonomy over the length and quality of lives. Ming appears to be a Chinese equivalent of the Greek moira. If the quality and length of human life depend on other-than-human entities, this should include health and illness, and hence we find in the seventh-century Qian jin yi fang by Sun Simiao (581–682?) a quote allegedly from the father of Daoism, Laozi, pointing out: “The fact that I suffer is tied to my having a body. If I had no body, what reason could there be for my suffering?” To this Sun Simiao added his own commentary: “That is, form and matter are the causes of disease. Only the absence of form is free of suffering. If not even the sages are able to keep suffering at a distance how should a candle in the wind be able to achieve this.”10

This passage is interesting. It denies the impact of numinous forces, including heaven, by pointing out that all matter rots, and as long as human life is tied to matter—that is, as long as we have a material body—we cannot escape deterioration or disease. To sum up, the heteronomy of human physical existence is conditioned here not by nu-
minous forces but by its material nature as such. This is an extremely negative outlook on human life, and it may have been recorded by Sun Simiao to justify his collection of thousands of pharmaceutical recipes to cure disease. With his statement, notably published as late as the Tang dynasty, Sun Simiao explicitly contradicted a key phrase found in one of the seminal texts of Chinese medicine that had been laid out more than half a millennium earlier, some time during the latter Han dynasty. In the *Huang Di nei jing su wen*, at the very end of chapter 3, an author unknown to us emphasized: “If the Way is carefully observed as the law [demands], the mandate of heaven will last long.” This is one of the statements inserted into the *Su wen* by its late Han editors. We do not know the identities of these persons, and perhaps it was only one single individual, who put together several hundred small textual pieces of different authorship, and used the occasion to add general political statements. The statement just quoted has no immediate medical implication. It reflects the threefold credo identified earlier. There are laws, fa, and they should lead the way, dao, and if they are followed, one’s life does not end prematurely. This is a claim to at least a limited degree of existential autonomy. It is repeated at the end of chapter 74, now with an explicit medical implication: “If the Way is carefully observed in accordance with the law [just outlined], a myriad successes are achieved in a myriad [cases] taken up. Qi and blood will assume a proper balance and the mandate of heaven will last long.”

The task of medicine is to minimize early death and suffering. This is achieved through medicine’s potential for healing disease, and for alerting people to risks that may shorten their lives, or at least generate suffering. Medicine is the cultural tool developed by humankind to obtain control over the length and quality of one’s life. In ancient Europe, the concept of natural laws opened the path towards a continuous increase of such existential autonomy. If we look at statements found in ancient Chinese sources, it appears that a similar movement was initiated by at least a small segment of Chinese intellectuals as well. A well-known and most obvious indicator of such a tendency is found in Tao Hongjing’s scripture *Yang xing yan ming lu*, written around 500 A.D. The very title suggests the quest that is commonly associated with any type of health care, be it medical or not: “Records of how to nourish one’s nature and extend life.” This may not sound extraordinary. We should be alerted, though, by a statement that offers insight into what must have been a discussion among intellectuals about existential heteronomy versus existential auton-
omy. Tao Hongjing flatly contradicted the statement quoted earlier from the Confucian *Lun yu* when he stated: “The classic of the immortals says: My life/fate/mandate (ming) rests with me, it does not rest with heaven (tian). But the stupid are not aware that this path (dao) is at the core of life (sheng ming). Hence, they are affected by wind evil causing the hundreds of diseases. The reason is always the same: their unrestrained behavior and the extremes of their desires result in depletion that eventually harms life.”

Unlike the Confucian classic of so many centuries earlier, and in contrast to Sun Simiao of the subsequent Tang dynasty, Tao Hongjing, echoing Xunzi, saw a way out of suffering. Humans have a certain degree of existential self-determination—if we are able to restrain our behavior and to keep our lives free of extreme desires. This is the essence of natural laws. Once one understands these laws, one has the freedom to live in accordance. This freedom, in turn, provides an individual with the potential for shaping the length and quality of his or her life, rather than depending upon the whims and arbitrariness of numinous powers. Greek medicine started from similar premises.

A question that emerges here is: who determines the laws that show the path toward a healthy long life? Apparently, Tao Hongjing’s vision of a healthy lifestyle is that of following a specific morality. We do not know whether he himself would have applied the notion of *fa*, law, to this morality. Certainly, he believed in standard guidelines that should be followed by humans to prevent suffering and an untimely death. His words, “My life/fate/mandate (ming) rests with me, it does not rest with heaven (tian),” sound defiant. He must have had someone in mind, perhaps even as far back as the author of the *Lun yu* passage quoted above, perhaps some contemporaries, who preached a more submissive attitude. Given all the writings by Tao Hongjing on the interactions between the world of the living and the world of the numinous, he cannot be named as witnessing a tendency to deny the existence of otherworldly forces holding sway over the living. But these forces, it appears, also must acknowledge some eternal moral standards. If humans comply with these standards the numinous must grant the expected reward, that is, a good and long life, possibly extended well into an existence beyond secular life.

Returning to the *Su wen*, we find many more statements to this effect. In its first chapter, possibly moved there from a less prominent location in the back of the text by the Tang editor Wang Bing, an anonymous author left another statement contradicting Sun Simiao’s fatalistic account: “When essence and spirit are guarded internally,
where could a disease come from?" People are able to escape illness if only they guard their essence and spirits. That is, humans themselves are responsible, and there is not only hope: there is certainty. Let us recall the notions conveyed, to the present, by writings like the *Qi men dun jia*. Their authors did not think of appealing to an individual suffering from illicit sexual desires. The priest was forced to enlist the assistance of some strong numinous force to expel a lower-ranking demon. In the *Su wen*, the appeal is directed at the individual. The message conveyed here is clear. Guard essence and spirit, and the promise of a life free of disease will come true.

The *Su wen* conveys this message implicitly and explicitly. Seemingly without links to the textual context, an editor or author has repeatedly interspersed in chapter 56 the phrase “above and below, the identical law,” as if repetition of a political slogan increased its impact on the reader. In chapter 25, a rather naturalistic interpretation of life denies the numinous any influence on human life: “Man comes to life through the *qi* of heaven and earth; he matures in accordance with the laws of the four seasons.” Whoever wrote this, he certainly did not acknowledge demons, spirits, or any other numinous forces as challenging human existential autonomy. And he made it quite clear who was at the top of the hierarchy of all beings: “Covered by heaven and carried by the earth, all the myriad beings have come to existence. None has a nobler position than man.”

We do not know of what political persuasion the author of these lines may have been. In general, the explicit emphasis on the necessity to follow the law might point to followers of the school of Legalism. But this might be an erroneous conclusion. After all, the importance of *fa*, whether to be understood as “model,” “standard,” or “law,” was acknowledged by virtually all the social ideologies competing for attention in Chinese antiquity. If we consider the yinyang and Five Agents doctrines, early Chinese expressions of a recognition of natural laws, we will notice that the entire *Su wen*, in contrast to pharmaceutical literature supported by Daoists, is based on such protoscientific thinking. As an author whose text found entrance into chapter 2 noted: “As for the Way, the sages practice it; the stupid wear it [for decoration only]. If one follows *yin* and *yang*, then life results; if one opposes them, then death results. If one follows them, then order results; if one opposes them, then disorder results.” Life and death are compared here to order and disorder; order is health, and disorder, as we shall see in other quotes later on, equals disease. All these statements were composed by authors who appear to have supported
the credo underlying science. Health is an issue of existential autonomy. Follow the laws, and you are safe. Disease results from disobeying the laws. Hence, again in contrast to Sun Simiao, who collected thousands of recipes to counter what he considered the inevitable, an author in chapter 2 of the *Su wen* expounded an entirely different worldview: “the sages did not treat those already ill, but treated those not yet ill, they did not put in order what was already in disorder, but put in order what was not yet in disorder.” That is, the sages knew how to treat the healthy body, and so did not need to treat diseases. The translation of this passage obfuscates the fact that to express the concepts of “treating” and “ordering,” the ancient author used the same term: *zhi*. He could have juxtaposed *liao*, “treating a disease,” with *zhi*, “ordering a social community.” His use of *zhi* in both contexts must have been deliberate and evidences the intention of emphasizing the parallels between medical and political ends. As if this were not enough to demonstrate that medicine is simply used here as a metaphor to push a political message, we find the origin of this statement in the writings of the second-century B.C. political philosopher Xunzi who said: “The noble man orders what is ordered; he does not order what is in disorder.” For Xunzi, the path (*dao*) to be followed had been laid out by the sages of earlier times. They had introduced the *dao* as an eternally valid compass that every man should own, and he too emphasized the importance of the law, *fa*, for social order and stability when he pointed out in his discourse on the “Grand Embodiment of the Perfect Way”: “if the law is perfected, then the state has constancy.”

Reading through these and other sources leaves one with the impression that on the surface Chinese protoscience and medicine seemed to follow the same credo as in ancient Greece. Some intellectuals began to believe in natural laws and they questioned older concepts of existential heteronomy. But below this surface, the situation as it developed in China differed profoundly from the history of medicine in Europe. In Chinese history, the close ties of natural laws to morality may have been severed by some authors, but they were never severed for good. Perhaps there were some authors, and a rereading of ancient Chinese sources may confirm this, who rejected the links between natural laws and morality on grounds that were accepted in Europe: the former are truly natural, while the latter is man-made. In Europe, numerous theologians and philosophers have discussed the issue of “natural law” and some have sought to place God even as subject to natural law, or at least let natural law be part of divine
creation. But all these attempts at keeping nature and its regularities within the power of the numinous have been only partially successful. Beginning with the Renaissance, European culture, in addition to seeing its religious beliefs weaken, has gradually witnessed the rise of an amoral, purely secular understanding of the universe. The results of this tendency are only too obvious. With their failure to shed the ties between natural laws and morality, Chinese intellectuals severely limited the degree of existential autonomy that could be achieved by believing in the yinyang and Five Agents doctrines, and the all-pervasive forces of qi. Existential autonomy is limited in Europe too. People have to respect the limits set by natural laws, for instance the law of gravity. We may be able to construct airplanes and high-rise buildings, but the limits nevertheless remain. However, in Europe, natural science at least promised moral autonomy. The laws of physics and chemistry, and the technology derived from their application, work for the good as they do for the evil, and there is no punishment to be expected from nature if an individual’s intentions or deeds fail to comply with standard moral norms. In China, natural science did not shed these ties. Those who wish for a good and long life, and are willing to act in accordance with the requirements of the yinyang and Five Agents doctrines, will not only have to watch their food habits, clothing, rising and resting, and sexual activities, they will also have to watch their thoughts and refrain from morally unbecoming endeavors.

More important, however, for an understanding of the fundamental difference between the cultural roles of medicine in China and Europe is the lack of a potential for political and metaphysical liberation in the Chinese understanding of laws, be they social or natural. In ancient Greece, social laws were introduced in the polis to further the political autonomy of the citizens. They served to limit the political influence of aristocrats and monarchy and the rich. Social law in ancient Greece was the cradle of European democracy. Even though polis democracy was followed by two millennia of autocratic rule, its ideals never vanished entirely until eventually the old order broke down and social revolutions occurred at many places. The introduction of social law appears to have encouraged a belief in the existence of natural law. In the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. no one could observe the existence of natural law. A few regularities, yes, but the assumption that these regularities, indeed all occurrences in the universe, followed a path defined by natural laws may be seen as a projection of the value of laws for society onto the entire natural universe.

Right from the beginning, the belief in natural laws was seen as a
threat to the belief in gods, symbolized by the capital punishment of Socrates for blasphemy. As the introduction of social laws limited the social heteronomy of citizens, and tried to put an end to the whims and arbitrariness of rulers, the belief in natural laws limited, and eventually, for an increasing number of people, ended the existential heteronomy of humankind. Thus, science came to be caught in an eternal contradiction with religion. The attempts of noted church fathers, especially in the Middle Ages, to reconcile the obviously useful sciences with the logics of a belief in divine almightiness are many, but they are all unsuited to change the basic fact: either you believe in natural laws or you believe in the unfathomable decisions of the gods or God. In the final analysis, the two worldviews are mutually exclusive. Individuals who believe in God may make use of the results of science; they may fly in airplanes and make phone calls with their cellular phones. But the very idea of science, that is, the belief in an existence of natural laws not affected by time, space, and numinous or secular persons, contradicts the concept of a god, demon, or ancestor acting at will, and thereby keeping a faulty airplane from crashing.

Early Chinese science clearly had a different origin. The notion of an existence of natural laws found entrance into the minds of some intellectuals, but it was unrelated to any quest for social liberation. An attempt was made to grant humankind a higher degree of existential self-determination by denying a concept of ming as being in the hands of heaven, and by pointing out a path, dao, that allows one to lead a long and healthy life. Such assertions are made in various sources, some linked with Daoist authors, such as Tao Hongjing, others with authors apparently closer to Confucian-Legalist thinkers, like Xunzi. Nonetheless, such views were never tied to any consistent attempt at ridding humankind from the belief in the tyranny of gods, demons, ancestors, or other such numinous beings. They were to be kept at bay by alliances with higher powers, or they were only tacitly acknowledged, but they were recognized. There certainly was a debate whether to continue such belief, and Mozi, the cynic, responded to such requests by pointing out the value of fear in having the population refrain from immoral behavior. No major stimulus kept this debate alive in the millennia after the Han dynasty, and Chinese society at large continued to believe in the ability of gods, demons, and ancestors to control the quality and length of human life. The sharp dividing line between social forces rejecting such existential heteronomy on the one side, and religious groups fiercely objecting to a pos-
sibility of existential autonomy on the other—which has characterized European society for so many centuries—did not emerge in China. It did not emerge because the very notion of feudal rule, that is, of social heteronomy, was never effectively questioned. The continuous failure of rulers in preimperial and imperial times to exhibit exemplary behavior stimulated the creators of social doctrines to think of and suggest ways to convince rulers to adhere to certain moral standards. A democratic system, where citizens could participate in regulating their affairs, was at best an issue pursued by some thinkers of marginal influence.

With the almost unconditional acceptance by virtually all major Chinese social ideologies of a far-reaching social and existential heteronomy, and given the nature of the Chinese science doctrines of systematic correspondences, the most serious conflicts marking the history of medicine in Europe could not emerge in China. The yin-yang and Five Agents doctrines are relational science. They may be well suited to explain some relationships and their effects in society and in humankind’s natural environment. They may even explain a Chinese superiority in social, economic, and military strategies over the West. But in contrast to Europe’s analytical science, relational science is unable to generate a technology that permits humankind to overcome many of the limits that constrain our natural existence. Chinese relational science has been the source of many impressive artifacts, some of which have been cherished and transmitted to this very day. An example is the doctrine of the Five Periods and Six Qi (wu yun liu qi) inserted into the *Huang Di Nei jing su wen* by Wang Bing during the Tang dynasty. This rather voluminous text of approximately thirty thousand characters is devoted to calculating the regularities of climatic change and to assisting people in adapting to these changes and thereby to remain healthy and enjoy a long life. The doctrine of the Five Periods and Six Qi is entirely secular; it does not acknowledge any numinous forces. It rests on the assumption that the climatic characteristics of any day, season, or year are conditioned by the dynamics of *qi*. The origins and rationale of these dynamics are not to be explained; they are simply there. If one wishes to lead a long and happy life, one should be prepared to live in harmony with these dynamics. The doctrine of the Five Periods and Six Qi was developed by unknown authors during the Han dynasty; it was transmitted through unknown channels until eventually Wang Bing provided them with public recognition at some time in the eighth century. As so many other strategies in Chinese health care, they reflect a desire
of the inhabitants of China that is identical with that of the people in Europe. The exploitation of countless pharmaceutical substances (be they gathered in nature or man-made), dietetics, needling, moxibus- tion, and so on all serve to help humans to maintain or to regain health, and if this is impossible, to mitigate suffering. Where these facets of health care were given a theoretical underpinning, it was one deduced from the principles of relational science.

European medicine has known the relational worldview too, but it has resisted temptations to grant relational worldviews a dominant position. European medicine has instead focused on analytical science from early on. Dissection and anatomy, as well as in later times the development and application of chemical and physical ex- planatory models, were closely tied to this focus on analytical science. The potential of analytical science has made many representatives of Euro- pean medicine believe that before long they will have the final tools required for existential autonomy. With biochemistry, biophysics, and biotechnology, it appears, the length and the quality of human life can be improved at human will. However, how far humans may go in their attempts at preventing, alleviating, and curing suffering is a question that has sparked conflict in Europe from the very beginning. The defenders of spiritual hegemony, of God’s almightiness have fiercely objected to all seminal breakthroughs in the history of Euro- pean medicine, be it the development of anatomy, the introduction of vaccination, the discovery of pain-free delivery, and, in recent times, a wide range of technology-based methods to help humans overcome, for example, the pain of childlessness by means of artificial reproduction. Stem cell research and cloning have provoked the wrath of the advocates of existential heteronomy just as prenatal diagnosis and abortion have. This is a conflict that knows no compromise.

Chinese culture has not acknowledged such antagonisms. First, this is true because relational science did not have the potential for developing the tools required by humankind to achieve a degree of existential autonomy similar to that reached by European analytical science. Second, it is because no social force existed in two millennia of Chinese imperial culture that might have striven for a social and existential autonomy of the people vis-à-vis their earthly government or their celestial numinous rulers. Marxism, a social ideology imported from Europe and reinterpreted by Chinese intellectuals in the early twentieth century, has massively challenged spiritual heteronomy for the first time in Chinese history, and thereby marginalized, at least for the time being, the religious aspects of Chinese traditional culture. It
has also recognized that Chinese medicine was tied to and part of a
science that offered no hope for successfully countering the superior
technological heteronomy that the West imposed on China. It is there-
fore that the communist government of the People’s Republic of China,
while continuing to pay lip-service to impressive achievements and
the benefits of Chinese medicine in the distant past, dismissed rela-
tional science as a basis of health care and replaced it with analytical
science right from the beginning. This political strategy of survival in
a world where supremacy can be achieved only on the basis of ana-
lytical science has resulted in the so-called Traditional Chinese Medi-
cine (TCM), an artificial product of the 1950s and 1960s. TCM is
based on the rationale of modern analytical science, and while the
Chinese authorities are cautious enough not to proceed too hastily, in
November 2008 they saw the time had come to give the old Chinese
medicine, based on relational science, a final deathblow when they
proposed in the Beijing Declaration that the future of TCM lies in
molecular biology and related analytical life sciences. With this move,
the end of Chinese medicine as an independent health care ideology
has been officially confirmed. The cultural environment that has kept
this medicine alive for exactly two millennia has vanished, and a
medicine that has lost its cultural environment has lost its lifeline and
is bound to perish. Western analytical science will examine drugs,
therapeutic techniques, and some concepts, and it will, where possi-
ble, provide their effects with a new scientific rationale. Many people
in the West who are unhappy with the rigid antispiritualism of so-
called biomedicine, who complain of a lack of humanity in biomed-
cine, and who believe that TCM is natural and holistic will continue
to project their quest for an alternative onto Chinese medicine, and
they will find much relief, because health care interventions may be
effective for various reasons, and not all of them reveal their causality
in double-blind experiments. Any child who has gone through grade-
and high-school education, whether it be in China or in the West, who
has been taught to use computers and to learn the basics of biology,
will be unable to return to the relational thinking that has been the
foundation of Chinese medicine for two thousand years. People with
an interest in Chinese medicine, wherever they have grown up, will
have to study relational science like a foreign language, but unlike a
foreign language, relational science no longer has a geographical ba-
sis where it is a native language, spoken and understood by all.

*Medicine in China: A History of Ideas* was written in the early
1970s at a time when almost no results of academic research on the
evolution of Chinese medicine were available. It was meant to be a first overview of the basic cognitive traditions underlying the development of health care in China from their documented beginnings to the present. In the meantime, Chinese medicine has become an acknowledged scholarly pursuit. The inseparable connection between the origin, acceptance, and change of medical concepts and their social, economic, and political environment, so controversially discussed when *Medicine in China: A History of Ideas* appeared, has been accepted as a truism and many blanks in our historiography have been filled in. My own contribution has focused on the analysis of seminal texts. They include the *Nan jing* of the Han dynasty, a book that has exerted a lasting impact, not only in China but also in Japan, on the practice of acupuncture and diagnosis; the *Yin hai jing wei* of the fifteenth/sixteenth century, as an example of an early Chinese medical specialty (ophthalmology) text; the *Yi xue yuan liu lun* by Xu Dachun of the eighteenth century as a first example of a reflection by a Chinese intellectual-physician on the nature of medicine; and more recently the *Huang Di Nei jing su wen* of the Han dynasty. The latter offers unprecedented insights into the early dynamics of Chinese medical thinking during the formative period of Chinese medicine. The more such data are made available to audiences in the West, the more obvious it becomes that health care in China was multifaceted and ideologically multicentered. Health care in general and medicine in particular in China have evolved continuously. The present volume ended at a time when it was not clear to outsiders which direction the Chinese government was aiming at in the treatment of its health care heritage. Since China opened its borders in the late 1970s, it has become clear that the Chinese authorities have unconditionally opted for a future based on analytical science. In the general public, though, a debate continues on the benefits to be derived from cultivating relational science (spoken of here as *xi tong lun*) and analytical science (called *huan yuan lun*) simultaneously. Nevertheless, as pointed out initially, the chapter of Chinese medicine as an independent health care system is irrevocably closed. This makes it all the more interesting to study the history of ideas of Chinese medicine as a phenomenon that has spanned two thousand years from beginning to end. Much further research is required to fully understand all the ramifications and details of the Chinese quest for health. *Medicine in China: A History of Ideas* offers the necessary first overview.
Notes to the Preface


3. In recent times this has led to debates among bioethicists about whether we can, should, or may aspire for a “posthuman future” by means of biomedicine; e.g., Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (New York: Picador, 2003).


14. Theological attempts to overcome the perennial tensions between science and religion are not restricted to Christianity. For example, some Muslim bioethicists claim that since technology and science are given by God, we should/must make full and even sometimes extreme use of this capacity. See also Donald S. Lopez Jr., *Buddhism and Science: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

15. On Chinese strategic planning, see especially the writings of Harro von Senger, such as Moulée—Supraplanning: Unerkannte Denkhorizonte aus dem Reich der Mitte (Munich: Hanser Verlag, 2008), and *The Book of Stratagems: Tactics for Triumph and Survival* (New York: Viking, 1991).


