

Origins of Chinese Medicine

Pangu: A Creation Myth

Chinese creation myths give us an insight into the origins of the concepts of yin/yang and Heaven/Earth which are so fundamental to Chinese culture and medicine. This myth, which was written down perhaps around the third century AD, is the story of Pangu.

In the beginning, dark chaos prevailed everywhere. This darkness took the form of an egg, and in this egg the first living being, Pangu, was born. Pangu slept and grew in the egg, fed and protected, for millennia. When he awoke after many years, he had grown into a giant.



Image from <http://www.123rf.com>

Then Pangu stretched and broke out of his egg. (Many cultures have similar myths of a cosmic egg that cracks open to begin life, including our modern “big bang” theory of the beginning of the world.)

In the story of Pangu, the light and clear parts of the egg rose and formed the sky or Heaven; the heavy and less pure parts fell and formed the Earth. This separation is the origin of the forces that are called yin and yang, the foundation of all of creation.

To keep the Heaven and Earth from falling back together, Pangu propped up the sky with his head and pressed against the earth with his feet. For the next 18,000 years, Pangu grew three meters each day,

so that Heaven and Earth were pushed farther and farther apart. Finally Pangu fell asleep exhausted, and he fell to pieces.

Then Pangu’s body formed the various parts of the earth. His breath became wind and clouds. His voice became thunder and lightning. His eyes became the sun and the moon. His body became the mountains. His four limbs became the four compass directions. His blood became the rivers. His veins became roads and paths. His muscles became fertile lands. His facial hair became the stars. His body hair became forests, plants and herbs. His bones and teeth became metals, rocks, and minerals. His semen and marrow became diamonds, jade, and pearls. His sweat became rain and dew. The fleas on his flesh became fish and animals.

And finally...the parasites on his body became people!
(Although other versions of this myth say he made people out of clay.)

In traditional Chinese philosophy and medicine, yin and yang, moon and sun, Earth and Heaven, are all equivalent concepts. So it is useful here to mention that when we talk about Heaven and Earth in Chinese medicine, Heaven does not have any Christian connotations. In other words, Heaven is not a place. This concept may perhaps be better translated as “sky.” It is an impersonal force that acts upon Earth. Heaven is a direction, the other half of Earth. Heaven initiates and Earth responds.



Read more about Pangu:

<http://www.ancient-origins.net/human-origins-folklore/pangu-and-chinese-creation-myth-00347>

The Three Legendary Sovereigns

The three legendary sovereigns are ancient culture heroes of China. They were probably tribal or clan leaders, if they lived at all. Their stories are a way to envision how the Chinese civilization began and developed. The legends mean that certain ideas came into people’s consciousness during those times and developed to full fruition later.

FU XI: The understanding of nature and cycles



Fu Xi dates to perhaps 3000 BCE. He is often depicted growing out of a mountain or wearing animal skins.

Fu Xi had a grand inspiration about energetics: an understanding of time, cycles, and change. He drew the eight trigrams (seen in the drawing to the left) after having a vision of a dragon horse with an intriguing design on it coming out of the Yellow River. Fu Xi used the sequence of trigrams to teach about the transformations of nature and life. The essence of Chinese medical thought is based on these transformations. In a way, he was the first to invent a “theory of everything.”

Fu Xi also invented nets for fishing and hunting and taught his people to cook. He invented musical instruments. He created the nine acupuncture needles: stone needles for bloodletting, draining abscesses, and regulating qi. He is holding a needle in the drawing.

Some historians believe that the Chinese written language was inspired by Fu Xi’s trigrams.

SHEN NUNG: The understanding of agriculture, trade, and the beginning of civilization

Shen Nung is known as the “Divine Farmer” who taught his people how to clear land and plant grains. Thus, he led humanity from hunting and gathering, from eating game and wearing skins, towards agriculture and domesticity. To be successful at agriculture, a farmer needs to understand and follow the cycles of nature, which are a fundamental part of Chinese medicine.

When there is agriculture, eventually there is trade (you grow tomatoes; I grow rice; we trade). When there is trade, then comes the dawning of civilization.

Shen Nung invented tea and herbal medicine, personally tasting hundreds of herbs. The legend is that he had a transparent stomach that helped him learn the properties of each herb! Herbal materia medica books written much later are still attributed to his authorship. Herbal medicine was not used only for illness; it was used to fortify and stimulate the body for maintaining health.



HUANG DI: The understanding of Tao, writing, and medicine



Huang Di, or The Yellow Emperor, may have been a real historical person. Some scholars, including Confucius, say he lived around 2500 BCE. The Yellow Emperor was a Leonardo da Vinci kind of person, credited with many inventions and innovations, including boats. He figured out astronomy and invented the first calendar. His wife invented silk.

Notably, Huang Di invented writing. One legend says that he was given the characters by a dragon that emerged from the Yellow River. Other legends say that his minister got the idea of Chinese characters from observing animal and bird tracks.

Huang Di invented acupuncture: the seminal Chinese medical classics written much later are still attributed to The Yellow Emperor.

After ruling for many years, Huang-Di became tired and weak. He allowed officials to make decisions for him and went to live in a simple hut in the courtyard of his palace. Through fasting, prayer, and meditation, he discovered the Dao or Way. The notion of the Dao is a fundamental part of Chinese culture to this day.