

Spiritual Healing and Science: Enemy or Friend? — Two Cases in Taiwan

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Abstract

There are at least three co-existing medical systems in Taiwan: Western Medicine, Chinese Medicine and folk/religious healing. Each system proposes its own etiology, classification, diagnosis, treatment, prognosis, and prevention of disease. Their relationship can be characterized as either conflict, competitive, cooperative, or complementary. In Taiwan, ever since the rising and domination of Western Medicine around 1899 during the period of Japanese occupation, folk/religious healing has been marginalized by the dominant discourse. While the Western Medicine is regarded as modern and progressive, the folk/religious healing is considered backward and superstitious. Nevertheless, even though folk/religious healing is not accepted by the dominant discourse, the “magical discourse” of folk/religious healing is still spread by mouth in the everyday conversation of people’s daily life. And the folk/religious healing is still embraced by people who seek for the “alternative” treatment, especially those patients who are unable to be cured by the treatment of Western Medicine or Chinese Medicine. Although the practices of folk/religious healing are not accepted by the scientific discourse, very few of folk/religious healers consider their practices un-scientific. In a modern society like Taiwan, every kind of folk/religious healing faces the issue of coming to terms with the scientific discourse. This paper tries to examine the complex relation of spiritual healing and science through two cases in Taiwan: one spiritual healer of the “medicine of soul and body,” and one group of healing prayer formed by Catholics.

For the spiritual healer of the “medicine of soul and body,” the cause of disease might be associated with invaded foreign spirits or karmic entanglement. For the Catholic healing group, disease might be the consequence of evil power or sin. Both propose their own spiritual models of etiology based upon their understanding of spiritual realm. Both develop their own techniques of spiritual healing, e.g. the appeasement of spirit, repentance, or the inner healing. Although the understanding of spirits and spiritual realms, and the communication and negotiation with spirits constitute one of the most important aspects of their healing practice, they try to incorporate the scientific perspective represented by Western Medicine into their system. For the spiritual healer of “medicine of body and soul,” the scientific natural law only explains the mechanism of disease but it could not answer the ultimate question of “why.” Nevertheless, the religious healing needs to appeal to the scientific

investigation to validate its effectiveness. Scientific validation therefore constitutes a powerful instrument for the religious healing to be accepted by the suspicious public. As to the Catholic healing group, the relationship between spiritual healing and science is not less complicated than the first case. The efficacious treatment of Western Medicine used to go hand in hand with the missionary process as the representation of “magical” power of Christianity. In the healing discourse and practice of the Catholic healing group, nevertheless, the role of science is diminished. Science represented by Western Medicine only offers partial explanation and partial solution to the people in affliction. Through the exploration of the relationship between religious healing and sciences by these two cases, this paper tries to offer an understanding that transcends the dualistic dichotomy of “demystifying” discourse of Western Medicine and the “magical” discourse of folk/religious healing.

Biography

Yi-Jia Tsai is the post-doctoral fellow of Fu-Jen Catholic University, Center for the Study of Science and Religion in Taiwan. She got her Ph.D. degree from Rice University, Department of Religious Studies in 2003. She also has two Master degree of psychology from Duquesne University and National Taiwan University. Her major research interest is religion and contemporary culture. Her doctoral thesis "The Reformative Visions of Mediumship in Contemporary Taiwan" explores how spirit mediums in contemporary Taiwan engage themselves in the complicated project of modernity. Right now she is conducting her post-doctoral research: "The Spirit Which Is Not One: A Preliminary Comparative Study of 'Spirit' and 'Spiritual Healing' between the Charismatic Movement of Christianity and the Spirit Modulation of Folk Religion in Taiwan."

I. The marginalization of religious healing and the continuous needs of spiritual healing

In Taiwan, as well as other societies that transform via the process of modernization, multiple medical systems are coexistent. According to Kleinman (1975, 1980), there are at least three co-existing medical systems in Taiwan: Western Medicine, Chinese Medicine and folk healing. Each system proposes its own etiology, classification, diagnosis, treatment, prognosis, and prevention of disease (Zhang, 1989: 86-7). Chinese Medicine basically follows the paradigm of systematic correspondence and yinyang doctrine. (Unschuld, 1985) Western Medicine that follows the natural scientific paradigm was imported to Taiwan around 1899 to 1945 during the period of Japanese occupation. Folk healings include experiential means and supernatural intervention. The former are accumulated through tradition and experiences, such as midwifery, folk prescription, folk health care, and traditional martial arts. The later involve supernatural power, such as shamanistic healing, fortune-telling, fengshui, divination, and Taoist incantation.

The relationship between different systems can be characterized as either conflict, competitive, cooperative, or complementary. Ever since the rising and domination of Western Medicine while the Japanese government trained 2800 physicians of Western Medicine, Chinese Medicine that used to dominate the traditional Chinese society becomes the secondary or subordinate medical system in Taiwan (Hu, 1997). As to folk or religious healing, they have been marginalized by the dominant discourse and practice during the rise and fall of Western Medicine and Chinese Medicine. While Western Medicine is regarded as modern and progressive, folk or religious healing is considered backward and superstitious. The rejection or

exclusion of folk or religious healing by the dominant medical system (especially the Western Medicine) can be traced to the historical process of Chinese modernization. The promotion of Western Medicine constitutes one of the most important parts of enlightening project of Chinese civilization that aims to eradicate superstitious practices, enrich the state and improve the health condition of people. The famous Chinese intellect Hu Shih has proposed that scientific Western Medicine could liberate China from the enchantment of superstitious witchcraft (Li, 1997).

Nevertheless, even though folk or religious healing is not accepted by the dominant discourse and practice, the “magical discourse” of folk or religious healing is still spread by mouth in the everyday conversation of people’s daily life. And the folk or religious healing is still embraced by people who seek for the “alternative” treatment, especially those patients who are unable to be cured by the treatment of Western Medicine or Chinese Medicine. People’s pursuit of folk or religious healing is related with the difficulties of the Western Medicine, such as the high cost of medical technology, the limited healing effect to the patients who suffer from the chronic diseases, and the unequal attribution of medical resources (Hu, 1997). According to Qu’s survey from 1991 to 1995, the religious practices that emphasize mystical efficacy and utilitarian pursuit were still continuous, or more popular than before, e.g., fengshui (geomancy), fortune-telling practices, and buyan (patch of fate). People in Taiwan are still very interested in the alternative healings that offered by folk healing or religious healing. The reason for the rise of some new religions can also be attributed to the religious healing proposed by them (Zhuang, 1997).

Zheng (2003) follows some scholars’ discussion of relation of science and religion and classified the relation of science and folk healing into three categories: conflict,

independent and relational. For Zheng, the folk healing transmitted through experiences and tradition is more liable to be incorporated into scientific system via the experimental study of their scientific effects. As to the spiritual healing, since they involve the intervention of supernatural power, they are usually considered either as conflict with or independent from the scientific scope. Although the practices of folk or religious healing are not accepted by the scientific discourse, very few folk or religious healers consider their practices un-scientific. In a modern society like Taiwan, every kind of alternative healing system faces the issue of coming to terms with the scientific discourse. This paper tries to examine the complex relation of spiritual healing and science through two cases: one spiritual healing of “medicine of soul and body” and one Catholic group of healing prayer in Taiwan. In the following I use the term “spiritual healing” to denote the two cases that will be discussed. According to Benor (1998), spiritual healing is "the systematic, purposeful intervention by one or more persons aiming to help (an)other living being (person, animal, plant, or other living system) or beings by means of focused intention, by touch, or by holding the hands near the other being, without application of physical, chemical, or conventional energetic means of intervention....Some of them include shamanism, faith healing, laying on of hands, distant healing, and mental healing” (p.369). Through the exploration of the relationship between spiritual healing and science by these two cases, this paper tries to offer an understanding that transcends the dualistic dichotomy of “demystifying” discourse of Western Medicine and the “magical” discourse of spiritual healing.

II. The first case: *lingti yiliao* (medicine of soul and body)

The first case I discuss is Zhu—a female spiritual healer who has practiced spiritual healing over 20 years. When she was a child, she has demonstrated special gift of

intuition, such as the capability of telling things of future. When she was nine years old, she realized her gift of healing by the magical recovery of his near-death grandfather who suffered from lung disease and was proclaimed hopeless by the physician. After she held her grandfather's hands, her grandfather recovered miraculously and lived for ten more years. Through other experiences of healing, Zhu gradually realizes that she was predestined to help people by her special healing gift. After Zhu gets a bachelor degree of Law in Taiwan and a master degree of Agriculture in the United States of America, she commits herself to the spiritual healing. For over 20 years, she has applied her unusual healing skills to cure many patients of a variety of diseases. Right now Zhu offers her charitable healing sessions at the Association of Body-Mind-Soul Health Promotion (founded in 2000) two afternoons per week. She is also the Superior Secretary of this association that aims at advancing the bodily, psychological and spiritual health of humans. Zhu's healing has demonstrated positive healing results to patients who suffer from various disease, such as cerebral palsy, refractory epilepsy, ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis), and mental illness. Zhu calls his spiritual healing *lingti yiliao*, literally means "medicine of soul and body." In the following I discuss Zhu's understanding of origin and meaning of disease, her technique of spiritual intervention, and the relation between science and spiritual healing demonstrated by this case.

Ignorance of Western medicine

According to Zhu, Western Medicine partially emphasizes the body and ignores the importance of soul:

“Human being is composed of the body and the soul. For the past hundreds of years, nevertheless, the focus of medical research has never shifted away from

the body, with the soul left unattended. In spite the fact that the contemporary medical science is advanced enough for working technical wonders such as artificial insemination, frozen embryo, and even genetic cloning, what it has focused is only the physical body without the soul. The reason why the modern medical science has failed to effectively control so many diseases is due to its ignorance of the existence of soul. The state of soul might be difficult for us to see and feel, but the soul actually takes the central controlling position in the mechanism of the human body. As a matter of fact, soul affects both the health of body and the psychological well-being...The way the Western Medicine treats diseases has proved too localized and limited—painkiller is used to stop the pain, anti-inflammatory to reduce inflammation. Only the symptom is treated, not the root of disease. Accordingly, the cure is often temporary...In whatever times, there are always numerous disease with unknown causes. Even when the causes can be reasonably diagnosed, those diseases might be still beyond any possible treatment—the so-called “hopeless” or “refractory” cases to both Western and Chinese medicines. And those are soul-related diseases. (Zhu, 2002)

Spiritual pathology of “medicine of soul and body”

For Zhu, the mechanism of the soul-related disease can only be healed by the correct recognition of its roots and the application of correct treatment:

“The spirit can take hold of the organs, the nervous system, or the skin, producing symptoms on the physical level or even causing the patient to lose control of emotions or sanity. You cannot expect any possible cure if the root of disease cannot be found and eliminated. Spiritual healing is intended to help the patient recover from the spirit’s intrusion and interference through communication on the spiritual level. No drugs and injection are involved in the treatment, and the healer does not have any physical contact with the patient’s body. What the healer applies is only ritualistic spiritual empowerment on the patient. For the physical damage resulting from chronic illnesses, the healer will need to activate the healing power of the soul itself. The patient needs to perform regular acts of repentance and introspection, and to mend his or her ways as an indispensable part of the treatment. (For those who are not able to do the regular “assignment”, such as the patients who suffer from the cerebral palsy, their lineal relatives have to do it in their stead.) If the

patient can genuinely repent and rectify their behavior, and if the revenging spirit can be persuaded by the healer and be willing to forgive, then the goal of recovery can eventually be achieved.” (Zhu, *ibid*)

For Zhu, our bodily state reflects the state of our soul. Therefore, the bodily illness in fact represents the problems of soul, especially the problem of karmic entanglement between souls. Moreover, the cause of corporeal disability or illness and the psychological disturbances are associated with invaded foreign spirits which have karmic entanglement with the patients.

Technique of spiritual intervention

As a spiritual healer, Zhu diagnoses the state of her clients by her spiritual power. And she treats their illness by communicating with the invaded spirits. Instead of exorcising the inflicted spirits away, Zhu is more like the moderator between debtors (patients) and their creditors (inflicted spirits). Since the real cause of disease originated from the wrong-doings of the patients' previous lives, patients themselves are responsible for their own disease. Therefore, they cannot rely only on the spiritual intervention of the spiritual healer without their own rectification and repentance. In order to be cured, the patients need to perform regular “assignment,” including reciting twenty “true words” (roughly means “loyal, forgiving, honest, clear, virtuous, decent, righteous, faithful, tolerant, impartial, learned, filial (piety), compassionate, kind, awakened, moderate, frugal, sincere, polite, and peaceful”) and transferring the merits of reciting to the inflicted spirits. In other words, patients' rectifications of previous habits and repentance constitute the most important part of cure.

The “medicine of soul and body” emphasizes the existence of soul/spirit, the

interrelatedness of body and soul, and the connection of disease and morality. The spiritual realm constitutes the original cause of disease; it also constitutes the ultimate ground of intervention. Although Zhu does not belong to any Buddhist group, her accounts of etiology of disease based on the mechanism of karmic entanglement are close to the Buddhist understanding of disease. On the one hand, disease is the representation of karmic effect and the destination determined by the effect. On the other hand, disease indicates to the moral responsibility one has to take for oneself. Therefore the karmic understanding of disease operates between the determinant and indeterminate space; disease reveals both the destination and redemption.

The “medicine of soul and body” is correspondent with the original understanding of sickness before the arising and dominance of the modern medicine. And it is not totally replaced by the disenchanting scientific world view. To a certain degree, such appeal of the supernatural realm is not conflict with the scope of modern medicine. The later explains the biological and physical levels of disease; its primary concern is the mechanism of “how.” The former accounts for the deep cause of disease, it offers answer for the question of “why.” (Zhang, 1989: 96-97) Accordingly, similar to other religious or spiritual healing that attempt to incorporate physical, psychological and spiritual dimensions into their scope of whole human being, the “medicine of soul and body” that proposes the relationship between disease and karma is capable of offering ultimate meaning for the ultimate condition of human being.

Science and “medicine of soul and body”

What is the relationship between science and spiritual healing demonstrated in this case? Although Zhu is never hesitant to demonstrate the limitation of modern

medicine, she never considers her healing unscientific or conflict with science. Furthermore, the Association of Body-Mind-Soul Health Promotion she actively participates in strongly emphasizes the role science plays in their pursuit of the advancement of body, mind and soul. In the opening statement for their new magazine, it proposes that:

“The Association of Body-Mind-Soul Health Promotion is a non-profit organization that pursuits the trinary health of body, mind and soul. In order to follow the origin of life and to explore the ultimate meaning of cosmos, we incorporate scientific, medical and social resources to devote ourselves to the exploration and study of spiritual healing, the science of mind, and the phenomena of parapsychology via scientific and objective attitude.”

The cooperative relationship between spiritual healing and science can be further demonstrated by Zhu’s participation with a research project conducted by physicians of Western Medicine and doctor of Chinese Medicine. This research project attempts to “prove” the effects of spiritual healing on neurological disorders such as cerebral palsy and refractory epilepsy. And it adopts the experimental design that includes experimental cases who receive only spiritual healing treatment and control cases who do not receive spiritual healing treatment. Researchers of medical science participate in diagnostic assessment and keeping track of the progression of those cases under spiritual treatment, which will be examined and recorded with the aid of scientific instruments. According to their research proposal, the doctors who join in this research project have watched closely a number of cases (disease such as cerebral palsy, psychosis, degenerative rheumatism, asthma) under Zhu’s treatment, and have kept a record of their progression. The doctors have come to the conclusion that Zhu’s spiritual treatments are non-invasive, do not involve any use of Western medicine, Chinese medicine, or Qi-gong, and do help to improve the condition of

those cases. This research team proposes that “it is hoped that through further scientific investigation, the mechanism of Zhu’s healing can be brought to light, so that we can better understand the existence (or non-existence) of the soul and how it is related to human diseases.” Although it is still unclear how the experimental procedures adopted in this project answer the question of the existence of soul, it is clear how the spiritual healing that is marginalized by the dominance of modern scientific medicine attempts to regain the possession of its lost territory by the appropriation of its antagonist’s weapon.

We can come to a temporary conclusion that the relationship between science and spiritual healing demonstrated in this case is both competitive and cooperative. On the one hand, for the spiritual healer, the scope of the Western medicine is limited in its partial emphasis of physical dimension and its failure to offer a more holistic perspective of human being. Nevertheless, the spiritual healing needs to appeal to the scientific investigation to prove its effectiveness. Scientific validation therefore constitutes a powerful instrument for the spiritual healing to be accepted by the suspicious public.

III. The second case: a Catholic group of healing prayer

The second case I discuss is a praying group for healing formed by Catholics in Taiwan. The core members of this group are deeply influenced by Father Wang—a Jesuit and a pioneer of *xinling yizhi* (inner healing) who enthusiastically committed himself to the prayer of inner healing in Taiwan since the 1970s. The core group members first experience the power of healing from God through Father Wang’s inner healing. Then they determined to continue Father Wang’s compassion for healing and form this group in 2003 after Father Wang’s decease. In the following I discuss

how this praying group reflects the origin and meaning of disease, the attitude, procedure of their healing prayer, and the relationship between science and healing prayer demonstrated by this case.

Origins and meaning of disease

The prayer group proposes multiple origins of disease. Sickness could be problems originated from physical, psychological or spiritual dimensions. The physical problems are related with bacteria, virus, genetics or environmental pollution. The psychological problems are due to emotional malady or stress. Both physical and psychological problems are taken care by professional physicians and psychologists or psychiatrists. In addition to the above origins, sickness might be associated with spiritual problems such as sin (individual or ancestral), curse, evil power or God's test. To a certain degree, such spiritual pathology considers sickness a matter of spiritual warfare between God and evil power. Consequently, the proposition of spiritual dimension offers disease broader meanings that are overlooked by the physical or psychological accounts. According to the spiritual understanding, the meaning of disease could be a warning of one's spiritual blindness or sinful state, a chance for repentance, or a call for a more intimate relationship with God.

Goal and appropriate attitude of healing prayer

For the group of healing prayer, Jesus constitutes the best exemplar of healer. Since Jesus' healing aims at the whole person, the healing prayer also emphasizes the restoration of one's holistic health, including physical, psychological and spiritual dimensions. Furthermore, the inner healing must take precedence over physical healing. Accordingly, instead of praying for miracle, the appropriate attitude for the

healing prayer should be praying for grace. For the healing group, the inner healing is the foundation for the physical healing. Theological speaking, the group of healing prayer attempts to synthesize theology of the cross and theology of glory: on the one hand, the experiences of sickness lead the patients to understand the meaning of Jesus' sacrificial death for them. Such understanding helps patients to learn to suffer with Jesus, and relate their healing with Jesus' wounds. On the other hand, the experiences of sickness could be a specific blessing from God. Through them God manifests His power and glory.

Method and procedure

The prayer healing is conducted by a team composed of one leading healer and several assistant healers. The leading healer directs the whole process of praying. The other assistant healers assist the process by their active participation of the patient's state. They offer "images" or biblical insights emerged from the praying process to the patients. During the whole process, "images" and "words"—no matter from healers or patients—constitute the most important avenues of God's messages. While the goal of each prayer might be specific, for example, praying for physical, psychological or interpersonal healing, for appropriate medical decision, or for spiritual discernment, the guide of the Holy Spirit does not necessarily follow the patient's original expectation. Emptying of one's mind and waiting for the pouring of spiritual power from the Holy Spirit thus constitutes the most essential preparatory state for the patient.

For the prayer group, both healer and patient play important roles for the success of the healing. For healers, they do not constitute the agent of healing. They are more like faithful media of the Holy Spirit who bring the blessings from God to patients.

Consequently healers' intimate relationship with God, their faith, honesty, submission, compassion and love constitute essential ground for God's healing to be manifested. For patients, the restoration of their relationship with God is both the ground and the goal of their healing. Accordingly, patients' faith, openness, desire and repentance become the soil for the spiritual power to work. Suspicion, disbelief, ignorance and sin constitute the barriers of healing.

Evaluation of healing effect

The evaluation of healing effect of prayer healing is a complicated issue. It can be characterized as immediate or gradual: sometimes patients feel the immediate impact of healing effect in the midst of or right after the healing session. Sometimes patients experience the effect of healing gradually in their later lives. The effect of healing can also be characterized by physical, psychological or spiritual improvement. Sometimes patients experience miraculous physical restoration. Sometimes patients do not experience any physical improvement, but experience the power of healing from their spiritual advancement, and consider it a bigger miracle. Since the healing group regards the effect of healing as the work of the Holy Spirit, the mechanism of healing effect is basically a mystery beyond the rational understanding of human.

Relationship between science and healing prayer

What is the relation between science and spiritual healing demonstrated in this case? Compared with the active pursuit of scientific proof demonstrated in the first case ("medicine of soul and body"), the group of healing prayer does not engage in any similar activity of scientific validation. One of the reasons for such indifference to the scientific proof can be attributed to the close connection between Western Medicine and Christian missionary process in Taiwan. The efficacious treatment of

Western Medicine used to go hand in hand with the missionary process as the representation of “magical” power of Christianity. Those hospitals built by missionaries play very important role in the importing process of Western Medicine to Taiwan. For the public, hence, there is a subtle association between science and Christianity. Both are imported from West, both are useful weapons for the combating of “superstition.” Although the spiritual healing of prayer does not accord with the modern scientific perspective that focuses totally on physical dimension, it is not necessarily considered “superstitious” as other folk system of spiritual healing since Christianity is a religion of “anti-superstitious.” Accordingly, we can propose a complementary relationship between Western Medicine and the practice of healing prayer. Since Jesus heals humans physically, psychologically and spiritually. The practice of healing prayer makes God’s healing more complete in addition to the modern professions of physicians and psychiatrist or psychologists.

Furthermore, the complementary relationship also implies an implicit critical connotation. In the healing discourse and practice of the group of healing prayer, the role of science is in fact diminished. Science represented by Western Medicine only offers partial explanation and partial solution to the people in affliction. In the pursuit of holistic health, the advancement of spiritual wellbeing is valued above the restoration of physical health. Hence we can say that the practice of healing prayer also offer a critical view of modern science as well as the first case that tries to expose the limit of Western Medicine.

IV. Conclusion

In the above discussion I try to show the limitation of the dualistic dichotomy of “demystifying” discourse of Western Medicine and the “magical” discourse of

spiritual healing via the demonstration of complicated relationship between science and spiritual healing in two cases. The above two cases understand the meaning of disease according to their visions beyond the scientific scope. For the spiritual healer of the “medicine of soul and body,” the cause of disease might be associated with invaded foreign spirits or karmic entanglement. For the Catholic healing group, disease might be the consequence of evil power or sin. Both propose their own spiritual models of etiology based upon their understanding of spiritual realm. Both develop their own techniques of spiritual healing, e.g. the appeasement of spirit, repentance, or the inner healing. Although the understanding of spirits and spiritual realms, and the communication and negotiation with spirits constitute one of the most important aspects of their healing practice, they try to incorporate the scientific perspective represented by Western Medicine into their system. For the spiritual healer of “medicine of body and soul,” the scientific natural law only explains the mechanism of disease but it could not answer the ultimate question of “why.” Nevertheless, the religious healing needs to appeal to the scientific investigation to validate its effectiveness. Scientific validation therefore constitutes a powerful instrument for the religious healing to be accepted by the suspicious public. As to the Catholic healing group, the relationship between spiritual healing and science is not less complicated than the first case. The efficacious treatment of Western Medicine used to go hand in hand with the missionary process as the representation of “magical” power of Christianity. Because of the subtle connection of science and Christianity, the practice of healing prayer is less inclined to be considered “superstitious” as other folk system of spiritual healing in Taiwan. For the Catholic healing group, their healing practice makes God’s holistic healing complete in addition to other modern professions. Such complementary perspective also implies an implicit critical view to the limitation of Western Medicine.

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