

Acupuncture Journeys to the West

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Acupuncture Anaesthesia in 1972 as a propaganda statement. Like other Chinese social realist artworks, it was meant to convey a message about the Chinese state and its people. In this case, the message was that China was fully modern, but modern with Chinese characteristics. To contemporary eyes, the painting looks like an artifact from an era when the state exercised almost total control over visual culture.

But *Acupuncture Anaesthesia* has a place in Western medicine and bioethics. The early 1970s saw China beginning to recover from the Cultural Revolution, including a controlled reopening to the West. This was the era of ping-pong diplomacy and Nixon in China. At the same time, North American and European interest in alternative medicine grew alongside general skepticism toward authority, including medical authority. The painting marks a moment when acupuncture and other components of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) were embraced by many Western patients and some physicians.

Despite its name, traditional Chinese medicine is not traditional. It is a construct of the Chinese state incorporating selected historical practices of Chinese medicine and pharmacy into a modern framework. Before and after the 1949 Revolution, many Chinese intellectuals argued that modernity required adopting Western medicine in place of historical Chinese medical practices. In the end, Mao Zedong himself rejected this argument, decreeing that a state interpretation of traditional medicine would be institutionalized and integrated into healthcare throughout China. Today, TCM continues to evolve in China, Taiwan, and in areas beyond its historical home, including in the United States.

For the Chinese regime of the 1970s, TCM was not just healthcare, but another Chinese achievement to be displayed to foreign visitors, like model schools, farms, and factories. Of all TCM therapies, acupuncture made the most spectacular impression on Western visitors, especially as it was presented in *Acupuncture Anaesthesia*—a drug-free alternative or powerful adjunct to surgical anesthesia.

Since the 1970s, more Americans have turned to complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), including acupuncture. Close to 40% of adults in the U.S. were using some form of CAM in 2007 according to the National Institutes of Health.^[1] Colleges devoted to TCM and other CAM modalities now train practitioners exclusively in those disciplines. In parallel, elements of CAM have also been incorporated into conventional healthcare education—often labeled integrated medicine (IM). The ethics of integrating alternative therapies into medical practice is complex; experts have yet to reach a consensus as to whether any of these practices have a place among mainstream medical treatments. Acupuncture has been among the most scrutinized alternative therapies. Even so, it falls into a gray zone—e.g., neither a quack remedy nor a well-understood medical therapy.^[2]

High-quality research confirms that acupuncture may offer relief from chronic pain. However, its efficacy in treating digestive disorders, intractable headaches, infertility, and other conditions remains unsupported by evidence-based standards—but neither are many accepted therapies of conventional medicine. To further complicate matters, characterizing acupuncture as “merely” an effective placebo is no longer a clear scientific or ethical dismissal.

It has been more than forty years since Tang Muli painted *Acupuncture Anaesthesia*. Acupuncture and other TCM modalities are here to stay in American healthcare. Their popularity is driven by patient demand and dissatisfaction with conventional therapies, as well as with the quality of patient-physician relationships. The 1970s Western encounter with TCM evoked an expectation of panacea-like solutions easily transferable from one cultural context to another. *Acupuncture Anaesthesia* captures the dramatic quality of that encounter and a pivotal moment in the translation of TCM to the West.

References

[1]“The Use of Complementary and Alternative Medicine in the United States,” NIH National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health.
DHHS, https://nccih.nih.gov/research/statistics/2007/camsurvey_fs1.htm.

[2]“Acupuncture,” NIH National Center or Complementary and Integrative Health.
DHHS, <http://nccam.nih.gov/health/acupuncture>.

Fig. 1 *Acupuncture Anaesthesia*, 1972 oil on canvas, 164 x 224 cm, Chinese National Art Gallery, Beijing, <http://fotografie.hfg-karlsruhe.de/content/acupuncture-anaesthesia>.