

# Uyghur Medicine in Practice: A Study in Khotan

Tursunjan Mattohti

Tsinghua University, Department of Sociology, Beijing, China

## ABSTRACT

*In Xinjiang, China, health-seeking behaviors among the Uyghur are not restricted to visitation to doctors of modern medicine because traditional Uyghur medicine is at their disposal as well. As Xinjiang's southernmost city, Khotan is a thriving center of Uyghur medicine, bolstered by a Uyghur Medical College, a marketplace specializing in the trade of Uyghur drugs, and an assemblage of skilled Uyghur doctors. The author conducted a study in Khotan on issues of etiology, diagnosis, and treatment in the practice of Uyghur medicine. Uyghur medicine is sustained a cultural model of illness that continues to define medical choices among the Uyghur people today. This paper focuses the question of how this cultural model of illness is manifested in etiology, diagnosis, and treatment.*

**Key words:** *Uyghur medicine, etiology, diagnosis, treatment*

## Introduction

Located in southern part of Xinjiang, a Uyghur autonomous region in northwest China, the city of Khotan has a population of 2 million people, of which about 96 percent are Uyghur. Dominated by a dry continental desert climate, the city's temperature varies greatly between day and night, with many hours of sunshine and only small amounts of rainfall throughout the year. At the time when the ancient Silk Road was flourishing, the city was an important junction of different cultures where goods, technologies, philosophies, religions, and medical knowledge were transmitted from one culture to another. Through time and history, Uyghur medicine in Khotan was greatly enriched by Greek medicine, Ayurvedic medicine, and Islamic medicine. Consequently, the development of Uyghur medicine in Khotan has acquired a distinctively multicultural character. By contrast, traditional Chinese medicine has had little impact in Khotan<sup>1</sup>.

Across Xinjiang, 40 hospitals specialize in Uyghur medicine<sup>2</sup> and about 1,500 students are enrolled each year into various colleges that offer training in Uyghur medicine. Apart from full-scale hospitals offering Uyghur medicine, hundreds of private clinics operate in Xinjiang where doctors use Uyghur medicine to treat their patients<sup>3</sup>. As a thriving center of Uyghur medicine, Khotan is blessed to have a college of traditional Uyghur medicine, a huge marketplace specializing in the trade of Uyghur medicines, and many renowned Uyghur doctors.

This paper draws on a study of Uyghur medicine in Khotan that was first undertaken for two months in 2006<sup>4</sup> and then was followed up as recently as the summer of 2014. The follow-up study, which also informs the writing of this paper, was part the author's effort in the past five years to conduct a comparative study of health status among Uyghur traders, farmers, and government officials. As a native of Khotan, the author speaks the local language fluently and is familiar with Khotan's clinics and doctors of Uyghur medicine. Thus, the author was allowed to observe interactions between patients and doctors at local clinics. This led to opportunities interviews with 10 doctors and more than 30 patients over the years.

## Theories and Etiologies of Traditional Uyghur Medicine

In responding to disease and illness, all human societies have created medical systems of one sort or another. According to Foster Anderson and Barbara Anderson, every traditional medicine includes a system of disease theories and a health care system. Its theoretical system embraces beliefs about the nature of health, the causes of diseases, and the remedies and other curing techniques<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, these disease theories are consisted of two distinctive approaches that can be described as »person-alistic« and »naturalistic«. The former views diseases as

caused by a supernatural being, a non-human being such as a ghost or an evil spirit, or human beings like sorcerers. The latter views a disease as one that prevails when the insensate elements in the body are not in balance with one's age and natural environment<sup>5</sup>. The belief system that underpins the Uyghur medical practice in Khotan is characteristic of both tendencies as they have been identified by Foster Anderson and Barbara Anderson.

The theoretical system of Uyghur medicine is deeply rooted in thoughts about nature. For instance, fire, air, water and soil are recognized in Uyghur medicine as the sources of change in the universe. Phrased differently, the living environment of humanity and the origins of all forms of lives are closely related to these four major elements of the natural world. So are the diseases contracted by humans<sup>6</sup>. In practice, as pointed out by Yusup Abdulhimit<sup>7</sup> (1985), the concepts of temperament, humor, and organ are emphasized.

In Uyghur, temperament is called Mizaj, and it refers to not only human characteristic properties such as physiology but also to characteristic properties of all things such as plants, animals and minerals in the world. Temperament is divided into four categories: Soghuq (coldness), Issiq (heat), Hol (wetness), and Quruq (dryness). There are also four complicated classifications of Quruq Issiq (dryness and heat), Hol Issiq (wetness and heat), Hol Soghuq (wetness and coldness), and Quruq Soghuq (dryness and coldness). These can be divided into normal and abnormal conditions according to an excess or insufficiency. For judgment on the human body, the concept of normal temperament is used to describe its physiology while the concept of abnormal temperament is used to describe its pathology.

Partly influenced by Greek medicine and partly informed by Arabic medicine, the concept of humor is vital to Uyghur medicine as well. In the Uyghur, humor is known as Helit, and it refers to four kinds of body humor: Sapra (yellow bile), Qan (blood), Balgham (phlegm), and Sawda (black bile), all believed to be under the influence of temperament. Their balance is relative, but resistance is absolute. The function of these body humors is to keep a balance in quantity and quality, leading to the normal physiological state of body or the body's abnormal state on the contrary. Thus, body humors include normal humors and abnormal humors. A normal humor keeps the body's original, natural and normal state while it renders vitality to life. An abnormal humor is the result of harmful Helit when it exceeds the normal levels created the quality and quantity of change in the liver.

In Uyghur, human organs are called Aza. While the concept of Aza includes the human brain, heart, liver, lung, spleen, kidney and so on, it also refers to the human skin, hairs, and nails. Uyghur medicine holds that each organ has a particular temperament corresponding to the organ's particular function. In other words, each organ plays an important role in ensuring human survival and reproductive ability while controlling one's mental and physical activities. Each organ also instructs the other organs to regulate, enrich and control the human body.

For example, while the brain is the center of the one's mental state because it produces ideas, sensations and movements, the brain can be affected by damages to other organs such as the eye or the nose which provides the possibility of seeing or smelling. The temperament of an organ is therefore a special notion in the theoretical framework of Uyghur medicine because it corresponds to finding proper diagnosis and treatment.

## Diagnosis and Treatment in Uyghur Medicine

The above-mentioned notions about how the human body works are of a dialectical relationship, and they form a systematically perceived pattern of correspondences between the natural forces of fire, air, water and soil and the embodied functions of temperament, humor, and organs. The two patient-physician dialogues that follow were recorded by this author during fieldwork, and they are used here to illustrate the dialectical nature of Uyghur medicine.

Dialogue One – Patient: »Today, I feel that I get cold, headache, and runny nose but not fever«. Physician: »Let me check your pulse«. Patient: »Do you think that my cold is caused by coldness?« Physician: »Yes. You should take some herbal medicines, say Zufa Jewhiri, and Loqi badam«. In this patient-physician interaction, the doctor tried to find out if Hilit and Mizaj (i.e., humor and temperament) affected his patient's pulse so as to determine if his symptoms were caused by Soghuq (i.e., coldness). The two herbs that he prescribed were meant to address the problem of coldness with the effect of inducing external perspirations and internal moisture.

Dialogue Two – Patient: »I have had a stomach problem these days.« Physician: »Let me check your pulse«. Patient: »How do you think of my condition?« Physician: »It is so hot these days. I assume you've have consumed a lot of cold drinks, like Coke, Pepsi, watermelon juice and perhaps Doghap«. Patient: »Yes, the hot weather makes me so thirsty«. Physician: »Your problem is caused by excessive coldness. For this, you should take some Qursi Jawarish Amber«. In this also very short dialogue, the doctor applied the widely understood concept of coldness among the Uyghur by evoking the drinking of Doghap, an ice water mixed with grape juice and yoghurt, along with Coke and Pepsi as a source of his discomfort. The simple solution the doctor offered was Qursi Jawarish Amber, a traditional gastrointestinal dosage consisted of different ingredients.

The two patient-physician dialogues above are indicative of the most visible attributes of the manner in which a disease's cause and cure are articulated in Uyghur medicine. Similar articulations are widespread in other cultural and medical traditions<sup>8</sup>. Generally, however, the purpose of diagnosis in Uyghur medicine is to decide whether the patient's problem is primarily Hilit or Mizaj in character; whether the problem has external or internal symptoms, and whether the problem is increased or decreased by the internal functions of human organs.

For purpose of brevity, observation, listening, smelling, questioning, and palpation can be said to be the five standard methods of diagnosis in Uyghur medicine, according to my informants among local doctors in Khotan. A physician is supposed to also look at a patient's skin color, tongue, nose, eyes, and teeth and even his hands and nails. Listening includes the sound of the patient's breathing and his or her manner of speaking or coughing. To smell means to smell odor coming from a patient's mouth or in his or her urine. Questioning tends to focus on the patient's family circumstances, habits of physical exercise, diet and details of bodily discomfort. Palpation is to take the patient's pulse at the artery of either forearm by placing four fingers on the artery and exerting varying degrees of pressure. Considered to be the most complex method of diagnosis, pulse reading is meant to tell not only the regularity of the heart beats but also the strong or weak quality of the heart beats. In sum, a diagnosis is made through close patient-physician interactions.

Any medical system is to face disease and death in all directions, and Uyghur medicine's basic aim in treatment is to restore the balance of Mizaj and Hilit. Dietary therapy is the most common way of treatment as one's diet is considered to harmonize or disturb the balance of Mizaj and Hilit. So in diagnosis and treatment, Uyghur doctors habitually offer advice on dietary restrictions or alterations. In general, dietary therapy is divided into food diet, therapeutic diet, and food-cum-therapeutic diet. According to my informants, patients tend to follow the professional advice about adjusting their Mizaj or Hilit by adjusting their dietary habits.

In addition to dietary therapy, a wide range of medical herbs has been in use for preventive and curative purposes. There are around five hundreds of medical herbs sold at Khotan's huge market of medical herbs, most of which are harvested in Xinjiang while some are from Pakistan and India. The herbal medicines that are commonly used at local clinics come in many forms, including unprocessed herbs, herbal tablets, herbal juice, herbal soup, boiled water mixed with herbs and even jams.

Psychiatric means of treatment are also important, because practitioners of Uyghur medicine tend to believe

that the human body and mind are as inseparable as matter and spirit. With the conviction that a physical disease can cause mental disease and vice-versa<sup>9</sup>, these doctors often tell their patients to pay attention to good lifestyles, moral integrity, honor, and family harmony, since they believe that spirituality is also a key component of one's wellbeing.

## Conclusion

People in all countries, everywhere, attempt to make sense of their health problems by trying to understand why they become ill. In Khotan, practitioners of Uyghur medicine consider several causal possibilities when they treat their patients. They seriously consider the power of nature and spirituality at the same time. In this sense, Uyghur medicine is a life-saving means via efforts made to deal with disturbances both in the body and in the mind. The still very strong belief among the local people and medical practitioners in Khotan – that Uyghur medicine remains an expression of the Uyghur cultural tradition and of the Islamic idea of purity and truthfulness – provides Khotan's ordinary residents and doctors with a unified lens to see Uyghur medicine and recognize its vitality. While the residents in Khotan also go to see doctors of modern medicine when they become ill, they continue to hold Uyghur medicine to their heart. By contrast, the fate of traditional Chinese medicine in Han Chinese areas in the People's Republic of China is endangered, since its scientific basis and efficacy are constantly challenged, condemned, and rejected in the Chinese news media and by the Chinese scientific community. This is another way to say that Uyghur medicine is sustainable precisely because its cultural foundation remains firm.

## Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to Prof. Jing Jun for his advices and suggestions. And I am grateful to The 16<sup>th</sup> world congress of The International Union of Anthropological Ethnological sciences for their support of transportation to the conference at Kunming, China.

## REFERENCES

1. FAN R, HOLLIDAY I, *J Altern Complem Med*, 12 (2006) 483. — 2. HALMURAT OPUR, *Journal of China Higher Medical Education*, Chinese edited, 8 (2007) 38. — 3. CONSER LAPHAM JW, *Tot Mizaj: Four Characters in Uyghur Traditions of Health, Medicine, and Longevity*. BA Thesis (Oregon State University, 2005). — 4. MATTOHTI T, *Research on the Healing Tradition of Uyghur: Medical culture of Uyghurs in Khotan*, MS Thesis (Xinjiang University, 2007). — 5. FOSTER GM, GALLATIN ANDERSON B, *Medical Anthropology* (New York, John Wiley & Sons Inc, 1978). — 6. HAJIB JK, *Kutadgu Bilig (Wisdom of Royal Glory)*,

*A Turko-Islamic Mirror for Princes*, Translated, with an Introduction and Notes, by Robert Dankoff, (The University of Chicago Press Ltd, London, 1983). — 7. ABDULHIMIT Y (Ed), *The Best Theories of Traditional Uyghur Medicine*, (Beijing, Minority Publishing House, 1985). — 8. JANZEN JM, *The Social Fabric of Health: An Introduction to Medical Anthropology*, (New York, McGraw-Hill Companies Inc, 2002). — 9. ABDULHAMIT M, *The studies on treatment of Uyghur Medicine*, (People Health Press, Xinjiang, Urumqi, 2004) by Uyghur language.

*T. Mattohti*

*Tsinghua University, Department of Sociology, Xiongzhi Xing Hall, 100084 Beijing, China  
e-mail: tursunmat@hotmail.com*

## **UYGHUR MEDICINA U PRAKSI: STUDIJA U KHOTANU**

### **SAŽETAK**

U Xinjangu, Kina, potrebe zdravstvene skrbi u populaciji Uyghur nisu ograničene na rad liječnika moderne medicine, jer je tradicionalna Uyghur medicina isto tako na raspolaganju. Kao najjužniji grad u Xinjangu, Khotan je uspjeno središte Uyghurske medicine, poduprto Uyghurskim Medicinskim fakultetom, tržnicom specijaliziranom u prodaji Uyghur lijekova te skupinom kvalificiranih Uyghurskih liječnika. Autor je proveo istraživanje u Khotanu o pitanjima od etiologije, dijagnoze i liječenja u praksi Uyghurske medicine. Uyghurska medicina se održala kao kulturni model bolesti koji danas i dalje definira medicinski izbor populacije Uyghur. Ovaj članak se fokusira na pitanje kako se ovaj kulturni model bolesti očituje u etiologiji, dijagnozi i liječenju.