The dichotomy between Eastern and Western medicine has been a favorite subject of Chinese literature since Lu Xun’s famous short story Yao (Medicine). Within only years of that story’s publication, the dichotomy reappeared in one of the first works of Taiwanese literature, Lai He’s short story She xiansheng (Mr. Snake 1930) about the lifelong dealings of a snake catcher-cum-healer with a Western physician. She reveals the ultimate irreconcilability between the Sino-Taiwanese view that interweaves traditional medicine with nature and fertility, and its view of Western medicine, which it associates with utter barrenness. The same incompatibility appears in Huang Chunming’s Erzi de da wanou (His Son’s Big Doll 1969) and Xian (Ringworms 1971), plus other works that link Western medicine to symbols of sterility such as surgical abortion and birth-control pills. Meanwhile, Wang Zhenhe’s novel Liang di xiangsi (Thoughts from Two Lands, 1990) contrasts the cold aseptic rooms of a Western clinic and devastating effects of radiotherapy with the human warmth accompanying bungled attempts to treat illness with unorthodox traditional methods. In all three works, physical objects assume a strong symbolic value: in She xiansheng, the magic bullet cure is deeply linked with the snake catcher but loses all therapeutic value after isolation and testing in a Western laboratory. Huang Chunming’s novel depicts all birth control attempts as a threat to the rustic domestic bliss of two lower class families while Wang Zhenhe presents radiotherapy as a dangerous invisible force that consumes the patient’s strength and will to live: meanwhile he portrays traditional Chinese medicine as a power that reconnects an old man to the living image of his past, regardless of its lack of therapeutic benefit.
Western medicine ranks among the leading subjects of post-Qing Chinese literature and it is therefore no surprise to find it in the nascent Taiwanese literature of the early 20th century. In fact, the historical and social patterns that helped shape both modern Chinese and Taiwanese literature share several similarities: both literatures were evolving in a context of traumatic political and administrative change followed by crisis that caused both populations to question dramatically their traditional cultural frames of reference. As different as both historical contexts may be, culturally speaking, the fall of the Qing Dynasty and the total disintegration of the young Republic of China after 1911 led roughly to the same consequences as Japanese colonial rule achieved on the Taiwanese intelligentsia in the period from 1895 to 1945. We can actually affirm that in each case the outcome was the formation of a strong national consciousness and the urge for a direct confrontation with Western-style modernization.

In light of these statements, the “obsession with medicine” which characterized the literary production of most writers early in the last century becomes perfectly justified and plausible, both as a naturalistic description of the attitude towards an evident symptom of the overall transformation of both Mainland and Taiwan societies, and as an allegory to a broader and anthropologically deeper conflict.

To better understand these preliminary affirmations, we shall examine a few specific issues and move on to textual material for a general analysis. I’d like to begin with a comparison of two short stories: Lu Xun’s famous Yao (Medicine, 1919) and Lai He’s She xiansheng (Mr. Snake, 1930), a minor work by the “father of modern Taiwanese literature”.

The first remarkable similarity between these works and their genesis is that both Lu Xun and Lai He were themselves trained physicians. Lu Xun graduated from Sendai Medical College and Lai He, from the Taipei Medical School, which was founded and financed by the Japanese government. Both novels underscore the contrast between “modern” and “traditional” treatment. Lu Xun sets up the character of a child suffering from tuberculosis while Lai He chooses victims of snake bite. In Lu Xun’s rendering of a child who eventually dies after failing to respond to a treatment of bread soaked in the blood of an executed revolutionary martyr, we see the mindset of the “enlightened” scientist. But more importantly, we also see that the tuberculosis is an obvious metaphor for political and moral decadence where the “transfusion” of sacrificial blood from innovative new forces and foreign ideologies fails fatally to make up for the boy’s own blood losses; this image is also a hint of Lu Xun’s obsession with Chinese cultural cannibalism. The concept of “yao” – represented as a character whose radical is “grass” (something rooted in the earth and therefore related to the most inner nature of Chinese men) is replaced by that of “kexue” 科學, “science” and “yi xue” 医学: the tradition inherited in an almost biological cycle is therefore replaced by something which has to be “xue”, “studied”, “discovered” and which is therefore “external” and “foreign”.

In contrast, “Mr. Snake” presents a failed attempt to recast shamanism inside a scientific, materialistic system and highlights the ultimate incompatibility of these opposite therapeutic systems. This plot follows a frog-catcher with a strong reputation as a healer, or shaman, thanks to his ability to cure snake bites in a small rural community in central

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1 Originally published in Taiwan Minbao 台灣民報 1930, n. 294, 295, 296 (January 1, 11 and 18)
Taiwan. After resisting all manner of threats and coercion from the scientific establishment eager to learn the secret of his cure, Mr. Snake finally says only days before dying: “In fact, there’s no secret treatment” and takes his secret with him to the grave. A few months later, laboratory analysis reports that his secret herbal mixture is merely a mild laxative.

“Mr. Snake” differs most remarkably from Lu Xun’s “Medicine” by stressing that the healer and his healing are entirely inseparable. The main character is perfectly aware that the ritual is a critical ingredient of the treatment, as seen in the following statement to a physician:

“With this kind of folks, we must use some sorcerer tricks…we have to add a little magic to the simplest things, in order to prevent them from understanding anything. This way, even what are obviously the simplest things, become more and more precious. Only by preventing them from knowing reality, can we get their cries of admiration. That’s all there is to it.”

This is surprisingly similar to the attitude of Quesalid, a Kwakiutl sorcerer described by Claude Levi-Strauss in his 1963 essay The Sorcerer and his Magic. Quesalid is a tricky character who decides to become a shaman himself – but does so only in order to debunk shamanism. Now, at one point in the Kwakiutl healing ritual, the shaman normally pulls out an object, pretends to extract it from the patient’s body and presents it to the patient as the incarnation of the illness. Now removed, the patient is cured. Well, Quesalid decides to subvert the treatment by replacing the object with a few drops of his saliva. By thus identifying entirely with the illness, Quesalid hardly compromised his reputation – in fact he enhanced it to the point where he eventually attributed some real “power” to the psychological impact of these “performances” and even refused to disclose his method to the elder shamans. Like Quesalid and his saliva, Mr. Snake identifies becomes one with the venomous reptile itself. Mr. Snake is also equally ambivalent: on the one hand, neither bribery nor threats of arrest and torture will force him to disclose the secret of his cure while, on the other hand, he openly acknowledges that his healing skills are in fact inexistent when he finally tells the physician: “As you’re in the same trade, I won’t tell you any lies, considering also that I’m going to die soon. Really, there’s no secret treatment: I hope you’ll believe me.” The lab test that determines the clinical irrelevance of the herbs is not meant to label Mr. Snake as a charlatan, but to underscore that, in this particular case, the shaman had died without a disciple to whom he could transmit his lore. Actually, the dialogue between Mr. Snake and the physician contains all the features of an initiation, where the physician becomes the apprentice faced with a choice and, like the wooers of Portia in the Merchant of Venice, is attracted by the golden glitter of the miracle herbs and thus neglects the basic facts about the illness, of which the healer reminds him in a later passage:

“As you know, there are several kinds of snakes in this place. Some are so poisonous that their bite leaves you no more than a few hours to live; you yourselves are surely aware of this. The most poisonous snakes are of the “yin” kind: their bite isn’t that painful, the poison flows inside the body and doesn’t cause swelling. Even the bite mark disappears in a few minutes. This is the...

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most dreadful poison: when people start to feel its effect, they’ve already just a few hours left. It’s because at first there’s almost no pain so they don’t call the doctor at once, and when they do, it’s already too late. But most of the people I’ve treated were bitten by “yang” snakes, whose poison is not that deadly: these “yang” snakes in fact deliver all their poison near the bite which therefore swells and causes pain. You see? Do we need a ‘secret treatment’ for this?”

Mr. Snake thus reframes the treatment according to the classic Daoist principle of radiant masculine “yang” in eternal complementarity to dark feminine “yin”: the snake itself associates symbolically with the element earth and fertilizing power that gives life only if vested with yang. (Indeed, Chinese folklore abounds in snakes fecundating supposedly sterile animals such as turtles).

The healer’s ability to juggle “yin” and “yang” is also a fundamental concept to fully understand the cultural frame of reference behind two of Huang Chunming 黃春明 (n.1937)’s most famous narratives. But while Lai He’s healers identify with shamanism, Huang’s sorcerer identifies with the malevolent presence of the physician. In Xian 蕭 (“Ringworms” 1969), the earlier of the stories, the central theme is the hard life of a farmer and his wife, for whom even the pleasure of sex becomes problematic because it means less privacy and more children to feed. Crisis comes when Ah-gui 阿桂, the wife, finds a “lepu” — a “magical” device to end the endless chain of unwanted pregnancies. It turns out to be an IUD which needs to be fitted by a physician. However, her husband Ah-fa 阿發 cannot imagine why the physician’s intervention is needed and copes by viewing the matter in a different way that masks the sexual component behind the purely symbolic value of the event:

“Ah-fa turned around and stared at Ah-gui, just like he had done the previous time the question came up. The simple idea of the process of insertion of the “lepu” was unbearable to him ‘The doctor who installs the “lepu” there at the hygiene office is Ah-sheng’s elder son, I know that, but Ah-gui is my wife just the same!’ And yet he thought ‘Damn! Couldn’t she have done this without telling me? Then I wouldn’t have to know of all this. But if she didn’t tell me, then wouldn’t it be like she was cheating on me?’ He thought this point was enough for him to need to decide. And he wasn’t someone to change his mind that easily. Thus he kept staring at Ah-gui, trying to re-organize his thinking to communicate his decision. His inner conflict was because this was all actually about his self-esteem.”

In another passage, Ah-fa expresses the fear that IUDs cause abortions and infertility and this statement opens up consideration of the symbolic value of the entire situation. In The Golden Bough, Sir James Frazer finds an example of imitative magic in the sterile women of the Babar Archipelago, who, in order to have a child, have their shaman make an invocation to the sun god by holding a fowl near the woman’s womb. The woman then makes a cotton doll and pretends it is the child the shaman had procured her. Ah-fa’s suspiciousness about the physician inserting the IUD into his wife’s body may connect to this same image: the physician inserts a device — that acts as a substitute for a fetus — into the woman’s womb and prevents Ah-fa from spreading his yang energy. In this sense, Ah-fa’s fears find some grounding: the physician now presents as a peculiar kind of shaman, whose function is to “fertilize” a woman with sterility. From this standpoint, it is easy to understand the different attitude of Kunshu 坤樹, the main character of the later

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3 First published in Caoyuan Zazhi 草原雜誌, n.2, 1969
short story *Erzi de da wanou* 兒子的大玩偶 (His Son’s Big Doll 1969)\(^5\) who tries to persuade his wife to take a pharmaceutical drug to abort an unwanted pregnancy. In this case, even if drug is supposed to prevent fertility, Kunshu doesn’t feel threatened as a male, because the pregnancy proved the power of his “yang” and the physician’s “magic” only affects her “yin”.

The dichotomy between the “barrenness” of Western medicine and the “fertilizing” power of folk medicine is even more evident in Wang Zhenhe 王禎和’s posthumously published novel *Liang di xiangsi* 兩地相思 (Thoughts From Two Lands 1991)\(^6\). Its main character is Uncle Chang-an 長安叔, a quiet, rational man of Mainland descent who decides to seek traditional treatment after being diagnosed with cancer and had experienced the dramatic and frightening atmosphere of Western hospitals. Based on *jimuzhu* 雞母珠(*abrus precatorius* or rosary pea), this treatment proves of no real benefit to his health but it does however boost his mental awareness, with heightened recall of his memories from the Mainland and his passionate love affair with Yulan 玉蘭, a Taiwanese woman.

“Thoughts From Two Lands” is a very complex novel and the experience of Western or Chinese medicine is just one of the main themes woven into the frame of style and content. At all events, the analysis of a few passages points up the importance of the contrast between the two medical systems in the economy of the novel. See for example his description of radiotherapy:

“Almost all of them had been through operations that left wounds big and little; some had even had their eyes dug out. The ones who had radiotherapy had their necks all black from the X-rays, just like the ashes of a burned piece of wood! After a few sessions, they couldn’t even eat by themselves because the X-rays have eaten all the flesh in their throats, so even a drop of water causes them such pain that they couldn’t hold back their tears…All their faces were yellow and they’d all lost weight…some were just skin and bones…The X-rays also blasted away their voices and you had to put your ear right up to their lips just to hear what they were saying. Others had their hearing completely destroyed by the therapy and couldn’t hear a thing, not even cars honking their horns in the street!”

This is an image of utter destruction that becomes even more poignant when you know it is based on Wang Zhenhe’s personal experiences at Taipei National Hospital. The radiotherapy is represented as a process of pure destruction experience that transforms a calm and self-confident man into a frightened haunting animal.

Halfway into the novel, Uncle Chang-an follows the advice of a fellow villager and starts a course of traditional herbal medicine. Although his clinical status fails to improve, his thoughts become increasingly sharper and the effect of the herbs is described as follows:

“Then he sank into a deep, confused sleep and in his dreams he again saw Yulan, holding Renfu in her arms, kneeling at the door of the hospital, with her mouth open in a soundless cry – he couldn’t hear her voice…and then her image changed into that of his wife Baolian, her eyes full of tears, crying that the baby was feverish! He hurried to her side and bent over her to check but then Yulan was sitting by his side, reading diligently from a book, without missing a single word: *My lord is far away, I miss him night and day. I can’t sleep at night, just waiting for his return,*

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\(^5\) First published in *Wenxue Jikan*, 文學季刊 n.6, 1969

\(^6\) First published in *Lianhe Wenxue*, 聯合文學, n.102, 1994
The herbal treatment has brought back Chang-an’s memories from a long lost past; paradoxically enough it is this totally ineffective treatment that gives him the will to fight for his life. As he says himself: “These people are all alive in my mind and they’ll go on living as long as I live to remember them!” Thus, this treatment becomes the magic bullet that is not meant to bring people back from the dead: it did not save Chang-an’s life but it certainly resurrected Yulan and Baolian. In conclusion, Taiwan literature distinguishes itself from Mainland literature by handling the subject of traditional medicine with deep respect, which it represents as a bond to the native soil, i.e. (1) a source of regenerative energy to the sick on their path to recovery as in “Mr. Snake”, (2) the granting of children as in “Ringworms” and (3) the resurgence of memories as in “Thoughts From Two Lands”. On the other hand, it invariably links Western medicine to the “foreign” or “colonizing” component (Japanese in Lai He and American in Huang Chunming or Wang Zhenhe) and is systematically presented as a sterilizing, destructive energy that annihilates the human body and the individual consciousness.