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Review

A historical evaluation of Chinese tongue diagnosis in the treatment of septicemic plague in the pre-antibiotic era, and as a new direction for revolutionary clinical research applications

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ABSTRACT

Chinese tongue diagnosis was initially developed to quickly and efficiently diagnose and prescribe medicine, while at the same time allowing the doctor to have minimal contact with the patient. At the time of its compiling, the spread of *Yersinia pestis*, often causing septicaemia and gangrene of the extremities, may have discouraged doctors to come in direct contact with their patients and take the pulse. However, in recent decades, modern developments in the field of traditional Chinese medicine, as well as the spread of antibiotics in conjunction with the advancements of microbiology, have overshadowed the original purpose of this methodology. Nevertheless, the fast approaching post-antibiotic era and the development of artificial intelligence may hold new applications for tongue diagnosis. This article focuses on the historical development of what is the world's earliest tongue diagnosis monograph, and discusses the directions that such knowledge may be used in future clinical research.

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1. Introduction

Tongue diagnosis is one of the key practices of clinical Chinese medicine. Yet, scholarly investigations about its origins, development and its initial purpose in the management of septicemic plague and other contagious diseases are still absent in Western literature. Additionally, there is a growing body of contemporary Chinese medicine tongue research, which often seems to develop independently from the classical theories, and towards many diverse directions that become progressively difficult to follow or categorize. Discovering a common ground for discussion, as well as new research directions and methodologies that effectively connect the classical theories with the modern advancements is becoming progressively necessary, especially given the increased application of integrative medicine.

Current advancements in the field of artificial intelligence [1,2], the popularization of e-health [3,4], telemedicine [5,6] and other related practices, as well as a theoretically fast-approaching post-antibiotic era are sufficient reasons for a fresh investigation of pre-modern tongue diagnosis in conjunction with contemporary medical research. We believe that re-discovering the original purpose of tongue observation has the potential to demonstrate that its pre-modern therapeutic principles may not be entirely outdated. Re-confirmation in a modern scientific setting and re-introduction of tongue diagnosis in a new platform that merges classic with contemporary research are essential, especially if it can ultimately provide practical solutions and answers for future clinical applications.

The purpose of this study was to investigate, identify and understand the original purpose and applications for tongue diagnosis, and also appreciate its development in light of the historical circumstances that engendered it. A historical and scholarly review of the primary literature may allow modern investigators to draw educated parallels, while firmly placing tongue observation in a clear contemporary context. Ultimately, the goal is to allow for well-informed decisions regarding future research, taking full advantage of the original strong points of tongue observation, while at the same time offering informed suggestions toward the directions that such future research may pursue.

2. Historical background

2.1. Observing the tongue

In the earliest versions of Chinese medicine, observation of the tongue was not regarded as a complete diagnostic procedure, or at least not in the way as it is commonly utilized in the clinic today. Although many important aspects of tongue theory were already outlined in the cornerstone medical classics such as the *Huang Di Nei Jing* (《黄帝内经》) and *Shang Han Za Bing Lun* (《伤寒杂论》), in reality, the total representation of the tongue and the theoretical contents introduced up until the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368) were so extremely limited that they can only be perceived as an introduction to tongue diagnosis [7].

Historically, the observation of the tongue as a complete diagnosis methodology first appeared in China around the Jin (1115–1234) and Yuan Dynasties with the development and introduction of the first such manual in the world, the *Ao Shi Shang Han Jin Jing Lu* (《敖氏伤寒金镜录》).

Interestingly, a strong nationalistic predisposition and scanty research on the history of medicine has often allowed many modern Chinese scholars to subscribe to an erroneous belief that Chinese tongue diagnosis has been around for at least 2000 or 3000 years [8,9] (the number of the millennia varies depending on the author), accidentally or otherwise misrepresenting the facts.

2.2. The practical reasons for developing a tongue diagnosis and the origins of *Ao Shi Shang Han Jin Jing Lu*

Given that there are no surviving copies of the book published prior to the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), the true origins of the *Ao Shi Shang Han Jin Jing Lu* are often subject to speculation. Nevertheless, it appears that at some point in history, a scholar with the surname Ao produced a collection of 12 tongue illustrations. Ao is sometimes associated with Ji-weng Ao (敖继翁), a scholar from Fujian who lived sometime during the Song (960–1279) and Yuan Dynasties. In any case, in his list, each of the illustrations was followed by the name of a classic prescription. That manuscript was most likely compiled from experience without offering any detailed theoretical explanation. The need for such a compilation derived from the fact that *Yersinia pestis*, which was transmitted through the fleas of rodents, would cause its 3 main manifestations, bubonic, septicemic or pneumonic plague, and often the extremities of the patients would turn gangrenous [10–12]. According to genetic studies confirming earlier historic speculations, all currently circulating strands of *Yersinia pestis*, originated in China around CE 1282–1343 [13,14], a chronology which roughly coincides with the Jin and Yuan Dynasties, the time when scholar Ao is believed to have lived. The speed by which septicemic plague was spreading was an important reason to discourage indigenous doctors from coming in physical contact with the patients.

At that time, tongue diagnosis offered a direct and non-invasive approach to diagnosis, and revolutionized Chinese medicine by providing a diagnostic standard based on objective determination of colors from a distance, rather than the subjective feeling of the pulse through direct contact with the sick. The continuous outbursts of contagious diseases that lasted through the first decades of the 20th century [15] kept this exact methodology relevant in China. However, the spread of antibiotics in the second half of the 20th century made such precautions redundant, and decreased the necessity of tongue diagnosis.

2.3. The secrecy surrounding the original tongue diagnosis and how it affected its development

Various prefaces and post-scripts to the earliest print editions [16,17] claim that the original manuscript was a secret manual to tongue diagnosis, circulating only among a few doctors, who were reluctant to reveal its existence. This is evident even from the title of the book, which did not contain the character for tongue, effectively hiding the fact that it contained information about tongue diagnosis. We first learn about this situation when, as the book chronicles, in 1341 a scholar named Qing-bi Du (杜清碧) observed a person prescribing herbs by merely looking at the tongue of patients. Upon questioning, that person declined to discuss anything about his methodology. According to Du's introduction to the text [17], he later chanced upon a copy of Ao's manual, and completed its theory by adding 24 more tongues from his own experience, to a total of 36 [18] (Fig. 1). From the published text, it is not entirely clear if Qing-bi Du ever printed his edited version or if he merely allowed it to be further recopied and circulated by hand. Ji Xue (薛己), who claimed to have discovered and further edited, printed and published Du's book in 1529, also declared that tongue inspection was a secret method for diagnosis [18] and was not something openly discussed among physicians, even during his time.

It is culturally interesting that doctors were not eager to propagate this method. In ancient China, secrecy [19] in the medical field was often perceived as an indication of the clinical validity of a methodology. This frequently erroneous belief still survives in folk mentality and is frequently exploited by charlatans, as seen from the enormity of unlicensed folk remedies that are still openly sold on back-streets all over China [19].

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