

Tibetan and Chinese pulse diagnostics: visual representations of tactile experience, a comparison

Elisabeth Hsu

Zhen Yan

Tibetan and Chinese pulse diagnostics are closely related, and in the first part of this paper the historical affinities of Tibetan and Chinese pulse diagnostics will be outlined. Zhen Yan has written her masters thesis on the early Tibetan texts (e.g. sMan-dpyap Zla-ba'I rGyal-po and rgyud-bzhi) and highlighted the similarities to Chinese pulse diagnostics (Suwen and Maijing, etc.), and this will form the basis of an in depth elaboration of her impending doctorate dissertation. She compares and contrasts the various qualities of the normal, sickness, odd (or strange), and death pulses, and their descriptions. The second part of the paper is devoted to a discussion of the Tibetan medical thankas of the 17th century which record various aspects of the process of Tibetan pulse diagnostics: locations on the body surface for taking the pulse (the point is that the pulse is not only taken at the wrist, as in present-day Chinese pulse taking, but at places like the neck, the loins, and various other places for which we have hints in early Chinese sources but which are no more practised in Chinese medicine today), rules about the condition in which a doctor is to take the pulse (These are: Do not eat wine and meat, avoid rubbing the body and roasting by the fire (not known from Chinese sources), do not overwork (i.e. in Tibet: hunt), do not eat cold foods and food that is hard to digest, do not overeat, do not fast, don't have sex, don't lie awake with insomnia, don't talk too much, don't use your brains too much, don't travel too far, don't stay motionless in one place. Take the pulse early in the morning) and the visual representation of the pulses themselves, a visual representation of tactile perception (the one mode of presenting movement is to show waves, the other is to show images – in both cases the visual signs that are produced would appear to be iconographic, but the iconographies are culture-specific). The Chinese and Tibetan material is from the 17th century, and before, and the paper may therefore be considered to be more historical in orientation. Yet part of the approach that we take to the material is informed by the anthropology of sensory experience.