It’s the aroma that catches my attention.

Unfamiliar, as if tasting a new fruit for the first time, yet simultaneously intimate, as if stepping into a shop chock-full of antiques that remind you of your own grandmother’s home…

Petals of dusty red peep forth from plump pouches of cloth. Seeds of shades of lavender and indigo adorn a round, silver platter. The seemingly endless rows of wooden shelves remind me of a library, an especially old and storied one, like the Providence Athenaeum. Decked in a white coat, a middle-aged man beckons us to enter, greeting our bewildered eyes as we crossed the threshold.

This traditional Chinese medicine pharmacy is perched in the basement of a large, twenty-first century hospital. From ginger to ginseng, wolfsbane to wolfberries, the fragrances of the herbs intermingle and collide in a tiny room in a large hospital in the middle of Hangzhou, Zhejiang, China.

I wondered if, amidst all the modernity of the huge hospital, the simple boxes brimming with dried seahorses and white peonies felt just as out of place as I did. I didn’t speak the language, nor did I fully understand the customs. I was nervous, a bit apprehensive of living in a country that is quite different from the one in which I grew up.

To be honest, I was not sure what I would learn during my time abroad last summer in China. The goal was to learn the principles of traditional Chinese medicine. Before embarking on the trip, I had packed a whole suitcase of questions. How would I apply what I learn to my future medical career? Would I be able to forge any friendships that span across different cultures and time zones and ideologies? Will I be challenged academically, emotionally, spiritually, and physically?

One month later, I did return home with a few answers in my pocket. It turns out, I learned so much more about myself, the world, and its people. I may have failed miserably at poking myself with acupuncture needles, and should have learned the language before I arrived, and felt very lost for the first week I was there, but my eyes were soon opened, as was my heart.

After more than 24 hours of flight time, with an additional hour of train rides (and an extra 30 minutes trying to find the train station itself), I was transported to a magical place. Where the 21st century meets a thousand-year-old history down winding roads and placid waters. This was my temporary home in a foreign land, a land brimming with beauty that cannot be tamed. I met many people on our daily bus trips, in the herbal clinics, and even on mountaintops.

From left to right, Alpert medical students Edward Tie, Jessica Cao, and Clara Mao in front of the SAHZU Jiefang Road campus in Hangzhou, China.
Eastern medicine varies vastly from medicine in the Western hemisphere. Equipped with fire, alcohol, and bamboo cups, I experimented with cupping therapy and even had the opportunity to practice on my classmates. I enjoyed sampling Goji berries and trying out acupuncture on myself. My knowledge of these alternative remedies greatly enhanced my medical education.

In the future, I could incorporate what I learn from traditional Chinese medicine to my practice as a physician. For example, I embrace the values behind holism, which emphasizes the individual patient, the patient-physician relationship, and preventing disease through healthy lifestyles. Furthermore, I especially was drawn to the ideals of spiritual and mental healing. A healthy body goes hand-in-hand with a healthy mind. Learning these elements has added a new dimension to my future capacity as a physician.

The pharmacist in the tiny herbal clinic regaled us with stories of how these tea leaves helped an elderly woman overcome a cold-like illness, or how those tree barks and dried fruit seeds render a potent combination to battle a headache. Coming from an American medical background, I was initially dubious. Can these alternative pathways really cure a viral or bacterial infection? Have these remedies been truly tried and tested? By the end of the program, however, my views significantly changed. I witnessed elderly patients receiving these herbal remedies and acupuncture. Even though we just stood there and watched and listened to her, an elderly woman who was receiving acupuncture told us xièxiè, thank you. Our presence alone was enough to give her comfort, knowing that we wanted to learn so that we may help others like her be healed. Their stories of how they feel much better after undergoing these medical methods gave me a new lens to my vision of health and restoration.

I have learned that we should respect many different ways of healing because healing is truly a complex endeavor. What resonated most with me during my time abroad was our shared goal. In both Eastern and Western medicine, we all just want to help and serve people. We are united by a common vision of sharing the gift of medicine with people who are in need. We need to respond to the needs of people with compassion, empathy, and honor.

What I also remember most about my time abroad were the friendships strengthened, not only with my fellow Brown University classmates but also with new friends thousands of miles away. I remember their smiles, their encouraging faces as they taught me a few Mandarin words, the way we all bear similar goals of impacting people and the world, the way we all just want to heal and be healed.

I returned to America with heightened awareness and an even more gripping passion to keep pursuing medicine. I want to reclaim the original goals of medicine, so we may not just participate in physical healing, but also emotional, spiritual, and mental. And if it takes seemingly out-of-the-box or out-of-the-ordinary methods, let us open our minds. Let us prioritize the needs and interests of the person who has trusted us with his or her care. Treatments and pills and surgical procedures, in both hemispheres of the world, may fail. So at the end of the day, when all the gadgets and gizmos are stripped away, let us remember the true goal of medicine: to be there for our fellow human beings. Let us grow in grace. Let us grow in wisdom.

Let us be noble in our pursuit of healing.

As Far as the East is from the West: Exchange Experiences in Traditional Chinese Medicine

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Sitting in JFK International Airport, I picked up a conversation with the girl next to me and came to discussing our travel plans.

“I am going to study in an exchange program at Zhejiang University School of Medicine and learn about TCM – Traditional Chinese Medicine – like acupuncture, cupping, herbology, etc,” I explained

“Oh! Is that the Chinese voodoo stuff?” she asked.

The gap between Western and Eastern medicine is as expansive as the Pacific itself. Western medicine connotes deduction, precision, and pharmaceuticals, whereas Eastern Medicine involves induction, balance, and a sense of spirituality. The two are not two sides of the same coin; they are different forms of currency.

My parents used TCM very often when I was growing up. They waited hours in line for a famous acupuncturist in Chinatown to insert the needles into their skin that would cure them from pollen allergies. When I, at the uncomfortable age of 13, developed uncontrollable acne and mood swings, I was taken to an herbalist, who brewed me brown-colored, odd-tasting soups to drink with my meals. Nonetheless, TCM was talked about as something you either “believe in” or you don’t, as if it were a religion or myth.

I had the unique experience of learning Traditional Chinese Medicine before I took any biology classes such as physiology or anatomy at Brown. As the enthusiastic physicians at ZUSM [Zhejiang University School of Medicine] first explained the duality of yin and yang, the equilibrium of the five elements within the body, and the circulation of chi, the concepts were difficult to grasp. Terms like “essence”