

## The Semiotic Universe in Traditional Chinese Medicine: A Chinese Philosophical Analysis

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### Abstract

Semiotic universe refers to a universe full of semiosis, dynamic sign process or sign interpretation. The universe, like life, is the action of signs. Semiotically, it is usually by Sebeok a global semiotics. In traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), however, a smaller world of cognition, semiotic universe also exists in the recognition of the world, the construction of the theoretical system and the communication of TCM around the world. The birth of TCM is a semiosis or sign process that the ancient Chinese tried to use their muse to interpret the nature, human and the society. They turned to something metaphysical and intangible to start the origin. From TCM perspective, the whole universe is filled with sign actions or semiosis. It is a semiotic universe.

**Key words:** semiotic universe • TCM • semiosis • interpretation

### Introduction

Semiotics is a study of signs and meanings. In its oldest usage, its origin can be dated back to the founder of medical science, Hippocrates, who attempted to understand the interaction between the observable pattern of physiological symptoms and possible diseases. Sebeok (2001) proposes an observation post for the studies on the signs of life and the life of signs, which meet in his “global semiotics”, in which, from this global perspective, anthropocentric and glottocentric semiotic theory and practice, for a time the foci of general semiotics or semiology, are no longer the sole foci. From his global semiotic theory, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) can be a comprehensive systematic science as well as culture which swells with the field to include biosemiotics, zoosemiotics, phytosemiotics, mycosemiotics, microsemiotics, environmental semiotics, endosemiotics, ecosemiotics, semioethics and all that under the umbrella of plain semiotics, or global semiotics. According to Sebeok, other field of knowledge, biology and the social science, ethology and linguistics, psychology and the health sciences, and human praxis generally encounter in global semiotics, which may be presented as a metascience involving all sign-related academic disciplines.

Medicine semiotics has never gained a firm foothold in semiotics itself or medical science either. (Colaguori, 2017) It is the case with traditional Chinese medicine semiotics (TCMS). However, it cannot be denied that TCMS has its logic and meanings. TCM is a comprehensive systematic medicine with the aim to solve the problems existing in human life and human health guided by TCM theories, among which qi, yin-yang and five-element

theories are of the Dao ( “道” in Chinese, generally and simply believed to be the ways or principles ) of TCM in China. It involves the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of diseases as well as guidance of rehabilitation and preservation of health. In Western medicine, semiotics may help physicians interpret signs and symptoms into diagnoses, which is in accordance to anthropocentric semiotics. A sign, especially, a symptom stands for something. Signs become a communication instrument between physicians and patients, and make the interpretation of our world possible. By contrast, TCM is a combination of natural and social sciences full of a variety of signs featured by its unique theoretical system, cognition of the relationship between nature and human or human and society, and scientific thinking methodology with conception of holism and treatment determination based on syndrome differentiation as its cardinal characteristics of theoretical system. Although asymptomatic infectors are not rarely mentioned, that doesn't mean there exists no sign or signal that the body has infected a virus. That is why TCM chooses to differentiate symptoms and syndromes. Asymptomatic infector doesn't mean a TCM expert can't find the syndromes that might hide deeply in the body. They are so asymptomatic or intangible that one cannot even feel their existence. These intangible signs can be interpreted with TCM concepts of qi, yin-yang, and five elements and some other typical Chinese terminologies, such as jing, or expressed as “essence” in English. These metaphysical things, all being the semiotically-believed meta-signs, feature that TCM is a world full of dynamic sign activities and experiences. As a matter of fact, it is a semiotic universe in TCM world and its original recognition is, to some extent, the play of musement or contemplation of semiosis. The communication between TCM practitioners and the patients occupies only a small proportion of the whole sign process. In 2019, Italian semiotician Susan Petrilli published her book *Signs, Language and Listening: Semioethical Perspectives*. In this book, the author adopted listening as a primary tool to present her “care for life” framework on helping and rescuing the sexual minorities and the people worldwide who are suffering from wars, disasters, and poverty. For the communication is more than language and listening, TCM diagnosis practice is a process involving the well accepted “four diagnoses”: 望(wàng, inspection), 闻(wén, listening and smelling or auscultation and olfaction), 问(wèn, inquiry) and 切(qiè, pulse taking and palpitation). The “care for life” in TCM is more than listening as proposed by Petrilli. Besides, the communication with the nature or society is included as well. TCM is beyond the field of pure medicine in the Western scope, but belongs to a field of how to balance between human and nature, human and society in an oriental scope. Such is a dynamic, rather than static, balance. Therefore, life is obviously an action full of signs in TCMS.

The cognition of the universe differs in China from that in the Western World from the very beginning of ancient time. The Western religions told their people God creates the universe, while Pangu, according to Chinese legendary myth, is the one who split the chaotic, intangible, smoke- or cloud-like balls to create the heaven and the earth. There exists a boundary of heterogeneity when the same problem is researched, for the two cultures are absolutely different from each other though the origin of the universe is just legendary. Whenever a doctor observes the individual phenomenon, an inferential procedure (or logismos) begins. This is an abductive process, which is basic for both diagnostic and mental hypothesis in TCM. Such an abductive process is in an oriental way rather than a western way. This oriental way is an accumulation of daily experience from the ancient times. TCM system has been continuously enriched and improved and different historical stages have witnessed different development in TCM contents and characteristics.

For example, when the ancient Chinese in the Neolithic Age discovered by chance that the stimulus from a pointed stone applied to the body can help them relieve the pain, they made an inference to build up the relation between the stimulus of the stone instrument and pain relief. But insofar as this relationship had been made conventional and registered as such a semiotic convention has been established. The pointed stone, thus, became a sign interpreted as a treatment instrument which acted as a rudiment of the acupuncture needle coming up later. Its shape, its function was recognized and generalized which later became the law for the ancient Chinese to seek for some substitute with similar function. Bone needles, bamboo needles and finally, with the development of metallurgy technology, metal needles came into being. Whatever the materials are, they bear the same function. Thus, this pointed-shaped needle which can be used to puncture human body's acupoints is no longer a concrete single needle but a functional instrument. It has been upgraded from the Secondness of sign to the Thirdness of sign.

## **Semiotic universe and TCM**

In the global semiotics dubbed by Sebeok, human being is a sign in a universe of signs. The symbiosis of human and nature is a shared theme of today's globe, which is just what TCM is seeking for from the very beginning: “天人合一” (the unity of man and nature) or “天人相应” (the adaptation of man to nature), one core doctrine of Huangdi's Inner Classics, a forefather of all the other medical books in China, with the meaning that human and nature's coexistence should be in a harmonious way, is always threading through the whole process of practice and interpretation of TCM. This doctrine can be interpreted in the following three aspects. First of all, the resemblance of human to nature, which means that human body's form and structure resemble those of the nature. Second, the movement and transformation of human physiological functional rhythm goes with the change of the four seasons. With the passage of every minute, hour, day, week, month, season or year, human's physiological function changes correspondingly. That is, the change of physiological function of human body is time-relevant or temporal. Third, the change of human body goes with the change of space. Temporal, spatial factors can by no means be neglected in the syndrome differentiation in TCM practice and treatment.

For example, different individuals may suffer the same disease but manifest different syndromes, different body conditions and living environments. In TCM, the treatment should be according to syndrome differentiation. In other words, though suffering from the same disease, the treatment should be conducted according to the interior environment and exterior one as well, which is highly in line with Jakob von Uexküll's *Umwelt* (1909), a subject-engaged environment or nature rather than the absolute nature without any subjective interference or the pure subjective understanding nature. Nature counts a lot in the pathogens according to TCM. The syndrome differentiation of COVID-19 infected patients in diagnosis and treatment is a case that shows TCM will always prescribe its treatment temporally and spatially. This makes a great difference from the western medicine or the modern medicine, for whom, the foci are typically on partial body instead of the whole environment of the body, still less the determining elements from the nature or the exterior environment.

The ancient Chinese philosophers hold the view that qi is the very original matter that constitutes the universe of human recognition and advocated unification of qi. The qiology theory can be generalized into two aspects, with qi being matter on the one hand and the origin of life

on the other. In Huangdi's Inner Classics, qi is always the element to be used to interpret the natural phenomena, human physiological activities, pathological varieties, clinical diagnoses, acupunctural and herbal treatments, and some other aspects, which enables a complete theoretically qiological system. This uniad theory of qi can be specifically embodied in the duad yin-yang theory, pentad five-elements theory, zang-fu organ theory, channel and meridian theory and some other typical TCM theories.

As Sebeok has included in his research, "The life of signs and the signs of life as they appear today in the biological science: the signs of life and of specifically human life, of adult life, and of the organism's relations with the environment, the signs of normal or pathological forms of dissolution and deterioration of communicative capabilities." (Petrilli, 2004) This is the western way of understanding biological science. In TCM, it has its typical life signs and signs of life. Huangdi's Inner Classics reads "阴阳离绝，精气乃绝", which means the unity of the opposites yin qi and yang qi, the interaction of both is a sign of life. Without any one of them, there is no life at all. The interrelationship between them is depicted in fig 1. TCM just brings us into an epistemological universe full of signs of qi, yin-yang, five elements and other similar signs.

As Locke designated human style of inquiry as a search for "humane understanding"; Peirce, as "the play of musement". Sebeok points out semiotics is an exclusively human style of inquiry, consisting of the contemplation of semiosis. (Petrilli, 2003) In TCM, semiotic transformation and interpretation/translation between different signs is the cordial characteristics. The relation between nature and human can be established through the transformation of signs (e.g. the transformation of qi,) and interpretation/translation of signs (e.g. the interpretation of yin-yang or five elements) through analogy for some common interpretant or similarity.

When a TCM practitioner does a diagnosis, semiosis and interpretation of the syndromes is already in his consciousness, a contemplation of semiosis. The relations or connections between the syndromes and the environment, the syndromes and the disease are interpreted and processed through the practitioner's experience accumulated by all the experts in TCM history.

## **Theoretical signs in TCM**

In TCM, the signs of "qi", "yin-yang", and "five elements" lay the TCM philosophical basis of the whole semiotic universe. Originated from the ancient Chinese philosophy, these three theoretical systems, but by no means merely these three ones, serving as sign systems in TCM, laying the foundation of a special Chinese way to recognize the world. Rather than physical, they are even more metaphysical.

### ***The sign of qi***

There is a monistic abstract cognition in ancient China that the objective material origin of the nature and the whole universe is "qi", a concept coming from "floating clouds". The ancient Chinese noticed the changing, flowing, gathering, and dispersing of the clouds, which they believed there was something intangible promoting the whole motion of the cloud in the sky. In this monism, qi is regarded as the basic material to form the whole universe though it is intangible or invisible. One, however, can feel the existence of qi through the movement of

something else. Everything in the world is synthesized when qi is moving and changing. It is only because qi is the only material which constitute the whole world that the universe can be regarded as a unified whole. Human life is synthesized from qi, and it is the same with animals, plants etc. Qi is a metaphysical reality which can be the innate qi inherited from parents before birth and the acquired qi obtained from food, air and the like in the nature. According to Zhang Dainian(2005), a Chinese philosopher, qi is an objective existence which takes up space and is capable of moving in Chinese classic philosophy. Without qi, without life. Therefore, in TCM, the item qi can be used to signify life. It is the origin of life and regarded as the sign of life in TCM. By contrast, Hippocrates, the ancestor of western medicine, proposed that three nutriments, including solid food, drink and pneuma, nourished the bodies of man and animals as well. Pneuma is something similar to yet narrower in concept than qi, for it is only called breath inside a body and air outside it, while qi is the substratum that constitutes everything in the universe. (Xie, 2010) Qi can nourish and construct the human body. In TCM, qi is materially basic and energetically dynamic of human activities. Qi is acknowledged to be the most elementary unit of any material structure which is comparable to atom in Greek philosophy rather than pneuma. Qi can be born or acquired. Those from parents are “born qi”, while those from nature, especially the clear air and nutrients in food, “acquired qi”.

Furthermore, qi is moving and changing all the time in nature and within human body as well. Different locations and functions of qi are named differently for the reason that they are interpreted dynamically. For example, one has Yuan-qi (元气), the meta-qi, which can be understood as the qi of all qi in human body; Jing-qi (精气), essence-qi, purer than Yuan-qi; Ying-qi (营气), nutrient-qi, which is chiefly composed of the essential qi derived from diet through the functioning of the spleen (in TCM concept) and stomach (TCM concept as well); and wei-qi (卫气), defense-qi, which moves outside the vessels to protect the superficies of the body and defends against the pathogenic attacks from the outside. There are still more concepts related to qi in TCM.

Qi is just one of the most basic philosophical sign in TCM. Most often the varied forms of qi is thought of as the sign that is the result of an interpretation of the general qi according to its generation, distribution, function and its relationship with the body.

### *The signs of yin-yang*

To have a further understanding of the universe, especially its descriptive features, qi is not the thing that can cover all. In order to solve the problem of a further understanding of the universe, qi is thus divided into yin and yang. This duadic division is introduced to TCM as a methodology. TCM is just an oriental medical sphere where various signs converge with human life. All the creatures on this Planet exist as part of one great ecological community, the biosphere. Though the term biosphere begun to draw on us only recently, the exact concept has always been existing in TCM, which can be simply interpreted as “unity of man and nature”, a principle that believes man is only one part of the ecology community or nature. The holism, or the universal view of things, is the routine of TCM’s principle, method, prescription, and medication. In TCM sphere, it is not just a biosphere, but one penetrated by semiosphere to every corner, incorporating all forms of communication, mainly reflected by the four major diagnoses as mentioned above in the very beginning. In short, signs of life. Life and semiosis coincide. Life is transformed from qi, which first diverges into yin qi and yang qi. Only when the yin qi and yang qi



interact in a dynamic balance can life be in a healthy equilibrium. Yin qi and yang qi is mediated albeit they are dyads, which can be manifested in the Yin-yang Taiji Diagram (fig. 1). It apparently depicts the sign processes when using yin-yang theory to interpret the whole universe.



**Fig 1** Yin-yang Taiji Diagram

The diagram above clearly manifests the relation between yin and yang. As shown, the division between yin and yang is not abrupt and static. Instead, the curve separating the ball into black and white indicates a dynamic balance between yin and yang. Yin and yang are first of all in opposition. They respectively represent the opposite sides of things and phenomena in the universe, such as earth and heaven, night and day, cold and heat, static and dynamic, internal and external, descending and extending, entering and exiting. The list can go on. In Chinese, yin stands for black, down, dark, inward movement and others, while yang is white, up, bright, outward movement and others. The interpretation and transformation can be graded up from firstness to thirdness. According to Peirce’s philosophy of evolution, symbols grow by incorporating indices and icons (CP 2.302, c. 1895). It is the case with the interpretation of the symbols of yin and yang. As long as the interpretation goes on, the growth of signs is bound to appear. The circle is not sectioned by a straight line across the middle into two half circles, but into two fish-shaped parts, which represent the dynamic equilibrium between yin and yang. On certain condition, yin can grow into yang while yang can also change back into yin, which is lively represented by the curve across the yin-yang circle. The two seeds of yin and yang, as shown in the above diagram, represent that in yang there exists yin, and vice versa. Unlike Cartesian’s dualism, yin and yang are not static dyads but two intertwined and interweaving elements, which are united in the same circle of the universe. According to Huangdi’s Inner classics, only when yin is at peace and yang is compact can essence-spirit be normal; and if yin and yang separate from each other, human spirit will eventually exhausted. (Li Zhaoguo, 2005)

Originally, yang, in Chinese, means “sunshine” while yin, “shadow”. The two special signifiers gradually evolved into a theory of extensive application, which consequently enrich the implication of yin and yang. In Huangdi’s Inner Classics, water is yin and fire is yang. “Water” and “fire” are specific things. That is the way the ancient Chinese apply specific things as metaphors to practice analogy, because fire is warm, bright, dynamic and up-flaming, while water is cold, dim, static and downward-moving. The features of water are the features of yin, and the ones of fire the ones of yang.

In Peirce’s triad division of his cognition of the semiotic world, signs can be divided into Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness which becomes the guidance of the classification of

qualisign-sinsign-legisign, icon-index-symbol, rheme-proposition-argument, etc. Likely, every sign in TCM universe can be attributed to n-otomy of various modes of sign production. Yin and yang are a dichotomy of philosophical concept in ancient China to illustrate the universe, which can be further illustrated as coldness-heat, downside-upside, inside-outside, silence-motion, deficiency-sufficiency, and so forth. But the division is nowhere to be static. Triadic division is also a rule in TCM. For instance, the concept of yin can be further divided into three levels: jueyin, shaoyin and taiyin; and it is the same with yang into three levels: taiyang, shaoyang, yangming. It is quite correspondent to Peirce's "quasi-interpreter" and "quasi-mind" (CP 4.551) which takes something as a sign of something else. It is commonly accepted in the interpretation of TCM theoretical system.

Between Peirce's triad, there may exist a degeneration or upgeneration, while for the dichotomy of yin-yang, they are more closely related to each other, for they are a unity of opposites, inter-basically promoting, nourishing and constraining each other. Yin will come into being when yang reaches its utmost, while yang is born when yin reaches its utmost, which is exemplarily reflected in the alternation of the four seasons, from cold to hot and back to cold. This kind of exchange shows a dynamic equilibrium of the inter-transformation. Between the three levels within the concepts of yin and yang, there also exist a dynamic transformation from one to another.

In modern understanding of TCM, even when a person is sick, there still exists an unhealthy equilibrium of yin qi and yang qi within a human body. In whichever case, the semiosis from the universe should never be neglected, for in TCM any healthy person could be a quasi-unhealthy one or any unhealthy person could be a quasi-healthy one if the environment he lives is changed. That is the concept of "the accordance between the heaven (the nature or the environment) and the human", by which it can be interpreted that any symptoms of diseases can never be diagnosed according to the human body; instead, the elements from the nature, such as the locations, the seasons, the climates, could be the stimulus to the interior environment of the body.

### ***The signs of five elements***

The introduction of qi and yin-yang concepts to TCM field is not enough to depict the function of the universe. Hence, five elements were introduced. Five elements theory is a pentadic understanding of human being and the world. The pentad includes wood, fire, earth, metal and water, which are believed to be the five basic substances of the world. They are so concrete materials that one cannot connect them directly to the construction of the world. The five elements, which has traditionally been translated into "wood", "fire", "earth", "metal" and "water", are not exactly static things. Instead, they are the movement of the five elements and believed to be the essential elements to construct the whole universe. The categories of smells, seasons, tastes, directions and other concepts can find their respective counterparts in these five elements. Theoretically, these five elements are not nouns but verbs. Sometimes they can be understood as "five movements". Take one of the element "wood" as an example. It is not the timber, a dead wood but a tree with life. The sign is a dynamic one which shows the action of the sign, the upward growth of life.

As has been mentioned at the beginning of this part, the five elements are introduced to depict the function of the universe. The interpretation of them is very important according to Chinese philosophy. Every time in explaining the diagnosis, pathogenesis or choice of treatment, an interpretation, inference or deduction can never be missed.

These five elements are not static but always kinetic, the relationship between which reflects that things and phenomena in the universe are growing and changing as a result of the steady sign action or semiosis between each other.

As in Shang Shu (Song, 2016 ), a famous ancient Chinese historical book, the features of the five elements have been explained, which act as the interpretant of the semiosis of interpretation of application of TCM theories. Wood can be bent and straightened; fire flares upwards; earth permits sowing, growing and reaping; metal can be molded and hardened; water moistens downwards. In the TCM theoretical system, the five elements not merely refer to the exact substance itself, they are the counterparts of five zang-organs (an anatomy concept in TCM), five colors, five musical tones, five grains, five flavors, five transformations, five weather agents, five directions and five seasons. Such sign action may go on as long as one wants to have an analysis or interpretation of the nature and human body. (see table 1)

**Table 1** Classification of things by five elements

The Natural World								
Five elements	Five Grains	Five Flavors	Five Colors	Five Transformations	Five Weathers Agents	Five Orientations	Five Seasons	Five Music Notes
Wood	Wheat		Green	Germination	Wind	East	Spring	Jue
Fire	Foxtail	Sour	Red	Growth	Heat	South	Summer	Zhi
Earth	Millet	Bitter	Yellow	Transformation	Dampness	Middle	Late summer	Gong
Metal	Sorghum	Sweet	White	Reaping	Dryness	West	Autumn	Shang
Water	Rice	Acrid	Black	Storing	Cold	North	Winter	Yu
	Soybean	Salty						
The Human World								
Five elements	Five Zang-viscera	Five Fu-viscera	Five sense organs	Five constituents	Five Emotions	Five secretions	Five pulse	Five Brilliances
Wood	Liver	Gallbladder	Eyes	Tendons	Anger	Tears	Wiry	Nail
Fire	Heart	Small intestine	Tongue	Vessels	Joy	Sweat	Surging	Face
Earth	Spleen	Stomach	Lips	Muscles	Brooding	Saliva	Moderate	Lip
Metal	Lung	Large intestine	Nose	Skin and hair	Grief	Nasal discharge	Superficial	Fine hair
Water	Kidney	Urinary bladder	Ears	Bones	Fear	Spittle	Deep	Hair

One should-be-mentioned important thing is the relationship between these five elements. They are not independent existence. On the one hand, for each sign of the five elements, any one could be interpreted as the mother of a certain element and the son of another



certain element. That is to say, wood can be the mother of fire and the son of water, because fire is interpreted as the burning of wood in ancient times and water usually promote the growth of tree (wood) according to an average mind; fire is the mother of earth and son of wood, for the burning of things results into a pile of dust (earth); earth is mother of metal, for in earth mineral can be found; metal is the mother of water, for it can be melted into water. This logic might sound a bit absurd to a western ear, but it indeed represents the most plain observation and musement of ancient Chinese philosophy. This is a fantastic cycling which enables TCM practitioners believe that the relation between any mother-son pair can bring about condition of one's body health. Anything wrong with the son or the mother will naturally influence its corresponding mother or son. This is a cyclic sequence of generation of the five elements. The five elements perform perfect interpretation in TCM daily practices. On the other hand, any of the five elements has its own "can-be-conquered" and "cannot-be-conquered" elements. In other word, wood restricts the earth for it can penetrate the earth and grow up; earth restricts water for it can be used to shut off the water especially in flood; water restricts fire for it is usually used to put off the fire; fire restricts metal, for the high temperature of fire can melt metal; and metal restricts wood, for wood is easily cut down by using metal tools. Thus forms a cyclic sequence of restriction. The relation between any restriction pair is accepted as a pair of "cannot-be-conquered" and "can-be-conquered". Take wood-earth pair as an example, for earth, wood is its "cannot-be-conquered" and it itself is the "can-be-conquered" in this pair. The mother-son relation or the restriction relation can be used as guidance in diagnoses and treatment of TCM sign interpretation or TCM semiosis.

In reading TCM works, a word, a phrase or a sentence is more of a sign of generality than itself to form a complete TCM theoretical system. They are somewhat like an equation in mathematics which is conditioned to get its value of x, y or z. Take yin-yang balance as an example. Yin and yang are the two values on each side of an equation. To balance the equation, any minute change of yin side or yang side will naturally cause the change of the other one. Thus, in order to achieve the goal of the balance of the equation, the translation and interpretation of the relation of yin-yang is of great importance. According to the yin-yang theory, they two are opposite and restricted with each other, interdependent on each other. What's more, there exists an equilibrium and waning-waxing between each other. And they will transform into each other under certain condition, nature included.

## **The semiotic universe of TCM theories**

In "The Evolution of Semiosis" (Posner, Robering, and Sebeok 1997-98, I), Sebeok opens with the question of the cosmos before semiosis and after the beginning of the universe and refers to the regnant paradigm of modern cosmology, i.e. the Big Bang theory. Similarly, in Ancient China, there is some theory of the beginning of the universe, which serves as the theoretical foundation of TCM. That is the theory of "uniad of qi", according to which the whole universe is a holistic unity of qi. Qi constitutes all the things in the universe. TCM adopted qi in almost all fields. Qi serves as not only the material basis of human body but dynamic energy of the human activities. Just as Sebeok believed, semiosis and life coincide. "Semiosis is the criterial attribute of life", which is an axiom Sebeok believes cardinal to semiotics. In the world of TCM, the start of life and semiosis is also a symbiosis. What TCM seeks is a dynamic balance between human and nature, human and society. Only the harmony of the whole universe can lead to the well-being of human being themselves. So in diagnosis, the body condition and symptoms are the indication of the judgment of disease for the doctors.

However, TCM believes any change from the universe will bring about different syndromes of a disease. That is why TCM's treatment determination is based on syndrome differentiation.

Semiotic universe believes that the universe is a semiotic web. Although TCM is a science studying human health, its difference from the western understanding makes it a special world of semiosis. Global semiotics enables the life of signs and the signs of life to be studied at a meeting point and an observation post. That is "life sciences" and "sign sciences" converge in "global semiotics". Also in TCM, the universe can be categorized into a dynamic triad of heaven, earth and man. It advocates observing earth with heaven and man with earth, and observing the function of human organs and the operation law of meridians (TCM concept) with that of all natural things in heaven and earth. Therefore, the essence of TCM is human, specifically the natural body of the human body. For example, the imbalance must be caused by the intrusion of foreign objects, called "邪 xie" (something evil) in TCM. To restore the balance state of the natural body, it is necessary to remove the evil qi, or intrusive objects that invade the natural body. Therefore, taking all natural things as medicine, man can achieve the natural balance of the human body and restore the natural smoothness of the meridians. Just as Sebeok's approach to the "life of signs" is "global" or "holistic", TCM features holistic thinking methodology, which can be interpreted as the unity of "heaven, earth and man", or to achieve the dynamic balance between man and nature.

In his "global semiotics", Sebeok criticized anthropocentric and glottocentric semiotic theory and practice. In TCM, similarly, human being is not the center either. The understanding of human life and life of signs are rooted to the holistic unity of the heaven, the earth and the human. Above all, one should obey the natural law to survive. When threatened, however, human life is always the first to be considered, which is also expanded to the development of Chinese economy, that is, the development of the country or the society should always give way to the survival of human being. Such kind of harmony is conditioned and dynamic rather than static. When understanding semiosis in TCM, it is not anthroposemiosis, but eco-semiosis, which means the outside natural and social world will always be concerned when a TCM practitioner starts to diagnose a disease. In other words, the semiotic universe in TCM includes the *innenwelt* and the *umwelt* (endosemiosis and eco-semiosis).

Internally, human body is a small world whose abnormality will be manifested from such symptoms as spirit, complexion, and any other physical conditions and actions which are usually observed by the four different diagnostic methods of TCM as has mentioned before. These four methods are used to determine a patient's illness. For a TCM practitioner, giving meaning to a patient's symptoms is the first step in the diagnosis process. These symptoms are usually interpreted into some terms related to the sign-vehicle qi, yin-yang, the five elements or some other signs. The appearance of a patient could help TCM doctors discover the pattern and development of his disease. Usually, any change of the five sense organs (ears, eyes, nose, lips and tongue) is believed to be reflections of the inner five-zang organs (kidney, liver, lungs, spleen, and heart) in TCM. Each of the sense organs is separately a representation of each inner five-zang organ. For example, the eyes reflect the liver's health. Whether one has bright eyes determined whether his liver is healthy or not. Similarly, the nose reflects the lungs; The lips reflect the spleen; the ears the kidney; and the tongue the heart. TCM specialists can tell just by looking at face or complexion if there is any health problem internally. The relations between the signs on the face and the objective diseases in the inner organs are mediated and interpreted by a TCM practitioners' experience. A patient's voice can represent whether he has

sufficient qi, and the poor digestion and mental illness may lead to the manifestation of bad breath or smelly breath. Inquiry is likely to show humanistic concern to a patient for the whole process of the chat will relax him so as to create a relaxing atmosphere. Pulse-taking is the essence as well as a distinguishing feature of TCM. The pulses of Cun, Guan, Chi of one's left and right wrists respectively reflect heart, liver and kidney for the left wrist and lung, spleen and vital gate for the right one. Also, for a TCM specialist, the tongue coating can be regarded as a natural gastroscope. A combination of the observation of tongue coating and pulse manifestation can show the conditions of the inner main organs.

Peirce's description of semiosis is an irreducibly triadic process or relation (sign, object, and interpretant), focuses particularly upon how the interpretant is produced, therefore it concerns that which is involved in understanding or in the teleonomic interpretation of the sign. (CP. 5.473) Externally, the outside world is more often than not to influence the human body. Different seasons, locations, times of the day, social elements, diet and other factors should be concerned when a TCM specialist obtains the symptoms through the four diagnostic methods.

For the existence and survival of the signs of five elements, it is vital that these signs can be translated or interpreted. As Peirce put it, a sign can complete its future-oriented double mission of representation and interpretability only when it is explained (CP 2.230), interpreted (CP 5.569), or has determined an interpretant (CP. 5.569). A Peircean sign process is a triadic one with a unity of a sign, an object and an interpretant. In TCM, no object creates no interpretant empowered by the above mentioned three metaphysical realities merely because it is a semiosis of triadic sign process. Qi, yin-yang and five elements become the carriers or sign-vehicles of different objects which needs interpreting. For the ancient Chinese, the floating clouds are just signs in the sky. They explored the object that the clouds might signify. After observation, they found the gathering and dispersing of the clouds were achieved because of the flow of wind. The clouds also present different shapes and different changes of the clouds may cause raining or snowing which may nourishing the earth, but over-raining may bring about flood. Such kind of intangible things as wind and cloud in the ancient Chinese eyes can be transformed into something tangible. Thus, an important concept that "tangibility is born from intangibility" and that all tangible things are born from intangible qi came into being. There is no doubt, the formation of the concept of qi is completely a sign process. From the natural signs in the sky, interpreters try to give their interpretation in their own understanding which finally lead to the product or the object "qi", a new sign, in turn, utilized to refer to the whole world. For example, when practicing acupuncture, a practitioner will communicate with his patients whether they perceive the sense of numbness, soreness or bloatness. If the answer is positive, they call it "De qi", which means the arrival of qi or the obtaining of qi. Naturally, the receiver's perception becomes the sign of the treatment effectiveness "De qi" which can be interpreted with the theory of qi. Thus, a sign process is completed when the three parties have been combined into one practice. For an acupuncturist, a patient's numbness, soreness or the like response are signs or symptoms that his stimulus of needling has been received and elicited the appropriate response.

Every time the correlational nature of the TCM sign function may be presupposed, TCM practitioners will use these metaphysical signs to explain the complex interplay between the signs of yin and yang or five elements. The recognition and understanding of ancient Chinese towards the world is just a contemplation of semiosis or the play of musement. Yin and yang are two signs originally used to index the "shadow" and "sunshine". The Chinese characters of these two concepts are "阴" and "阳". They are signs stand for shadow and

sunshine which are believed to related to the sun and the moon. According to Peirce(2.300), a sign is “anything which determines something else (its interpretant) to refer to an object to which itself refers (its object) in the same way, the interpretant becoming in turn a sign, and so on ad infinitum”. Eco(1979, 69) defines that a sign “implies a process of unlimited semiosis”. This kind of unlimited semiosis is typical in TCM. Whenever one comes to a sign in nature, yin will become the object as long as interpreted with the features of static, darkness, or downwardness. On the one hand, yin-yang can be the expression of “shadow” and “sunshine”; on the other, it in turn can be the content of any other thing. For example, in TCM, the left and right sides are respectively the passages of yin and yang through which they can ascend and descend; water and fire are the signs of yin and yang. (Li Zhaoguo, 2005)

The birth of TCM is a semiosis or sign process that the ancient Chinese tried to use their muse to interpret the nature, human and the society. They turned to something metaphysical and intangible to start the origin. In the spread of these concepts, sign processes are also involved. As Eco distinguished in the introduction part of *A Theory of Semiotics*, there are a process of communication and a process of signification. To explore the reason that TCM cannot easily be accepted by many throughout the world, we may find it concerns the problem of a communicative process or a signifying process. For those experts in TCM, they have already acquired the knowledge or philosophy TCM based on, knew the rules and laws of the TCM system. Any sign is not merely a meaningless stimulus but arouses an interpretive response in their mind. Sorting the signs, interpreting them, reasoning with the principles of TCM and determining the problems of the body, they explore the ways to solve the problems, and prescribe the treatment. For those unknowledgeable of TCM philosophy, any sign, such as qi, yin or yang, five elements, is just a stimulus without any interpretation in mind, which contributes to no passage of information, although they know there is something behind it.

Not only in the treatment of TCM can we recognize a comprehensive complete sign process, but we can also recognize in many other aspects, syndrome differentiation, pathology, diagnosis, to name only a few. When talking about a disease, TCM usually divides it into three different diagnostic categories: symptom- syndrome-disease. Logically speaking, a disease includes a complete process of onset, including specific etiology, mode of onset, typical clinical manifestations, development laws and outcomes, reflecting the basic laws of occurrence, development and prognosis; Syndrome type is the pathological summary of the body at a certain stage of the disease, revealing the nature of the disease at a certain stage, reflecting the adaptability of the body and its relationship with the environment, and providing basis and guidance for treatment; Symptoms are subjective discomfort or objective abnormal changes of the body, such as headache, fever and accelerated pulse, reflecting the nature of the disease. These three concepts are logically interrelated. Symptoms are the basic elements of syndromes and the clinical manifestations of diseases. For the whole process of disease, there will be a certain stage of pattern or syndrome. Or, a disease is a series of syndromes or symptoms. At different stages of this process, different syndromes involve different climate, environment and personality.

Symptoms are usually separate and independent phenomena which can be a patients' subjective abnormal feeling or behavior, and also unusual index obtained when checked by a doctor. Syndrome or pattern is unique to TCM, which generally formed by a group of comparatively, stable, interlinked pathological summary of the body in a certain stage or of a certain type.

Whenever a TCM practitioner start to treat a patient, there will be a syndrome differentiation first, a dynamic sign action and interpretation of qi, yin-yang, and five elements etc. According to the four diagnoses of observation, auscultation and olfaction, inquiry and pulse, the four conventional ways in TCM to grasp a patients' body condition, various symptoms will be collected and analyzed comprehensively by induction, deduction and abduction. The correlated pathogeneses are typically interpreted from a holism perspective, whether the yin-yang balance is broken, whether the five elements of the body zang-fu organs practice a healthy cycling of mutual- generation and restraint, and whether the body qi is still sufficient to maintain the life activities of the human body, etc.

In TCM anatomy, different channels and meridians are scattering all over a human body. Their transportation and flowing vary with the change of time and the space as well. They are very important for acupuncture practice, for the acupoints tend to be scattering along them. In the way of acupuncture, the prescription of acupuncture treatment does not lie in the sizes or types of needles applied, but in the different time and space one is in. What, then, cause that time and space determine the prescription of acupuncture treatment? It is the metaphysical theory of yin-yang. Different space and time mean different nature or environment, while different environment means different formation of yin-yang which is bound to influence the prescription or, to be specific, the stimulus to different acupoints. The practice of acupuncture cannot exist without the mentioning of yin-yang only because it is the way the whole world is a unity of opposites.

The relationship between semiotics and global life and health problems is not just a matter of historical order. This comes from the relationship between Hippocrates and Galen's medical semiotics, symptomatology and modern semiotics. In ancient China, a variety of medical classics and experts pushed forward such philosophical exposition in the fields of botany, biology, physics, medicine, pharmacy and physiology in the modern sense as the preference of universal health to a sold-out of all the medications for profit, the preference of universal health to individual wealth and the devotion of life to tasting blindly the unknown weeds in nature etc. are today's human reproduction process, biological signifying process. The study of cosmic signifier process lays an ideological foundation to a certain extent.

TCM culture guides the treatment of diseases on the one hand, and advocates, together with traditional Chinese culture, the love of the earth, biology, mankind, others, sentient beings, development and unity on the other hand, which confirm the purport of global semiotics and ethical semiotics. It is a semiotic universe in TCM world.

## **Conclusion**

Such is the dynamic action and interpretation of TCM signs. Isolated sign interpretation is not enough for the understanding of the philosophy of TCM. Only when one category, such as yin-yang category or five-element category, is interrelated to another and interpreted together, can one truly understand the philosophical basis of TCM and apply it to clinical treatment. "A sign cannot make sense except in the context of other signs". (Kotov & Kull, 2011) It is what Juri Lotman put forward that all semiotic systems are "immersed" in semiosphere, a semiotic



space, and “can only function by interaction with that space” (Lotman 1990:125) TCM is this kind of semiotic systems that are immersed in a semiotic space and can only function well by interaction within this space. Also, life is the action of signs, and the universe is the action of signs as well. From TCM perspective, the whole universe is filled with sign actions or semiosis. It is a semiosic universe.

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