

Ancient Chinese Natural Philosophy as Reflected in Etiological Terms in Chinese Medicine

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Abstract

Beginning with a semantic investigation of etiological terms, this article examines how the dual relationships between humans and nature and between humans and spirits were encoded in the conceptual system of ancient Chinese medicine. It then considers the multiple factors that shaped ancient Chinese conceptions of disease causation. Etiological terms in Chinese medicine are not merely a collection of technical expressions; they constitute a cognitive system that encodes ancient natural-philosophical ideas. Examining these terms and their underlying philosophical implications helps clarify how ancient medical knowledge was formed. It also invites renewed reflection on the nature of medicine: medicine has never been only a technical body of knowledge about disease, but also a civilization's comprehensive way of understanding the relationships among humanity, nature, and the cosmos. By contrast with both the reductionist tendency of modern biomedicine and the fragmentary explanations of purely supernatural or purely mechanistic etiologies, this integrated vision demonstrates its value by showing how nature, spirits, and the human body were coherently articulated within a single cognitive system—one that anticipates contemporary calls for holistic, multicausal, and humanistic medicine.

Keywords: Chinese medicine, etiological terms, natural philosophy

1. Introduction

Chinese medicine is an important component of traditional Chinese culture. It reflects early Chinese understandings of the human body, nature, and the relationships among the myriad things of the cosmos, while its theoretical foundations are deeply rooted in ancient Chinese philosophy. Chinese medicine primarily understands disease through an explanatory system

centered on wholeness, dynamism, and relationality. Knowledge of disease causation was therefore crucial to maintaining health and preventing illness. Some scholars hold that Chinese medicine, centered on "qi 气, blood, yin-yang 阴阳, the viscera, and the meridians," regards the human body as a holistic system rather than as a collection of anatomically independent parts, thereby giving rise to a mode of thought characterized by systems theory (Sun Dazhi et al., 2013). Ancient medical texts record that many diseases were not attributed to a single pathogenic factor but to two or more sources, expressing an etiological model in which one disease could have multiple causes. Through semantic investigation, textual analysis, and philosophical interpretation of etiological terms in ancient medical literature, this article seeks to reveal the rich and systematic natural philosophy embedded in those terms and thereby deepen understanding of the characteristic modes of thought found in traditional Chinese culture. Against traditional perspectives that separate natural philosophy from medicine—whether by reducing disease to mechanical malfunction or by relegating causation to isolated supernatural agents—this integrated vision proves its importance by recovering a mode of thought in which cosmic order, environmental change, and human health are inseparable, thereby offering a more adequate framework for understanding the complexity of disease and the place of the human being in nature (Li Zhenji, Xu Chunbo, 2011).

2. The Unity of Heaven and Humanity and the Human Relationship with Nature

"The unity of Heaven and humanity" 天人合一 is one of the central propositions of ancient Chinese philosophy. It holds that human beings and the natural world share the same origin and structure. Heaven, Earth, humanity, and all things between Heaven and Earth coexist within an organically interconnected system; through mutual dependence and constraint, they sustain the normal operation of the cosmos. In Chinese medicine, the human being, as one of the myriad things, is a microcosm. The small and the great not only share the same origin and principles but also correspond in form, meaning, and transformation. Whatever exists in nature has a corresponding organ, bodily region, or function in the human being, and changes in Heaven and Earth are mirrored by changes in human physiology (Xue Gongchen, 1993). In other words, the patterns governing nature and those governing human life correspond to one another through mutual resonance and reflection.

2.1 Qi 气

"Qi" 气 is a fundamental term in Chinese medicine and has a wide range of meanings. At the microcosmic level, it refers to the subtle substance that sustains movement and transformation within the body, or to the functional activity of the organs and tissues, as the qi of food and drink, the qi of organs, and the qi of channel. The "Jueqi" 《决气》 chapter of the Lingshu 《灵枢》 states: "The upper burner opens and disperses, diffusing the flavors of the five grains; it warms the skin, fills the body, and moistens the hair like mist and dew. This is called qi 气." The body was understood to possess an internal qi-pressure environment. As qi 气 circulates, it distributes nutrients to the organs and protects both the organs and the body as a whole. When qi 气 flows freely and remains balanced, the organs function normally; when its movement becomes stagnant or obstructed, the body's internal qi-pressure

environment is disturbed, impairing organ function and potentially causing disease. (Chen Zengyue, 2017)

At the macrocosmic level, qi also denotes the most basic substance constituting all things in the universe. The "Baoming Quanxing lun" 《宝命全形论》 chapter of the Suwen 《素问》 states: "Human beings are born from the qi 气 of Heaven and Earth and are formed in accordance with the laws of the four seasons" and "Human life arises from Earth and depends upon Heaven; the conjunction of the qi of Heaven and Earth is called a human being." "Liu qi" 六气 of Chinese medicine are the six normal climatic variations of nature. When they are excessive, deficient, or occur out of season, however, they become pathogenic factors known as "liu yin" 六淫: wind, cold, summer-heat, dampness, dryness, and fire or heat. Whether illness is attributed to the externally contracted six excesses or to internally damaging emotions, disease ultimately occurs through disruption, obstruction, or depletion of the normal movement of qi 气, blood, and body fluids. Such disruptive influences are collectively termed xie qi 邪气. Chinese medicine therefore understands the development of disease as a process in which zheng qi 正气 and xie qi 邪气 contend and wax or wane in relation to one another.

Medical literature contains numerous disease terms formed with qi as a morpheme, including qi zhi 气滞 (qi stagnation), qi ni 气逆 (qi counterflow), qi xian 气陷 (qi sinking), qi bi 气闭 (qi block), and qi tuo 气脱 (qi collapse). These terms describe different forms of dysfunctional qi 气 movement with considerable precision: stagnation denotes impeded movement; counterflow, disordered ascent and descent; sinking, failure of qi 气 to rise; block, obstruction of inward and outward movement; and collapse, excessive dissipation. Together they form an integrated framework for analyzing etiology and pathogenesis.

As an etiological term, qi has two principal meanings. First, it can denote an altered subtle substance outside the body, as in seasonal qi, pathogenic qi, and ghostly qi 气. Second, it can denote an altered subtle substance within the body, as in stagnant qi 气, congested qi 气, taxation qi 气, and turbid qi 气. The natural world was thought to arise through the conjunction of the qi 气 of Heaven and Earth, subtle forces that keep the myriad things in ceaseless motion. When disturbed by improper influences, these forces could be transformed into pathogenic factors. The corresponding process within the body involved the transformation of food essence, normally nutritive and supportive of organ function, into a pathogenic influence. Qi 气 thus served as a highly productive semantic unit capable of explaining diverse causes and manifestations of disease and disclosing underlying pathogenic mechanisms. It exemplifies the cognitive insight by which ancient thinkers used a unified and fluid concept of substance and function to apprehend the complexity of life (Wang Jianfeng, 2025).

2.2 Wind 风

The original meaning of wind is moving air, a natural phenomenon. The "Wind" 风 entry in the Shuowen Jiezi 《说文解字》 states: "Wind comprises the eight winds. The east is called the Mingshu 明庶 wind; the southeast, the Qingming 清明 wind; the south, the Jing 景 wind; the southwest, the Liang 凉 wind; the west, the Changhe 阊阖 wind; the northwest, the

Buzhou 不周 wind; the north, the Guangmo 广莫 wind; and the northeast, the Rong 融 wind." For ancient people, wind was inseparable from direction and season and provided an important basis for observing nature and organizing space and time. Wind is mobile, changeable, and ascending. Many diseases likewise begin rapidly, migrate from one location to another, or present unstable symptoms. Migratory impediment, for example, produces joint pain that shifts location; wind rash produces transient swellings of the skin; and wind stroke brings sudden loss of consciousness and cognitive impairment. By the analogical method known as "taking images and classifying by similarity" 取象比类, Chinese medicine grouped such pathogenic influences under the term wind.

As an etiological morpheme, wind has two principal senses in Chinese medical literature: external wind 外风 and internal wind 内风. External wind is one of the six excesses. Classified as a yang pathogen, it primarily attacks the body's exterior, channels and collaterals, and the lung and defensive qi, producing externally contracted exterior patterns. It frequently occurs in compounds in which wind precedes another element, including pathogenic wind, wind-heat, wind-cold, wind-dampness, wind-toxin, wind rash, and wind dizziness. The "Feng lun" 《风论》 chapter of the Suwen 《素问》 states: "Wind moves readily and changes repeatedly. When the interstices open, there is a sudden chill; when they close, there is heat and oppression." It continues: "When wind enters and binds the head, it causes ocular wind and coldness of the eyes. When wind is contracted while drinking alcohol, it causes leaking wind. ... Wind is therefore the chief of the hundred diseases; as it transforms, it becomes other diseases." This passage identifies two aspects of ancient understandings of wind. First, wind was regarded as a major cause of externally contracted disease and was assigned an exceptionally wide scope. Second, it readily combined with other pathogens such as cold, heat, dampness, and dryness, producing compound causes.

Internal wind, by contrast, is a category of pathological patterns generated within the body. It results from dysfunction of the organs and consequent disorder of qi 气 and blood and is characterized by an acute and changeable course. It commonly appears in compounds in which wind follows another element, including wind stroke, painful wind or gout, liver wind, and intestinal wind. The differentiation of external from internal wind emerged through the development of Chinese medical theory. It marked the deepening of etiology from a theory of external contraction toward one that also encompassed internal injury, while greatly expanding the semantic range and word-forming capacity of wind. As either a modifier or a lexical core, wind helped form numerous compounds that reveal its associations with causes, mechanisms, course, and manifestations of disease. Its linguistic productivity offers a condensed expression of the systematic and relational character of Chinese medical theory.

3. Animism and the Human Relationship with Spirits

In ancient society, the belief that spirits caused disease was among the most common and representative etiological ideas. Illness readily provoked fear, especially when unknown infectious diseases appeared suddenly, spread widely, and caused high mortality. Such outbreaks were naturally attributed to harassment by spirits. From remote antiquity onward, some epidemics and contagious diseases were explained as the work of spirits. The "Jiejiu"

《诘咎》section of the Shuihudi Qin bamboo manuscripts 《睡虎地秦简》, for example, depicts many kinds of spirits that torment or toy with people, causing nightmares, illness, mental disturbance, and even death. By the medieval period, these beliefs had become still more widespread. Volume 16 of the Soushen ji 《搜神记》records: "In former times, Zhuanxu 颛顼 had three sons who died and became epidemic demons. One dwelt in the Jiang River 江水 and became a malaria demon; one dwelt in the Ruohu River 若水 and became a wangliang 魍魉 demon; and one dwelt in human dwellings, where it delighted in frightening children and became a minor demon. Thus, at the beginning of the year, the fangxiangshi was ordered to lead the grand exorcism and drive away the epidemic demons." Similar accounts of spirits causing disease appear in the Xuanzhong ji 《玄中记》, Lunheng 《论衡》, and Taiping jing 《太平经》. Those who died in war, through punishment, accident, disaster, epidemic disease, suicide, or premature death were often believed to become vengeful ghosts. They returned to the human world to demand offerings or seek revenge, and epidemic disease was considered one of their most common means of doing harm (Lin Fushi, 2012).

Because scientific knowledge and medical techniques were limited, ancient people could not accurately identify the sources and mechanisms of disease, and their etiological explanations therefore often acquired a supernatural character. Chinese medical texts indicate substantial agreement among physicians that disease could be related to the activities of spirits. Diseases whose causes were unknown or difficult to grasp were commonly represented by the terms "ghost". This linguistic practice incorporated forms of inference derived from ordinary experience and common knowledge. Medical texts contain a rich vocabulary for diseases associated with baleful beings and forces, chiefly xie 邪, gui 鬼, gu 蛊, shi 尸, e 恶, and wu 忤.

3.1 Xie 邪

Xie 邪 is the most representative term for an external cause of disease in ancient medical texts. It can mean deviant, improper, or evil. In medical contexts, it often refers either to anomalous and malevolent beings or to pathogenic qi opposed to the body's healthy qi. In this broad sense, xie accommodates two categories of causation. The "Ma" rhyme section 《麻韵》 of the Guangyun 《广韵》 defines xie as "illness caused by ghosts." In medieval sources, the disyllabic compounds xie wu 邪物 ("malevolent beings") and xie wu 邪忤 ("malevolent encounters") were often used for strange entities that offended or harmed people. In volume 3 of Qianjin yifang 《千金翼方》, under "Inferior-Grade Drugs of the Wood Category," croton seed is described as "pungent and warm in flavor, warm when raw and cold when cooked, and highly toxic. It treats cold damage, warm malaria, alternating cold and heat ... and eliminates ghost toxin, gu infestation, zhu disease, and malevolent beings." In volume 5 of the Buddhist Guanding jing 《佛说灌顶经》, translated by Srimitra 帛尸梨蜜多罗 during the Eastern Jin, the text states: "In the south are nine thousand great spirits. Their leaders are twenty-eight spirit kings, who can ward off every evil, guard the south, and eliminate the diseases of the five warm epidemics and epidemic toxins, as well as afflictions caused by flying corpses, malevolent encounters, and calamitous zhu 注" (T21/510b).

Wu 忤 means to offend, encounter resistance, or come into conflict. Volume 4 of Yiqie jing

yinyi 《一切经音义》 cites Fu Qian's Eastern Han Tong su wen 《通俗文》: "To encounter wu is called e" (C56/874b). Here, encountering wu means coming upon a hostile anomalous being, while e 恶 denotes the illness or calamity caused by such a being. Xie 邪 could also refer broadly to spirits, demons, and the various pathogenic forms of wind, cold, summer-heat, and heat. When the body was weak, these malevolent entities and forces could exploit that weakness and disrupt its normal system. Spirit-mediated pathogenic qi took many forms, including ghost toxin qi 气, ghostly pathogenic qi 气, and the qi 气 of violent ghosts, all considered direct sources of disease. Pathogenic cold, cold qi 气, and wind qi 气, arising from abnormal changes in wind, cold, summer-heat, and dampness, likewise belonged to the category of improper qi and constituted another source of illness.

Seasonal epidemic qi 气 was a paradigmatic discordant form of qi 气, understood ultimately as the product of climatic disharmony and disruption of orderly healthy qi 气. Chinese medicine was consistently attentive to abnormal changes in the external environment and developed theories linking seasonal disharmony and discordant qi 气 to disease. Morbid qi 气 was thought to be transmissible and mobile, properties regarded as crucial to widespread epidemic transmission. Across medical and other sources, the view that qi 气 with malevolent properties could be a source of epidemic disease appears to have been shared by physicians and the broader population from the Eastern Han through the Sui 隋 and Tang 唐 dynasties. Under the rubric of xie 邪, spirits, anomalous beings, and improper qi 气 all served as external causes of disease. Ancient medical works often combined the concepts of xie 邪, ghosts, and qi 气 to describe or explain causation, emphasizing both the harmful character of the source and its capacity to injure individuals and communities. Although ghosts, qi 气, and xie 邪 share a basic orientation toward harmful agency, each has a different emphasis: xie 邪 denotes malevolent or pathogenic powers in the broadest sense; ghosts foreground religious agents; and qi 气 highlights the effects of environmental and climatic variation.

3.2 Gui 鬼(Ghosts)

Ancient people believed that a spiritual entity persisted after death. This spirit existing apart from bodily form was called gui 鬼(ghost). The "Gui" 鬼 entry in the Shuowen Jiezi 《说文解字》 states: "That to which a person returns is a ghost. It is derived from the graph for person and depicts a ghost's head. A ghost is yin qi that harms like a thief; the graph follows si." The Shuowen xizhuan 《说文系传》 elaborates: "The Erya 《尔雅》 says, 'Ghost means return.' The Hanshi waizhuan 《韩诗外传》 says, 'When a person dies, flesh returns to earth, blood returns to water, and bones return to stone. The hun qi 魂气 ascends to Heaven, while the yin qi 阴气 remains thinly and alone, without support.' Hun 魂 is yang qi 阳气, which causes people to rise, move, exert strength, and expand outward; yin qi 阴气 restrains people, causing them to stop, sink, stagnate, and close. After death, the hun qi 魂气 returns to Heaven and no yang remains. Pure yin qi 阴气 therefore sinks and stagnates; when it attaches to a person, it causes harm. A thief is one who inflicts injury." Zhang Taiyan's 章太炎 Lecture Notes on the Shuowen Jiezi 《说文解字》 observes: "What the ancients called ghosts did not refer exclusively to the dead; animals and other beings of strange appearance could also be called ghosts." (Zhang Taiyan, 2010) The term was thus extended to all

nameless and frightening spirits and strange beings.

In medical texts, nightmare demons, numinous apparitions, hun and po souls, ghosts, and wangliang monsters belong to this semantic field. All were regarded as sources of sudden diseases of unknown origin. One example is “ghost strike” 鬼击, also called “ghost assault” 鬼排, which the Dictionary of Chinese Medicine defines as an illness marked by sudden gripping pain in the chest or abdomen, sometimes with bleeding. Volume 14 of Ishinpo 《医心方》, in “Formulas for Ghost Strike,” cites the Zhubing yuanhou lun 《诸病源候论》: “Ghost strike means that the qi 气 of a violent ghost strikes and adheres to a person. It develops without warning and suddenly affects the person like a blade stabbing from the side. There is urgent, gripping pain in the chest, flanks, and abdomen that cannot bear pressure. The patient may vomit blood, bleed from the nose or mouth, or pass blood below. It is also called ghost assault, meaning that a ghost pushes against and strikes a person. When a person's qi 气 and blood are weak and the essential spirit has declined, a sudden encounter and collision with ghosts and spirits may expose the person to their assault. Mild cases recover after debility; severe cases often end in death.” This passage offers a theoretical explanation of a lethal acute condition of unknown origin. It attributes the illness to the qi 气 of violent ghosts and to ghostly assault, while identifying constitutional weakness as a susceptibility factor, thereby illustrating the Chinese medical method of inferring causes from clinical manifestations.

Related expressions include “ghost beating” 鬼打 and “ghost stabbing” 鬼刺. Volume 20 of Qianjin yifang 《千金翼方》, in the section on emergencies, records: “Cangcong Powder 仓公散 is a formula for the myriad diseases. ... Grind the four ingredients in equal portions. It treats sudden ghost beating, ghost assault, ghost stabbing, pain in the heart and abdomen, vomiting or passing blood, loss of consciousness resembling death, and nightmares in which the sleeper bites the heel without awareness, as well as diseases caused by various evil and toxic qi 气.”

3.3 Gu 蛊

Gu 蛊 was also regarded as an external cause of disease and denoted toxicity produced by insects within the abdomen. The “Chong” 虫 entry in the Shuowen Jiezi 《说文解字》 states: “Gu 蛊 means insects in the abdomen.” Duan Yucai 段玉裁 comments: “In zhong chong 中虫, zhong 中 is always read in the departing tone. ... ‘Insects in the abdomen’ means the toxicity caused when insects attack within the abdomen. Because it enters from outside, it is called zhong 中, ‘to be struck’; because it consumes from within, it is called chong 虫, ‘insect.’ This reading differs from those for long worms and short worms in the abdomen in the Chong 虫 section.” The oracle-bone form of gu 蛊 “𠩺” depicts insects in a vessel. Its original meaning referred to venomous creatures deliberately reared to poison others. The Zhouli 《周礼》states: “The Shushi 庶氏 official is responsible for eliminating poisonous gu 蛊.” Zheng Xuan 郑玄 comments: “Poisonous gu 蛊 are insect creatures that cause illness and injury.”

The “Gudu hou” 《蛊毒候》 chapter in volume 25 of the Zhubing yuanhou lun 《诸病源候论》 states: “There are several kinds of gu 蛊 toxin, all forms of bewildering and transforming

qi 气. Some people deliberately manufacture it. They gather insects, snakes, and similar creatures, keep them together in a vessel, and allow them to devour one another. The single creature that remains is called gu 蛊. It can transform and bewilder, follow food and drink, and bring calamity upon others; when it harms another, its keeper gains good fortune. For this reason, lawless people rear and employ it. There is also flying gu 飞蛊, which comes and goes without discernible cause and gradually assumes the appearance of ghostly qi 气; when contracted, the illness suddenly becomes severe. Most people afflicted by gu 蛊 die because its toxic power is extreme." The passage describes both how gu 蛊 creatures were produced and how they were believed to harm human health.

3.4 Shi 尸 (Corpse Agents) and Worms

Ancient people believed that "corpse worms" were latent in the womb, inborn with the human being, and sustained by consuming the vital essence of the five grains in the abdomen. They were treated as internal causes of many diseases. Volume 81 of Zhang Junfang's 张君房 Yunji qiqian 《云笈七签》 cites the Scripture of the Three Corpses 《三尸经》: "When human beings are born, each takes form in the parents' womb and is nourished by the essence of the five grains. Thus every person's abdomen contains three corpses and nine worms, which bring great harm." The "three corpses" 三尸 and "three worms" 三虫 both fall within the broader concept of corpse worms and appear frequently in medieval sources, especially Daoist texts. The "Shangchong" 《商虫》 chapter of the Lunheng 《论衡》 states: "There are three worms in the human abdomen. In the marshes of low ground, the worm is called the leech. Leeches feed on people's feet, while the three worms feed on the intestines." The "Weizhi" 《微旨》 chapter of the Baopuzi neipian 《抱朴子内篇》 states: "The body contains three corpses. Although these beings lack form, they belong to the category of souls, spirits, ghosts, and divinities. They desire an early human death, for once the person dies these corpses can become ghosts, roam freely, and enjoy the sacrificial offerings made by humans." Volume 92 of the Taiping jing 《太平经》 similarly describes ulcers, scabies, and other ailments as the work of the three worms in the abdomen. Such texts explicitly locate the three corpses and three worms inside the body. Daoism 道教 therefore regarded the internal cultivation practice of ingesting qi as one of the most effective means of eliminating the three corpses.

Modern discussions often conflate the three corpses with the three worms, although they were not identical in early literature. The meaning of the three worms was relatively concrete and inclined toward material entities, principally three actual types of parasites in the body. The meaning of the three corpses was more ambiguous, and most scholars associate them with personified spirits. (Zhang Tongli, 2010; Tang Lujun et al., 2020) Their similarities should not be overlooked: both arose within the body and damaged health. On this basis, Daoists combined features of the three corpses and three worms to create a new image, the "san Peng" 三彭. The three corpses thereby acquired new properties, joining knowledge of the three worms in medicine to their original traits of greed and evil. The concepts of the three corpses and three worms were subsequently unified and could refer to one another. Combined expressions such as "three corpse-worms" and "three corpses and three worms" also appeared, although they tended semantically to denote spirits in a broad sense. Without precise

instruments to reveal minute living organisms, ancient people could not observe parasites directly and therefore interpreted some internal parasitic infections as disturbances caused by spirits.

Chinese medicine held that corpse worms remained dormant in the body and generally could not cause disease independently. They became pathogenic only when activated by external factors. Volume 14 of *Ishinpo* 《医心方》, in "Formulas for Treating Transmitted Corpse Disease," cites the *Zhubing yuanhou lun* 《诸病源候论》: "The human body naturally contains three corpses and various worms, born together with the person. These malevolent worms can communicate with ghosts and spirits and constantly draw external pathogens inward, causing illness and injury." The same chapter cites Master Ge's Formulas 《葛氏方》: "The five corpses are corpse ghosts within the body that receive external pathogens and cause disease together with them." Thus, the internal three corpses and worms were believed to communicate with external spirits and numinous beings, draw pathogenic influences into the body, and then cause diseases such as corpse transmission.

Zhang Jiafeng 张嘉凤 argues that exposure to corpse worms was not the decisive factor in contracting epidemic disease because everyone possessed them. The decisive factors were external ghosts or pathogens: only those exposed to the places where such agents were present could have the corpse worms within their bodies draw the agents inward and cause illness. This explained why not everyone necessarily fell ill during an epidemic. Zhang further notes that disease caused when corpse worms drew in external pathogenic spirits required a prior deficiency in the patient's organs, yin 阴 and yang 阳, qi 气, or blood. People with disharmonious yin and yang or depleted qi 气 and blood were considered constitutionally weaker and more vulnerable to the combined effects of internal affliction and external pathogens. (Zhang Jiafeng, 2005)

Analysis of these terms suggests that ancient understandings of spirit-induced disease can be summarized in three categories. The first comprises external factors, including ghosts, strange beings, and improper qi 气. These agents were believed to invade the body directly, disrupt normal life processes, and spread among groups through interpersonal contact. The second comprises internal factors, principally the activity of corpse worms within the body. Corpse worms belonged broadly to the category of spirits. Although they rarely caused disease directly, they were considered indispensable intermediaries connecting the body to external pathogens. The third category combines internal and external causes: the three corpses and other worms within the body attract ghosts and pathogenic beings from outside, and together they induce disease. Such combined causation presupposed defects in the patient's bodily functions. These three categories reflect widespread Chinese medical conceptions of the human relationship with spirits from the Eastern Han through the Sui and Tang dynasties.

4. Factors Shaping Ancient Conceptions of Disease Causation

Ancient etiological thought was the product of long-term interaction among multiple factors. Rather than arising from a single body of experience or cultural tradition, it developed as a collective cognitive system through repeated encounters, integration, and reconstruction involving the natural environment, magical beliefs, philosophical reflection, social structures,

and medical practice.

4.1 The Natural and Living Environment as a Direct Source of Disease Experience

Before rational medical thought had fully matured, ancient people observed seasonal change, geographic variation, and natural disasters over long periods. Combining those observations with the idea of resonance between Heaven and humanity, they gradually connected disease with the natural environment. The "Jiyi" 《疾医》 section of the Zhouli 《周礼》 states: "In spring there are wasting diseases; in summer, itching and scabies; in autumn, malaria and cold disorders; in winter, cough and upward-rushing qi 气." The idea that climatic anomalies caused epidemics was especially common. The "Mengchun ji" 《孟春纪》 of the Lüshi Chunqiu 《吕氏春秋》 states: "If the ordinances of autumn are implemented in the first month of spring, the people will suffer a great epidemic" and "If the ordinances of summer are implemented in the last month of spring, epidemics will be frequent among the people."

The Huangdi neijing 《黄帝内经》 discusses in detail the relationship between seasonal disorder and disease. The "Siqu tiaoshen dalun" 《四气调神大论》 chapter of the Suwen 《素问》 states: "To oppose the qi 气 of spring prevents shaoyang 少阳 from engendering and causes internal change in liver qi 肝气. To oppose the qi 气 of summer prevents taiyang 太阳 from flourishing and causes depletion within heart qi 心气. To oppose the qi 气 of autumn prevents taiyin 太阴 from gathering and causes fullness and distress in lung qi 肺气. To oppose the qi 气 of winter prevents shaoyin 少阴 from storing and causes kidney qi 肾气 to sink alone." By the Han dynasty, the rise of the gua-qi theory 卦气说 systematized the relationship between climatic anomaly and disease. It interpreted whether the expected influences of the four seasons, eight seasonal nodes, and twenty-four solar terms arrived on schedule through correlative signs of wind, rain, cold, and warmth. Once this form of omen-based thinking about anomalies and disasters entered medicine, it was fully expressed in the Huangdi neijing 《黄帝内经》 and Shanghan lun 《伤寒论》. The theory correlated trigrams, solar terms, phenological phenomena, and human channels, reflecting an early account of seasonal epidemic qi 气 centered on anomalies in weather and calendrical timing. (Liu Liwei, Bi Yang, Liu Changhua, Fan Yipin, et al,2025) By integrating nature and pathology through the idea of resonance between Heaven and humanity, it represented the highest level of Han-dynasty understanding of climatic causes of disease. Although the theory contained mystical elements, it grasped the substantive role of external causes and thus established an experiential basis for later Chinese medical theories of externally contracted disease.

4.2 Magic and Religion as a Dominant Framework of Supernatural Explanation

If the experiential basis of ancient etiology lay in the natural environment, its earliest systematic explanatory framework may have arisen from magic and religion. Faced with the pain of illness and the threat of death, early people found it difficult to understand causes in terms of physical processes and therefore turned to supernatural forces, including spirits, ancestors, heavenly punishment, and taboos. Magical and religious etiologies were not simply products of ignorant superstition. Under historically specific cognitive conditions, they formed a comprehensive human response to suffering and death. Psychologically, they met

the need for causal explanation; socially, they supplied norms of conduct and institutional support for early medical practice. Unearthed texts, including the Shuihudi Qin bamboo manuscripts 《睡虎地秦简》 and the Mawangdui silk manuscripts 《马王堆帛书》, show that the theory of spirit-induced disease had already taken shape. Although received medical works commonly present qi as the dominant basis of etiology and do not directly discuss spirit affliction, etiological terms such as xie 邪 and pathogenic qi 气 can also be understood as transformations or reworkings of spirit-based theories.

From the middle and late Eastern Han onward, successive epidemics produced severe social crises. The theory of spirit-induced disease regained prominence and assumed new forms, of which “zhu disease” 注病 is representative. Volume 14 of Ishinpo 《医心方》, in “Formulas for Treating Zhu Disease 注病” cites Master Ge’s Formulas 《葛氏方》: “Zhu disease 注病 is corpse zhu 注, one of the five corpse diseases, and it is accompanied by injury from various ghosts and pathogenic forces. In general, it causes intermittent chills and fever, persistent lassitude and silence, and diffuse discomfort whose source cannot be identified. It continues for years and months, gradually leading to death. After death, it is transmitted to those nearby and may extinguish an entire household.” The same chapter cites the Zhubing yuanhou lun 《诸病源候论》: “Zhu 注 means to reside: pathogenic qi 气 dwells within the human body, and the condition is therefore called zhu 注. It results when yin 阴 and yang 阳 lose their safeguards, the channels and collaterals become empty, and wind, cold, summer-heat, dampness, diet, taxation, and fatigue take effect. Sudden exposure to the qi 气 of life and death or an abrupt encounter with the essence of a ghostly being can also cause the disease.”

Zhu disease 注病, often abbreviated simply as zhu 注, was a widely prevalent contagious disease in ancient society. The graph zhu 注 originally had no medical meaning. The “Shui” 《水》 entry in the Shuowen Jiezi 《说文解字》 defines it as “to pour,” referring to water being poured or infused. The Shijing 《诗经》 states: “The Feng River 丰水 flows eastward; this is Yu’s 禹 achievement.” Because flowing water spreads from place to place, the term developed the senses of transmission and transfer. Chinese medicine often used analogy and metaphor, a mode of thought called “taking comparisons” 取譬, to move between understandings of different phenomena. The image of flowing water could thus describe a disease entering the human body and provide a motivation for naming it zhu 注.

In the medical term zhu disease 注病, zhu 注 has two senses. The first is “to remain” or “to dwell for a long time.” Ghosts or toxic pathogenic qi enter the body and remain there, causing persistent and difficult-to-cure illness. The second is “to flow into” or “to transmit.” Zhu disease 注病 is usually contracted from outside and can pass to other people. The “Shijibing” 《释疾病》 section of the Shiming 《释名》 states: “In zhu disease 注病, when one person dies, another contracts it, as qi 气 is infused from one into the other.” After one person dies, the epidemic qi 气 carried by that person is transferred into another, who then contracts the same disease. Large numbers of unearthed Han 汉 and later exorcistic texts, also known as tomb-quelling texts, provide further evidence that religion, magic, and medicine shared a common understanding of spirits.

The revival of spirit-based etiology was deeply rooted in the social and cultural conditions of the Eastern Han 汉 through the Wei 魏, Jin 晋, and Northern and Southern dynasties. Daoism 道教 and Buddhism rose rapidly during this period, and their expanding influence was related in part to their perceived success in responding to disease. Monks and Daoist priests were often knowledgeable about medicine. Like physicians, they became sources of help for the sick and used medical knowledge in diagnosis and treatment while disseminating religious teachings. Explanations of disease in terms of ghosts, spirits, and pathogenic qi in Buddhist and Daoist texts often correspond with those in Chinese medical literature.

Daoist scriptures, for example, frequently claim that chaotic times bring forth demons, spirits, and strange beings that harm people, with epidemics following in their wake. Volume 36 of the Taiping jing 《太平经》 states: "A great transgression brings great disorder. It is called counterflow qi 逆气 and counterflow government; its harm allows yin qi 阴气 to overcome yang 阳 and those below to deceive those above. Ghosts, spirits, and malevolent beings flourish, together exploiting the human way, and often walk by day without avoiding people. Consequently, diseases cannot be brought to an end, and the procession of ghosts does not cease." Volume 72 similarly states: "After the accumulated burden of inherited wrongdoing, Heaven and Earth suffer many calamities. Ghostly beings, ancient essences, baleful forces, and corpse calamities are innumerable; wind, dampness, abscesses, and scabies also remain. In later ages, manifold disasters flow abroad, too numerous to name." Within the teachings of the Taiping jing 《太平经》, death and disease did not arise without cause but resulted from the anger of spirits and invasion by pathogenic qi. Volume 2 of the Taiping jing chao 《太平经钞》 states: "When illnesses caused by ghostly beings are numerous, the spirits of Heaven and Earth are angry. When many suffer warm diseases and die, the qi 气 of greater yang 阳 kills them; when many die of cold diseases, the qi 气 of greater yin 阴 harms them."

Buddhist scriptures also frequently invoke ghosts, spirits, and pathogenic qi when discussing disease. In volume 2 of the Zhuanji baiyuan jing 《撰集百缘经》, translated by Zhi Qian 支谦 in the state of Wu 吴 during the Three Kingdoms period, "the Buddha was residing in the Karanda Bamboo Grove at Rajagriha. At that time, many epidemic demons in the village of Nala were killing the people. The inhabitants competed to beseech and make offerings to benevolent heavenly spirits, hoping that the epidemic would gradually subside" (T4/209c). Volume 1 of the Foshuo pumenpin jing 《佛说普门品经》, translated by Dharmaraksa 竺法护 in the Western Jin 西晋, states: "Internally they produce thoughts of ghosts and spirits, while externally hundreds and thousands of ghosts and spirits gather and attach themselves to them. For this reason they fall ill or die and undergo immeasurable suffering, all because their minds are deviant and improper" (T11/772b). In sum, medieval medical explanations of disease were substantially influenced by Buddhist and Daoist thought and in turn promoted the dissemination of religious teachings. Over time, medicine absorbed elements concerning spirits from religion, magic, and popular custom, forming a historically distinctive conception of disease.

5. Conclusion

Across history, human beings have sought the causes of disease in order to survive and

flourish, using different methods to construct plausible explanations. In Chinese medicine, disease was not treated as an isolated event within the body, but as an expression of imbalance in the relationships between human beings and nature, society, and spirits. Etiological terms served as carriers of this cognitive system. They provide a direct linguistic expression of a holistic cosmological medicine and an indispensable window onto ancient natural philosophy.

The extension of morphemes such as qi 气 and wind from natural images to medical concepts shows how ancient thinkers used the unity of Heaven and humanity to integrate cosmic order and bodily regularity within a single explanatory system. Terms such as xie 邪, ghost, gu 蛊, and corpse, by contrast, reflect the convergence of medical, magical, Daoist, and Buddhist systems of knowledge during the medieval period. Ancient etiological thought differs fundamentally from modern medicine in its knowledge claims. Its core concerns, however, including the human relationship with nature, holistic modes of thought, and multicausal models of disease, remain suggestive. The natural-philosophical ideas and humanistic concerns contained in this tradition are particularly salient in a contemporary medical context increasingly shaped by specialization and technology.

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