

ASIA PACIFIC

# An Expert on Chinese Medicine, but No New Age Healer

The Saturday Profile

By IAN JOHNSON    SEPT. 23, 2016

BERLIN — One day in 1971, the doorbell rang at Paul U. Unschuld’s apartment in Munich. He opened the door to find a young man, who laconically said in English: “Hi, I am James Quinn, C.I.A. Tell me about the military usage of acupuncture.”

So began the German academic’s rise from relative obscurity to his position as the West’s leading authority on ancient Chinese healing practices. One of the first Western scholars to tackle Chinese medicine in a systematic and serious way, Dr. Unschuld has seen his subject more as a way to interpret Chinese civilization than as a New Age answer to modern medicine.

Respected and sometimes resented for his scrupulousness in translating Chinese medical texts, Dr. Unschuld, a tall man of regal bearing, harks back to an era of scholarship, when people who engaged with China were called Sinologists — those who studied broad swaths of the Chinese world that reflected their wide-ranging interests.

For Dr. Unschuld, that has included amassing a collection of statues of medical deities that is planned to be a centerpiece

of Berlin's Humboldt Forum, a new museum under construction that will showcase non-European cultures.

Dr. Unschuld has also collected 1,100 antique manuscripts that could give clues to how medicine was practiced at China's grass-roots level. The manuscripts contain more than 40,000 prescriptions that are being examined for promising ingredients, with some of the remedies for epilepsy already being studied by a Chinese-German start-up.

In his spare time, Dr. Unschuld has led German government delegations to China, and has written books on how medicine helps to explain China's rise to global prominence.

"If there are two words I'd associate with Unschuld, it's rigor and exactitude," said Phil Garrison, a teacher at the Pacific College of Oriental Medicine in San Diego and at the Finger Lakes School of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine in Seneca Falls, N.Y. "But these qualities are a double-edged sword."

That is because Dr. Unschuld, who is as blunt as he is outspoken, stands at the center of a long and contentious debate in the West over Chinese medicine. For many, it is the ur-alternative to what they see as the industrialized and chemicalized medicine that dominates in the West. For others, it is little more than charlatanism, with its successes attributed to the placebo effect and the odd folk remedy.

Dr. Unschuld is a challenge to both ways of thinking. He has just finished a 28-year English translation of the three principal parts of the foundational work of Chinese medicine: the Huangdi Neijing, or Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic, published by the University of California Press. But unlike many of the textbooks used in Chinese medicine schools in the West, Dr. Unschuld's works are monuments to the art of serious translation; he avoids New Age jargon like "energy" or familiar Western medical terms like "pathogens," seeing both as unfair to the ancient writers and their worldviews.

But this reflects a deep respect for the ancient authors the detractors of Chinese medicine sometimes lack. Dr. Unschuld hunts down obscure terms and devises consistent terminologies that are sometimes not easy to read, but are faithful to the

original text. Almost universally, his translations are regarded as trailblazing — making available, for the first time in a Western language, the complete foundational works of Chinese medicine from up to 2,000 years ago.

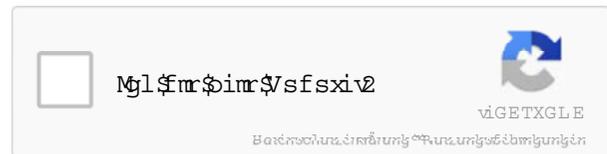
“There exist any number of critical editions of the works of Hippocrates or Galen” from ancient Greece, said Don Harper, a professor at the University of Chicago, who studies ancient Chinese religious and medical texts. “Paul is the first to provide anything comparable to the Chinese corpus.”

But for many Western practitioners of Chinese medicine, Dr. Unschuld is an uncompromising guide to the Chinese classics. His books sell well, but many Westerners prefer more accessible translations that use more familiar terms.

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“People were very threatened by what he said,” said Z’ev Rosenberg, an author, and a practitioner and teacher of Chinese medicine. “He said you need access to the sources and the terminology.”

And then there is the issue of efficacy. With his extremely dry humor, Dr. Unschuld likens Chinese medicine to the herbal

formulas of the medieval Christian mystic **Hildegard von Bingen**. If people want to try it, they should be free to do so, he said, but not at taxpayer expense. As for himself, Dr. Unschuld says he has never tried Chinese medicine.

At his office in Berlin's famous **Charité hospital** — where many pioneers of modern medicine got their start — Dr. Unschuld told a story about how, several years ago, he suffered a bilateral lung embolism. Pointing out the window to the hospital's main tower, he said he was saved by modern medicine.

“Excuse me, but acupuncture and herbs can't help you there,” he said, with a laugh. “But there are some health problems where these therapies may be beneficial, and, hence, I'm not against it when someone uses it.”

At times, Dr. Unschuld almost seems perplexed that his field of study actually became an alternative source of medical treatment. He said Chinese medicine's popularity in the West can trace its roots to the Cold War, to 1971 to be exact. That is when James Reston, a columnist for *The New York Times*, reported about how he was treated in China for a burst appendix, in part with acupuncture and mugwort.

This was during the Kissinger-Nixon rapprochement with China, and the start of China's decades-long reopening to the outside world. Chinese medicine became part of the country's allure. Soon came the visit to Dr. Unschuld from Mr. Quinn, the C.I.A. agent; the opening of Chinese medical schools in the West; and a flood of books and translations about the exotic-sounding healing arts from the Orient.

Dr. Unschuld's interest in medicine was not entirely unique in his family. His great-grandfather had treated the king of Belgium and other European nobility. Dr. Unschuld says he grew up in a household filled with vases and other chinoiserie donated by grateful patients. His father had been a pharmacist who collected pharmaceutical artifacts and pharmacopoeias of past centuries.

Initially, Dr. Unschuld earned a degree in pharmacy in Munich along with his wife, Ulrike. But he had also been fascinated

with foreign languages and had completed a parallel track in Chinese studies. In 1969, before what he assumed would be a career in the pharmaceutical industry, the couple went to Taiwan for a year to improve their Chinese language skills.

Instead, Dr. Unschuld spent the year interviewing medical practitioners. The resulting Ph.D. thesis started his career as an expert on Chinese medicine, and for 20 years he headed the **Institute for the History of Medicine** at Munich's Ludwig Maximilian University.

His purely academic approach, however, makes him a difficult figure for China to embrace. While widely respected for his knowledge and translations, he has done little to advance the government's agenda of promoting Chinese medicine as soft power. Echoing other critics, he describes China's translations of the classics as "complete swindles," saying they are done with little care and only a political goal in mind.

For Dr. Unschuld, Chinese medicine is far more interesting as an allegory for China's mental state. His most famous book is a history of Chinese medical ideas, in which he sees classic figures, such as the Yellow Emperor, as a reflection of the Chinese people's deep-seated pragmatism. At a time when demons and ghosts were blamed for illness, these Chinese works from 2,000 years ago ascribed it to behavior or disease that could be corrected or cured.

"It is a metaphor for enlightenment," he says.

Especially striking, Dr. Unschuld says, is that the Chinese approach puts responsibility on the individual, as reflected in the statement "wo ming zai wo, bu zai tian" — "my fate lies with me, not with heaven." This mentality was reflected on a national level in the 19th and 20th centuries, when China was being attacked by outsiders. The Chinese largely blamed themselves and sought concrete answers by studying foreign ideas, industrializing and building a modern economy.

In China, Dr. Unschuld said, "Medicine and politics are similar: You don't blame others, you blame yourself." He added, "You ask: 'What did I do wrong? What made me vulnerable? What can I do against it?' This is why China has risen."

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