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Shifting Choices of Traditional Chinese Medicine and Social Identity in Jakarta

Alexander Raymon,[1*] Dian Ardiansyah[2], and Rudi[3]

[1,2,3]*Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia*

**Corresponding author: medialenterakebajikan@students.unnes.ac.id*

ABSTRACT
Nowadays, Chinese people in Indonesia (known as Tionghoa) tend to abandon traditional medicine inherited from their ancestors and turn to Western medicine. In fact, if viewed from a historical perspective, traditional Chinese herbal medicine and science in Indonesia have existed and been practiced in Indonesian society for centuries. This shift in treatment choices involves various complex factors including the social identity of the Indonesian Chinese community itself. Conventional Western medical practices that are considered modern often clash with alternative Eastern medicine that is considered traditional. However, in the metropolitan city of Jakarta, both types of treatment methods have their own ups and downs, and also have their own advantages and enthusiasts. This study used the Spradley Domain Analysis method to explore the description of the social situation of the Tionghoa community in the city of Jakarta and to examine the history of traditional Chinese medicine, both herbal remedies and practices, and the shift in public preference for Western medicine in Jakarta. Overall, this study explores the interaction between the two: the relationship between perspectives and changing medical choices regarding which is considered more effective for maintaining health.

Keywords: *Tionghoa; Shift; Traditional Chinese Medicine; Social Identity; Modern Medicine*

1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesians tend to have diverse preferences when it comes to treatment, with varying preferences between traditional and modern (Western) medicine. Some prefer modern medicine because it's perceived as more evidence-based and utilizes advanced technology, while others prefer traditional medicine due to cost, inherited beliefs, or a more holistic approach.

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) has historically been preferred by people for several reasons, including its holistic approach focused on balancing body, mind, and spirit, and its use of natural methods such as herbs and manual techniques, which are considered safer. Furthermore, TCM emphasizes disease prevention and maintaining overall health, rather than simply treating symptoms.

The method of traditional Chinese medicine is different from modern Western medicine that entered Indonesia later, namely around the 19th century (Hanafiah & Amir, 1999). Western medicine continues to develop until it is considered modern medicine. While Chinese medicine still holds the traditional concept so it is considered alternative medicine.

Background and Method

In this paper, the author examines the phenomenon of shifting choices of traditional medicine based on the theory of functionalism as a tool for analysis (Takari, 2017). The theory of functionalism is a theory used in social sciences that emphasizes the dependence between

institutions (institutions) and customs in certain communities. To support the study with this theory, the author uses auto-ethnography methods, field research, interviews and literature studies.

A qualitative research design will be employed to explore how choices regarding Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) are shifting in Jakarta and how these choices relate to social identity. The study will utilize a phenomenological approach to capture the lived experiences and meanings constructed by individuals engaging with TCM, following Schutz's phenomenology framework to understand the motivations and social contexts behind these choices

As for the analysis in this paper, the Spradley domain analysis method (Spradley, 1979) used as a tool to explore the description of the social situation of the object being studied, namely the Chinese (Tionghoa) community in the city of Jakarta. Although the description obtained is not yet in-depth, through this method the author can find the domain or category of the situation being studied, as the main basis for seeing the pattern of choice of the Tionghoa community regarding medical services.

Following the four basic steps of the historical research method in sequence, starting from the heuristic stage where the author collects various historical sources on traditional Chinese medicine, source criticism where the author uses it to sort and obtain historical facts, followed by the next stage, namely interpretation or synthesis to search for, study and compile the relationship of relevant facts related to the shift in traditional medicine choices, to then be finalized in the final stage, namely reconstruction in the form of writing this paper (historiography). The sources used include books, research results, as well as interviews with practitioners, observers and patients of traditional Chinese medicine in Jakarta, including the author's own personal observations at several sinshe practice locations or traditional Chinese medicine clinics in Jakarta.

This study also used observational methods in several TCM clinics in Jakarta to document patient behavior, the clinic environment, and interactions between patients and practitioners. Observations focused on how cultural elements and social identities were expressed and negotiated within these spaces.

2. History

Historically, traditional Chinese medicine in Indonesia is related to the arrival of Admiral Cheng Ho (1371-1433) to the Nusantara region in the 15th century, which indirectly helped pave the way for the entry of traditional Chinese medicine from the physicians of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) (Lanxing, 2021). After Cheng Ho's death, the next wave of Chinese people who came to Indonesia also brought various herbal remedies, medical books and carried out traditional medical practices. The latter is now popularly known as Sinshe (Xiansheng 先生). In the past, Sinshe or Sinsang (Hokkien dialect) or Xiansheng (Mandarin) meant teacher (Tanggok, 2015).

The Chinese community in Jakarta known as 'Tionghoa' (Zhonghua 华人) as an integral and inseparable part of Indonesian society has long used Eastern medicine from China or

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) as their reference in treatment, including to maintain their daily health.

Batavia (1621-1942), the forerunner of the city of Jakarta, in the past was known as a port city, a melting pot[1] of cultures, a place where various ethnic groups met, traded and introduced and influenced each other's cultures and traditions. The very limited sanitation conditions and health facilities in the past made traditional medicine successful in its time.

Among the many traditional medicines and local wisdom that have flourished in the archipelago, traditional Eastern medicine brought and developed by the Chinese community that has existed in the archipelago for centuries[2], is one of the choices that is suitable and preferred by the Indonesian people in general, and the Chinese ethnic group in particular.(Liji, 2012).

Traditional Chinese medicine techniques themselves are quite unique and have various methods, some use herbs (herbal; caoyao 草藥), acupuncture (acupuncture; zhenjiu 針灸), massage (urut; anmo 按摩), burning techniques (moxibustion; aijiu 艾灸), cupping therapy (cupping; baguan 拔罐), stimulation massage (pressure massage; tuina 推拿), internal energy therapy (chi kung, qigong 氣功), and so on. Details of the techniques and use of traditional Chinese medicine can be traced in historical records from the Han Dynasty (202 BC – 220 AD) namely in the Yellow Emperor's Esoteric Medicine Book (Huangdi Neijing 黃帝內經). (Bing, 2002).

Regarding its spread and distribution to the archipelago including Batavia, it is believed that the role of Admiral Cheng Ho's fleet played an important role. The military medical system that developed during the Ming Dynasty triggered the emergence of medical experts both in the center and on the fleet of Chinese ships. The empire not only placed medical experts in the palace, but also sent physicians to the border troops and participated in expeditionary voyages. (Lanxing, 2021:3)

The waves of people from China who came to Indonesia in the following centuries until the early 20th century also brought various herbal remedies, medical books and carried out traditional medical practices (Cheung et al., 2023).

[1] A picture where many ethnic groups gather in one place, namely the city, and merge into one.

[2] Since the Tang Dynasty (618-907), there has been cultural interaction between the Tang Dynasty and the Srivijaya Kingdom pioneered by a Buddhist priest named Yi Jing. The peak of China's relationship with the archipelago reached its peak during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) with Admiral Cheng Ho's seven voyages to the Western Ocean. Records of these visits are recorded in the history books of the Ming Dynasty in the 15th century.

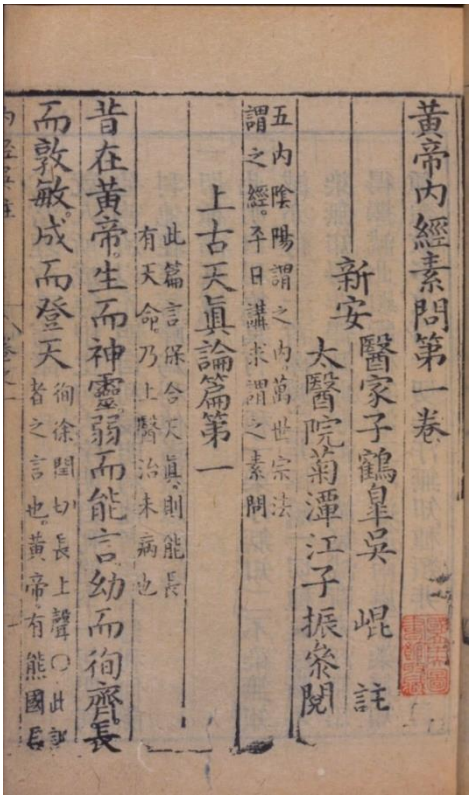
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Figure 1. The Yellow Emperor's Esoteric Medicine Collection (Huangdi Neijing 黃帝內經) as a primary source for the origins of traditional Chinese medicine. Source: Taiwan Digital Archives Catalog. original edition of the Wu family in She County during the Wanli Period of the Ming Dynasty (1573-1620)

3. Cultural Erosion in the Face of Globalization

In the city of Jakarta, which has now transformed into a metropolitan city, medical treatment has become a basic thing and must be accessible to all its residents, without exception. However, the reality is that not everyone is able or willing to access the available medical treatment provided by both the private sector and the local government.

For a multi-ethnic and multi-dimensional city like Jakarta, the choice of treatment is of course very complete and accompanied by relatively easy access, when compared to the conditions of access to treatment in the regions. Residents who need it can also choose whether they want to access traditional or modern medicine. There are also quite a lot of choices for traditional medicine, ranging from Javanese, Sundanese, Arabic, Chinese, and others.

Until the end of the 20th century, ethnographically, traditional medicine in Jakarta was still successful, including traditional Chinese medicine which was popular not only among ethnic Chinese but also all levels of society (Alkatiri, 2010). On the other hand, technological advances and developments in the era have also given rise to racial barriers that have caused an excess of dislike for traditional medicine and traditional Chinese healing techniques, one of which is through hoax news. (Badan POM RI, 2021)

Entering the era of political reform in Indonesia, the practice of Chinese medicine for the public was usually held free of charge in various Chinese temples and in various Chinese organizations in cities on the island of Java, including in Jakarta. This activity, in addition to showing identity, also strengthened the relationship between the Chinese ethnic group and other social groups. However, during the New Order, the practice of traditional medicine was hampered by the prohibition of Chinese culture and traditions (Suryadinata, 2002), which accelerated the erosion of the influence of traditional Chinese medicine.

After the Reformation, the practice of traditional medicine could be resumed more openly, but the Chinese community that had experienced regeneration found it difficult to adapt and continue this traditional medicine culture, even though it was not included in religious rituals, it was sometimes held in Chinese temples or in Chinese organizations. It is believed that this was the result of the repression of Chinese cultural traditions for 32 years in Indonesia which caused the Peranakan Chinese to lose their social identity (Suryadinata, 1984). On the other hand, among non-Chinese people, traditional Chinese medicine was actually liked and well received, especially herbs such as jamu made from leaves and roots (Andriati & R. M. T. Wahjudi, 2016). One example of the efficacy of traditional herbal medicine, namely processed binahong leaves (known in Indonesia by the brand name Pien Tze Huang) to heal postpartum wounds, has also been legendary among Chinese and non-Chinese women. However, this phenomenon often clashes with modern Western medical techniques that assume that there can be negative effects from traditional medicine.

During the spread of the Covid-19 outbreak to the point of becoming a pandemic, traditional medicines in Indonesia sold well, including traditional Chinese medicines made from various ingredients. This reflects a society that still believes and trusts in traditional medicine. This ebb and flow continues to this day. Coupled with the existence of hoax news that adds to the decline in trust in traditional medicine. (Tim Cek Fakta Kompas, 2021). On the other hand, the author's experience when observing conditions in the field, the mindset of people who have high expectations of traditional medicine is often incorrect. Some people still consider traditional medicine as 'divine medicine' that can cure various diseases. In fact, it is clearly not like that. Each medicine and technique has its own purpose.

Jakarta's diverse population includes both those who rely on TCM for its affordability and accessibility, and wealthier individuals who reject it due to its "low prestige." This highlights broader healthcare inequity issues, where treatment choices are not purely medical but are shaped by social class, identity, and economic power. The public's shifting trust—swinging between traditional and modern medicine, especially during events like the COVID-19 pandemic—demonstrates the fragile nature of medical credibility. Hoaxes, misinformation, and the politicization of medicine add to the complexity of choosing healthcare paths. Balancing respect for traditional systems with evidence-based approaches requires education, integration, and policy clarity is the biggest challenge in this fast-paced, multicultured environment. It calls attention to the urgent need to rethink how traditional knowledge systems can be preserved, integrated, and respected in contemporary health landscapes.

To complete the data and reconstruct the facts, structured surveys and questionnaires distributed to visitors of TCM clinics in Jakarta. These instruments gathered demographic data, reasons for choosing TCM, perceptions of TCM's cultural significance, and the influence of

social identity on healthcare decisions the author then conducted interviews with several sources, both practitioners, patients, and observers of traditional Chinese medicine in Jakarta. The results of the author's interviews with sources, obtained the following data:

Respondent	Domain Analysis	Reason
I	Chinese ethnicity follows the flow of progress	Progress of the times, economy
II	As Chinese Ethnic Identity	Preserving Traditions, economy
III	Inevitable	Generational indifference
IV	Collaboration to remain sustainable	Progress of the times, regeneration
V	Collaboration to remain sustainable	Progress of the times, regeneration

Table 1. Respondent Interviews Regarding the Rise and Fall of Traditional Chinese Medicine[3]

In the context of the social identity domain of the Chinese community, the table above shows that there is acceptance and change in perspective towards traditional medicine among respondents. Partly due to generational change. But there is also a resignation that progress is inevitable due to the absence of regeneration and advances in medical technology, so that modern medicine becomes a necessity. The lack of regeneration in TCM practice due to decades of repression and disinterest among youth reflects a global problem in sustaining intangible cultural knowledge. Once these skills vanish, they're difficult to revive without structural support.

[3] Interviews were conducted on October 19, 2024 with respondents: Mr. Seng Boen, Mr. Lim Charlie, Mr. Lim Vincent, Ms. Thio Heliana, Ms. Thio Heliani. Interviews were conducted via telephone.

Figure 2. A Sinshe practice using traditional Chinese massage method

Economy is also a factor in the willingness to choose traditional Chinese medicine when respondents are sick. For respondents, the relatively cheaper price and the social ties to ancestral traditions make them continue to choose this type of traditional medicine. The gradual abandonment of traditional Chinese medicine by younger generations of Tionghoa community mirrors a global pattern in which indigenous and traditional practices are increasingly devalued or lost due to modernization, Westernization, and economic pressures. This reflects a real-world challenge of preserving cultural heritage in multicultural, globalized societies where modern medicine is seen as superior or more credible.

On the other hand, respondents aged between 40-70 years old, consider the ebb and flow of traditional medicine, apart from the lack of regeneration, is also influenced by the mindset that assumes that western medical techniques are definitely better than traditional ones.

Respondent	Effectiveness of Traditional Chinese Medicine (Functional and Cultural Approach)	Reason
I	Agree	Maintaining the cultural values of each ethnic group
II	Agree	Maintaining the cultural values of each ethnic group

Respondent	Effectiveness of Traditional Chinese Medicine (Functional and Cultural Approach)	Reason
III	Agree with notes	Synergizing with the society in which we live
IV	Agree with notes	Need to go hand in hand with the progress of medical technology
V	Agree with notes	Need to go hand in hand with the progress of medical technology

Table 2. Interview with Respondents of Traditional Chinese Medicine Practitioners, Sinshe[4]

Functionally, Jakarta society is faced with the need for cheap, appropriate, effective, efficient and certainly efficacious medical treatment. Traditional Chinese medicine such as herbal, massage, acupuncture, blood vessel acupressure, and others can be choices that suit the needs of the community's economic capabilities. However, along with advances in medical technology, traditional medical techniques have been eroded by advances in the times and the dominance of Western medicine supported by sophisticated tools with minimal involvement of doctors.

All respondents from table 2, namely practitioners (sinshe), agreed with the effectiveness of traditional Chinese medicine which is very good and beneficial for the health and healing of patients. However, on the one hand, respondents also acknowledged that cooperation and progress are needed in line with the development of Western medical technology. They are aware of the limitations of traditional techniques, namely that for a long time, the patient's consistency in following the prescription or method given by the sinshe is needed.

In the interview and domain analysis sessions, it was also found that nowadays the ingredients for mixing traditional Chinese herbal medicine in Indonesia are difficult to obtain because the plants are indeed rare, or there are prohibitions or limitations on importing ingredients from China.

Despite centuries of trusted use and cultural significance, traditional Chinese medicine in Jakarta is facing extinction—not due to ineffectiveness, but because of generational disconnect, government repression, and the prestige-driven preference for Western hospitals abroad.

[4] The interview was conducted on October 19, 2024 with respondents: Sinshe Aweng, Sinshe Gouw, Sinshe Tjandra. Sinshe Jaya. The interview was conducted via telephone.

The next challenge conveyed by practitioners is prestige or pride for patients from wealthy backgrounds. The social identity of these patients makes them prefer to go to modern hospitals abroad for treatment. The image of sinshe as a traditional practitioner is often considered old-fashioned and underappreciated. This finding also shows that ethnic social ties have no influence when it comes to the image of traditional versus modern efficacy.

4. Conclusion

From the analysis of the respondent domain and the functional theoretical basis discussed previously, the author concludes that the shift in the choice of traditional Chinese medicine to modern medicine among the Chinese community in Jakarta is an inevitable phenomenon.

The factors that caused this shift are:

1. The repression factor of the social identity of the Chinese ethnic group during the New Order era which also suppressed the sustainability of this traditional medicine

2. The lack of regeneration that understands the techniques and processes of making traditional Chinese medicine

3. The difficulty of obtaining increasingly rare raw materials, coupled with the prohibition or restrictions on imports from China

4. The mindset of the community that has been ingrained regarding the image of Western medicine is modern medicine with the support of sophisticated tools that cannot be matched by traditional medicine

5. Loss of emotional ties to ethnicity

6. Economic ability to seek treatment abroad

7. Doubts about the efficacy of traditional medicine due to hoaxes on social media

8. The limitations of traditional medicine itself.

Nowadays, in general, Western medicine has become the main choice among the Indonesian people in general. Traditional Chinese medicine is still trying to be maintained by collaborating with modern Western medicine. In addition, by going hand in hand with modern medicine, it has given rise to responses, appreciation and increased interest from the Indonesian people in general and the Chinese in particular towards this increasingly eroded traditional medicine.

The shifting choices in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) among the Chinese community in Jakarta connects deeply with broader global challenges in cultural preservation, healthcare equity, and medical pluralism.

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