

# Figuratively Speaking of 'Danger of Death' in Chinese Pulse Diagnostics

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THIS CONTRIBUTION TO THE HISTORY of unconventional medicine takes an anthropological perspective. By focusing on the 'Seven sorts of Pulses which indicate danger of Death' in a Chinese treatise translated into English in the mid-eighteenth century and on the emotions in anticipation of death expressed there, it highlights problems which any researcher interested in understanding other 'life worlds' and world-views is bound to encounter. As is well known, the conceptions and experiences of body and nature, self and other, and life and death in unconventional medicine differ from those in the dominating models of contemporary biomedical sciences; and it is sometimes precisely the altered conception of self which these medicines offer that provides the basis for successful therapy.<sup>1</sup>

The sense of 'pulse' used in Chinese diagnostics differs from that used in Western medicine, where the pulses reflect the heart beat, systole and diastole. The Chinese 'pulses' have qualities indicative of the patient's condition which only the initiated can recognise. Chinese physicians distinguish between many different pulses, but this article is not about the rationale of Chinese pulse diagnostics,<sup>2</sup> and discusses only a few. They are mentioned in one of the first publications of early modern Europe which contained translations of Chinese medical writings, Jean Baptiste Du Halde's *A Description of the Empire of China and Chinese-Tartary* ([1735] 1741).<sup>3</sup> Among these Chinese treatises there is one called 'The Secret of the Pulse'<sup>4</sup>

and, in its first part, there is a section on 'Seven sorts of Pulses which indicate danger of Death'. This article examines the ways in which these 'pulses indicative of death' are described and explores the feelings in the face of death thereby communicated. It also highlights the difficulties one encounters in undertaking such an interpretive task.<sup>5</sup>

'Pulses indicative of death' were presumably already known to physicians of Chinese antiquity. In the fifth chapter of the *Pulse Canon* (*Maijing*) of the third century AD, they are attributed to Bian Que, a legendary figure who practised medicine in feudal times, before the canonical medicine of the elite, generally known as the 'medicine of systematic correspondences',<sup>6</sup> became predominant with the consolidation of the Chinese empire in the last centuries BC. Prediction of whether a patient's condition was terminal or not was crucial for doctors in antiquity. In the former case they would refuse to render treatment,<sup>7</sup> probably in order to retain their credibility. This may explain the importance of the 'pulses indicative of death'.

This article is divided into three parts. Part One presents the 'data': first, excerpts from the main text (which describes the quality of the 'pulses' with 'similes'), and secondly, excerpts from the commentary to the main text (which assesses the same 'pulses' with verbs of motion and various adjectives). Part Two presents some of the (scant) evidence about the complicated history of these text excerpts. Part Three, by far the longest, discusses obstacles that any attempt to gain an understanding of the 'life worlds' contained in such a multi-layered text presents to the anthropologist-historian.

### **Definitions**

The term 'simile', mentioned above, is a term that is often contrasted with 'metaphor'. A 'metaphor' is generally defined as 'a figure of speech in which a word or expression normally used for one kind of object, action, etc. is extended to another',<sup>8</sup> while a 'simile' provides a more explicit or 'literal' account. However, Robert Fogelin,<sup>9</sup> among others, has proposed that we do away with the idea that metaphors have 'figurative meaning' and with the distinction between metaphors as 'figures of speech' and similes as 'literal comparisons'. There are different 'ways of speaking', he says, and regardless of whether one makes use of a metaphor or a simile, one is then 'figuratively speaking' about the world. The meaning of such 'figurative comparisons' is established through co-operation between speaker and addressee and can be established through contextualisation of the utterance. This approach, explained in more detail below, is used in investigating this material.

## The Data

IN THE TREATISE ON THE 'THE SECRET OF THE PULSE', the 'Seven sorts of Pulses which indicate danger of Death' are described in two ways: in the main text by a 'figurative comparison' (a so-called 'simile') and in the commentary (given in smaller script) by verbs of motion and various adjectives. These descriptions of the 'pulses', although contained in only two short text excerpts, shed light on several attitudes towards imminent death.

### 'Pulses' in the Main Text assessed by 'Figurative Comparison'

The 'pulses' in the main text are assessed by figurative comparisons (italicised words are my emphasis):

1. When the Pulse, being felt in the Morning, seems to bubble under the Fingers irregularly *like Water over a great Fire*, one may be assured that the Patient will die in the Evening; that is, has very little Time to live.
2. It is a sign Death is equally near if the Pulse seems *like a Fish, whose Head is stopped, and cannot move, but frisks with its Tail not very regularly*. The cause of the Distemper lies in the Kidneys.
3. When the Pulse, after beating in a hurry, changes all of a sudden, and becomes very slow and sluggish, there is likewise danger of Death, but it is not altogether so near.
4. If the Pulse, by the Hardness of its Beats, *resembles in some sort a Bullet of Stone or dried [sic] Earth shot out of a Cross-Bow*, both the Lungs and Stomach want Spirits: Nor is this a transient Failure, but a rooted Distemper.
5. In like manner, if the Pulse seems *like Drops of Water that fall into a House, through some Crack or little Hole in the Roof*, and in its return is scattered and disordered, *much like the Twists of a Cord which is unravelled*, the Bones are dried up even to the very Marrow.
6. Also, if the Motion of the Pulse, at the Extremity of the Cubitus in both Arms, *resembles the Pace of a Frog embarrassed in the Weeds, or that of a Toad*, Death in all these Cases is certain.
7. If the Motion of the Pulse *resembles the hasty pecking of the Beak of a Bird*, there is a failure of Spirits in the Stomach: one may also conclude that the Heart performs its Functions but ill, and that the Blood is in no good Condition.<sup>10</sup>

The figurative comparisons describe these 'pulses' by invoking specific episodes (with the exception of case 5, which mentions two such episodes in a sequence, and of case 3, where the 'pulse' is described with verbs and

adjectives). One may therefore be inclined to speak of each episode as drawing on 'metaphorical imagery'. But in the above examples the notions of 'metaphor' and 'imagery' are more misleading than revealing. In particular the etymology of the term 'imagery' alludes to a visual experience, while most of the above episodes are meant to communicate a tactile one.

Having said this, the text refers to a primarily tactile perception only once: the *hardness* of the beat from a bullet of stone (in case 4). In the other cases, the figurative comparison might relate a synaesthetic description of the 'pulse'. Thus, the 'Fish, whose Head is stopped, and cannot move, but frisks with its Tail not very regularly' may be taken as a visual image used to describe a tactile perception. But it could also refer to the distinctive tactile experience of, say, a fisherman who has just caught a fish and, as it still flips with its tail, tries to hold it in his hands. Such indeterminacy is increased by the observation that, while the figurative comparison may indeed refer to the tactile experience of sensing distinctive 'pulses', the episode described appears to relate an emotion too, which, as we will see, might be one that patient and doctor experience in anticipation of imminent death. Such indeterminacy between sensory and emotional experience is well documented in the literature.<sup>11</sup>

### 'Pulses' in the Commentary assessed with Verbs and Adjectives

The commentary on the above seven 'pulses' is given in smaller typescript and must have been of a later date than the text itself. In the commentary, each of the above episodes is contained in the name, to which is added a description with verbs of motion and various adjectives. It seems as though the commentator found it necessary to elucidate the meaning of the name by providing a description of these 'pulses' with specific verbs and adjectives. He asserts that there are many more than seven 'pulses' which indicate 'danger of Death'; he enumerates 17, to which he adds some more. We, however, will limit ourselves to those mentioned first. With the exception of the second 'pulse', they are the same as those encountered in the main text (italicised words are my emphasis).

The first of these Pulses is call'd Fu fwe, the bubbling of the Kettle ... (the name is then explained without further comments) (cf. case 1)

The second is called Few ho, the Union, or Continuity of Waves ... (not discussed previously)

The third is call'd Tan she, the Stone or Bullet of a Cross-Bow: That is, *when the Pulse, coming, as it were, from between the Bones, beats hard and dry against the Fingers* (cf. case 4)

The fourth is call'd Chyo-tso, the pecking of a Bird; and is *when the Pulse beats three or four times in a hard and sharp manner against the Fingers, then ceasing a little returns after the same Fashion like a Bird picking up Grain.* (cf. case 7)

The fifth is called Vu lew, a Crack, by which the Water drops into a House: That is, *when the Pulse, after it has ceased for some time, beats freely again, like a small Drop that slips thro' a Chink ...* (cf. case 5)

The sixth is call'd Kyay so, a String that is untwisted: And is, *when the Pulse dispersing is so disorder'd that one cannot perceive it return to any regular Motion ...* (cf. case 5)

The seventh is call'd Yu Tsyang; the Frisking of Fish: This is, *when the Beatings of the Pulse, being mostly superficial, are mixed with deep ones; it is felt, and then goes away, nor can one tell what is become of it ...* (cf. case 2)

The eighth is call'd Hya yew, the Pace of a Toad: That is, *when feeling the Pulse gently, 'tis not perceiv'd for some while, because it is deep (Chin), and of a sudden there is felt a deep superficial Beating (Few) but weak, which presently ceases, and after a considerable time returns in the same manner again ...* (cf. case 6)<sup>12</sup>

Among these eight 'pulses', seven have a name that alludes to one of the previously given episodes in the main text, but the commentator describes only six of them with verbs of motion and various adjectives, namely the third to the eighth 'pulse', and discussion will be limited to these. The verbs indicate that if the 'pulse' is discontinuous – there being a coming and going, a ceasing and returning – death is indicated. Adjectives expressing a mixing of categories (for instance of superficial and deep 'pulses') and verbs referring to a dispersal of the 'pulse' also seem to be indicative of death, a suggestion which will be corroborated by adjectives discussed in more detail in Part Three.

## An Archaeology of the History of the Text

IN ORDER TO MAKE SENSE OF THE ABOVE OBSERVATIONS, one has to place the translations published by Du Halde in their historical context. Du Halde mentions P. Hervieu, 'an ancient Missionary in China', as translator of the text. Hervieu attributes the treatise on 'The Secret of the Pulse' to Wang shu ho,<sup>13</sup> whom he incorrectly presents as having 'lived under Tsin shi whang' and as 'the most antient [sic] Author on this Subject'.<sup>14</sup> (However, Wang Shuhe lived in fact in the third century AD and Qin shi Huangdi ruled the Chinese empire, after having unified it, between 221–07 BC). Moreover the translated treatise, known as *Wang Shuhe maijue*, was certainly not composed by Wang Shuhe but probably compiled by a certain Gao Yangsheng of the tenth century.<sup>15</sup> This treatise was one of the many versions of the *Maijue*

(*Rhymed Pulse Lore*) that were then in circulation<sup>16</sup> but have now lost significance. Much, but not all, of its contents are related to Wang Shuhe's *Pulse Canon* (*Maijing*) (third century AD) and also with the *Canon of Difficult Issues* (*Nanjing*) (second century AD).<sup>17</sup>

The Chinese text on which the modern European translation is based is not known. However, given that the *Pulse Canon* records verbatim six of the above figurative comparisons (as the comparison of the transliteration in Du Halde with the Chinese graphs in the *Pulse Canon* suggests), it is reasonable to assume that they were also contained in the *Rhymed Pulse Lore* on which the translation is based. These are the 'Crack by which the Water drops into a House' (*wu lou*) and the 'pecking of a Bird' (*que zhao*), 'the coming of the Pulse like a Bullet of Stone shot out of a Cross-Bow' (*lai ru tan she*) and its 'going like [an untwisted or, rather,] a loose Cord' (*qu ru jie suo*), the 'Pace of a Toad [or a shrimp]' (*ha* [or *xia*] *zhi you*)<sup>18</sup> and the 'Frisking of Fish' (*yu zhi xiang*).<sup>19</sup> These 'pulses' have been listed here in the same sequence and combination as they are recorded in the *Pulse Canon*. It obviously differs from that given in Du Halde's main text and also from that in the commentary. It is possible that the sequence in the *Pulse Canon* may have described a progression of increasingly serious conditions of illness, i.e. that the 'pulse' likened to dripping water is least alarming and that likened to the flipping tail of a fish most dangerous. However, it is difficult to provide conclusive evidence for this interpretation.

The idiom *jie suo*, which is rendered as 'Twists of a Cord which is unravelling' in the main text and as 'a String that is untwisted' in the commentary, requires attention. In Du Halde's main text it is related to falling water drops (in case 5); in the commentary it is mentioned on its own (as sixth 'pulse'), and in the *Pulse Canon* it describes a 'pulse' that 'comes like a Bullet of Stone shot out of a Cross-Bow and goes like a loose Cord'. The question is which of these three versions was the original one. While the complicated histories of textual editions preclude certainty, it makes sense to assume that the earliest record, i.e. that in the *Pulse Canon*, is closer to the original. Although the semantics of a sentence cannot always provide convincing evidence, here they offer at least some support. First, in the description of the 'pulse' as one that 'comes like a Bullet of Stone shot out of a Cross-Bow and goes like a loose Cord' it is easy to see the hardness of its coming as being opposed to the looseness of its going. This interpretation would give a certain internal coherence to the description of the movement of the 'pulse'. (Such internal coherence cannot be attributed to the 'pulse' of case 5 in the main text, which mentions the water droplets in the same sentence as the unravelling cord.) Secondly, most episodes in the main text

of the translation refer to observations – in our understanding – of nature. The two exceptions concern precisely those which in the *Pulse Canon* describe a single movement of the 'pulse': the 'Bullet of Stone or dried Earth shot out of a Cross-Bow' (in case 4) and 'the Twists of a Cord which is unravelled' (in case 5). These two episodes refer to an experience with cultural artefacts in social practice. They differ from the others in that they are assembled in a composite sentence and in that they are derived from experiences with the social rather than the natural world.

There is evidence that the 'pulses indicative of death' were among the first that Chinese physicians became interested in, because one of the earliest extant documents of practices precursory to those of canonical medicine (a manuscript unearthed from a tomb closed in 168 BC) refers in a text passage to such 'pulses' (*mai*).<sup>20</sup> These conditions are described in the same stylistic manner as those in the main text, by means of a figurative comparison which alludes to experience with cultural artefacts in daily life (italicised words are my emphasis): 'If, when stroking the vessel-pulse it is *as if three persons together were triply pounding [millet]*, death occurs within three days' and 'If the vessel-pulse is severed *as if one were eating a meal [i.e. as the oesophagus gets 'severed' when one eats a meal and swallows down a bite of food]*, death occurs within three days'.<sup>21</sup> These figurative comparisons from the second century BC allude to social life, and together with the one alluding to the hardness of a bullet shot and the looseness of a string, they differ from the others which refer to observations of the natural world.

To summarise, six figurative comparisons of the 'Seven Pulses which indicate danger of Death' can be traced to the *Pulse Canon* of the third century AD. This suggests that these idioms had been preserved verbatim in the *Rhymed Pulse Lore* of the tenth century AD and in the version which provided the basis for the translation given in Du Halde. However, the sequencing and combination of these idioms differ, and this may testify to variations made in the course of the transmission of the text. These episodes are assessed by the same stylistic means (i.e. figurative comparisons) as the 'pulses' indicative of death in a manuscript of the second century BC. The commentary on these figurative comparisons, in terms of verbs of motion and various adjectives, was certainly of a later date.

### The Problem of Cultural Translation

THE DESCRIPTIONS OF THE 'Seven sorts of Pulses which indicate danger of Death' concern tactile perception. However, since emotional experience has been shown to have an impact on perception and

cognition,<sup>22</sup> they may also refer to the situational context and the feelings developed in the face of death. The descriptions of these 'pulses' may therefore point to feelings that were predominant in a situation where the doctor sensed the patient's emotional state in anticipation of imminent death. Of course, interpretive undertakings of this kind call for extreme caution; only two points will be mentioned here.

First, given that doctrines of unconventional medicine are often related in a particular writing style or 'way of speaking', it is important to distinguish between knowledge and the expression of knowledge in language. Roger Keesing criticises simplistic attempts to equate a 'way of speaking' with a philosophical conception of the world:

When Kwaio talk about the past as down, the future as up, are we to see this as evidence of a different philosophical conception of time than our own or simply as a somewhat different metaphoric scheme for talking about it? ... All languages are pervaded, I think, by metaphoric usages that are not 'dead' but simply conventional ways of talking about one realm of experience – often a more abstract one – in terms of another more directly amenable to characterization in words ... Anthropologists have been prone to take such ways of talking as evidence for world-views radically different from our own.<sup>23</sup>

Keesing is certainly right to question the validity of deriving a world-view from one decontextualised word alone. Yet the above text excerpts are written in a style marked by various forms of indirectness. Such indirectness, particularly in 'figurative comparisons', has long attracted the attention of anthropologists.<sup>24</sup> In the late 1970s it became generally accepted that

Metaphors are thus part of scientific discourse, just as they are part of religious belief. Furthermore, metaphor is not a random analogy. Its imagery builds on clusters or sets of underlying associations which anthropologists can and should examine.<sup>25</sup>

'Figurative comparisons' may indeed be taken as a key to a 'life world', particularly if one treats them, following Robert Fogelin, as speech acts where meaning is derived from a successful co-operation between sender and receiver. Fogelin considers the notion of 'figurative meaning' misleading when in fact one is 'figuratively speaking' about the world. He thereby compares the researcher engaging in interpretive research to an addressee in a speech act situation who tries to make sense of an author's utterance by seeking suitable 'contexts'. Both simile and metaphor convey the author's meaning in an indirect way, and the addressee who wishes to make sense of what is being said is expected to find ways of adjusting the situational context so that it squares with the utterance made.<sup>26</sup> Such an approach to



'figurative comparisons' demands that the researcher establish meaning through situational contextualisation of the utterance. It postulates that finding the 'context' to 'a way of speaking' provides a key to the 'life world' of the author.

The second point worth consideration is that core issues of unconventional medicine are often insufficiently researched and not well understood. With regard to the figurative comparisons for describing the 'pulses indicative of death', this implies that both touch as a means of perception and emotion in anticipation of death are not very well researched topics. While death is a much discussed theme in anthropology,<sup>27</sup> the associated emotions are often neglected and, if discussed, they are usually those of the bereaved.<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, anthropologists have little to say on 'fear of death'.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps this is because the 'fear of death', phrased as such, is a fairly recent phenomenon in European history. (The 'fear of hell' may have been more salient for a Christian in medieval times.) It is also possible that emotions related to the anticipation of death are generally not expressed in social interaction and are hence invisible to the social scientist. Emotions expressed in culturally specific ways may not always be perceived by the researcher.

### Figuratively Speaking of Death

Some of the discrepancies between the Chinese idioms and their translation are particularly illuminating. They suggest that in the course of translation approximations to the emotion of 'fear of death' were imported into the text. Thus, the Chinese idiom *si mai* means 'pulses [indicative] of death' but in Du Halde it is given as 'Pulses which indicate *danger* of Death' (italics added). Or, the Chinese idiom *xia [ha] zhi you* means simply 'gait of a shrimp [or a frog]' which, considering that *xia* as a verb designates a winding and wriggling, may have described a meandering movement, while in Du Halde it is translated as 'the Pace of a Frog embarrassed in the Weeds' (in case 6), which instantly invokes the imagery of the animal engaged in a struggle. Likewise, *yu zhi xiang* may have designated the 'hovering [and immobility] of a fish [in the water]', while the translation of 'a Fish, whose head is stopped, and cannot move, but frisks the Tail not very regularly' (in case 2) would seem to allude to the apparent struggle which a fish shows after being caught. These translations, in contrast to the Chinese original, seem to allude to a situation in which the 'pulse' of a patient who is anticipating death is compared to a fish or frog struggling to stay alive. In a similar vein, the word 'hasty' in the expression 'the hasty pecking of the Beak of a Bird' (in case 7) points to an anxious state of mind, but again this is not explicitly rendered

in the Chinese original: *que zhao* simply means ‘the sparrow is pecking’. In summary, while it is difficult to know whether or not ‘fear of death’ was implicit in the Chinese text, the modern European translation makes ‘fear of death’ explicit. The figurative comparisons used for describing the tactile experience of ‘pulses indicative of death’ express thus a feeling which refers to the situational context in which the doctor recognised them.

It would be rash to derive from the above ‘fear of death’ as reflecting the attitude of the early modern European translator(s) and contrast it with that of the equanimous East Asian physicians. Depending on register, style and other social factors determining language use, emotions are expressed in some writings more than in others. A translation often provides a more explicit interpretation of the original, particularly if a native speaker and a translator produce it in mutual interaction. In this way the interlocutor’s comments on a text excerpt can become part of the translation.

Naturally, one would expect that the Chinese idioms used for describing a tactile experience reflected the situational context and the ‘life world’ of the actors involved as well. Considering that the dripping water (*wu lou*) and the pecking of the bird (*que zhao*) are mentioned in the *Pulse Canon* in sequence, it is possible that these two episodes primarily referred to frequencies of the ‘pulse’ rate. According to the commentary to the *Pulse Canon*, the falling water droplets referred to a comparatively slower rate and the bird’s pecking to a more rapid one.<sup>30</sup> If the intervals between slowly falling water droplets had been conceived as regular, they may have alluded to a measuring of time in anticipation of death, comparable to the imagery of death waiting *with the hourglass* by the sick man’s bedside; the bird’s pecking may have referred to the rapid pulse rate caused by fevers or anxiety. However, from the material at hand it is impossible to know.

On what basis or in respect to what kind of ‘context’ may it be assumed that falling water droplets indicated time measurement? One approach lies in the history of culture-specific technologies: while the tick-tock of mechanical clocks was not known in premodern China, the water clock had been invented by the last centuries BC.<sup>31</sup> The word *lou* elsewhere in medical texts designates the measurement of equivalent time intervals.<sup>32</sup> Such modes of contextualisation are more acceptable, but they cannot provide conclusive evidence. Nor can they explain why the text mentions not the water clock, but *wu lou*, a dripping in the northwestern corner of a house with an opening in the roof for worshipping the dead (transcribed as *wu lew* in case 5).

Considering that *wu lou*, which referred to an opening directly connected to the sky, is a place for worshipping the dead already mentioned

in the *Book of Songs* (one of the earliest extant documents of Chinese literature)<sup>33</sup> and that birds are also often associated with the soul in ancient China,<sup>34</sup> *wu lou* and *que zhao* may originally have evoked associations with death now lost to us, and perhaps even to the Chinese physicians and their patients. It is difficult to know.

One may also choose to resort to cross-cultural comparison in order to provide 'context' for these figurative comparisons. For instance, why should a 'pulse' likened to 'a Bullet of Stone or dried Earth shot out of a Cross-Bow' be indicative of death (case 4)? It seems as though it were alluding to a sudden stroke of death, possibly due to being startled and losing soul (i.e. loss of spirit), which is a well-known phenomenon in China<sup>35</sup> and in Asia in general, if not throughout the world at large. However, the cross-cultural vantage point is unreliable because it can just as easily provide contradictory models. Thus, rather than comparing the process of dying to the process of boiling water turning into hot vapour (as in case 1), exponents of occidental traditions like Shakespeare would rather speak of a fire turning into cold ashes.<sup>36</sup> It cannot be overstated that cross-cultural comparison cannot be used as a reliable basis for such an interpretive undertaking.

In summary, the 'context' provided for making sense of the above few figurative comparisons has been derived from cultural practice, i.e. culture-specific artefacts and ritual context. No indications have been found which would allow these figurative comparisons to be considered as expressing the predominant feelings of the situational context in which doctor and patient awaited imminent death. As already stated, the figurative comparisons for describing tactile experience implicitly may have alluded to emotional states as well, but it would be difficult to demonstrate this.

It would be wrong to deduce from this that 'fear of death' was not known in China. In order to dispel this idea, a philosopher of the fourth century BC is cited here, Master Zhuang. A.C. Graham praises his personal and spontaneous writing style: 'Nothing in his unusual sensibility is more striking than the lyrical, ecstatic tone in which he writes of death.'<sup>37</sup> Most of Master Zhuang's writings on death are assembled in the chapter called 'The Teacher who is the ultimate Ancestor' (Da zong shi).<sup>38</sup> This chapter, which consists of various stories, begins by discussing life and death in more general terms. These statements about the 'way' (*dao*) and 'genuine men' (*zhenren*) convey ideas which by implication point out attitudes towards death. For instance, when Master Zhuang says 'The genuine men of ancient times did not know how to delight in life nor did they know how to fear death,'<sup>39</sup> the opposition of 'delighting (*yue*) in life' and 'fearing [or hating] (*wu*) death' may well reflect an attitude, not unlike that of the early modern translator,

where death is hated and/or feared. According to the *Zhuangzi* the genuine men of high antiquity lived in a morally superior state as compared with most people of more recent eras – early China and modern times. They treated life and death with equanimity.

Elsewhere in the chapter there is a story of a certain Master Lai. When his wife and children wept (*qi*) on the verge of his death, they were told not to fear the transformations that death was to bring about (*wu pa hua*),<sup>40</sup> the transformations mentioned being those into rat's liver (*su gan*) or spider legs (*chong bi*).<sup>41</sup> Here death is described as a *hua*-transformation, and Master Zhuang's choice of the word *hua* may well have had overtones of irony. While it may have referred to transformation through digestion,<sup>42</sup> that is, consumption by rats and spiders, *hua* is also used to describe a process of moral transformation and spiritual refinement.<sup>43</sup> This view of death as a process of *hua* contrasts with the fear, *pa*, experienced by Master Lai's wife and children.

The attitude to life and death put forth in the *Zhuangzi* is, as a commentator put it, one of *wu xin*, 'to be without [desires of the] heart' and emotional entanglement with life.<sup>44</sup> This attitude of 'when receiving [things], to be joyful about them' (*shou er xi zhi*) and 'when losing them, to [willingly] return them' (*wang er fu zhi*)<sup>45</sup> is repeatedly put forth. We may assume that another sentiment, fear of death, was implicitly targeted.

The above excerpts from Master Zhuang's writings on death illustrate that 'fear of death' was not a sentiment unknown to Chinese people in antiquity. Even if the descriptions of the 'pulses' in Chinese do not make 'fear of death' explicit, we cannot be sure that it was not implicitly contained in them.

### Adjectives for touch and their connotations of death

In the above text excerpts from the 'Seven pulses indicating danger of Death' adjectives mentioned by the commentator,<sup>46</sup> such as the 'irregular' and the 'dispersed', involve a tactile experience. But they also contain connotations of death as a form of irregularity and disintegration. Thus, dying is conceived of as a dispersal of *qi* in the *Zhuangzi* and many other writings: 'When *qi* congregates, then one is born ... and when *qi* disperses, then one dies' (*[qi] ju ze wei sheng ... san ze wei si*).<sup>47</sup> Such a conceptualisation of dying emphasizes the potential for resilience and reversibility, even with regard to a process which is irreversible to us.

Some other adjectives also allude to processes of dying as conceived in canonical medical writings of the Han dynasty. Thus, the adjectives 'hard and dry' and 'hard and sharp', which one would expect to describe primarily

a tactile perception, have connotations of dying in the light of Chinese medical doctrine where ageing is regarded as a process of drying out and withering away, and consequently, of hardening up.<sup>48</sup> The terms Chinese medical authors used for describing processes of ageing testify to their well-known preference for botanical analogies.<sup>49</sup> The dried and shrivelled (*ku gao*), two terms frequently encountered in medical writings, originally described dead wood and grass, as the following quote from the *Laozi* (third century BC) suggests: 'A man is supple and weak (*rou ruo*) when living but hard and stiff (*jian qiang*) when dead. Grass and trees are pliant and fragile (*rou cui*) when living but dried and shrivelled (*ku gao*) when dead.'<sup>50</sup> The *Laozi* and related philosophical writings, which contain ideas also found in the medical canons, highly valued the supple and weak and saw these as attributes of water.<sup>51</sup> Dying as a process of drying out and hardening points to the ancient Chinese conviction that likens water to life. Yet the Chinese physicians who used these words for describing the tactile experience of sensing 'pulses indicative of death' may have been just as unaware of their references to the process of dying and death as the Kwaio who speaks of the past as down and the future as up.

### Discussion

Chinese physicians described 'pulses indicative of death' in figurative comparisons and also, in a more 'literal' way, with verbs of motion and adjectives for describing touch. One may have thought that these descriptions expressed solely the physicians' tactile experiences, but this is not the case. Thus, a figurative comparison, as for instance the 'hasty pecking of the Beak of a Bird', may have related a synaesthetic description alluding both to the visual imagery and to the distinctive tactile experience that it evokes. Also, some adjectives which quite straightforwardly describe a tactile experience, like the 'hard' or 'dry', may have had connotations derived from their use in ancient Chinese writings as references to the process of dying and death. In addition, the early modern European translation of the originally Chinese figurative comparisons makes explicit allusion to an emotion: fear of death. It expresses a feeling likely to have arisen in a situation where death was imminent. Figurative comparisons which were meant to describe a tactile experience thus conveyed information on the emotions in the situational context in which the tactile experience was made.

This article stresses the difficulties and dangers that any interpretive task presents to the researcher who intends to use 'ways of speaking' to derive information on the feelings and 'life world', thoughts and world-view of

other people. 'Ways of speaking' cannot immediately be equated with modes of thought and feeling. Thus, the explicit allusion to 'fear of death' in the early modern translation, but not in the Chinese, cannot be taken as a sign that 'fear of death' was not contained in the figurative comparisons given in Chinese.

Difficulties in using these 'ways of speaking' as keys to a 'life world' arise furthermore from the complicated history of the textual excerpts. Thus, already in antiquity some of the above figurative comparisons may have been coined by medical authors adhering to different medical traditions. In the *Pulse Canon* of the third century AD, for instance, one pulse description alluded to experiences in the social world (it was also the only composite one), while the other five to the natural world. The eighteenth-century English translation in Du Halde thus contains points of view of an unknown number of authors, commentators and translators, who cannot be located in place and time. Their 'way of speaking' may allude to the situational context (the imminence of death), it may inform on the cultural context (as reflected in terms reminiscent of culture-specific artefacts and ritual spaces), and it may have connotations derived from other contexts in which they have been used (of which, however, the authors, commentators, and translators need not necessarily have been aware). Though the 'ways of speaking' about 'pulses indicative of death' are succinct, they have many layers of meaning with traces from different ages, cultures, and traditions.

## Notes

- 1 See, for instance, H. Johannessen et al. (eds.), *Studies in Alternative Therapy 2: Body and Nature* (Odense, 1995). I am indebted to Ma Kanwen, whose expertise got me started, and to the participants of the seminar on the 'History of Unconventional Medicine', held on 11–12 September 1998 in Norrköping, Sweden. I would also like to thank the participants of a Needham Research Institute Text Reading Seminar as well as Mark Lewis for remarks which helped on the Chinese side. Erica Brindley, Robert Hinde, Erling Høg, Julia Lawton and Rudolph Pfister made valuable comments on earlier drafts.
- 2 For an excellent discussion of Chinese 'pulse' diagnostics, in contradistinction to Greek sphygmology, see S. Kuriyama, *The Expressiveness of the Body and the Divergence of Greek and Chinese Medicine* (New York, 1999), pp. 17–108.
- 3 J.B. Du Halde, *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique et physique de l'Empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie Chinoise*, 4 vols., (Paris, 1735), trans. R. Brookes, *A Description of the Empire of China and Chinese-Tartary, Together with the Kingdoms of Korea, and Tibet: Containing the Geography and History (Natural as well as Civil) of those Countries*, 2 vols. (London, 1741). See vol. 2, pp. 183–236 and pp. 229–35 [erroneous page numbering]. The material discussed is from the English edition, 1741, vol. 2, pp. 184–207.
- 4 This treatise, also translated as the *Rhymed Pulse Lore* [Majue], has a remarkable history in Europe and the Middle East. It was translated into Persian as early as the fourteenth century, and may even have been known to Avicenna in the tenth century.
- 5 With its focus on the emotions in anticipation of imminent death, this article complements 'Towards a Science of Touch', *Anthropology and Medicine* 7:2 and 7:3 (2000).
- 6 P.U. Unschuld, *Medicine in China. A History of Ideas* (Berkeley, [1980] 1985).
- 7 Sima Qian, *Shiji* [Historical Records] (Beijing, [first century BC] 1959), chapter 105.2, pp. 2794–820.
- 8 This dictionary definition of 'metaphor' in P.H. Matthews, *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Linguistics* (Oxford, 1997) represents what M. Black in *Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy* (Ithaca, 1962), p. 31, calls the 'substitution view of metaphor'.
- 9 R.J. Fogelin, *Figuratively Speaking* (New Haven, 1986), presents an elaboration of the so-called 'elliptical-simile theory of metaphors' or, in Black's terminology (*Models and Metaphors*, p. 35), a 'comparison view of metaphor' (which is a special case of the 'substitution view'). Fogelin's approach is informed by speech act theory, as initiated by J.L. Austin, and by the conviction that communication depends on a principle of co-operation between speaker and addressee, as put forth by H.P. Grice, but he does not adopt any of their detailed theoretical frameworks.
- 10 Du Halde, *Description of the Chinese Empire*, pp. 190–91.

- 11 See B. Beck, 'The Metaphor as Mediator between Semantic and Analogic Modes of Thought', *Current Anthropology* 19:1 (1978), 84.
- 12 Du Halde, *Description of the Chinese Empire*, p. 191.
- 13 Du Halde, *Description of the Chinese Empire*, p. 184.
- 14 Du Halde, *Description of the Chinese Empire*, p. 196.
- 15 Li Shizhen, *Binhu maixue* [Study of the Pulse], *Qijing bamaikao* [The Eight Odd Vessels Examined] and *Maijue kaozheng* [The Rhymed Pulse Lore Examined], (Beijing, [1564] 1956), p. 140.
- 16 G.-D. Lu and J. Needham, *Celestial Lancets. A History and Rationale of Acupuncture and Moxa* (Cambridge, 1980), p. 277.
- 17 Chen Yannan, *Maijing zhujiao* [The Pulse Canon Annotated] (Beijing, 1991), and P.U. Unschuld, *Nan-ching. The Classic of Difficult Issues. With Commentaries by Chinese and Japanese Authors from the Third through to the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley, 1986).
- 18 The Chinese graph is pronounced as *ha*, meaning frog, and also as *xia*, meaning shrimp. Its transliteration as *hya* in Du Halde does not give conclusive information on its pronunciation.
- 19 Chen, *Maijing* 5, p. 162.
- 20 Mawangdui Hanmu boshu zhengli xiaozu (eds.), *Mawangdui Hanmu boshu* [The Silk Documents from a Han Tomb at Mawangdui] (Beijing, 1985). See vol. 4, p. 5.
- 21 The term *mai* is by some translated as 'vessel' rather than 'pulse', therefore I render it in translation here as 'vessel-pulse'. The translation for the former is informed by D. Harper, *Early Chinese Medical Literature: The Mawangdui Medical Manuscripts* (London, 1998), p. 200, who basically follows Ma Jixing (ed.), *Mawangdui gu yishu kaoshi* [Explanation of the Ancient Medical Documents from Mawangdui] (Changsha, 1992), p. 204. The translation of the latter 'pulse' differs from theirs (which interprets *ru shi dun* as 'a short time span, namely the time it takes to eat a meal'). My point is that both 'pulses' are assessed by a simile which describes tactile perception. It is possible that in antiquity the 'pulses' were taken at the neck, and that the severing of the vessel-pulse was compared to the occlusion of the oesophagus when one swallows a bite of food.
- 22 See, for instance, A.R. Damasio, *Descartes' Error. Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York, 1994).
- 23 R. Keesing, 'Anthropology as an Interpretive Quest', *Current Anthropology* 28:2 (1987), 161–76.
- 24 See, in particular, J.W. Fernandez, *Persuasions and Performances. The Play of Tropes in Culture* (Bloomington, 1986), and J.W. Fernandez (ed.), *Beyond Metaphor. The Theory of Tropes in Anthropology* (Stanford, 1991).
- 25 B. Beck, 'The Metaphor as Mediator', p. 84.
- 26 Insofar as the meaning of figurative comparisons is established through an interaction of speaker and addressee, Fogelin's approach is reminiscent of Black's



(*Models and Metaphors*, p. 39), 'interaction model of metaphor', where 'the reader is forced' (italics added) to do something in order to make sense of a metaphor (which in that case is 'to connect' two ideas).

- 27 See for instance M. Bloch and J. Parry, *Death and the Regeneration of Life* (Cambridge, 1982).
- 28 R.A. Le Vine, 'Gusii Funerals: Meanings of Life and Death in an African Community', *Ethos* 10:1 (1982), pp. 26–65.
- 29 Among the exceptions belong M. Taussig, 'Culture of Terror – Space of Death. Roger Casement's Putumayo Report and the Explanation of Torture', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26 (1984), 467–97, who discusses fear of death in the context of torture, and M. Trawick, 'Untouchability and the Fear of Death in a Tamil Song' in C.A. Lutz and L. Abu-Lughod (eds.), *Language and the Politics of Emotion* (Cambridge and Paris, 1990), pp. 186–206, who is, however, concerned mostly with questions of incest and pollution.
- 30 Chen, *Maijing* 5, p. 161, describes the coming of the *wu lou* 'pulse', inter alia, as 'abruptly being severed and stopping, and occasionally emerging again' and the coming of the *que zhao* 'pulse' as 'very frequent and rapid, and when being severed and stopped, instantly coming again'.
- 31 The earliest reference dates to the *Rites of Zhou* [Zhouli] (third–first century BC). See J. Needham, in collaboration with Wang Ling, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 3, *Mathematics and the Sciences of the Heavens and the Earth* (Cambridge, 1959), pp. 313–29.
- 32 Unschuld, *The Classic of Difficult Issues*, p. 65.
- 33 Anon., 'Shijing zhengyi' [Orthodox Interpretation of the Book of Songs] in Ruan Yuan (ed.) *Shisanjing zhushu* (Beijing, [1816] 1980), Daya, Yi, vol. 1, p. 555.
- 34 F. Waterbury, *Bird-deities in China*. *Artibus Asiae Supplement* 10 (Ascona, 1952), pp. 57–72. An early attempt to assemble knowledge from a wide variety of sources on the topic, this book is to be read with caution.
- 35 P.A. Kuhn, *Soulstealers. The Chinese Sorcery Scare of 1768* (Cambridge, MA, 1990).
- 36 Cited in Fogelin, *Figuratively Speaking*, p. 108.
- 37 A.C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao. Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (La Salle, 1989), p. 202.
- 38 Guo Qingfan, *Zhuangzi jishi* [Collected Annotations to the *Zhuangzi*] (Beijing, [1894] 1961), ch. 6, vol. 1, pp. 224–86; trans. A.C. Graham, *Chuang-tzu: The Inner Chapters* (London, 1981), pp. 84–93.
- 39 Guo, *Zhuangzi* 6, vol. 1, p. 229. Alternative translations are given by Graham, *Chuang-tzu*, p. 85 and by D. Coyle, 'On the *Zhenren*' in R. Ames (ed.), *Wandering at Ease in the Zhuangzi* (Albany, 1998), pp. 197–210. Graham and Coyle both translate *wu* in the sense of 'to hate' or 'to despise', but *wu si* has in other contexts been translated as 'to fear death'. The idea that death is feared (*wei*) and not only hated is stated verbatim in the *Lao zi*. See Chen Guying, *Laozi zhushi ji pingjie* [Explanation

and Review of the *Laozi*] (Beijing, 1984), verse 74, p. 337; trans. D.C. Lau, *Lao Tzu, Tao te ching* (Harmondsworth, 1967), LXXIV, p. 136.

- 40 Graham, *Chuang-tzu*, p. 88, translates *wu pa hua* as not to 'startle him while he transforms'; *pa* generally means 'to fear' and not 'to startle'. Further research is needed to clarify this issue conclusively.
- 41 Guo, *Zhuangzi* 6, vol. 1, p. 261.
- 42 E. Hsu, 'Change in Chinese Medicine: *bian* and *hua*. An Anthropologist's Approach' in V. Alleton and A. Volkov (eds.), *Notions et perceptions du changement en Chine*. Mémoires de l'Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises XXXVI (Paris, 1994), pp. 41–58.
- 43 Consider for instance the idiom *jiao hua*: to educate and thereby transform. The use of the word *hua* for describing digestive transformations may well imply that in the Chinese view digestion was seen as a process of refinement.
- 44 Guo, *Zhuangzi* 6, vol. 1, p. 229.
- 45 Guo, *Zhuangzi* 6, vol. 1, p. 229. Graham, *Chuang-Tzu*, p. 88, and Coyle, 'On the Zhenren', p. 203, both translate *wang* as 'to forget' which is correct. Given that radicals in writings of the time were often used interchangeably, it is nevertheless possible to read *wang* as being written without the heart radical.
- 46 The adjectives in the main text such as the 'irregular' (in case 1), the 'not very regular' (in case 2) and the 'scattered and disordered' (in case 5), which invoke the idea of death due to irregularity and disintegration, are not contained in the idioms of the Chinese original and must have been added in the course of translation.
- 47 Guo, *Zhuangzi* 22, vol. 3, p. 733.
- 48 See for instance Anon., *Huangdi Neijing Suwen*, ch. 1, p. 7: *jie* in the phrase *jie tian gui*, which refers to the menopause; the ceasing of the flow of blood has connotations of drying up. The term *jie* is used in idioms such as draining marshlands (*jie ze*) or the drying up of ponds (*chi zhi jie yi*). Consider also the adjectives 'burned' (*jiao*) and 'withered' (*ku*, in the Tang glossed as *gao*), as attributes of old age.
- 49 S. Kuriyama, 'Visual Knowledge in Classical Chinese Medicine' in D. Bates (ed.), *Knowledge and the Scholarly Medical Traditions* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 205–34.
- 50 Chen, *Laozi*, verse 76, p. 342; trans. D.C. Lau, *Lao Tzu*, LXXVI, p. 138.
- 51 So was the 'still' (*jing*) and the 'lowly' (*xia*): 'The large state is the lower reaches of a river – the place where all the streams of the world unite. In the union of the world, the female always gets the better of the male by stillness. By being still, she takes the lower position.' See Lau, *Lao Tzu*, LXI, p. 122, and also LXVI, p. 128. Chen, *Laozi*, verse 61, p. 301, and verse 66, p. 316. Notably, the 'pulse' said to 'bubble under the Fingers irregularly like Water over a great Fire' points to a conception of the perfect state of being as that of cool and still water.