

The Yin and Yang of Climate Change: Treating the Roots of the Crisis

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Embedded in the long history of Chinese medicine is the understanding of connection. Rather than looking through the lens of separation, Chinese medicine sees the world as a whole. This includes the recognition that what happens on a large scale can happen on a small scale, and vice versa. In our era of global warming, Chinese medicine's understanding of *yin* and *yang* can help us treat the root causes of climate change.

Mary, a woman in her early fifties, comes into our office for her first appointment looking for relief from night sweats. She describes being very physically active, volunteering with several non-profits, and maintaining a busy family and social life. Externally she appears to be in good shape but her internal condition tells a different story. Her pulse and tongue indicate a diagnosis that is very common in our clinic: kidney yin deficient heat.

Looking at the big picture, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 2007 issued its exhaustive fourth assessment report, summarizing vast amounts of Western scientific research on the condition of the climate. Along with Al Gore, it was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize for assembling and analyzing the work of more than 2500 scientific experts, over 800 contributing authors, and more than 450 leading authors from over 130 countries. Summarizing its findings, there is nearly universal scientific consensus that the planet is warming significantly due to the actions of humans. If left unchecked, the continued affects of global warming are virtually guaranteed, including violent storms, dramatic melting of glaciers with rises in sea levels, and increasing floods and droughts.¹ And rather than being separate conditions, Mary's situation and what the IPCC report described are the same thing playing itself out on two, interrelated levels.

Chinese medicine has a long history of recognizing the inherent connections between the small picture and the big picture. In recognizing the connection between the microcosm and macrocosm, the *Nei Jing* states that the "human being is a small universe as the human body has

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everything that the universe has."² Our methods of diagnosis – pulse and tongue – allow us to evaluate one part of a person in order to understand their condition in body, mind and spirit.

In my clinical practice, and I imagine for most of us practicing in the West, kidney yin deficient heat is very common. It's so common, in fact, that many people assume that feeling hot, being irritable, and experiencing a general lack of internal peace are a usual part of life. Rather than being inevitable, however, this condition is a direct reflection of how we are living. While there are numerous factors that create deficient kidney yin, an underlying cause is being too busy for too long.

In looking at Mary's condition, she appeared healthy from our external, Western perspective: she exercised regularly, was physically strong, and maintained an active social life. What was lacking was a well-established understanding of health from the inside out. This is what Chinese medicine can offer – on both a micro (individual) and macro (global) level. Of urgent importance in our era of climate change is the understanding is that more is not necessarily better. More exercise, more work, more play, seeing more patients, prescribing more herbal formulas – these do not necessarily lead to a healthier life. It is my view that this "more" mentality is manifesting globally in our rapidly warming climate.

The Science of Climate Change

The basic science of global climate change is simple: When we create gases such as carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide from the burning of oil and coal, they accumulate in the upper atmosphere. When sunlight enters the atmosphere, it is oscillating at a relatively rapid rate, and when it hits the earth and is reflected outward, its vibration slows. This prevents part of it from

escaping, creating a warming effect. This captured reflected sunlight and increase in temperature is a similar process to what happens in a greenhouse, hence the terms "greenhouse effect" and "greenhouse gases."

In addition to this increase in heat, there has been a decrease in the planet's ability to keep itself cool. Forests are able to absorb vast amounts of potentially warming gases. However, large-scale global deforestation has dramatically reduced the amount of trees, thereby decreasing the planet's ability to absorb what we're emitting. Also, it appears that the amount of greenhouse gases the oceans can absorb is also decreasing significantly as they may have reached a saturation point.³

Seen together, the dramatic increase in heat-trapping gases and equally dramatic decrease in the planet's ability to cool itself looks just like Chinese medicine's understanding of yin deficient heat. And what is creating this increase in heat and decrease in yin? We are. We in the industrialized world and the United States in particular continue to release greenhouse gases at a rapidly increasing rate. Simultaneously, we continue to drastically cut down forests. In the U.S., for example, where we constitute about 3% of the global population but contribute over 20% of greenhouse gases, we have cut down over 95% of our original forests.

And why are we doing this? Among other issues, we collectively suffer from yin deficient heat. That does not mean that each of us individually will have a pulse or tongue that indicates this diagnosis in particular. It also doesn't mean that we should assume all acupuncture treatments or herbal medicine prescriptions should focus on this particular dynamic. What it does mean is that we as a society are pathologically overactive from an inability to slow down. We are creating too much, consuming too

much, and driving and flying too much. As *yin/yang* theory shows us, when there is an excess of one there will be a deficiency of the other. Our societal excess of *yang* has created our collective lack of *yin*.

Another important part of Chinese medicine theory is that we cannot ultimately treat this *yang* excess through doing more. Yes, we need to rapidly and dramatically increase the use of wind and solar power, use low and no emission vehicles and eat and live more locally. But the lasting antidote for too much *yang* is more *yin*. Trying to address global warming by doing more makes as much sense as prescribing large amounts of hot *fu zi* and *rou gui* to address kidney yin deficient night sweats.

As practitioners and students of Chinese medicine, we have an important role to play in addressing the root causes of global warming. Our understanding of *yin* and *yang*, so central to the practice of the medicine, offers much needed wisdom about personal health that can be expanded to a

cultural scale. Of course, there is no better place for us to start than living a balanced life in this era of global warming and pathological overdoing.

References

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1. PCC Summary for Policy Makers, 2007
2. Translated by Wu Liansheng et al, p 18
3. *With Speed and Violence*, p 86-89 for reference about oceans in particular.

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