

A Comparative Study on Chinese Wellness Wisdom and Health Narratives in Nineteenth-Century British Literature from a Cross-Cultural Perspective

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Abstract: This paper explores the comparative perspectives between Chinese traditional wellness wisdom and health narratives in nineteenth-century British literature, analyzing the similarities and differences in their health concepts, practices, and cultural backgrounds. Chinese wellness wisdom is rooted in the philosophical notion of “harmony between heaven and humanity,” emphasizing the unity of body, mind, and the natural environment. It advocates maintaining health through the regulation of yin-yang balance and the Five Elements, focusing on prevention through daily wellness practices. Nineteenth-century British literature, in contrast, reflects the social upheavals brought by the Industrial Revolution and their impact on individual health. British writers use vivid literary narratives to explore the intricate relationships between physical and psychological health and societal conditions. This paper delves into four key British literary works, examining how health was understood during that time and discussing a cross-cultural comparison of health concepts between China and Britain.

Key words: Health Narratives; Cross-Cultural Perspective; Chinese Wellness Wisdom; Nineteenth-Century British Literary Works

Introduction

With the acceleration of globalization, cultural exchanges and integration between the East and West have become increasingly close. In the realm of health, the exchange between different cultural traditions is particularly evident. China, with its rich heritage of wellness culture, emphasizes achieving health through balancing the body and mind and harmonizing with nature. In contrast, nineteenth-century British literature often portrays health issues as central to the conflicts between individuals and society, especially against the backdrop of the Industrial Revolution. Health in British literature is frequently imbued with deep social and personal meanings. This paper aims to examine, from a cross-cultural perspective, the health wisdom embedded in Chinese wellness traditions and health narratives in nineteenth-century British literature. It will explore their differences and similarities in health philosophies, practices, and cultural contexts and examine how they influence each other in the context of globalization.

I. The Philosophical Foundations of Chinese Wellness Wisdom

Chinese traditional wellness wisdom is deeply rooted in Taoist and Confucian thought, as well as traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), emphasizing the importance of balancing the body, mind, and environment to maintain health. Wellness is not only an individual pursuit but a collective harmony with nature. This wisdom extends beyond the physical realm, involving moral, spiritual, and social responsibility. The following section delves into the philosophical foundations of Chinese wellness wisdom in greater detail.

1. The Cosmology of the Unity Between Heaven and Humanity

The concept of “unity between heaven and humanity” lies at the heart of Chinese traditional philosophy and profoundly shapes its wellness wisdom. Taoism views humans and nature as an interconnected whole, where the two elements complement each other, and humans are urged to live in accordance with natural laws. Wellness is not merely the pursuit of individual health but is sought within the grand framework of cosmic balance. The Yellow Emperor’s Classic of Medicine, a seminal text in Chinese medicine, proposes the idea of aligning human behavior with natural rhythms to achieve wellness, advocating adapting to seasonal changes through lifestyle adjustments such as diet and daily routines (Zhang, 2020).

2. The Harmonization of Yin and Yang and the Five Elements

The theory of yin-yang, fundamental to Chinese philosophy, is also a core concept in wellness wisdom. The balance of yin and yang is considered crucial to maintaining health, with imbalances often seen as the root cause of illness. Yin and yang not only symbolize the opposing forces in the universe but also represent the interaction of internal bodily functions. TCM emphasizes regulating yin and yang to maintain bodily harmony, stressing that the equilibrium between these forces is essential for well-being. The Five Elements theory—wood, fire, earth, metal, and water—describes the dynamic relationships within the human body and the natural world. According to this theory, organs are classified by their corresponding elements: the liver is associated with wood, the heart with fire, the spleen with earth, the lungs with metal, and the kidneys with water. Balancing these elements is believed to ensure physical and emotional health (Li, 2018).

3. Emotional Wellness and Mind Regulation

Chinese wellness wisdom is not only concerned with the body but also places significant emphasis on emotional regulation. TCM holds that excessive emotions can harm internal organs and lead to health imbalances. Therefore, maintaining emotional equanimity is a key aspect of wellness. The Yellow Emperor’s Classic of Medicine states that disturbances in the seven emotions (joy, anger, worry, thought, sadness,

fear, and shock) can affect health. Practitioners of wellness strive to cultivate calmness of mind, controlling emotions and achieving mental clarity to align the body and spirit. Confucian ethics also underscore the importance of moral cultivation and inner harmony for achieving mental health, complementing the Taoist focus on emotional balance (Liu, 2017).

II. Health Narratives in Nineteenth-Century British Literature

Nineteenth-century Britain was in the midst of the Industrial Revolution, a period of rapid social transformation that placed significant pressures on both physical and mental health. British novelists, through literary forms, vividly portrayed the health issues that arose in this context, particularly the dual anxieties surrounding physical and mental health. The following four classic works from nineteenth-century British literature provide a detailed account of the health issues depicted in their narratives, reflecting the complex relationships between societal change and individual health.

1. Jane Eyre: Isolation and Psychological Trauma

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* offers an insightful portrayal of the psychological health challenges faced by women during the Victorian era. The protagonist, Jane, endures a harsh and oppressive upbringing, which deeply affects her physical and mental well-being. However, through self-reflection and the establishment of personal dignity, Jane gradually restores her psychological balance (Brontë, 1847). *Jane Eyre* is not only a call for female independence but also a demonstration of how one can achieve mental wellness through personal adjustment in adverse circumstances. The recurring themes of isolation and psychological trauma reflect the broader societal neglect of individual mental health, particularly in the case of women facing social oppression.

2. Frankenstein: The Ethical Conflict Between Technology and Health

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is not only a speculative tale of scientific advancement but also a profound reflection on the ethical and health consequences of technological progress. Victor Frankenstein's creation of life through science leads to the destruction of his own health and that of those around him. This story serves as a cautionary tale about the potential threats of unchecked technological progress, particularly when it surpasses natural laws and poses risks to both physical and psychological health (Shelley, 1818). *Frankenstein* and his creation symbolize the dual crises of body and mind that arise when human ambition overrides ethical considerations in the pursuit of scientific advancement.

3. Great Expectations: Class Mobility and Psychological Anxiety

Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* traces the psychological struggles of its protagonist, Pip, as he navigates his social ascent. Pip rises from an impoverished orphan to a gentleman in society, yet throughout this journey, he experiences deep moral conflict and psychological turmoil. Dickens uses Pip's story to highlight the mental health challenges associated with social mobility in an industrial society, illustrating how the pursuit of wealth and status can have detrimental effects on one's psychological health (Dickens, 1861). The novel reflects the tension between societal class mobility and individual mental well-being, revealing the complex interplay between societal expectations and personal health.

4. Tess of the d'Urbervilles: Moral Oppression and Psychological Collapse

Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* explores the devastating impact of moral oppression on an individual's psychological health. Tess, a rural girl, is subjected to sexual violence, social rejection, and moral judgment, leading to her eventual psychological breakdown (Hardy, 1891). Through Tess's tragic fate, Hardy critiques the moral constraints placed on women in Victorian society, highlighting how such societal pressures can destroy one's mental health. Tess's fate symbolizes the conflict between social morality and individual mental well-being, reflecting the far-reaching effects of societal pressure on personal health.

III. Cross-Cultural Comparison: Similarities and Differences in Health Concepts between China and Britain

1. Comparison between Holistic Health and Individual Health

Chinese wellness wisdom emphasizes holistic health, focusing on the harmony of body, mind, and nature. Central to this philosophy is the regulation of diet, emotions, and physical exercise to maintain a balance between physical and mental well-being (Zhang, 2020). This preventive approach emphasizes maintaining health through daily wellness practices. In contrast, health narratives in nineteenth-century British literature focus more on individual psychological health, particularly in the context of industrialization and social change. The mental state of individuals struggling under societal pressures and emotional conflict becomes the focal point of health (Smith & Johnson, 2020).

2. Differences in Focus between Prevention and Treatment

Chinese wellness philosophy stresses the importance of preventing illness before it occurs, focusing on daily wellness practices to maintain the balance of body and mind (Li, 2018). TCM practices emphasize self-regulation in daily life, controlling emotions, diet, and routines to achieve physical and mental harmony. In contrast, British literature from the nineteenth century often addresses health issues that arise in moments of crisis or psychological breakdown. Characters frequently seek self-reflection or external support systems to restore their health. For example, in *Jane Eyre*, the protagonist achieves mental balance through independence and self-reflection after enduring emotional distress (Brontë, 1847).

3. Cultural Differences in Health Problems

Chinese wellness wisdom is deeply rooted in Taoism, Confucianism, and TCM, emphasizing harmony between the individual,

nature, and society (Liu, 2017). This cultural background encourages a focus on maintaining long-term health through prevention rather than addressing health problems after they arise. In contrast, nineteenth-century British literature reflects the pressures and psychological challenges faced by individuals amid the rapid changes of industrialization. As society underwent significant transformation, particularly with class mobility and technological advancement, mental health issues became prominent themes in literature (Dickens, 1861).

Conclusion

Through a cross-cultural comparison of Chinese wellness wisdom and health narratives in nineteenth-century British literature, this paper reveals significant differences in their health philosophies, practices, and cultural backgrounds. Chinese wellness culture emphasizes holistic health, prevention, and daily wellness practices to achieve harmony between body and mind and between individuals and nature. In contrast, nineteenth-century British literature focuses on individual mental health, particularly in the context of societal change and pressure, portraying characters' psychological struggles within complex emotional and social environments. As globalization advances, the mutual borrowing and integration of health concepts from China and Britain provide new insights into addressing modern societal health issues and promoting global health development.

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Participated in the Ministry of Education's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Youth Fund project "Research on Ethical Dilemmas in Baldwin's Works". Participated in the 8th China International College Students' "Internet+" Innovation and Entrepreneurship Competition in 2022 and won the National Silver Award. Participated in the 16th Shandong Province College Students' Science and Technology Translation Competition and won the provincial first prize. This study is one of the practical outcomes of the "Literary Translation" project, a professional degree teaching case library construction project for graduate students at Shandong Jianzhu University, and also this project is sponsored by Shandong Province; it is meanwhile one of the researches of the "Literary Translation" high-quality course construction project for graduate education at Shandong Jianzhu University (ALK202214, SDYAL2022161).

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