

CORH Values – Season 1, Episode 4

Jason Clower on Health and Wellness in China

East Asia expert Jason Clower discusses the state of healthcare in China and assesses the role of Communism in fostering the current healthcare situation in the country. We also discuss Traditional Chinese Medicine, its efficacy and the conceptions of the body that underlie it, and move on to a broader discussion of Qi and the Yin-Yang complex.

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Transcript:

Hello, welcome to CORH Values, the religion and humanities podcast produced by the Department of Comparative Religion and Humanities at California State University Chico. I'm your host and chair of the department, Daniel Veidlinger. Each semester or I guess we should say season. We're going to be focusing on a different topic. And this season will be talking about health and Pandemic. Today we are going to be talking with Dr. Jason Clower, who came to us from Harvard with a PhD granted by their committee on the study of religion. And he now teaches Asian religions here at CSU Chico and has written several books on the thought of modern Chinese philosopher ozone sun. So Dr. Clower, welcome. Good morning. It's great to be here. Good. The theme for this season is religion, health, and pandemics. And your expertise and East Asia can give us a lot of interesting information about this subject from that point of view. So I wanted to start by just talking about a basic question that I think a lot of people have. And that is, what is the health care system like in China today. So in the United States, we of course, had been hearing a lot about single-payer health system and the benefits and detriments of our current health system here in America. And I, myself, I've often wondered what exactly it's like in China. Of course they are nominally communist and what communism exactly means in the Chinese context, the day is itself a complicated topic. So could you say a little bit about what kind of health care access people happened China today? Absolutely. And because I'm an academic, I'm going to insist that we go back in history so that I can talk even more. Back when the Chinese Revolution happened, one of the very laudable things that the Chinese Communist Party did was to put on a big push for, I guess what you could call basic services. For China's big population. They had an agrarian country. Their Communist Party had an agrarian strategy to power and governance. And they started a push for services to the farming people, for example, one of the famous things that they did was quickly boost the literacy rate. Which is not an easy thing to do in a country where you have that, where you had people with, in some cases, almost no book education and a language that's intrinsically white, difficult in that it's not alphabetic. Another thing that they did was health care. As in everything that the early Chinese Communist Party did, they were masters of taking slender resources and then stretching them as far as they could go. By identifying priorities. They knew that they didn't have the personnel or the money to really adequately serve a population as big as they had, which I think was about 600 million people back in the 1940s. Guys, so quite small. Yeah, our times of spades. Okay. So what they did figure though, was that you could, you could go a very long way towards serving people's most pressing needs. Just by having a kind of cadre of personnel with very basic medical training and send them right out to the villages. And what do I mean by basic training? They would know things about modern hygiene, like germ theory and how to apply it. And sanitation systems, really elementary level medical knowledge, but it had huge preventive power. So this was the era of these people called the barefoot doctors. They called them barefoot, not because they didn't have shoes, but because they would be, at least in propaganda, they'd be right out in the rice fields next to the peasants themselves, teaching them while they labored. And of course, if you walk into a rice paddy, you need to take off your shoes. So at that stage, for the next 60 years, China had a system that worked like that. It mostly it was basic, very basic preventive services. And then there was a hospital system. If you actually got sick and you need medical care, you would go to a hospital in your town or county or province or for the very best care, you could go all the way to the capital, Beijing or one of the big metropolises. And there you'd be taken care of. But you were largely on your own with costs. And people could people could go into what we would now call medical bankruptcy from this. That wasn't helped by the fact that China was a communist

country. It was still search traditional system where you and your family and your loved ones would pay for what treatment you needed as best you could. And there was even a sort of informal expectation that you would give your doctors and nurses a gift, which is to say a bribe. Again, a very rational thing to do. If there's resource competition, there still weren't enough doctors to go around for as many patients as they were. And so the patients the, even after they paid to get into the hospital, still had to compete with their dollars for the attention of the doctors and nurses. In fact, I even remember that when I would be in Chinese hospitals, people's relatives would still bring them their food from home. Is that so this is really interesting. I'm surprised about this because I would've thought that at least in the so-called Communist China, they would have a fully socialized medical care like they haven't Canada. Where basically whatever you need is going to be covered by the National Health Program or even like Medicare here in America. But I guess that's not the case. Money. It's a resource competition, right? Is the name of the game. Too many people for too few resources. And the government feels an imperative that, that a party that calls itself the communist party is expected to provide certain things and they kind of can't. Now, this is a very interesting thing. This is the part of our story where traditional Chinese medicine enters the stage. Yes. Okay, Let's get to that. It's cheap and widely used. It always has been even in the days back in the fifties and sixties and seventies in communist China, when anything that's smacked of the old regime or tradition was suspect. Even then, traditional Chinese medicine was always a going concern. There has been, there's been decades of research right through the communists period on the efficacy of Chinese medicine, how to use it in a modern hospital setting. And today I'm told that something like 20% of the medical care in China is TCM, Traditional Chinese Medicine. Though, to be honest, that sounds, that sounds strangely low to me because I think it it discounts all the medical care that's going on. Even outside of an outpatient level. What do I mean by that? Well, like one place where I lived in Beijing in the nineties, had a local neighborhood committee that would organize acupressure, which is sort of like a poor person's do it yourself. Acupuncture, acupressure groups for the local elderly people. And in the afternoon after their naps, they would get together and they would give each other traditional Chinese medicine hand and foot massages to take care of chronic conditions like diabetes, which are almost universal among Chinese elderly people. So that was, that wasn't a real structured medical kind of care, but I don't think that would show up on anybody's charts. It's like a care being provided. A traditional Chinese medicine context. Yeah, I'm sure 20% is no because I mean, in California it's probably 20 percent, right? That's like a serious I have a lot of friends that go to try a traditional Chinese medical doctors. Sides must be much higher and shine. But yeah, I've read about this recently and I was surprised to read that during the Communist period, one of the few elements of traditional Chinese culture that has been fostered by the currents communist regime has been the traditional Chinese Medicine. Whereas a lot of the other ideas were relegated to the past as they side. I think it might just be a function. Of what I take to be a well-established fact that preventive care is cheaper than acute care. And that's what a lot of traditional Chinese medicine is, right? A lot of it is much more what they call holistic, that it doesn't look at a particular pressing ailment that to suddenly come up right now, but rather tries to keep general health and the body as an ongoing concern right now. And that's not to say that this stuff can't get expensive. Ingredients in herbal Chinese medicines can get very costly. The reason again, is resource competition. You've got chinese medical recipes that are made that call for herbs and even animal products like horns or claws or what have you of various animals are like their internal organs. And these are, these are made of herbs that could be found a couple of thousand years ago and the Han dynasty. But now they might be very rare and precious. They might even call for like parts of endangered. Yes, I've heard about that. And now that China has some, some very wealthy people. There are, there are dollars out there willing to compete for like bare bladder bile and things like that. And so every now and then in the news you see a piece about somebody paying some astronomical sum for like a rhinoceros for something that's going to be ground into medicine. There's a system based on traditional Chinese ideas and its practitioners say that it greatly increases their health and well-being. But in this case, the Chinese government, I believe, is not in favor of its usage by the people. This is known as father Gong. And I wonder if you could say a little bit more about it. They're quite anti-Chinese communist. And the reason for that is they got suddenly and harshly suppressed back around 999 or 2000 because they were suspected of turning their practice of seagull, of medicinal and spiritual breathing disciplines. They were suspected of turning that into a political rebellion. Which sounds very odd, like a terrific leap in logic to us. But in the Chinese context it's not because for whatever reason, medical stuff has always been connected with spiritual stuff in the Chinese tradition. And the Chinese rebellions have historically had a sort of spiritual side to them. That is, the dynasties. Whenever somebody through a rebellion, typically there was some sort of millenarian

religious dimension to it. Very often somebody who made bold to launch an anti-imperial rebellion wouldn't just propose like a political message and a policy platform, but would announce that there was some kind of new religious eon or, or epoch taking place. And they were, It's harbinger. This tended to come out of Buddhist millenarian thought. But it also had a lot of Taoism and Qigong and traditional Chinese medical disciplines mixed into it. And so for that reason, the Chinese government was very supportive of research on Shigong in traditional Chinese medicine, but also very watchful of it. And they were right to be as, as far as they were concerned. Now, in point of fact, was, was follow and go really going to launch some sort of political coup? No, I don't think so. But if somebody had wanted to turn it into some sort of like American Revolution style committee of correspondence and Minute Man organization. They, they probably had the infrastructure right there at their fingertips. Had they wanted to do that. So Qi Gong you were talking about. So there's this word so, that is one of the central features of the human spirit body combination. And it's one of the central things that Chinese medicine aims to. Correct. So could you say a little bit about what exactly she is? She is so over-determined. It has it has entirely too many meanings, right? It can be anything in a sense. It, it, Let's start with one of its most common translations that are now popular and scholarly circles. Psycho physical stuff or a psychophysical energy. That, that term, psychophysical covers pretty much the entirety of being it, right? I would say, yeah. Well, I mean, my understanding is that it's kind of connected to the entirety of being in the sense that without SHE, nothing in the material world that we live in would actually be there. Right? That's anyone of my understandings of it. So in In Neo-Confucian thought, which we can, we can roughly say is, I mean it got some trouble for this, but we could roughly call that the bulk of Chinese philosophy for the last thousand years or so. In Neo-Confucian thought, she is the stuff of the world, both physical and energetic and spiritual. And it conforms to this. Conforms to forms or patterns, leap, right? Kind of structures or not, not physical structures just like, like as li, like the Platonic ideals that are then instantiated in the actual world through mixing with G. It's been compared to that. And I would say for our purposes today, we should just say yes, it's just like that. And so the key part then is the category that encompasses, well, everything that has particular existence. Including this is the part that many of us miss, including like matter, like earth, metal would, you know, Abdulla and hard stuff that also is t. However, in Chinese medicine it has, it's sometimes refers to just breath or air. Okay? And in fact, in just everyday kitchen table parlance, see typically just means air, like the atmosphere, right? Okay. And words for meteorology, climate, weather, all, all use the word T in them. Okay? Not completely specific to China. In many cultures there are words like prawn off for example, in Sanskrit, the refer to both just action will breath, but also spiritual energy that's enlivens the body. Yes. So because of, because of that connection with air, she also shows up in Chinese medical discourse as a sort of energetic flow that is somehow related to breath. Right? And one way that you can manipulate that flow is at a, at a gross level using things like acupuncture needles or or just applying pressure from the skin, acupressure. But another way to do it more directly is to practice breathing exercises. And you, you breathe according to certain patterns that, that actually look quite a bit like yogic bundles. And I would I would hazard a guess that there was actual communication. Yeah. I was just going to ask me about that. How much of this is completely independently arisen in China before contact with India. And how much of it, as we now know, it, does have Indian influence in it in terms of the Xi. So one of the basic principles of TCM is that when one is ill, that she is somehow not flowing through the body properly. And you want to read this, maybe a blockage in one of the channels, right? So I guess it's an idea that there are different channels in the body through which she flows and when it flows freely, one feels healthy. And when the flow is impeded in some way, one feels unwell. So the different practices of TCM are aimed at allowing the CI to flow more freely as that more or less your understanding? Yes, That's my understanding. Okay. So the big question becomes, when it's looked at through Western science is, well, is there a CI? And if there isn't, this flow of g as described by the Chinese traditional documents. Does that mean that TCM doesn't work? I was just sort of anticipating this direction a little bit. There are efforts nowadays to try to theorize what she could be in any, given that it's not the key and the meridians or lines that it flows along. Art. Of course they're not, you know, you don't find them in a body when you dissect dead right there. The subtle bodies things in it? Yes, yes, Exactly. Certainly. The ancient Chinese medical practitioners, of course, were quite aware of this. Sometimes we forget that they were, they were almost certainly intimately familiar with innards and and dissection more than we were because they lived in a pretty rough world and bodies were no mystery to that. Yes, I know I was. I'm glad you brought this up because I wanted to talk about this. There's this idea that One of the reasons that medicine stagnated in the west over the years is because in the West now there were religious restrictions against performing dissections. That

doesn't work for me on a number of levels. One is that, I mean, maybe there were some religious restrictions about the treatment of dead bodies in the West and Christianity in particular. Except that when you were alive in the Middle Ages, they were disemboweling, do and whatever. So if they thought that was all writes, sure. They thought it was okay to also dissemble you once you're already dead. I mean, it just doesn't make sense that as you say, they might have been more familiar in China with the interests of the body from the West, but they were certainly very familiar with the insides of a human being in the West as well. I mean, if not through medicine then at least through war. So to think that they were completely surprised in the, I guess it was 17th century when they did start doing proper dissections. This doesn't sound right to me. And more than that, They they handled innards of animals exact sure. It was everybody in every walk of life. If you were a commoner, you would be splitting and cutting animals. If you were noblemen, even you were doing this because hunting was whatever your occupations and I'm I'm certain that they had a level of familiarity with these things that almost nobody in the present day does. A slightly better than they knew even better than we did now, of course, in the West, there was a strict division between the animal world and the human world. So they might not have wanted to recognize that humans have similar structures. But in Asia, that strict dichotomy was not nearly as strong as far as I understand. So these days, there are efforts, of course, to try to make traditional Chinese medicine able to speak the language of Western type medicine. It if, if only enough to sort of do apologetics for yeah. And I'm not I'm not too familiar with the different strategies that they're undertaking. But I do often hear people like my own acupuncture. It speaking of the prevalence of Chinese medicine in California, I, I do hear people point out that there are even structures in the body that are known to Western anatomy but have simply been thought of before is kinda like junk tissue or, or just arrangements of tissue that are worth studying until now. And the example that people use these days is fascia. That kind of it's, it's a very thin trends parent material, tissue that covers muscles under the skin. And if you think about like skinning a chicken, you'll know. You're, you know, all about FAFSA. But it just hasn't been paid attention to by Western medicine. But more and more there's thinking in sort of integrative medicine circles that actually a lot of medical problems do revolve around dysfunctions of the FAFSA. So that's not to say that TCM is necessarily saying, well CHE and meridians are really about fashion. I think that's 11 possibility, but their point is to kind of reopen our minds to the possibility. There are a few important things about the body that are still being appreciated by Western medicine. Yeah, I think those even more than a few. There's a lot we don't know about the body. That is for sure many, many mysteries about how a lot of things operate. And of course, something that I often talk about in relation to this is that sometimes there is a bit of mixing in people's minds between the mechanism of action, Yahoo or some sort of medicine and the fact that it works and they have to be connected. So for example, if you actually look at the description of how Western drugs work, you will more often than not see the report say, it is believed that drug may excite the H3 receptors or whatever. That's. Because the fact is that for many Western drugs they don't exactly know how it works. They just know that it works by testing it against people who didn't receive it and seeing who, who did better. Yes. And this applies to so much in Chinese martial arts which are closely connected to Chinese medicine. Especially in California. We've all seen people doing THE before. And maybe you've sort of heard stories about quote unquote, internal power, right? I, I've, I've experienced this firsthand. Had lessons with an 80-year-old, THE master in China, who was a frail old man. But when he pushed you, you, you knew it? Yeah. And so they've traditionally the explanations for this kind of undeniable physical power that they can display is it makes it sound as though they're drawing on a kind of like she battery in their abdomens and then sending jolts of electricity at will out through their limbs that cause you to go flying. A lot of these kinds of quote unquote internal power that are, that Chinese martial arts talk about as though they're like electricity coming out of a battery. Really can just be read as pretty ordinary applications of physics right? Through the human body that do you like it. So here an example is that different flavors of Chinese tea based martial arts are internal martial arts. We'll talk about different kinds of see that they can employ Like, like tendon t and or rising She. And I think that it's, you can, if you go back to the drawing board and you look at some of the movements that they're doing that you can recognize that when they say, see, I think it corresponds pretty closely to just what we would call strength. They are giving words to these things that will simply be sufficient for them to explain it and teach it to somebody else. They're not actually purporting to give physics description of kinds of energy in the universe. They're inventing a terminology that's purpose built for the purpose of teaching somebody to do what they do. And that's it. The thinkers of old before modern times, we're much more sophisticated than people get. You know. Yes, they really were and they knew, as you say, they knew what the human body looked like and they knew that you

couldn't see the meridians exactly there. So it's not like they actually necessarily thought that they were there. But this is the case for the Talmudic thinkers in the Jewish tradition. They were way more sophisticated than people realize and understood a lot about the world and about how law works and about even how the body works and things like that. And people just don't give the ancients nearly enough credit. I think Yin and Yang is a concept that one hears about a lot and one sees the yin-yang symbol tattooed on many students bags and other people talk a lot about the idea of harmony when it comes to thinking about shine, these approaches to health. And so one thing I wanted to clarify a little bit because I myself get confused about this. So Yin and Yang represents two opposite forces in the universe in being the female force, which is associated with more passivity. And Yang being the male force, the more active force. And that everything in the universe exhibits both of these in various combinations, including the human being. And I'm wondering if the aim of Chinese medicine is to harmonize these in the human body, or if maybe you are supposed to have more of one than the other, I would amend one word in that description and I think it will answer the question. And that is, rather than think of Yin and Yang it as forces, I would say it makes better sense to call them phases. So imagine, if you will, watching waves move single out one particular way that you track it. And what does it do? It it grows and swells. And then at its zenith, crests is so that's its young fades. And then after it kind of reaches a tipping point at which it begins to trend downward again, loses its energy, and then the undulation begins. And it dips, keeps tipping until it reaches its trough or it's made here. And then again, it begins to swell. So it's what you're observing, our alternating phases of a growing, waxing young and then turn into a deepening mean and then back again. And so if you think of it that way, you wouldn't really be able to have more mean or more young. It needs to move through both phases and extending that metaphor. You might think of Chinese medicine as preserving harmony in the sense that we want to keep the wave rolling along, crusting and undulating without interruption. If one body and one person has one wave. You might think of traditional Chinese medicine. I was trying to keep it just rolling along smoothly for as long as it's energy will take it. I see. Okay, So there's a movement associated with this is not like at any given moment. The Yin and Yang phases, I necessarily supposed to be always equal in a human being. But we've got two different phases. Like maybe during nighttime were more in Yin phase and then during the daytime Maybe it's more of a young face, something like that. That's exactly right. Keep in mind too, that in and young these phases are descriptions of the state of some thing or structure or coherence at a given time, right? And so you always want to be asking in or young with respect to what? Like, I'm a man and so my endocrine system, we certainly want that to be young dominant because I have this male body and we, it's, it's not going to be healthy. If suddenly endocrine things that are supposed to be man type States suddenly take on February properties like we don't want to pump me full of estrogen. So in that respect, we're going to look at my endocrine system and compared to a woman. And we say, yes, Jason says more, more young and we want to keep it that way. But with my, my cycles, mice sleep, wake cycles. That's a different thing there. Right now. I'm in a young phase. It's late morning. The young energy the day is about to reach its climax. And then, and then we'll tip over into Aghion thing. And with it, I'm going to sort of grow that's active and go into repose in the evening when the atmosphere itself is sort of in low. I see. So when we speak about harmony, we can say in harmony with the environments and with the needs of the moment rather than equal? At all times? Yes. Yes. Okay, Now that's a good way of thinking of it and that helps clarify things in my mind and hopefully it will in the listener's mind. So the last thing I wanted to talk about, because we have to get to this little bit in a discussion like this is Nadar and the Daoist alchemy that how you pronounce it. Yes, That's exactly it. Okay. So over time in China there has been, I guess you could almost say, an obsession with longevity, which grew into such longevity that you essentially become immortal. And one thing I've always been a little unclear about is whether when the texts talk about the great immortals, do they mean that you physically live forever or your somehow transmuted into a kind of divine like being outside of the bottle. I think it depends on who you're asking. Certainly. I know of people who think of it as a sort of like the spirit being liberated from the body, shutting the body like a husk. I think there might be people who take it as a kind of it. The body lives, literally living forever. To my knowledge. There are people who think of it both ways. Okay? There are multiple traditions and commentarial sub traditions about these things. And I, I think that if we look into them closely, we would find different sets of answers in various traditions and at various times, right? So just again, just like India, that there's different subjects and they will all have rather different interpretations of how this all plays out. So you can basically have anything. So you could have some groups that at some point did believe that the Spirit can leave the body and exist in a kind of heavenly world. Others believed that the physical body can be purified to such an extent that it

will physically live forever on earth. And maybe the sages will then go and live in the mountains in isolation because red contact with regular humans, if your model is somehow problematic, you probably find all of these things in different texts. Yeah, I think that we would find representatives of each of those positions with China. It's sometimes it's helpful to recall that China, it's helpful to think of China not so much as a country. When you're thinking in historical terms as a continent, to think of China as being analogous more to Europe. Where there is this connecting civilizational and cultural and religious tissue. But Finland is a very different place from Portugal. Yes, exactly as how I speak of India as well. Yeah, I like that. I know PV. It's unfortunate that we have these maps that list things in certain ways and people don't really understand the extent of the variety within these countries. Well, that's why we need more tenure lines in subjects like comparative religion and area studies. Well, Dr. Jason Clower, Thank you very much. This was just fascinating. It really helped to broaden my understanding of Chinese culture and their approach to health and disease and well-being of the body. Thank you very much for coming on today. Thank you. There's nothing in the world that I like more than talking about stuff like this. Great. If you'd like to learn more about the Department of Comparative Religion and Humanities, please go to our website at CSU Chico.edu slash C O R H that CSU CH ICO.edu slash C O R H. I want to point out that the opinions expressed here in do not necessarily reflect those of the faculty and staff of our department.