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## A Tale of Two Needles

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# A Tale of Two Needles

## **Abstract**

Looking back, I guess the name should have been my first clue. “Alternative” medicine? “Complementary” medicine? What is it about these medical practices, which to me are completely traditional, that places them in a secondary position to other medicinal options in the United States? [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, alternative medicine, acupuncture, herbal medicine

## **Disciplines**

Alternative and Complementary Medicine | Chinese Studies

## **Comments**

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](#) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at [surgegettysburg.wordpress.com](#) Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

# SURGE

**[ VERB ] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward**

## A TALE OF TWO NEEDLES

September 25, 2013

Looking back, I guess the name should have been my first clue. “Alternative” medicine? “Complementary” medicine? What is it about these medical practices, which to me are completely traditional, that places them in a secondary position to other medicinal options in the United States?



From [Osteopathy](#) to Chiropractic, [Naturopathy](#) to Chinese acupuncture, Americans have debated endlessly about complementary medicines, how effective it is and how much science there is to back them up. Even as Americans have begun to accept complementary medicines, it still only makes up a very small portion of the money they spend on their healthcare.

As a Chinese citizen, I grew up in a nation where complementary medicine is common, so it was weird for me to find out that the medical practices we used so often in China are regarded as unsafe or empirical here in the U.S.

In my country, Chinese herb medicine and acupuncture are used more frequently than modern medicine. We believe that because Chinese medicine is derived from nature, from herbs, it has few side effects and is thus much safer to use. People are more willing to buy drugs that are marked “made in herb,” and people who have chronic diseases will ultimately give up modern therapy in favor of Chinese medicine. Almost 90 percent of Chinese people use acupuncture or other alternative medicines, and from our experience, it is not only cheap but efficient.

Chinese medicine holds a holy position.

Maybe it seems inconsequential, but the American attitude towards medicine terrified me when I first came here. The first time I went to the school’s Health Center due to a minor cuticle infection, the nurse looked at my finger and told me to lie down. Fear flooded my brain as I wondered why my whole body needed to be relaxed to take care of what I thought was an insignificant problem.

Obviously nothing terrible came of my first medical experience in the U.S., but it made me wonder why Americans have such a hard time accepting the cheap but efficient medicines that are so prominent in my country.

After all, “modern” methods of healing are expensive and full of chemicals. They rely on excessive technology to fix a small problem. Americans are willing to take a medication with a list of side-effects that could run laps around their original symptoms without thinking twice about why they got sick in the first place. They use the same

treatment methods to fix both mental illness and physical illness, ignoring how utterly different these types of health problems are. From stomach cramps to schizophrenia, anxiety to headaches, the local drugstore has just the thing you're looking for to put you in your happy place, or at least make you comfortably numb. This need-it-now, fast-food-fast-fix-fast-life mentality causes Americans to consume quick fixes for every slight inconvenience they encounter.

A lot of people, including me, have criticized [the unsustainable and unaffordable healthcare systems in America](#). I have mocked people's arrogance of their blind faith in modern medicine and their ignorance of alternative, yet more efficient ways of healing.

But the more I thought about it, the more I wondered, is it really true that Chinese medicine is better? Chinese people are more willing to undergo acupuncture to deal with various diseases, even if the acupuncture does not work for them. They are willing to try Chinese medicine even when it does not suit their diseases. Few people think about why Chinese medicine deserves such support, because they, like me, have grown up with assuming that the herb does no harm. We do not even think this is a question that deserves our thought.

I suddenly realized that maybe Americans think the same way as me: they might mock my blind faith in my traditional medicine, and my ignorance and suspicion of modern medicine. Perhaps Americans' blind trust and dependence on modern technology is same as Chinese people's blind trust and dependence on traditional Chinese medicine.

I think that American people, as well, do not think about the legitimacy of the questions we raise about their modern medicine. The holy position that people give to Chinese medicine is the same that people in America give to their modern medicine, only the phrasing is different.

When people are sick, they're usually tired, upset, and maybe even scared. They seek out what is familiar, what they trust. Believe it or not, medicine is something that can be extremely personal, but I hope that people can give up the stereotypes and biases that they have about it. It is not a person's culture, but their body's response to a specific type of medicine that determines which is better.

The debate between the effectiveness of complementary and modern medical practices may not seem like a typical social justice issue, but the cultural bias that leads people to assume that one is better than the other without actually bothering to consider the facts is. Furthermore, consideration does not necessarily mean deciding which one is best. When it comes to cultural differences, often times there is no right or wrong answer, just different opinions of equal worth.

If someone were now to ask me whether I still believe Chinese medicine is better than American medicine, I would say "YES!" But this time I could tell them why I think that, and yes, that my answer is a bit biased.

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