

The Historical Logic of the Development of Medical Humanities in China and Its Implications for Integrated Talent Strategies

Lei Chuan^{1,*}

¹ Donghua Academy of China Studies, Guangzhou 510630, China

*** Correspondence:**

Lei Chuan

lei12345678@163.com

Received: 9 December 2025 /Accepted: 26 December 2025 /Published online: 31 December 2025

Abstract

The development of medical humanities in China has followed a distinctive historical trajectory shaped by indigenous intellectual traditions, modern transformations, and changing conceptions of medicine and humanity. Unlike the relatively linear evolution of medical humanities in Western contexts, the Chinese experience reflects a complex interplay between classical medical thought, moral philosophy, social governance, and modern scientific paradigms. In recent years, the strategic emphasis on the integrated development of education, science and technology, and talent — particularly as articulated in China's long-term modernization agenda — has renewed scholarly interest in the historical foundations of humanistic approaches to medicine. This paper examines the historical logic of medical humanities in China from a perspective of intellectual history, focusing on its conceptual origins, evolutionary phases, and underlying value orientations. By tracing the continuity and transformation of humanistic thought in Chinese medicine, the study seeks to summarize key historical experiences that can inform contemporary reflections on talent cultivation at the level of ideas and values. Rather than addressing institutional or technological issues, the paper highlights how historical insights from Chinese medical humanities can enrich the conceptual understanding of integrated talent development in the present era.

Keywords: Medical Humanities in China; Intellectual History; History of Medicine; Humanistic Tradition; Integrated Talent Development

1. Introduction

The relationship between medicine and humanity has long occupied a central place in Chinese intellectual history. From classical medical texts to modern debates on scientific medicine, Chinese reflections on health and healing have consistently intertwined technical knowledge with moral, social, and philosophical concerns. In contemporary academic discourse, these reflections

are often subsumed under the rubric of “medical humanities,” a term that gained prominence in China relatively late but resonates deeply with long-standing indigenous traditions.

At present, the renewed emphasis on the integrated development of education, science and technology, and talent—formally articulated at the level of national strategy—has provided a broader framework for reexamining the historical foundations of humanistic thought in medicine. The emphasis placed by the Party on advancing education, technological innovation, and talent cultivation as an integrated whole reflects a holistic vision of modernization. Within this vision, questions concerning the formation of values, intellectual traditions, and cultural resources are inseparable from discussions of human development. Against this backdrop, revisiting the historical logic of medical humanities in China is not merely an exercise in retrospective scholarship. Rather, it offers an opportunity to clarify how conceptions of medical knowledge, moral responsibility, and human cultivation have evolved over time, and how these evolutions have shaped distinctive approaches to nurturing medical talent. Importantly, such historical inquiry operates at the level of ideas and intellectual orientations, rather than policy instruments or institutional arrangements.

Existing studies on medical humanities in China have tended to focus on contemporary applications, particularly in medical education and clinical practice. While valuable, these studies often treat history as a background rather than as a source of conceptual insight. Moreover, there is a tendency to interpret medical humanities primarily through Western theoretical frameworks, thereby overlooking the internal logic of China’s own intellectual traditions. This paper seeks to address these gaps by offering a historically grounded analysis of Chinese medical humanities as an evolving constellation of ideas rather than a recently imported academic field. The central argument advanced here is that the development of medical humanities in China has followed a historically layered logic characterized by continuity, adaptation, and reinterpretation. From the moral cosmology of classical medicine, through the epistemic disruptions of modernity, to contemporary efforts at synthesis, Chinese medical humanities has consistently grappled with the relationship between technical expertise and human values. Understanding this historical logic can provide conceptual resources for reflecting on integrated approaches to talent development that emphasize not only competence, but also moral orientation and social responsibility.

2. Historical and Intellectual Context of Chinese Medical Humanities

To appreciate the historical logic of medical humanities in China, it is necessary to situate it within the broader landscape of Chinese intellectual history. Unlike the modern Western distinction between science and the humanities, traditional Chinese thought approached knowledge in a holistic manner, emphasizing harmony between human beings, society, and the natural world. Medicine, as a practice concerned with life and health, occupied a privileged position within this worldview (Farquhar, 1994). Classical Chinese medicine was deeply embedded in philosophical systems such as Confucianism, Daoism, and Yin–Yang cosmology. Medical knowledge was not understood as value-neutral technique, but as a form of moral practice oriented toward the cultivation of both the healer and the patient. The physician was

expected to embody virtues such as benevolence (ren), sincerity, and responsibility, reflecting a broader conception of learning as self-cultivation. In this sense, the humanistic dimension of medicine was not an external supplement, but an intrinsic aspect of medical knowledge itself. The historical continuity of this orientation is evident in canonical medical texts, which frequently combine physiological explanations with moral exhortations. Health was conceived not merely as biological equilibrium, but as a reflection of ethical conduct and social harmony. Such ideas shaped the social status of physicians and informed expectations regarding their role in society. Medicine functioned as both a technical art and a moral vocation, reinforcing the inseparability of knowledge and virtue.

The encounter with Western medicine in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries introduced profound epistemic challenges. Modern scientific medicine brought new methods, technologies, and explanatory frameworks that emphasized empirical verification and experimental reasoning. This encounter disrupted traditional conceptions of medicine, prompting intense debates about the nature of medical knowledge and its relationship to Chinese cultural values. Some reformers advocated wholesale adoption of Western models, while others sought to preserve the moral and humanistic foundations of Chinese medicine.

This period of intellectual tension marked a critical turning point in the historical development of medical humanities in China. Rather than disappearing, humanistic reflection was rearticulated in response to modernity. Questions concerning the moral limits of medical intervention, the social responsibilities of physicians, and the human meaning of scientific progress became central themes in medical discourse. These debates laid the groundwork for later conceptualizations of medical humanities as a reflective field mediating between science and human values.

3. The Evolutionary Phases of Medical Humanities in China: From Classical Integration to Modern Reconfiguration

The historical development of medical humanities in China cannot be understood as a linear progression toward a predefined disciplinary form. Rather, it unfolds through a series of evolutionary phases in which conceptions of medicine, humanity, and knowledge are continuously rearticulated in response to broader intellectual and social transformations. These phases reveal a distinctive historical logic characterized by integration, disruption, and reconstruction, each of which contributes to the shaping of humanistic reflection in medicine.

3.1. Classical Integration: Medicine as Moral and Cosmological Practice

In premodern China, what is now retrospectively identified as “medical humanities” existed not as a separate field, but as an intrinsic dimension of medical knowledge itself. Classical Chinese medicine was embedded within a cosmological and ethical worldview that resisted sharp distinctions between nature and society, body and mind, technique and morality. Medical reasoning drew upon concepts such as qi, yin and yang, and the five phases, which were simultaneously naturalistic and normative in character. Within this framework, medicine functioned as a practice of moral cultivation. The healer’s technical competence was inseparable from ethical self-discipline and social responsibility. Classical medical writings frequently

emphasized the physician's obligation to care for life with compassion and humility, reflecting Confucian ideals of benevolence and righteousness. Healing was thus understood as an activity that restored harmony not only within the body, but also within the moral order.

This integrated understanding of medicine and humanity shaped the formation of medical knowledge and the transmission of expertise. Learning medicine was regarded as a form of self-cultivation, requiring mastery of texts, moral reflection, and experiential wisdom. The absence of a rigid boundary between scientific and humanistic knowledge allowed medical thought to develop as a holistic intellectual tradition, in which technical explanation and ethical meaning were mutually reinforcing.

3.2. Epistemic Disruption and Intellectual Tension in the Modern Era

The advent of modern scientific medicine in China marked a decisive rupture in this integrated tradition. Beginning in the late Qing dynasty and intensifying during the Republican period, Western biomedical knowledge introduced new epistemic standards centered on experimentation, anatomy, and laboratory science. These standards challenged long-established modes of medical reasoning and called into question the legitimacy of traditional explanatory frameworks.

This encounter generated profound intellectual tension rather than immediate replacement. Modernizers debated whether medicine should be redefined exclusively as a scientific enterprise or whether it should retain its moral and cultural dimensions. Some reformers criticized traditional medicine as unscientific, while others defended its humanistic orientation as an essential component of Chinese civilization. These debates extended beyond technical efficacy to encompass broader questions about cultural identity, knowledge authority, and the goals of healing.

Within this context, humanistic reflection on medicine assumed a new form. No longer taken for granted as part of an integrated worldview, the moral and social dimensions of medicine became objects of explicit inquiry. Intellectuals began to ask how scientific medicine could be reconciled with ethical responsibility, and whether technological progress necessarily entailed the erosion of humanistic values. Although the term "medical humanities" was not yet in use, the underlying concerns foreshadowed later disciplinary developments.

3.3. Rearticulation under Socialist and Post-Reform Contexts

Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China, medical thought was further reshaped by socialist ideology and collective conceptions of health and society. Medicine was framed as a public good serving social needs, and physicians were expected to embody both professional competence and political-moral commitment. While scientific medicine gained institutional dominance, moral discourse remained integral to medical identity, albeit articulated in different ideological terms.

In the post-reform period, the diversification of intellectual life and the expansion of higher education created new spaces for academic reflection on medicine and humanity. Influenced by global scholarly trends, Chinese researchers began to engage more explicitly with concepts associated with medical humanities, including patient experience, narrative understanding, and

the cultural analysis of medicine. At the same time, there was renewed interest in reinterpreting traditional medical thought as a source of humanistic insight rather than merely a historical artifact (Kleinman, 1980; Unschuld, 1985; Unschuld, 2010).

This phase is characterized less by continuity than by reinterpretation. Elements of classical moral medicine were selectively reexamined and translated into contemporary academic language. Rather than restoring a premodern synthesis, scholars sought to articulate humanistic perspectives compatible with modern scientific understanding. This process of rearticulation reflects an ongoing effort to negotiate the relationship between inherited intellectual traditions and contemporary forms of knowledge.

3.4. Historical Logic and Conceptual Continuities

Across these evolutionary phases, a consistent historical logic becomes apparent. Despite changes in epistemic frameworks and social conditions, Chinese medical thought has repeatedly returned to questions concerning the moral purpose of medicine, the cultivation of the healer, and the relationship between technical knowledge and human values. These recurring concerns suggest that medical humanities in China is not simply a borrowed concept, but a historically grounded orientation rooted in indigenous intellectual traditions. This historical logic does not imply unbroken continuity or resistance to change. On the contrary, it reveals a capacity for adaptation and reinterpretation. Humanistic reflection has persisted not by rejecting new forms of knowledge, but by engaging them critically and selectively. Such engagement has allowed Chinese medical humanities to survive epistemic disruptions and remain relevant across different historical contexts. Understanding these evolutionary dynamics provides a basis for summarizing historical experience at the level of ideas and values. It also prepares the ground for examining how these experiences can inform contemporary reflections on the cultivation of medical talent, particularly in contexts that emphasize integrated development. The next section will explore these implications by drawing conceptual lessons from the historical trajectory outlined above.

4. Historical Experience and Intellectual Implications of Chinese Medical Humanities

The historical evolution of medical humanities in China, as outlined in the preceding section, offers more than a descriptive account of shifting ideas or changing medical practices. It reveals a series of enduring intellectual experiences through which medicine has been continuously understood as a profoundly human endeavor, inseparable from broader reflections on morality, social order, and the cultivation of persons. These experiences are not reducible to specific doctrines, canonical texts, or institutional arrangements. Rather, they reflect deep-seated patterns within the Chinese intellectual tradition concerning the relationship between knowledge and virtue, technique and meaning, and individual expertise and collective responsibility. From a historical perspective, Chinese medical humanities emerges less as a discrete academic field than as a recurrent mode of reflection embedded within medical thought itself. Across different historical periods—despite profound transformations in epistemology, social structure, and ideological orientation—certain core concerns repeatedly surface: how medical knowledge should be acquired and used, what moral qualities are expected of those who practice medicine, and how

medicine relates to broader conceptions of human flourishing. Examining these recurring concerns allows for a more nuanced understanding of the intellectual resources that Chinese medical humanities brings to contemporary discussions of human development, particularly at the level of values and intellectual orientation rather than institutional design.

4.1. The Persistent Unity of Knowledge and Moral Cultivation

One of the most salient historical experiences in the Chinese development of medical humanities is the persistent association between medical knowledge and moral cultivation. In classical Chinese thought, the acquisition of medical knowledge was never conceived as a purely technical endeavor. To learn medicine was simultaneously to cultivate one's character, refine one's intentions, and assume responsibility for the well-being of others. Medical learning was thus embedded within broader traditions of self-cultivation that emphasized ethical reflection, emotional discipline, and social commitment.

This conception stands in marked contrast to modern tendencies—particularly within highly specialized professional systems—to separate technical competence from moral formation. In the Chinese tradition, technical mastery devoid of moral grounding was often viewed with suspicion, as it risked becoming a form of skill detached from humane purpose. The ideal physician was not merely one who possessed knowledge of therapies and diagnostics, but one whose conduct embodied virtues such as compassion, integrity, and attentiveness to human suffering.

Importantly, this unity of knowledge and morality did not vanish with the introduction of modern scientific medicine. As epistemic frameworks shifted and biomedical rationality gained prominence, the moral dimension of medical practice was repeatedly rearticulated rather than abandoned. In different historical contexts, it appeared in new conceptual vocabularies—such as social responsibility, service to the people, or professional integrity—yet the underlying concern remained remarkably consistent. Medicine continued to be understood as a vocation carrying intrinsic ethical significance.

This historical continuity suggests that, within the Chinese intellectual context, the cultivation of medical talent has never been understood solely as the transmission of specialized skills or scientific expertise. Rather, it has consistently been framed as a broader process of human formation, in which intellectual competence and moral orientation are mutually reinforcing. As a historical experience, this unity provides a powerful conceptual lens for understanding how medical humanities in China articulates the relationship between learning, character, and responsibility.

4.2. Holism as an Intellectual Orientation

Another important intellectual implication of the Chinese medical humanities tradition lies in its holistic orientation. Classical Chinese medicine resisted analytical approaches that isolated bodily functions from their emotional, social, and environmental contexts. Health was conceived as a dynamic and relational state, shaped by the interaction of physiological processes, emotional dispositions, patterns of daily life, and broader natural rhythms. Illness, accordingly, was not simply a localized malfunction but a disturbance in an interconnected system. This holistic orientation extended beyond medical theory into broader reflections on human life (Leung, 2012;

Lloyd et al., 2002). The body was not treated as a mechanical object detached from the person, but as an integral dimension of lived experience and moral existence. Such an understanding fostered sensitivity to the complexity of human life and cautioned against overly narrow or reductionist explanations of health and disease.

With the arrival of modern scientific medicine, new analytical tools and explanatory models profoundly transformed medical knowledge. Nevertheless, the holistic impulse continued to inform intellectual reflections on the limits of purely technical approaches. In historical debates over medical modernization, concerns were frequently raised about the risk of fragmenting the human subject into isolated biological components, thereby losing sight of meaning, experience, and context. This holism should not be interpreted as opposition to scientific reasoning or empirical analysis. Rather, it represents an insistence on contextual understanding and integrative reflection. As a historical experience, holism functions less as a fixed doctrinal position than as a guiding intellectual orientation—one that continually reminds medical thought of the irreducible complexity of human life. Within Chinese medical humanities, this orientation has served as a counterbalance to tendencies toward excessive specialization, reinforcing the humanistic concern with wholeness, relationality, and lived experience.

4.3. Adaptation and Reflexivity in the Face of Epistemic Change

The historical development of medical humanities in China also demonstrates a notable capacity for adaptation and reflexivity in response to epistemic change. When confronted with the authority of modern science and its associated forms of knowledge, Chinese intellectuals did not respond with uniform resistance or passive acceptance. Instead, they engaged in sustained reflection on how new epistemologies could be incorporated without erasing foundational humanistic concerns. This reflexive engagement involved critical examination of the assumptions underlying different knowledge systems. Rather than treating scientific medicine as either an unquestionable ideal or an existential threat to tradition, many thinkers approached it as a powerful yet partial form of understanding that required ethical and cultural interpretation (Foucault, 1980; Zhang, 2007). Such an approach enabled selective appropriation, reinterpretation, and integration, rather than wholesale replacement or rigid preservation.

Reflexivity, in this historical sense, refers to the capacity to situate knowledge within broader frameworks of meaning and value. It involves awareness of the limits of any single epistemic system and openness to dialogue across intellectual traditions. Chinese medical thought has repeatedly demonstrated this reflexive posture, navigating the tensions between tradition and modernity through reinterpretation rather than exclusion. As an intellectual experience, this capacity for reflexive adaptation highlights a mode of thinking that values conceptual flexibility, historical awareness, and critical dialogue. It suggests that medical humanities in China has developed not through static continuity, but through dynamic engagement with change—an engagement that preserves humanistic orientation while remaining responsive to new forms of knowledge.

4.4. Humanistic Concern as a Stable Normative Horizon

Despite substantial changes in language, ideology, and epistemology across historical periods, humanistic concern has functioned as a stable normative horizon in Chinese medical thought. Whether articulated through Confucian moral philosophy, socialist ethical ideals, or contemporary academic discourse, questions about the human meaning of medicine—its purpose, responsibilities, and impact on human life—have remained central.

This normative continuity does not imply uniformity of expression. On the contrary, humanistic concern has been repeatedly reframed in response to shifting historical contexts (Sivin, 1987). What remains consistent is the conviction that medicine cannot be adequately understood as a value-neutral technical enterprise. It must be evaluated in terms of its implications for human dignity, social relations, and moral responsibility.

Recognizing this continuity has important implications for how medical humanities in China is conceptualized today. Rather than viewing it exclusively as an imported academic field or a recent institutional innovation, medical humanities can be understood as a contemporary articulation of long-standing intellectual concerns deeply embedded in Chinese culture. Such a perspective emphasizes continuity without denying historical transformation, and tradition without idealization.

Taken together, these historical experiences—the unity of knowledge and morality, holistic orientation, reflexive adaptation, and enduring humanistic concern—constitute the intellectual core of Chinese medical humanities. They provide a rich conceptual foundation for reflecting on how historical insight can inform contemporary approaches to human development and talent cultivation at the level of values, intellectual orientation, and cultural meaning. Building on this foundation, the final section of this paper turns to the broader implications of these insights for integrated perspectives on talent development, drawing on historical logic rather than institutional analysis.

5. Conclusion

This paper has examined the historical logic of the development of medical humanities in China from the perspective of intellectual history, tracing its evolution across classical, modern, and contemporary contexts. Rather than treating medical humanities as a recently imported academic construct, the analysis has demonstrated that humanistic reflection on medicine has long been embedded in Chinese intellectual traditions. From the moral cosmology of classical medicine to the reflexive engagements prompted by modern scientific paradigms, Chinese medical thought has persistently grappled with the relationship between technical knowledge and human values. Several core insights emerge from this historical inquiry. First, the enduring association between medical knowledge and moral cultivation highlights a distinctive understanding of medicine as a vocation oriented toward human betterment rather than mere technical proficiency. This understanding has shaped expectations of physicians and healers across historical periods, reinforcing the idea that the formation of medical expertise is inseparable from ethical orientation and social responsibility. Second, the holistic orientation

characteristic of Chinese medical thought reveals a longstanding resistance to reductionist conceptions of health and healing. While epistemic frameworks have changed, concerns about the fragmentation of human experience and the loss of meaning in overly technical approaches have remained salient. This historical sensitivity underscores the importance of contextual and integrative understanding in reflections on medicine. Third, the capacity for adaptation and reflexive engagement with epistemic change constitutes a crucial intellectual resource. Chinese medical humanities has not followed a path of static preservation or wholesale replacement; instead, it has evolved through reinterpretation and dialogue. This reflexive posture has enabled humanistic concerns to persist amid profound transformations in knowledge systems and social structures. Finally, the continuity of humanistic concern across diverse historical contexts suggests that medical humanities in China functions as a stable normative horizon rather than a bounded discipline defined by rigid institutional criteria. It represents an enduring mode of inquiry into the human meaning of medicine, capable of being rearticulated in response to changing historical conditions. These historical insights acquire renewed significance in the contemporary context in which China emphasizes the integrated advancement of education, science and technology, and talent development as a core component of its modernization strategy. As articulated in recent high-level strategic planning, the goal of forming a coordinated pattern of education–technology–talent development reflects a holistic vision of human development. From the perspective of intellectual history, the Chinese tradition of medical humanities offers conceptual resources for understanding talent not merely as a carrier of skills, but as a bearer of values, responsibility, and cultural meaning.

Importantly, this paper does not propose direct policy prescriptions or institutional models. Instead, it suggests that historical reflection can enrich contemporary thinking by clarifying the value orientations and intellectual assumptions that underlie approaches to talent cultivation. By drawing on the historical logic of Chinese medical humanities, scholars and educators can engage more deeply with questions concerning the human purposes of knowledge, the ethical dimensions of professional formation, and the cultural foundations of modern development. In this sense, the study of Chinese medical humanities is not only an exploration of the past, but also a contribution to ongoing theoretical reflection on the relationship between knowledge, humanity, and development. Recognizing this historical depth can help situate contemporary strategies within a broader intellectual horizon, thereby enhancing their conceptual coherence and cultural resonance.

Author Contributions:

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding:

This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement:

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement:

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement:

Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest:

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- Farquhar, J. (1994). *Knowing practice: The clinical encounter of Chinese medicine*. Westview Press.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972–1977* (C. Gordon, Ed.). Pantheon Books.
- Kleinman, A. (1980). *Patients and healers in the context of culture*. University of California Press.
- Leung, A. K. C. (2012). *Health and hygiene in Chinese East Asia: Policies and public health in the long twentieth century*. Duke University Press.
- Lloyd, G. E. R., & Sivin, N. (2002). *The way and the word: Science and medicine in early China and Greece*. Yale University Press.
- Sivin, N. (1987). *Traditional medicine in contemporary China*. University of Michigan Center for Chinese Studies.
- Unschuld, P. U. (1985). *Medicine in China: A history of ideas*. University of California Press.
- Unschuld, P. U. (2010). *What is medicine? Western and Eastern approaches to healing*. University of California Press.
- Zhang, D. (2007). *Key concepts in Chinese philosophy* (E. Ryden, Trans.). Yale University Press.

License: Copyright (c) 2025 Author.

All articles published in this journal are licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0). This license permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and source are properly credited. Authors retain copyright of their work, and readers are free to copy, share, adapt, and build upon the material for any purpose, including commercial use, as long as appropriate attribution is given.