

Exactly Foundation – Residency #22 – *Drink It While It's Hot* by Hu Qiren, January 2023, Singapore

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Word from the 'Wart'

This project is about Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), of which I'm no expert with only cursory knowledge, like ginger and hot water is always good for me. Which is why I am so pleased to meet Qiren who comes from a family of Singapore-based Chinese medical hall owners and TCM practitioners and has actually exhibited contemporary artworks on the topic [award winning 不變真參 *American Ginseng* (2015) and *Traditional Chinese Medicine* (2009)].²

What interested me initially in TCM was those awful news reports of illegal trafficking of animal parts transiting through Singapore. So much so that Singapore has the accolade of becoming the world's second largest trading hub in shark's fins, for example (2017).³ It is just mind boggling to see a photo of 25 tons of pangolin scales, seized while transiting through Singapore from Nigeria, bound for Vietnam and possibly destined for China customers (2019).⁴

As a market, we are tiny but as a processing/transacting/logistics hub, we are huge. Why is that? Because Singapore is near sources for these animal parts such as Indonesia and Vietnam and has historically been important trade-stops especially for China-bound goods. Like the pangolin case headlines, "smugglers 'exploiting Singapore's efficient ports'". When we're good, we're good for everyone.

Therein, lies the issue at hand: "the ethics of hubbing". Do we/should we as citizens have a say in what products and services Singapore be primed for hubbing or be the center of? Are some items problematic like these animal parts, like oil refining, like digital game development? Or should we just leave it to market forces to make that choice of us based on profit&loss? Just close one eye -- I don't eat that stuff anyway?

Singapore's middle-man role of wholesale/processing in TCM goods is not highly visible and is often owned by Chinese small medium business families; it's a very traditional business. Importantly, few of us know it, see it much less agonize over it.

On the other hand, TCM's retail presence looks perfectly normal and benign; in fact, the shops are quite festive especially during Chinese New Year.

What harm can it all be ... TCM is mostly herbal, boiled a long time, not tasting great but it's all good for one's health, right? Much advice is given on matching up food ingredients and ailment treatment ... color, aroma, taste, and texture. Much more is said of a good meal, about balance between the heatiness of the ingredients to your body (hot, warm, cool, and cold) and between at least five tastes (pungent, sweet, sour, bitter, and salty). But do we *really* need to eat sea cucumber at Chinese New Year? We mindlessly do because it is "traditional".

Things may be changing: the UN last weekend announced a treaty that now needs to be ratified on the protection of biodiversity a third of the world's seas by 2030, which impacts fishing and deep-sea mining.⁵ Most of us no longer think of sharks' fin soup as a must in wedding banquets. But some still revere bird's nest; is that a problem?

In fairness, TCM is much more than a bowl of brown liquid and weird organics. There's a whole gigantic discourse on device-assisted therapy such as acupuncture and hot cupping to treat physical ailments and even ease cancer invasions. Singapore even has the Singapore College of Traditional Chinese Medicine that offers courses from certificates to Doctor of Medicine (TCM), jointly conducted with the GuangZhou University of Chinese Medicine.⁶

So, TCM is no small happening. It is a fine-tuned network of practitioners, vendors, clients, educators and advocates.

Lastly, I have always wondered: if this long 3000-year history of health goodness has been practiced for such a long time, why are we as a "Chinese race" not "superior"? We don't necessarily live longer, look better, are taller, are smarter. We're not ahead of any game.

So, what is it all for?

¹ *Wart* is short for Stalwart, which Exactly Foundation's first resident Kevin Lee suggested that for future residences, I should pen a statement as "Exactly Foundation Stalwart" – a label that sounds like too much adult responsibility.

² <https://www.huqiren.art/american-ginseng>

³ <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/spore-edging-worlds-second-largest-sharks-fin-trader>

⁴ <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/record-seizures-pangolin-scales-smugglers-exploiting-singapores-efficient-ports>

⁵ https://www.democracynow.org/2023/3/6/historic_un_agreement_protecting_marine_biodiversity?utm_source=Democracy+Now%21&utm_campaign=d8363f6866-Daily_Digest_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_fa2346a853-d8363f6866-192602286

⁶ <http://www.singaporetcm.edu.sg/cn/courses.php>