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Medical Conflicts Between West and East – the Strange Case of Two Chinese Women in Portugal

In 1911, Portugal was going through the most agitated period of its political history — the implantation of the Republic — initiated by the revolt of 5 October on the previous year followed by severely repressed strike outbreaks months, radical reforms on education and ongoing separation between Church and State. On the backstage, the new regime is friable and fragmentation of the Republican Party into various factions undermine the successive governments. Curiously, without knowing it and certainly without wanting it, two Chinese women passing through Lisbon will find themselves involved in the events that will bring to the public opinion the various contradictions of this revolution, at the same time that its own country was also embracing it.

Despite the scientific medical advances in most areas, ophthalmic knowledge was still scarce and limited and blindness was a prevalent scourge in many countries at the early 20th century.

This article tells the untold history about Achus and Goé (at that time 29 and 31 years old, respectively), both born in Shanghai, who exercised “the healing of eye diseases”. The two sisters traveled across all Asia and East Europe until Portugal where they carried out interventions in various locations. The fame of their healing methods quickly spread throughout the city of Lisbon and surroundings and then across the entire country.

At that time, there was only one public clinical establishment to treat blindness in Portugal, but without the necessary conditions for the purpose for which it was intended. Furthermore, there were very few doctors and medical students who wanted to specialize in this area. Nevertheless, the new government, which had a representative number of physicians, accuses the two Chinese of illegally practicing medicine, forbidding them to continue their business and, soon after, issues orders to expel the women from the country. A wave of indignation soon travels across the country as hope shattered of curing countless of additional cases of existing blindness. The turmoil generated by their expulsion added to the disappointment with the new Constitution of the Portuguese Republic and with the republican promises of economic and social improvements.

What scientific medical knowledge did these two Chinese women had, where they learn it, what they effectively did performed to their patient’s

eyes — were they a fraud or did they actually performed better than official medical doctors? Also, how was medicine in China at the beginning of the XX century?

These are some of the questions that the authors propose to answer in the present article.

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Modernist Culture – the Making of Modern Surgery

Surgeons have ever been nomad and their role in society has been constantly changing during all mankind history. Since grimy barber-surgeons to run-of-the-mill surgeons turned themselves into surgeon-apothecaries, general practitioners and eventually respectful scientists who can fuse their art on the basis of experimental science and claim it to be founded on rational principles.

This article aims to provide an answer to one simple question: How is modern surgery born?

Modernism emerged alongside radical challenges to traditional belief systems, the reorganization of society, new modes of visual display, and innovations in all scientific areas. This reflection focuses on the diverse inventions, new techniques and creative scientific thinking all over the world that responded to and inspired Portuguese surgeons. It explores such wide ranging subjects as world conflicts, art and publishing, intertwined with the continuous growth of scientific knowledge.

The present work is a kaleidoscope of medical concepts on the practice of surgery, in particular the historical settings from the first half of 20th century. It emphasises that understanding a disease and its particular treatment forms does not just include recounting explicit accounts of disease given by medical literature. It needs an holistic analysis of the social relations embedded in such concepts. By doing this, the authors propose to illustrate how modernist surgery rose from a relatively humble position in medieval life to being seen as one of the great achievements of modern culture. We examine how semiology entered surgery, how medical theory and surgical practices relate to social contexts.

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