

# Is *Asian* More Pejorative Than *Oriental*?

William Morris, DAOM, PhD, LAc

There currently is much debate within the medical field about the proper naming of medical practices that have their roots in China. It has gone to such extremes that the California legislators officially changed the word *Oriental* to *Asian*. However, in an effort to be politically correct, they may have missed the mark.

## *Asian*

The words *Asian* and *Oriental* have similar roots. In ancient times, they referred to the direction of the rising sun. The term *Asian* occurred in Greece as a descriptive for what is now Turkey, some 14 centuries before the Common Era. Further, *Asia* may come from the Akkadian word (*w*)*asû(m)*, which means "to go out" or "to ascend," referring to the direction of the sun at sunrise in the Middle East. It also likely is connected with the Phoenician word *asa*, meaning east. For the Greeks and Romans, the term *Asian* described those peoples whose power and territory were usurped in an imperialistic and hegemonic attempt to rule the world.

## *Oriental*

The term *Oriental* emerged during the post-enlightenment era in connection with the European fascination with Eastern culture. The origins of the term *Orient*, circa 1300, originally referred to the east. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, *Oriental* was connected to the colonization of the Near-East and the East by France and England and later the U.S. It was during this time frame that *Oriental* was used to express European imperialism at the material, aesthetic and sociological levels. Edward Said, defined orientalism as "a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based upon the Orient's special place in European Western experience."<sup>1</sup> Thus the post-enlightenment and imperialistic world of England, France, and later the United States, used the term *Orientalism* as a reference to character, style, trait or idiom felt to be from the Orient.

## 1970s Development

The histories of these two words pose an interesting quandary for the present-day field of acupuncture and Oriental medicine (AOM). We now fast-forward to North America in the late 1970s. The Chinese, Korean and Japanese communities are developing a legal structure for their culturally distinct medical practices. The Japanese and Koreans adopted the term *Oriental medicine* in order to reflect their medical practices as distinct from the Chinese, yet sharing a common foundation.

Under these circumstances, *Oriental medicine* developed into a brand identity. Regulatory agencies throughout the U.S. began using the term *Oriental* as part of the language of legislature and incorporation. Several agencies adopted the term. These included the Accreditation Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (ACAOM), the Federation of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine Regulatory Agencies (FAOMRA), the National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (NCCAOM), and the American Association of Acupuncture and

Oriental Medicine (AAAOM).

Currently, the term *Oriental medicine* is identified with the aggregate practices of acupuncture, herbal medicine, manual therapies, cupping, moxibustion bleeding, exercise therapies and dietary therapies. The field has matured in terms of its identity.

We find some commonality for use of the terms *Oriental* and *Asian* in postmodern medical practices of North America. Both terms are rooted in a desire to fairly represent cultural practices from the Far East. The dominant cultures and countries that brought the practices of acupuncture and Oriental medicine to the West, notably, China, Japan and Korea, seek to be identified fairly.

However, the identity of *Asian* medical practices tends to lack specificity due to the wide-ranging geographical, cultural and medical influences. Consider the following facts. The Thai, Vietnamese, and the subcontinental practices of the unani tibb, ayurvedic and Buddhist medical disciplines have unique features of practice. But they have no licensing status or official regulatory recognition at this time. Further, the full plurality of medical beliefs and disciplines practiced throughout Asia involve more than 60 percent of the global population. It also is the Earth's largest continent with 29.4 percent of the land mass. It's necessary to create a clear practice- and geographically-based description of the profession.

#### Chinese Traditional Medicine

Linguistic authorities such as Heiner Fruehauf and Paul Unschuld recommend using the term *Chinese traditional medicine*. Ideally, this captures the heterogeneous body of practices that compose the history of practice. However, the use of this description poses nationalistic concerns for the Vietnamese, Korean and Japanese communities, not to mention the French, English, Dutch and American.

While these ethnographic and cultural concerns are debated, the American public has a small but growing awareness of what "Oriental medicine" entails. The Western community increasingly is aware of acupuncture and that disciplined training is necessary for its successful practice. The phrase *acupuncture and Oriental medicine* captures this very well.

#### Oriental Medicine

The contemporary American use of the term *Oriental medicine* is a positive, specific and historical usage that emerged when the discipline was constructed and professionally recognized in the U.S. during the late 1970s. Generally speaking, the term is inclusive of the entire body of medical practices in which certified and licensed acupuncturists in the U.S. engage. It includes a plurality of national origins as well as methodologies. Therefore, my recommendation is to remain with the name *Oriental medicine*.

#### Reference

- Said, E. *Orientalism*. New York: Random House, 1978.

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