

Unfamiliarly familiar uncomfortableness



So I am sick. The doctor says it should be just a sore throat, although it feels like a spiky alien hiding in my esophagus. That being said, I put all endeavors to explore Indian cuisine aside and focus on finding meals that are both familiar and potentially swallowable without the risk to faint from all the pains. My adventurous ethnographic spirit only goes so far.

Of course I saw a doctor. And then another one. And then a third one. To be nice, I just wanted to make sure. To be honest, I didn't trust the first two. And that actually surprises me. Because up to this day I can clearly remember me and my flatmate at that time having a discussion about whether or not to trust the local doctors of the small Chinese town we were living in. I argued that doctors around the world are first and foremost qualified because of their experience of practicing medicine, completely unrelated to the particular medical tradition they follow. Meanwhile my flatmate just had an ingrown toenail removed by a doctor who couldn't wait for the local anesthesia to kick in, so his position in our argument was colored somewhat more pessimistic.

But I actually never regretted my optimistic perspective on Chinese doctors and medical institutions. On the contrary, most encounters were professional, original and comforting. So why is it I can't seem to warm up to Indian doctors? Maybe it's just the damn short consultation hours, in which I forget to say half the things I wanted to and I am asked just a minimal amount of questions before being prescribed a whole list of meds that supposedly cure my disease. Because going to the doctors is much like going to the hairdresser for me: The more time you invest the more satisfied I will be in the end - even if the same result could have been achieved in less than five minutes. Or maybe it's just the walk to the doctor's office and witnessing all the dirt and waste around me, people spitting and dogs pooping on the street, that just makes a clean office look a little too good to be true.

I did make out one major difference, though, between seeing a doctor in China and seeing one in India: China has a huge medical tradition of its own which is still implemented today and which enjoys a clientele at least as big as those looking for modern medicine. But more than that, traditional Chinese and western medicine overlap a lot and people don't usually use one or the other exclusively. And neither do practitioners. So when I visit a doctor in China it always carries a feeling of experiencing something completely new, foreign and exotic, and that means having no other choice than to trust the work of the expert in question. In India we have an Ayurvedic tradition which is still strong, but by no means mainstream, so seeing a doctor here much resembles seeing one back home in a European country - in its basic structure and essence. There's a waiting room, a consultation room, people being called into the consultation room, talked to, examined and sent home with recipes for meds to take. But there are certain differences. And I think I have mentioned it somewhere before, culture shock means not experiencing the totally foreign things, but those which are look like things we are used to, but are not when stepping closer: The tiny size of both office and waiting room, the uniform price for every examination, the lack of receipts for those cash payments, again - the short consultation times, the pills that are sold without outer packaging or package insert, the number of different drugs you are told to take at once. All those little things contribute to this unfamiliarly familiar experience all the while being in an uncomfortable state to begin with.

There are a couple of treatments to this sort of "illness". Ideally, you can find a practitioner whom you can trust and who makes you feel comfortable under his or her care. If those kind of doctors aren't around, you will have to stick with those non-professional people you can trust and let them guide you through these annoying times.

That helps.

A little.