

Why did I recommend *Destiny* for Medical Humanities?

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In the MA in Chinese Health and Humanities at UCL (伦敦大学学院), we have been promoting the teaching of Medical Humanities through the screening of Chinese movies in a course called *Chinese film, medicine and the body* that started in February 2012. The course covers different aspects of the Chinese medical experience, community life and public health, issues such as sickness and death, disability, the family (functional and dysfunctional), environment, martial arts and the supernatural body, etc.

The discipline of Medical Humanities was “invented” as early as the 1970s, but since not many people are familiar with its core issues, I will set them out here in brief: medical humanities is an interdisciplinary field of medicine which includes the humanities (literature, philosophy, ethics, history and religion), social science (anthropology, cultural studies, psychology, sociology, health geography) and the arts (literature, theatre, film, and visual arts) and their application to medical education and practice.

The humanities and arts provide insight into the human condition, suffering, personhood, and our responsibility to each other, and offer a historical perspective on medical practice. Attention to literature and the arts helps to develop and nurture skills of observation, analysis, empathy (共情), and self-reflection – skills that are essential for humane medical care. The social sciences help us to understand how bioscience (生命科学) and medicine take place within cultural and social contexts and how culture interacts with the individual experience of illness and the way medicine is practised.

Therefore, the aims of Medical Humanities could be basically defined as follows: a) making us familiar with how our body defines us and makes us who we are; b) improving medical care through patients’ narratives; c) shaping health and wellbeing through the appreciation of the arts; d) understanding our culture and history through medical experiences; e) changing public perception of illness and sufferers, of people who are challenged physically or educationally; f) encouraging empathy in doctors; g) raising awareness on issues of access to healthcare; h) debating medical ethics and, last but not least, directing our governments in terms of developing appropriate legislation, policies and national plans to solve some of the problems.

When I first watched *Destiny* by Chinese director Zhang Wei, I was startled by its precision in pointing out some major problems in our approach and attitudes towards autistic children and adults.

Xihe is a child with a mild case of autism, which nevertheless makes it difficult for him to interact with other people and to relate to the external environment. Xihe's mother has a family history in dealing with autism in her experience with her older brother.

Although every effort is made by Xihe's teachers to integrate him into a class at the local primary school, Xihe's reactions are often not acceptable to the parents of the other children in the class. After some incidents, the school principal is pressured into asking Xihe's mother to get him out of the school. She petitions most of the parents and obtains many signatures, and the school after long deliberations agrees to take him back. But on the day when Xihe goes back to his class (his mother has also resigned from her job and intends to be with the child during class hours), the parents wanting a "normal" environment for their children are there demonstrating against it. Xihe doesn't want to stay at home so his mother starts teaching him in the underground. This catches the attention of the media, who report the story and provoke much public discussion. At first this seems to be a good way of raising awareness, but later it becomes merely a source of voyeuristic interest for the general public. The movie ends with Xihe's autistic uncle shaking and breaking down the cage in which the villagers have confined him to stop him being aggressive. In a subplot, we also see an older child and his grandmother left alone to care for him by his parents. After many problems, his grandmother, desperate and unable to find a solution, opts for suicide as a way of ending their suffering.

The attitudes of the children's parents at Xihe's school and those of the villagers towards Xihe's uncle are emblematic of the social stigma attached to disability. Xihe's mother (please note: we never learn her name, because her status, her persona is defined by being first and foremost the child's mother or her brother's sister) is firmly convinced that the only answer for Xihe's improvement and integration in society is "inclusive education".

So in *Destiny* we learn that different approaches have been adopted in dealing with disabled children: "special" or segregated education, integrated education and inclusive education. We basically know what special schools are: separate schools targeting specific impairments (schools for the blind, the deaf, the mentally impaired) in which children are classified according to their impairment and allocated to a school designed to respond to it. But we may not be familiar with the inclusive system where children with disabilities are located in mainstream schools, addressing the diversity of needs and reducing exclusion, a system that involves changes and modifications, and is based on the conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all members of society.

In *Destiny*, we begin to understand this through Xihe's mother's campaign and

her assertion that the only solution is inclusion, and that “inclusion” goes beyond integration; it promotes changes throughout the education system and the community, to ensure that the system adapts to the child, rather than the child being obliged to adapt to the system. As Xihe’s mother says: “Is not Xihe who has to adjust to us, it is we that have to adjust to Xihe.”

The media have an enormous impact in shaping public opinion. On the other hand they can also turn a tragedy into something to be watched by a public wanting to feed its thirst for peculiar, curious, grotesque news and situations. This is shown very well in *Destiny*.

We see mentioned in *Destiny* that the doctor assessing Xihe’s condition supports inclusive education. But as the law does not establish the basis for inclusion, there is not sufficient pressure applied to the parents of the other children to accept it, or to the educational institutions and on the local governments to do something about it.

I will take a moment here to describe what my country has done about this. Since 1992, the Italian parliament has implemented the Italian Framework Law for the Assistance, Social Integration and Rights of the Disabled Person. This law is the main framework for all disability issues: it guarantees specific rights for people with disabilities and their families, provides assistance, stipulates full integration and the adoption of measures for prevention and functional recovery, and ensures social, economic and legal protection. Amongst its provisions, it includes the right to inclusive education of every child with a disability ascertained by a doctor’s certificate; the requirement that all learning institutions accept students with disabilities; the coordination of all services, equipment, timetabling and transport; the set-up of a tailored educational plan; the training of teachers, counselling and working groups; the establishment of a National Commission on Inclusive Education.

Inclusion is not about pity and mercy; it is a system that ensures the respect of a fundamental human right: the right to education for all. We hope to see many more movies like *Destiny* to increase public perception and change society for the better.