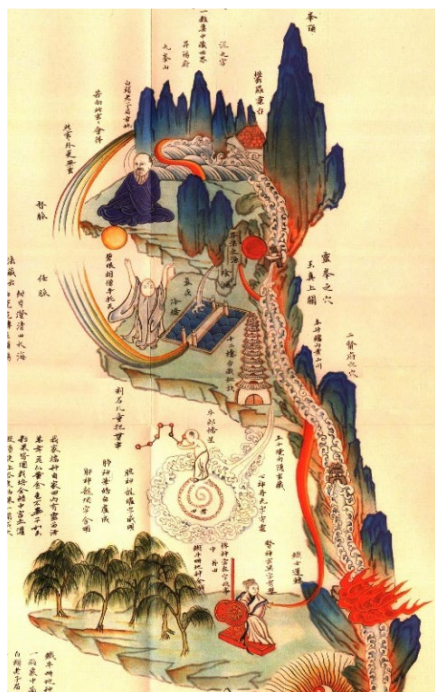


Anth 127a: Medicine, Body, and Culture



*Anatomical illustrations from Andreas Vesalius's 1543 book, *On the Fabric of the Human Body*.*



The body represented as a cosmological landscape in a 19th-century Daoist diagram.

Class Schedule: Monday, Tuesday & Thursday, 6:30-9:00PM, from June 1 to July 3

Location: Schwartz 103 (In person)

Instructor: Hui Wen, huiwenn@brandeis.edu

Office Hours: By appointment (email to schedule)

Course Description

Medicine has always been, at its core, an attempt to respond to pain and suffering. Medical anthropology examines this process, asking how suffering, healing, and care are understood, practiced, and made meaningful across different social and cultural worlds. From selected readings, we will explore how anthropologists have approached historical and contemporary problems in the global field of medicine. Topics of the course include how different forms of medical knowledge and belief are produced and come into tension in practice; how suffering and illness are shaped by political, economic, and religious forces; and how certain notions of the body are produced and become normative. While our course trajectory will lead us to treat biomedicine as only one among many systems of meaning and authority, we will also spend some time examining the application of biomedicine in different cultures and regions, thereby complicating the notion that biomedicine is somehow insulated from the reach of culture. The course encourages students to apply anthropological theories of medicine, the body, and care through multiple methods, linking classroom learning with students' own inquiries into everyday life.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Explain and compare how different societies think about health, illness, suffering, and healing, recognizing the diversity of medical systems and their cultural logics.
- Describe and apply key theories and concepts in the anthropological study of medicine.
- Critically question taken-for-granted assumptions about ostensibly “universal” human experiences and sensibilities.
- Develop and practice skills in analytical writing, in-class discussion, and collaborative learning.
- Apply a range of ethnographic research tools, including participant observation, open-ended interviews, qualitative data analysis, and basic digital tools (e.g., GIS or StoryMap) for research and presentation.

Course Requirements

Required readings

All readings will be uploaded to Moodle. Readings will amount to approximately 50-100 pages per week. **Please complete the reading *on or before* the class date listed in the syllabus.**

“Recommended” readings are optional, if you have interest in a particular topic.

Attendance and Participation (20%)

Active, informed, and respectful participation in discussions; completion of all assigned readings and media before class. Students are expected to come prepared with thoughts, questions, or comments each week. Students are also encouraged to bring in relevant materials from everyday life (news articles, social media such as Instagram, or personal observations) that connect to course themes and help deepen our understanding of the course content.

I understand that circumstances may occasionally prevent attendance (e.g., illness, family emergencies, travel delays, or job interviews). Students may miss up to two classes without penalty. Each additional absence will result in a five-point deduction from the attendance portion of the participation grade.

Body-Observation Journal (20%)

Submit a 1-page single-spaced journal, where you observe and reflect on your own bodily experiences and everyday practices related to health, including but not limited to appearance, sleep, diet, stress, exercise, illness, or medical care. Your reflection should connect personal observations to broader sociocultural contexts, such as health systems, social expectations about the body, or cultural beliefs about wellness and healing.

Analysis Essay (25%)

Submit a 1-page, single-spaced analytical essay engaging with at least two course readings. The essay should focus on a topic in medical anthropology and demonstrate your ability to analyze concepts and arguments discussed in class.

Final Project (35%)

The final project allows you to explore a topic related to medicine, body, and culture in greater depth. You may choose between two directions:

Option A: Mini Ethnography

Conduct a small research project based on your own observations and at least one interview (for example in a health-related setting or everyday environment). You should include brief fieldnotes from your observations and use specific examples from your data. Your analysis should engage with at least three course readings and use them to interpret your findings. This ethnography could be built on your body-observation journal or focus on a different topic.

Option B: Analytical Paper

Write an analytical paper that develops a clear argument about a concept, debate, or social phenomenon related to medical anthropology. Your paper should engage with at least three course readings and use them to support and frame your analysis. You may expand on your earlier 1-page analysis essay or develop a new topic.

You may present your project in one of the following formats:

1. **Essay** (6 pages, double-spaced) presenting a clear argument supported by evidence.
2. **StoryMap Project** combining text, images, and maps to present your analysis visually.
3. **Presentation** (10 minutes) followed by 5 minutes of Q&A. [Arranged on July 2nd]

Further instructions will be provided during the course. You are welcome to discuss project ideas with me over email or in-person.

Summary of Assessment Weighting

Class Element	Weight	Learning Goals	Due Date
Class Participation	20%	Engage with key concepts; contribute to discussion; connect course content to everyday life	Ongoing
Body-Observation Journal	20%	Practice observation; reflect on the body, health, and daily experience; develop ethnographic sense	Monday, June 15 th
Analysis Essay	25%	Develop a clear argument; apply course concepts; practice analytical writing	Thursday, June 25 th
Final Project	35%	Synthesize course concepts, tools, and your own research to develop an argument about health, medicine, and the body	Sunday, July 5 th

Schedule (Subject to Change)

Note: readings listed for each date should be completed *before* class on that day.

Week 1. Medicine as Culture System

How do societies shape what counts as illness, healing, and a normal body?

Monday, June 1st

- Introduction, go through the syllabus; icebreakers; share most recent experiences with any medical system

Tuesday, June 2nd

- Fadiman, Anne. 1997. *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, chs. 1–4.
- In-class film screening: *Between Two Worlds: the Hmong Shaman in America* (1996)

Thursday, June 4th

- Fadiman, Anne. 1997. *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, chs. 5–9, 17

Week 2. Doing Medical Anthropology: Ethnography, Inquiry, and Method

How do anthropologists investigate illness, healing, and medical knowledge in different societies? What kinds of questions guide their research, and how does ethnography help them make sense of medicine in everyday life?

Monday, June 8th

- Evans-Pritchard, E. E. 1976 [1937]. *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. Chapter 1 “Witchcraft is an Organic and Hereditary Phenomenon” and Chapter 2 “The Notion of Witchcraft Explains Unfortunate Events,” pp. 1–32.

Tuesday, June 9th

- Farquhar, Judith. 1994. *Knowing Practice: The Clinical Encounter of Chinese Medicine*. Boulder: Westview Press. Introduction and Chapter 1 “The Body in Chinese Medicine,” pp. 1–38.
- In-class experiential session: massage and embodied knowledge

Thursday, June 11th

- Mattingly, Cheryl. 1991. “In Search of the Good: Narrative Reasoning in Clinical Practice.” *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 5(4): 399–419.
- In-class librarian session: GIS and StoryMap

Week 3. Biomedicine and Its Repercussions

What happens when biomedicine reshapes how we classify, interpret, and respond to suffering?

Monday, June 15th **Paper 1 Body-Observation Journal Due**

- Bowker, Geoffrey C., and Susan Leigh Star. 1999. *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences*. MIT Press. Introduction and Chapter 1 “To Classify Is Human,” pp. 1–32.
- Recommended: Mukherjee, Siddhartha. 2011. *The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer*. 1st Scribner trade paperback ed., Scribner. [Selection]

Tuesday, June 16th

- Conrad, Peter. 2007. *The Medicalization of Society: On the Transformation of Human Conditions into Treatable Disorders*. Johns Hopkins University Press. Chapter 1 “The Medicalization of Society,” or Chapter 4 “ADHD and the Medicalization of Childhood.”

Thursday, June 18th

- Scheper-Hughes, Nancy. 1992. *Death without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Chapter 5, “Nervosa.”

Week 4. A Closer Look: Gender, Race, and Global Inequalities in Biomedicine

Whose bodies are most likely to be ignored, misread, or controlled by medicine?

Monday, June 22nd

- Martin, Emily. 1991. “The Egg and the Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles.” *Signs* 16 (3): 485–501.

Tuesday, June 23rd

- Paul Farmer. 2004. “On Suffering and Structural Violence: Social and Economic Rights in the Global Era.” In *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor*, University of California Press.
- Recommended: Ottersen, Ole Petter et al. 2014. “The Political Origins of Health Inequity: Prospects for Change.” *The Lancet*, Volume 383, Issue 9917, 630 – 667.

Thursday, June 25th **Paper 2 Analytical Essay Due**

- Petryna, Adriana. 2009. *When Experiments Travel: Clinical Trials and the Global Search for Human Subjects*. 1st ed. Princeton University Press. [selection]
- In-class film screening: *Fire in the Blood* (2012)

Week 5. Who Defines a “Normal” Body? Menopause, Anti-Aging, and Biohacking

How do medicine, culture, and markets define what counts as a “normal” body across the life course? When do natural processes like aging or menopause become problems to be treated, or opportunities to be optimized?

Monday, June 29th

- Itō, Hiromi. 2024. *The Thorn Puller*. Translated by Jeffrey Angles. Stone Bridge Press. [selection]
- Recommended: Lock, Margaret M. 1993. *Encounters with Aging: Mythologies of Menopause in Japan and North America*. University of California Press.

Tuesday, June 30th

- Lamb, Sarah. 2014. “Permanent Personhood or Meaningful Decline? Toward a Critical Anthropology of Successful Aging.” *Journal of Aging Studies*: 41–52. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2013.12.006>.
- Recommended: Katz, Stephen. “Busy Bodies: Activity, Aging, and the Management of Everyday Life.” *Journal of Aging Studies* (Oxford) 14, no. 2: 135–52. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0890-4065\(00\)80008-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0890-4065(00)80008-0).

Thursday, July 2nd

- Friend, Tad. 2017. “Silicon Valley’s Quest to Live Forever.” *The New Yorker*.
- Recommended: Walter, Chip. 2020. *Immortality, Inc: Renegade Science, Silicon Valley Billions, and the Quest to Live Forever*. National Geographic Society.
- Wrapping up + students’ presentations

July 5th Final Project Due