

Chinese activists protest the use of traditional treatments—they want medical science

October 7 2019



Each card in this deck, which was printed in 37,000 copies, warned about the dangers of treatment with Traditional Chinese Medicine. The deck was distributed among poker clubs in rural China. Credit: University of Copenhagen

In the West, the number of people challenging scientific authority has been growing in past decades. This has, among other things, led to a decline in the support for mass vaccination programmes and to an increase in alternative forms of treatment. In China, however, activists are defending modern medical science and criticising traditional Chinese medicine, which hospitals are obliged to offer to patients on an equal footing with modern medical care.

Over a number of years, Chinese researcher Qiaoyan Zhu, affiliated with the University of Copenhagen's Department of Communication, has collected data on the many thousands of science [activists](#) in China through observations in internet forums, on [social media](#) and during in-person meetings. She has also interviewed hundreds of activists.

Together with Professor Maja Horst, who has specialised in research communication, Zhu has analysed data on the activists and their protests in an article now published in the journal *Public Understanding of Science*:

"The activists are better educated and wealthier than the average Chinese population, and a large majority of them keep up to date with scientific developments. The protests do not reflect a broad popular movement, but the activists make an impact with their communication at several different levels," Maja Horst explained and added:

"Many of them are protesting individually by writing directly to family, friends and colleagues who have been treated with—and in some cases taken ill from—traditional Chinese medicine. Some have also hung posters in hospitals and other official institutions to draw attention to the dangers of traditional treatments. But most of the activism takes place online, on social media and blogs.

The activists hold the cards

Activists operating in a regime like China are obviously not given the same leeway as activists in an open democratic society—there are limits to what the authorities are willing to accept in the public sphere in particular. However, there is still ample opportunity to organise and plan actions online.

"In addition to smaller groups and individual activists that have profiles

on social media, larger online groups are also being formed, in some cases, gaining a high degree of visibility. The [card game](#) with 52 criticisms about traditional Chinese medicine that a group of activists produced in 37,000 copies and distributed to family, friends and local poker clubs is a good example. Poker is a highly popular pastime in rural China, so the critical deck of cards is a creative way of reaching a large audience," Maja Horst said.

Maja Horst and Qiaoyan Zhu have also found examples of more direct action methods, where local activist groups contact school authorities to complain that traditional Chinese medicine is part of the syllabus in schools. Or that activists help patients refuse treatment if they are offered treatment with traditional Chinese medicine.

Will we see similar science activism in Europe?

The Chinese style of science activism, which Maja Horst and Qiaoyan Zhu have studied, is rather traditional and fact-based compared to the often more spectacular and symbol-laden communication that Western activists use when, for example, protesting genetic research. But they conclude by anticipating a possible similar development in the West:

"We have already seen Marches for Science in the U.S. and Europe so it is not unlikely we will begin to see more activism in favour of science and evidence-based medicine in our part of the world, as well. We may well see a counter-reaction toward climate skeptics and anti-vaxxers who challenge established [science](#) and its results."

More information: Qiaoyan Zhu et al, Science communication activism: Protesting Traditional Chinese Medicine in China, *Public Understanding of Science* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/0963662519865405](https://doi.org/10.1177/0963662519865405)

Provided by University of Copenhagen

Citation: Chinese activists protest the use of traditional treatments—they want medical science (2019, October 7) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-10-chinese-activists-protest-traditional-treatments.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.