East Asian medicines (EAMs) have always been interested in the interior of the body – organs, circulatory pathways, muscles, flesh, bones but never developed technologies that made these structures visible for the purpose of diagnosis. Western science sees this as but another example for the inferiority of EAMs. Instead, if Western concerns for the body’s interior evidence a deep distrust into human sensibilities that date back to ancient Greeks, then EAMs physicians, like East Asian philosophers, writers and painters, believe that a skilled observer can read a situation – specifically it’s propensities and dynamics of development – from the way it manifests itself. Amongst other things, this means that non-verbal communication skills, such as observation and palpation are of fundamental importance for the process of diagnosis in EAMs.

Observation includes looking at the patient’s complexion, skin quality, gait, movements, tongue, etc., while palpation meticulously covers pulses, abdomen, and meridians. The information gained by these simple skills are very valuable and take a short time to be gathered: for example, a red tip of the tongue, sensitivity in the epigastrium with a heart beat felt superficially might indicate that the patient is suffering from some sort of psycho-emotional disturbance, such as sleeping problems or anxiety; another example is a very tight/choppy pulse, sublingual veins distended and a very specific area sensitive to pressure in the lower abdomen could indicate that the patient suffers from dysmenorrhoea; furthermore, if the tongue is thin and pale, the pulse is feeble and thready and the complexion is sallow and lustreless, the patient might be suffering from anaemia, and so on. These checks when carried out by an expert practitioner, take only a few minutes and are used to formulate a diagnosis when they are correlated with the information provided by the patient, the biomedical diagnosis and the answers to specific questions asked by the practitioner.

Reading the body is not only a tool for diagnosis but it is also helpful for understanding health issues that might be hidden or difficult to perceive in the short consultations typical of today’s NHS practice. These kinds of skills could be useful in conventional clinical settings because it could make the consultation more informative and it would help to ‘personalise’ treatment, thus, potentially saving significant costs to the NHS.