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The Institutional Transmission of Chinese Medicine

A typology of the Main Issues

ABSTRACT: The aim of this article is to propose a typology of the different issues that the transmission of traditional Chinese medicine encounters today in the world, by successively highlighting ideological, epistemological, political, and educational difficulties. After showing how much the polarised aspect of the debates on Chinese medicine is already entrenched among specialists in this discipline, we explore the question of the epistemological status of this Chinese tradition by confronting it with the dominant biomedicine of Western origin. The originality of Chinese structures that were set up to protect and promote this national tradition is then highlighted as a possible source of inspiration at the international level, before describing the different economic factors likely to play a positive or negative role in the development of this medical and cultural heritage at the local level. Finally, the specific didactic questions that the transmission of this heritage and the teaching of this discipline raise are analysed before presenting a conclusion.

KEYWORDS: Chinese medicine, epistemology, health policy, pedagogy, social sciences

Teaching Chinese medicine to a Western public that knows almost nothing about the philosophical principles of Chinese civilisation implies overcoming a set of considerable intellectual, pedagogical, and institutional difficulties. (1) In 2004, Professor Éric Marié, who at that time held a position as research director at the Nanchang faculty of Chinese Medicine in Jiangxi and also taught this discipline at Lausanne University, (2) was invited to use his expertise to establish a university degree that might help meet this challenge at France’s University of La Rochelle. This degree, first supported by a letter written by the educational advisor at the Chinese Embassy in France to the university president, and then approved by the board of directors, received numerous registration applications but never saw the light of day. The registration forms were returned to the students. No reason was ever given to explain why this course of studies was not ultimately launched. This experience of failure led Pierre-Henry de Bruyn, who initiated the project, to ponder the resistance that traditional Chinese medicine encounters when attempting to penetrate a university environment in certain Western countries. The present article is the fruit of this reflection, enriched by the reflections that have led Évelyne Micoller to the Chinese heritage and the teaching of this discipline raise are analysed before presenting a conclusion.

1. Given that the term “Traditional Chinese Medicine” (TCM) chosen by the PRC since the 1950s as a translation for the Chinese term zhongyi (“Chinese Medicine” – CM) is increasingly acquiring a limited meaning that is not really a synonym for “Chinese medicine,” we prefer to use a literal translation of the term here, even if we still use the acronym “TCM” for the sake of convenience. In regards to this subject it is important to remember that [Elisabeth Hsu, Volker Scheid and Kim Taylor have explained the difference between the traditional medicine promoted by the government, namely TCM, and Chinese medicine in its larger acceptance. By presenting the plurality of medical practices, Scheid and then Taylor take into account the developments of TCM since 1949: Chinese medicine has been transformed into TCM by a planned state intervention.” [Évelyne Micoller, “Un savoir thérapeutique hybride et mobile – Éclairage sur la recherche médicale en médecine chinoise en Chine aujourd’hui,” Revue d’anthropologie des connaissances, vol. 5, no. 1, 2011 pp. 41–70, p. 47].

2. In 2003, Éric Marié also presented a PhD dissertation in comparative history of medicine at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales [Graduate School of Social Sciences]. This work was then published under the title: Le diagnostic par les pouls en Chine et en Europe – Une histoire de la sphygmom étrie et de la sphygmométrie de l’Arabie aux xixe siècle (Diagnosis by pulse in China and in Europe – A history of sphygmography from the beginning to the eighteenth century). Paris-Berlin-New York, Springer, 2011.
number of years, as could be observed in 2006 with the mediated debate centring around an article by Zhang Congyao, professor of philosophy of science at Changsha University, which considered the issue of including TCM in the Chinese public health system. (10) Meanwhile in the West, this ideological aspect is even more pronounced in that it also crosses the narrow field of several specialists in this discipline, as we shall demonstrate. The “national character” of “Chinese” medicine involuntarily reveals these deep reflexes in the Western world that determine people’s attitudes toward the Other. In the preface of a book on the practice of acupuncture in the West published in 1997, Giovanni Maciocia thus pointed out:

Practically ever since Oriental medicine was introduced to the Western world, at least in recent times, there has been a dynamic tension between the need to absorb, understand and preserve Oriental medicine and the need to adapt it to Western conditions. Two opposing views could be presented, the first advocating the need to swiftly adapt Oriental medicine to Western conditions, the second advocating the need to first absorb, understand and master Oriental medicine as it has been handed down in Asia. (4)

Western discussions of Chinese medicine thus cross lines of tension between a centripetal and centrifugal motion. The centripetal motion consists of trying to absorb the differences of the Other by filtering the content of his knowledge and experiences into familiar categories of thinking. This is often found, for example, in Western faculties of medicine. In this kind of environment, the only aspects of Chinese medicine deemed worthy of interest are those that can join your “centre” in a fractional manner, or expressed differently, your mode of thinking: foreign medical tradition stops being “Chinese,” but certain aspects are considered possibly to be worth “medical” interest because of their therapeutic effectiveness. (5) At the opposite end of the spectrum, the centrifugal approach tries to stress the exotic characteristics of the discipline: it is cultivated by numerous private schools of Chinese medicine but also in university environments in the faculties of Chinese studies, where it is brought into the medical dimension through its “Chinese” character: Chinese medicine thus becomes Chinoiserie.

It is important to stress that no environment, including that of specialists in Chinese medicine, escapes this tension. For example, we can observe that Western historians of Chinese medicine, based on their intellectual or ideological prejudices, often present divergent points of view in their interpretations of contemporary history. Thus the anthropologist Elisabeth Hsu, in the preface of her collective work Innovation in Chinese Medicine, introduced the articles of Volker Scheid and Kim Taylor, specialists in the history of Chinese medicine, while stressing the following contrast:

When Taylor highlights unification through political indoctrination, Scheid emphasizes pluralism in government institutions; where Taylor mentions application of the Soviet sciences, Scheid stresses adaptation of Western medicine; and where Taylor shows how canonical knowledge was done away with, Scheid delves into cracking medical lineages and establishes genealogies of drug prescriptions. (6)

The contrast between positive prejudices toward Chinese medicine, such as those of Volker Scheid, or negative, as with Kim Taylor, is moreover not new. The parallels with two other specialists, Manfred Porkert and Paul Unschuld, confirm this: the former defends the profoundly scientific character of Chinese medicine, while the latter considers the use of this discipline in the West to be mainly a response to an ideological and spiritual void. Manfred Porkert holds:

At present three major factors work together in the debasement of Chinese medicine. The first, most visible and much dreaded, is the apparent power, in appearance overwhelming and universal, of orthodox Western medicine. The second, widespread and much publicised in all industrialised Western countries, is the acclaim and interest Chinese medicine gets from practitioners of what is called “alternative” medicine. (7) And the third, by far the most serious, menace is the bungling and degradation Chinese medicine suffers from some of its most prominent speakers in China proper. (8)

And yet, according to Porkert, Chinese medicine is “a science in its own right,” the existence of which offers the medical profession a unique opportunity for potential development, as little as it may be recognised as such. (9) It is in this same line of thought that certain authors today are writing veritable comparative chronological tables, thus indirectly attributing to the history of Chinese medicine an importance comparable to that of Western medicine. One of the most eminent examples of this type of work is the collection inaugurated in 2004 under the very telling title of Bridging Hippocrates and Huang Ti. (10)

In contrast to this viewpoint, Paul Unschuld considers instead the current idolatry of “nature” in the West, which...

...required a theology, and this was certainly not offered by the use of water, warmth, heat, light, and air. This is too primitive. So-called Chinese medicine was better equipped to provide the required theology. It simultaneously presented itself as a secularized religion. [...] The “theology” of Chinese medicine gives answers that believers in the churches of conventional religion have to live without. Of course, this “theology” is not theology, because it has no Theos. The yin-yang and five agents doctrines are the cosmology of a secular

5. The article by Lucia Candelise in this issue shows that in France, there was a strong reaction among acupuncture doctors against this centripetal tendency, which created a current among them that she called “traditionalist.” Also see Ronald Guilloux, “Évolution de la ‘tradition’ dans la réception de l’acupuncture chinoise en France (1860-1980),” Revue d’anthropologie des connaissances, vol. 5, no. 1, 2011, pp. 13-40.
7. Chinese medicine would thus be reduced to no more than a somewhat ethereal holistic therapeutic technique manipulated by New Age and natural medical advocates.
8. Manfred Porkert, Chinese Medicine Debased — Essays on Methodology, Dinkelscherben (Germany), Phanor, 1998, p. 2. In this third point, Manfred Porkert directly targets current Chinese state institutions that are disseminating the teaching of Chinese medicine under the pressure of political motivations that are better thought out than those under a concern for scientific fidelity to a therapeutic tradition. In the twenty-first century, in addition to the political motivations described by Porkert, there are also motivations for increasing the scientific outreach of China as well as powerful economic motives (Évelyne Miceli, art. cit., 2009, pp. 81-82).
9. Ibid., pp. 13-35, p. 34.
religion. It is a religion, because it makes the individuals’ integration in the greater whole understandable. It is secular, because the luminous does not exist in this religion. No god or gods. No demons or ancestors.\textsuperscript{(11)}

Here we find, on the topic of TCM, the old Western debate between science and religion. Torn between a possible status of “science” (defended by those who not only study it, but also use it as practitioners, such as Volker Scheid and Manfred Porkert) and a kind of religious doctrine that one must either believe or doubt (as Paul Unschuld and Kim Taylor both suggest in their own manner), Chinese medicine struggles to find this epistemological status, which consequently constitutes the second fundamental issue it encounters in the process of transmission.

The second issue: Leaving a vague epistemological status

The question of the relationship between science and religion has been asked in a much different manner in China than in the West. Knowledge is not constructed in China in opposition to a religious power. It also did not form its structure in a discourse involving a pretension of scientific universality. As a “medical” tradition, the principle motivation by which the Chinese cultivated and transmitted their medical tradition is essentially practical: only therapeutic effectiveness counted.

To arrive at concrete therapeutic results, they had to consider human beings who were ill and human beings who were in good health. They consciously created a culturally situated anthropology and cosmology. Therefore Chinese medicine is “Chinese” because it rests on an approach to the body and mind nourished by a specific civilisation: Chinese culture. In a world where Western culture has exercised an influence of almost tidal wave proportions, Chinese medicine offers a way of discovering concretely how a therapeutic action is possible from the starting point of a perception of human beings other than what a Western perspective offers. Shigehisa Kuriyama has demonstrated how perceptions of the body in Greek and Chinese medical traditions frequently appear to describe its structure in a discourse involving a pretension of scientific universality. As a “medical” tradition, the principle motivation by which the Chinese cultivated and transmitted their medical tradition is essentially practical: only therapeutic effectiveness counted.

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The true structure and workings of the human body are, we casually assume, everywhere the same, a universal reality. But when we look into history, and our sense of reality wavers. (…) Accounts of the body in diverse medical traditions frequently appear to describe mutually alien, almost unrelated worlds.\textsuperscript{(12)}

The observation of this difference between the perceptions of the body conveyed by Taoism and that circulating in the West is the basis of a recent work by Pierre-Henry de Bruyn, which as an extension of Kristoffer Schipper’s ground-breaking book on the Taoist body\textsuperscript{[13]} aims to address the current state of this question in Western studies.\textsuperscript{[14]} This work presents Taoism as a doctrine that is essentially centred on the body. However, to insist excessively on the Taoist roots (Confucian or Buddhist) of Chinese medicine would also risk obscuring the epistemological status of the latter rather than helping to define it. It is therefore better to consider the problem by going back to what is essential in the act of healing: this is what the Chinese have done over the centuries in transmitting their medical traditions.

Before the nineteenth century, the only “medicine” (\textit{yi\textsubscript{xue})} that the Chinese knew was Chinese. Over its long history, Chinese medicine nonetheless crossed other Asian medical traditions, including, for example, Indian and Buddhist medicine, as highlighted by Paul Unschuld.\textsuperscript{(15)} On the other hand, numerous very local Chinese medical traditions or medical knowledge cultivated in ethnic minority groups exist in China and refer to medical knowledge based on written (Tibetan, Mongolian, Korean, and Uyghur medicine) or oral sources. The importation of what is referred to as “Western medicine” (\textit{xiyi\textsubscript{j}}) upset this intellectual landscape, and Chinese medical tradition found itself gradually placed in a position of relativity in China to the point of soon becoming only a “Chinese” medicine (\textit{zhongyi}). Very soon, certain Chinese medicines tried to propose a synthesis by attempting to integrate elements of Western medicine into their traditional medical system: they came to be known as the “school of integration between Chinese and Western medicines” (\textit{zhongxi huitong\textsubscript{pai}}).\textsuperscript{(16)}

Some years later, Mao Zedong renewed these efforts by advocating a union of Western and Chinese doctors. The debates on the kind of union envisioned were numerous, and revolved around different slogans. What order of priority should be considered: “first Chinese medicine and then Western medicine” (\textit{先中後西 - xian zhong hou xi}), or the inverse?\textsuperscript{(17)} Would it be better to think of mutual “integration” (\textit{结合 - jiehe}), “unification” (\textit{reconciliation - tuanjie}), “cooperation” (\textit{cooperation - hezuo}),\textsuperscript{(18)} or even “synthesis” (\textit{ synthesis - zonghe})?\textsuperscript{(19)}

However, certain researchers or social actors believe that China will be able to find its medical legitimacy through its own specificity, rather than by seeking to join Western medicine with Chinese medicine. They stress that contemporary Chinese medicine has an urgent need for development and deep transformation. The Chinese anthropologist Hor Ting thus explains what many of his compatriots are thinking:

\textit{In China, since the transformation of traditional society, Chinese medicine has been modernized from its traditional aspects. For most contemporaneous Chinese, as for the author, the modernization of Chinese medicine seems quite natural and uncontested. In fact, this view is formed a priori on three assumptions:}

\begin{itemize}
  \item Chinese medicine has to change from its ancient form to a new form;
  \item Chinese medicine has to complete its evolution from its present primitive level to a higher level;
\end{itemize}

16. Among other things, Tang Zonghai (1851-1908), Zhang Shouyi (1873-1934), and Zhang Xichun (1860-1933) were famous supporters of this current.
18. Ibid., p. 137.
19. In the twenty-first century, the use of terms referring to the concept of synthesis is spreading in symposia, and in official, academic, and popular publications; for example in the context of the First World Congress of WHO on traditional medicine (\textit{chuantong yixue)\textsubscript{yao} at WHO Congress on Traditional Medicine hosted by the Ministry of Health and SATCMC), 7-9 November 2008, on the topic “Developing Traditional, Alternative and Complementary Medicines for Today’s Society,” facts and observations collected by Évelyne Micoller and presented to this Congress. Let us add that Volker Scheid (2002) formalised this concept.
• Chinese medicine has to be transformed from an unscientific practice to a scientific practice. (29)

Then, in a critical approach, Hor Ting himself demonstrates the assumptions that he has just defined. According to him, Chinese medicine should not try to find a new form for itself, because outside of China it is precisely as “traditional” medicine that it has been adopted by Westerners as a “medicine of the future.” (27) In addition, since Chinese medicine constitutes a well-established system of knowledge and skills, it represents de facto an “empirico-speculative medicine, developed into its full maturity” and should not aim for a new metamorphoses in order to be an accomplished medical tradition. (22) Finally, by noting that therapeutic efficiency is what counts in the medical act of healing rather than the scientific explanation provided, (23) Hor Ting goes so far as to reverse perspectives by declaring, from the point of view of science history, that it is in fact Western medicine that should be considered strange for claiming to base all of its processes on a “reasonable scientific objectivity” for which it creates its own unique criteria of truth; thus it should be Western and not Chinese medicine that represents “an isolated case in medical history.” (24) This reasoning shows how the question of the epistemological status of Chinese medicine can indirectly shake up certain scientific dogmas and can wrongly lead, by an inverse excess, to caricaturing knowledge called “scientific” and engendering a reductive vision of science, neglecting the fact that the model of the scientific paradigm consists of a continual reconsideration of previous results through the insertion of new results, and that as such, the scientific process is only interested in what it can know in the state of the knowledge of the moment. Furthermore, this paradigm is based on a theory of knowledge that is “open” in perpetual construction and thus reconstruction. From this point of view, the epistemological resistance that Chinese medicine encounters in its transmission process is double: on the one hand, the systematic questioning of its practices and results required of Chinese medicine by the dominant scientific paradigm produces internal resistance to a modification of its modes of operation; on the other hand, compelled to acknowledge its experience through experimental results that are quantitatively measurable, Chinese medicine is facing an external challenge of a kind that is totally new in its history.

The third issue: Establishing competent institutions and efficient public policies

Chinese medicine would not have even the epistemologically vague and ideologically debated status it has in China and the world today without the major political support that the authorities of the PRC strategically chose to give it at the end of the 1950s.

It is indisputable that starting in the 1950s, China established powerful institutional organisations charged with the national and international dissemination of Chinese medicine. (25) In addition, for Kim Taylor, “It is also noteworthy that only after Hong Kong was returned to China in 1997, were similar steps taken to institutionalize and standardize the medicine.” (16)

We can at least state that this process intensified after the handover of Hong Kong. Such strong political support for Chinese medicine by PRC authorities does not, however, justify the reduction of Chinese medicine to a mere political medical system, or to deduce that the interest of “the West” was attracted more to the “traditional” aspects of Chinese medicine than its “scientific merits.” (27) In fact, if the political character of TCM is often decried, this does not detract from its scientific or above all therapeutic merits.

To be able to understand how the Chinese government structures this discipline, or what the political lines it defines may be, it is important to know the principal institutions mobilised to promote and bring about its institutional dissemination. At present, the central administrative organisation in the development of TCM in China and in the world is the “State Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine of the People’s Republic of China” (中華人民共和國國家中醫藥管理局－SATCM-PRC), (26) which has been given two essentials missions. With the help of members of the vast network that it directs in the various Chinese institutions in China and in the world, this institution must:

1) Formulate strategies, plans, and policies for the development of TCM and the use of ethnic medicines;
2) Supervise all concrete applications of TCM, both preventive and clinical;
3) Coordinate the integration of TCM and Western medicine;
4) Guide the exploration, summarisation, and improvement of the theoretical components of TCM;
5) Direct the protection, exploration, and rational usage at the industrial scale of Chinese pharmacopoeia;
6) Promote educational activity at all levels in order to ensure the renewal of a pool of competencies in TCM;
7) Direct the scientific and technical research likely to improve the credit granted to TCM;
8) Ensure the protection of the immaterial heritage that constitutes TCM at the diagnostic and therapeutic level as well as at the literal and cultural level;

21. Ibid., p. 304.
22. Ibid., p. 307.
23. Ibid., p. 311.
24. Ibid., p. 310.
25. On this question see the detailed study of Wen Xiang, Minguo zhongyi yizheng (The medical policy of Chinese medicine in the Republic of China), Beijing, Zhongguo Zhongyiyao chubanshe, 2007.
27. Ibid., p. 109.
28. We choose to use the acronym “SATCM-PRC” rather than “SATCMC,” which is currently used in official translations (cf. note 19 above), in order to stress the political character of the term: since China is not only constituted by the PRC, this nuance could be, in certain contexts, as ill-suited as zhongyi as “TCM.”
9) Develop international collaborations for better transmission of TCM in the world, especially in partnership with Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan; 10) And finally – last but not least! – “To perform other tasks given by the State Council and the Ministry of Health.” (29)

A secretary general and five vice-commissioners preside over this administration. The careers of these great public servants of Chinese medicine shed light on the political character of this institution, and the diversity of their origins testify to its national dimension and the balance between regions. (30) It is also important to stress that none of these officials has training in biomedicine, but all have post-graduate degrees in Chinese medicine. (31) These two details allow us to stress how much the SATCM-PRC reveals a very marked national character and constitutes an atypical form of organisation compared to Western institutions, where policy decisions on health issues are typically entrusted to experts trained in biomedicine.

All of these officials serve one common mission: promoting Chinese medicine in China and in the world according to the wishes and respecting the instructions of the PRC authorities. Numerous other associations in China are working in this direction, but always in relationship with this central authority. Among these we will mention the “Confederation for the Universalisation of Chinese Herbal Medicine” (中藥全球化聯盟 – Zhongyao quangjiuhua lianmeng), which was founded in 2003 and aims to bring together the political authorities of the entire world, universities, research centres, and the pharmaceutical industry to promote the modernisation of Chinese medicine, ensure the protection of its cultural capital, improve the quality of its products, and by creating a platform for exchange, to encourage hospital research and bring the tradition of pharmacology and Chinese medicine into the mainstream of medical studies. Since its foundation, this confederation has already organized nine academic conferences, the last of which was held in August 2011 in Shanghai. (32)

The productivity of SATCM-PRC is not limited to China or even to Chinese medicine. It has also contributed to creating awareness at the international level of the need to establish adequate institutions for the management of alternative medicine policies that are distinct from those directly involved in the area of biomedicine. (33) On the other hand, these Chinese organisations lack a similar structure in most other countries. In the pursuit of international recognition of “Chinese” medicine as belonging to the “world” heritage of humanity, it would be wise to reflect on the national or possibly supranational SATCMs (for example a Europe-SATCM), which would not arise directly from SATCM-PRC, but the creation of which could be modelled on this institution. South Korea, for example, moved in this direction by creating a series of institutions in the 1990s for promoting its own medical tradition. (34) The response that the public authorities of a country or a place can give to the therapeutic needs of practitioners using Chinese medicine in their medical practices (as well as to the sick who require them) passes through established political structures adapted to this specific discipline and healthcare system. The original institutional
Chinese experience that constitutes the SATCM-PRC experience, charged with keeping alive a medical system that is complementary to the dominant system of biomedicine, could justifiably inspire others to carry out similar initiatives. Determining who in a given country can speak with authority on Chinese medicine, coordinate training in each discipline, rule on the competencies required to exercise it, and orient research in this area, are vital questions for the future of Chinese medicine in the world. They are neither ideological nor philosophical; they are political and economic.

**The fourth issue: Finding the economic means for development**

The fact that Chinese medicine represents a potential source of financial benefit results endows its organisation with an economic dimension that further complicates the process of its transmission. Without even talking about issues of training (which we will address separately below), several aspects should be stressed in this area: the market for medicinal products, professional opportunities, reimbursement for healthcare, and research financing. We will principally address the situation in China.

**The market for medicinal products**

The economic issue of the market for Chinese medicine represents the most obvious financial interest. It influences the current discussions on Chinese medicine in a decisive manner both in China and abroad. With some 6,000 manufacturers of medicine in China, capable of producing more than 1,000 chemical medicines and 8,000 traditional Chinese medicines, a large number of people are involved in marketing these products: as early as 1999, the Journal of Chinese Medicine counted some 1,000 medicine factories, of which 178 were average to large, with a total production valued at over US$23.5 billion (194.6 billion yuan). This turnover has increased considerably in the last ten years. In 2007, estimated sales in traditional pharmaceutical products in China increased to US$5.5 billion out of a total of US$22.6 billion for all medicines combined. The underlying economic dimension of the current discourse of the market for Chinese medicine is omnipresent. A March 2008 report by the Institute of Chinese Medicine (ICM) of the Chinese University of Hong Kong written at the request of the Hong Kong Government mentions, for example, that:

*Chinese medicine naturally enjoys prestige in the field of traditional medicine [...] One evidence of the revival is rising expenditure on traditional and alternative medicine in United States and Europe. The economic potential of Chinese Medicine is therefore international. [...] If traditional herbal products can be clinically proven efficacious, the economic potential will increase considerably. [...] Hong Kong can comfortably develop its hallmark in Chinese Medicine products and make use of this new endeavour to further economic growth.*

This same report nevertheless mentions that Hong Kong’s Chinese medicine industry also confronts numerous difficulties: first, the quality of the plants is not reliable enough; next, the laboratories responsible for quality control are deficient; and finally, the number of competent technicians is insufficient. Further on the report also mentions that the Chinese medicine industry lacks both investment and an innovative spirit.

**The situation of Chinese medicine (in the PRC), from a therapeutic point of view, is clearly distinguished by an exceptional situation and characteristics. Currently in the entire country, there are 3,072 hospitals of Chinese medicine at an urban or higher level, with 332,000 beds and 161 different specialties. In 90 percent of the hospitals of Western medicines there are departments of Chinese medicine. 524,000 practitioners have diploma qualifications in Chinese medicine (<zhongyi zige zhengshu>). 237,000 are registered as masters in Chinese medicine (<zhuce zhongyishu>). The number of registered annual consultations in Chinese medicine is 244 million (2.44 billion – yici), comprising 18.49 percent of the total number of medical consultations.*

The question of professional opportunities for persons trained in Chinese medicine consequently seems less sensitive in China than in most other parts of the world. Nonetheless, here, too, a problem remains for two reasons: on the one hand, Chinese medical care is less expensive than that of Western medicine, bringing in proportionally less money to those who provide it; on the other hand, the social status of those who practice this type of medicine suffers from the “non-scientific” reputation of this discipline, and their social recognition tends to weaken. Professor Wang Ningsheng thus notes that popular support for Chinese medicine tends to wane and weaken (中醫的民間基礎越來越鬆散薄弱 – Zhongyi de minjian jichu yuelai yue songsan boruo).
Healthcare coverage policies

The third economic factor likely to influence the development of Chinese medicine in a major way is medical insurance policies (on consultations, prescriptions, services, products...). In the PRC, the cost of consultations in Chinese medicine is covered in a similar manner to that of biomedical medicine. In Singapore, Chinese medicine is covered by medical insurance, even in private clinics, while in Taiwan the reimbursement rate varies among different insurance plans.

The well-known arguments in favour of allowing patients the choice of Chinese medicine include a lesser probability of secondary effects and a lower cost, except for patients who seek the highest-quality products and services. This means lower cost for health insurers. Comparing costs concretely, it suffices to observe the prescription counters of a typical hospital in a major Chinese city that provide both types of medicines; in fact, all patients with a prescription go to these counters. Traditional and biomedical products are often, but not always, supplied separately in two hospital pharmacies located side by side. The personnel generally consist of pharmacists or specialised assistants. For a common benign pathology, less than 10 yuan is needed to procure ordinary traditional pharmacopeia services. This means lower cost for health insurers. Comparing costs of Chinese healthcare that WHO held up as a model for developing countries, China, covering around 80 percent of the total market. In the twenty-first century, pharmacies functioning outside the hospital system have developed a lucrative market of “OTC” (over the counter) products to increase their share of the domestic market; they thus sell a certain number of traditional medicines carrying the OTC label.

That being said, it is nonetheless necessary, as far as China is concerned, to limit the impact that healthcare coverage has on the use of Chinese medicine, given that only a small minority (20 percent) of the Chinese population was covered by health insurance in the early 2000s, and that sources estimated that 15 to 20 percent of the population receives 60 to 80 percent of all public medical resources. The privileged social categories are mainly employees of government or state enterprises. Fifty percent of the urban population and 80 percent of the rural population have no medical coverage; 50 percent of the inhabitants of rural zones do not have access to healthcare due to its cost (WHO, country file, 2000). Deteriorating infrastructure, lack of personnel, and evidence of an increased prevalence of some pathologies have been acknowledged in most rural zones. Over the past two decades, the basic Chinese healthcare that WHO held up as a model for developing countries has completely disappeared in favour of a commercialised and de facto privatised system based on forcing public health structures to fund themselves. The healthcare reform officially launched in 2009 has as its main objective reduction of inequalities in healthcare and thus poverty. Made public in 2001 and 2009, the guidelines envision the generalisation of a health insurance system with basic coverage for 90 percent of the population (almost all the urbanities and 85 percent of the rural population). Sources also point out that the main role of health insurance is to ensure that the poor have access to medical care.

Funding research

The last decisive economic factor is that of financing research in Chinese medicine. There are two dangers here, one extrinsic and the other intrinsic to the discipline. On the one hand, in promoting research, for example aiming at the identification of “active elements” in Chinese pharmacopeia, the pressure of the large pharmaceutical groups (foreign or Chinese) may progressively cause work in this area to develop too unilaterally in a direction that is foreign and even destructive to dimensions that are fundamental to the specific cultural heritage that constitutes Chinese medicine. On the other hand, Chinese medicine, which builds on the historic accumulation of numerous therapeutic experiences, still struggles to develop the specific processes of experimentation and testing that are universally acknowledged by the scientific community.

In China, research in Chinese medicine is principally financed within the framework of the R&D programs of Chinese pharmaceutical groups. Certain groups exclusively produce and market Chinese medical products; other businesses are not specialised and also finance research into biomedical and integrated medicine. The protocols of biomedical research can also integrate elements that come from Chinese medicine, while conversely those of Chinese medicine can do so with elements of biomedicine. State organs such as the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Science and Technology, and the Ministry of Culture and Heritage also contribute to developing research in Chinese medicine. The government substantially increased its financial support in the twenty-first century. In the framework of research in industrial, university, or hospital environments, a single scientific methodology tends to be applied.

At the heart of complex economic issues, research and development in Chinese medicine has entered the framework of the world health market by virtue of its potential for putting products of pharmacotherapy to market in the 21st century.
In China, traditional medicine has long been considered to involve a great deal of knowledge twice over, on the one hand because practical mastery could only be acquired through long personal experience (taking pulses, diagnosis, discerned modifications of pharmacopeia formulas according to the needs of each particular patient, etc.), and on the other hand, because its theoretical knowledge required a vast literary culture of texts written in classical Chinese. The challenge of finding teachers excelling in both areas has arisen in China today with force. Recurring demands for a return to more classical teaching are currently heard in the world of classical medicine. Several proposals by Professor Liu Lihong (李力红) illustrate this point.

In his training, Liu Lihong embodies a mixture of two pedagogical traditions. Trained during nine successive years at various modern Chinese universities (1978–1983; student at the Guangxi faculty of MC; 1983-1989: researcher in the department of heat damage disorder [温病研究室 – wēn-bìng yān-jù shì], the last three years of which he spent in Chengdu; 1989-1992: doctorate at the Nanjing faculty of MC under the direction of professor Chen Yiren [陈亦人 1924–2004]), he then returned to Guangxi to teach fundamental theories, and was subsequently invited to Tsinghua University from 2002 to 2003. During this training he also had the opportunity to follow more traditional training – as is done in China by many disciples who accompany masters to become initiated into medical practices through daily contact.

The fifth issue: Innovation in specific education

The fifth type of major issues that transmission of the heritage of Chinese medicine faces concerns the specific teaching method of this discipline. Jumping suddenly during the 1950s from an individualised mode of transmission, most often intra-familial, to a more institutional and university structure, the teaching of Chinese medicine has not yet recovered, even in China, from this fundamental change. Three observations attest to this: the quasi-cult of the žaozhongyi (老中医 – venerable doctors) (李可 1804-1901) at the end of the nineteenth century. He has been teaching at the University of TCM of this autonomous region since 1997, specifically in the use of classical formulas for the treatment of chronic illnesses. Known as a great specialist of Shang Han Lun (Treatise on Febrile Diseases), a classic of Chinese medicine written in the second century by Zhang Zhongjing (张仲景 150–219), Liu Lihong became famous through the publication of two works: Kaqi zhongyi zhi men (Opening the Doors of Chinese Medicine, 1998) and above all Sikao zhongyi (Reflecting on Chinese Medicine, 2004) which is presented as a knowledge commentary on Shang Han Lun. Reading the latter book, one of the most famous contemporary Chinese doctors, Professor Deng Tietao (邓铁涛 1916), said: “I no longer walk my path alone; there is someone behind me who wants to continue the tradition of MCT…” (吾道不孤,後继有人矣). The conversation between Liu Lihong and Wang Qingyu on the nature of the necessary transmission in Chinese medicine [www.classicalchinesemedicine.org/2011/02/liu-lihong-reflections-on-gandong-real-transmission-of-knowledge-requires-that-our-hearts-are-moved], and Liu Lihong’s deep conviction on the primordial role of emotions (情 – gāndóng) in this process [www.classicalchinesemedicine.org/2011/02/lui-lihong-reflections-on-gandong-real-transmission-of-knowledge-requires-that-our-hearts-are-moved].

Thus Liu Lihong spent a period of seven years with Li Yangbo (李阳波 1916), said: “I no longer walk my path alone; there is someone behind me who wants to continue the tradition of MCT…” (吾道不孤,後继有人矣). The conversation between Liu Lihong and Wang Qingyu on the nature of the necessary transmission in Chinese medicine [www.classicalchinesemedicine.org/2011/02/liu-lihong-reflections-on-gandong-real-transmission-of-knowledge-requires-that-our-hearts-are-moved], and Liu Lihong’s deep conviction on the primordial role of emotions (情 – gāndóng) in this process [www.classicalchinesemedicine.org/2011/02/lui-lihong-reflections-on-gandong-real-transmission-of-knowledge-requires-that-our-hearts-are-moved].

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In certain passages of his book Reflecting on Chinese Medicine, Liu Lihong paints a relatively sombre situation for Chinese medicine in China:

Whether in academies of Chinese medicine or in departments of Chinese medicine of Western academies of Oriental medicine, Chinese medicine has become almost a mere ornament. Those who study Chinese medicine don’t have confidence in it: as soon as they encounter a bit of difficulty, they either hastily administer Western medication or add to the standard Western remedies a bit of Chinese medicine to do a bit good […] Seeing Chinese medicine fall so low can only lead to gloom. (60)

He points out:

These last ten years, a question often raised in the world of Chinese medicine is why the theory of Chinese medicine has stopped at clinical problems. In all scientific disciplines, it is theory that walks in the forefront while practice slowly follows behind. (61)

But contrary to this idea of a Chinese medicine devoid of a specific theoretical foundation, Liu Lihong sets out his personal position as follows:

The way I see it is quite the opposite: theory [of Chinese medicine] has not experienced regression ( 没有落后 – meiyou luohou ), but has even made enormous progress ( 大大的超前 – dada de chaoqian ) in many areas.

For him, an important problem is the didactic one:

Currently in Chinese medicine there is a strange and even frightening phenomenon that consists of a progressive weakening of the teaching of the classics of Chinese medicine. Most contemporary academies of Chinese medicine have already transformed [the study] of the classics into an optional (elective) course – those of Chengdu or Nanjing, honourable institutions that in the past gave such weight to this material, have not been the exception. But does this type of transformation truly constitute progress? I have serious doubts. (62)

According to Liu Lihong, the study of the classics is an indispensable element in learning Chinese medicine:

The classics are for life, [for the practitioner of Chinese medicine] a compulsory course: if you really want to study Chinese medicine, then working on the classics in depth is the type of project that you must do of necessity. (63)

This study is doubly difficult. From a literary point of view, the study of the classics of Chinese medicine requires a high philological intelligence allowing the student to progressively grasp the multiple meanings of a text and then penetrate the meaning of words ( 字義 – ziyi ) and sentences ( 句義 – juyi ), as well as the overall meaning ( 條義 – zongyi ) of the text. Next, this process requires the inner cultivation of a receptive spirit toward the subtext. Thus Liu Lihong states:

Another problem to which we must pay attention in order to study the classics [of Chinese medicine] well is to fulfil a fundamental condition, or to put it another way, to acquire an essential quality: knowing how to undertake this study in a state of a faithfully respectful receptivity ( 信受舉行 – xinshou juxing ). In our modern times, many study the classics [of Chinese medicine] by approaching them with a critical eye, considering the classics unscientific and therefore beneath the intelligence of the students; but then, what classics would they study? If you launch yourself into study of the classics with antipathy and considering them outdated, how will you be able to enter into it? This is why the attitude brought to studying the classics is so important; you must believe them completely, accept them, and then reflect on how to act in conformance with their spirit. (64)

The Liu Lihong’s comments cited obviously cannot summarise the thoughts deeply cultivated by a detailed and living study of Shang Han Lun, but they do demonstrate the vigor with which a return to a teaching of TCM based on the classics can be defended today in China. The importance given to a study of the classics in the learning of Chinese medicine is explained by the fact that the medical practice inherits a long human experience of individuals who have fought for centuries to maintain health, defeat illness, and hold off death. By basing itself mainly on the scientific and experimental objectivity of “contemporary” science, according to the scientific paradigm it prescribes, biomedicine tends to consider these therapeutic experiences of the past as relatively outmoded vis-à-vis the strength of experimental evidence. (65)

This is what constitutes its specific strength, but what can sometimes be felt as oppressive by practitioners of Chinese medicine:

Obviously the methods for arriving at a diagnosis in Chinese medicine and in Western medicine are profoundly different. The Western doctor has a large number of modernised methods to help him, and these methods themselves are always progressing. What is the state of this regarding Chinese medicine? It has nothing similar: in all things it can only base itself on itself. That is why studying Chinese medicine is more difficult than studying Western medicine. If you study Western medicine, all the techniques of the entire world come to your aid: modern physics helps you; modern chemistry supports you; modern biology helps you some more. But if you study Chinese medicine, nobody helps you; on the contrary, you seem determined to complicate your life. That is why if somebody wants to succeed in studying Chinese medicine, especially in the context of the current modernisation, it is really no easy matter. Everyone must think long and hard about this problem and allow an unshakable confidence to take root [in the value of Chinese medicine]. (66)
Conclusion

The analysis of the principal issues that polarise discussions on Chinese medicine and that influence its process of institutional transmission does not allow us to imagine the future and even survival of this medical tradition without a certain trepidation. Professor Xie Peishan (謝培山 – 1934-) illustrated this point by saying: "In reality, the future of Chinese medicine today hangs by a thread" (中醫藥的前途實際上是處在命懸一線的關口 – zhongyiyao de qiantu shijian shi chuzai mingxuanyixian de guankou). [67]

The reflections above indicate several focal points that could allow consideration of the future with a greater sense of ease:

1. Be aware of the current ideological polarisation of the debates, in China as well as in the West, between partisans and opponents of Chinese medicine;
2. Reconfirm as central the therapeutic perspective of the medical act vis-à-vis the theoretical model of approach to the body on which its efficiency is based;
3. Build adequate political structures on a national as well as supranational level to ensure global management of the application of this medical tradition;
4. Take greater account of the multiple economic factors likely to influence the development and reception of this tradition;
5. Encourage pedagogic initiatives (respectful at the same of the history of didactics specific to the discipline and the demands of scientific training at an international level) that promote superior instruction in this medical tradition. [68]

On the other hand, we should not underestimate the fact that advantages favouring the institutional transmission of certain Chinese medicine on a global level can be identified: the size and influence of Chinese diasporas throughout the world, the key positions held by Chinese professionals at WHO, Chinese medicine’s relatively lower cost compared to biomedical for transmission to developing countries, and finally, the increased international mobility of traditional doctors and a middle class that is equally mobile and considers Chinese medicine a heritage to be preserved, valued, and promoted. This mobility has certainly been facilitated by China’s economic development. As a complement to the highlighted issues in this article, all these factors help explain why Chinese medicine is already a world medicine. Consequently, the prospects for future research aimed at identifying the forms that are developing in the context and transformation of this very living knowledge are numerous and promising.

Translated by Maxi Schwarz-Bastami

67. DHKCMIP-08, p. 18
68. An official report given to the Hong Kong authorities in 2001 stated the urgency of teaching this tradition in a way that will allow it to become international, which implies defined courses with exams of which the validation is duly recognised [DHKCMIP-08, p. 22]. One example in this direction is the three university degrees in Chinese medicine that have been created these last few years at the faculty of medicine of Montpellier University, in the framework of a political partnership with the city of Chengdu before the management was entrusted to Éric Marié, which is experiencing a major success, http://offre-formation.univ-montp1.fr/fr/_modules/education/education.html?educationid=FR_RNE_0341067X_FR_1247098274080 (consulted on 23 November 2011).