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Learning from the Ancients without Getting Stuck in the Old: Working with the Scholarly Tradition of Chinese Medicine

Historical and ethnographic research demonstrates that TCM is not the traditional medicine of ancient China but that a rather modern offshoot of that tradition. It was created between in the late 1950s to facilitate the integration of Chinese medicine into a modernized health care system and its dissemination to the West. TCM emphasizes the systematization and standardization of knowledge and practice, as well as its integration with biomedicine. The scholarly medical tradition that dominated elite medicine in late imperial China, instead, emphasized the self-actualization of individual physicians through a process of self-cultivation. The “herbalized” formulas that dominate TCM acupuncture treatment protocols, for instance, embody efforts to standardize treatment practices across therapeutic disciplines. Acupuncture, as practiced by a scholar physician, on the other hand will embody their personal understanding of the classical literature in the light of contemporary practice.

In our own practices we strive to actualize this scholarly approach to Chinese medicine. Our presentation will first situate this approach theoretically in relation to other currents of contemporary practice drawing on models from classical Chinese medicine, science studies and anthropology. We will then present two different cases to outline our approach in relation to actual clinical practice. We orient our practice through concepts familiar from TCM such as root (*ben*), manifestations (*biao*), patho-dynamic (*bingji*) and qi transformation (*qi hua*), but emphasize dynamic and process more forcefully and self-consciously.