
Chinese Traditional Healing is a catalogue of over 800 medical manuscripts dating from the seventeenth to the twentieth century held by the Staatsbibliothek Preußischer Kulturbesitz and the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin, but it is also much more. It opens a window on to a broad range of traditional folk medicines practised outside the circles of the educated elite normally studied in Chinese medicine: rarely-studied layers of Chinese medical culture that include a rich mix of local practices of itinerant healers, secret trade languages and writing codes, and healing magic. Fascinating to read, the 200-page introductory essay touches on this wide range of uncommon topics, introducing not only the material in the manuscripts, but the textual, linguistic, and orthographic challenges they present, existing research in these areas, and, perhaps the largest contribution, a broad overview of the variety and characteristics of these medicines.

The introductory essay presents more than the thematic scope of the collection, allowing potential researchers to assess where within the broader palette of manuscripts a given work may fall. It assesses the methodological problems inherent in the study of the genres, and gives some sense of the existing work on that kind of material. The length and breadth of Chinese medical history allows them to draw parallels with earlier genres of practice, from commentaries on the theory of cold-damage disorders (shanghan 傷寒) to apotropaic and incantation treatments (zhuyou 祝由), and to identify substitute homonyms for pharmaceutical terms. This enables them to make insightful preliminary assessments about whether the manuscripts represent continuities of older traditions, or local innovations.

The manuscripts, collected by Unschuld and Zheng over the last 40 years, are individually described in over 2,000 pages of the second and third volumes of the set, giving extensive details as to the textual and material conditions of the manuscripts, their contents, authors and copyists, opening and closing lines, images, presence of taboo characters (useful for dating the work), and previous owners, in addition to insightful abstracts of each work. Abstracts include the authors’ assessment of the text’s date, sources, general contents, and likely locus of social circulation. They discuss the interesting, problematic, and innovative features of the text, such as if it uses argot (secret trade tongue) or special orthography, and importantly, which print sources have been copied into the manuscript. The former is important to consider as trade argot, homnymal references, and miscopied characters can make it ‘virtually impossible for someone not raised in Chinese culture to fully comprehend the [manuscripts’] data’ (p. xii). The latter is a great service to potential researchers, saving them much time assessing already well-known texts, and allowing them to focus on materials not previously studied in the history of Chinese medicine. The abstracts thus enable the potential researcher to assess as fully as possible the manuscripts’ contents and feasibility of study before selecting it.

The first volume assists further with a wealth of indices. The English-language index lists topics mentioned in the abstracts from abortion, abscesses, and advertisements to weddings, wonder drugs, and wounds received from knives. Chinese indices are organised by pinyin, and include text titles, person names, recipe names, drug names, technical terms, place names, disease terms, acupuncture/moxibustion terms, and miscellaneous quotes, phrases, and aphorisms. The largest is the over 350-page index of recipe names. Pharmacological lore represents by far the greatest share of knowledge, with drug recipes contained in 347 of the manuscripts, dwarfing the other disciplines, which are represented in at most 60 or so different works each.

There are a few omissions, which would improve the catalogue further. It is unfortunate that the entries do not describe where or when the manuscripts were acquired. Although these texts circulated in the book market and could have been originally compiled a good distance from the point of acquisition, many of them are the product of local, guild-type, or secret traditions. Transparency about their provenance would assist research on the spread or geographic
concentration of particular treatment styles and traditions, and assist readers where homophones are used for drug names or technical terms. A further help might be a bibliography of key reference materials, paper and digital. Unschuld and Zheng recommend Xue Mo 雪漠 1991, and Gu Jianqing 古健青 1991, as particularly useful for interpreting technical and secret-society terms, but these citations are buried in footnotes. No doubt they drew on more during their study of the manuscripts over the years.

A further two volumes of teaser scans are also available, on special order basis. These show samples of the first page of every manuscript in the collection, and allow researchers to make preliminary assessments of the manuscripts they might travel to see. A small number of these volumes were released to various libraries, such as the Needham Research Institute, Cambridge. The Staatsbibliothek Berlin is currently planning to digitize the main portions of 100 manuscripts in the near future, but the ideal future of the collection would be to make fully accessible online scans. The entire contents of the manuscripts were also typed up during the making of this catalogue, and if a full-text search capability were to accompany the scans this would truly make the texts accessible.

If the catalogue succeeds in its aim to tempt you to view the collections in Berlin, the lion’s share is held at the Staatsbibliothek. Their digital catalogue will incorporate the manuscripts’ meta-data in late 2013, so that they can be called up online. When this reviewer visited in December 2012, a copy of the catalogue could not be found on site, so bring a photocopy of relevant pages from the catalogue just in case. Interested readers should contact the East Asia Department 49 30 266 436001 in advance. Their website can be found at http://staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/en/about-the-library/abteilungen/ostasien/.

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