CHAPTER 1

Rethinking the Sino-Japanese Medical Classics: Antiquarianism, Languages, and Medical Philology

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Be careful about reading health books. You may die of a misprint.

Mark Twain

Based on a series of research seminars entitled “East Asia and the Early Modern World: Fresh Perspectives on Intellectual and Cultural History, 1550–1800,” this second volume of our recently completed three-year (2009–2012) research cluster investigates new areas of medical history located on the margins of the present historiography of the East Asian medical classics. Using new sources, making new connections, and reexamining old assumptions, the investigators interrogate whether and why European medical modernity is an appropriate standard for delineating the modern fate of East Asia’s medical classics. We have found that the exceptional importance of early modern Europe in the history of modern medicine should not be used to gloss over the equally distinctive developments in East Asia.

The essays on the history of medicine in China and Japan in this volume are written by highly regarded and accomplished junior and senior scholars. All the research is original. Each essay has something important to contribute to knowledge about a central, yet still incompletely understood dynamics of East Asian medicine, namely, the relationship between medical texts, medical practice, and practitioner identity. This volume advances our knowledge about the ways in which, through the compilation and creative rereading of texts, physicians and scholars packaged learned medical knowledge, especially how they addressed the history of different genres of texts and the ways in which textual knowledge was put into practice. The essays in this volume are especially valuable for directing our attention to the movement of medical texts between different polities and cultures of early modern East Asia, especially China and Japan. Of particular interest are the interactions, similarities, and differences
among medical thinkers across East Asia, who shared a similar corpus of texts yet developed divergent interpretations of the same published works. We hope this volume will be of interest and value to scholars of East Asian medical history and anthropology, as well as to scholars of medicine in other cultures who value comparative perspectives.

Based on the volume’s contributions, we propose to use “philology” initially as an umbrella term for any and all activities involving the study, deployment, or evaluation of ideas contained in classical texts. The kinds of things that medical writers historically did with texts ranged widely, from historical linguistic research into ambiguous terms, to collating topically arranged anthologies of excerpts from earlier medical writings, to what could bluntly be called “proof-texting” (a doctor’s empirical experience tells him that such and such a formula works for such and such a disease, and then he searches through the literature to find a textual source to legitimate his practice).

If we were to group all our findings simply under the rubric of “philology,” however, we would miss the opportunity to analyze, compare, and contrast the many different, and sometimes contradictory, things that literate practitioners did with texts. At the very least, we also need a more deliberate discussion of the term “philology” and its relation to the different kinds of text-related activities we see in this volume. For example, we can also draw a clearer and more productive distinction between “classicism” as an antiquarian orientation and “philology” as a specific epistemological strategy for identifying the facts/truths in a classic. Hence, we acknowledge that there are many faces of “philology” at work in our volume.

In the essays by Mathias Vigouroux, Susan Burns, Federico Marcon, and Angela Ki Che Leung, for instance, a different set of associations emerges, and at first sight “languages and philology” would seem to be a more natural and sufficient match for our subject, and thus obviate any extended discussion of “medicine and philology.” However, the other essays, by Asaf Goldschmidt, Fabien Simonis, Daniel Trambaiolo, and Mayanagi Makoto, are more informed by a medical philology, which implies first of all a working with texts, with terms, with grammatical structures, with chronologies and contexts. Philology is the basis of an adequate and meaningful translation of texts from one language into another, from one (ancient) time into the “present,” from one culture into another—such as from Chinese into Japanese, and vice versa. In our medical fields, philology involves issues such as the use of anachronistic contemporary terms in the interpretation of ancient medical concepts. Philology thus allows us to address the changing meaning of the same term, often reflecting well-known metaphors in the source language that are transposed to the target language. Although each essay touches on the reliability of received