Understanding One Thousand Golden Drugs: Transformation of Pharmaceutical Practice from Pre-modern to Contemporary China

East Asia Commission

Organizers:
1) Christine Yi Lai Luk, (The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR, People's Republic of China), chrisluk@hku.hk
2) Yan Liu, (Jackman Humanities Institute, University of Toronto, Canada), yanvliu1@gmail.com
3) Lijing Jiang, (School of Humanities and Social Science, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore), Jiang.Lijing@gmail.com

Abstract: What can we learn from a drug? Today we are surrounded by copious pharmaceutical products with alluring promises, yet it remains a challenge for biomedical researchers to develop efficacious drugs that can specifically target disease while minimizing side effects. The symposium explores this topic by examining how historical knowledge of drugs, mediated by epistemological and technological innovation, transformed biomedical research and pharmaceutical practice in modern and postcolonial China.

The symposium consists of two panels grouped by period. The first panel focuses on pre-20th century, probing the roots of Chinese pharmacology and its globalization in the early modern era. Yan Liu will inspect the diverse techniques of preparing and employing drugs in traditional Chinese pharmacy by studying a number of foundational materia medica texts and texts on drug processing (paozhi) in pre-modern China. Ming Chen will explore the rapid transmission of Chinese and Indian drug knowledge to Europe from the 16th to 19th century, and how it influenced the development of modern Western pharmacology. Lijing Jiang will investigate biomedical research initiated in the 19th and early 20th century, and how traditional drug knowledge inspired Western scientists in China to assume new research strategies and invent new theoretical apparatus, which had a long-term impact on biomedical studies of TCM drugs.

The second panel focuses on the transformation of traditional Chinese pharmacology in the 20th-century and contemporary China. Xiaomeng Liu will study the technology of drug processing in a modern Chinese pharmaceutical company, revealing the drastic shift from the handwork-based preparation of drugs to mechanized pharmaceutical production in the 20th century. Liz Chee Pui Yee will explore the animal-based drugs in the second half of the 20th century, charting the development of a newly emerging industry that combined the theories of traditional Chinese medicine with Western (Soviet) science to promote the medicinal use of animals driven by political and economic policies. Jia-Chen Fu will focus on herbal drugs in the same period by studying the social and political dynamics of the research on artemisinin and how such research shaped understandings of the natural in modern medicine. Christine Luk will examine the cultural politics of drug discovery in contemporary Hong Kong. The research shows how traditional conceptions such as “artificial” and “natural” are factored into the biotechnological investigation of drugs and the development of novel remedies for prevalent disease such as cancers.

Altogether, positioning drugs at the center of our research, the symposium underscores their fluid materiality and diverse ways they interact with human actors as well as social and political forces. The material practice we focus on provides a productive space in which epistemic development intermingled with technological innovation and social intervention.
Moreover, the symposium seeks to problematize the rigid dichotomy between “natural” and “artificial,” by highlighting the key role of technological mediation in transforming drugs. Finally, our studies demonstrate the dynamic interplay between historical knowledge and modern biomedical practice. While traditional knowledge was markedly transformed in the new framework of Western science, it also profoundly shaped the thinking and practice of biomedicine today.

**Keywords:** China, India, and Hong Kong – Technology/Biotechnology – Material Practice and Epistemology – Natural and Artificial Drugs – Transnational Pharmacology.

**Participants:**
- Jia-Chen Fu
- Christine Yi Lai Luk
- Lijing Jiang
- Ming Chen
- Liu Xiaomeng
- Yan Liu
- Sean Hsiang-lin Lei