S-22 – Intellectual Geographies of Chinese Medicine

East Asia Commission  ISHEASTM

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Abstract:
The recent impact of the history of medicine has been to shift the intellectual landscapes of
the history of science in East Asia, from a reexamination of actor categories within imperial
China, for example, to the global history of knowledge and material exchange across Asia and
extending to Europe. Medical products and doctrines, tools and practices, physicians and texts
have travelled in and out of China in caravans and ships, through diplomatic and religious
missions. Following the movement of medical concepts, technologies, texts, and peoples
across linguistic, social, and geographic boundaries, reveals processes of translation,
assimilation, and transformation.

This symposium presents six studies of regional transmission of medical objects and practices
in East Asia. We examine embodied practices of hand mnemonics and therapeutic exercise,
Buddhist statuary representations of internal organs, knowledge transmission by translation
and incantation, and materia medica. Each paper localises their objects of study within their
original contexts, and describes the arc of their transmission and reinterpretation in new
environ. Altogether, we wish to come to comparative statements about styles, contexts and
media of transmission, and what forces contribute to stability and change of knowledge.

By introducing the term Intellectual Geographies, we wish to bring into comparison not just
transmissions across time and space, but across different knowledge ecologies. Our materials
circulate not only through China, Japan, Korea and the Islamic World, but also through social
networks of ritual donors, the imperial medical academy, doctor networks, Khanate courts,
and Daoist and Buddhist editors and practitioners’ bodies. As spatial distance allows for
creative mis-readings (viz. Harold Bloom) or reworkings of objects, so too do differences in
institutional knowledge practices, hierarchies of power, and conditions of practice. Five of our
papers compare objects and practices in Daoist, Buddhist and Islamic frameworks in relation to
more overtly medical contexts, and in so doing, we highlight the role of religious actors in the
production and circulation of medical knowledge. We tentatively suggest that religious actors
in East Asia played roles comparable to those of artisans and craftsmen in early modern
Europe, as technical actors hitherto peripheral to narratives of Grand Science. By placing these
papers together, we suggest that the positions of these actors, who have until now played
minor roles in narratives about the production of East Asian scientific knowledge, constitute
sites with great potential to study the processes of transmission, assimilation and
transformation of knowledge.
Keywords: Medicine in East Asia – Intellectual Geographies – Embodiment – Transmission – Medicine and Religion.

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