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Medical Impressions
Print Culture and the Introduction of Chinese Medicine in Western Europe, 1650-1800

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a research description containing urgent questions and discussions in the field of global book history. It rethinks the crucial impact of new printed media on the early modern European encounter with Asia, and perceptions of these encounters. It proposes to do so through an interdisciplinary study taking on the entangled histories of the burgeoning of print culture and the introduction of Chinese medicine. On one level, this project pioneers the comprehensive study of print culture's influence on the formation and dissemination of non-European medical information, by postulating that early modern print culture was as an engine of change, conveying and altering ideas of Chinese medicine during a period of exceptional transformation and increased global trade, travel, and proselytising, in which the producers of print played a fundamental role. On another level, the project theoretically and methodologically integrates scientific analyses of form and content across and between global cultures, thus charting the process of knowledge transfer in a comprehensive manner and expanding research horizons across fields in historical studies, synthesising perspectives and methods from book history, global history and the history of medicine and science.

Keywords: Print culture, Medical history, Early-modern Europe, History of the book.

1. INTRODUCTION

While the COVID-19 pandemic underscores both the intercultural dynamics surrounding global issues of health and medicine and new media's impact on shaping public knowledge of health issues today, these dynamics are not new.[1] Rather, they can be traced to the intersection of the rise of print culture and the 'First global age'. From the 17th century onwards, Europe witnessed a growing interest in medicine emanating from China. Simultaneously, the emergence of affordable print, combined with increased literacy, facilitated the dissemination of knowledge across a more varied audience (Salman 2017). However, scholars have largely neglected print's fundamental role in European encounters of global medical knowledge. As such, the crucial interplay between informational form and content is disregarded. While recent studies emphasise the magnitude of the global movement of ideas and goods, scholarship on early modern Europe's relationship with Chinese medicine is locked into an approach that examines the acceptance of new ideas without taking into account their modes of

[1] See the *Dutch Scientific Agenda*, cluster 110, or the *Flemish Scientific Agenda*, core questions 18, 45, and 50. These questions are also indirectly addressed by the European Commission's priority 'A new push for European democracy', and its related Code of Practice on Disinformation, as well as the priority 'A Europe fit for the digital age', and its related action on connectivity.

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conveyance - that is, the material reality of printed texts (size, shape, genre etc.) and the role of their producers (printers, publishers, illustrators etc.). Therefore, scholarship privileges relatively costly and specialist genres such as medical treatises. By extension, it unintentionally overemphasises the transmission of certain ideas while neglecting others. I propose to readjust this imbalance by exploring the critical dynamics between ideas and their modes of transmission through a range of different printed genres**.** The core objective is to trace the circulation of knowledge about Chinese medicine in early modern western-Europe. By examining how different ideas moved through different printed formats, the project charts the process of knowledge transfer in a comprehensive manner and expands research horizons across fields in historical studies, synthesizing perspectives and methods from book history, global history, and the history of medicine and science.

2. BACKGROUND

Chinese medicine provides the ideal case study in the dissemination of new knowledge through printed media. The 17th and 18th centuries saw a print and news revolution comparable to the 21st-century digital media revolution, and this period coincided with the 'First global age' characterized by an unprecedented information exchange between Europe and Asia. The increased production and consumption of books, periodicals and ephemeral media – constituting a 'culture of print' – fundamentally influenced the formation and dissemination of medical knowledge. Foreign medicine became an integral part of the budding (proto)-scientific worldview (Schiebinger, 2007; Cook 2011; Crawford 2016). Against this background, China held a special place in the European imagination (Brook 2013; Schmidt 2015; Weststeijn 2020). Accordingly, this first period of intensive global contacts saw a growing interest in medicine from the so-called 'Middle Kingdom (Barnes 2005). The Low Countries, England, France, and the German Lands were the main European hubs for products *from* and images *of* China (Vande Walle & Golvers 2003; Lux 2021).

Science, by definition, is *communication.* Recent scholarship demonstrates that pre-modern (medical) science was collectively constructed based on exchanges between local, national, international, and global political, socio-economic and geographical contexts (Secord 2004). Concerning the global circulation of medicine, Harold Cook and others have opened up new avenues of research, concentrating on the cultural implications of medical exchange in colonial spaces (Schiebinger 2005); (Cook 2020). These scholars illuminate how Chinese medicine was tried, adopted, and described, and how in this process the knowledge produced was transformed (Dorner, 2020; Dover 2021). Meanwhile, historians of medicine address questions of how and why knowledge circulated, and how new knowledge ceased to be the property of single individuals or small circles and became part of the understanding of much wider groups (Fissel 2011; Leong 2019; Minuzzi 2021). While these expanded approaches have shifted attention from medical theories to the role of empirical practises, their commercial and material aspects and the objects employed in the making of scientific knowledge, they still largely overlook the material forms of knowledge transfers.

3. METHODOLOGY

Medical Impressions addresses these issues from the *methodological* vantage point of **print culture**. Print culture encapsulates both the materiality of print and its cultural contexts. It includes both ephemeral genres and robust bound volumes—according as much attention to advertisements and satirical pamphlets as to canonical texts. So far, few historians have investigated this diversification of the print landscape regarding medical knowledge, *with* non-European medical knowledge *as* terra incognita in existing scholarship. *Medical Impressions* addresses this problem by laying bare processes of knowledge transfer and the mechanisms behind them, offering a basis for theoretical cross-fertilization and comparisons across regions and time periods. Print culture is an ideal interface, not just between loose strands of the debate on Chinese medical knowledge in early modern Europe, but between different disciplines as well. This methodology exposes how the medical discourse developed,

how any text's meaning was shaped by other texts; how the narrative was influenced by the interaction between different media; and the manner in which the varied materialities of printed media affected content.

The project has four key objectives: **I**. assess the formation of discourses on Chinese medicine in print (*intertextuality*), **II**. explore how ideas about Chinese medicine were altered in the process of transmission between printed media (*intermediality*), **III**. trace how the materiality of print and production processes influenced discourses (*paratextuality*), To finally: **IV**. establish how various processes associated with print culture influenced the spread of Chinese medical knowledge across European society. This project thereby combines close reading of textual evidence with object-oriented research. It will use six **case studies** that are equally divided between medicinal *products* and *practices*. Within the European framework, scholars note that such practices and products could be either adopted or rejected (Chakrabarti 2010). To examine these disparate attitudes and to ask how discussions of Chinese medicine in print contributed to the construction of public reactions towards this subject, the project will consider three **products**: *tea* (widespread adoption) (Van Driem 2019), *China root* (moderate adoption) (Winterbottom 2019), and *ginseng* (limited adoption) (Sul 2017), and three **practices**: *pulse diagnosis* (widespread adoption) (Hsu 2000), *moxibustion* (moderate adoption) (Garber 2020), and *acupuncture* (limited adoption) (Borriello 2017).

This project charts and analyses early modern intercultural representations that continue to be relevant today. China has become a major player on the world stage, yet as lamented by Beijing's vice-minister of Foreign Affairs Fu Ying, China's long isolation from the West has resulted in an 'information deficit'. This deficit has become all the more pressing as demonstrated by the recent outbreak of COVID-19. Media – be it a seventeenth-century newspaper or a twenty-first-century talk show – have the power to influence both public perception and official policy. Such representations have real-life consequences., as made evident by the ongoing debate on the recognition of Traditional Chinese Medicine by policymaking organizations like the WHO and health insurers, or the many incidents of xenophobia and racism related to the coronavirus-pandemic.[2] This project works towards overcoming the information deficit between China and the West by exposing how media have influenced the Western debate on Chinese medicine from its inception.

[2] 'The World Health Organization's decision to include traditional Chinese medicine in its global diagnostic compendium could backfire', in *Nature* 2019; 'The World Health Organization gives the nod to Traditional Chinese Medicine. Bad idea', in *Scientific American*, 1 April 2019.

Figure 1. Willem ten Rhijne, *Dissertatio de arthritide: Mantissa schematica: De acupunctura* (London, 1683), Marsh's Library Exhibits.

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