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<http://www.journaltcm.com>Classification of interventions in Traditional Chinese Medicine<sup>☆</sup>Hongyong Deng<sup>a</sup>, Clive E. Adams<sup>b</sup>, Farhad Shokrane<sup>b</sup>, Shanghua Liang<sup>a,\*</sup><sup>a</sup>Institute of Traditional Chinese Medicine Literature, Shanghai University of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Shanghai 201203, China<sup>b</sup>Cochrane Schizophrenia Group, Institute of Mental Health, University of Nottingham, Nottingham NG7 2TU, UK

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To describe the key systems used for Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) classification.**Methods:** The TCM classifications used in the International Classification of Diseases-9 Clinical Modification (ICD-9-CM) volume 3, the ICD-10 Procedure Coding System, the International Classification of Health Interventions, and the Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) and Chinese Traditional Medicine and Materia Medica Subject Headings (TCMeSH) thesauruses were compared regarding descriptive terms, structure, and features of TCM interventions.**Results:** The National Library of Medicine's MeSH thesaurus is ubiquitous. The ICD-9-CM (volume 3), ICD-10 Procedure Coding System, and International Classification of Health Interventions cover insufficient concepts of TCM, and cannot be used directly as classification systems for TCM interventions. In contrast, the TCM contents of the TCMeSH thesaurus are complete, systematic, and detailed, and its hierarchical structure can be used for effective TCM classification.**Conclusions:** TCM classification is very limited and flawed. The MeSH thesaurus helps decrease the detrimental effect of the language barrier. Similarly, the TCMeSH thesaurus can help those without full command of the Mandarin language to access Chinese literature, but the value of searches using TCMeSH could be improved by collaborative working with Information Specialists who are fluent in Mandarin and understand TCM.

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## 1. Introduction

Systematic healthcare reviews, often involving Meta-analyses, are a major source of evidence required when compiling guidelines or policies. The production and maintenance of such evidence necessitates the effective identification of relevant studies. This identification of studies can be greatly enhanced by good classification systems. Classification systems are especially important when reviewing interventions, as there are such large numbers of intervention types. Classification systems can potentially reduce confusion regarding terms, bring order to a complex interrelated group of treatments, and enable effective identification of the same, similar, or related interventions.

Since the 1970s, international health and medical communities have worked to classify medical terms regarding interventions. The medical subject headings (MeSH) thesaurus of the National Library of Medicine (NLM) is a large, generic, medical classification system

[1,2]. MeSH terms are employed within PubMed, which is a large general medical database. The MeSH thesaurus is highly structured, and serves the whole medical community; however, there are limitations to the level of detail to which specific parameters are classified. Hence, each medical subspecialty, although served by the MeSH thesaurus, is not necessarily fulfilled by it. The inclusion of new indexing within MeSH is a dynamic process, but not necessarily a rapid one. Specialist databases outside of PubMed tend to evolve their own controlled languages, which add further levels of classification to their highly specific subject areas. These controlled languages serve the same purposes as the original NLM MeSH classification, but service a more specialist user group.

Swift accurate identification of relevant work is essential for those undertaking systematic reviews. However, the sophistication of classifications varies. The present study explores this variation in the classification of interventions within Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). TCM has been in clinical use for more than 3000 years, and has accumulated a large number of interventions based on Chinese traditional culture and unique medical theory. A system of classification for interventions in TCM is necessary to meet the increasing demand for international communication, as well as for its own internal development.

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\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [liangshanghua@163.com](mailto:liangshanghua@163.com) (Liang SH).

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Fig. 1. Structure of acupuncture and moxibustion interventions in the Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) thesaurus.

## 2. Methods

We collected and screened information on TCM intervention classifications from the libraries in Shanghai University of TCM and the University of Nottingham. Our pilot studies on this subject suggested that the main classifications were developed and distributed by large medical health organizations and institutes, such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the NLM, and the China Academy of Chinese Medical Sciences; therefore, we retrieved the latest progress news and documents from the relevant websites for these organizations. We used the term ‘acupuncture’ as a search word, and listed and compared all results returned by the classifications or thesauruses to evaluate the TCM terms and structure included in each system.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Medical subject headings

The MeSH thesaurus is a comprehensive controlled vocabulary thesaurus that was created by the US NLM in 1954. The MeSH thesaurus is currently the most widely accepted tool for indexing, cataloguing, and searching for biomedical and health-related information and documents. It consists of sets of terms naming descriptors, subheadings, entry terms, and Supplementary Concept Records. From its inception, the MeSH thesaurus was designed to be a dynamic list, with procedures in place for recommending and examining the need for new headings. There are 27 883 descriptors in the latest 2016 version, with over 87 000 entry terms to assist in identification of the most appropriate MeSH

term. All MeSH descriptors are arranged in a hierarchical or ‘tree’ structure. The roots of the tree are 16 very broad concepts such as ‘Diseases [C]’ or ‘Phenomena and Processes [G]’, with more specific headings branching off into 13 subheadings.

As early as 1967, the TCM term ‘moxibustion’ was introduced into the MeSH thesaurus as ‘the burning of a small, thimble-sized, smoldering plug of dried leaves on the skin at an acupoint, usually the plugs contain leaves of Mugwort or moxa’, and subsequently TCM was accepted as a type of medical system catalogued under ‘Medicine, East Asian Traditional’ in 1984 [3]. Most TCM descriptors are listed in the ‘complementary medicine therapy’, ‘culture’, and ‘drug’ categories. The TCM descriptors fall into broad general terms such as ‘Yin Yang’ and ‘Qi’, therapy terms such as ‘acupuncture’, ‘moxibustion’, and ‘massage’, terms relevant to Chinese Materia Medica such as ‘Drugs, Chinese Herbal’, and then many Supplementary Concept Records of chemical compositions of herbs or TCM prescriptions. TCM interventions are mainly listed in the branch of ‘Analytical, Diagnostic and Therapeutic Techniques and Equipment [E]- Therapeutics [E02]- Complementary Therapies [E02. 190]’. There are 10 items comprising interventions related to acupuncture and moxibustion in the MeSH thesaurus [4].

Within the MeSH thesaurus, the classification of TCM is more detailed and systematic compared with other traditional medicines, but the coverage of all relevant TCM interventions is still far from comprehensive. Furthermore, some hierarchical relationships within the MeSH thesaurus are problematic. For example, ‘Moxibustion [E02.190.044.588]’ is currently a subordinate concept of ‘Acupuncture Therapy [E02.190.044]’, but in reality they are parallel concepts in both theory and practice (Fig. 1).

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