



## Traditional Chinese and Thai medicine in a comparative perspective



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### ABSTRACT

The work presented in this paper compares traditional Chinese medicine and traditional Thai medicine, expounding on origins, academic thinking, theoretical system, diagnostic method and modern development. Based on a secondary analysis of available literature, the paper concentrates on two crucial historical developments: (1) the response to, and consequences of, the impact of the Western medicine; and (2) the revival of traditional medicine in these two countries and its prospects. From a comparative perspective, the analysis has led to the conclusion that the rise and fall of traditional medicine is an issue closely related with social and political issues; and the development of traditional medicines requires national policy and financial support from governments, human resource development, the improvement of service quality, and the dissemination of traditional medicine knowledge to the public. In addition, this paper also suggests deepening exchanges and cooperation between China and Thailand, strengthening cooperation between traditional medicine and medical tourism.

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### 1. Introduction

Traditional medicine (TM) has been used for thousands of years in some countries.<sup>1</sup> The history of Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) dates back to antiquity, traditional Chinese medical science and medicine has been spread to many places all over the world.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, evidence shows that Thai people began to use herbal medicine for the treatment of various symptoms and diseases and health promotion before the Sukhothai period or before 1238 A.D. The Kingdom of Thailand also has its own system of traditional medicine which is called “Thai traditional medicine” (TTM) and it had been a means of national health care for the Thai people until the early 20th century.<sup>3</sup>

Among the TMs in the world, there are Chinese, Korean, Japanese traditional medicines which originated from ancient China. Besides,

the Ayurvedic medicine has Indian origin and Unani medicine is used in Arabic countries.<sup>4</sup> Although TTM is not considered to be a major traditional medicine in the world, it is worth a study because there is much comparability between TCM and TTM. Both China and Thailand are developing countries with similar climatic and geographical environment. Both countries are rich in medical resources and have distant historical and cultural backgrounds. Besides, there have been many overseas Chinese people in Thailand for a long time and TCM has been accepted and developed in Thai society.

The TM of China and Thailand differ in their origins, academic thinking, theoretical system and diagnostic method. And yet, the modern development of these two medicines strikingly manifests a historical similarity: The spread of modern medicine from the Western world to the East led to a decline in the practice of traditional medicine both in Thailand and China. Based on a secondary analysis of available literature, this paper aims to do comparative studies between TCM and TTM, and concentrates on two crucial historical developments: (1) the response to, and consequences of, the impact of the Western medicine; and (2) the revival of traditional medicine in these two countries and its prospects. In this ever-changing globalization age, the practical significance of the comparison is to discover the objective laws of the development of TM, to fully identify the similarities and differences between the two medicines, to create a necessary platform for securing cultural sensitivity and enhancing mutual understanding and cooperation between the two countries.

*Abbreviations:* TM, traditional medicine; TCM, traditional Chinese Medicine; TTM, traditional Thai medicine; FDA, Thai food and drug administration; KMT, the nationalists; MOPH, Thailand's ministry of public health; WHO, world health organization; PHC, primary health care; ITTM, institute of Thai traditional medicine; DATM, department for the development of Thai traditional and alternative medicine; DSHEA, dietary supplement health and education act; SARS, severe acute respiratory syndrome; UNESCO, united nations educational, scientific and cultural organization; ICD-11, the 11th version of international classification of disease.

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## 2. TCM and TTM

### 2.1. Legal definition and brief history

Committee for Terms in TCM defined TCM as “a comprehensive science to study transformation between health and disease in human life and the prevention, diagnosis, treatment, rehabilitation and health care based on Chinese medicine theory and practical experience”.<sup>5</sup> However, TCM is born of Chinese culture and there are a lot of enlightening views in Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, the major schools of philosophy in Chinese civilization. They are thought to be essential to healthy living and development of TCM. TCM originated from the legendary clan leader Fu Xi (2593 BC) period, established its theoretical system during the late years of the Warring States period to Chin and Han dynasties (475 BC–AD 220).<sup>6</sup> So the Comprehensive academic system of TCM had been formed more than 2500 years. During the Jin and Tang dynasties (265 AD–907 AD), TCM experienced great development and absorbed much medical information from Arabian countries, Japan and India. During the Song and Yuan dynasties (960 AD–1368 AD), the invention of printing technology and further advances in papermaking caused TCM to spread widely and to be deeply researched. During the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368 AD–1911 AD), every part of TCM was enriched and TCM spread to the countries of Europe and the Americas. From the beginning of the Opium War in 1840, China was continually defeated by outside forces. There were some Chinese people who, as a result of the national crisis, developed a cultural inferiority complex and produced a tide of complete opposition to their own culture. Western medicine took root, and Chinese medicine went into a hundred year decline.

According to the “Protection and Promotion of Thai Traditional Medicine Wisdom Act B.E. 2542” (1999), TTM is defined as “the medical processes dealing with the examination, diagnosis, therapy, treatment, or prevention of diseases, or promotion and rehabilitation of the health of humans or animals, midwifery, Thai massage, as well as the preparation, production of Thai traditional medicines and the making of devices and instruments for medical purposes”.<sup>7</sup> TTM is a holistic and natural approach of health care that is derived from Buddhist beliefs, the observation of and respect for nature, and the wisdom of Thai ancestors. In addition, traditional knowledge of TTM was also built through the processes of “selection”, “adoption”, “adaptation” and “utilization” of traditional medicine of some countries with which Thailand had contact in the past, e.g., India and China, to suit the Thai way of life. TTM knowledge was gradually developed, systematized, revised, recorded, and passed on from generation to generation throughout the country’s history, from Sukothai to Ayutthaya (1350–1767), Thonburi (1767–1782), and the early Ratanakosin period (1782–1916), as a means of health care for the Thai people. After Burma destroyed Ayutthaya in 1767, Kings Rama I–III of the present Chakri Dynasty played an important role in the revival of TTM. Over 1000 drug recipes and the body of knowledge of TTM regarding the origin of diseases and their treatments were gathered and inscribed on marble tablets and placed on the walls of two temples, namely Wat Po and Wat Raja Oros. The purposes of the Kings’ orders were to compile collective knowledge of TTM that was partly lost or destroyed during the Burmese–Siamese War (1765–1767) and to give health education to the Thai people so that they could take care of their health using TTM. Unfortunately, the influence of Western medicine, which was introduced into Thailand by missionaries and western physicians since the reign of King Rama III (1787–1851), gradually increased and eventually led to the abandonment of the systematic teaching of TTM in the medical school in 1916. This sparked the decline in TTM acceptance, especially among people in the urban areas, and the status

of TTM practitioners in the country’s health care system for over 60 years.

### 2.2. Academic thinking and theoretical system

TCM is based on the view that man and the universe are one unity or, in other words, the relation between man and nature is harmonious. According to TCM, people become ill because they do not know the laws of nature, of society, or of relations among people. So TCM aims for balances in three major aspects because all illnesses are caused by imbalance. This is rather similar to the Galenic medicine in ancient Rome and Greece. The three balances are balance between man and nature, balance between an individual and the society, balance between the functions of the body organs. TCM is a dialectical and dynamic system which integrates theories such as the theories of *yin* and *yang* (the positive and negative forces, they not only depend on each other and oppose each other, but also tend to transform and alternate in waxing and waning), and *wuxing* (the five elements –water, fire, metal, wood and earth, the relations between them are inter-promotion, interaction, over-action and counter-action), and *jingluo* (Channels and Collaterals), of visceral manifestation, of treatment based on the differentiation of symptoms and signs, of pharmacology, of acupuncture and moxibustion, etc. The theoretical system explored in the earliest-extant *Huangdi Neijing* remains the mainstay of TCM up to this day.<sup>6</sup> *Huangdi Neijing*, the theoretical work on TCM that emerged in the Warring States Period (475–221 B.C.), marks the establishment of Chinese medicine’s unique theoretical system. Another classic work, *Shennong’s Herbal Classic* sums up medical experiences prior to the Qin (221–207 B.C.) Dynasty, records 365 varieties of medicinal herbs and it is the earliest pharmacopoeia ever found in China.

TTM, by contrast, is an integrated system of medicine incorporating the Indian derived Ayurvedic system and the Chinese system amalgamated with a deep-rooted belief in the supernatural, mystique and astrology.<sup>8</sup> Buddhism has a great influence upon TTM and its many principles are used for medical analysis.<sup>9</sup> However, the principal philosophy of TTM leans heavily toward the Ayurvedic teaching and Buddhism thoughts which are the attainment of equilibrium among the four basic elements, namely earth, water, wind and fire. These elements are called as “*tards*” in Thai language, which are the very essence of human life. In order to stay healthy, the four elements must be in perfect balance and harmony, and TTM seeks to restore health by overcoming imbalances in the system. TTM also states that everyone has one’s own dominant element called “*tard-chao-ruan*” in Thai language, which is basically determined by the date and month of one’s conception. The *tard-chao-ruan* of a person plays an important role with regard to one’s characteristics and appearance as well as the weak point in one’s health (Vichai and Anchalee).<sup>10</sup> According to TTM, the seasons, age, geography, time and behavior can affect one’s health as well. Illness can be caused by supernatural powers (ancestor souls, evil spirits, and punishment from spirits for misbehavior), powers of nature (imbalance of *tards*, imbalance of hot and cold, imbalance of body equilibrium), powers of the universe (influence of sun, moon and stars) and *Kimijati*, which is the equivalent of microorganisms or parasites.<sup>10</sup> During the reign of King Narai the Great (1656–1688), the doctors that served the king united to compile a textbook of King Narai’s medicines or *Tamra Phra Osod Phra Narai*, which was the first official textbook of Thai drug recipes. During the reign of King Rama V (1868–1910), the first medical textbook *Tumra Paetsart Sonkrau* and the first Thai national formulary called *Tumra Paetsart Sonkhrau Chabub Luang* as well as *Tumra Vejasuksa*, the first TTM textbook for medical students, were published. They are still official textbooks of TTM accepted by the Thai Food

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