

## • Review

# A history of standardization in the English translation of traditional Chinese medicine terminology

Xiao Ye<sup>1,2</sup>, Hong-xia Zhang<sup>3,4</sup>

1. College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Zhejiang Chinese Medical University, Hangzhou 310053, China

2. Confucius Institute, University of Coimbra, Coimbra 3004-530, Portugal

3. College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Zhejiang Chinese Medical University, Hangzhou 310053, China

4. Faculty of Education, East China Normal University, Shanghai 200062, China

### ABSTRACT

In order to facilitate and propose further international standardization of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) terminology, this article applies methods of historiography, philology and descriptive study to divide the history of TCM into three phases, based on representative experts and social events; to illustrate different aspects of these experts and their translation principles and standards and to discuss associated factors and inherent problems. The authors find that the development of a terminology standard for TCM has generally progressed from early approaches that were ill-suited to the contemporary needs to culturally and professionally referenced approaches, from uncoordinated research to systematic studies, and from individual works to collaborative endeavors. The present international standards of TCM terminology have been attained through the work of numerous scholars and experts in the history of the field. The authors are optimistic that a more comprehensive and recognized standard will come out soon.

**Keywords:** standardization; terminology; English translation; history; medicine, Chinese traditional

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### 1 Introduction

In the last few decades, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) has spread quickly in parts of the world that share English as a common language. It has been fully or partly accepted in many Western countries and more countries are considering its regulation and inclusion in the medical care system. However, TCM originates from China and its source language is Chinese and even ancient Chinese. TCM learners can easily find that a single TCM term may have many translations in common use, and the literature—including inappropriately translated ones. This

causes confusion in academic study, clinical research, and all forms of communication. In order to solve this problem, linguists and medical experts working around the world, individually, and in groups, have sought to establish a standardized English version of the TCM terminology. This work has pursued for decades and some progress has been made. However, to date, there is no unanimously recognized international standard translation. A general illustration of this history may be helpful to contextualize the mistakes that we have made, the experiences that we have accumulated and the problems that we still must solve.

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Correspondence: Hong-xia Zhang, Associate Prof.; E-mail: [evezhanghx@sina.com](mailto:evezhanghx@sina.com)

## 2 History review

### 2.1 1960s and 1970s

The transfer of Chinese medicine across Western countries has been intermittent for hundreds of years. Some books of Chinese medicine were translated to or written in Western languages during this period, but according to the literature that has been found, it was not until the 1960s that some scholars noticed the lack of standardization in the translation of TCM terminology and tried to establish such a standard by themselves.

#### 2.1.1 Manfred B. Porkert

Manfred Porkert, born in 1933 in the Czech Republic, had received his Ph.D. degree in Chinese studies at the Paris Sorbonne in 1957. He is now an emeritus professor of Munich University, Germany. He praised Chinese medicine as a modern and future medicine, a mature science and a genuine life science.<sup>[1]</sup> He was perhaps the first author to cogently discuss terminology and the need for precision and consistency in the translation of TCM.<sup>[2]</sup> He endeavored to establish a standardized and practical terminology system of Chinese medicine by solely using Latin words. This was reflected in a number of papers, written in German, which were published between 1961 and 1965,<sup>[3]</sup> and also in many of his important works, such as *The Theoretical Foundations of Chinese Medicine* and *The Essentials of Chinese Diagnostics*, both of which were published in English in 1974.

Although his standardized terminology system may be accurate in expressing the meanings, the terms he translated were very difficult to read, recognize, remember and popularize, because the contemporary use of Latin has been greatly different to the situation in the 17th century.<sup>[4]</sup> As a result, his books and terminology system were very difficult to understand; this difficulty extended to its application in teaching, research and communication, especially for Chinese practitioners. His terminology system was thus not adopted.

#### 2.1.2 Joseph Needham

Joseph Needham, born in 1900 in England, was a scientist, historian and sinologist. He was a member of British Royal Society and worked in the University of Cambridge. His greatest contribution to mankind is his study on the science and technology of China, which is mainly recorded in a series of monographs, called the *Science and Civilization in China Series*, published by Cambridge University Press since 1954. This work includes considerable attention to Chinese medical history. His other great work on Chinese medicine is *Celestial Lancets: A History and Rationale of Acupuncture and Moxa*, published in 1980. He also perceived the problem of translating TCM terms and discussed strategies toward its resolution. He did not agree with Manfred B. Porkert's

method and said, "He pursued a line rather different from that which we would still prefer to adopt. He has largely gone over direct[ly] to Latin."<sup>[3]</sup> Instead, Needham tried to create a vocabulary based on semantic roots that would be well understood by Western readers, and invented many new terms based on Greek and Latin roots. Aside from this main strategy, he used a more flexible approach. For example, he opposed transliteration, but adopted it for some untranslatable terms, such as Tao, Yin, Yang and especially qi, which was previously translated as "energy". He thought literal translation was inappropriate for expressing the message and prevented readers from understanding, but he used it when the semantic connotation was clear, such as the heart, liver, lung, spleen and kidney for respective terms in Chinese medicine.<sup>[5]</sup>

His strategy of standardization had great impact on some future scholars and continued to be a frequent topic of discussion among experts and translators through the beginning of the 21st century.

Though Manfred B. Porkert and Joseph Needham applied different strategies to the standardization of TCM terms, their approaches were largely confined to the use of Latin words or Latin and Greek roots, which was probably influenced by their traditional use in Western science and medicine. However, both of their strategies generated new and difficult words for modern readers. Moreover, over time, the familiarity with classical languages has faded, and fewer people can comfortably read and understand the words generated in these classically inspired translation systems. Although they failed to establish a standardized terminology system, these first efforts provided an invaluable experience and established a need for a standardized English translation of TCM terms.

### 2.2 1980s and 1990s

In 1972, American president Richard Milhous Nixon visited China. During the trip, the use of acupuncture for pain control was reported in the *New York Times*, arousing a fever for learning TCM across the Western world. At the beginning, many Westerners went to Southeast Asia, China (Hong Kong and Taiwan) and Japan to learn acupuncture. After the Cultural Revolution in China (1966–1976), Westerners started to learn acupuncture directly in mainland China, and could obtain a World Health Organization (WHO) training certificate. With its rapid expansion, and widely ranging primary sources, to have one standard English version of TCM terminology seemed much more urgent and a few standards emerged, and were broadly adopted. In addition, scholars from China began to participate in this effort.

#### 2.2.1 Ou Ming

Though many Chinese-English dictionaries of Chinese medicine were published in this period in China, Ou Ming was perhaps the first Chinese author to comprehensively

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