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Tu's Nobel Prize Not a Win for Ancient Chinese Medicine

A unified system that includes the best of all traditions is the way forward for the country's healthcare system

By Paul U. Unschuld



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In a debate about whether Tu Youyou's Nobel Prize is a win for Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), it is first necessary to define what TCM is. The term "TCM" is understood and defined differently by various interest groups. The lay public in the West generally understand TCM as a system of health care theories and practices that evolved over the past millennia and is still practiced in China today.

On the other hand, Western scholars often see TCM as a small and modernized kernel of the Chinese medical heritage.

Nowadays, historical notions of human physiology and disease in China that contradict modern medical knowledge are gradually being phased out.

Substances and therapeutic techniques that have been in use for centuries are increasingly being subjected to scientific validation. Therefore, scholars see a gap between contemporary TCM practices and historical Chinese medicine.

The movement to modernize Chinese medical heritage started in the late 19th century and received strong state backing since 1949. Since Mao Zedong demanded a "unification of Chinese medicine", the authorities took numerous measures to provide Chinese medicine with a stronger voice in Chinese health politics, integrate it into public health measures, to standardize the competence of its practitioners, push for transparency, reprint and analyze historical writings, and legitimize as much of the Chinese medical heritage as possible in terms of modern science.

With her finding, Tu has supported Mao Zedong and all those Chinese political leaders who have requested, throughout the 20th century, a merger of historical Chinese medicine with modern science as an indispensable pre-condition to restore the country's national dignity and enhance its global influence. These political leaders were eager to acknowledge the value of Chinese medicine as an integrated aspect of historical Chinese culture.

But awarding the Nobel Prize in medicine to Tu is not a vindication of Chinese medicine in its historical sense. It may be seen as a vindication of modernized TCM that has evolved in China after Mao Zedong asked to "dig out the treasures" that exist in historical Chinese medicine.

Tu has dug out one such treasure by isolating from the herb Qinghao its active chemical ingredient

Artemisinin. She had followed a hint in the 4th century scholar Ge Hong's Handbook of Prescriptions for Emergencies from among 42 other cures for malaria.

The others recommended spiders, wood lice and even exorcism. These remaining 41 prescriptions listed by Ge Hong are also part of "historical Chinese medicine" but no one today would claim them to be vindicated by Tu's research and the Nobel Prize. Tu's finding has shown that it is worthwhile to search in historical Chinese medical material for valuable medication, but this does not mean that historical Chinese medicine is vindicated in its entirety.

You may ask what the fundamental difference between Western modern science and the Chinese medical heritage is. The definition of the term "science" is a key to answering this question.

Historical Chinese medicine was based on a system of ideas that can still be considered scientific. The Yin-yang and Five Phases (wu xing) doctrines are secular world views in that they emphasize the existence of laws of nature. They were explicitly designed to reject beliefs in gods, demons, ancestors, and spirits. In this regard, ancient Chinese natural science has the same foundation as ancient natural science developed in Europe. The latter became the basis of modern Western science.

One of the main differences between the historical Chinese science and modern science is that the former uses a relationist approach, while the latter relies on analytical methods. Analytical science attempts to identify the constituents of all things in order to understand their nature and how they can be modified. In Chinese relationist science, the Yin-yang and Five Phases doctrines do not focus on constituents, but instead on the relationships between things to understand their nature and to make use of them.

Both of them have their merits, but in a direct confrontation, the analytical method triumphs over the relationist philosophy. China understood this in the early 20th century and reformers and revolutionaries have pushed for the adoption of modern science, technology and medicine.

Still, TCM and what is left of historical Chinese medicine will continue to play an important role in the healthcare system in the country and beyond. With or without scientific proof, there is no doubt that many treatments developed based on traditional medical knowledge are useful, and are appreciated by doctors and patients alike.

Modern western medicine has many blank spots and weaknesses. Some of them can be filled or balanced by therapeutic approaches developed and applied in Chinese historical medicine over the centuries and adopted in TCM. TCM in the modernized sense was never meant to compete with Western medicine. It would be unable to successfully compete in several fields, including surgery, public health, epidemiology, psychiatry and disaster relief medicine.

The Beijing Declaration on TCM of 2007 clearly states: "TCM is biomedicine," and "the future of TCM lies in molecular biology." That is the policy of Chinese authorities. They are not interested in the existence of two competing systems forever. They strive to create one unified system, including the best of all traditions, foreign and native.

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