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# Chinese Medicine and the Rectification of Names

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Over the past few decades, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) has gained much popularity and recognition in those nations belonging to Western Civilization. A by-product of this, has been the attempt to align the terminology of TCM with cultural and lingual concepts more commonly used in those countries outside of China. This manner of cultural translation has been most prominent in two areas: Anatomy and Herbalism. In this article, I wish to focus on the latter.

Western Herbalism is a tradition just as old as Chinese Herbalism. Up to about the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century of the Common Era, the most commonly practiced form of medicine in Western Civilization had been Herbalism. It was only during the past 150-170 years or so, that Modern Western Medicine had come to use politics and business in order to almost entirely obliterate traditional medicines in its regions of influence, for its own dominance and benefit. Nonetheless, much of the knowledge pertaining to Traditional Western Herbal Medicine still survived in small pockets of devote communities of practitioners.

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Long before Modern Western Medicine's conquest of the medical field, Traditional Western Herbal Medicine was already strongly affected by another subjugation – that of the Greek and Latin languages.

Western Civilization, still to this day, ripples and echoes the forgotten vibrations of Greek and Latin cultures, to which it appeals like venerated ancestors. In this strong and desperate nostalgic longing, researchers of natural phenomenon in Europe, and later in the United States and elsewhere, sought to classify everything and anything on planet Earth with Greek and Latin names. This of course is related to various historical phenomenon, such as the dominance of the Catholic church, and other issues beyond the scope of this article. Suffice to say that, to this day, the use of Greek and Latin in the sciences is in part meant to retain intellectual power over the less-educated masses.

Due to such cultural currents, Western Herbalism has also suffered from the Greek and Latin onslaught, having been coerced into a modality with which herbs are named in a language which bears no relevance whatsoever to the daily lives of either practitioners or patients. This form of negative influence, was then borrowed and applied to TCM Herbalism, in the manner of cultural imperialism – the (often subconscious) wish to forcefully compel Chinese cultural traits to bend and kneel before what Western Civilization deems most appropriate.

Before I continue, it ought to be noted that as a member of Western Civilization and a lover of it, such controversial



statements are not meant to berate its merits or existence; neither to promote Chinese Culture as 'its superior'. Rather, they point to a problematic sort of cultural clash, whose nature I wish to now elucidate.

Those who have studied in-depth more than one language, know and understand well, that a vernacular is more than the sum of its letters and vocabulary. Any language to have ever existed, is also a key to its people – a legend to the map of its accompanying culture and history, and the collective psyche of the humans involved. Because of this, no profound translation of any text or glossary, can be without a substantial loss of meaning. Sometimes, this is unavoidable. Christianity for example, cannot exist without translations of the Old and New Testaments into newer languages. When a translation is done well, and there is ample commentary adjacent to a text, then such a thing is tolerable. However, problems arise when commentary is absent, and especially when terminology which arises from texts, strongly infiltrates the daily speech, or the common technical use of a profession.

I am an Israeli Jew, a native speaker of the Hebrew language. I have thoroughly and professionally studied the Old Testament. Being so, over the years, numerous instances have come to my attention, of major misunderstandings of that text by Christians, due to awfully inaccurate, or even purely false, translations of central phrases and concepts. I wish to herein share three examples as such, so that I could later relate them to my claim as to why and how Greek and Latin are enemies of TCM.



In the Book of Genesis, chapter 4 verse 9, it reads: “Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" "I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?" ”. That entire translation is inaccurate. In the original Hebrew: ‘Lord’ is written as ‘Yehova’ (יהוה). ‘Cain’ is written as Kayin. ‘Abel’ is written as ‘Hevel’. ‘Keeper’ should be ‘Guardian’ (שומר). Also, the question did not originally have a question mark.

Another example, of a verse very commonly quoted, is: “Love thy neighbour”. The English translations from the Book of Leviticus, chapter 19 verse 18, usually read: “...you shall love your neighbor as yourself”. But in the original Hebrew, the word ‘neighbour’ is absent. The word used instead, Re’eha (רעה) means: “your fellow man”.

In the Book of Ecclesiastes, the most commonly repeated word, which is central to its theme and message, is ‘Hevel’ (הבל). This word has been translated into English as “Vanity”, “Nothingness”, “No purpose”, “pointless”, and other things. First of all, note that the word ‘Hevel’ (הבל) is the exact name of ‘Abel’, in the original Hebrew. Secondly, in the context of the Book of Ecclesiastes, Hevel does not mean any of the things which the English translations claim it does. Hevel is usually used to mean: ‘The vapor which comes out of one’s mouth on a cold day’. As a metaphor, it refers to something which is at the same time, both substantial and insubstantial, visible yet invisible, coming and going quickly. You feel as if you could grasp it, but you cannot. It notably bears some similarities to the Chinese character and concept of Qi 氣.



Even the names of the books I quoted from – Genesis, Leviticus and Ecclesiastes – are called entirely different things in the original Hebrew. But then again, I do not wish to digress too much beyond the purpose of arriving at the discussion of the harm which Greek and Latin do unto TCM.

Notice then how, even with a language like Hebrew, which has close cultural connotations with English-speaking peoples, translations of monumental texts fail to do justice to intrinsic meanings. This is then all the more atrocious, when English speakers attempt to convey Chinese ideas in Greek and Latin, or for that matter, when Chinese people read Old Testament translations from English to their own tongue. By this I do not mean to infer, of course, that Christianity has no validity, or that the divine message it enshrines is false. What I am to indicate, is that a language and a culture could very easily be taken out of context, leading to strange conclusions.

When the vocabulary of a language, and especially professional terminology, are thus translated into another language, there is often a loss of meaning. This is exaggerated and made worse, when a certain language completely replaces another, and the original language was the one which created the cultural practice in question. Such is the dynamic between Greek, Latin and Chinese, with regard to TCM.

There are some rare examples, where this may work without overt clashing. A good one would be of the herb Hǎi Mǎ 海馬, which is a ‘Sea Horse’ in many languages, including Chinese, English, Greek, Latin and Hebrew. There are certain herbs and animals which, for whatever reason, most humans have named



similarly. But in most cases, this leads to awkward misunderstandings, and often spells disaster. This we see in name of single herbs, and more so in the names of herbal formulas.

Think for instance of the herb Dāng Guī 當歸. The original Chinese can mean things which are beneficial for remembering the use and function of this herb, such as: “For a woman to marry” (used for women’s health issues), “to gather together” (it is a Yin tonic), or “to act as something which gives back to” (again, a Yin tonic hint). In comparison, the Latin name ‘Angelica’ has theological connotations unrelated to the medical use of this plant in TCM.

The herb Huáng Lián 黃連, its name in Chinese refers to its appearance – Yellow Links. It also refers to certain name-category of herbs that are yellow and have related properties, such as Da Huang (Big Yellow), Huang Qin (Yellow Salt-Marsh Plant), Huang Bai (Yellow + type of tree), etc. In Latin, this herb is called ‘Coptis’, which means nothing whatsoever to most people. At least the folk English name, ‘Goldenthread’, is reminiscent of the Chinese one.

With the single herbs, what is typically lost directly is meaning. But with formula names, the loss is often much greater, encompassing both meaning, and cultural context.

Consider the formula Sì Jūnzǐ Tāng 四君子湯, which is one of the most fundamental and commonly used in our medicine. The name is written wrong from the onset, typically separating the characters Jūn 君 and Zǐ 子 in Pin-Yin, even though they



manifest a single ‘word’ in Chinese. The term Junzi is a core idea in Confucianism, often inaccurately translated as ‘Gentleman’. Hence the common translation of the entire name of this formula as ‘Four Gentlemen Decoction’. This is easier to write and teach, but carries a wrong meaning and context. It would have been better to write down such a name as ‘Four Junzi Decoction’.

The term Jūnzǐ 君子 in the Chinese language and culture is slightly similar in its idea to the ‘equivalent’ term of a ‘Gentleman’ in European culture, but the associated social values are not the same. The opposite of the Junzi is the Xiaoren – the ‘small person’, or ‘lesser person’. What we would call a ‘petty person’ in English. The Junzi, in comparison, is a word meant to denote ‘The Virtuous Person’. Yet the virtues being referred to here are the once ascribed and described in the Analects of Confucius (Lun Yu), and not those of European chivalry. That book must be read many times, with commentary, to make that point, which goes beyond the scope of this article.

So, when the Chinese called this formula ‘Four Junzi Decoction’, what did they mean? Plainly, it is comprised of four plants. These herbs are understood to be ‘pillars of TCM’, much like the Junzi is a ‘pillar of society’. When several Junzi come together, they create harmony, mend imbalances, and strengthen – which is what the formula is intended to do. The Junzi is also a person who embodies the virtues of uprightness and honesty – Zhèng 正 . The same Chinese character is used for the term Zhèng Qì 正氣 - the Upright Qi of the body. Thus, it is implied in the name



of this formula, that the combination of the herbs will support the Upright Qi.

Thus we see, that the word ‘Gentleman’, arising from the Latin root-word ‘Gentilis’ (“of the same clan”), and descriptive of European-styled chivalry, cannot possibly convey the nuances of Chinese culture.

Or otherwise, Let us take the example of the formula Xiāo Yáo Sǎn 逍遙散. This formula’s various names are good to examine, as it is one of the most commonly used in TCM worldwide.

In the crooked Langish (Latin-English), it was renamed as ‘Bupleurum and Tang Kuei Formula’. What an unsightly abomination! Bupleurum is the Latin name of the herb Chái Hú 柴胡, which can mean ‘Thin Firewood’ – describing its appearance (like miniature logs used as firewood). But the name Bupleurum, a Latin mispronunciation of a Greek term, means ‘Oxen Rib’, which is not only unrelated to the TCM uses of the herb, but is actually confusing in terms of medical context. The name Tang Kuei is the ugly remnant of the defunct Wade-Giles method of transliterating Chinese into English.

Another name given to this formula in English is ‘Rambling Powder’, which once more has no intrinsic meaning relevant to TCM, and is likely a terrible mistranslation of the original Chinese. This formula has nothing to do with ‘rambling’, a sort of behaviour more characteristic of a troubled heart than a stagnant liver.

At surface level, Xiao Yao San (and its several variants) is an exceedingly useful formula for the treatment of Liver Qi





Stagnation invading the Spleen, which may cause dozens of different symptoms. Such is the simple clinical understanding of this formula. But there is also a more nuanced, psycho-spiritual comprehension of what this formula can do, and it is being referenced by its original name in Chinese.

The name of the formula itself is taken from the Daoist classic of Zhuanzi, and means: 'easy-going', or 'free and unfettered'. The short story where this name is mentioned, tells of a tree (wood phase) which is gnarly, crooked, ugly, and overall unfit for use by humans in any way, shape or form. However, because the tree is of no use, it can be safe and long-lived, and is not threatened by the axes of people. Such is also a metaphor for the Liver in the context of this formula. The stagnant Liver causes problems with relationships, primarily through excessive anger and the formation of an overly-stubborn personality which is inflexible. Yet with the formula, the Liver (wood phase; tree) can assume a nature which 'does not invite the axe'. The person becomes more flexible in his mindset, which causes the 'tree' to initially appear ugly, with twisted roots and branches. But in that seemingly-awkward form is a flexibility body and mind relative to circumstances, which keeps the person safe from harm - internal and external.

There is furthermore an understanding, that Xiao Yao San, when prescribed to that right type of patient, can help such a person restore aspects Ziran - their natural Self. By first relaxing the Liver's stagnation, and then pacifying it, this formula brings a person into a state of being 'at ease with himself'. This naturally manifests an attitude which is Xiao Yao - 'easy-going', or 'free and unfettered'. This essentially modifies



a person into someone who is inclined to be kinder, gentler, nicer, and perhaps even more empathetic, and certainly less inclined towards conflict. All of this, relative to one's already extant constitution. None of these important lingual and cultural connotations could be deduced, in cases where the formula is presented in a name in English, Greek or Latin.

When either meaning, cultural context or both are lost, due to an insistence on utilizing Greek or Latin, the medicine suffers. The Chinese people have spent thousands of years, wisely constructing a specialized terminology for their medicine, which is intended to ease, improve and make more accurate, the work of the physician. To inseminate this tradition with foreign ideas with too great a zeal, is to do more than merely spit into the well from which one drinks. The implications are also, that there are being created generations of inferior professionals, whose understanding of the medicine is diminished. Why ought this be done? Simply due to the laziness of folks in studying a little bit of Chinese language and culture? To appease the academic and scientific establishments, which in fact compete with TCM often, and some of which seek to destroy it? We must ask ourselves – are such motivations to justify, that any patient should receive treatment from a practitioner who is ignorant of the roots of his or her own craft?

One of the main doctrines taught by Kongzi (Confucius), pertained to the 'Rectification of Names' (Zhèng Míng 正名). It is the idea, that a people and a culture are being corrupted, when their language does not reflect the true and genuine meaning of what they wish to convey. In light of this, Kongzi contended that we ought to strive to learn a more accurate,



nanced and proper use of language, for this manner of engagement holds the power to reshape societies for the better. It is high time that TCM scholars and practitioners worldwide sound their voices out-loud, about the need for the practice at large to undergo such a rectification of names, for the sake of current and future generations.

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