Narrating a History for China’s Medical Past: Christianity, Natural Philosophy and History in Wang Honghan’s *Gujin yishi* 古今醫史 (History of Medicine Past and Present)

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I. Introduction: Localizing Oecumenical Science

Scientific transactions between cultures constitute an important research domain in Joseph Needham’s (1900-1995) interpretation of the history of Chinese science. For Needham, the comparison of cross-cultural scientific exchanges serves the purpose of counting scientific credits of a civilization and of demonstrating how universal modern science conquered different scientific traditions. For him, the seventeenth century marks a crucial epoch in the history of science. The balance sheet of scientific exchanges before the seventeenth century shows a surplus for Chinese civilization and proves its capability in producing science, a view now commonly held among most scholars of Chinese science, but one denied by many scholars and scientists in the early twentieth century. The balance gradually shifts when China encounters Europe in the seventeenth century, however. This was the time when “the older streams of science in different civilizations like rivers flowed into the ocean of modern science.”1 According to Needham, modern science is “ocumenical” and thus puts an end to other local scientific traditions. Glorious as it may have been, the once superior but parochial scientific

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tradition of China was outshone by modern science and merged with it in the seventeenth century.

There is at least one factual mistake in Needham’s metaphorical description. The brook of Chinese science probably had never been intended to flow into the sea of modern science. By this metaphor, Needham has largely naturalized power relations between China and Europe, turning the Chinese into a people ready to accept the more oecumenical Western science. In fact, the story is more complicated, but, basically speaking, science from the West overflowed its shores with the support of the newly rising European powers. The coming of Western science into China was thus tinged with commercial and religious interests. Despite the popularity of “why not” questions used to provoke imaginations and discussions regarding this issue, recent scholarship has largely shifted away from them and concentrated more on what actually happened when the two scientific traditions met. Although Needham’s puzzle is probably obsolete, the question of how to understand the scientific transactions between China and Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries remains. Nicolas Standaert has recently put forward his methodological reflections on how to understand this cultural contact in general. He discusses and evaluates four different methodological frameworks: “transmission”, “reception”, “invention” and “interaction and communication”. The “transmission” model focuses on how messages (religious or scientific) were transmitted to the receivers, while the “reception” model studies how the receivers reacted to these messages. Both, however, depict the receivers as passive historical agents. The “invention” model analyzes how the transmitters constructed representations of the receivers so as to impose power relations on them. The “interaction and communication” model, which Standaert opts to promote, can be considered a synthesis of the above-mentioned approaches and reorients the problematic of cultural exchange by iterating how the identities of the parties involved were negotiated and transformed: a dialogue between “self” and “other”. In admitting the usefulness of these approaches, which generate reliable and tenable information and perspectives, I will focus on the case of Wang Honghan 王宏翰 (1648-c. 1700), a Christian Confucian physician of the seventeenth century, to analyse and discuss the problem of “using” foreign knowledge consciously or unconsciously received through cultural transaction to negotiate one’s own identity and interests.

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All the important issues in the four methodologies that Standaert discusses, to a certain extent, have to be incorporated into an approach that investigates how the information communicated was used. My concerns are not primarily focussed on how messages were transmitted or altered, as is pursued in the “transmission” and “reception” models. Instead, I am more interested in how messages were communicated in a kind of “material” way, that is the ways in which users simply placed the information into a structure of meaning generated in their own daily life for shaping their own understanding of the world, without knowledge of the origins of or alterations to these messages. Consequently, tracing the origins and spread of a certain message does not constitute the core of my inquiry, since during the period under discussion most historical actors on the Chinese side were simply unable or felt no urgency to trace the messages back to their European origins as modern scholars would like to do. Recognizing that these messages had travelled from Europe was enough for them for their daily practices. Similarly, neither the understanding nor the misunderstanding of the parties involved in a cultural exchange is investigated here. Although such judgments may be important for modern scholars, historical actors more often made use of information without worrying whether they had distorted it. Users appropriated messages as if they were concrete material, particularly when these messages were encoded in the form of imprints. By studying how users placed codified materials in different contexts and used them on different occasions allows us to penetrate deeply into the worlds of perception of the various actors involved in the cultural transaction, whether they were Chinese or not, and to see how foreign knowledge was adopted into their daily practices and constituted a world of meaning of their own. In other words, there is a history of local users waiting to be explored so as to understand what “sciences”, “natural philosophy” and “history” meant to historical agents.

This paper thus studies how Wang Honghan, a Chinese physician, faced a new imagining of the world transmitted by the missionaries, for whom the true origins of things came from one source: the Lord God. I will discuss how he appropriated the cultural resources available to him, including Christianity, Western natural philosophy and traditional writings on medical history in China.


5 I will use “the missionaries” as a general term to indicate the priests from various Catholic orders in China during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Although the Jesuits are often considered the major player in Sino-European scientific transactions during this period, they were certainly not the only ones involved. The Dominicans and Franciscans also wrote on natural philosophy. Wang Honghan at least read the Dominican Raimundo del Valle’s (賴 蒙 篤, O. P., 1613–1683) work *Xingshen shiyi 形 神 實 義* (The True Meaning of the Body and Soul). To what extent the Chinese Christians distinguished these different orders and realized how their differences might influence their beliefs is a question that requires more investigation.
to construct a history of Chinese medicine in order to re-examine his own profession, define proper medical practices, and defend the social boundaries of the Confucian physician (rú yì 儒醫).

II. Hybrid Identities

Wang Honghan was a native of Songjiang 松江 in today’s Shanghai area. He came from a Christian family, his grandfather Wang Guochen 王國臣 having been among the earliest converts of his fellow county-man Xu Guangqi 徐光啟 (1562-1633), one of the famous pillars of the church in late Ming China (p. 374). Since then, “Learning from Heaven” (tiānxué 天學), a synthesis of Christian theology and natural philosophy, had become Wang’s family tradition. In addition to religion, Wang Guochen was also interested in Western natural philosophy, which he transmitted to his son, who kept many books about Western learning as well as objects such as astronomical instruments and world maps. Unfortunately, all these treatises and objects were eventually lost. Thanks to his Christian connections, Wang Honghan strove to recover this loss and finally succeeded in his endeavour. In addition to medical material, mostly excerpted from natural theological texts, Wang was also familiar with Western geographical

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7 Here and thereafter, page numbers in the text refer to Wang Honghan, Gujin yishi (History of Medicine Past and Present), in Xuxiu Siku quanshu (Complete Books of the Four Treasuries, Continued and Revised), Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshi, 1997, vol. 1030.
and astronomical treatises. This demonstrates that he was interested not only in Christian beliefs but also in natural knowledge, often in the form of natural theology transmitted by Western missionaries. This natural philosophy wrapped in Christian thought provided Wang with the foundation to formulate his own unique historical narrative.

In addition to being a devoted Christian, Wang practiced medicine in Wu (吴) County, Jiangsu province, one of the most competitive areas in medicine at that time. Wang came from a family with a medical tradition. His grandfather was familiar with medical theories and his father was a physician. Wang did not neglect his knowledge of Western learning, but applied it to an attempt to transform the Chinese medical system. In his most renowned work, Yixue yuanshi (The Origin of Medicine), he spent a chapter discussing Western medical knowledge and natural philosophy. He was the only Chinese physician we know of from that period who made an effort to integrate Western medical knowledge with Chinese medicine. At one point, he even proposed to replace such fundamental concepts as the correspondence of the wuzang (五脏) (Five Organs) and the wuxing (五行) (Five Phrases) with the correspondence of European Four Elements (六行) and other four organs. While the medical knowledge he acquired from Western learning might have increased his understanding of human physiology, he did not really apply it in practice. Judging from his writings and medical cases, Wang’s treatments and the theoretical foundation of his practice still relied on Chinese medical tradition. Western medical knowledge served only decorative functions in his writings, mainly to demonstrate that an understanding of the body had Christian origins. In reality, Wang probably never gained access to the art of healing in Western medicine. The Western medical knowledge that he had learned was anatomical in nature, which Western missionaries had integrated into their natural philosophy to reveal the grace of God’s creation.

Wang Honghan was not simply an ordinary physician. He considered himself a physician steeped in Confucian doctrine. Like other promising youngsters of his time, Wang prepared for the civil service examinations to advance himself in officialdom and society. However, his mother’s illness changed the course of his career, and he began to study medicine. Although he gave up his pursuit of an official career, like so many others he never abandoned his identity as a Confu-
cian scholar. Not only did Confucian learning offer him basic knowledge of the classical tradition, but it also enabled him to enter literati circles. The combination of physician and Confucian scholar enhanced Wang’s social status. He was not only ranked very high as a Confucian physician among some medical practitioners, but was also very well-connected. His The Origin of Medicine includes prefaces by some of the most important Han Chinese officials in the Kangxi 康熙 (r. 1662-1722) era, such as Xu Qianxue 徐乾學 (1631-1694) and Han Tan 韓菼 (1637-1704), all of whom praised Wang as a Confucian scholar well versed in medicine.\(^{12}\) Identifying himself as a Confucian scholar, Wang also attempted to bridge Confucian learning and Western learning. His syncretism, nonetheless, followed the directions that the missionaries had indicated for him.

Western missionaries who visited China in the seventeenth century brought a new cultural issue to their Chinese audience—a new interpretation of the problem of origins based on the Book of Genesis. The missionaries pondered over the provenance of the Chinese people, their civilization and cultural achievements, such as astronomy, and most of all, Confucianism. This was not surprising since the issue of the origins of human history was a major concern, deriving from the biblical tradition, to Europeans seeking to associate what they had found in other places of the world with their own traditions. The Bible provided a holistic narrative structure rendering human history comprehensible after so many novelties had surged into their lives.\(^{13}\) According to the missionaries, the Chinese, though highly civilized, were no exception to this Universal History.

In the view of the missionaries, the Chinese were, of course, Noah’s descendants after the human race had been all but destroyed by God’s wrath. The first Chinese Fuxi 伏羲, one of Noah’s grandsons, was a Christian.\(^{14}\) Unfortunately, the Chinese had forgotten their Christian legacy, the remains of which were preserved in ancient Confucian texts, such as the “Book of Odes” (Shijing) and the

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\(^{12}\) Han Tan 韓菼, “Preface”, in Wang Honghan, Yixue yuanshi, p. 3; Xu Qianxue, “Preface”, in Wang Honghan, Yixue yuanshi, p. 4.


"Book of Documents" (Shujing) in which the Lord on High (shangdi 上 帝) was often mentioned. Confucianism actually belonged to the ancient branch of Christianity. The First Emperor of the Qin set fire to the ancient books and was the first to disrupt the transmission of this ancient tradition, leaving Christianity burned to dust. Then came St. Thomas, the apostle, during the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD), and the Nestorians followed in the Tang (618-907). Much later, Matteo Ricci found Jews in Kaifeng 開 封. Thus, though the evidence was scanty, the existence of Christianity in ancient China was indisputable. Why then were most contemporary Confucian scholars unable to recognize these Christian roots? For this, the missionaries blamed the Song Confucians, who had blended Buddhist and Daoist concepts, such as li 理 (Principle) and taiji 太 極 (Supreme Ultimate), into their commentaries of the ancient classics and obscured the fact of Creation and the existence of the Lord on High in ancient texts. The missionaries therefore claimed that they were the genuine friends of true Confucians, whom they would help to restore the authentic beliefs. They behaved as if they were a father witnessing the marriage of Christianity and Confucianism. This perception of the common past of Christianity and Confucianism largely circulated among missionaries and their Chinese converts. Wang Honghan created his Gujin yishi 古 今 醫 史 (History of Medicine Past and Present) within this Christian historical narrative.

III. Natural Philosophy and History of Chinese Medicine

When Wang Honghan composed his History of Medicine Past and Present in 1697, a textual tradition of medical genealogy already existed, waiting for his appropriation. Wang wrote this text before his death, but was not able to have it published. However, it was circulated in manuscript form during the Qing and we have two extant versions of the manuscript. Although we are not sure how influential Wang’s vision of Chinese medical history was, it no doubt attracted different readers, as it was probably the only medical history produced in the seventeenth century. One of the readers even tried to collate it, though with poor results. This later collated copy contains more errors than the earlier version. Moreover, following Wang’s textual format, an anonymous reader compiled a sequel to the History of Medicine Past and Present in which the genealogy of physicians was extended to the Qing dynasty, including Wang’s family (pp. 363-379). Occasionally, readers commented on Wang’s opinions about medical history (p. 319). Although he held a unique vision of China’s medical past, Qing readers seem to have perceived his work as a specimen within the already existing genre of medical history and did not discuss his Christian interpretations.

15 Huang Feimo 黃 斐 默, Zhengjiao fengbao 正 教 奉 褒 (Imperial Compliments to the Orthodox Religion), Shanghai: Cimutang, 1894, p. 25a.
As a matter of fact, the *History of Medicine Past and Present* arranges the flow of history according to the biographies of past medical practitioners, following the genre of dynastic histories, as other authors had done before. Important events, new inventions or critical ideas in the development of medicine are delineated by means of the individual careers of famous physicians. Human agency is singled out as the most important aspect in the history of medicine.

Wang employs a method that Ann Blair has called “commonplace writing”, one used in Europe and that involved the cutting-and-pasting of excerpts from extant texts with the addition of sporadic supplements to create books of natural philosophy. This had also been a common feature in book production, particularly in the area of technical texts, in China since the late Ming period. Wang and his predecessors authoring histories of Chinese medicine were no exceptions to this trend. However, among the writings of medical history, the *History of Medicine Past and Present* is rather eccentric. Wang attaches niggling comments at the end of some biographies. They are somewhat like the *zan* (comments) included in the dynastic histories, but his wording is far stronger. He uses the term *zhengwu* (correcting wrongs) to end some of the biographies of the physicians that he has selected, injecting a strong sense of distinguishing the orthodox point of view from the heterodox. It is in these comments that we detect how Wang forged the histories of medicine, Confucianism and Christianity into a single coherent history.

Most of these *zhengwu* (correcting wrongs) can be found in the first *juan* (chapter), which covers the origins of medicine up to the Three Kingdoms period (220-280), when the healing strategies and textual traditions of Chinese medicine were under construction. In his preface, Wang states that the principles of understanding the phenomenal world have to be judged by orthodox Confucian doctrines. Medicine is no exception. However, the development of medicine did not progress linearly. At its provenance, medicine, like Confucianism, was the creation of the ancient Sage Kings, who implemented it to save their subjects from suffering. Medicine and Confucianism were the two wings of statecraft. For Wang, this was also the golden age when Christianity, medicine and Confucianism were one. However, when the legacy of Christianity became obscured, Daoism and Buddhism bewildered later scholars, leading to the decline of Confucianism and medicine. Confucian scholars in the Song dynasty did not rebut this heterodoxy, but on the contrary were attracted by it. Confucianism and medicine decayed even more as a result. The spread of heresy led to chaos in the medical realm. Not only did Daoists and Buddhists practice medicine using phantasmagorical magic, but witches and quacks also crowded the market. Wang claims that he wrote the *History of Medicine Past and Present* in an attempt to purge the absurd elements from the history of medicine and to disassociate Daoist illusions of immortality from medicine. By correcting the “wrongs” in medical history,

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Wang is endeavouring to save true medical learning and to restore the uncorrupted customs of ancient times (p. 307).

“Correcting wrongs” therefore performed two functions. First, it is where he attacks what he considered heterodoxy, as we can glean from his commentaries to the biographies of physicians in the past. He harshly criticizes the competition of Daoism and Buddhism with Confucianism not only in the religious field, but also in medicine. Second, via zhengwu Wang attempts to save the declining status of medicine and physicians. He wages a war against other healers, particularly those who associated with magic, witchcraft and Daoist practices.

a. Natural Philosophy and Curing Heresy

For Wang Honghan, the deterioration of medicine had its own history, full of preposterous stories. The original image and thus achievements of the ancient Sage Kings who had created medicine were thereby concealed. To restore true medicine one had to start from its provenance by correcting the life stories of the founders of medicine. Wang boldly borrows natural philosophy to argue against the many “wrongs” that dotted the history of Chinese medicine.

Wang follows Chinese tradition in considering Fuxi the ancestor of medicine. This beginning carried, however, a Christian overtone, because Fuxi was also held to be the first of mankind in China and a descendant of Noah. In addition to copying biographical information from other texts, Wang carefully re-works these texts, expunging what seems to him unbelievable and retaining the “facts” to which all agreed. When Fuxi is mentioned in medical histories, he is associated with Wood of the Five Phases, and is born with the head of a snake and body of a human. Some texts even mention that Fuxi’s mother became pregnant after she had stepped on the foot of a giant. The invention of the hexagrams and Nine Acupuncture Needles was Fuxi’s main contribution to medicine.

Wang admits that Fuxi did have a mother, but denies the story of her pregnancy. He also rejects Fuxi’s appearance. Moreover, he does not consider Fuxi the inventor of acupuncture, which he attributes to the Yellow Emperor and his minister Qibo, as recorded in the Huangdi neijing (Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor). However, Wang does appreciate Fuxi’s creation of the hexagrams, writing, marriage and music so that people could cultivate themselves, and it is because of these inventions that the principles underlying illness became manifested and the practice of medicine made possible. Wang thus credits Fuxi as the Sage Ancestor (shengzu) of medicine. Wang’s description largely rationalizes Fuxi’s image so that it could fit both into a Christian narrative about human origins and the lore of medical textual tradition.

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17 This image of Fuxi only appears in the textual tradition of medical history. The normal image of Fuxi depicts a human head and a snake’s body. This reversal of Fuxi’s head and body is probably due to a textual error that occurred during the Song period.
Wang’s mission of correcting the wrongs in medical history starts with the biography of Shennong 神農, who was associated with the invention of materia medica (bencao 本草). Tradition had it that Shennong had been poisoned seventy times a day when he tried out the properties of herbs. Wang disputes this legend, arguing that this story first appeared in the early Han dynasty (202 BC-220 AD) text Huainanzi 淮南子 (The Book of Master Huainan), by which time the ancient teachings had already declined according to the historical narrative of the Christian missionaries. In addition, a sage like Shennong would not have been so stupid as to test the herbs by himself in order to know their properties. Moreover, he argues that the poisons could not have been all that powerful if a man was able to be poisoned seventy times a day without dying. If they were really strong toxins, he would have died immediately. Therefore, Wang concludes, the story was just a fable.

Wang also strongly protests against the practice of worshipping Fuxi and Shennong in the Temple of the Three Emperors. In the textual tradition of medical history followed by Wang, Fuxi was recorded as having the head of a snake, while Shennong had that of a bull. When the Temple of the Three Emperors first became a state cult associated with medicine in the Yuan dynasty, the statues of the two sages with an animal shape appeared in many of these religious sites. Wang argues that human beings are unique as being clearly distinguished from animals. In one passage he writes: “Man is the most splendid being under Heaven, to whom God bestows a rational soul (lingxing 灵性), and his animal and vegetative souls have developed to the utmost extent. Therefore, he is able to understand human relations and moral principles.” (p.323) If one deductively investigates the principle [of things] (tui ge zhi li 推格致理), one can realize that humans and animals cannot simply be transmuted. Thus, the animal tropes of the two sages have to be understood only in a metaphorical way (pp. 315-316).

Note the term gezhi 格致, which often referred to Christian-Aristotelian natural philosophy when used by Christian literati during this period. According to this natural philosophy, God created the myriad things, each of which retained a distinct nature. Therefore, it was impossible for a human being to transform into a dog, let alone for an animal head and a human body to be combined. The missionaries often used this argument to refute the Buddhist theory of transmigration, which held that a human being could become another kind of being in his next life depending on the karma that he had accumulated. Wang Honghan imported Western natural philosophy in order to reject Daoist stories of immortals who were often depicted as beings that transformed their body into another form.

of existence. The biography of Huangdi 黃帝, the Yellow Emperor, in the *History of Medicine Past and Present* is another such example.

The Yellow Emperor was associated with the composition of the *Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor* (*Neijing* 內經), which laid down the theoretical foundations of traditional Chinese medicine. However, according to the histories of medicine before the *History of Medicine Past and Present*, the Yellow Emperor had also attained immortality and ascended to heaven riding a dragon. Wang, by applying Western natural philosophy, disputes this traditional lore of Daoism. He first refutes the legend of the Dragon King (*longwang* 龍王) and Dragon Girl (*longnü* 龍女) by arguing that every being possesses its own particular nature that could not be altered. The physical appearance of a dragon could not be changed, nor could its size be extended or shrunk at will. Therefore, a dragon could not transform itself into a human shape, nor could it change its size suddenly. The only reasonable account for the human shape of a dragon witnessed by people and scholars was that it was the work of demons (p. 316).

Wang then further argues that a dragon could not fly to heaven. He first asserts that the dragon was a water animal and flying thus simply did not accord with its nature. Even if it could ascend into the air, it could not fly very high. When the *qi* of the earth rose during spring and summer and the water became disturbed, the dragon could not dive into the water, but could ascend together with the *qi*. However, if at this moment the dragon encountered storms, it would lose control and crash into the mountains. As a result, it is not surprising to find a dead dragon in a valley. Obviously it was absurd, Wang contends, that a dragon could carry the Yellow Emperor to heaven. Moreover, he argues that a dragon was unable to cause rainfall. In reality, the dragon seen by people was nothing more than dry air forced to descend from heaven by cold clouds which then attracted wet air from the earth. The confrontation of the two air layers formed a linear shape, which was easily mistaken for a dragon (pp. 316-317).

Thus, by appropriating Western natural philosophy Wang defines the nature of a dragon and explains a natural phenomenon that was believed to be caused by a dragon. By denying the possibility that a dragon could fly to heaven, he also denies the legend that the Yellow Emperor had transformed into an immortal and ridden a dragon up to heaven. Wang thus purifies the image of the Yellow Emperor from Daoist accretions, while leaving him in place as one of the founding fathers of medicine.  

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19 Wang Honghan also applies this reasoning to Hugong’s *壺公* case from which the famous idiom *xuanhu* 懸壺 (Practice Medicine, literally hanging a pot) was derived (p. 322). Hugong, a legendary immortal, practiced medicine in marketplace, hanging a pot before his stand as a symbol. He was said to jump into his pot at the end of the day after the close of business. Wang argues that this was impossible, for human beings were unable to extend or shrink their size at will.

20 Wang also refutes the legend of Ma Shihuang 马師皇, a contemporary of the Yellow Emperor, who once cured a dragon and was carried up to heaven by it. By fault-
In addition to cleansing superstitious elements from the biographies of medical sages in ancient times, Wang also applies himself to the correction of the wrongs in the biographies of Daoist physicians whose legends and skills were firmly inscribed in the historical memory of medieval medical practitioners. For instance, Liu An 刘安 in the Han dynasty was said to have ascended to heaven, followed by his dogs and chickens. Wang claims that this story was fabricated by the *Liexian zhuan* 列仙傳 (Biographies of the Immortals). Following Christian theology, Wang asserts that the Lord on High rewards the virtuous, permitting their souls to enter Heaven, so that they can attend him. However, their bodies remain beneath the soil and cannot ascend to Heaven. He stresses that his remarks should serve to awaken the misled (xing mi 醒迷), that is, those who have departed from Confucian doctrines and indulged in heresy (pp. 322-323).

Another example which Wang adduces against Daoism is Xu Xun’s 许逊 (239-374?) biography. Xu was born in an era when epidemics raged. He practiced Daoism, from which he learned the methods of treating epidemics and purportedly saved the lives of many people as a result. Like other immortals, Xu was said to have ascended to Heaven. In the Song dynasty, Xu was promoted by the Huizong 徽宗 emperor to the status of a Daoist true master (*zhenjun* 真君). Wang directed his criticism at Huizong, who had created the highest deity in Daoism, the Jade Emperor (*yuhuang dadi* 玉皇大帝), the highest ruler of Gods and Heaven. Wang states that the so-called Jade Emperor was nothing more than an ordinary man before he received that title. How could he compare with the true Lord on High? What could be more ridiculous than an emperor in the mundane world bestowing an official title to the emperor in Heaven? If the Huizong emperor were so mighty, why had he not foreseen his own miserable fate? However, because of Huizong’s action, people confused the Jade Emperor with the Lord on High. Alas, Wang laments, the world has been polluted by the work of demons, and he has no choice but to fight against the degenerate custom of the Jade Emperor cult (pp. 328-329).

Ever since Christianity had entered China in the mid sixteenth century, missionaries and converted Chinese literati had initiated a tradition of “awakening the misled” or “rebutting absurdity” (*pi wang* 闢妄) to criticize Daoism, Buddhism and popular religion.21 Writings of this sort were popular, and many were written in plain language aimed at educating the lower class. Wang Honghan, too, had written a book entitled *Pi wang*, which is probably no longer extant.22 In
this way, Wang made clear his Christian identity while at the same time accepting the textual tradition of “rebutting absurdity”. His History of Medicine Past and Present no doubt served the purpose of Christian persuasion.

b. Defending Professional Boundaries and Defining Proper Medical Practices

While invoking Christian beliefs in his crusade to combat Daoism, Buddhism, and popular religion, Wang Honghan did not leave out the sins of magical healers. Many entries in his History of Medicine Past and Present are directed against them.

Different types of medical care have coexisted throughout Chinese history. Since there was no formal licensing system in late imperial China, various kinds of healers competed intensively for clients in the health sector. Magical healing practiced by witches, quacks and religious practitioners in the temples was very popular. Although the physicians’ therapeutic strategies largely relied on prescriptions and acupuncture, they sometimes evoked the power of magical practices in dealing with difficult cases and conferred on their treatments a medical reason drawn from medical texts. Perhaps because of competition or social factors, such as the increasing number of lower level literati who often chose to become physicians after several failures in the civil service examinations, a group of so-called “Confucian physicians” (ruyi 儒 醫) gradually took shape since the Song dynasty.23 The main claim of this group was that they were not common doctors who merely read prescription books or medical primers. Rather, they were Confucian literati well-versed in both Confucian and medical classics. The label of “classical education” drew the boundary between themselves and other medical practitioners. Since there was no institutional means to safeguard this boundary, Confucian physicians constantly had to underscore its existence. It was against this historical background that Wang Honghan composed his History of Medicine Past and Present.

As a Confucian physician, Wang targeted religious healers and quacks as his main competitors. He comments on the biography of Miaofu 苗 父, a physician in high antiquity believed to be the ancestor of spell healing (zhuyou 祝 由), by saying that magic and witchcraft were not a part of the heritage of the sages. They were the inventions of Daoism in medieval China and thus belonged to

heresy. However, people in later times were fond of these eerie stories of healing with spells and circulated them widely. He expresses severe doubt regarding the question of whether healing with spells had really been effective in high antiquity, since one could not find any convincing proof for it during his own time. Eventually he cites *Mengzi* 孟子 (Mencius), who noted that if one were to believe in books completely, one would be better off without them (p. 318).

Wang further explicates his position by distinguishing God (shen 神) from ghosts (gui 鬼). God is just and perfect in nature, therefore, human beings could not abuse him by means of spells proffered for their own petty desires. Spells, Wang claims, are a conspiracy of the Devil intended to lead human beings astray. The Devil pretends to accede to human desire and attaches himself to spells in order to demonstrate his magical power. Occasionally, when one’s mind/heart is bewildered, the power of spells can clarify one’s confusion and, as a result, one’s ailment can come to an end. However, if the disease resides in one’s internal organs, spells will be entirely useless and even harmful, because proper medical treatment will be delayed. Wang concludes that God and the Devil never intervene in a process of illness. It was human stupidity that had invented this conviction and caused men’s own eventual suffering and death (pp. 318-319).

Wang comments on Xian 咸, a spirit medium (wu 巫) of the time of the mythical emperor Yao, in the same manner. It was said that Xian was able to prolong life by using spells. He was also capable of causing trees to dry up and birds to fall down by curses. Wang corrects what was “wrong” in the biography of spirit medium Xian by stating that fortune or misfortune, longevity or premature death, were under the jurisdiction of the Lord on High. No one could usurp His power. Xian’s story was only a lie created by foolish people. He urges Confucian scholars to discard this kind of fiction (p. 319).

Wang further attacks the practice of magical healing in his days by commenting on Li Xi’s 李醯 biography. Li was the chief court physician in the Qin dynasty (221-206 BC). When the legendary doctor Bian Que 扁鹊 practiced medicine in the Qin period, Li realized that his skill would not exceed Bian Que’s and thus paid an assassin to murder him. Wang states that Li must have been a mediocre doctor judging from his jealousy of Bian Que. He remarks that the art of healing had declined since the Warring States period (476-221 BC), which constituted the hotbed for producing a shameful physician like Li Xi. His contemporaries were no better, as they were concerned only with their business and not the Way of medicine.

Wang complains further that the situation in the Jiangnan 江南 area had deteriorated even further, and the worst of all was Wu County where he practiced medicine. People in Wu County trusted spirit mediums, diviners and mediocre physicians more than learned physician. These quacks formed an interested group to cheat people and caused much damage. Wang laments this situation, one that has prompted him to awaken people so that they might refrain from heterodox medical practices (pp. 321-322). By commenting on the biographies of past phy-
sicians, Wang delineates the professional boundaries of medicine and aims at making his construction of history a tool for demoralizing his competitors.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the *History of Medicine Past and Present* is Wang’s biography of Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200), the renowned Neo-Confucian master who had never been listed in the genealogy of famous physicians in any previous writings of medical history. Wang first underlines Zhu’s status as a Confucian familiar with medicine by citing Zhu’s remark on the *Maijue 脉诀* (The Verbal Instructions of the Pulse), which he considered a forgery. Wang wholeheartedly agrees with Zhu on this point and argues that Zhu was thus worthy of being enlisted in the genealogy of eminent physicians.

Wang’s praise for Zhu is only a camouflage, however. In his comments on Zhu’s biography, Wang harshly criticizes Zhu’s placing of physicians and spirit mediums in the same category. According to Zhu, both were dispensable while at the same time comparable to those who did labour service (*jianyi 贱役*). Although their status was low, people constantly needed their services. Zhu seemed to insinuate that their low social status and their engagement in business transactions would compromise their moral integrity. An influential figure like Zhu Xi despising physicians to such an extent certainly disturbed Wang, who accuses Zhu of ignoring the distinction between medicine and witchcraft. Wang asserts that spirit mediums were indeed of a lowly profession, because they rely on magic based on false principles. Medicine is entirely different in nature, Wang claims. According to Wang, there are two kinds of physicians. One concerned only with business, the other with the Way of medicine. The former provide reliable diagnoses and prescriptions and are capable of providing care to both noble men and common people. Such an important social role should not be treated as a lowly profession. As for the latter, they are able to grasp the secrets of the creation of Heaven and Earth, the origins of life, and the Principle (*li 理*), which is identical with Confucian perceptions. Unfortunately, contemporary Confucians concentrated their energy on preparing for the civil service examinations and ignored the significance of the Principle. Moreover, common people considered medicine a means to attain longevity or a path to fortune without realizing that medicine was actually the avenue to Principle. The art of medicine had declined as a result. Even a learned Confucian like Zhu Xi misunderstood the nature of medicine. It also proved, Wang adds, that Zhu Xi, though learned, had not attained the ultimate Principle (pp. 345-346).

Master Zhu’s errors were not limited to blurring the boundaries between spirit mediums and physicians; he was also superstitious. Wang continues his attacks in his comment on the biography of Yang Wenxiu 杨文修, with whom Zhu Xi once had talked the whole night long. Yang had learned medicine to cure his mother’s illness, a typical narrative for a Confucian physician. In addition to medical work, Yang also compiled a book on *fengshui 风水* or geomancy. Wang criticizes Zhu Xi for indulging in a discussion on geomancy with Yang. Zhu was so convinced of geomantic practices that he buried his parents separately. Even
worse, Zhu had a great influence on subsequent burial customs, particularly in his hometown of Huizhou 徽州, Anhui province, where people wasted fortunes on obtaining a suitably auspicious burial ground. Wang is so upset with such decadent customs that he feels obliged to criticize geomancy so that people will be aware that they squandered their fortune merely to benefit geomancers. Wang also claims that a burial ground bore no relation whatsoever with the fortunes of the offspring of the deceased. The purpose of choosing a burial ground was, in fact, to avoid wind (fēng 風) and water (shuǐ 水), so that the natural environment would not easily damage the corpses of one’s parents. Here Wang beautifully plays with the words fēng and shuǐ, separating them as two factors one had to consider when choosing a burial ground, to argue against fēngshuí, geomancy, which he regards as deluded (mí 迷). It is one’s behaviour that determines one’s fortune, Wang adds. Virtue is the only thing that matters. Wang rhetorically asks why a great Confucian like Zhu Xi believed in such nonsense (pp. 346-347).

Wang’s critical depiction of Zhu Xi has to be situated in Confucian and Christian historical context. For a literatus of the early Qing, Zhu Xi was no doubt the most significant figure in the Confucian tradition. The commentaries on the classics of his school had become textbooks for the civil service examinations. However, for the missionaries and their converts, Zhu Xi’s thought represented a philosophy alienated from God’s grace. Zhu Xi’s school believed that lǐ and qì generated and ordered the myriad things. There was no place for the miraculous creation and redemption of human sin by the Christian Lord. The missionaries were of the opinion that Confucianism had declined from a period in ancient times when it had been united with Christianity, and for Wang, with medicine. Unfortunately, the Chinese gradually lost touch with Christian teachings, which the Western missionaries had now brought back to re-enlighten the “dark continent”, and to restore the appearance of original Confucianism polluted by Song Confucianism.

Identifying himself as a Confucian-Christian physician, Wang had to negotiate the tension between Zhu Xi as a great Confucian master and his denigrating comments on physicians. As a Confucian literatus, Wang accepts Zhu Xi’s orthodox status. Thus, when commenting on Zhu Xi’s words about spirit mediums, he uses an 按 (annotation [by the author]) instead of zhengwù (correcting errors). This represents a more attenuated attitude toward Zhu Xi than the wording he employs in commenting on Yang Wenxiu’s biography. From the Christian point of view, however, Zhu Xi was one of the points of departure away from God, believing a non-personal Principle to be the ultimate cause of the universe. Moreover, as a Christian physician, Wang makes use of the case of Zhu Xi to draw professional boundaries and to criticize improper religious medical practices. Zhu Xi’s example clearly demonstrates how the Christian narrative of Chinese history and Confucianism became the model for Wang’s construction of the history of Chinese medicine.

Wang does not forget to define proper medicine while attacking the medical practices led by “superstition”. He largely “rationalizes” the anecdotes of the
legendary physicians. For instance, Bian Que was believed to be capable of seeing the internal organs, greatly improving his diagnosis. All the histories before the History of Medicine Past and Present agreed on this point. Wang, however, asserts that this was only a metaphor, describing Bian Que’s skill of diagnosis, but not his possession of a pair of “x-ray” eyes (p. 321). Neither does Wang believe that Hua Tuo 華 陀 could perform “brain surgery”. Hua Tuo was the most famous physician of the Three Kingdoms Period (220-280). Cao Cao 曹 操, the founding father of the Wei 魏 dynasty, once had a severe headache and hired Hua to treat him. Hua attempted to employ a dramatic means, opening Cao’s head, to cure him. Cao, however, grew skeptical and had Hua killed. With regard to this legend, Wang comments that the head is the vital organ where the six yangmai 阳 脉 intersect according to the theory of Chinese medicine. Cutting the head up and releasing qi would only aggravate the illness. Hua Tuo must have discovered that Cao Cao would soon usurp the Han and thus planned to murder him. Unfortunately, Hua had failed in his attempt and was killed instead (p. 326).

It is interesting to note that the examples to which Wang refers are related to surgery. Anatomy was the most distinctive feature of Western medical knowledge transmitted to China during this period. However, anatomical knowledge was rarely applied to surgery and was mainly used to demonstrate the miracle of God’s creation.24 Moreover, upper class physicians had the tendency to touch their patients less in the Ming and Qing periods. Physicians mainly relied on pulse diagnosis and prescriptions.25 They even advocated that injury related to orthopaedics should also be treated by internal medicine. Although the early missionaries sometimes practiced surgery in China, its efficacy certainly could not be compared with what was practiced by later missionaries after the middle of the nineteenth century, when anaesthesia and antiseptics had been invented. Wang’s suspicions regarding surgery have to be understood against this historical background.

To sum up, Wang Honghan’s efforts to provide a boundary framework for his profession relied not only on the exclusion of medical practitioners that he considered unqualified, but also on circumscribing what proper practices were. Social boundaries were not physical lines, but were constructed through the various strategies of social agents. In the case of Wang’s History of Medicine Past and Present, the boundaries between Confucian physicians and other healers were defined by using the sort of textual learning and practical skills that he considered legitimate. By discussing the history of medical skills allotted to various medical


practitioners, Wang was able to draw distinct social boundaries between Confucian physicians and other healers.

IV. The Use of History

What was at stake then when Wang Honghan composed his History of Medicine Past and Present? What were the purpose served by Wang’s enthusiasm in defining proper professional boundaries and practices in this work? The answers to these questions can be sought from the historical context in which Wang was situated. In this section, I will first review the medical situation in Wu County and discuss how Wang attacked spirit mediums by writing a history about them.

Medicine in late imperial China was a lucrative but extremely competitive business, particularly in the Jiangnan area. Not only did physicians compete with each other; they also had to face challenges from itinerant physicians, quacks, religious healers and amateurs. A rapid population increase in Jiangnan certainly contributed to the demand for medical care and competition among physicians. Zhang Lu, a physician in the seventeenth century, once observed that many literati had become physicians in the early Qing, and that they promoted each other to gain instant fame to such an extent that almost every established household produced a physician. The temporary oversupply of doctors further intensified the competition among physicians in Wang Honghan’s time.

The government’s laissez-faire medical policy was another factor that led to severe competition among physicians. After the establishment of the Ming dynasty, the Chinese government retreated almost completely from responsibility for health care, which it left to the local gentry. Nor did the government assume control over the quality of physicians. Except at the court, no examination was

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29 Leung Angela Ki Che, “Organized Medicine in Ming-Qing China: State and Private Medical Institutions in the Lower Yangzi Region”, Late Imperial China 8.1 (1987): 134-166; Chao Yuan-ling, “Medicine and Society”, pp. 111-131. Although medical officials (yixue 醫 學) were set up in local administrations, they did not count as formal officials (liuguan 流 官). They were simply selected by the local government and were given licenses, but exerted no standardizing power over the medical practices of other physicians.
provided for medical practitioners nor a licensing process imposed on them.\textsuperscript{30} Determining who was a competent physician became a difficult problem for the patient. Intensive competition among physicians called for a distinguishing apparatus by which elite physicians could differentiate themselves from other healers. Writing medical treatises thus became one of the most important devices by which elite physicians not only promoted themselves, but also demonstrated their knowledge to potential wealthy clients. Not surprisingly, they often requested officials to preface their treatises in order to certify their credentials.

Wu County, where Wang Honghan practiced medicine, had witnessed intensive medical competition since the Ming.\textsuperscript{31} With its rich medical resources, Wu County was also considered the place where the best physicians in the empire congregated. Despite its abundance of physicians, spirit mediums and diviners also occupied a certain market share. They were often associated with the notorious Wutong 五通 (God of Wealth) cult.\textsuperscript{32} Wutong was a licentious and powerful deity to whom many patients prayed for health. Spirit mediums in the Wutong temples often took advantage of the opportunity to earn a fortune. Due in part to Wutong’s supposed sexual power, they specialized in the treating female patients, sometimes colluding with wealthy visitors’ servants to acquire useful health information. They would then demand that the visitor donate money before certain rituals to ward off illness could be performed. Occasionally, monks even cooperated with spirit mediums in the worship of Wutong and prayed for the patients.\textsuperscript{33}

The popularity of the Wutong cult enraged the Confucian scholar Tang Bin 湯斌 (1627-1687), who was Provincial Commissioner in charge of the administration of Wu County at that time. In 1685, Tang resolutely swept away the Wutong temples in order to terminate the cult once and for all. Tang’s action was highly praised by local Christians, who considered the Wutong cult pure superstition. Not only did the painter and Christian Wu Li 吳歷 (1632-1718) applaud


\textsuperscript{31} Gao Qi 高啟, “Zeng Wang yishi xu” 贈王醫師序 (Preface dedicated to Physician Wang), in \textit{Gao Qingqiu ji} 高青丘集 (Collected Essays of Gao Qi), Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1985, p. 904.


Tang Bing’s action, but Wang Honghan also witnessed the decrease of spirit mediums in Wu County (p. 321). Wang links himself to these events in his *History of Medicine Past and Present* by attacking spirit mediums that had been identified as heterodox by local officials. His comments about them aim at denouncing their role as miracle workers and depriving them of their status as legitimate healers.

Spirit mediums were not the only group responsible for the blurring of boundaries between Confucian physicians and religious healers. Physicians themselves were partly responsible. Some physicians participated in local festivals related to the celebration of immortals and medicine. For instance, they celebrated the birthdays of Lü Dongbin and the Medical King (Yaowang), participating in and burning incense during rituals. Wang Honghan labels them as mediocre physicians who mislead people to believe that medicine is somehow associated with the Daoist pursuit of immortality. He feels obligated to provide a way to differentiate Confucian physicians from others. Rewriting the history of past physicians served this purpose.

Wang’s references to his contemporary world in the *History of Medicine Past and Present* reveal not only his Christian concerns about Chinese folk beliefs, but also his attempts to establish the boundaries between himself and the healers involved in folk religious practices. The medical history that Wang narrates depicts Wang as a Confucian physician, and relegates other religious healers to an inferior position. By associating various types of healers with the historical decline of medicine, he is thus able to define the true qualities of a physician and suggest a proper relationship between physicians and patients. While attacking other religious healers, his text also communicates his Christian beliefs and Western natural philosophy to his readers and makes them part of the qualifications of a physician. No doubt, Christian natural philosophy and beliefs distinguished Wang from other Confucian physicians. By appropriating medical history from his Christian perspective, Wang, in his own view, stood out as one of the few eminent physicians not only in his own era but also throughout history.

**V. Conclusion**

Cross-cultural scientific exchanges transformed not only the material conditions of human existence but also human consciousness. When modern “oecumenical” science, as Needham asserts, overflowed into the streams of other scientific traditions, it was subjected to the appropriations of the local hosts who shaped the

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34 Chen Yuan 陈垣, *Wu Yushan xiansheng nianpu* 吳漁山先生年譜 (Chronological Biography of Mr. Wu Yushan), Beijing: Furen daxue, 1937, p. 32a.

35 Gu Lu 顧祿, *Qingjia lu* 清嘉錄 (Records of Qingji [i.e. Wu County]), Taipei: Taipei Shangwu yinshuguan, 1976, juan 4, pp. 5a, 6b.
significances of science and technology by using them for their own purposes. Cross-cultural exchanges of science and technology, however, not only transmitted pure knowledge, as scientific knowledge transferred in the late Ming was bundled together with Christianity. It represented a lesser truth in relation to the overarching religion, which held God to be the cause of the phenomenal world. From Him came the myriad things, different groups of human beings, their languages, and, most of all, science and technology. Tinged with this religious message, adapting European science and technology in seventeenth-century China was thus not only a material but also cultural event.

In Wang Honghan’s case, the practical uses of anatomical knowledge and natural philosophy that came together with Christianity were probably limited. As witnessed by his medical cases appended to the *History of Medicine Past and Present*, his practices still followed the typical ways of a Confucian doctor. Nonetheless, he applied Western natural philosophy and Christianity to reinterpret the history of China’s medical past, which then became the instrument for him to articulate his identity as a Confucian doctor. With the additional knowledge of Christianity, he was able to define proper medical practices and construct social boundaries between himself and other physicians.

Wang duplicated the extant texts on medical history and then appended his own commentaries to some biographies he considered important. He even attempted to redraw the trajectories of medical history by granting Zhu Xi a significant position. He integrated his medical history into a Christian scheme by appropriating the extant traditional genres and texts of medical history. He merged Chinese and Christian historical theory to present a common origin for Confucian physicians’ vision of history, affirming that the Principle of medicine was identical with that of Confucianism. In this way, Wang forged a “trinity” of Christianity, Confucianism and medicine and shed new light on the already old medical history narratives. The underlying foundation for his narrative was Christianity and Western natural philosophy, which he employed in his comments to criticize Buddhist and Daoist healers, spirit mediums, mediocre physicians and all sorts of superstitions related to medicine. Confucianism was then used to support this historical narrative.

However, Wang’s Confucianism was not the official state-supported *lixue* 理学 (Learning of Principle) represented by the Cheng-Zhu 程朱 orthodoxy. To a seventeenth-century Chinese Christian, *lixue* had lost touch with the original Confucianism when the Chinese people had still been familiar with the grace of God and had recorded this in their sacred classics. The once glorious “trinity” had been lost when ancient China fell into turmoil and the ancient texts were burned during the Qin dynasty. Thus, the Chinese were eventually alienated from God’s grace. Both Confucianism and medicine declined, leaving the arena to be invaded by heterodox Buddhists, Daoists and all sort of heterodox healers. The revival of *lixue* in the Song dynasty actually alienated the Chinese even further from their ancient knowledge. *Lixue* had been infiltrated by Buddhism, but the Confucians did not even realize this fact. Western missionaries restored Christi-
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anity and Confucianism to its original integrity, thus reunifying medicine and making possible the unity between Confucianism and Christianity. In this plot of “paradise lost” and “paradise regained”, Wang used a strategy of inclusion and exclusion and thus rebuilt and guarded the boundaries between himself and other medical practitioners. He recruited Confucian scholars as his allies, asking them to pay due attention to the significant enlightenment that Christianity could bring and thereby rebut numerous heterodox fictions in the hagiography of medicine.

Wang’s *History of Medicine Past and Present* allows us to gain an insight into the interplay between Chinese identities and Western religio-scientific ideas within the arena of medicine.36 His hybrid identities rendered his blending of the history of traditional Chinese medicine, Christianity and Confucianism possible and forged them into a homogeneous discourse that endowed them with a monolithic origin. He projected his Christian perception of history onto the trajectory of medicine and positioned himself on that trajectory as a Confucian physician who had comprehended the “Learning from Heaven”. His rewriting of the textual tradition of medical history in turn enhanced his hybrid identities, which functioned as a marker of his own cultural capital to differentiate himself from other healers in the competitive medical market in Wu County.