
Frédéric Obringer

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It took until 2000 to finally have a volume of the great series Science and Civilisation in China (SCC) on medicine. For a subject as vast as this, it is something of a surprise to find that it is one of the thinner volumes of the series, less than 300 pages, though this is not the least of the paradoxes of the publication. To understand this situation we have to give a short history of the book.

At the end of his life, Joseph Needham was working, together with Lu Gwei-djen, on the history of Chinese medicine, which had been a concern of his for some considerable time. Several articles resulted from this work, as well as the book on acupuncture and moxibustion, Celestial Lancets, published in 1980. The original intention was for all this to be updated and edited. In 1993, two years before the death of Needham, Nathan Sivin agreed to deal with this work, though not without some hesitation. For him, “The problem lay not in the book but in the field of enquiry” (p. 1). Thus, there was a clear difference of viewpoint between Needham and Sivin.

Lu and Needham’s “gaze remained fixed on the emergence of modern biomedical knowledge from discoveries and concepts that originated in many parts of the world”, while Sivin “did not see knowledge, no matter where, as converging toward a predestined state” (p. 1). In the same way, “the issue is not how A or B anticipated the modern Z, but how people went from A to B and what we can learn from that about the process of historical change” (p. 1).

For Sivin, as “in the near future no one is yet ready to survey the whole of medical history in a way that will meet the high standards of the series [SCC]” (p. 3), the only possibility was to provide a selection of essays in which Needham and Lu presented their own insights as a volume of the series. This volume became then only a record of their pioneering work and a guide to recent insights.

After an introduction by Sivin, the volume contains five sections, each section being originally an article published in various works and here revised by Sivin, concluding with a large bibliography according to the model of the SCC series.
The introduction gives Nathan Sivin the opportunity to explain the differences between his methodological conceptions of the history Chinese medicine and those of Needham, and to suggest many themes of research that should be explored before a general history can be considered. For Sivin, the recurrent themes of Needham works are the following (p. 6-9):

- Unit of exploration: the world.
- Two kinds of comparison: achievements of different civilisations (locating priorities), and items of Chinese knowledge or practice with those of today.
- Sciences in different civilisations converge to form one universal science.
- Polymathic field to explore.
- A constant opposition between “Taoism” and “Confucianism”; Needham held Taoism particularly responsible for originating scientific attitudes and accomplishments.
- Economic data rarely appear, and discussions of social patterns largely depend on the dichotomy of Confucianism vs. Taoism.

In fact, most historians of Chinese science today will readily agree with Sivin’s remarks about the “Needham style”, but this is true for all the subjects Needham studied. For many years now, volumes of the SCC series have been written by specialists and not by Needham and his early collaborators. Thus, the choice just to publish a short volume on Chinese medicine composed only of some formerly published articles is explained by the characteristics of the field. For example, Sivin says that “the nearly 10,000 surviving books on medicine written before 1900 present a very different scale of historiographic effort. (...) For that reason, with great regret, I was unable to take up Needham’s challenge” (p. 3). In roughly the last twenty years, “new” historians of Chinese medicine, like their colleagues working on history of Western medicine, have aimed for an integral understanding of technical phenomena against the background of their time and place and of the social and intellectual interactions between healers and patients. In this context, there are still so many questions to be explored that the writing of a general history of Chinese medicine by one or two authors would, without doubt, be very difficult. In particular, as Sivin remarks, the economics of medical practice, medical pluralism, patronage, growth of a “national drug market”, occupational organizations, to give just some examples, are important topics insufficiently studied until now.

The first article of the volume, “Medicine in Chinese Culture” (1966), is a general survey of “the position of medicine and medical doctors in traditional-Chinese society”. For Needham, medicine was shaped by “feudal bureaucratism”, a concept today outdated. At the beginning of the article, Needham explains his ambition: “But while all the physical and some of the simpler biological sciences in China and Europe have long ago fused into one, this has not yet happened with the medical systems of the two civilisations. As we shall later see, much in Chi-
nese medicine cannot yet be explained in modern terms, but that means neither that it is valueless, nor that it lacks profound interest. We hope that this volume may lead to greater mutual understanding in the intercultural and intercivilizational confrontations of our times. We shall consider (...) a number of topics indispensable to an overview of classical medicine: its doctrines and early history, the influence of China’s characteristic forms of government and religion, acupuncture as a quintessential therapy, the differences between traditional and modern medicine, and the prospects for their integration” (p. 38).

The second article, “Hygiene and Preventive Medicine in Ancient China” (1962), is an illustration of the attitude of Needham toward Taoism: “Ancient Chinese medicine was closely associated with the beliefs of the philosophers who may broadly be termed Taoist. In contrast to the Confucians who were interested primarily in human society alone, the Taoists devoted themselves to the study of Nature (...) (p. 67). The topics of this article include conceptions of longevity, efforts to prevent disease, as well as principles of nutritional regimen and of personal hygiene.

“China and the Origin of Qualifying Examinations in Medicine” (1962) deals with medical posts and examinations, with a focus on the Song Dynasty, concluding with Chinese influence on Islam and of Islam on Europe. In “China and the Origins of Immunology” (1980), Needham gives a history of Chinese traditional etiological theories of smallpox and of smallpox inoculation. In this part, Needham argues that Taoists secretly practiced it perhaps as early as the eighth century, but at least from the time of the Song Prime Minister Wang Dan 王旦 (957-1017), though his arguments are not fully accepted by historians of Chinese medicine

The main topic of “Forensic Medicine in Ancient China” (1988) is the “greatest work on forensic medicine prior to the Scientific Revolution”, the Xiyuan jilu 洗冤集錄 (The Washing Away of Wrongs), written by a jurist learned in medicine, Song Ci 宋慈, in 1247. Seven pages are also devoted to the Qin bamboo slips dealing with legal cases, and some others to the development of the subject in Yuan, Ming and Qing times.

To sum up, the volume is a good introduction to the “Needham style”, but, except for the remarks of Sivin and for the bibliography, this is not the first book that young students should turn to when they want to have an updated survey of the history of Chinese medicine. We hope that the new generation of outstanding scholars from China, Japan, North America and Europe will soon be able to produce such a book.