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## • English Translation of TCM

# Introducing *Considerations in the Translation of Chinese Medicine*

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**ABSTRACT:** This article introduces the document, *Considerations in the Translation of Chinese Medicine*, published in PDF form online in both Chinese and English. This 20-page document includes several sections describing why the *Considerations* is necessary, the specificity of texts in Chinese medicine; the history of translation in Chinese medicine; who constitutes an ideal translator of Chinese medicine; what types of language exist in Chinese medicine; and specific issues in the translation of Chinese medicine, such as domestication versus foreignization, technical terminology, period-specific language, style, polysemy, and etymological translation. The final section offers a brief advisory for consumers, and concludes with a call to further discussion, and action, specifically in the development of international collaborative efforts towards the creation of more rigorous guidelines for the translation of Chinese medicine. The current article provides an overview of several of these sections, and includes links to the original document.

**KEYWORDS:** translation; English; Chinese medicine; language

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For many years now, the *Journal of Integrative Medicine* has published articles covering various topics in the English translation of Chinese medicine. Despite these efforts, however, the broader world of clinical Chinese medicine, especially in the West, remains acutely unaware of many key issues concerning the translation process. Unfortunately, this means that despite the continued development of Chinese medicine and integrative care in China, there remain significant hurdles related to language, cultural perspective, and access to materials in the United States, Europe, and beyond.

For these reasons, the UCLA Center for East-West Medicine (CEWM) has released a document entitled “*Considerations in the Translation of Chinese Medicine*” (abbreviated as the *Considerations*), authored by Sonya Pritzker, Ph.D., L.Ac., Ka-Kit Hui, M.D., F.A.C.P., Hanmo Zhang, Ph.D., and Weijun Zhang, D.PH. The twenty-page document, available for free download in both Chinese and English at

<http://cewm.med.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/CM-Considerations-4.10.14-FINAL.pdf> (English) or <http://cewm.med.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/CHINESE-CM-Considerations-4.28.14-FINAL.pdf> (Chinese), aims to raise awareness among the many stakeholders involved in the translation of Chinese medicine. This includes not only the producers but also consumers of translations, as well as various individuals involved in the production process. It is further hoped that the document will help promote communication in the field as a whole, and will play a role in the development of more high-quality translations in clinical Chinese medicine, especially in order to facilitate increased opportunities for international collaboration in research, education, and practice.

Inspired in large part by the American Council of Learned Societies’ *Guidelines for the Translation of Social Science Texts*<sup>[1]</sup>, the *Considerations* addresses the need for both high quantity and quality of translations of Chinese medical



materials. The document acknowledges the fact that Chinese medicine rests on a highly text-based, philosophical, cultural, and scholarly tradition in which classical guidelines for the care of patients are constantly reevaluated in the light of historical and contemporary clinical case information and biomedical advancements. Only a minuscule portion of this rich tradition has been translated into English. In light of the ever-growing popularity of Chinese medicine as a complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) in the English-speaking world, it would be beneficial to many practitioners and patients alike to have more English translations of Chinese medical texts. This need is amplified by the fact that only a few of the 50 schools of Chinese medicine in the United States that train students in acupuncture, Chinese herbal medicine, and massage require any Chinese language training. Most English-speaking practitioners in the United States must therefore depend on translated materials.

Given this need for more high-quality translations, as well as the reality that many if not most United States practitioners must depend on such translations in order to further their education, it is crucial at this time that all stakeholders in the translation of Chinese medicine, especially consumers, understand at least the basics regarding the scope and complexity of translation in this vast field. The *Considerations* is also necessary because stakeholders also need to be aware of how to recognize, utilize, and create *better* translations of Chinese medical texts. High-quality translations of Chinese medical texts are firmly grounded in academic rigor, clinical experience, and cultural sensitivity. As a result, readers and practitioners are variably influenced by different translations and the inevitable choices that translators make along the way, often without significant guidance. Such choices often lead to the loss or shift of critical diagnostic and treatment information. Such losses and shifts can critically impact the way that Chinese medicine is practiced, as well as the outcomes that can be measured in research<sup>[2]</sup>. Likewise, such choices often can and do maintain the cultural misrepresentation of Chinese medicine in English, for example, in the overuse of biomedical terminology without explanation or through the use of orthographic resources (e.g., capitalization) that perpetuate certain characterizations of Chinese medicine vis-à-vis biomedicine<sup>[3]</sup>.

The *Considerations* further addresses the ways in which Chinese medical texts differ from texts in other fields such as the natural sciences or biomedicine, fields in which there is established terminology that is both standardized and accepted across domains and publications. In comparison with biomedicine and the sciences, the lexical choices of Chinese medicine are complex in part because of the lack of widely accepted standards. Although there have been attempts at the creation of such standards, there is not yet an internationally agreed-upon set of standard terms<sup>[2,4,5]</sup>. In comparison with literary texts, Chinese medical texts are meant to be useful in real-life clinical situations, rather than simply be read through or discussed. Although

some Chinese medical texts are translated for historical reasons only, many are intended as guides for practice. This applies, often, to both classic treatises and contemporary texts. Translators, and ideally consumers, must therefore understand the context and format of the text in its original form, as well as the context in which the translation will be utilized. This presents multiple complications, including potential differences in the types of practice that readers of the original text and the translated text engage in.

Due to the complexity of translating Chinese medical texts, the *Considerations* thus also approaches the interconnected issues of who constitutes the ideal translator in Chinese medicine. In this vast field, the range of knowledge required to conduct translations — beyond a linguistic proficiency in both Chinese and English — is quite broad. Some background or training in clinical Chinese medicine is crucial. Furthermore, even for the translation of contemporary texts, some knowledge of classical, literary Chinese language is required, as contemporary texts often include both brief and extended quotes from classical works. Even those classical texts, though, are interpreted in contemporary times within a global healthcare framework that includes biomedicine, so some background or training in biomedicine (Western medicine) is also essential. Other characteristics of the ideal translator include having a strong understanding of the frameworks of Chinese history and contemporary Western healthcare, plus an in-depth appreciation of the multiple genres of Chinese medicine texts.

It is rare indeed to find a single translator, especially a native English speaker, who can meet this wide range of requirements. It is inherently problematic to have a native Chinese speaker as the primary translator involved in translating Chinese texts into English, as it tends to create texts that are difficult to edit and often inappropriately framed for the target audience. It is also important to consider, however, that many native Chinese speakers may be able to provide key insights into the text that a native English speaker may need in order to translate more accurately and appropriately. Likewise, it may also be important to include historians, physicians of Chinese medicine or biomedicine, or even social scientists who understand both cultural contexts. For this reason, the *Considerations* makes specific recommendations on the best team approach to the translation of Chinese medical texts.

After briefly discussing the thorny issue of how to understand language in the translation of Chinese medicine, and the pros and cons of using a referential versus network approach, the *Considerations* goes on to address several specific issues in the field. For example, the complex issue of source-oriented versus target-oriented translation is approached in a discussion of how the divergence of culturally Western or Chinese desires and motivations often create tension in the translation of specific texts. In these cases, original language is often transformed in order to make the text sound more biomedical or more traditional<sup>[6-9]</sup>. Original style and period-specific language may also be sacrificed, issues that the *Considerations* addresses, along

with the problems plaguing many Western translations that struggle with multiple meanings (polysemy) of Chinese medical terms, and over-relying on etymological explanations in translation. Finally, *Considerations* addresses the issues of technical terminology and the competing standard term sets that are currently available; biomedicalization, where authors and translators must balance the need to acknowledge relationships between contemporary biomedical science and Chinese medicine without sacrificing the original intention of the medicine; and clinical relevance, where even the most responsible translation cannot compete with lesser products if it is not clinically useful.

The *Considerations* concludes with a discussion of how consumers might better judge translations after reading the brief document. Especially when consumers do not have access to the original texts or even the original language, this is a challenging task. One way to evaluate translations, the *Considerations* suggests, is to consult multiple translations of an original work. Even when this option is unavailable, the document hopes to help make consumers more aware of what they are reading and utilizing in their clinical practice. This awareness is particularly critical because consumers of Chinese medical translations are often also *participants* in the translation process, as textual knowledge is made real through practice and as Chinese medicine concepts are explained to patients and other interested parties<sup>[3]</sup>. Given this fact, blind trust in translations produced by translators with multiple agendas is no longer a viable option. The *Considerations* thus hopes to spark a conversation that will eventually lead to the collaborative establishment of better guidelines in the field of Chinese medical translation. It is our hope that readers in China can participate in this conversation.

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The project was inspired by the *Guidelines for the Translation of Social Science Texts* ([www.acls.org/sstp.htm](http://www.acls.org/sstp.htm)).

### Conflict of interests

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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### Submission Guide

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