Mapping Drugs across Epistemic and Geographic Domains in Early Medieval China

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Project Questions and Rationale

It’s a long-held cultural belief that Daoists 道士, or more specifically, transcendents 仙人, were among the primary stakeholders in the early Chinese drug market. They held secret drug recipes, they made money by picking plants in the mountains and selling them in markets, and they used this knowledge not only to heal individuals, but to achieve miraculous longevity. How can we assess this claim, and come to a better understanding of the roles Daoists played in the medical marketplace, and the medical practice of religious figures generally?

So far, evidence used in these arguments has been anecdotal. When we read histories of pharmacology, or drug knowledge, they rarely include materials from the Daoist canon. Pharmacological history begins with the hazy formation of the *Shennong Bencao jing* 神農本草經 (SNBCJ) in roughly the second century CE, and moves on up through history through a series of centralized, standard texts. Arguments about Daoism are usually based on the fact that the earliest layer, the SNBCJ, is organized into Upper, Middle and Lower quality drugs 上中下, for nourishing life 養命, nourishing inner nature 養性, and for curing disease 治病. Many scholars contend that this reflected a “Daoist” goal of searching for longevity. However, close studies of the Daoist canon show that Daoists and transcendents used such drugs in ways that did not correspond to this hierarchy.

Furthermore, this way of approaching drug culture constructs its development through only a very narrow lineage of texts, leading us to imagine that drug knowledge circulated in China within a systematic, serially produced set of texts, and that the development of drug knowledge took place over time through editorial...
processes, the revising and adding to the *Bencao*. Yet this represents just a fraction of the drug culture of the time, accessible to only a very limited number of people. Such an analysis shows us nothing of the complex interactions between sellers, doctors, Daoists, Buddhists, homemakers, and many other characters who were involved in the drug trade.

Other studies of the wider circulation of drug knowledge are largely anecdotal, focusing on recipe texts which have been recovered from excavated sites like Dunhuang, Mawangdui, Wuwei and other places. These have received a lot of attention in recent years. However, these studies do not make systematic arguments about the entirety of the drug record, and the Daoist and Buddhist canons remain largely overlooked. The problem here is not a matter of smallness of resources, but of largess. References to drugs appear in many different shapes and forms in the Canon, and we cannot treat them all with the same analytical lens, or trust them equally as reliable sources of historical evidence. There are drug recipes for fasting, for yangsheng, for healing. There are hagiographies describing Transcendents using plants, animals and minerals for healing and to attain miraculous powers. Different texts each use and construct drugs in different ways. Who would ever think of a fabled story about someone rising to heaven in broad daylight as a reliable source for how to use a plant or mineral? Yet, these are nevertheless a cultural record of *some kind*, about drugs and popular cultural imaginings of them, and they testify to the circulation of these drugs through broad cultural domains. Such a reckoning of the diversity of drug lores in the canons, and a theoretical framework for how to study them has never been made.

There remains to be produced a systematic overview of the drug contents in the Daoist and Buddhist canons against which we can compare the genealogical development of the *Bencao* literature. This is the goal of the project at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, run by Chen Shih-pei and myself, with much input from Brent Ho-Leung Ho of Leiden University.
以電腦地圖科技跨越六朝草藥於地理及知識領域的分界

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摘要

我們如何更好的理解傳統中醫學市場的複雜性和多樣性，以及醫學知識的各種不同的轉化和轉交方式？如何比較道家與佛家等不同團體在中國史醫學中扮演的角色及它們彼此競爭的方式？大多數過往的研究是基於親事性的例子來探究，因為總體性地分析道藏與大藏經等大量文獻需要很多專業知識，很少醫學史家能憑一己之力嘗試。

馬克斯普朗克科學史研究所正在建設的平台將運用現有的數位方法來總體性地分析道藏和大藏經文獻。它將能在此數據經文庫檢索多詞詞集，產出時間、文類、和地區上的統計分析。此外，該平台將能在時空的維度上視覺化呈現數據，從而使學者能夠識別出藥物知識被創造的區域和時間。為了準備文獻供此平台分析，我們也將運用一個新型半自動文本標記系統的MARKUS來減少標記的時間。

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