INTRODUCTION

This book began as an indictment of the present. My goal was to expose and clear away the distortions introduced by modern ideologies into our interpretation of ancient Chinese medical history beginning in the nineteenth century. I had expected to find evidence of these ideologies in the various retellings of ancient medical history – namely, narratives that assume the progress of knowledge over the ages and relate the triumph of reason over superstition. This, of course, I found. But to my surprise, there was more. In modern retellings of Chinese medical history, I also discovered the tenacious survival of ancient historiographical practices, traces of which are everywhere, expressed in the selection and interpretation of the archive.

I first became aware of old historiographical practices while looking for evidence of modern bias. Nowhere did such bias seem more obvious than in the presentation of ancient figures by twentieth-century historians. Take Joseph Needham (1900–95) and Lu Gwei-djen 魯桂珍 (1904–91), for instance, two individuals often referred to as pioneers in the history of Chinese science. Their views on the origins of Chinese medicine are set forth in two seminal works, *Celestial Lancets: A History and Rationale of Acupuncture and Moxa* (1980) and an influential volume on medicine in *Science and Civilisation* (2000). Their story about the progress of Chinese medicine enumerated the achievements of what they called the “fathers of medicine.”

Chinese medical history begins with the “liberation” of healing practices from the older, purely magico-religious understandings of illness. According to Needham and Lu, the signs of such a shift may be glimpsed in the prognoses of Attendant He 和 (fl. 541 BC), whose “lectures” revealed the advance from magic and religion to primitive scientific theory.¹ Attendant He’s breakthrough was then followed by the achievements
of Bian Que 扁鵲, a mythical court physician with murky dates and lauded as a Chinese “Hippocrates.” Next in the sequence of medical progenitors was Chunyu Yi 淳于意 (fl. ca. 180–154 BC) of the Han 漢 dynasty (206 BC–AD 220), whose records of consultation proved that “the examination of the sick person, the investigation of the clinical history, the comparison of data from different examinations, and the therapeutic deductions all formed part of a discipline which constituted a valid and valuable precursor of contemporary clinical science.” The achievements of Zhang Ji 張機 in the early third century AD were next, as Zhang was the “first to set forth prescriptions in detail, and the first to classify febrile illnesses…” Then came Hua Tuo 華佗 (d. AD 208), who won “enduring fame for his skill in surgery and related disciplines, his early use of some kind of anesthesia, and his discoveries and inventions of medical gymnastics….” Last were two figures of late antiquity, Huangfu Mi 皇甫謐 (AD 215–282) and Wang Xi 王熙 (AD 180–270?): the first purportedly composed the earliest work on acupuncture, whereas the other perfected the techniques of pulse diagnosis.

Needham and Lu surely were not alone in imbuing ancient healers with modern significance. Similar descriptions run throughout the literature, a literature Nathan Sivin criticizes for “chronicling the careers of Great Men.” Indeed, a scan of the historiography reveals a similar emphasis on the ancient healer’s achievements. Notably, such an emphasis is found in the History of Chinese Medicine (Zhongguo yixue shi 中國醫學史) by Chen Bangxian 陳邦賢 (1889–1976), initially published in 1919 and sometimes described as the first modern history of Chinese medicine. The same historiographical tendency is also on display in an important work by Fan Xingzhun 范行準 (1906–98), a Short History of Chinese Medicine (Zhongguo yixue shilüe 中國醫學史略; 1986). There, Fan included many of the same descriptions of Needham’s “fathers of medicine”: Attendant He’s famous discussion of illness, Bian Que’s innovations in diagnosis and therapy, Chunyu Yi’s clinical case histories, Zhang Ji’s painstaking emphasis on empirical observation, Hua Tuo’s surgical feats, and the treatises by Huangfu Mi and Wang Xi.

Over time, what I found most striking about the medical fathers was not so much their modern significance as their sheer ubiquity. They appear throughout the current scholarship, which has achieved considerable sophistication since Needham and can hardly be thought of as hagiography. Consider the case of mythical Bian Que; scholars like Yamada Keiji 山田慶兒 no longer write about Bian Que as a historical
INTRODUCTION

personage. Nevertheless, scholars continue to use Bian Que’s biography in a dynastic history as a source, culling it for clues about ancient medical theory and for hints of professional conflict between healers and their occult competitors. Similarly, current historians have moved far beyond Needham’s naïve reading of the textual record, and they no longer treat Chunyu Yi’s biography as evidence of an “advanced clinical science.” Even so, the biography continues to supply scholars with the materials to reconstruct practices of transmission, to examine medical theory in the second century BC, and to nuance our understandings of the relationship between medicine and divination.

The relevance of the ancient medical fathers to contemporary scholarship is perhaps clearest in a recent work by Liao Yuqun 廖育群, Traditional Chinese Medicine (2011). Like other contemporary historians, Liao approaches his sources with an admirable judiciousness and a broad knowledge of the archaeological record. Still, Liao finds it difficult to write Chinese medical history without invoking the words and deeds attributed to the ancient progenitors of the craft. This is evident from a short chapter entitled “Stories about Famous Doctors in History,” which contains descriptions of the ancient progenitors and references many of the same stories used by Needham and countless others.

The medical fathers’ iron grip on the historical imagination is further evident in popular presentations of Chinese medicine. We find them in illustrated cartoons that depict scenes from the life of Bian Que, storybook versions of Chinese medicine from the People’s Republic of China, and popular websites about Chinese medicine targeted at Americans seeking alternative therapies. All of these describe the achievements of the ancient medical fathers, and some paint portraits of them. For example, the National Institutes of Health sponsored a digital website that summarized an exhibit held at the National Library of Medicine from October 1999 to May 2000. We find there the history of Chinese medicine recounted through the descriptions of legendary and historical innovators: the Yellow Emperor, the Divine Husbandman, Zhang Ji, and so forth; such descriptions were also accompanied by portraits of the ancestors (see Figure 1).

Where did these fathers of medicine come from? And how did these figures acquire such a prominent place in both the modern historiography and popular imagination? The questions deserve to be asked because the medical fathers hardly represented a natural grouping. After all, the figures were very different from one another. Some of them, particularly Bian Que, depicted in early stone reliefs as half-man and half-bird,
were clearly mythical beings. Others, such as Chunyu Yi and Zhang Ji, had a distinctly mundane feel to them. More importantly, the sources that Needham and other historians used to explain the contributions of these figures – and thus to construct a broader narrative of healing in ancient China – were hardly obvious candidates for medical history. Such sources were materials of disparate periods, authors, audiences, and aims. Very few of them in fact were actually medical treatises, being composed of bits and pieces of historical chronicles, dynastic histories – and worse still, political allegories. Given such diversity, how did these figures and pieces of text ever find their way into a single narrative? In other words, what principles or circumstances conspired to give them their stubborn place within the archive?
INTRODUCTION

In raising these questions, my objective is not to criticize the medical fathers as a modern anachronism. On the contrary, this book will show that the fathers do have their place in Chinese medical history (although their significance is quite different from what Needham imagined). To get somewhat ahead of myself, I will argue that the medical fathers are less useful for explaining the development of Chinese medical practice or theory in antiquity. Instead, they are of interest because they reveal how early Chinese authors provided modern historians like Needham not only with the raw materials, but also the categories, genres, and objects of scholarly inquiry with which to study the past. In this way, the medical fathers connect the historiographical practices of antiquity with the scholarly taxonomies of the present.

THE MEDICAL FATHERS – A EUROPEAN INVENTION?

So where did the notion of the medical fathers come from? My initial suspicions naturally fell on the modern pioneers of Chinese medical history, particularly Joseph Needham. In part, such suspicions were aroused by the patent anachronism of most claims about the fathers, claims that assumed the existence of something called “clinical science,” “anesthesia,” and “rationality” in ancient China. Indeed, such claims led me to question whether “Chinese medical history” was merely the invention of some modern scholar, ransacking the textual record for references to healers, in search of historical “data” that fit with a preconceived story inspired by European history.

That blame would fall on the modern historian is predictable enough; the influence of postcolonial studies within the China field has been rather pronounced over the last two decades. Responding to the publication of Edward Said’s call to arms, such works take as their starting point the idea that “the ethnological thinking of the present has roots in a colonial past.”\(^{13}\) In the context of Chinese studies, such a paradigm has prompted scholars to trace the genealogies of modern categories and disciplines. In so doing, pervasive concepts like Confucianism have been unmasked as European inventions, the result of scholars imposing European investigative modalities onto the raw data of the Chinese past.\(^{14}\)

In large part, my initial thinking about the medical fathers was guided by two studies that exemplify the genealogical approach within the China field. The first is a celebrated study, *Art in China* (1997) by Craig
Clunas, which tackles a problem that offers a rough analogy to the medical fathers. In this, Clunas makes a case against the prevailing trend of assuming the existence of something called “Chinese art,” an assumption omnipresent in the opening of galleries, the writing of art history, and the organization of museums. According to Clunas, “Chinese art” was the product of scholars in nineteenth-century Europe and North America, who lumped together a diverse collection of objects produced by dissimilar parties and divergent cultural economies.15

The second is Lionel Jensen’s *Manufacturing Confucianism* (1997), a seminal work that challenged historians to rethink the characterization of Confucius 孔子 (551–479 BC) as a philosopher.16 According to Jensen, current understandings of this ancient figure should be understood primarily as an artifact of European modernity. Beginning in the sixteenth century, the Jesuit missionaries at court designated their hero as a pagan philosopher, on par with Plato and Aristotle, as opposed to a religious figure. Such a decision, Jensen argues, reflected the dynamics of contemporary European discourse rather than the contents of the *Analects* or the beliefs of Confucian followers. By referring to Confucius as a secular philosopher, the Jesuits effectively avoided the suggestion that the literate tradition they so admired represented a false, pagan religion. Adopted by Enlightenment philosophers, such a designation was later reintroduced into China by Western-educated modernizers during the colonial era. And it was these modernizers who awarded Confucius a prominent place in the new discipline of Chinese philosophy.17

Initially, Needham’s medical fathers seemed to fit with the case of Chinese art or philosophy. Such a grouping gave every sign of being the result of modern historians forcing European taxonomies upon ancient textual materials. To begin with, Needham’s habit of comparing Chinese figures to Hippocrates and Galen (AD 130–200), a habit he shared with other twentieth-century historians, looked like a smoking gun. Such a move offered a parallel to the Jesuit designation of Confucius as a philosopher. In addition, the stories told by twentieth-century historians bear the imprint of modernist assumptions regarding the evolution of human societies and the development of science. Take the claims about Attendant He, which I sharply criticized in an earlier article. According to Needham, this figure laid the groundwork for the advance of science from religion.18 But this claim, I emphasized, also resembled an older, now largely discredited, narrative often told about Greek medicine in the twentieth century – to wit, that a scientific medicine required the rejection of traditional beliefs regarding the divine sources of illness. Such a
INTRODUCTION

resemblance, I thought, suggested that twentieth-century historians were using Chinese sources to flesh out a European theoretical skeleton – in this case, a teleological story about the development of modern science.19

I ultimately found the conventional explanation unsatisfactory. Such an explanation, I came to realize, was vulnerable to two recurring criticisms of works undertaken in the postcolonial vein. The first is the problem of native agency. According to critics, the singular focus on the circumstances surrounding the European construction of the Chinese past leaves the indigenous scholar out of the picture. As Thomas Trautmann puts it bluntly, such a focus leads to a “‘White men in the tropics’ kind of story.”20 Yet, we know that native agency was present in moments of European contact and even conquest.21 To return to the subject of Chinese philosophy, more recent scholarship has illuminated the fact that the Jesuits could not have invented Confucius as a philosopher on their own. Such an invention, in fact, required the help of native literati, who assisted the Jesuits in their project of learning, translating, and introducing the classical canon to European audiences.22

Second, the postcolonial approach has been roundly criticized for overlooking the ways that non-Western systems of knowledge have shaped current scholarly practice. As Philip Wagoner sums it up, this approach assumes that there can be no significant continuities across the ruptures generated by the introduction of European epistemologies. It posits that whatever traditions of learning existed before European contact were effectively displaced by European theories. But as some historians of Indian history have forcefully pointed out, this picture of the genesis of modern disciplines has its pitfalls. By focusing exclusively on European origins, it obscures the dual parentage of modern scholarship – the fact that it was the conjuncture of Western and non-Western traditions that produced the categories, historical subjects, and theoretical resources assumed by Western scholars in the present. For example, Trautmann argues that the modern notion of the language family, a foundational idea of modern linguistics, came out of the marriage of Indian traditions of linguistic analysis to biblical ideas about genealogy.23

While China historians have yet to forcefully challenge narratives of rupture, there is reason to look for evidence of cross-pollination in contemporary scholarship.24 With respect to Chinese philosophy, the Jesuits were not the first to apply an anachronistic label to Confucius. As Wiebke Denecke points out, Han dynasty bibliographers assigned Confucius to the masters category (zi 子) centuries after his death.25 Such a move also had ramifications for how people read the Analects, having effectively
lumped texts of disparate genres and provenance into a single category. More crucially, Han systems of classification were not displaced by Jesuit taxonomies; in fact, recent scholarship has highlighted the lingering influence of such classification systems on modern understandings of the past. As a result, it is worth considering the extent to which Han classification systems paved the way for miscellaneous works to be relabeled as a monolithic Chinese philosophy in the early modern period. In other words, the concoction of Confucius as a philosopher was probably a collaborative effort, one that drew upon the efforts of Han bibliographers, Jesuit missionaries, and Chinese modernizers.

Indeed, if we resume our discussion of the Chinese medical fathers, there are signs that they were more than a projection of the European imagination. Granted, scholars usually trace the roots of the Chinese medical history field back to the 1920s, a period of modernization and Westernization. In addition, the word now commonly used in Chinese for “medical history” (yixue shi 醫學史) is a modern neologism, a translation of a European term into Japanese dating to the late nineteenth century. Yet as Wu Yiyi points out, before the twentieth century, “there had been a tradition in China of collecting and collating biographical data about doctors.”

More importantly, the medical fathers grouping was anticipated in the earliest surviving treatise on acupuncture (see Figure 2). Its early medieval author, Huangfu Mi, one of Needham’s medical fathers, described the genesis of the curative arts in the following way. “In high antiquity,” he wrote, “the Way of Medicine began when the Divine Husbandman (Shennong 神農) tasted the plants in order to learn of the hundred medicines.” With this statement, Huangfu Mi recounted the deeds and discoveries of subsequent generations of healers. Following the Divine Husbandman, there was the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi 黃帝), who resumed the enterprise by investigating the human body with other ancient worthies; the minister of the Shang dynasty (sixteenth through eleventh century BC) who committed his understanding of pharmacology to writing; and four famous court physicians who lived prior to the imperial unification of 221 BC, including the legendary Bian Que and Attendant He; last were three exemplary healers from the Han dynasty, Chunyu Yi, Hua Tuo, and Zhang Ji.

Huangfu Mi’s sketch resembles those of modern historians, including Needham and Lu, on several counts. To begin with, its list of exemplary healers overlaps with the aforementioned medical fathers and others to a surprising extent (though Needham, unlike his immediate predecessors,
omitted the earliest mythical figures from his genealogy). The similarities, however, go beyond the list of figures. Like the history by Needham and Lu, Huangfu Mi chose to illustrate the Way of Medicine by tracing its genesis and historical evolution through exemplary figures: the cultural progenitor who discovered the curative properties of drugs, the mythical lord whose discovery of the body’s mysteries enabled acupuncture, the seer who perfected the art of diagnosing incipient ills, and even a virtuoso of dubious character who practiced the arts of extending life alongside surgery. By focusing on lore about exemplary healers, Huangfu Mi’s history anchored his undefined subject matter to particular moments in time and place. This history, finally, supplied human faces to what were otherwise a dizzying array of practices, texts, and techniques.

Taking the resonances between Needham and Huangfu Mi as its point of departure, the Art of Healing in Early China provides the first full-length study of the historiography of Chinese curative traditions. By tracing the changing boundaries of the medical archive over two millennia, this book attempts to build upon the critical spirit that animates studies in the genealogical vein, particularly those by Clunas and Jensen. It interrogates the concept of medical history – specifically, what has been branded medical history, and by whom? In what contexts were representations of such figures made, and what range of purposes did they serve.

Figure 2 Huangfu Mi’s list of exemplary healers. Huangfu Mi’s list overlaps significantly with the narrative found in works by twentieth-century historians such as Joseph Needham.
Source: Figure drawn by author.
before being combined into a single narrative? Through such methods of analysis, this book retrieves the diversity of contexts that produced stories about the medical fathers, contexts often lost or obscured by modern taxonomies.

At the same time, this book departs from the dominant focus on European modernity and its investigative modalities. Toward this end, it adopts an expanded time frame and traces the formation of the medical archive in key moments in antiquity as well as in modern times. By conducting a deep genealogy of knowledge, the Art of Medicine unearths the role played by ancient and medieval scholars in generating modern knowledge about the past. In this way, it invites scholars to reflect on the ways ancient and medieval forms of Chinese knowledge production are folded into the practices of modern historiography.

More concretely, the Art of Medicine demonstrates that the modern historiography did not emerge out of a vacuum in the 1920s. Predicated on earlier efforts to construct a medical past, this undertaking was initiated neither by Western nor by Western-educated Chinese scholars. Instead, it was an ancient philologist, the imperial bibliographer of the Han dynasty, Liu Xiang (77–6 BC), who laid the groundwork for defining the archive of Chinese medical history. As we will see, Liu Xiang’s first medical history is best thought of as a bricolage, a narrative cobbled together from a patchwork of repurposed textual resources. Before that time, what existed was not medical history but the isolated elements of one: stories about healers found in texts of dissimilar dates, authors, and aims. It was only later, in the first century BC, that such diverse materials had the status of medical history thrust upon them by Liu Xiang. Though anachronistic, Liu Xiang’s taxonomy nevertheless proved to be a useful one. Providing a prototype for generations of healers and scholars to come, it was subsequently expanded upon and adapted to a range of divergent ends. Seen from this perspective, twentieth-century interpretations of medical history did not represent a profound break with earlier historiographical practices. On the contrary, such interpretations were merely the latest cycle of creation and destruction.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Having laid out the goals and methods of the Art of Medicine, I should explain how I will prove my main hypothesis: which stories about ancient healers will guide the discussion, why I have chosen them, and how I will read them.