Comparative study on WHO Western Pacific Region and World Federation of Chinese Medicine Societies international standard terminologies on traditional medicine: Diseases in Internal Medicine (Part 1)

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Currently in English translation of terms concerning diseases in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), three major approaches are often used, namely, literal translation, loan words from modern medicine and transliteration.

Literal translation is often used in order to avoid misinterpretation and preserve the original features of TCM. “Warm disease” (热病), “cold damage” (伤寒) and “miscellaneous disease” (杂病) are a few examples of such an approach. The approach of loan words is usually used when a disease in TCM is pathologically the same as that in modern medicine. “Common cold” (感冒), “stomachache” (胃脘痛) and “malaria” (疟) are some of the typical examples. Transliteration is usually used when a disease in TCM is so unique that it can neither find its equivalence in modern medicine nor corresponding elements in English. “Bi” (痹), “Gan” (癌) and “Bentun” (奔豚) are a few examples of such kind unique diseases that are difficult to be translated into English and are used to be transliterated in the past.

With the intensified international communication in the field of TCM, some of this kind of
terms now have been translated in order to make it easier for readers to understand. For instance, “Bì” (背) is now translated either as “impediment” or “obstructive syndrome”, “Gān” (肝) is translated as “infantile malnutrition” and “Bēntūn” (奔豚) is translated either as “running piglet” or “running-pig syndrome”. Scientifically speaking, the translation of such unique names of diseases is quite inaccurate and even, to some extent, misleading. But for the convenience of international communication, such a translation may be practical. However, for the purpose of correct interpretation, accurate explanation and definition are certainly necessary.

In the WHO International Standard Terminologies on Traditional Medicine in the Western Pacific Region[11] (abbreviated as the WPRO Standard) and the International Standard Chinese-English Basic Nomenclature of Chinese Medicine compiled by World Federation of Chinese Medicine Societies[12] (abbreviated as the WFCMS Standard), the approaches of literal translation and loan words are used much more frequently than transliteration, seeming to indicate that the use of transliteration is quite restricted now. The following is a brief analysis of the English translation and international standardization of the related terms included in these two international standards according to the studies made in the book entitled International Standardization of English Translation of Traditional Chinese Medicine: Study of Theory, Summarization of Practice and Exploration of Methods[13].

阳病 yang disease: (1) disease of yang meridians; (2) a general designation for deficiency patterns/syndromes and/or cold patterns/syndromes of the viscera, also called yin stages of disease transformation

阴病 yin disease: (1) disease of yin meridians; (2) a general designation for excess patterns/syndromes and/or heat patterns/syndromes, also called yang stages of disease transformation

In TCM, the so-called “yin disease” and “yang disease” are actually concepts referring to different types of disorders that are yin or yang in nature, or related to yin meridians or yang meridians, or located in the zang-organs or fu-organs, or progressing to the yin stage or yang stage. Thus in clinical practice and pathological study, they are not dealt with as individual diseases. Even in the dictionaries of TCM, they are not taken as individual terms.

伤寒 cold damage: (1) a general term for various externally contracted febrile diseases; (2) a condition caused by cold, manifested as chills and fever, absence of sweating, headache and floating tense pulse

In TCM, the so-called 伤寒 means three things, febrile disease due to invasion of external pathogenic factors, disease caused by attack of pathogenic cold or cold attack in winter[14]. That is why it has been frequently translated as “exogenous febrile disease”, a little bit wordy, but quite accurate as compared with other ways of translation. However, in the West, translators tend to render it as “cold damage” or “cold attack”, seeming quite equivalent to the original term in structure. In order to simplify the translation of this term, such an

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imitated way of translation is gradually used by more and more translators in recent years.

 miscellaneous disease: various internal diseases other than cold-induced diseases and warm diseases

In the term of miscellaneous, the Chinese character 杂 means complicated or confused, but to translate it as “miscellaneous” has gradually become a common practice in recent years. The so-called 杂 refers to a variety of diseases in internal medicine caused by various pathogenic factors. In A Full Collection of Miscellaneous Diseases, a book composed of 30 volumes compiled by a Japanese scholar of TCM, and published in 1853, it divided miscellaneous diseases into six major categories, namely, the category due to internal causes, the category due to various disorders of qi, the category due to various disorders of blood, the category due to disorders of viscera and the category due to physical overstrain. The Chinese character 新 means being attacked or being invaded by external pathogenic factors. In the Chinese-English Dictionary of TCM, 新感 was translated as “disease caused by recent attack of evils”, a literal approach of translation frequently adopted in the early period of TCM translation. Such a wordy translation, though quite clearly revealing the basic meaning of this term, is obviously not quite practical for communication. About ten years ago, Professor Xie Zhu-fan changed it into “new contraction” which is both concise in structure and clear in meaning.

 seasonal epidemic: epidemic infectious disease in a certain season

In the term seasonal epidemic, the Chinese character 时 means time while 疫 means epidemic disease. Thus 时疫 refers to seasonal widespread diseases, such as the intestinal infectious diseases occurring in summer and autumn. In the early Chinese-English dictionaries of TCM, 时疫 is usually translated as “epidemic disease”. Comparatively speaking, “seasonal epidemic” sounds more accurate because it has emphasized “time” which is quite important in describing the nature, incidence and pathogenesis of this kind of diseases.

 common cold: affliction of the lung-superficies by pathogenic wind, mainly manifested as fever, chills, headache, general aching, congested nose, sneezing, itching throat and cough

In the definition of common cold, “lung-superficies” is obviously the translation of the Chinese term 肺卫, literally meaning the lung and the defense qi, which in fact describes the close relationship between the lung and the defense qi. According to TCM theory, the defense qi flows outside the vessels to protect the surface of the body while the lung governs the surface of the body and prevents pathogenic factors from invading the body. That is why the lung and the defense qi are often used together to refer to the surface of the body. So the Chinese term 肺卫 can be simply translated as “superficies” or “body surface”. To translate it as “lung-superficies” seems confusing.

 influenza: a disease attributable to invasion of the lung-superficies by an epidemic pathogen that causes acute fever, sore throat, headache and general aching

The translation of “lung-superficies” in the definition of 流行感冒 is analyzed above. In TCM, 流行感冒 is an epidemic disease usually caused by seasonal pathogenic factors, manifested as chilliness, high fever, headache, arthralgia, lassitude, thirst, sore-throat, red tongue with whitish fur and rapid pulse.

 dampness damage: a disease due to external contraction of dampness or obstruction of the stomach and intestines by dampness-turbidity

In the term of 浊滞, the Chinese character 滞 was frequently translated as “wetness” in the early period of TCM term translation. However, in terms of semantics, 滞 just refers to a sense of humidity, not so serious as wetness. Maybe that is why “wetness” is gradually replaced by “dampness”. In the definition, “dampness-turbidity” may be the literal translation of the Chinese term 滞浊 which just refers to dampness. Dampness is heavy and sticky in nature, tends to retain in the location of disease and blocks yang qi. That is
why it is often called 湿滞 in TCM, in which the Chinese character 湿 means heavy and sticky.

痢疾 dysentery: a disease characterized by abdominal pain, tenesmus, diarrhea with stool containing mucus and blood

The Chinese term 痢疾 is similar to dysentery in English. That is why it is often translated as “dysentery”. In the book entitled Yellow Emperor’s Canon of Medicine, this disease is called 肠澼. In the book entitled Treatise on Cold Damage and Miscellaneous Diseases compiled by Zhang Zhong-jing, 痢疾 (dysentery) and 泄泻 (diarrhea) are all called 下利 characterized by acute intestinal disorder frequently encountered in summer and autumn. In terms of causes, it can be divided into summer dysentery, dampness-heat dysentery, cold dysentery and heat dysentery; in terms of stool, it can be divided into red dysentery, white dysentery, blood dysentery, red-white dysentery, pus-blood dysentery and multicolored dysentery; in terms of severity and duration, it can be divided into pestilent dysentery, toxic dysentery, qi dysentery, dysentery with lockjaw, recurrent dysentery, extraordinary dysentery, long-standing dysentery and deficiency dysentery.

疫毒痢 epidemic toxin dysentery: severe case of dysentery characterized by acute onset of high fever, headache, severe abdominal pain, frequent stools containing blood and mucus, and even loss of consciousness with convulsions or reversal cold of the limbs and cyanosis

In the current translation practice, 痢疾 is also translated as “fulminant dysentery” or “pestilent dysentery”, appearing quite concise and clear. In TCM, 痢疾 refers to severe case of epidemic dysentery, also known as 痢疫 or 时疫, usually caused by exuberant pestilential toxin that accumulates and congests in the intestines, consequently damaging the blood and qi. Clinical manifestations also include deep red tongue with yellow and dry fur, slippery and rapid pulse.

休息痢 intermittent dysentery: chronic dysentery with frequent relapse

The so-called 休息痢 in TCM just refers to chronic dysentery with frequent relapse caused by improper treatment, or insufficiency of qi and blood, or retention of dampness-heat in the intestine and stomach due to deficiency of the spleen and kidney. Thus in the WFCMS Standard, this term is translated as “recurrent dysentery” which is commonly used in the current translation practice.

嘔吐痢 food-denying dysentery: severe case of dysentery with utter loss of appetite and vomiting upon eating and drinking

In TCM, 嘔吐痢 is a serious condition of dysentery caused by consumption of stomach yin and disorder of the stomach due to accumulation of virulent dampness and heat in the intestines, or by damage of the spleen and stomach, or by exhaustion of qi in the middle energizer, usually manifested as anorexia, vomiting, frequent diarrhea, emaciation, oppression in the chest and upper abdomen, crimson tongue with yellow and slimy fur. The commonly used translation of 嘔吐痢 is anorectic dysentery. In the WFCMS Standard, this term is translated as “food-denial dysentery”, quite similar to that in the WPRO Standard. Comparatively speaking, anorectic dysentery seems more concise and clearer than either “food-denying dysentery” or “food-denial dysentery”.

霍乱 cholera: a disease characterized by sudden onset of simultaneous vomiting and diarrhea with the vomitus and stool like rice water, referring to acute gastroenteritis, food poisoning and cholera.

Though 霍乱 in TCM is similar to cholera in modern medicine, there is still great difference between them. In TCM, 霍乱 is either caused by uncooked cold food and unhygienic food, or by attack of pathogenic cold, summer-heat and epidemic disease, usually divided into cold cholera, heat cholera, dry cholera, dampness cholera and cholera with muscular cramps. While in modern medicine, cholera is an acute intestinal infection caused by ingestion of food or water contaminated with the bacterium Vibrio cholerae. It has a short incubation period, from less than one day to five days, and produces an enterotoxin that causes copious, painless, watery diarrhea that can quickly lead to severe dehydration and death if treatment is not promptly given. Vomiting also occurs in most patients. In view of such an obvious difference, to use “cholera” to translate 霍乱 seems improper.
干霍乱 dry cholera: an acute illness characterized by sudden onset of abdominal colic and epigastric oppression accompanied by desire but failure to vomit and desire but failure to defecate.

In TCM, 干霍乱 refers to a disease caused by retention of dampness in the stomach and intestines due to improper and unhygienic food or invasion of pestilent factors. Clinical manifestations also include restlessness, pallor, cold extremities, perspiration and deep pulse.

疟疾 (病) malaria: a disease attributed to contraction of malarial parasites, marked by paroxysms of shivering chills, high fever and sweating, also known as malaria-like disease.

In TCM, 疟 is similar to malaria in modern medicine. In the book entitled Yellow Emperor’s Canon of Medicine, this disease is called 疟疾; in the book entitled Synopsis of Golden Chamber, it is called 疟病; in the book entitled Great Peace and Benevolence Formulae, it is called 疟疾. In terms of clinical manifestations and syndromes, it can be divided into wind malaria, summer-heat malaria, dampness malaria, phlegm malaria, cold malaria, warm malaria, yin malaria, yang malaria, miasmic malaria, malarial mass, chronic malaria and miasma; in terms of time of seizure, it can be divided into tertian malaria, quartan malaria, triple-yin malaria and chronic malaria; in terms of causes, it can be divided into consumptive malaria, deficiency malaria, miasmic malaria and pestilential malaria.

湿疟 dampness malaria: malaria complicated by dampness, manifested as paroxysms of chills and unsurfaced fever, accompanied by impaired sweating, nausea, vomiting, anorexia, slimy tongue coating and relaxed pulse.

Dampness malaria actually refers to malaria that occurs in summer. The clinical manifestations also include general pain, heaviness of the extremities, chest oppression, facial puffiness, soft and slow pulse. In the definition of dampness malaria, the expression “unsurfaced fever” may be the translation of the Chinese term 其然不扬 which means that the fever is indistinct or mild. The expression “impaired sweating” is hard to understand. In fact sweating is seldom seen in dampness malaria. The expression “relaxed pulse” may be the translation of the Chinese term 缓脉 which means relatively slow pulse.

湿疟 warm malaria: malaria with higher fever and lower chills than an ordinary attack, accompanied by inhibited sweating and dire thirst.

According to the book entitled Yellow Emperor’s Canon of Medicine, warm malaria is usually caused by attack of wind followed by attack of cold, marked by fever prior to chills. Clinical manifestations also include emaciation, consumption of the brains, restlessness and taut pulse. In TCM, warm malaria also refers to a type of epidemic disease. In the book entitled Treatise on Acute Epidemic Warm Diseases written by Wu Youxing in 1642, it says that progress of malaria into the stomach will cause internal syndrome known as warm malaria which can be treated by the therapeutic methods used to treat epidemic diseases.

寒疟 cold malaria: malaria with higher chills and lower fever or even no fever, no sweating, and absence of thirst.

Cold malaria is usually caused by internal retention of cold complicated by attack of malaria in autumn, marked by chills followed by fever, more chills and less fever, or chills without fever. Clinical manifestations still include lumbago, backache, headache, nape ache, taut and tense pulse.

劳疟 taxation malaria: chronic malaria with mild chills and fever, and with attacks being brought on by fatigue.

The so-called 劳疟 in TCM refers to chronic malaria caused by deficiency of healthy qi or weakness due to long-standing disease complicated by attack of malarial factors, occurring either in the daytime or in the night, clinically manifested as mild chills and fever, accompanied by qi deficiency, profuse sweating and poor appetite. In the current translation practice, 劳疟 is also frequently translated as “overstrain malaria” or “consumptive malaria”. In the WFCMS Standard, “consumptive malaria” is adopted to translate 劳疟. In English, the word taxation means system of raising money by taxes or taxes to be paid. To translate 劳疟 as
“taxation malaria” seems a little bit too literal.

Miasmatic malaria: severe malaria with loss of consciousness or jaundice

In TCM, miasmatic malaria is clinically divided into two types, heat miasmatic malaria, which should be treated by expelling miasma, removing heat and protecting fluid, and cold miasmatic malaria, which should be treated by expelling miasma, opening orifices, resolving turbidity and regulating qi.

Miasma: noxious efﬂuvium that is alleged to cause malaria

In Chinese, 病 refers to a supposed noxious emanation from forest, alleged to be the cause of diseases like malaria endemic in certain areas, while 病 refers to a sort of pestilence caused by dampness-heat complicated with miasmatic factors.

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