

Kan-Wen Ma

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Kan-Wen Ma was a distinguished authority on the history of Chinese medicine. In China, he is credited with establishing the term “traditional Chinese medicine” (TCM) for the treasure house of knowledge that exists in ancient texts. He introduced Western audiences to a wider understanding of the antiquity of TCM and the complex and subtle contributions of its practitioners. His special academic interest was comparisons between traditional Chinese medical thinking and European and Islamic medical thought from the earliest times. In his lifetime, he published or edited 12 books and 160 academic papers despite suffering and having his career blighted by the chaos of the Cultural Revolution in China in the 1960s and 1970s.

Few academics could have experienced the vicissitudes of life in 20th century China and created not one, but two successful careers, first in Mao’s China and later in the more peaceful environment of the University of London. Towards the end of his life, at UCL, he was working to complete a wide ranging study of the interaction between the Western medical missionary movement in China and traditional Chinese medicine in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Kan-Wen Ma was born in Beijing in 1927 into a family who numbered traditional physicians among its members. His father was head of a secondary school in Beijing. He was at school when the Japanese invaded China in the 1930s. This made home life challenging and studies difficult, but in 1945 he gained entrance to the elite Yenching University, where he studied history and philosophy of science. Yenching, founded by Christian missionaries and funded through American philanthropy, offered a Western style university education. He became fluent in English and appreciative of British and American culture, with an understanding of Christianity. In 1952 Yenching, whose alumni include the author Han Suyin, was absorbed into Peking University and continued to develop links with Harvard through the Harvard-Yenching Institute. In mid-life, Kan-Wen Ma astonished colleagues at international conferences by his ability to recite English poetry (particularly Shelley) and sing traditional British, German, and American songs. He loved the Scottish air “Loch Lomond,” and it was played at his funeral service, alongside “Amazing Grace.” His command of the English language later enabled him to lead much of the editorial work in China on the English dictionaries of Chinese traditional medical terms.

He undertook training in Western medicine at Beijing University Medical College in the early 1950s, which enabled him to bridge the two distinct medical systems. He worked for the *China Bulletin of New Medicine*, where he published an early paper on Avicenna (Ibn Sina) in 1952, showing his breadth of research. His active career as an historian began by working at first in the department of medical history at the Central Academy of Health, before moving to lecture and research at the China Academy of Traditional Chinese Medicine in Beijing. The encyclopaedic knowledge of the history of traditional Chinese medicine which he later demonstrated, developed throughout the 1950s with papers on the Tang physician Sun Si-Miao, the legendary healer Bian Que, and the Han dynasty surgeon Hua Tuo. TCM is a very ancient collection of medical theory and practice, with some written texts dating at least from the Warring States period (475-221 BC). It has been a continuous and evolving system, with practice achieved through many modalities—herbal therapies, acupuncture, moxibustion, cupping, and manipulation-exercise therapies.

In 1962 Kan-Wen Ma began training as a doctor of TCM. This would greatly enhance his historical research. He enrolled for the accelerated course offered to those who already had studied Western medicine. The policies promoted in the People’s

Republic of China were to safeguard TCM and develop modern scientific medicine, as well as encourage the integration of the two systems in practice. Kan-Wen Ma, based in Beijing's Academy of Traditional Chinese Medicine, worked to bring the classics to a modern audience, providing English-Chinese translation of terms in the context of contemporary science. Attention to how the two systems enriched each other increasingly characterised his work. Unfortunately, his researches were interrupted by the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). As an intellectual who had obtained a university degree from a Western style university, he was vulnerable to political criticism and suffered severely. He spent a harsh year in captivity before being sent to the countryside and forced to undertake hard manual labour as part of his "reform." His strength and resilience helped save his life, but sadly took 10 years out of his academic prime.

By the late 1970s, the Cultural Revolution had ended. Kan-Wen Ma was able to return to the Academy of Chinese Traditional Medicine in Beijing, where he continued to publish papers charting the introduction of concepts of Chinese medicine in Europe as well as on Greek, Roman, and Arabian medicine. He became first an associate and then full professor, and continued his research on the Song dynasty paediatrician Qian Yi.

By the 1980s, as China was opening up to the wider world, Kan-Wen Ma's work became better known abroad. Initial interest came from Japan. He visited twice, presenting papers on public health and the history of obstetrics. At the instigation of Armin Prinz, he was offered a guest professorship at the Abteilung Ethnomedizin [the department of ethnomedicine] at the medical faculty of Vienna University, starting a relationship that would last over the following 20 years. In 1986 he was invited by the eminent sinologist Paul Unschuld to be a guest professor and spent several months at the Ludwig-Maximilians University in Munich. Kan-Wen was aware of the contribution made by Joseph Needham and Liu Gwei Djen through their extraordinary work on science and civilisation in China. He was a member of the standing committee in China for the translation and publication of Needham's works. When in the UK, he was able to contact Needham in Cambridge; Needham was to remark that Kan-Wen was a "very impressive man" and supported his application for a research grant. His family joined him in the UK, and in the 1990s he acquired British citizenship. He found an academic home at the University of London, based mainly at the Wellcome Unit for the History of Medicine.

For the remaining quarter of a century, Kan-Wen Ma continued with his primary research objective—to display the richness of the Chinese medical tradition and to demonstrate the links between China's medicine and other international systems. He was greatly in demand as a speaker and lectured at conferences across the world. His 2000 paper, entitled "On acupuncture: its place in the history of Chinese Medicine,"¹ demonstrates his extensive knowledge of the historical texts. He refers to William Osler's observation of the value of treating lumbago with acupuncture, and his work on the physician Sir John Floyer's (1649-1734) interest in Chinese pulse diagnosis, reveals the awareness of an Enlightenment doctor of a system of thought that, although apparently remote, could benefit his own.

He was a founder member of the UK Association for TCM, and almost every professional society or journal in the specialism of Chinese medicine or its history invited him to join. In turn he was indefatigable in his demands for rigour in terminology and practice. He supervised postgraduate and undergraduate medical

students who displayed an interest in Chinese medicine and was generous in his willingness to advise and support colleagues, keeping up extensive correspondence with medical historians across the world. At the age of 82 he visited the Chinese University of Hong Kong to lecture on the coexistence of Chinese and Western medicine in China, and to advise the authors on the subsequent paper, “Integrating TCM: Experiences from China.”² His last published paper was on the introduction of acupuncture to Britain.³ He continued to work up to his final illness, leaving behind an almost completed paper on the medical missionary Benjamin Hobson (1816-73). He believed in and epitomised Confucian virtues: generosity, dignity, and industriousness. His passion for work was fuelled by the knowledge of the time he had lost, and he tackled his research and his life with determined optimism using his favourite quotation from Shelley: “If winter comes, can spring be far behind?”

Kan-Wen Ma leaves his wife, Lindi. His daughter, Wei-Yao Ma, and his son in law, Wentao Song, both work at Cambridge University. His two grandchildren were schooled in the UK, and both have graduated successfully from UK universities.

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