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Chinese Medicine in Japan from its Beginnings to the 20th Century: Convergence and Irritation

The influence traditional East Asian medicine has had on Japan up to present day is often regarded in the West as a shining example of successful medical pluralism. In China many see it as a proof positive of the exportability of their own traditional medicine. Furthermore, in China as in Japan, this East Asian facet of modern-day health care is often invoked, and occasionally overused, as a symbol of common ground within the vast sphere of the “culture of Chinese characters” or of the “Confucian world”, respectively. A look back through history shows that the reception of Chinese medicine in Japan was a protracted and complex process. There were many shades of eclectic assimilation of certain authors and texts; modern methods and know-how were taken up and improved upon in Japan, and important treatises from China painstakingly compiled and printed. There were phases of heavier Chinese influence, often reinforced by the appearance of Chinese refugees who were skilled in the art of healing, but there were also periods of estrangement from China, even out-and-out rejection, not only in the 19th century. The lecture draws an outline of this development, starting with the *Ishin-Sho* (984 AD), which forms an early point of crystallization of Japanese independence that aroused considerable attention in China as well. A knowledge of these processes, which go far back in history, sheds but a few rays of light on the marked differences between Japan and China, which are often perceived by Europeans only in the vaguest of terms. It also helps in understanding the foundations on which pluralism is sustained in present-day Japanese medicine.

