

An Exploration of Dissemination and Exchanges between Ancient Traditional Chinese and Vietnamese Medicine

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Abstract

China and Vietnam are geographically connected, and Vietnam has been deeply influenced by Chinese culture. The development of Vietnam's ancient traditional medicine was profoundly shaped by China. This study aims to analyze the exchanges of traditional medicine between China and Vietnam from the Qin and Han dynasties to the Ming and Qing dynasties. Using a documentary analysis method, it conducts an extensive review of journals, ancient books and other materials related to Sino-Vietnamese traditional medical interactions. It reveals historical exchanges and interactions between ancient China and Vietnam in areas such as medicinal materials, medical practitioners, and medical books. These interactions enabled Vietnam to form a medical system that is inherently connected to Chinese medicine yet distinct in its own right. By doing so, this research enhances our understanding of the relationship between Chinese and Vietnamese medicine—one of shared origins with divergent developments—and provides a historical foundation for the inheritance and international exchange of traditional medicine today.

Keywords: Traditional medical exchange; China and Vietnam; Ancient medical books; Medical practitioners

1 Introduction

As early as the Qin and Han dynasties (秦汉时期), the traditional medicine of the two countries blended with each other. Traditional Vietnamese medicine, known as “Eastern medicine”, “Vietnamese ethnic medicine” or “ancient Vietnamese medicine”, has a long history of thousands of years. After France ruled Vietnam in the late 19th century, since China and Vietnam were “the East” relative to the “West”, traditional medicine was called “Eastern medicine” to distinguish it from modern medicine in the West. In the long historical development, Vietnamese people formed their own medical system,

which has much in common with traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) from theory to technology, and is still in existence and use today.¹

Since the mid-20th century, several scholars have conducted research on the exchanges of traditional medicine between China and Vietnam. Domestically, researchers such as Feng Hanyong (冯汉镛) and Feng Lijun (冯立军) have focused on the close historical ties between the two countries, examining Sino-Vietnamese medical interactions from the perspective of medical dissemination. Scholars like Xiao Yongzhi (肖永芝) have approached the topic through Vietnamese medical books, elucidating the transmission of Chinese medical works and ideas in Vietnam. Internationally, scholar Mayanagi Makoto (真柳诚) conducted field research in Vietnamese libraries and the Vietnamese Han-Nôm Research Institute (越南汉喃研究院), summarizing the characteristics and trends of the ancient medical texts that still exist in Vietnam. Currently, research on Vietnamese medical books has primarily focused on textual analysis, without placing them in the historical context of ancient Sino-Vietnamese medical exchanges. This study will conduct a comprehensive analysis of the research on Vietnamese medical books and the historical materials related to Sino-Vietnamese traditional medical exchanges, linking textual research with historical analysis, and providing new evidence to deepen the understanding of the “shared origins and divergent developments” of the traditional medicine of the two countries.

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2 Overview of ancient Sino-Vietnamese relations

From a geographical perspective, Vietnam is a close neighbor to China, connected by mountains and rivers. Vietnam shares a border of over 1,000 kilometers with Guangxi (广西) and Yunnan (云南) provinces through its seven provinces, including Guangning (广宁) and Hejiang (河江). The geographic proximity has naturally facilitated exchanges between the two countries throughout various periods. As a neighboring country of China, Vietnam has been influenced by traditional Chinese culture since ancient times, and the influence has been more and more significant with the establishment and development of China's feudal dynasties. The language used in ancient Vietnam, its customs and architectural style, or its medicine all showed a strong Chinese flavor.

In a long historical period, Vietnam has integrated various aspects of Chinese culture and governance. Among all of the countries in Southeast Asia, Vietnam has been influenced by ancient Chinese culture the most.² As early as 214 BC, the first emperor of Qin dynasty (秦朝) established the prefectures of Nanhai (南海郡), Guilin (桂林郡) and Xiangjun (象郡), and incorporated the northern and central areas of today's Vietnam into Xiang prefecture, which started "the Period of Prefecture and County (郡县时期)" in Vietnamese history.³ At the turn of the Qin and Han dynasties, Zhao Tuo (赵陀) established *Nan Yue Guo* (南越国 *South Yue Country*) and the two prefectures of Jiaozhi (交趾) and Jiuzhen (九真). Emperor Wu of Han dynasty (汉武帝) put down a rebellion of South Yue and divided it into nine prefectures, of which Jiaozhi, Jiuzhen and Rinan (日南) prefectures were all within the territory of the present Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Since then, the advanced culture, production technology and medical theories of the central plains have been continuously introduced into Vietnam, promoting the local economy and social progress. In the Sui and Tang dynasties (隋唐时期), the Annan (安南) protectorate was set up in Vietnam, with ten prefectures under it. Schools were established, and the legal system and imperial examination system of the Tang dynasty were implemented. At this time, Chinese characters became the official script of Vietnam, which was used for writing, education and literary creation, and the introduction of the imperial examination system also enabled the Vietnamese scholars to study the classics of Confucianism.⁴ In the early Song dynasty (宋朝), Annan broke away from China and established the Kingdom of Daqu Yue (大瞿越国). The Dinh dynasty (丁朝, 968–980), the first autonomous feudal king in the history of Vietnam, was established by the Dinh leaders (丁部领), ending the Period of Prefectures and Counties (郡县制) and becoming a vassal of China.⁵ After its independence, the State of Annan still followed the Chinese system of laws and regulations. The official system of

Annan was similar to that of China, with six ministries, six offices and six departments in the central government, as well as the Censorate, *Tai Yi Yuan* (太医院 the Imperial Institute of Medicine), the National History Academy, and the Magistrate's Office, etc.⁶ The local administration has the levels of province, prefecture, district and county, and the rank of officials and costumes were modeled after those of the Tang and Song dynasties. In Vietnam, the criminal documents issued by the Li dynasty (李朝, 1010–1225) and the criminal laws determined by the Chen dynasty were based on *Tang Lyv Shu Yi* (《唐律疏义》 *Tang Code*). In all the dynasties of Annan, Confucianism was the basis of governing. The Li dynasty built Confucian temples. The Chen dynasty (陈朝, 1225–1400) founded a national college to teach *Si Shu Wu Jing* (四书五经 four books and five classics) and to rule the country with Confucianism, honoring Confucius as the "first teacher". The Li dynasty (黎朝, 1428–1788) took *Si Shu Da Quan* (《四书大全》 *Complete Commentary on the Four Books*) as the content of the imperial examination.⁷ During the Ruan dynasty (阮朝, 1802–1945), Chinese characters were still the official script, and official documents on histories such as *Da Nan Shi Lu* (《大南实录》 *The Veritable Records of Vietnam*), and codes of law were written in Chinese. The Confucian classics were printed and distributed throughout the country.⁴ At the middle of the 19th century, Vietnam became a colony of France. For more than 2,000 years, Vietnam almost transplanted and copied Chinese culture. Despite the efforts of the later French colonists, Chinese culture has remained in the blood of the Vietnamese people and has been integrated into all aspects of Vietnam's politics, economy, culture and society.⁶ To this day, the distinctive "Chinese imprint" can still be found in Vietnam's language, customs, arts and monuments.

Chinese characters and language have been used in Vietnam for a long time. Since the implementation of the prefecture and county system in the Qin dynasty, a large number of immigrants from the central plains and Han officials entered Vietnam, and the long-term cultural exchange led to the absorption of many Chinese characters into the Vietnamese language, and the Vietnamese people also created the "Nan characters" based on the Chinese characters. According to linguists, more than 50% of modern Vietnamese characters were borrowed from Chinese.⁴ Since the Vietnamese language belonged to the Sino-Tibetan language family (汉藏语系) and there were a large number of Chinese loanwords, it was suitable to use Chinese characters. Therefore, since the Qin and Han dynasties, Chinese characters had been the official and commonly used characters in Vietnam, called "Confucian characters". Until 1918, in the French colonial period when the abolition of Chinese characters was announced, Vietnam had used Chinese characters more than two thousand years. It was in this historical, social and cultural context that Vietnam's traditional

medical books came into being. To this day, distinct “Chinese traces” can still be found in aspects such as the language, customs, arts, and historical sites of Vietnam.

3 The History of the Intercommunication of herbs

There is a long history of medicine exchange between China and Vietnam, and Chinese medicinal materials have been introduced into the country through non-governmental trade and gift return from the government.⁸ In the Tang dynasty, with the increasingly developed land and sea transportation, the medical trade between China and Vietnam was frequent. Annan “learned to use Lingbei (岭北) tea and medicine”. At that time, the Tang government adopted open and inclusive policies toward merchants engaged in long-distance trade, transporting medicines, tea, and other goods to Annan while bringing back local products such as rhinoceros horns, hawksbill turtles, and pearls to China. As stated in *Jiu Tang Shu* (《旧唐书》 *Old History of the Tang Dynasty*): “Trade should be promoted, and exchanges should not be prohibited (诸道一任兴贩, 不得禁止往来)”.⁹ When the governments of the Song and Yuan dynasties accepted Vietnamese tributes, they also gave in return a large number of gifts to Vietnam, medicine included frequently. For instance, in the fourth year of the Yuan dynasty (1267), “Yuan gives jade belts, medicine, saddles and other things (元赐光易玉带、药饵、鞍髻等物)”, and in the sixth year of the Yuan dynasty (1269), “give coins, silk and medicine in return to thank Vietnam (又具表纳贡, 别奉表谢赐西锦、币帛、药物)”.¹⁰ During the Song and Yuan dynasties, a steady stream of Fujian (福建) merchants sailed to Jiaozhi. These merchant ships brought medicine, cloth and silk from China to be exchanged for Vietnamese pearls and jewelry.¹¹ In the Song dynasty, the government once opened two trade fairs in Qinzhou (钦州) and Yongping Village (永平寨) in Guangxi for trading between China and Vietnam, in which rich Vietnamese merchants exchanged gold, silver, copper coins, *Chen Xiang* (沉香 *Aquilaria Lignum Resinatum*), elephant teeth and rhino horns for Chinese medicinal materials, silk and paper.¹²

In addition to the Sino-Vietnamese border “trade”, Vietnam also often sent people to China to buy a large number of medicinal materials, as it was quoted in volume 5 of *Leng Lu Yi Hua* (《冷庐医话》 *Medical Discourses of the Cold Shack*) by Lu Yitian (陆以湑) in the Qing dynasty from *Qian Tang Xian Zhi* (《钱塘县志》 *Qiantang County Records*) that in Southern Song dynasty, Vietnamese merchants came to Lin’an (临安) to purchase a large amount of *Tu Fu Ling* (土茯苓 *Smilacis Glabrae Rhizoma*), resulting in an increased price of the medicine.¹³ At the time of Song and Yuan dynasties, despite of war for years, the medical exchanges were not cut off between China and Vietnam. “The Song dynasty has satin, medicinal materials and other

things and sells them in the market (宋有缎子、药材等物, 置卖为市)”. From the thirteenth year of Zhiyuan (至元) in the Yuan dynasty (1276), the Shengzong (圣宗) of Vietnam, Chen Huang (陈晃), “sends Tao Shiguang (陶世光) to Longzhou (龙州) on a mission to buy medicine and investigate the situation of Yuan people”.¹⁴ It can be seen that the trade of medicinal materials was extremely frequent between China and Vietnam at that time.

During the exchanges between China and Vietnam, Chinese medicines continued to be introduced into Vietnam, and at the same time, Vietnamese exotic medicines were also introduced into China in the form of tributary and non-governmental trade.¹⁵ In the early Eastern Han dynasty, Ma Yuan (马援) went on an expedition to Jiaozhi and brought back a large amount of *Yi Yi Ren* (薏苡仁 *Coicis Semen*). According to *Hou Han Shu Ma Yuan Zhuan* (《后汉书·马援传》 *History of the Latter Han Dynasty: Biography of Ma Yuan*): “Initially, when Yuan was in Jiaozhi, he often consumed coix seed, which helped to lighten the body and reduce desires, thereby countering the harmful miasma. The coix seeds in the southern region were large, and Yuan intended to use them as seeds. When the army returned, he carried a cartload of them (初, 援在交阯, 常饵薏苡实, 用能轻身省欲, 以胜瘴气. 南方薏苡实大, 援欲以为种, 军还, 载之一车)”. At the beginning of the Three Kingdoms Period, Zhang Jin (张津) served as a magistrate in Jiaozhi and sent Cao Cao (曹操) *Yi Zhi Ren* (益智仁 *Alpiniae Oxyphyllae Fructus*) produced in Vietnam as a gift.¹³

According to volume 49 of *San Guo Zhi* (《三国志》 *Records of the Three Kingdoms*), “whenever Xie (夔) sent an envoy to Sun Quan (孙权), he gave thousands of various spices and exquisite ko-hemp cloth as gifts (夔每遣使诣权, 致杂香、细葛, 辄以千数)”.¹⁶ Since then, Vietnamese medicine has been increasingly introduced into China. *Chen Xiang*, *Yu Jin* (郁金 *Curcuma Radix*) and *Su He Xiang* (苏合香 *Liquidambar orientalis Mill.*) produced in Vietnam as recorded in *Liang Shu Fu Nan Zhuan* (《梁书·扶南传》 *History of the Liang Dynasty: Biography of Funan*), and *Shui Su* (水苏 *Stachys japonica Miq*) as well as *Shi Liu Huang* (石硫磺 *Sulfur*) produced in Vietnam as recorded in *Ming Yi Bie Lu* (《名医别录》 *Miscellaneous Records of Famous Physicians*), were all imported into China from Vietnam. By the Tang dynasty, according to Su Jing’s (苏敬) *Tang Ben Cao* (《唐本草》 *Tang Materia Medica*) and Chen Zangqi’s (陈藏器) *Ben Cao Shi Yi* (《本草拾遗》 *Supplement to “The Grand Compendium of Materia Medica”*), the medicines shipped from Vietnam at that time included *Bai Hua Teng* (白花藤 *Wisteria venusta*), *An Mo Le* (庵摩勒 *Phyllanthus emblica Linn.*), *Ding Xiang* (丁香 *Caryophylli Flos*), *He Li Le* (诃黎勒 *Terminalia Chebula*), *Su Fang Mu* (苏方木 *Caesalpinia sappan Linn.*) and *Bai Mao Xiang* (白茅香 *Imperatae Rhizoma*), among which a large amount of *Su Fang Mu* was imported.

Vietnam was an important country that paid tribute to the Song dynasty. According to *Song Shi* (《宋史》 *History*

of the Song Dynasty), Jiaozhi paid tribute to China dozens of times in the Song dynasty. The main types of tribute brought by Jiaozhi envoys were spices, medicinal materials, pearls, hawksbill turtles and rhino horns, etc. Located in the middle of Vietnam, the ancient country “Zhan Cheng (占城)” also paid tribute to the Song dynasty for more than 40 times, among which the quantity of aromatic medicinal herbs was very large, and amounted to more than 100 thousand jin in each tribute.¹⁷ In the Song dynasty’s *Zhu Fan Zhi* (《诸蕃志》 *Records of Foreign Countries*), it is also described that Jiaozhi used local medicines as tributes, “locally-produced *Chen Xiang*, *Peng Lai Xiang* (蓬莱香 *Aquilaria sinensis*), gold and silver, iron, cinnabar, pearls and shells, rhino horns and ivories, feathers and kingfishers, tri-dacna, salt, lacquer, kapok and silk cotton are used as tributes every year”. It was recorded in Volume 488 of *Song Shi* that medicines were brought from Zhancheng to China as tributes, “In the second year of Tianxi (天禧二年), the king sent an envoy to pay tributes, including 72 ivories, 86 rhino horns, 1,000 shells of *Dai Mao* (玳瑁 *Eretmochelys imbricata*), 50 jin (斤) of *Ru Xiang* (乳香 *Olibanum*), 80 jin of *Ding Xiang*, 65 jin of *Dou Kou* (豆蔻 *Amomi Fructus Rotundus*), 100 jin of *Chen Xiang*, 200 jin of *Jian Xiang* (笺香 *Aquilaria sinensis*), 68 jin of *Bie Jian* (别笺), 100 jin of *Hui Xiang* (茴香 *Foeniculum vulgare* Mill.) and 1500 jin of *Bing Lang* (槟榔 *Arecae Semen*)”. In Yuan dynasty, Vietnam continued to be in a vassal relation with China, and in the third year of Yuan Shizu Zhongtong (元世祖中统三年), it was stipulated that “beginning from the fourth year of Zhongtong, a tribute should be paid every three years with *Ne Ciding* (讷刺丁 official of the Yuan dynasty) as the official who carried a *Hu Fu* (虎符 tiger-shaped tally of military authority) and travelled to and from the country of Annan (自中统四年始, 每三年一贡, 仍以讷刺丁充达鲁花赤, 佩虎符, 往来安南国中)”.¹⁸ Vietnam paid a total of 52 tributes to the Yuan dynasty, of which *Su He You* (苏合油 Sect. *Liquidambar*), *Zhu Sha* (朱砂 *Cinnabaris*), *Chen Xiang*, *Tan Xiang* (檀香 *Santali Albi Lignum*), *Xi Jiao* (犀角 *Rhinoceros nicornis* LR.simus Burchell) and other medicines played an important role in the tribute.¹² Vietnam was also the country which paid tribute to the Ming dynasty the earliest. According to relevant materials, from the first year of Hongwu (洪武元年, 1368) to the tenth year of Chongzhen (崇祯十年, 1637), Annan paid tribute 79 times, and Zhancheng 72 times. Among the tributes were *Dou Kou*, *Tan Xiang*, *Xi Jiao*, *Hu Jiao* (胡椒 *Piperis Fructus*) and other medicines.¹⁹ When the Vietnamese government paid tribute to the Ming government, it often proposed to exchange the tribute for Chinese books, medicinal materials and other things they lacked. For example, in the first year of Tianshun (天顺元年, 1457) in the Ming dynasty, Li Wenlao (黎文老), a vassal of the Vietnamese king reported that “Poetry and books are good for the heart, and medicine and stone needles prolong the life. Since

ancient times, Chinese books and medicinal materials in this country are used to clarify morality and justice, and lengthen the span of life. Today, I would like to follow the old customs to take to China our local spices and other things that the country does not have, and bring in return Chinese books and medicines (诗书所以淑人心, 药石所以寿人命, 本国自古以来每资中国书籍、药材, 以明道义, 以跻寿域。今乞循旧习, 以带来土产香味等物易其所无, 回国资用)”. Emperor Yingzong of the Ming dynasty (明英宗) immediately granted the request of Vietnam.²⁰ It can be seen that this tribute trade played an important role in the exchange and development of medicine between China and Vietnam when there was a strict ban on maritime trade in the Ming dynasty. The import and export of foreign medicines did not stop despite wars, maritime bans and other reasons.

It can be seen that Chinese medicines were continuously introduced into Vietnam through folk exchange, border trade, tribute and other ways, which enabled Vietnamese people and doctors to use Chinese medicines, and promoted the clinical application of Chinese medicines in Vietnam. At the same time, the introduction of Vietnamese aromatic medicinal herbs to China greatly increased the varieties of Chinese herbal medicine, and the introduction of Vietnamese aromatic medicinal herbs also urged Chinese scholars to re-examine the theory of *Si Qi Wu Wei* (四气五味 four qi and five flavours) in *Huang Di Nei Jing* (《黄帝内经》 *The Yellow Emperor’s Inner Classic*), bringing forth new ideas and promoting the development of Chinese medicine theory. Based on the exchange of medicine, the herbology has been integrated and exchanged between China and Vietnam.²¹

4 Exchanges of medical practitioners

According to historical records, in 257 BC, the Chinese doctor Cui Wei (崔伟) practiced medicine in Vietnam for many years, cured Yong Xuan (雍玄) and Ren Xiu (任修) of their illness of weakness, and wrote the book *Gong Yu Ji Ji* (《公余集记》 *Collections Recorded in Spare Time after Work*), which was circulated in Vietnam and was the beginning of the introduction of Chinese medicine to Vietnam. Dong Feng (董奉), a famous doctor in the Three Kingdoms Period, went to Vietnam to treat the then Vietnamese official Shi Xie (士燮); Lin Sheng (林胜), the “Cangwu Taoist (苍梧道士)” in Southern Qi, went to Vietnam to collect herb medicines and cured Yin Keng’s wife of abdominal distension with “*Wen Bai Wan* (温白丸 Warming White Pill)”, which was then introduced into Vietnam.²² In the Sui and Tang dynasties, Shen Guangxun (申光逊) used *Hu Jiao*, *Gan Jiang* (干姜 *Zingiberis Rhizoma*) and other spicy medicines to cure Sun Zhong’ao (孙仲敖), a native of Annan of brain pain. In the sixth year of Shaoxing in the Song dynasty (宋绍兴六年, 1136), Chinese monk Ming Kong (明空) used spiritual therapy to cure the Vietnamese Emperor

Shenzong (神宗皇帝) of the Li dynasty of his serious illness, and he was highly revered and got the title “imperial teacher”. Around the 14th century, Chinese acupuncture and moxibustion spread widely in Vietnam, and Zou Geng (邹庚), an acupuncturist in the Yuan dynasty, went to Vietnam to practice medicine with good efficacy, earning him the reputation of the “miracle-working doctor”. The emperor Chen Hao (陈皞) of the Chen dynasty in Vietnam once experienced drowning in his childhood. Dr. Zou Geng saved him by using acupuncture, indicating that acupuncture had already been introduced to Vietnam at that time. Superb medical skills of Chinese doctors have been widely praised by Vietnamese people. The rulers of Vietnam also had great respect for famous Chinese doctors. The last feudal dynasty of Vietnam (Ruan dynasty 阮朝) built a temple to worship the outstanding medical practitioners of the past dynasties, many of whom were famous ancient Chinese doctors, such as Sun Simiao (孙思邈), Bian Que (扁鹊), Ge Hong (葛洪), Yu Fu (俞跗), Zhang Ji (张机) and so on. The sacrificial ranking was exactly the same as the Sanhuang Temple (三皇庙) built in the Yuan and Ming dynasties.²³ In history, a steady stream of Chinese doctors came to Vietnam to practise medicine, which speeded the spread and promotion of TCM in Vietnam. On this basis, combined with the local humid subtropical climate and geographical location, as well as the fact that the local residents were prone to suffer from heat, rheumatic and gastrointestinal diseases, Vietnamese medicine drew on the local people’s experience in medicine and gradually developed through the long-term unremitting efforts of Chinese and Vietnamese doctors.²⁴

Under the influence of Chinese medicine and doctors, some famous doctors also appeared in Vietnam. They were called to China to cure diseases for the emperor and the people of China. For example, after Emperor Shizu of Yuan dynasty (元世祖) established a suzerain-vassal relationship with the Chen dynasty of Vietnam, he required Vietnam to send three physicians as tribute every three years. According to *Yuan Shi* (《元史》 *History of the Yuan Dynasty*): “Since you have pledged loyalty as a subject, starting from the fourth year of Zhongtong, you were to send tribute every three years. You may select Confucian scholars, physicians, and those skilled in the arts of divination, as well as other craftsmen, with three of each (卿既委质为臣, 其自中统四年为始, 每三年一贡, 可选儒士、医人及通阴阳卜筮、诸色人匠, 各三人)”. Emperor Chengzu of Ming dynasty (明成祖) recruited craftsmen from Jiaozhi to serve in China. The famous Vietnamese doctor Ruan Bojing (阮伯靖) (Fig. 1) was recruited to China in the Ming dynasty in 1384, and cured the postpartum illness of a princess consort.²⁵ The Ming Emperor appreciated his talent, granted him the title of *Chan Shi Da Yi* (禅师大医 Great Doctor of Zen Master) and kept him in the Imperial Institute of Medicine to practice medicine.²⁶ In June of the fifth year of Yongle



Figure 1 An image of Hujing Zen Master (source with permission from: <https://tueyduong.com/dai-y-thien-su-tue-tinh/>)

(永乐五年, 1407), Emperor Chengzu said to Zhang Fu (张辅), general commander of Jiaozhi, Hou Muchen (侯沐晨), left vice general, and Liu Xie (刘携), the military secretary, that “Jiaozhi should have people that are virtuous, knowledgeable and fond of living alone in the mountains and forests ... Those who know yin-yang (阴阳), fortune-telling and medicine should be found carefully and sent to the capital for promotion (交趾应有怀才抱德、山林隐逸、明经能文、博学有才.....阴阳术数, 医药方脉之人、悉心访求, 以礼遣送赴京擢用)”.²⁷ In September of the fifth year of Yongle (1407), Zhang Fu sent “770 craftsmen (including doctors) from Jiaozhi to Nanjing (南京), the capital of Ming dynasty”. In October, another 900 craftsmen were sent to the capital. In the 11th year of Yongle (1413), more than 130 Jiaozhi artisans brought their families to Nanjing and cured many difficult diseases.²⁸ At the end of the Ming dynasty and the beginning of the Qing dynasty, a group of special doctors known as “Overseas Chinese Doctors” emerged in Vietnam.²⁹ During the late Ming period, China was embroiled in political turmoil. Li Zicheng (李自成) led a rebellion against the Ming dynasty, and the Manchu people of the Qing dynasty took control of the entral plains. Many people, unable to endure the chaos of war, fled southward to Vietnam to escape the conflict, among whom were numerous doctors. *Mo Shi Jia Pu* (《莫氏家谱》 *The Mo Family Genealogy*) records: “During the great turmoil at the end of the Ming dynasty, our ancestor, Mo Jiu (莫玖), fled south to Vietnam to escape the invasion of the minorities (明末大乱, 我莫太公玖, 因不堪胡虏侵扰之乱, 越海南投)”.³⁰ At that time, there were about a thousand people who traveled with him, most of whom were his relatives or fellow villagers.

Some of these overseas Chinese doctors, who had practiced medicine in Vietnam for a long time, earned the respect and admiration of the local people. In fact, out of

deep reverence for them, some even established temples in their honor and deified them. Some overseas Chinese doctors also participated in military activities while practicing medicine in Vietnam. For example, *Da Nan Shi Lu* (《大南实录》 *Great Annals of the South*) records: “In the fifteenth year of the Mingming reign (明命十五年), in Jiading (嘉定), a medical practitioner named He Wenli (何文力) used his own medicine to treat diseases, and many soldiers recovered (明命十五年, 嘉定有业医者何文力, 自出家药以治病, 兵痊愈者众)”. Although this historical record does not explicitly state that He Wenli was an overseas Chinese, other historical sources note that “Those in professions such as witchcraft, medicine, fortune-telling, and arithmetic were all of Chinese origin (其巫祝医命、星卜算术诸家, 皆唐人为之)”,³¹ suggesting he was a Chinese. When the Vietnamese emperor heard about this, he “bestowed upon him the rank of a ninth-grade doctor and ordered to pay him according to what was needed (赏授正九品医生, 令照所需还其值)”. Another example is the Qing official Yang Duanpeng (杨端朋), who also joined the military to practice medicine and treated more than 4,000 soldiers. The Vietnamese government first rewarded him with clothing and silver, and later, after an official reported that Yang had treated a large number of soldiers, they “further rewarded him with 100 taels of silver and appointed him as a doctor in the Imperial Institute of Medicine, with a seventh-grade rank, under the jurisdiction of Jiading province (复加赏白金一百两, 授太医院医正, 秩从七品, 隶嘉定省)”.

With the large migration of Chinese to Vietnam, many overseas Chinese physicians opened herbal medicine stores or general stores selling Chinese medicinal herbs. *Jia Ding Tong Zhi* (《嘉定通志》 *Comprehensive Annals of Jiading*) once described the prosperity of Chai Gun (柴棍), the largest commercial center in southern Vietnam at the end of the 18th and early 19th centuries: “Goods sold include brocade, porcelain... bookshops, herbal medicine shops, tea houses, noodle shops, and there is nothing that cannot be found in the rivers and ports of the north and south”.³² In the 31st year of the Guangxu reign (光绪三十一年, 1905), Yan Qu (严璩) traveled to various places in Vietnam for more than two months and wrote *Yue Nan You Li Ji* (《越南游历记》 *Travel Notes on Vietnam*), in which he stated, “The Vietnamese still use traditional Chinese methods in medicine (越南人医药仍用中国旧法)”. Chinese medicinal materials were imported into Vietnam, with *Chuan Xiong* (川芎 *Rhizoma Chuanxiong*), *Bai Zhu* (白术 *Rhizoma Atractylodis Macrocephalae*), *Dang Gui* (当归 *Angelicae Sinensis Radix*), *Fu Ling* (茯苓 *Poria*), *Sheng Di* (生地 *Rehmanniae Radix*), *Gan Cao* (甘草 *Glycyrrhizae Radix et Rhizoma*), and *Bai Shao* (白芍 *Paeoniae Radix Alba*) being the most common. Before the French occupation, around 100,000 *dan* (担 a traditional Chinese unit of weight) of medicinal materials were imported annually, and even in the early 20th century, this figure still reached 20,000 *dan*

per year. Overseas Chinese doctors also opened herbal medicine stores in various parts of Vietnam. For example, in Haifang (海防), there was “*Yong Cui Tai* (永萃泰)” owned by a Guangdong native named Cheng Kongzhi (程孔之); in Henei (河内), there were “*An He Tang* (安和堂)” by Guo Chengji (郭成记), “*Xiang Chun Tang* (祥春堂)” by Zhu Sanji (朱三记), “*Pu Sheng Tang* (普生堂)” by Huang Wan (黄万), “*Guang Sheng Tang* (广生堂)” by Guan Jieqing (关杰卿), “*De Sheng Tang* (德生堂)” by Guan Yiji (关意记), and “*Yong He Cheng* (永合成)” by Guo Zaoyuan (郭藻元); in Anpei (安沛), there were “*Yao He Tang* (天和堂)” by Pan Jia (潘佳) and “*Zi Shou Tang* (滋寿堂)” by Liang Xuecai (梁学才). These herbal medicine merchants organized industry associations called “Pharmaceutical Guilds. Overseas Chinese in Vietnam also established hospitals. In 1901, in the area known as “Chinatown”, they founded a maternity hospital and set up schools to train midwives.

Medical expert exchanges between China and Vietnam became a link of medical exchanges between the two countries. Chinese doctors brought the healing ideas and methods of TCM to Vietnam, which promoted the development of Vietnamese medicine. On this basis, Vietnamese doctors developed their own traditional medicine considering the characteristics of local climate and the physique of local residents, and brought it to China through physician recruitment by the Chinese government, promoting the mutual integration of medicine between the two countries.

5 The dissemination and evolution of Chinese medical books

As a special commodity carrying scientific knowledge and cultural spirit, books have political and cultural value beyond that of general commodities. The transmission of Chinese books to Vietnam has a great and far-reaching influence on Vietnamese culture.³³ As an important part of the “Sinophone cultural sphere”, the relationship between China and Vietnam is closer than that of any other country in Southeast Asia. As a part of China’s territory for a long time, Vietnam has been deeply influenced by China in politics, economy and culture. The Chinese language has been promoted in Vietnam, and Chinese classics have also been imported into Vietnam.³⁴ *Huang Di Nei Jing*, *Ben Cao Gang Mu* (《本草纲目》 *The Great Compendium of Materia Medica*), *Dong Yuan Shi Shu* [《东垣十书》 *Ten Books by (Li) Dongyuan*], *Jing Yue Quan Shu* [《景岳全书》 *The Complete Works of (Zhang) Jingyue*], *Yi Xue Ru Men* (《医学入门》 *Introduction to Medicine*), *Shou Shi Bao Yuan* (《寿世保元》 *Prolonging Life and Preserving the Origin*) and other medical classics also entered Vietnam by means of book exchange between China and Vietnam. Chinese medical books were highly valued in Vietnam. Vietnamese doctors studied these books and developed Chinese medicine considering the characteristics of local

climate and medicinal herbs, and wrote many medical books in Chinese or Han-Nôm (汉喃) language.³⁵ For example, the book of *Ba Zhen Quan Shu* (《八阵全书》 *Complete Manual of Eight Military Formations*) (the author is unknown) in Vietnam was based on *Jing Yue Quan Shu*. In the sixth year of Xuande in the Ming dynasty (明宣德六年, 1432), Vietnamese Pan Fuxian (潘孚先) wrote a book titled *Ben Cao Zhi Wu Zhuan Yao* (《本草植物纂要》 *Compendium of Materia Medica Plants*), which collected a large number of Chinese medicines. In addition, the famous Vietnamese medical books such as *Zhong Yue Yao Xing He Bian* (《中越药性合编》 *Compilation of Sino-Vietnamese Medicinal Properties*), and *Nan Yao Shen Xiao* (《南药神效》 *Miraculous Medicine of the Southern Country*) (Fig. 2) were all written under the influence of TCM.³⁶ *Hai Shang Yi Zong Xin Ling Quan Zhi* (《海上医宗心领全帙》 *Complete Compendium of Essential Medical Knowledge from Hai Shang Lan Weng*) (Fig. 3) written by Vietnam's "medical sage" Li Youzhuo³⁷ (黎有卓) was the first complete medical book in the country. It learned from *Huang Di Nei Jing* in theory, and included many medicines, half of which were Chinese medicines, and the other half Vietnamese medicines. The medical prescriptions included in the book such as *Gui Zhi Tang* (桂枝汤 Cinnamon Twig Decoction) and *Ren Shen Bai Du San* (人参败毒散 Ginseng Toxin-resolving Powder) were from Chinese medicine.³⁸ Other books, like *Xian Chuan Dou Zhen Yi Shu* (《仙传痘疹医书》 *Immortal-transmitted Medical Classic on Smallpox Diagnosis and Treatment*) by Fan Baifu (范百福) and *Yi Shu Chao Lue* (《医书抄略》 *Medical Book Copy*) by Wu Shoufu (武手府) (an acupuncture book), were also written under the influence of TCM.

Tribute trade is an official commodity trade with tributary relationship. Books were often included in the goods returned by China to Vietnam. In the official



Figure 2 *Nan Yao Shen Xiao* (《南药神效》 *Miraculous Medicine of the Southern Country*) (source with permission from: National Library of Vietnam)



Figure 3 Pages of *Hai Shang Yi Zong Xin Ling Quan Zhi* (《海上医宗心领全帙》 *Complete Compendium of Essential Medical Knowledge from Hai Shang Lan Weng*) (source with permission from: National Library of Vietnam)

exchanges between China and Vietnam in the Tang and Song dynasties, books were important items for Vietnamese officials' attention. According to statistics, from the middle of the 17th century to the 19th century, Vietnam sent about 80 missions to China. At that time, Vietnamese envoys and officials often made friends with Chinese officials to get books as gifts, and they also bought books from different places in China, playing a very important role in the process of spreading Chinese books to Vietnam.³⁹ There was a great demand for Chinese books in Vietnam, and various communication channels between China and Vietnam were smooth, so many Chinese classics were imported into Vietnam. According to a survey conducted by scholars on the collections of Vietnamese Han-Nôm Research Institute, the Literature Institute, the History Institute and the National Library of Vietnam at the Vietnam National Center for Social Sciences, Han-Nôm documents collected by the French Far Eastern Institute, the Oriental Writing Department of the French National Library, and the French Asiatic Society Library in *Yue Nan Han Nan Wen Xian Mu Lu Ti Yao* (《越南汉喃文献目录提要》 *Catalogue of Han-Nôm Documents in Vietnam*)⁴⁰ published in 2004 by the Humanities and Social Sciences Center of Academia Sinica in Taiwan, China as well as the Japanese *Dong Yang Wen Ku An Nan Ben Mu Lu* (《东洋文库安南本目录》 *Catalogue of Annam Books in the Toyo Bunko*) and *Gu Shu Yuan Shu Ji Shou Ce* (《古书院书籍手册》 *Ancient Academy Books*). There were a total of 514 kinds of Annam Chinese classics, including 39 kinds of Confucian classics, 18 kinds of historical records, 406 kinds of philosophical writings, 51 kinds of miscellaneous works,⁴¹ reflecting the dissemination of Chinese books in Vietnam.⁴² In the process of book exchange between China and Vietnam,

envoys, monks and taoists, officials and soldiers, expatriates and businessmen were all important media. In addition, Chinese bookshops also played an important role in the exchange. For example, there were many bookshops in Guangzhou (广州) and Foshan (佛山), and the books they printed were “sold in central, north-western and southern China, as well as the South Ocean Islands (including Vietnam). Many workers were needed for printing and folding of books, with the number of workers no less than a thousand [行销内地、西北、江南、南洋群岛 (含越南), 印刷摺叠, 需人颇多, 盛时不下千人云]”, and it can be seen that Guangzhou and Foshan were among the important supplying places of Chinese books to Vietnam, with famous bookshops of *Jin Yu Tang* (金玉堂), *Jin Wen Tang* (近文堂), *Ying Wen Tang* (英文堂), *Wen Yuan Tang* (文元堂), *Tian Bao Lou* (天宝楼), *Bao Hua Ge* (宝华阁), *Zi Lin Shu Ju* (字林书局), *Rong He Yuan* (荣和园), *Sheng Nan Zhan* (盛南栈), *Shi Jie Yuan* (拾介园), *Wu Yun Lou* (五云楼), etc. In particular, the owners of Foshan book shops like *Shi Jie Yuan* and *Wu Yun Lou* are keen on engraving Chinese books for Vietnamese people, which has become a spectacular landscape of book engraving in southern China, showing the openness of Guangdong in book export at that time.³⁴

Chinese medical books arrived at Vietnam, and spread and developed locally, so that a medical culture that is harmonious yet different from China came into existence in the country. Mayanagi Makoto, a Japanese scholar, compared medicine in the Sinophone cultural sphere to the fruits of various trees cultivated in the medical forest of China (abundant medical books in the past dynasties of China), which was spread to neighboring countries. Then the countries selected seeds adapted to their local culture, and cultivated the seeds or hybridized them with local ones, absorbing foreign knowledge genes, and produced new fruits (ancient medical books of Vietnam).⁴³

6 Conclusion

Since the Qin dynasty, when Chinese characters were first introduced to Vietnam, until the French colonial period abolished their use in 1918, Vietnam used Chinese characters for over two thousand years. During this time, a large number of medical books written in classical Chinese were created. For nearly a thousand years, from Emperor Wu of Han's pacification of Nan Yue until Vietnam became a French colony, the two countries maintained a “suzerain-vassal relationship,” which fostered close political, economic, and cultural ties. Chinese medicinal materials were continuously introduced to Vietnam through folk medicine exchanges, border trade fairs, and tributary bestowals. At the same time, Vietnamese aromatic medicinal herbs were introduced to China, promoting reciprocal integration in the study of materia medica. The mutual visits of medical

practitioners between the two nations served as a crucial bridge for Sino-Vietnamese medical exchanges. Chinese medical books circulated in Vietnam, where they were disseminated and adapted locally, allowing the country to develop its own traditional medical system. This system, while theoretically and technically aligned with Chinese medicine, also developed distinct characteristics.

Future research into Vietnamese medical books could explore, through new materials, how different aspects of Chinese traditional medicine—such as various doctrines and specialized disciplines—were transmitted, absorbed, and applied in Vietnam. Additionally, it can examine how the Vietnamese constructed their own traditional medicine by incorporating Chinese medical knowledge. Further analysis will reveal the unique aspects of traditional Vietnamese medicine and offer insights into the process of “acceptance—adaptation—innovation” of traditional medicine in Vietnam.

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Ethical approval

This study does not contain any studies with human or animal subjects performed by any of the authors.

Author contributions

LIU Yixuan wrote this article. YANG Lina revised the manuscript, and RUAN Mingyu provided relevant materials.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no financial or other conflicts of interest.

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