On October 21, 2011, the UCLA Center for East-West Medicine (CEWM) and the UCLA Confucius Institute together hosted an international workshop on the translation and dissemination of Chinese Medicine. Bringing together various stakeholders in the translation process, including nearly three dozen scholars, clinicians, and students, the current status of translation in China and the U.S. was laid out. This was followed by input from an expert panel on key issues and group discussion focused on investigating current challenges and generating concrete plans and goals.

After a brief introduction by Dr. Ka-Kit Hui, MD, FACP, Director of the UCLA CEWM, Dr. Li Zhao guo, PhD, Professor and Vice Dean of Shanghai Normal University’s Foreign Languages College, and Vice President and Secretary General of the World Federation of Chinese Medical Societies (WFCMS), began the day with the keynote speech on the history and current status of translation in China.

Drawing upon his extensive writing and translation experience, Dr. Li emphasized that quality translation is very difficult and there are few who can do it well. This difficulty exists for many reasons, such as the unique cultural context within which
classical texts were authored, the fact that the language used in many Chinese medical texts is ancient, as well as the reality that many of the concepts are based in abstract classic Chinese philosophy. Dr. Li concluded his speech stating that, although there are many challenges to translation, it is possible to overcome them, and the Chinese and Americans need to work together.

Following Dr. Li's speech, Dr. Sonya Pritzker, PhD, LAc, Assistant Researcher and Clinical Specialist at UCLA CEWM, reported on the current state of translation and dissemination of Chinese medicine in the U.S. She discussed some of the major points of tension including debates over biomedicalization, alternative medicine, the authenticity of classical Chinese medicine vs. “Traditional Chinese Medicine”, standardization, and Chinese language instruction. Dr. Pritzker went on to emphasize some realities of the current situation, such as the fact that there exist a plurality of terms and there is no central authority. There is also a very small market within which multiple publishers must compete for the sale of textbooks. Lastly, there is the reality that the World Health Organization is standardizing terms with the ICD 11.

Following her speech, and a round of introductions by all workshop participants, Dr. Pritzker presented questions to a panel of experts in various aspects of the Chinese medical field. Each question was reflective of the history of translation issues and “tensions.” She invited the panelists to help unravel those complications and lead the way to progress.

The first panel consisted of experts on education in Chinese medicine, including Bob Damone, Academic Dean at Pacific College of Oriental Medicine (PCOM), Tsuyehwa Lai, Instructional Coordinator at Oregon College of Oriental Medicine (OCOM), Brenda Hood, Associate Professor at National College of Natural Medicine (NCNM), and Mao Shing Ni, Co-founder of Yo San University.

The next panel addressed issues in publishing, and included experts such as Eric Brand, Author and Translator at Paradigm Publications, Robert Felt, Editor and Director at Paradigm Publications, Marilyn Allen, Editor at Acupuncture Today, and Jonathon Schell, Director of the Chinese Medicine Database. Afterwards, all workshop participants were invited to split up into three groups representing distinct areas of Chinese Medicine – Education, Publishing, and Clinical Practice.

The group focusing on the education side agreed on the importance of implementing at least some Chinese-language medical instruction within the curriculum. Salary incentives were mentioned, as were potential standard lists of terms to be learned, and stock teaching materials and textbooks that could be readily shared amongst schools.
The group focusing on the publishing side addressed the challenges of having a limited market to support the creation of a diverse array of textbooks. Taking advantage of the newest technology, e.g., e-books, applications for smart phones, and micropayment systems, was brought up multiple times as a necessary step for survival of the field. Lastly, the desire to become more involved with institutions in China was expressed.

The group discussing clinical practice emphasized the need for the ability of practitioners of Chinese medicine to be able to translate technical terms into a language their patients can understand. In interactions with biomedical professionals, it was thought that Chinese medical practitioners should maintain their professional integrity, resisting the urge to simply choose biomedical terms as one-for-one replacements for the Chinese concepts. They further explored the ideas of making basic term sheets for patients available in Chinese medical clinics and, possibly, a standard database of metaphors and analogies to assist practitioners in interacting with patients.

Overall, translation of a culturally unique and temporally distant system of medicine, rooted in abstract philosophies, is recognized as being very challenging, especially in the U.S., where biomedicine is the dominant mindset and system of healthcare. This workshop brought together experts, scholars, and students to engage in discussion on how to move forward with high quality rendering of this medicine into the English language for training and education purposes, as well as the day-to-day clinical reality of practitioners, and how to support these endeavors with a strong publishing industry.

In conclusion, practical and immediate next steps were proposed: (1) the formation of an email listserve that will include all workshop participants and will welcome the participation of other qualified professionals, (2) the development of specific proposals for further funding, and (3) the organization of an ongoing dialogue with China. While there is still much work to do on this project, a feeling of the success of the day was unanimous, and participants are all excited about the future.