

The 4th Ma Kanwen Memorial Lecture

“Vitamins, Chinese Dietetics and Modern Nutritional Knowledge”

delivered virtually by

Hilary Smith

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Abstract

What has Chinese medicine contributed to modern nutritional knowledge? Ever since the 1920s, when nutrition science began to emerge as a professional discipline in China, open-minded biochemists and nutritionists have credited classical Chinese doctors with a kind of uncanny prescience. In particular, they have suggested, the vitamin-rich remedies in ancient formularies and food-therapy books show that premodern Chinese healers knew how to treat vitamin deficiencies effectively, something that only became possible in modern nutrition science after decades of laboratory research and clinical observation. But the vitamin, this talk will argue, is a peculiar fixation of early twentieth-century scientists. It retains an outsized importance in contemporary understandings of food and health, but Republican-era (1912-1949) practitioners of Chinese medicine paid little attention to it. Nor is there much evidence that modern nutrition scientists learned a great deal about vitamins or vitamin deficiencies by looking at ancient Chinese texts. This lecture explores how the vitamin came to be so central to Chinese nutrition science, and how that centrality obscured other meanings of healthy diet expressed in classical texts and in the Chinese-medicine journals of the Republican period.

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by Wednesday 3rd June to receive the Zoom invitation.**