A Rosetta Stone for traditional Chinese medicine

October 29 2007

Scientists in the United Kingdom have "decoded" the inscrutable language of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), revealing its strong chemical foundation in a way that may help scientists mine age-old Chinese medicines to develop tomorrow's new drugs. Their study is scheduled for the Nov./Dec. issue of ACS' bi-monthly *Journal of Chemical Information and Modeling*.

David J. Barlow, Thomas M. Ehrman, and Peter J. Hylands point out that traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) - regarded by many Western experts as an archaic system doomed to extinction 50 years ago - has undergone a "remarkable renaissance" in recent years.

However, the arcane language used to describe categories of medication in TCM has hindered effective understanding of one of the most developed and mature systems of alternative medicine in existence.

To overcome that barrier, the researchers analyzed patterns among 8411 compounds from 240 Chinese herbs in relation to the categories found in traditional Chinese medicine. Organizing their findings in a kind of herbal "map," their results reveal that many categories in Chinese medicine are amenable to translation to Western terminology.

TCM's "fire poison" group, for example, is comparable to today's family of anti-inflammatory medicines. Now, future researchers will better understand the chemical basis of remedies that have been in use for thousands of years, the study indicated.

"This is likely to be of benefit both in the search for new drugs and, equally significantly, in understanding how Chinese medicine works," say the authors.

Source: ACS