

FOREWORD

This book offers a translation—with accompanying commentary—of the *Qishier fanzheng*, a nineteenth-century manual of Chinese medicine. But much of the manual's contents will likely be unfamiliar even to specialists of Chinese medical history. We find no mention of the flows and blockages of *qi*, no appeals to the interactions of *yin* and *yang* and the five phases, no concern, in short, with what we have come to imagine as the core elements of Chinese medical thought. What we find, instead, are intriguing puzzles—diseases named after a menagerie of animals, remedies whose logic is often a mystery. And that is what makes this manual so notable and fascinating. It hints at how little we know, even now, about the history of sicknesses and their cures in China.

The seminal works in English that inspired contemporary scholarship on traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) started to appear some forty years ago. The year 1980 saw the publication of *Celestial Lancets* by Lu Gwei-Djen and Joseph Needham, still the major Western-language study of the history of acupuncture. Ted Kaptchuk came out with his influential popularization of Chinese medical thought—*The Web That Has No Weaver*—in 1983, and this was followed in 1985 by the English translation of Paul Unschuld's ambitious survey, *Medicine in China: A History of Ideas*, and in 1987 by Nathan Sivin's translation of a modern TCM textbook, *Traditional Medicine in Contemporary China*.

All of these foundational studies shared one thing in common: they portrayed medicine in China as firmly rooted in major systems of thought—first and foremost in the cosmological theories of *qi*, *yin* and *yang* and the five phases, and secondarily, in the beliefs of Daoism and Buddhism. And this same emphasis on grand philosophical frameworks has continued to characterize most writings about TCM to this day. The motley beliefs and practices falling outside of these intellectual traditions have all been casually lumped together under the label of “folk medicine” and received only occasional, passing mention.

And yet we know that in China, as in the rest of the world, such “folk medicine” was the primary experience of medicine for most people for most of history. Our own ready access to specialists all educated to a shared standard is a historical exception, a recent luxury that is enjoyed, even today, only in some areas of the world. In traditional China, erudite physicians whose diagnoses and therapies were guided by the cosmological reasoning of the *Yellow Emperor’s Classic of Medicine* were never more than a tiny elite in a vast sea of diverse healers. Most afflictions were likely handled with the resolute practicality that we find in the *Qishier fanzheng*. It was enough simply to name the disease and apply its remedy. Seeking explanations—asking *why* a disease manifested itself in the way that it did or *why* a particular remedy was supposed to cure it—was superfluous.

Still, today, we cannot help but wonder about these whys. Major parts of the cures proposed in the *Qishier fanzheng*—acupuncture, moxibustion, drugs—are recognizable therapies of TCM. But there are also a good number of less familiar treatments, such as striking parts of the body with shoes or mixing in fluids from masticating horses. And all these elements are deployed in unexpected combinations not found in the classics of acupuncture or the major compendia of pharmacology. A woman is suffering from stomach pains? *Needle the top of her head and the soles of her feet and apply tobacco tar.* A man is shaking his head and wagging his tail? *Needle his forehead and apply the rust of a used hoe three times.* We cannot help but ask: How do acupuncture and tobacco tar work together? Why the rust, specifically, of a used hoe, and why precisely three times? The classical theories of TCM offer little clue. Whatever the latent reasoning behind such treatments, it is clear that folk medicine in China drew on a far more lush and variegated imagination of potencies—a richer sense of the power of diverse places and concrete things—than the bare schemes of *yin-yang* and the five phases.

The specific diseases identified by the *Qishier fanzheng*, too, intimate a vast, unexplored world. There is, to begin, the recurring association of ailments with particular animals—with phoenixes and lambs, mules and horses, snakes, turtles, and toads. What are we to make of this? These associations plainly mattered: the text’s illustrations served above all to underscore their primacy. Yet none of the animal names featured in our manual appear in Chao Yuanfang’s famous encyclopedia of diseases, the *Zhubing yuanhou lun* (610), and I have yet to find them in later nosological writings. The *Qishier*

fanzheng's evocation of flapping phoenixes and bleating sheep whispers to us of an alternative, radically different approach to diseases of which previous scholarship had given us no intimation.

Nor is it simply the names that are strange. Often, the symptoms with which they are associated are just as puzzling. To be sure, human beings can suffer from a fantastic range of afflictions, and the medical dramas of our own time regularly feature obscure ailments whose manifestations are so bizarre as to verge on the incredible. Outlandish symptoms make for entertaining drama. But *Qishier fanzheng* is, as we have noted, a resolutely practical manual, and compared to the over 1,700 syndromes cataloged in Chao Yuanfang's compendium, 72 represents a very small number. It would seem reasonable to suppose that if the manual's author chose to include a disease in his limited selection it was because the disease was common, because it was a condition whose cure would be necessary in the everyday lives of his readers. And so we are not at all surprised to see prescriptions for such complaints as headaches, stomach pains, and itching. But how often did nineteenth-century Chinese have to deal with patients who flapped their arms like a phoenix? How frequently did one come across sufferers bleating like sheep? And how exactly should we picture the behavior of those afflicted by shaking-head-wagging-tail disease?

The *Qishier fanzheng*, in sum, abounds in engaging enigmas. For much of the four decades scholars have confidently discoursed on Chinese medical thought based on their reading of the *Yellow Emperor's Classic of Medicine* and works composed in its wake. But Professor Suleski's translation and commentary calls our attention to a work that now compels us to expand our horizons—that suggests that the history of Chinese beliefs and practices surrounding sicknesses and their cures may be like the proverbial elephant palpated by blind men: a realm of startling variety and unimaginable immensity of which we have grasped, it turns out, still only a small patch.

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