

**True Healing in Early Medieval China:
Sun Simiao on Healing without Drugs, Transforming Bodies,
Emotions, and Cultivating Life
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Like international biomedicine, Chinese medicine has arrived at an important crossroads, both in the West and in Asia. It is therefore with great happiness that I read the questions posted on the congress website: “What is the goal of TCM? Healing is the goal of our medicine, but what is healing in Chinese medicine? ... What is it all about?” These are the questions that need to be asked by each and every teacher, practitioner, student, and patient, again and again. Our answers will vary greatly, depending on our financial status, level of education, personal life history, patients’ needs, and daily mood. As a historian of Chinese medicine, medical anthropologist, author and translator, lecturer and educator (on both CM and sustainable local farming), mother, patient, and biodynamic goat farmer responsible for the welfare of at least ten species cohabitating, eating, feeding, birthing, and dying, these are questions I have asked myself constantly over the past few years. The following paragraphs offer very short examples from one of the most important classics in Chinese medicine, an enormous and comprehensive encyclopedia titled *Bei ji qian jin yao fang* (Essential Prescriptions for Every Emergency, worth a Thousand in Gold), which was completed by Sun Simiao in ca. 652 CE. I have selected three specific examples in order to illustrate what Sun Simiao meant when he spoke of the “great physician” and of “nurturing life” (*yang sheng* 養生), or in other words, his understanding of the true practice of Chinese medicine.

Let us first look at Sun Simiao’s understanding of medical practice, as reflected in the content of the *Bei ji qian jin yao fang*: The overwhelming majority of medical advice in this text consists of complex medicinal formulas, complemented by some instructions on acupuncture and moxibustion, exorcistic and other religious practices, simple household recipes, physical manipulations, and what we would now consider magical remedies, one scroll on pulses (primarily as a diagnostic tool for “reading” the body), one scroll on dietetics, and one on “nurturing the body” (*yang xing* 養形 (in the sense of the physical body, elsewhere contrasted to *shen* 神 “spirit”). From transmitted sources like Sun Simiao’s biography in the dynastic histories, we know very little about the author’s life, except that he was famous for his penetrating understanding of philosophy, religion literature, and cosmology, had illustrious friends in the high society of the Tang dynasty, was repeatedly asked to be the emperor’s advisor but refused to serve under immoral rulers, and spent the latter part of his life as an ascetic in the mountains in pursuit of longevity. Celebrated and deified in China as a Daoist immortal and the “King of medicine” (*yao wang* 藥王), he exemplifies the syncretism of Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism that was common in early medieval China. This same spirit also pervades the selection of prescriptions in his encyclopedia. Motivated by a Confucian concern for the weaker members of society and for continuing the family line, he extended the practice of “nurturing life” to include gynecology, pediatrics, and also geriatrics. His complex medicinal formulas, still commonly used today, reflect the sophisticated knowledge of educated literati practitioners with access to a body of technical literature. In his own practice and in the few essays interspersed throughout the *Qian jin fang*, on the other hand, we clearly find an understanding of medicine as a body of knowledge on cultivating the mortal body as a microcosm in harmony with the macrocosm based on the system of correlative thinking, with the ideal of situating the body as a microcosm in harmony with the macrocosm and prolonging life by moving *qi* and blood, avoiding overtaxing the body, and preventing disease from arising in the first place.

This attitude is most vividly expressed in the chapter on *yang xing* (nurturing the physical body). To give the reader a taste, it includes the following advice on ascetic living:

“Running water does not spoil, the door post does not rot. The Way of nurturing the body consists of never standing still nor moving for a long time, never sitting nor lying for a long time, never looking nor hearing for a long time. Avoid overeating, overdrinking, and overworking. Avoid anxiety and worrying, great anger, sorrow and grief, great fear, jumping about, too many words, and great laughter....A person who is good at preserving life constantly reduces thoughts, ideas, desires, worldly affairs, speaking, laughter, worrying, joy, happiness, anger, likes, and dislikes...”

The chapter continues with advice on healthy living, gymnastics and self-massage for cultivating and moving *qi*, meditative and breathing exercises, what we would now term alchemical formulas and medicinal foods to transform the body, “The Yellow Emperor’s Taboos and Prohibitions” (behavioral guidelines including rules of common politeness, not to sit with the feet facing the fire or the stove; not to sit, walk, or stand facing the sun etc.) and a lengthy chapter on “supplementing and boosting in the bedroom” (i.e. cultivating *qi* by sexual intercourse, avoiding seminal emissions, gaining the maximum health benefits, and avoiding astrologically and spiritually inauspicious times and positions. Here we find, for example, the statement “There is nothing more to the art of the bedchamber than mounting ten women in one night while blocking and securing (*bi gu* 閉固 i.e., without ejaculation).

Another dimension of the art of “nurturing life” is revealed in the chapter on dietetics (*shi zhi* 食治). In the introduction, Sun quotes Zhang Zhongjing as saying:

“When a person’s body is balanced and harmonious, you must merely nurture it well. Do not recklessly take drugs because the strength of drugs assists only in parts and causes the person’s visceral *qi* to become imbalanced, so that they easily contract external trouble.

All substances that contain *qi* provide food and thereby preserve life. Nevertheless, eating them unawares has the opposite effect [i.e. the effect of creating loss]. The common people today use them daily without awareness, and so they hardly recognize when water and fire draw near....

What people depend on is the physical body; what disorders harmonious *qi* is disease; what regulates vexing poisons is drugs; what rescues life and provides support in crises is the physician. To make the root of the body safe, you must provide it with food. To rescue from the speed of disease, you must rely on drugs....

Food is able to expel evil and secure the viscera and bowels, to please the spirit and clear the will, by supplying blood and *qi*. If you are able to use food to stabilize chronic disorders, release emotions, and chase away disease, you can call yourself an outstanding craftsperson. This is the special method of lengthening the years and “eating for old age” and the utmost art of nurturing life....

People who practice medicine must first thoroughly understand the source of the disorder and know what has been violated. Then, use food to treat it, and if food will not cure it, afterwards apply drugs.

Like the previous example, this chapter again advocates the common notion of classical Chinese medicine to “treat disease before it arises” and to first use the least invasive tools at the practitioner’s disposal, namely food and advice on healthy living. The same sentiment, we might add, that we also find in the categorization of medicinal substances in texts like the *Shen nong*

ben cao jing (Divine Farmer's Classic of Materia Medica), where the highest-ranking drugs, associated with Heaven, are those without medicinal efficacy that should be taken over a long period of time, with the effect of "nurturing life", while the lowest category are those associated with earth, that have medicinal efficacy and treat disease by expelling evil *qi* of cold or heat, breaking up accumulations, and curing disease.

Turning now to what we might consider a more "clinical" chapter in Sun Simiao's encyclopedia, let us briefly look at the chapter on gynecology and the key role played by emotions in both etiology and therapy, as applied to women's bodies. To explain his famous statement that "women's diseases are ten times more difficult to treat than men's," he elaborates:

"From the age of fourteen on, [women's] *yin qi* floats up and spills over, [causing] a hundred thoughts to pass through the heart. ...

Women's predilections and desires exceed men's and they contract disease at twice the rate of men. In addition, when they are affected by compassion and attachment, love and hatred, envy and jealousy, and worry and rancor, these become firmly lodged and deep-seated. Since they are unable to control their emotions by themselves, the roots of their diseases are deep and it is difficult to obtain a cure in their treatment. ...

This essay lays out Sun's rationale for placing the prescriptions for women, an impressive roughly 10% of his entire encyclopedia, at the very beginning of his book, after the general introduction. In his broad understanding and for his time revolutionary reinterpretation of the meaning of "nurturing life," women assumed a truly primary role because of their role as childbearers. Given their weaker, emotionally unstable nature, what was more important for a "gentleman engaged in the art of nurturing life" than to thoroughly familiarize himself with the multitude of symptoms and disorders that could affect the women under his roof! Armed with Sun's long three scrolls of prescriptions, "what would there be to worry or fear even in the face of a harvest of unexpected surprises?"

To conclude this brief essay, let us take a step back and look at these three examples together. What emerges as an underlying common thread in Sun Simiao's writing is his concern not with curing specific diseases in the biomedical sense of the term, that is, by treating symptoms with drugs, but with understanding the complex relationship between the microcosm of the human body and the macrocosm. Having attained that stage of enlightened insight, the "great physician" will be able to diagnose and then realign any potential disharmony, first by means of *qi* cultivation (including things like lifestyle, morality, exercise, spiritual practice, meditation, and sexual intercourse), then by means of diet, and only as a last resort by means of medical intervention. The ideals and instructions described in the *Bei ji qian jin yao fang*, especially the warning against excessive engagement in worldly affairs, might be impossible to implement for most ordinary practitioners caught in the web of modern life, but any practitioner of Chinese medicine, in the narrow and broad sense, should be conscious of these roots and never stop trying to inch closer to the ideals explained and illustrated so vividly by Sun Simiao.