

The Medical Classic of the Yellow Emperor

Translated by Zhu Ming

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS

黃帝內經

孫兆重

THE MEDICAL CLASSIC OF THE YELLOW EMPEROR

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Zhu Ming

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Website :

<http://www.flp.com.cn>

Email Address :

Info@flp.com.cn

Sales@flp.com.cn

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Website:

<http://www.flp.com.cn>

Email Address:

Info@flp.com.cn

Sales@flp.com.cn

黄 帝 内 经

朱 明 译

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Translator's Preface

With the rapid expansion of China's policy of openness, cultural exchange between the West and East is being greatly stimulated. Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), as a distinctive element of East Asian civilization and one of the great medical traditions of the world, is attracting more and more interest. Awareness of acupuncture has spread widely in the Western society and TCM is also gaining recognition daily. Nowadays, highly advanced Western medicine is facing a kind of great Green Revolution that aims at producing more natural drugs and medical techniques without noxious side-effects. In contrast, millennia old TCM, which successfully united all scientific achievements in ancient times, has failed to absorb modern advanced technology in recent times and is confronted with a great challenge of modernization. Therefore, it is inevitable that ancient East Asian medical understanding will combine with modern Western medical knowledge to form a glorious whole, which our contemporaries and generations to come will appreciate as a great contribution to the cause of human health.

In Western countries scholars and physicians are engaged in systematic and comprehensive study of TCM and have made rapid progress both in theory and in practice. Naturally, many of these researchers into TCM are interested in knowing its earliest sources, which have been rendered mysterious and enticing by their inaccessibility. It is unfortunate, but there are three significant cultural and linguistic barriers to easy understanding: between English language and Chinese language, between standard Chinese and TCM technical terminology, and between modern TCM terminology and archaic medical Chinese. Few of the westerners who have tried to stride over the three wide gaps have been able to successfully approach this attractive and exotic medical field. Hence, more culture brokers are needed who are sufficiently proficient in TCM, on archaic medical Chinese and in English, so that more Western people can receive adequate information about the origins of TCM.

The Medical Classic of the Yellow Emperor (Huang Di Nei Jing), which is also translated by Ilza Veith as *The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine* (1966), is the oldest extant classic of TCM and the source of theory for this independent medical system. This book is written in the form of a dialogue in which the Yellow Emperor (the legendary first ancestor of the Chinese nation) discusses medicine with his ministers and some well-known doctors. No student of TCM in China could escape knowing about this text.

I made my decision to translate *The Medical Classic of the Yellow Emperor* into English after I became a doctor of TCM from the Hunan College of Traditional Chinese Medicine and had undertaken clinical practice of TCM for many years. Fearing that my translation would

do disservice to this great text, I proceeded meticulously in almost every step of my work, yet it was pushed forward slowly but surely by my faithfulness to, and enthusiasm for, the masterpiece.

The Original Version

A perfect version of the original text is a precondition for a satisfactorily translated product. I choose the textbook version of *The Medical Classic of the Yellow Emperor* as my original. It was edited by the Compiling and Checking Committee of Textbooks of State Universities and Colleges organized by the Ministry of Public Health of the People's Republic of China in 1982. The chief editor, Dr. Cheng Shide, is from Beijing TCM College. This textbook explains the original articles of *The Medical Classic of the Yellow Emperor* in a scientific, orderly and concise way. It is the unquestionably authoritative and consummate source. Annotations that quote explanatory notes of many famous ancient medical masters are presented as concisely as possible, while some necessary explanations are added.

Structure of This Book

The structure of this book is to present the translations of an original article, or a section of dialogue, from *The Medical Classic of the Yellow Emperor*, followed by annotations and commentaries. This stable structure is intended to constantly clarify the reader's understanding.

Sometimes, the original article and the annotations may convey a same concept in two different forms of expression. For example, the original article says, "Open the ghost gate and cleanse the clear *fu*-organ," while the annotation which follows says, "Diaphoresis and diuresis." The reason for the significant difference between the translation of the original article and the annotation is that, while words "diaphoresis and diuresis" present a readily recognizable gloss in Western medical terminology, a literal translation of the original text is closer to the expression accepted by practitioners of TCM in China and comes closer to reflecting the real meaning in the context of TCM conceptualization.

Most of the original articles of *The Medical Classic of the Yellow Emperor* are quite terse. Hence, in order to make the translations of each article as close as possible to the Chinese language source, the annotations making the concepts and sentences more complete and clearer, and the commentaries summing up the gist of the articles, are usually indispensable.

Style of Translation

Literal translation, freely conveying factual information, is dependable and is the technique of translation adopted here. Many books have been successfully translated word-for-word into English and published in order to introduce TCM to the world.

However, in an ordinary situation when an ancient classic of TCM is translated, dozens of experts from many fields take part in the work. First, professors of TCM interpret the book into current Chinese; then, professors of Western medicine, historians, linguists, anthropologists, etc., who have profound knowledge of English and Chinese, but not of TCM, translate this book into English. So, it is not difficult for us to imagine that errors due to different modes of thinking may occur. The different modes of thinking, different word usages, different styles and skills of translation, etc., may perplex readers. Western readers will frequently find inconsistencies in identifying concepts, just as if a man has five different names. The mistakes in disease names used in Western medicine will twist the facts fundamentally and confuse readers, especially among scholars of Western medicine. Thus, to translate verbatim is the best but hardest choice.

The principle of literal translation penetrates the entire proceeding of my work. Unavoidably, some words have to be added or deleted on some necessary occasions in order to offer a correct and full understanding. Some examples of literal translation are demonstrated as follows:

1. 邪之所凑，其气必虚。

Where evils converge, the *qi* must be deficient.

2. 正气存内，邪不可干。

The right *qi* exists inside; evils cannot make disturbance.

3. 壮水之主以制阳光。

Strengthen the dominance of water to control the *yang* light.

4. 益火之源以消阴翳。

Boost the source of fire to disperse the *yin* shadow.

5. 五藏者，所以藏精神血气魂魄者也。

The five *zang*-organs are what store the essence, spirit, blood, *qi*, *yang* soul, and *yin* soul.

6. 六府者，所以化水谷而行津液者也。

The six *fu*-organs are what transform water and grains and move the fluids.

Word Selection

All terms and concepts of TCM originate from the daily speech and activities of working people. It is easy to find their equivalents in English. English is based on people's shared experience in living, just as Chinese is. Therefore, English equivalents for terms in TCM can be determined. Generally speaking, any word that clearly conveys the true meaning of a Chinese term is acceptable. However, both Chinese and English have many synonyms, so a reliable and relatively stable system of terms is required. It is a matter for rejoicing that the system of terms is becoming more and more mature now in a universally recognized way after the efforts of many people from China and abroad. I have consulted many English books about TCM published in China and overseas. Of these, I tend to favor the work of the English enthusiast, Dr. Nigel Wiseman, who has made insightful and marvelous explorations in establishing the terminological system of TCM.

It is worthwhile to mention that it is not wise for us to try to equate the terms of TCM to those of Western medicine, inasmuch as it usually leads to conceptual mistakes. In general, the anatomical terms are compatible. We had better avoid using the terms of Western medicine in TCM, especially using disease names, which often risks committing fatal mistakes, because TCM and Western medicine research the same entity from utterly different angles.

I am confident that no expression in this book will seem too thorny when a foreign reader has grasped terms that frequently appear, such as *qi* (气), *yin* (阴), *yang* (阳), *zang*-organ(脏), *fu*-organ(腑), triple-warmer (三焦), nutritive *qi* (营), and defensive *qi* (卫). A lucid English version, which even a foreigner without any knowledge of TCM and Chinese culture can understand with ease, is what I have done my utmost to produce. As we all know, science has no borders. TCM, the great treasure, should belong to the world's people. I am sure the comprehensive exportation of TCM will bring a brighter future to the health cause of the human race.

Many sincere thanks are extended to Prof. Tong Yao and Prof. Yao Yong, working in Shanghai University of TCM now, for their instructive advice for modification. I also want to express my special gratitude to the international scholars of TCM, Prof. Stephen R. Smith of Wittenberg University in Springfield, Ohio, USA, Dr. Isabeau Volhardt, L.AC. of University of Washington, and Dr. Kim Taylor of University of Cambridge in England for their convincing and extensive revisions of my manuscript and their cordial encouragement. The English language is also corrected by Patti J. Tobin, Justin Sattin, Barry J. Grice, Volker Scheid, John Wm. Schiffeler, Gypsy Cole, Chao Yuan-Ling, Liu Xun, and Sun Ming, whose enthusiastic support for this project is admirable. The quality of the book

would not have been improved without their generous help. Being impossible to be unassailable, this book eagerly awaits more criticism from all fields.

Zhu Ming

Huaihua, Hunan Province, China.

January 1, 2000.

Tel. 0086 – 0745 – 2350157

Email: zhuming6812@hotmail.com

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Introduction to

The Medical Classic of the Yellow Emperor

The Medical Classic of the Yellow Emperor is one of the earliest books found in the corpus of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). It enunciates the systematic structure of the theoretical system of TCM and reflects the theoretical principles and academic thoughts associated with it. This theoretical system has formed the basis for development of TCM since its establishment. Nearly all academic thoughts of many well-known medical masters and medical schools appearing during the history of TCM have grown out of the theoretical system of *The Medical Classic of the Yellow Emperor*. Consequently, it is one of the basic theoretical curriculums of TCM today.

All medical theories come from practice and, in turn, direct practice. Throughout the millennia, the great contributions by TCM to ensure the well-being of Chinese people depended on the theoretical system of *The Medical Classic of the Yellow Emperor*. Therefore, it received lavish attention from medical practitioners throughout Chinese history and was venerated as an ancestral work of physicians, not to mention being a compulsory classical work in TCM.

Times of Compilation and Its Author

Many historians and physicians throughout Chinese history studied and verified that the major contents of *The Medical Classic of the Yellow Emperor* had appeared in the Warring States Period (475 BC — 221 BC). It had been added during the Qin Dynasty (221 BC — 206 BC) and Han Dynasty (206 BC — 220 AD), and had been compiled to the public at the early time of the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC — 24 AD).

The Yellow Emperor is the legendary first ancestor of the Chinese nation, and many Chinese people are proud of being regarded as his offspring. Many Chinese living in earlier times ascribed all their culture to him. This book was titled with his name in order to lead it to fame and authority. The academic divergence of thoughts in this book sufficiently indicates that it is neither a work of a single individual, nor medical achievement of a certain period or a local region, but rather the summarization of experiences of many medical practitioners over a long time.

Components of the Book

The currently universal version of *The Medical Classic of the Yellow Emperor* encompasses two parts, *The Plain Questions* and *The Divine Pivot*. Each part has eighty-one articles. Thus, the book is composed of one hundred and sixty-two articles.

Basic Academic Thoughts Found in the Theoretical System of *The Medical Classic of the Yellow Emperor*

The compilation of *The Medical Classic of the Yellow Emperor* established the unique theoretical system of TCM, and formed the basis for the development of TCM. According to the development regularity of medicines and the inference from the theoretical contents of *The Medical Classic of the Yellow Emperor*, this distinct system is based on anatomical knowledge, and directed by ancient philosophical thoughts. It was produced after long observation of life's phenomena, and proved repeatedly through medical practice. It developed gradually to form from perceptual cognition to rational knowledge and from scraps to comprehensiveness. Therefore, the theoretical system described in this work is under the guidance of ancient plain materialist dialectics, combining with the regularity of human life's activities. This system also presents a lot of significant theoretical principles and academic thoughts. They are also ideological ways that we must master when we study *The Medical Classic of the Yellow Emperor*. This theoretical system has two typical features, i. e., plain materialist dialectics and integral idea that man and nature are mutually corresponding.

Plain Materialist Dialectics

A. The "essential *qi*" is the source of the generation and formation of everything. The ancient Chinese philosophers regarded that the source of the cosmos was the essential *qi*. Everything in the world was produced by the essential *qi*, namely, original *qi*. The *qi* is an invisible materialistic element that forms everything. Of course, the "everything" also encompasses the human beings. Man is endowed with the essential *qi* from nature, and it is called *qi*, essential *qi*, vital *qi*, or original *qi*. The concept of *qi* permeated the medical field. Thus, the idea that everything consists of *qi* is inevitably shown in *The Medical Classic of the Yellow Emperor*. The *qi* is not only the basic material that forms the body, but also the dynamic power of the body. The life's activities of human beings are the manifestations of movements of the *qi*. Different combinations of the *qi* may generate different things. So, according to different places and different functioning of the *qi*, different names of *qi* are determined, such as true *qi*, ancestral *qi*, nutritive *qi*, defensive *qi*, liver *qi*,

spleen *qi*, heart *qi*, etc.

B. The materialism is highlighted. Prevailed the theories of *yin-yang* and the five elements in plain materialist dialectics, which were used to explain the changes of nature in the Spring and Autumn Period (770 BC — 476 BC) and Warring States Period (475 BC — 221 BC). It let more people become suspicious of the religious superstitions towards gods and ghosts. Life science was led to the realm of materialism.

C. The proposition that the life is antagonistic and united is prominent. Not only the body's structures but also life's activities are antagonistic and united, and too are man and nature. Everything has its two antagonistic and united sides, i.e., *yin* and *yang*. The antagonistic and united movements of the *yin* and *yang* push everything to develop forward incessantly, originating birth and death of everything.

D. Life is undergoing constant flux all the time. *The Medical Classic of the Yellow Emperor* regards the entity of nature, living things and diseases as not being motionless and still, but incessantly moving, developing and changing under the mutual actions of the *yin* and *yang*. Consequently, we should analyze and treat a disease with the idea of movement. This is the theoretical reference to syndrome identification and treatment determination in TCM.

The Integral Idea That Man and Nature Are Mutually Corresponding

Man and nature are mutually corresponding. This is a unique feature of TCM that differs from almost all other world medicines. TCM regards the physiological processes and pathological changes of human beings are closely related to nature. Many things involved are put into correspondences organically, such as the waxing and waning of the *yin* and *yang* of nature; the five elements that constitute the world, i.e., wood, fire, soil, metal and water; the running of the sun and moon and stars. The climatic changes of spring, summer, autumn and winter; the spring generation, summer growth, autumn harvest, and winter storage; the human functional system in which the five *zang*-organs are the chief body, and such things, are linked up as well. The occultness and the intrinsic links of both the universe and human beings are incredibly demonstrated.

Chapter Sorting

The Medical Classic of the Yellow Emperor was compiled over two thousand years ago. The language used in this book is archaic and laconic, and its expressions are gracious, far-reaching, and abstruse. The time when it was written is very distant. The book was copied again and again by hand. In ancient times people wrote on bamboo slips which were then tied together. Over the years the binding would sometimes fall apart and the slips would smudge or break. Therefore, pieces of the original text might become mixed up, in-