Introduction

1. The Problem With Medicinal Identification

To improve the reader's understanding of the content of this book through a more intuitive and sensory access to the substances discussed therein, we have included the following information for each entry: After the Chinese text you will find

- the pinyin pronunciation, which is how Chinese medicinals are referred to in the clinical context of contemporary Chinese Medicine,

- a literal translation of the Chinese characters in quotation marks, when these contain any potentially meaningful information at all. In instances where characters are used purely for phonetic reasons and no semantic connection could be established, this information is missing.

- the scientific identification, including the specific part of the plant or animal used, whenever possible, and

- an English common name in parentheses, whenever applicable. Please note that this information is given with some hesitation, to give the reader a very general sense of the substance discussed but not to aid in identification. These common names often refer to plant families instead of a specific species, and we therefore cannot assume that a local variety would have the same medicinal effect as described in this text.

Please note that this translation is not a scientific treatise and that I am a translator of early Chinese medical literature, not a specialist in pharmaceutical identification. Moreover, the exact and unequivocal equation of ancient Chinese terms with modern substances is often far from certain, if not impossible. Like in any other medical tradition worldwide, the problems of identification and local variation have been debated by Chinese scholars, practitioners, scientists, wildcrafters, growers, pharmacists, and other “plant people” since the time of the Divine Farmer. Before you use any substance on the basis of the English identification in this work, please consult the pertinent

medical and scientific literature and seek the advice of trained professionals. For the purpose of the present book, I have tended to select general English terms that may give the reader some insight into the type of substance discussed, based on her or his familiarity with perhaps a more common variety, but these terms often refer to many different species depending on the area of the world you might live in. Whether a particular local species or variety might serve as an appropriate substitution for medicinal usage is not a question this book is attempting to address.

Whenever scholarly consensus has been able to ascertain the common identity over distances of time and space, the botanical identifications found in this book are based on the 1982 edition of the *Zhōngyào Dà Cídiǎn* 中藥大辭典 ("Great Dictionary of Chinese Medicinals"). Dr. Eugene Anderson's assistance and expertise with this aspect of the translation is gratefully acknowledged.

Technical disease terms that require an explanation are marked by consistent capitalization in the running translation text. Definitions and explanations of these terms can be found in the Glossary. My entries there are based on explanations from early classical literature, most notably the Zhū Bìng Yuán Hòu Lùn that was completed in 610 CE.

Another topic that requires a word of caution is the specific part of plants in particular, but also of some animals, that may be used for medicinal purposes, with the effect described in the text. In some entries, the part is specified in the name (皮 *pí* "bark," 實 *shí* "fruit/seed," 花 huā "flower," etc.), but more often than not, this information is unfortunately missing. In such cases, the English common name only identifies the plant to reflect a literal translation, while the scientific identification provides the additional information on the plant part used, whenever that has been established with reasonable certainty. To avoid the risk of potentially misleading the reader, I have refrained from adding any extra information unless my critical historian's mind, and the academic consensus of Chinese and Western researchers with much more time and resources on their hands, have firmly and unequivocally accepted such additions, as in the case of the entry on *rénshēn* referring to the root.

2. Ruminations on Terminology

For the present book, I have intentionally restrained myself from writing too many sinological footnotes that discuss details of terminological choices of limited or no consequence to a "normal" reader. Here I just want to briefly draw attention to a few characters

or phrases that are particularly significant for the present translation.

I have rendered the character 毒 *dú* as "toxin" or "toxic" in the present translation, depending on its grammatical function. Most importantly, it is used in each entry in the phrases 無毒 *wú dú* or 有毒 *yǒu dú*, translated as "toxic" or "non-toxic" respectively. For each substance, the text gives information on the "toxicity" right after the categorization into the Five Flavors (五味 *wǔ wèi*, namely sour, salty, sweet, bitter, and acrid) and Four Qì (四氣 *sì qì*, often translated as "thermodynamic qualities," namely cold, hot, cool, and warm). Given the use of this text as a materia medica, in other words, as a collection of information on substances recommended for human consumption for the purpose of improving or preserving health and longevity, we are led to wonder: Why would a full third of this text be classified as "toxic," namely the so-called "lower" category of medicinals that are associated with earth, identified as "assistants and messengers," and said to "eliminate the evil qì of cold and heat, break up accumulations and gatherings, and cure diseases"? And then there is the middle category of "vassals" who are "in charge of nurturing the Heavenly nature," about whom the text warns: "Some of them are poisonous and some are not, so deliberate their suitability carefully." And why would the

substances with the highest efficacy, which are actually able to "treat disease" (治病 *zhì bìng*), be classified as the lowest category, directly contrary to the way in which most modern doctors would rank them?

To cite just one example, the medicinal effect of the substance *qínjiāo, Zanthoxylum bungeanum* (Shenxi pepper; page 256), which is classified as toxic, is described in this way: "It treats wind evil qì, warms the center, gets rid of cold-related *Bì* Impediment, makes the teeth firm, grows the hair on the head, and brightens the eyes." These effects certainly make it look like a highly useful substance. More significantly, the text continues: "Consumed over a long period of time, it lightens the body, makes the complexion beautiful, allows you to withstand aging, increases the years, and facilitates the breakthrough of spirit [illumination]." How do we reconcile this description, and the advice on long-term consumption, with its classification as "toxic"?

This entry in fact might shed light not only on the meaning of 毒 *dú* ("toxic/toxin"), but also on two other phrases of great significance for this translation project: The phrases 久服 *jiǔ fú* ("consumed over a long time") and 通神 *tōng shén*, which I have ended up translating with considerable awkwardness as "facilitate the breakthrough of spirit [illumination]."

Let us first return to our consideration of the meaning of toxicity in The Divine Farmer's Classic of Materia Medica. When we look at the categorization of substances as toxic (or the sub-category of slightly toxic) or non-toxic, it becomes clear that our contemporary, scientific or popular, meaning of "toxic" does not fit neatly into the ancient Chinese meaning of *dú* 毒. For example, why are *shíliúhuáng* 石硫黄 (sulfur; page 284) and *máfén* 麻蕡 (hemp seed; page 282) categorized as "toxic" when *dānshā* 丹砂 (cinnabar, a.k.a. mercuric sulfide; page 143) and *fēngzǐ* 蜂子 (wasp; page 175) are said to be "non-toxic"?

For an answer, we need to recall the primary intention and authorship and audience of the information contained in this text. Today, the *Divine Farmer's Classic of Materia Medica* is considered one of the most important classics in Chinese Medicine and is therefore treasured deeply by students and practitioners of this form of medicine. For many centuries, physicians have found insights in this text into the medicinal effect of substances, to support their practice of treating disease and alleviating their patients' suffering. Nevertheless, we must never forget that our modern understanding of the scope and goals of "medicine" or of "materia medica" was very different from the early notions of 醫 *yī* ("medicine") and of 本草 *běncǎo* ("roots and grasses," which I have translated as "materia medica").

As expressed in most classical medical literature in one form or another, the creators of the early Chinese classics, for example, idealized the approach of "treating disease before it arises" (治未病 *zhì wéi bìng*). Even more drastically, many if not most of the leading researchers of natural science in early and medieval China were actively engaged in efforts to physically and spiritually transform their natural body and transcend the limitations of its mortal human form (形 *xíng*), to avoid or transform death and turn into spirit immortals (仙 *xiān*). We must never forget this alchemical background, which differs so greatly from our own intentions for the use of "medicinal" substances.

From this perspective, the term 毒 *dú* "toxin/toxic" takes on a different meaning. Looked at from the perspective of etymology, it is a combination of the two characters 生 *shēng* ("life"), or 草 *cǎo* ("grass") over 毋 *wú* ("do not!"), aptly paraphrased by the famous Swedish linguist Bernhard Karlgren as "forbidden herbs." Early variations of the character include the characters 刀 dāo ("knife") or 虫 *chóng* ("insect"), both things that are associated with harming people. So in other contexts, the character can safely be equated with the English term "toxin," which is why I have chosen to do so here as well. The issue, in other words, is not that the Chinese character 毒 means something different from the English word "toxin," but that it carries

a specific meaning here that we must keep in mind. I used to explain it as "medicinal efficacy" in the context of this book, but such an explanation only works if we are clear on the different meaning of "medicinal" in the early texts: Yes, treating disease was one desired outcome of using natural substances, but the actual transformation of the physical body, which in cases like the long-term consumption of cinnabar and other minerals might involve inflicting real and permanent harm on it, was a higher and more important goal, associated with the connection to heaven.

The long-term consumption of substances aimed at the gradual alchemical transformation of the body is therefore an essential aspect of the information presented in The *Divine Farmer's Classic of Materia Medica*. The reader can gain a better understanding of the specific goals of this alchemical transformation by looking at the effects of substances described after the phrase 久服 *jiǔ fú* ("Consumed over a long time"). The most important effects are related to three actions: lightening the body (輕身 *qīng shēn*), staving off aging (or extending the years or some variation thereof, 耐老延年 *nài lǎo yán niān*), and, the most difficult phrase to translate in the entire book, "facilitate the breakthrough of spirit [illumination] (通神 *tōng shén*). The goal of preventing or reversing aging requires no more explanation here. Similarly, "lightening the body" is

an effect that the reader can experience on a personal level. In my mind, I read it literally, in the sense that the body feels light and airy, instead of being weighted down in such a way that it requires effort to keep it upright or move limbs.

Resolving the conundrum of translating the expression 通神 *tōng shén*, or its common relative 通神明 *tōng shénmíng*, proves much harder. I have changed my translation dozens of times, from the awfully prosaic "unclog the spirit" to the unclear "connect [the body's?] spirit(s) with [Heaven's brightness]," to the poetic but maybe too free "induce a state of lucid connectedness," to its current version, "facilitate the breakthrough of spirit [illumination]." There are almost as many possibilities for interpreting and translating this phrase as there are readers and translators. I look forward to receiving your comments but do not anticipate a solution that will satisfy many discerning readers. I would in fact have much preferred to leave it in *pīnyīn* but have decided against this practice, to keep the text accessible to readers with no background in Chinese.

Neither 通 *tōng* nor 神 *shén* are characters that are easily translated into any modern language. In the case of 神 *shén*, the English "spirit" or "Spirit" may express the connection to Heavenly Spirit, or to spirit in the sense of a person's vitality or esprit, but it leaves out the plurality of "spirits" that inhabit the human

body, surround it in the natural environment, and connect it upwards with Heaven. Those of you who practice Chinese medicine or any of the Chinese arts of self-cultivation know that *shén* is just *shén*, and that "spirit," whether in the singular or plural, is indeed a questionable and uneasy English rendition of one of the most important concepts in Chinese culture. Etymologically, you could perhaps explain it as the act of "stretching upward toward something sacred," a place or entity that most people associate with the Chinese concept of "Heaven."

Concerning the character 通 *tōng*, it implies the idea of connecting, of penetrating through all the way to the end, of unclogging, as in the medical action of 通經 *tōng jīng*, of unclogging the channels (or the menstrual period) by removing obstructions, of restoring free flow. Again, this is perhaps a concept that is more easily grasped by experiencing the effect of this action on the human body in person. In the oldest Chinese dictionary *Shuō Wén Jiě Zì* 說文解字, the character 通 is defined as 達 *dá*, "to reach." In addition, the classical meanings of the character include notions like to pervade, to comprehend, to move forcefully, and to communicate and interact. In my mind, especially in the phrase 通神明 *tōng shénmíng* ("facilitate the breakthrough of spirit illumination"), the medicinal substance that is said to have this effect allows the light

of the spirit or spirits to shine through, to illuminate the farthest reaches of "Under Heaven" like the super-charged beam of a magical flashlight. But ultimately, this phrase may just be impossible to express in a modern Western language but can only be grasped on a non-rational level, because it is beyond the limitations of our linguistic capacities.

In conclusion, I hope that you enjoy pondering these sorts of conundrums as much as I do and that this book invites you to ponder a few new ones.

> "Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves… Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer."
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> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*