

PREFACE

BY SABINE WILMS, PHD

夫為醫者，再讀醫書耳。讀而不能為醫者有矣，未有不讀而能為醫者也。

Physicians undoubtedly immerse themselves in the medical texts! People who study [the texts] but are incapable of practicing as physicians certainly do exist. But there has never been anybody who does not study and yet is capable of practicing as a physician.

Southern Sòng History,
preface to the *Líng Shū* 靈樞 “Divine Pivot”

No tree, it is said, can grow to heaven unless its roots reach down to hell.

C.G. Jung, *Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self*, 1951

It is not just because I am a farmer with dirt under my nails that the “Divine Farmer’s Classic of Materia Medica” has always been one of my favorite books.

As a critical historian and teacher of classical Chinese medicine at the National University of Natural Medicine and elsewhere, I firmly believe this little book to be one of the most important, foundational texts of this medicine that I love so dearly and have dedicated my life to. For this reason, Happy Goats Productions has decided to produce a literal and clean translation, with the earliest currently available Chinese source text side-by-side with my English rendition.

Our intention is two-fold: On the one hand, we want those of you with no access to a solid edition of the Chinese source text or no ability to read classical Chinese on their own to enjoy this gem with as little outside interpretation or alteration as possible. For this reason I have chosen a faithful and very literal translation of the text over an elegant and perhaps more easily digestible interpretation. On the other hand, we hope that the bilingual layout encourages those of you who possess some background in classical Chinese to look at the Chinese text while reading my translation, so that you can gain a deeper understanding of the text than any translation could ever offer.

After decades of struggling with translating philosophical, cosmological, and medical literature from classical Chinese to English, I have come to the conclusion that no translation could ever do justice to the depth of the original source. The gap between early

Chinese and modern English culture is simply too large to find direct equivalents for too many terms and phrases, from *qì* to *shén* (“spirit(s),” if you must give it an English word). Moreover, any translation will always by necessity be limited by the translator’s own level of cultivation and understanding of the material, and when it comes to the pursuit of immortality or harmony between Heaven and Earth, we modern people are not even scratching the surface of what the ancient texts have to offer us. For this reason, I encourage all my readers to make friends with the Chinese part of the text as well, to engage with it in whatever way you can, to write it out in calligraphy, have a native speaker read it out loud for you, run it through a Chinese translation software, memorize it, sleep on it, or read it to your dog. For many entries, the grammar patterns are not that difficult and quite repetitive. For this reason, this book is actually an ideal text to study classical Chinese with, especially if you are a practitioner of Chinese medicine. May this book encourage you to dip your toes in the “bubbling spring” (湧泉, *yǒngquán*, a.k.a. KI-1) of the medical classics so that they become a frequently-visited source of rejuvenation and joy for yourself and of inspiration and clarity for your clinical practice.

Whether you are a practicing physician or pharmacist, a fellow “herb head” and plant lover, a historian

of early Chinese culture and natural science, or just curious about one of the most ancient texts from early Chinese literature, we sincerely hope that you will enjoy this text as much as we do!

One reason for the importance of this text is obviously the ancient origin of the knowledge contained therein and its association with *Shén Nóng*, a name that translates literally as “Divine Farmer.” This ancient semi-mythological culture hero of Chinese civilization has been celebrated for thousands of years in China for the invention of agriculture, among many other achievements. A text from the second century BCE called *Huáinánzǐ* 淮南子 recounts the following legend:

古者，民茹草飲水，采樹木之實，食羸蠃之肉。時多疾病毒傷之害，於是神農乃始教民播種五穀，相土地宜，燥濕肥瘠高下，嘗百草之滋味，水泉之甘苦，令民知所辟就。當此之時，一日而遇七十毒。

In ancient times, the people subsisted on grasses to eat and water to drink, picked fruits and nuts from the trees and ate the meat of snails and clams. They frequently fell ill due to being injured by poisoning. For this reason the Divine Farmer began to teach the people how to sow and cultivate the Five Grains and assess the suitability of land and soil for dryness and moistness, fertile or rocky ground, and high or low

elevation. He tasted the flavors of the hundred herbs and sweetness and bitterness of the water in their springs, letting the people know what places to avoid and what places to draw near to. During this time, he encountered seventy poisons in a single day.

In addition to his association with agriculture, bibliographic records and citations from the Han dynasty on connect Shén Nóng's name to titles on the subject of "nurturing life" (養生 *yǎng shēng*), or in other words, the prevention of illness and preservation and optimization of health for the purpose of prolonging one's lifespan or even attaining immortality by transcending the limitations of the mortal body. The content as well as the value judgments inherent in the categorization of medicinals in this text will show the astute reader the significance of this association with a tradition not primarily concerned with treating illness but with preventing it and with promoting longevity or even immortality instead. It is no coincidence either that the single other key figure associated with the *Běncǎo Jīng*, namely the historical figure Táo Hóngjǐng (see below), is better known in Chinese history as the founder of the Shàngqīng 上清 ("Supreme Clarity") school of Daoism. His biography aptly depicts him as a hermit who specialized in academic, religious, and alchemical research into methods of transcending the

limitations of the natural human body by transforming it into a refined immortal existence, similar to the emergence of a butterfly from the chrysalis.

Materia medica literature, called 本草 *běncǎo* (“roots and grasses”) in Chinese, has a long and illustrious, if somewhat overwhelming, history in Chinese medicine. The trusted catalogue of Chinese medical literature *Zhōngguó Yī Jí Kǎo* 中國醫籍考 (“Investigation of Chinese Medical Literature”), published in 1819 by the Japanese scholar Tanba no Mototane, lists no fewer than 2,605 titles, a number that does not include the subsequent category of *shízhì* 食治 (“Materia Dietetica”).¹ In Mototane’s work, the title *Shén Nóng Běncǎo Jīng* (“Divine Farmer’s Classic of Materia Medica”) appears as the first book in the category of *běncǎo* 本草 (“materia medica”). Although recorded as a text in three volumes in the bibliography of the Sui 隨 Dynasty (581–618 CE), the original, if we can even speak of a single source at all, has unfortunately not survived. Due to later scholars’ respect for the information contained in this work, however, we have countless copies of the preface and the text of the individual entries, as quoted in the major materia medica literature from classical times on. With some minor disagreements on the placement and order of individual substances in

1 I gratefully accept the count by Paul U. Unschuld in his *Medicine in China. A History of Pharmaceutics*, p. 2.

one or the other of the three categories, scholars agree that the original text contained descriptions of 365 medicinal substances, classified into the three categories of “upper,” “middle,” and “lower” in accordance with their effect on the human body and their association with Heaven, Humanity, and Earth, respectively.

The preservation of this treasure trove of early Chinese knowledge about the natural world may be due mostly to the efforts of one of the earliest and most illustrious proponents of this text: the above-mentioned scholar, author, and Daoist practitioner Táo Hóngjǐng 陶弘景 (452–536), style name Yǐn Jū 隱居 (“Living in Hiding”).

As Táo’s preface to the text shows, it was already obvious to scholars in the early sixth century that the information contained in the various materia medica texts associated with the Divine Farmer did not come directly from his pen but had been expanded on in the process of oral transmission over thousands of years:

舊說皆稱《神農本草經》，余以為信然。昔神農氏之王天下也，畫易卦以通鬼神之情；造耕種以省煞害之弊；宣藥療疾，以拯夭傷之命。此三道者，歷群聖而滋彰。文王、孔子，象象繇辭，幽贊人天。后稷、伊尹，播厥百谷，惠被生民。岐、皇、彭、扁，振揚輔導，恩流含氣。並歲逾三千，民到於今賴之。但軒轅以前，文字未傳，如六爻指垂，畫象稼穡。。

The old explanations all refer to a “*Divine Farmer’s Classic of Materia Medica*.” I consider this to be reliable. In the past, in his rule of Under Heaven, the Divine Farmer drew the trigrams of the “*Classic of Changes*” to provide access to the dispositions of the supernatural entities; set up the plowing and planting of fields to save people from death from terminal injuries; and promulgated [information on] medicinals and the curing of illnesses, to rescue from the fate of premature loss of life and damages. These three Teachings (lit. “*Dao*”) were [then] enriched and illuminated by passing through large numbers of sages. King Wén and Confucius added judgments, images, and commentaries, acclaiming humanity and heaven through obscurity. Hòu Jì and Yī Yǐn disseminated the Hundred Grains, bestowing their benevolence on all living people. Qí Bó, Huángdì, Péngzǔ, and Biǎn Què provided guidance and support with great fervor. In this way, the [Divine Farmer’s] beneficence has circulated and remained alive. And even though three thousand years have gone by, the people still rely on it to this day!

Nevertheless, before the time of the Yellow Emperor, written characters were not yet transmitted and the six lines [from the *Classic of Changes*] were bequeathed to posterity with finger gestures, while

the tasks of sowing and reaping were transmitted by means of pictures...

While in pursuit of immortality, alchemical transformation of the body, and transcendence of this mundane world in his hermitage on Mount Máo, Táo Hóngjǐng collated and compiled the materia medica information of his times into first a shorter three-volume, and then a longer seven-volume version of a so-called “Classic of Materia Medica.” Making matters a bit confusing, he titled the first one *Shén Nóng Běncǎo Jīng* 神農本草經 (“Divine Farmer’s Classic of Materia Medica”) and the second one *Běncǎo Jīng Jí Zhù* 本草經集註 (“Collected Comments on the Classic of Materia Medica”). Their content overlaps substantially, and these texts have themselves been lost in their original version. Nevertheless, because the text of Táo’s materia medica, regardless of the version, has been quoted and expanded on innumerable times by later authors, it has been possible to reconstruct the original with considerable confidence.

In his preface to the “Collected Comments,” Táo mentions that the original information of the text, referred to by its abbreviated title as *Běn Jīng* 本經 (“Root Classic”), was first written down during the Hàn dynasty in four volumes, one containing general information and the other three containing monographs on

medicinal substances in three categories associated with Heaven, Humanity, and Earth respectively. Táo further explains that his work includes an expansion of the original 365 substances by another 365 substances and commentaries by himself and by “famous physicians” (名醫 *míng yī*) on such topics as alternate names, information on growing, harvesting, preparation, and storage, and medicinal uses, which he set off from the original text by using a different ink color. Táo’s collected commentaries were subsequently published separately under the title *Míng Yī Bié Lù* 名醫別錄 (“Separate Records by Famous Physicians”). More importantly, however, the text of his original “Classic of Materia Medica” and the commentary by himself and the “Famous Doctors” has been preserved and expanded upon ever since, ensuring not just their survival but their continued preponderance as one of the pivotal texts in the traditional literature of Chinese medicine.

In contemporary Chinese bookstores, editions of the *Shén Nóng Běncǎo Jīng* are ubiquitous but unfortunately not consistent in regards to the order, numbering, and classification of substances. This does not need to concern the practitioner who is merely looking for information contained in the individual monographs. It can, however, cause serious headaches to critical scholars or translators like myself who are trying to publish

a new version of the text. Táo Hóngjǐng himself had already mentioned categorizing the monographs both in the original three tiers of upper, middle, and lower, and in accordance with their natural origin into “precious stones” (玉石 yù shí), “herbs and trees” (草木 cǎo mù), “insects and wild animals” (蟲獸 chóng shòu) and “fruits, vegetables, rice, and grains” (果菜米穀 guǒ cài mǐ gǔ), as most scholars believe he had done in his own edition. At this particular moment, I have more than a dozen Chinese versions of this text in front of me, all called “*Shén Nóng Běncǎo Jīng*” and claiming to be critical historical editions. Hardly any of them agree with one another on the precise number, classification, and arrangement of the monographs. For the purposes of this book, I have chosen to follow the arrangement suggested by the eminent researcher of early classical medical literature Mǎ Jìxìng 馬繼興 in his new critical edition from 2012, because I have complete faith in his lifetime of research into the textual history of China’s medical classics (he was born in 1925!).

While I would have loved to spend weeks researching each single substance and could have compiled dozens of pages on the various commentaries to each entry, I have decided to limit the content of this edition strictly to what is believed to have been the earliest layer of the text. Wanting to let the ancient classic speak for itself as faithfully to the original as possible in an

affordable and manageable modern English edition, I have even refrained from including Táo Hóngjǐng's commentary. There is always time for another book in the future...