

Philosophy and Philology: Two Approaches of Commentating the *Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing* (*Shen Nong's Classic of the Materia Medica*) in the Ming and Qing Dynasties

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Abstract

This paper tests the hypothesis that the commentary trend of the *Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing* (*Shen Nong's Classic of the Materia Medica*) arises alongside the fashionable philology of the time, or the aversion against the Jin-Yuan medical philosophy. After surveying 12 major commentaries, it is concluded that the situation is more complicated than a simple assertion. The seemingly opposite philosophy and philology approaches have been used eclectically to innovate the understanding of ancient traditional Chinese medicine texts.

Keywords: Chinese materia medica; *Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing* (*Shen Nong's Classic of the Materia Medica*); Jin-Yuan school; Philology

1 Introduction

The struggle between the Neo-Confucianism and the “Hanxue tradition” (汉学), or “Han Learning” is a major issue of the intellectual history of late Imperial China. Around the Ming-Qing transition, scholars reflected that extreme individualism and empty arguments were side effects of the Neo-Confucianism, which could have brought about the decline of the Ming dynasty.¹ There emerged an idea of re-examining the original texts before the Han dynasty. Although the two standpoints both claimed that they venerated the ancient sages, Neo-Confucianists interpreted the texts based on the theories developed after the 12th century, whereas the Han school scholars rejected them by scrutinizing what were exactly said in the ancient texts. Benjamin Elman identifies these two approaches as “philosophy” and “philology.”² This phenomenon also appears in Chinese medicine. In the case of pharmacy, *Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing* (《神农本草经》) *Shen Nong's Classic of the Materia Medica*,

hereafter “the Classic”) is considered as the earliest and only ancient materia medica monograph in China before the Jin dynasty. People attributed its authorship to the Sage Lord Shen Nong (神农) and thus it enjoyed a privileged status. However, the argument that the Classic has been neglected was repeatedly raised in history. It is true that the Classic almost disappeared, but Tao Hongjing (陶弘景) rescued the texts, reorganized and expanded the book with his own commentaries into *Ben Cao Jing Ji Zhu* (《本草经集注》) *Collective Commentaries on the Classic of Materia Medica*. He preserved the Classic via separated colors of ink. Since then, all the official materia medica published in various dynasties would arrange the Classic's texts at the beginning of the descriptions of each substance in order to honor the book. The famous *Ben Cao Gang Mu* (《本草纲目》) *The Grand Compendium of Materia Medica* by Li Shenzhen (李时珍) also follows this custom. Nevertheless, the issue of commentating and reinventing the Classic was continuously raised. A scholar of the Qing dynasty even accused that “since Li Shizhen's *Ben Cao Gang Mu* became popular, the *Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing* declined.”³

In today's pharmacopoeia standard, Li Shizhen is a nearly perfect master. He had almost all kinds of merits. He valued positivism and was willing to inquire the opinions of the laboring class; he was thoughtful enough to first incorporate the philology of medicinal substances' name into the materia medica literature. However, to Li himself, he was mostly proud of its contributions in enlightening the Neo-Confucianism philosophy. The design of his book was greatly influenced by the orthodox ideology crystalized by Zhu Xi (朱熹).⁴ Coincidentally, Li highly showed respects to the book *Zhen Zhu Nang* (《珍珠囊》) *Pouch of Pearls* and raised

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its author Zhang Yuansu (张元素) to the top person in the history of Chinese medicine. Zhang, his student Li Gao (李杲), and Li Gao's student Wang Haogu (王好古) continued constructing new ideas in materia medica. These masters were figures of the new medical theories. The new medical theories took shape during the Jin and Yuan dynasties; hence they are sometimes called Jin-Yuan theories. Another master Zhu Zhenheng (朱震亨) further incorporated the new medical theories with the Neo-Confucianism of Zhu Xi.⁵ Their doctrines continued dominating the medical field in the Ming dynasty. Li Shizhen's *Ben Cao Gang Mu* simply reflected the paradigm of his time. Under the influence of such new medical theories, he would quote texts of the Classic when needed to solidify his viewpoints, but those texts were not his emphasis.

Up until the time of Li Shizhen, it was true that very few physicians had highlighted the texts of the Classic in their writings, although they often claimed that they respected it. However, this situation gradually changed in the Qing dynasty. Modern scholars have suggested that a new trend against the Neo-Confucianism emerged since the late Ming dynasty. This trend started with the rise of philology and the fashion of venerating the ancient sages. This anti-Neo-Confucianism trend relooked at how original the prevailing edition of the ancient medical texts was, and how to rebuild the "true version" of the original text. The debates first started around the *Shang Han Lun* (《伤寒论》 *Treatise on Cold Damage*) enthusiastically in the early Qing period.⁶ Later the attention was further expanded to Chinese materia medica. Paul Unschuld uses "the Hanxue tradition" to describe this trend launched by Lu Fu (卢复) and Miu Xiyong (缪希雍). Lu was the first person to restore the texts and Miu was first who wrote commentaries of the Classic in late Imperial China. Their efforts could be explained as part of a greater trend.⁵ This paper aims at testing these hypotheses, by examining the philosophical or philological tendencies of 12 of the most important commentaries of the Classic in the Ming and Qing dynasties, as well as explaining their meanings.

2 Free interpretation in the name of ancient sage

Miu Xiyong, along with Lu Fu, were the most renowned physicians and the earliest figures who emphasized on the returning to the original text in the lower Yangzi delta in the late Ming dynasty. With his knowledge and medical expertise, Miu was respected by the gentry class and had deep relations with several privileged spheres, including politics and publishing industry. Miu was said to be the first person to write commentaries for the Classic. Although his attribution is controversial, it is doubtless that Miu's work *Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing Shu* (《神农本草经疏》 *Commentary on "Shen Nong's Classic of the Materia Medica"*) won much more readerships

and attentions than any similar works before. Since Tao Hongjing rescued the Classic and restored it as part of his collective commentaries compilation, medical authors had not treated the Classic as seriously as Confucian scholars treating *Lun Yu* (《论语》 *The Analects*). Miu uses the word *shu* (疏 exegesis), a genre of Confucian texts, to elucidate the meanings of original commentary of the Classic and to show respects to Tao Hongjing's contributions. By using this character, Miu established a milestone, claiming that his objective is to excavate the secrets in the ancient texts hidden for a long time.

There are several possible approaches for commenting ancient medical texts, and Miu's *Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing Shu* is by no means philological. The main body of his commentaries consists of three parts: *shu* (exegesis), *zhu zhi can hu* (主治参互 indications for cross reference), and *jian wu* (简误 distinguishing errors). These sections show no interests in linguistic issues. He concentrated his efforts on the essential nature of the medical substances. Unlike the previous materia medica literature, the references given are few and they were quoted to support his understanding. He does not always agree with the Jin-Yuan masters, but he retains certain respects to their contributions.⁷ When he found the Classic contradicted with his understanding, he would not hesitate to reject the texts. For example, in his comments for Hua Shi (滑石 *Talcum*), he mentioned that "there is definitely no such reason."⁸ He broke the fundamental rule that a commentator should always obey the original texts. At such times, he was not a commentator by definition. Instead, the Classic served as Miu's footnotes supporting his arguments. This feature coincided with the fashion of the late Ming philosophy.

Miu had a couple of friends sharing the interests in Chinese materia medica. The most distinguished among them is Lu Fu, a leading medical figure in Hangzhou. Lu spent over a decade separating and salvaging quotations derived from the original Classic scattered across multiple sources and constructing them into a single book. Although the quality of this edition is not highly regarded, he is remembered as the first medical scholar who attempted to restore the original texts of the Classic in late Imperial China. Lu Fu wrote a book titled *Zhi Yuan Yi Cao Ti Yao* (《芷园臆草题药》 *On Speculation and Discussion of Remedies in the Angelica Garden*), which reveals that, as a successful healer, his focus is on the practical aspects of the medical substances. Unfortunately, he did not elaborate much of his practical interpretation of the Classic in this brief book.⁹

Later he found that his son Lu Zhiyi (卢之颐) also had a good understanding of Chinese medicine. He asked Lu Zhiyi to compile a more extensive work on materia medica, and thus *Ben Cao Sheng Ya Ban Ji* (《本草乘雅半偈》 *Four Beautiful Aspects of Materia Medica in Semi-hymn*) was published in 1647. The organization of this book suggested that it is a commentary of the Classic. Every remedy started with the original texts identified

by his father, followed by *he* (核 investigation), *can* (参 cross-referencing), *yan* (衍 expansion), and *duan* (断 conclusion). The most important part is cross-referencing, which is the part that Lu Zhiyi examines his opinions. The reason he chose the term “cross-referencing” with an underlying meditating meaning is because both he and his father were fascinated by Buddhist philosophy and wanted to incorporate it in their understanding of materia medica. The title consists of another Buddhist term “*ji* (偈 hymn)” too. Other than adopting the terms “cross-referencing” and “hymn” from Zen Buddhism, Buddhist thoughts and analogy were infused in his writings and became a characteristic of his book. The rich metaphor found in the title and content of the book suggested that it was originally written for readers with certain literary attainment. The Classic itself could not have any substantial linkage with Buddhist philosophy, but it was Lu Zhiyi’s freedom to interpret the texts in this way.

In addition to Buddhist philosophy, the Neo-Confucianism philosophy is also highlighted in Lu Zhiyi’s book. Both Lu Fu and Lu Zhiyi highly appreciated Li Shizhen’s contributions to the development of Chinese materia medica. They also admired Li Gao’s theories. The book echoed Li Shizhen to honor him as the outstanding theorist in history. Besides, Miu Xiyong gave this book direct help. Lu Zhiyi revealed that the completion of this book benefitted from Miu’s guidance. Sometimes he would quote a full paragraph from Miu before giving his own understanding.¹⁰

Zhang Lu (张璐) is another representative figure in the history of commentating the Classic. Contemporary historians count him as one of the “three masters in the early Qing dynasty.” He was well-known at his time because when the Emperor Kangxi of the Qing dynasty traveled to the Lower Yangtze river area in 1705, his son Zhang Yirou (张以柔) was arranged to have an audience with the emperor to present his father’s works as a gift. Zhang Lu established his authority in the study of ancient classic *Shang Han Lun*. In 1662, he claimed that he found the right order of *Shang Han Lun*, which had been messed up by previous experts for over 13 centuries. For this reason, he was misunderstood as a loyal fan of Zhang Zhongjing (张仲景), the author of *Shang Han Lun*.⁶ In fact, his clinical approach is quite different from that of the so-called *Jing Fang* (经方 classical prescription) school, which opposes the therapies suggested by masters of the Jin-Yuan new medical theories. Instead, Zhang Lu picked up whatever sounded reasonable to him. His academic interests cover various areas in medicine, including materia medica. According to himself, his interest in writing his own materia medica was triggered once he had a glance of a commentary of the Classic at a friend’s house. Zhang Lu published an impressive book titled *Ben Jing Feng Yuan* (《本经逢原》 *Encountering the Sources of the “Classic of Materia Medica”*). In the preface, he explained that this book would help readers to skillfully interpret the Classic.¹¹ This objective is similar

to Miu’s proposal. Their aimed readers were physicians of advanced level instead of laymen or beginners.

Given that the title focuses on the Classic, Li Shizhen’s influence is more visible in the book. Zhang Lu discussed more than 700 medical substances. Over half of them are from *Ben Cao Gang Mu* but not the Classic. Its arrangement of chapters and structure also follows that of Li Shizhen. For example, he includes the item “fires,” which was first introduced to the materia medica literature by Li Shizhen. He praises Li’s book as a complete set for all kinds of *fa* (法 rules as well as methods). On the other hand, he lamented that Li lacked flexibility, thus failed to reach the level of intelligence and dexterity. It was a mistake of Li to merely list the few texts of the Classic at the beginning of each medical substance without elucidating their essential meanings. Therefore, he chose to contribute in this context.¹¹

However, Zhang Lu did not achieve the same level of attainment as Li either. There is no clear order when the texts of the Classic would appear in his writings. He was enthusiastic in providing more information about the medical substances or sharing his own clinical experience. He quoted extensively in his writings. From those quotations, we could see that he does embrace the Neo-Confucian traditions. Sometimes, he would remark how thoughtful and subtle the Classic texts were. This was how he fulfilled his theme to elucidate the essence. On the other hand, similar to Miu, his opinions are not always in concord with the Classic. When such cases happened, he would just say that “it was wrong,” or “it was a mistake caused by transcription.”¹¹

Zhang’s personal philosophical tendency is not as clear as Miu or the father and son of Lu. He is more a generalist, still accepting the official Neo-Confucianism theory. Nevertheless, these three commentators shared the same idea to demonstrate their own understandings rather than sticking to the texts of the Classic.

3 Formation of the materia medica study against Jin-Yuan theories

Zhang Zhicong (张志聪) lived in the same era as Zhang Lu. Modern scholars categorized them as the *Zun Gu Pai* (尊古派 group of classicism), but their therapeutic styles and academic understanding toward the Classic were quite different. While Zhang Lu was based in Suzhou, Zhang Zhicong’s activities were in Hangzhou surrounding. Zhang Zhicong’s tendency of adoring the ancient medical classics could be better explained by his education. He first learned medicine with Zhang Suichen (张遂辰), an expert on *Shang Han Lun*. Later he studied with Lu Zhiyi. Compared to Zhang Lu, he was more concerned with the textual meanings of the ancient medical texts, including *Shang Han Lun* and *Huang Di Nei Jing* (《黄帝内经》 *The Yellow Emperor’s Inner Classic*). He was particularly fond of the *wu yun liu qi* (五运六气 five circulatory phrases and six seasonal influences)

theory, which was incorporated as part of the *Huang Di Nei Jing* during the Tang dynasty. Although this theory was neither used by Zhang Zhongjing nor embraced by masters of the Jin-Yuan theories, it was generally agreed that the theory had an immemorial origin. Therefore, utilizing them would not shake one's standpoint as a follower of *Jing Fang* school. When he extended his studies to materia medica, he extensively adopted that theory as his analytical foundation. The title he gave to his commentaries of the Classic was *Ben Cao Chong Yuan* (《本草崇原》 *Reverence for the Origin of the Materia Medica*), reminding his readers that those who want to study materia medica must take its origin, namely the Classic, seriously. He even organized a medical school to closely study the ancient medical texts with his pupils. The commentaries of those ancient texts were the result of his collaboration with his medical pupils. They were written for experts but not for laymen. This can be confirmed as some of the descriptions derived not only from textual reading but also his clinical experience.

The inclusion of Zhang Zhicong's own clinical experience became clear especially when he tried to attack the masters of Jin-Yuan theories. In the commentary on *Niu Huang* (牛黄 *Calculus Bovis*), he refuted Li Gao's interpretation and accused him of "liking to make speculations." "I am afraid that Li's theory would bring disaster to thousands of generations"¹² In the case of *Shao Yao* (芍药 *Radix Paeoniae*), he criticized that most physicians simply follow masters of the Yuan or Ming dynasties. They "do not examine the *Huang Di Nei Jing*, do not examine the nature of things, but instead spread falsehood and foolishly abide by it. All of them are bungled in the name of customs. Isn't it sad?"¹² Zhang Zhicong is the first commentator to oppose the Neo-Confucianism philosophy in the study of materia medica. He portrayed himself as a loyal follower of the Classic. He was not as famous as Zhang Lu during his lifetime, but after his death, he won more followers.

Other than Zhang Lu, Xu Dachun (徐大椿) is another physician who received personal recognition from the emperor. The Emperor Qianlong of the Qing dynasty even proposed to recruit him into the Imperial Academy. Xu is a great figure of the *Jing Fang* school. His maxim for Chinese medicine studies is to always trace the origin. With this presumption, it is natural that he prefers ancient classical Chinese medicine theories over the contemporary theories. One of his famous books is to denounce a prevailing medical philosophy invented by Zhao Xianke (赵献可) to be groundless and ridiculous. Similar to Zhang Zhicong, Xu also disagreed with masters and philosophers of the Jin-Yuan theories such as Zhang Yuansu or Li Gao. He criticized their interpretations of medical substances as strained and farfetched arguments. In the preface of his commentaries of the Classic, Xu condemned the Jin-Yuan philosophers as a group "overconfident in themselves," and thus "repeated the mistakes." "Even when they used medical substances

mentioned in the Classic, they mostly missed the subtle features of the drugs." All of the problems took place indeed "because the Classic is not elaborately studied."¹³

The book he wrote to deal with these problems is *Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing Bai Zhong Lu* (《神农本草经百种录》 *A Hundred Records on "Shen Nong's Classic of the Materia Medica"*). Xu's writing strategy was to select only 100 medical substances from the Classic that he is familiar with, and to provide brief commentaries to its texts sentence by sentence. Although he did not extensively explain all medical substances, readers could grasp how to use other herbs by means of inference. As he put it, he "selected a total of one hundred [medical substances] in number that could be verified by eyes and ears without suspicions, for which the reasoning would be testable, then traced the origins of the relevant discussions, and elucidated the reasons why they were used in such ways, so as to make the ancient sages' ideas behind the prescriptions for healing illness to become obviously visible."¹³ There are no philological remarks in this book. Xu did not bother to explain word by word literally. Xu expressed his insights and experiences with the texts. For him, using the appearance and flavor without involving the theory of meridian tropism is sufficient to grasp the nature of medical substances. Xu's straightforward rhetoric rejected the ground for Jin-Yuan philosophies and theories.

Zhang Zhicong and Xu Dachun denounced the legitimacy of the Neo-Confucianist theory from different perspectives. Chen Nianzu (陈念祖), who holds an even stronger animosity against the Jin-Yuan theories, considered that uniting their forces to form an alliance to gain a domineering position for the classical Chinese medicine theories is a good idea. Chen is better known for the name Chen Xiuyuan (陈修园). He had the opportunity to serve as local magistrates at several places, but he was better known as a medical writer during his career as a government officer throughout the entire country. He was productive and was good at expressing complicated ideas in simple languages. Thus, he was quite a celebrity in the publishing industry.⁶

Just like Zhang Zhicong and Xu Dachun, Chen was enthusiastic about reviving classical Chinese medicine. He believed in classical teaching because it has been proven to be more effective than those physicians who adopted the Jin-Yuan theories. Xu Dachun has the same understanding but he was not as eminent as Chen did. Chen also devoted himself in commenting for the Classic. His book named *Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing Du* (《神农本草经读》 *Readings of the "Shen Nong's Classic of the Materia Medica"*) was published in 1803. This book demonstrated hostility against the Jin-Yuan masters, including their followers such as Li Shizhen. He claimed that a pupil must burn the Jin-Yuan masters' books before discussing medicine with him. In another occasion, he said that "since Li Shizhen's *Ben Cao Gang Mu* became popular, the

Classic has declined.”³ In the preface of the book, his friend quoted an even more radical objection: “Is there anyone who has successfully healed patients using the theories from Zhu Zhenheng, Zhang Yuansu, Wang Haogu and Li Gao?”³

In the book *Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing Du*, Chen arranged his commentaries by quoting the original texts of the Classic first under each medical substance, followed by his general comments with the prefix “Chen Xiuyuan says.” Chen’s style was used to feature long quotation from Zhang Zhicong and Xu Dachun, occasionally adding *Ben Cao Jing Jie* (《本草经解》 *Explanations of the Materia Medica Classic*) attributed to Ye Gui (叶桂), a renowned Suzhou physician in the Qing dynasty. In the “General Notice” of his commentaries, Chen explained that he was not completely satisfied with those authors, but he gave them merits and thus would append their words.³

In the epilogue of Chen Xiuyuan’s medical book, a friend of Chen said that he worried that the theories of Zhang Yuansu and Li Gao were over-prevailing, therefore, he collected early writings of Zhang Zhicong, Ye Gui, and Chen Xiuyuan to make a book. He was pleased to see that Chen Xiuyuan had done so, thus he could “drop his original plan for a while.”³ By collecting these commentaries together, Chen garnered a group of readers and followers who were interested in learning classical Chinese medicine and applying the classical theories to their practices.

At that time, there seemed to be a demand for such a book. Chen’s targeted audience was more popular, much less scholarly than Xu Dachun’s book. However, since he considerably incorporated quotations from Xu’s works into his own book, he has broadened Xu’s readership with his own work.

The desire for such commentaries on the Classic in the late Qing dynasty continues to grow following Chen’s publication. About one century later, Zhong Xuelu (仲学路) made a similar compilation titled *Ben Cao Chong Yuan Ji Shuo* (《本草崇原集说》 *Collected Essays on Venerating the Origins of Materia Medica*) and published it in 1909. This volume highlighted Chen Xiuyuan’s contribution in promoting Zhang Zhongjing’s scholarship, and particularly picked up some of Chen’s essays as its appendices.¹⁴ Zhong is known as a master of classical Chinese medicine. His students, for example, Zhang Taiyan (章太炎) continued promoting the use of classical Chinese medicine. Such classical Chinese medicine-focused materia medica books were indeed useful to physicians. Although classical Chinese medicine was not the only mainstream of medical thoughts in the Qing dynasty as some scholars assumed, by uniting authors of similar opinions against the Jin-Yuan philosophers, Chen Xiuyuan shaped a corpus of *Jing Fang* school’s publications that crystalized the position to compete with the Jin-Yuan theories on equal terms.

4 Input of pure philologists and their compromise

The most crucial contribution to the studies of the Classic in the Qing dynasty is the restoration of the original text. Although the earliest pioneer is Lu Fu in the late Ming dynasty, his work is no more than picking sentences out of the earlier materia medica monographs. Scholars do not regard highly of Lu Fu’s work, but give more attention to Sun Xingyan (孙星衍), Huang Shi (黄奭), Gu Guanguang (顾观光), and Jiang Guoyi (姜国伊). Sun and Huang were pure philologists without medical background, but that was not the case of the other two philologists. Gu and Jiang practiced medicine and provided their own medical opinions in their commentaries for the Classic they reconstructed.¹⁵

Gu wrote *Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing Jiao Zhu* (《神农本草经校注》 *The Proofread “Shen Nong’s Classic of the Materia Medica” with Commentaries*). It is noteworthy that Gu did not involve in the debates against the Jin-Yuan theories. Gu managed his commentaries differently from Chen. Under the commentary of each medical substance, Gu complemented it with other ancient Chinese medicine books in order to reveal other aspects of its nature or usages. Sometimes he would complement the medical substance with how classical Chinese dictionaries interpret certain characters, such as *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* (《说文解字》 *Elucidations of Script and Explications of Characters*) or *Shi Ming* (《释名》 *Explanation of Names*). Gu was an expert of philology. In his other works on geology and mathematics, he basically followed the same style. Gu’s input of linguistic information mainly served to present a more comprehensive picture of the medical term. He did not try to make any clear argument or criticize other authors in his commentaries.¹⁶

Jiang’s reconstructed the Classic titled *Ben Jing Jing Shi* (《本经经释》 *Interpretations of the “Shen Nong’s Classic of the Materia Medica”*). His philological style is somehow different from Gu’s. He claimed that his editorial principle was to “interpret the classics with (other) classics,” a methodology often adopted by Confucian scholars in the Han dynasty. He transplanted this method to the annotations of medical classics. Under each medical substance, he quoted relevant texts from the *Huang Di Nei Jing* or *Shang Han Lun* to identify how authors of other ancient Chinese medicine classics assess the substance, or how they applied it to practice. His assumption was that authors from the era of the Classic should have an understanding closer to the original meaning of the text. He might disagree with the Jin-Yuan theories.¹⁷

The representative figure who annotated the Classic with therapeutic thinking is Zou Shu (邹澍). He produced three books on materia medica in total, namely *Ben Jing Shu Zheng* (《本经疏证》 *Exegesis and Verification on the “Classic of Materia Medica”*), *Ben Jing Xu Shu* (《本经续疏》 *Continued Verification to the “Classic of Materia Medica”*), and *Ben Jing Xu Shu Yao*

(《本经序疏要》 *Continued Exegesis on Essentials in the “Classic of Materia Medica”*). The three books all aimed at interpreting the ideas of the Classic.

Zou was born in a scholarly family and he himself was versed in several fields, but he was mostly fond of Chinese medicine. Among his known 14 works, nine of them were about medical texts including the *Huang Di Nei Jing* and *Shang Han Lun*. The bibliography showed his passion and tendency in reviving ancient classics. His works on materia medica followed this same principle. Zou adopted texts from the Classic, *Shang Han Lun*, as well as *Huang Di Nei Jing* in his book *Ben Jing Shu Zheng*. The descriptions of each medical substance start with a section drawn from the Classic or Tao Hongjing’s elaboration, followed by his philological analysis as well as various references, including historical, religious, and even Western sources. Certainly, opinions about therapies formed an essential part in his commentaries. Usually, he placed *Shang Han Lun* or other classical prescriptions as guides. At the same time, he also incorporated many medical authors after the Jin dynasty to discuss their merits and shortcomings.

In the preface, Zou stated that his commentating on the Classic using philosophical approach was inspired by Liu Ruojin’s (刘若金) work, the *Ben Cao Shu* (《本草述》 *Description of the Materia Medica*).¹⁸ His friend Yang Shitai (杨时泰) recommended this book to him. Yang admired Liu and compiled Liu’s work as an abridged version titled *Ben Cao Shu Gou Yuan* (《本草述钩元》 *A Study on the Origins of the Description of the Materia Medica*). Zou recognized the book’s value, but regretted that it mainly relied on Jin-Yuan philosophical theories. Zou believed that classical works such as *Shang Han Lun* should not be overlooked. This encounter shapes the writing of *Ben Jing Shu Zheng*.¹⁹ For this reason, other than Zhang Zhongjing, Liu was the most frequently quoted author in Zou’s commentaries. Other than Liu, Lu Fu and his son Lu Zhiyi also received intensive attention in his commentary.

His research tools were not limited to textual studies. In the commentary, Zou occasionally revealed the facet of a positivist. For example, he recorded that he had dug a hole in order to observe the roots of Xuan Fu Hua (旋覆花 *Flos Inulae*), confirming that Li Shizhen was wrong. In another event, he mentioned that the spider’s belly contained no silk.¹⁸ None of the materia medica monograph provided such information, thus this description could be the result of his own dissection. He was not a blind worshiper of the ancient Chinese medical classics. He once claimed that, contrary to the orthodox belief, the legend that Shen Nong tasted herbs to write up the Classic could not be true.²⁰ As a philologist, etymology is Zou’s main method to solve puzzles in medical debates. He explained that since the Jin-Yuan masters interpreted wrongly some characters in the *Shang Han Lun*, their reasonings failed to explain the true meaning of the original text.¹⁸

Thus, etymology and therapeutic practices became his major tools to carry out dialogs with medical

philosophers such as Liu Ruojin. For example, he would praise Liu’s comments on Bai Qian (白前 *Rhizoma et Radix Cynanchi Stauntonii*) as “surely as so,” but he would further remark that “as for why it is so, he was still unclear.”¹⁸ The key to find the answer is philology. Zou did not always find fault in Liu and other philosophers. Sometimes he would even recognize that Liu’s interpretations “could compensate what is missing in the Classic.”¹⁸ As a qualified philologist, he could appreciate the merits of philosophical thinking. He also recognized the charm of exploring the philological reason. Based on his understanding of the two approaches, he said that “we would find that there are countless facts sharing the same underlying truth.”¹⁸ Zou shows that philosophy and philology were not necessarily opposite approaches confronting each other. A balanced approach using both philosophical and philological approaches could lead to mastery of medicine closer to perfection.

Before the fall of the Qing dynasty, the last important philological annotator of the Classic is Mo Meishi (莫枚士). After two failures in the imperial examinations, he devoted himself to medicine. When he was young, he acquired solid training in linguistic research methods, which he extensively applied in his studies of several medical texts. He published *Yan Jing Yan* (《研经言》 *Essays on Studying Classics*), *Jing Fang Shi Li* (《经方释例》 *Commentating the Classical Prescriptions with Examples*), and *Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing Jiao Zhu* (《神农本草经校注》 *Proofread Commentaries of the “Shen Nong’s Classic of the Materia Medica”*). This list showed that he was a loyal follower of the classical approach. To compose those books, he applied not only the linguistic tools that he learned but also the methods of “interpreting the classics with (other) ancient classical texts.” Unlike Gu Guanguang or Jiang Guoyi, he tried to clarify more facts in the texts, usually in the form of identifying the exact medical substances according to the original contexts. His achievements gained wider recognition from his contemporaries than Gu or Jiang. Although his explanations were somehow too erudite for the general readers, philological scholars recognized his contributions. For example, Lu Maoxiu (陆懋修), a leading physician in the lower Yangtze river delta and also a *Jing Fang* master, highly praised him and wrote forewords for his first two books.²¹ It is clear that Mo’s standpoint is to promote ancient classical Chinese medicine. However, he never tries to attack the Jin-Yuan theories. Sometimes he would point out Li Shizhen’s mistakes. The criticisms are always limited to the understanding of a certain medical substance, and his criticism was never personal.²²

5 Conclusion

This article examines 12 important commentaries of the Classic in the Ming and Qing dynasties. It tries to reveal that the authors’ approaches and outcomes

diversify in great scale even though they all claimed that they are venerating ancient sages. It is convenient to use the dual framework of the philosophical and philological approaches to grasp the larger picture of happening in this period, but not every author had chosen to side a unilateral approach. In fact, among the “Hanxue tradition” annotators identified by modern scholars, we could at least classify them into three groups: (1) those who had stronger philosophical approach, such as Miu Xiyong, Lu Fu, Lu Zhiyi, and Zhang Lu; (2) those who opposed the Jin-Yuan theories and adored the classics especially *Shang Han Lun*, such as Zhang Zhicong, Xu Dachun, Chen Nianzu, and Zhong Xuelu; and (3) those who were strict philologists, such as Gu Guanguang, Jiang Guoyi, Zou Shu, and Mo Meishi. When scholars talk about the Qing dynasty’s orthodox school, they usually refer to scholars who are versed in linguistic trainings. Modern historians would place them at the side opposite to the Jin-Yuan approach. However, these philologists turned out to be eclectic. They either refrain from attacking the philosophers, or appreciate the Neo-Confucianism and believe that it is possible to incorporate the two approaches. In short, there is a spectrum in the so-called philological scholars. To generalize them as one single group is over-simplified or even misleading.

In view of the brevity of ancient medical classics, the Jin-Yuan theories adopted philosophical speculation to find out the truths that have not been clearly stated, and developed some wonderful theories. At the intellectual level, the Jin-Yuan medical scholars have attracted many outstanding people, such as Li Shizhen, to join their side. But sometimes they would get too immersed in speculations and go beyond reality. On the other hand, the “Hanxue tradition” attaches great importance to finding evidence, and carefully considers every word and sentence of ancient books. When it is taken too far, it may become rigid and trivial. Similar contradictions exist in both China and Japan. However, Japan has clear barriers between the two sides, while the Chinese are more tolerant to allow the two sides to complement each other. At the very least, the four philologists discussed above treated the philosophers gently. It must also be noted that the scholars discussed above are grouped by their lifetime instead of by the two approaches. Before the linguistic methods matured in the Qing dynasty, it is natural that no philological commentators in strict definition were involved. However, throughout the Qing dynasty, physicians from both sides were active in the medical fields. In the latter part of late Imperial China, these three groups of physicians co-existed, and commonly formed a foundation for today’s traditional Chinese medicine.

These examples also show that although those approaches are different, each of these medical figures strived to convince readers on their own claims in the name of the Classic. Therefore, venerating the Classic

should not be understood as a sign of pedantic or obstinate attitude, but rather it is very often adopted as a convenient method to inspire innovations in Chinese medicine.

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