

The *Ben Cao Gang Mu* is a sixteenth-century Chinese encyclopedia of medical matter and natural history by Li Shizhen (1518–1593). The culmination of a sixteen-hundred-year history of Chinese medical and pharmaceutical literature, it is considered the most important and comprehensive book ever written in the history of Chinese medicine. Today it remains an invaluable resource for researchers and practitioners. This nine-volume series reveals an almost two-millennia panorama of wide-ranging observations and sophisticated interpretations, ingenious manipulations, and practical applications of natural substances for the benefit of human health. Paul Unschuld's annotated translation of the *Ben Cao Gang Mu*, presented with the original Chinese text, opens a rare window into viewing the people and culture of China's past.

This new translation of the *Ben Cao Gang Mu* is the first to include the complete Chinese text. While the English translation alone is sufficient for people interested in the practical, clinical application of TCM, the full Chinese text gives those who can read ancient Chinese a chance to explore the translation. It is also an invaluable tool for those who wish to study Chinese medical and pharmaceutical terminology. The translation is based on the same approach applied in Dr. Unschuld's best-available translations of the ancient Chinese medical classics: *Suwen*, *Lingshu* and *Nanjing*. Specifically, the Chinese thoughts of centuries, if not millennia, are not squeezed into the straitjacket of terminology dominating biomedicine today. They are rendered to reflect the thoughts, both clinical and cultural, of the Chinese themselves.

The *Ben Cao Gang Mu* Series

The complete Chinese text translated and annotated by Paul U. Unschuld

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To support the translation and its consistency, Dr. Unschuld has also developed *The Dictionary of the Ben Cao Gang Mu* published in three volumes:

- Vol. I. Chinese Historical Illness Terminology
- Vol. II. Geographical and Administrative Designations
- Vol. III. Persons and Literary Sources

The *Ben Cao Gang Mu* like the 1600-year history of previous *ben cao* works covers large numbers of herbs, animals, minerals and man-made substances. Where it differs is in the systematic description. For the first time in the Chinese *ben cao* literature the text:

- Reviews previous authors and their opinions, always providing the source.
- Identifies the inherent contradictions and discusses the pros and cons of earlier views.
- Includes formulas for almost every item described.
- Includes detailed data on formula ingredients, amounts, pharmaceutical preparation and intake.

There are lengthy quotes of earlier physicians' experiences with the application of individual substances. This is very different from today's works on Chinese material medica where you are informed of the nature of substances and their established effects as if these were self-evidently and unequivocally true. In Dr. Unschuld's translation you will learn of the many possibilities to influence the effect of an individual substance by adding this or that compound, by different pharmaceutical processing, or by different modes of ingestion. Reading these accounts brings modern practitioners much closer to the traditional nature of a substance. There is an unparalleled wealth of internal and external modes of application for medicinal substances and therapeutic techniques.

Apart from direct therapeutic appeal the texts provide a wonderful collection of hints at ancient Chinese culture and civilization. The *Ben Cao Gang Mu* is the most encompassing and most important literary work in the history of Chinese medicine. It shows the tremendous wealth of practical and theoretical approaches to health and healing. There is a comparable work nowhere else in the world.

The text provides a most impressive creativity in the processing of natural substances to prepare them for pharmaceutical application. There are thoroughly heterogenous conceptualizations of health and disease. The yin-yang and five phase doctrines of systematic correspondences being only one. In fact, Li Shizhen is a remarkably liberal chronicler of the sources of therapeutic knowledge. You might expect him to insist on certain sources of knowledge as the only legitimate sources. That is not the case. He freely reports on many different sources, be they dreams, beggars, naturalists, princes, convicts or observers of animal behavior. Li Shizhen warns against adhering too closely to the doctrines of yin-yang and five phases and encourages his readers to follow the experiences of previous experts, even if they do not agree with the yin-yang and five phases doctrines.

Also, the *Ben Cao Gang Mu* has quite a few notes that, while they may surprise today's readers, they nonetheless give insight into the classical Chinese culture. One example is a pharmaceutical drug that can also be used to make the coins you spend secretly return to you. Today's readers should not be surprised to discover that the *Ben Cao Gang Mu* was written entirely from a male perspective. This is especially obvious in view of therapies related to sexuality. Countless formulas and curative recommendations are aimed at strengthening the sexual desire and potency of males. Indeed, substances are recommended to make women pay men for love, not the other way round.

Why prepare a new translation if there is one, published decades ago by Foreign Language Press? The Foreign Language Press edition is problematic in several ways. First, there is no presentation of Chinese original text. This, of course, denies advanced clinicians and scholars the opportunity to see what versions were chosen, which English terms related to which Chinese expressions. Since the Foreign Language Press edition omits text passages, absence of the original Chinese denies readers the opportunity to learn what information the translators assumed was unnecessary, or why they thought it so.

Dr. Unchuld's approach lets readers access as closely as possible the understanding ancient physicians and naturalists had of human existence, health and disease. The terminology he has designed and applied will not always sound "scientific" in a modern biomedical sense, but they reflect the ancient concepts of etiology, pathology, physiology and necessary treatment. This is what practitioners must know to understand the original sense of these ideas.

Enforced use of modern biomedical terminology for traditional Chinese concepts obscures clinical details. Examples are *yong* and *ju*. Under biomedicalization these terms are usually translated as "abscesses." In some of the cases described in this massive materia medica they do refer to what we might identify as an "abscess." But that is not the meaning expressed by the characters for *yong* and *ju*. Their literal translation is "obstruction-illness" and "impediment-illness" because the underlying idea is that the pathways of qi or blood are blocked, which is analogous to thrombosis. Eventually the qi or the blood break out of their channels or vessels and results in an open wound, the abscess. Contracted versions in English do not accurately present the meaning of passages that are difficult to translate because of the depth and complexity of the text.

There are also countless erroneous translations in the previous text, for example:

乳石發渴。寒水石一塊含之，以瘥爲度

FLP: For treating breast carcinoma with thirst. Hold one piece of gypsum in the mouth until the thirst is quenched.

Correction: Thirst resulting from stalactite mineral [poisoning]. Hold one piece of gypsum in the mouth until a cure is achieved

此有赤白二種。白者入藥用，赤者見鬼神，甚有毒

FLP: There are two species, one red and the other white. The white one is used as drug and the red one is used by ghosts and monsters, and is very toxic

Correction: This [herb] has two kinds, red and white. White specimens are added to medication. Red ones let one see demon spirits; they are very poisonous.

水旱蟲荒，國有代有，甚則懷金立鵠，易子炊骸。爲民父母者，不可不知此法也

FLP: Famines due to flood, drought, or plague of insects appear in each country and in every generation. At a time when food is not available, when one is willing to trade gold for it, or when people swap their children so that they can eat them and burn human bones as firewood, officials should know this prescription

Correction: [Catastrophes caused by] water, drought, worms/bugs and famine hit the country in every generation. In severe situations even the affluent give away their children and use bones to cook a meal. Those who represent the parents of the people, they must know this method [of famine relief].

癥飲油。有飲油五升以來方快者，不爾則病，此是髮入于胃，氣血裹之，化爲蟲也

FLP: For treating a hard mass accompanying addiction to oil. The patient drinks a lot of oil, even as much as five *sheng*. Parasites emerge in the stomach.

Correction: A concretion-illness caused by hair, with [an urge to] drink oil. There are cases of people finding pleasure in drinking up to five *sheng* of oil, because they fall ill if they do not drink that much. In the present case, human hairs from the head have found their way into the stomach where it combines itself with qi and blood, with an eventual transformation to worms/bugs.