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HSCI 5533
September 1, 2012

Monkeys and Medicine: Separating Fact and Folklore

One of the marked comparisons that can be made between Needham's approach to the history of Chinese medicine and that of Nappi is how engaging the history is for the reader. Both works are full of marvelous facts about the history of Chinese medicine and the individuals who charted its course. *Inkpot* however is more engaging to the reader as a narrative than *Science and Civilisation's* almost glorified timeline approach. When dealing with religion or folklore for example, Nappi reveals the general consensus of Li Shizhen is he dismissed Daoist practices outright as superstitions. Nappi's research led to an understanding that Shizhen's numerous quotes and sources, many of which Shizhen himself described as Daoist, that it "is difficult to maintain the position... that Li simply rejects Daoist as superstition and sought to purge it from Ming medicine" (Nappi, 46). Nappi then goes on to follow Shizhen's organization of information from all sources. Needham, on the other hand, begins the discussion on medicine illuminating the idea that "It is appropriate to divide science into the "orthodox" and the "unorthodox" (Needham, 38). Clearly maintaining a one of the other cataloging of the history of medicine seems at best, convenient, and at worst, stagnant. Mathematics and Agriculture fell into the 'orthodox' categories while medicine was clearly "a borderline case," this is especially true since early Chinese physicians were regarded as 'artisans.'

Needham's history unfolds in almost a textbook fashion, and reads almost as interestingly as one. Nappi's *Inkpot* flows very organically and intertwines the biography of Li Shizen, the biography of his *Bencao*, and the broader history of Chinese medicine. While Needham's tome is factual and interesting it does not illicit the imagination the way Nappi's work does. This is evident from Nappi's first lines: "Stop for a moment, look up from this book, and close your eyes" (Nappi, 1) The later descriptions of Shizen's body lying in state, or his self study of the effects of nightshade wine, all give a personable and relatable quality to *Inkpot*, whereas Needham's "Influence of Bureaucratism on Chinese Medicine" reads like a closing Dow Jones Index report. The work is full of names and influential people, both in Chinese medicine and historians of Chinese medicine, but they are generally muddled up with the many others in the text.

These examples show that the major difference between Needham's work and Nappi's is the engagement of the reader. Nappi's work will most likely be better received by nonstudents of Chinese medicine than Needham's simply because it is a pleasure to read. The arc of Shizen's storyline, as told by Nappi at least, also makes it easier for historians to place it within a larger narrative of global history of medicine. The most basic comparison to make is that the Chinese were just as interested in the physical observations of the world as any other scientists (physicians). The Chinese cannot be waved off as a superstitious lot who spent the medieval period conversing with tree and water spirits searching for the meaning of life. Through Li Shizen, Nappi reveals how methodical and precise Chinese medicine was, while at the same time discussing things that seem more ethereal and folkloric

to western readers. There are specific details for rendering medicine from dragon bones. Each recipe treats a specific ailment and when prepared in the manner accounted by Shizen is generally a successful treatment. The argument against the existence of dragon bones notwithstanding, the evidence for careful and systematic procedure is there. To dismiss the dragon bone recipes are to dismiss the herbal and botanical recipes as well. The herbals and botanicals worked to some degree and have a place in the world of medicine. More time should be spent deciphering what dragon bones were (I have a strong bet placed on fossils, but natural mineral formations are just as likely) than simply regarding the references with disdain.

Another, possibly more tangential, way to tie Nappi's historical Chinese medicine within the holistic Gordian Knot of the history of medicine could be the impact that it had, and has, on trade. Many of Shizen's reports and recipes were from spices and material that did not occur naturally in China. Pepper and other spices arrived in China via the Silk Routes and almost immediately became staples in Chinese medicine. A comparison of uses in the native areas where these articles are found might reveal more about the relationships between China and the west. Were just the raw materials traded or were medicinal ideas transported as well?

Exotic animal parts were, and still are, a staple of Chinese medicine. These examples, as with the botanical ones can be traced back to an indigenous source and the relationship between that source and China could reveal much. For instance, rhinoceros horn and elephant tusks are presumed to come from an Indian source, but how likely was it that China could receive trade goods from African species? Ancient Chinese medicine as it is practiced today does not see a difference in the

horn from India and the Horn from Africa. Did the early Chinese physicians? Was there even a need to have a distinction then, or were they all from one source? Avoiding a Whiggish interpretation of history, this present day relationship could open up a door to a study of exotica and its uses in Ancient Chinese medicine.

Another area of focus that would allow Nappi and Shizen to fill a worldwide view would be to look at counterfeit medicines. Shizen records how to ascertain whether rhinoceros horns, and many other materials, are authentic or if they are counterfeit. All of these processes he discusses rely on the senses; sight, smell, taste, etc. These are the exact same observational scientific tenants of the west. There is evidence, and a good deal of it if Shizen is to be believed, of a large business of counterfeiting medicinal goods. This is not an isolated event happening only in China. The study could be on where the raw material for forgery were obtained, whether or not China traded medicinal fakes to other areas, or even if it was better to have a fake physician with real medicine or a real physician using faked ingredients.

One final thought on comparison between Shizen and the west. His self-experimentation with nightshade is not unlike Newton's self-tests on optics with a blade between his eye and socket or 19th century scientist noting the time they inhaled an anesthetic gas and then logging the time that they awoke, if they did. When individuals are studied within a system, such as the history of medicine, the stage for comparison studies can be set any number of ways.