

"Shang Han Lun" benefits many, Zhang Zhongjing endures

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Abstract: As one of the four great masterpieces of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), "Treatise on Cold Pathogenic Diseases" has been widely recognized by TCM scholars for its significant clinical guidance. However, the importance of "Treatise on Cold Pathogenic Diseases" in education is often overlooked. We will first analyze the reasons for its important position in the history of TCM, then introduce the main ideas and characteristics of "Treatise on Cold Pathogenic Diseases" from the perspectives of medical ethics and medical skills, and finally discuss its significant guidance for beginners in TCM and the specific manifestations of its historical value.

Keywords: Treatise on Cold Pathogenic Diseases, Zhang Zhongjing, Medical Ethics, Medical Skills, Historical Value

1. Introduction

"Treatise on Cold Pathogenic Diseases," as one of the four great masterpieces of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), has been widely recognized by TCM scholars for its significant clinical guidance. However, for beginners in TCM like us, many people believe that "Treatise on Cold Pathogenic Diseases" is not as important as imagined. Among countless more accessible medical books, the abstruse "Treatise on Cold Pathogenic Diseases" is undoubtedly dispensable. In order to explore the reasons why "Treatise on Cold Pathogenic Diseases" ranks among the four major classics of medicine, our group has extensively collected information about Zhang Zhongjing's life, referred to various evaluations of the treatise, and carefully read the original text, attempting to engage in a direct dialogue with Zhang Zhongjing and to feel his sincere heart when he wrote the book. Although this may be too broad, it is also our heartfelt words after reading, and we would like to take this opportunity to express our admiration for Zhang Zhongjing.

2. Scholars praise "Shang Han Lun" and Zhang Zhongjing's confidence in it

Through the materials we have collected, it has become evident that individuals from both ancient times and the present have held Zhang Zhongjing in the highest regard. However, in the eyes of our students and teachers, the basics of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), diagnostics, and herbal medicine are considered far more important than classical medical texts. Yet, in our group's view, the significance of "Treatise on Cold Pathogenic Diseases" surpasses these foundational subjects. Insights into this can be gleaned from the evaluations of others and the preface written by Zhang Zhongjing himself.

Since "Treatise on Cold Pathogenic Diseases" was organized and compiled by Wang Shu he, it became a closely guarded secret among medical practitioners during the Southern Dynasties, not to be casually revealed. By the Tang Dynasty, it had become a required subject for medical officials' examinations. Sun Si Miao once lamented that the masters of the Jiangnan region kept the essential formulas of Zhang Zhongjing confidential and did not disseminate them. Subsequent studies on "Treatise on Cold Pathogenic Diseases" number in the tens of thousands, such as "Shang Han Lai Su Ji" and Cheng Wuyi's "Annotation of Treatise on Cold Pathogenic Diseases". Historically, four to five hundred scholars have explored its theories and prescriptions, leaving nearly a thousand monographs and specialized treatises, thus forming a particularly brilliant and unique school of Cold Pathogenic Disease studies in the history of TCM. Statistics show that by 2002, nearly 2000 books had been published for the study of "Treatise on Cold Pathogenic and

Miscellaneous Diseases". Although interpretations vary, there are very few voices in opposition. In modern times, not only do many renowned TCM practitioners have a profound understanding of "Treatise on Cold Pathogenic Diseases", but some have also proposed that studying it before other miscellaneous diseases is like building a house from the top down, starting with the difficult and then moving to the easy, whereas starting with other miscellaneous diseases and then moving to "Treatise on Cold Pathogenic Diseases" is like starting with the easy and then tackling the difficult. They have pointed out that many people give up on TCM halfway due to the incorrect sequence of learning, which has had a significant impact. (Miscellaneous diseases refer to works in various fields of TCM such as internal medicine, surgery, gynecology, and pediatrics).

What makes this even more intriguing is that in the preface of his book, Zhongjing wrote: "Although I have not been able to cure all diseases, I have managed to understand the origins of illnesses. If one were to follow the compilations I have made, more than half of the thinking is already there." It is important to note that ancient authors would never promote themselves as blatantly as modern authors do. Moreover, from other statements made by Zhongjing, it is clear that he was not an arrogant person. For instance, at the beginning of his book, he speaks of his admiration for the talents of the people from Yue who entered the state of Gu and observed the color of the Marquis of Qi, often sighing in admiration of their exceptional skills. Whether it was the historical records of his diagnosis of Wang Can or his original text stating that "in yin diseases, the presence of yang pulses indicates life, and in yang diseases, the presence of yin pulses indicates death," it is evident that Zhongjing's skills in pulse diagnosis were on par with those of Bian Que. Yet, he begins his work by emphasizing his deep respect for Bian Que, which shows his humility. That such a humble person would make such a confident statement about his book indicates Zhongjing's satisfaction and pride in it. So, what is the guiding significance of such an important book for us students?

3. "Shang Han Lun" promotes medical ethics and healing for the masses

Upon reviewing the compilation of "Shang Han Lun," it is observed that despite the many articles being lost or reorganized, the language of the preface remains cohesive and seamless, showing no signs of revision. Thus, we realize that while others may focus on the subsequent articles, the preface is often habitually overlooked. However, the content placed at the forefront should typically be of the utmost importance. At this point, we encountered a statement in the memoir of a renowned traditional Chinese medicine practitioner, who shared a saying given to him by a monk: "In your lifetime of treating patients, you have only truly cured two diseases and healed two people. Let me share a saying with you to see if it resonates—diseases come in a thousand forms but are rooted in yin and yang; people may be diverse, but they are all driven by the pursuit of fame and profit." Through this saying, we seem to understand the significance of the preface in "Shang Han Lun," as it serves as a guiding principle, highlighting the vital instructional value of medical ethics for medical students, not only in the study of medicine but also in life.

3.1. Medical ethics supreme: The medical spirit and practice of Zhang Zhongjing

After a humble beginning in the preface, Zhongjing sharply criticizes the contemporary world for its pursuit of fame and profit, even using strong language such as "muddled and ignorant, stupid as wandering spirits." In ancient times, medical practitioners highly valued mutual respect and would never express such disdain for their peers in their writings. Zhongjing's action indicates the extent to which medical ethics had deteriorated during the late Han Dynasty, to the point where he did not consider such people his colleagues. On the other hand, it also demonstrates the irreplaceable position of medical ethics in Zhongjing's mind. In ancient apprenticeships, the memorization of classics was highly emphasized, and with Zhongjing's confidence in his work becoming a classic, he emphasized the importance of medical ethics right from the start, showing his meticulous intention. As everyone knows, the beginning of a text is usually the most memorable, just as we are particularly familiar with the formula for Mahjong Soup when reciting prescriptions. Zhongjing hoped that future beginners in medicine would deeply imprint the importance of medical ethics in their minds from the very start of their studies. However, contrary to his wishes, many later medical practitioners seemed not to place medical ethics in their hearts, treating it like the neglected "Preface to Shang Han Lun," just as Laozi said: "The superior man hears the Tao and diligently practices it; the average man hears the Tao and half believes it; the inferior man hears the Tao and laughs at it, without

laughter it would not be the Tao." Yet, "Shang Han Lun," born in an era where every household suffered the pain of death and every family wailed in sorrow, and Zhang Zhongjing, born in an era where medical skills were considered no more than witchcraft and prostitution, and practitioners were classified among the lowest of society, was like a lotus emerging unstained from the mud. The "Shang Han Lun," written with his heart's blood, expressed his disdain for fame and wealth and his unwavering pursuit of the medical path. In "Shang Han Lun," he lamented the past losses and the premature deaths that could not be saved, clearly opposing the perfunctory attitude of diagnosing diseases by merely glancing and prescribing medicine without a thorough examination, not feeling the pulse fully, not examining the patient's whole body, not considering the three parts of the body, not counting the breath for fifty movements, not making a decisive diagnosis in a short term, and not observing the nine signs, thus neglecting the inspection of the patient's condition. He expressed the idea that one should save the world if possible, and if not, then save the people; if one cannot be a good official, one should at least be a good doctor. This shows that the thoughts expressed in "Shang Han Lun" on treating and saving people coincide with the descriptions in "The Great Medical Spirit" that a great physician must calm the mind and focus the will, be without desire or demand, first develop a heart of great compassion and empathy, vow to universally save all living beings from suffering, and treat all those who come for help without discrimination, regardless of their status, age, beauty, or wisdom, treating them all equally as if they were one's closest kin. It is evident that Zhongjing was a pioneer in advocating medical ethics. During his time writing in Lingnan, although he saved fewer people from the plague of his time, he has saved countless people suffering from various diseases in later generations, and although he taught fewer medical practitioners of his time, he has inspired countless beginners in medicine for generations to come.

3.2. Zhongjing's ethics in healing, teaching, and writing

In terms of healing, he used common diseases among the common people, such as Tai yang (Greater Yang) influenza, as examples, and described treatments for externally contracted diseases caused by the six pernicious influences. He formulated prescriptions with medicines that were affordable to the common people, often using inexpensive and common ingredients like ginger, jujube, and licorice, which, although simple and used in small quantities, were highly effective. The use of acupuncture on the foot Yang ming (Stomach) meridian to prevent the spread of the disease reflects the concept of preventing illness before it occurs. This approach not only prevents the deterioration of the condition but also alleviates the economic burden on patients, avoiding the modern tendency of some medical practitioners to treat minor illnesses as major ones. These aspects demonstrate the medical ethics embodied by Zhongjing in his work.

In the aspect of educating, "Shang Han Lun" has established a unique system of principles, formulas, and medicines. For instance, in the case of Tai yang influenza, it not only provides the composition and dosage of the medicine but also includes the method of administration and precautions, unlike some practitioners who obscure and conceal information. This provides beginners with a platform to initially understand the medical field, and he never includes content that he does not understand himself, thus avoiding causing confusion for future learners.

In terms of writing, all conclusions are derived from case studies, seeking truth and pragmatism, and never indulging in wild speculation. For example, the description of stroke is based on the symptoms of fever, sweating, aversion to wind, and slow pulse that occur in Tai yang disease, rather than being conjured from subjective imagination.

After discussing medical ethics in terms of saving lives, educating, and writing, we find that Zhongjing always prioritizes the health of the patients when saving lives, never withholds knowledge when educating, and never deliberately makes things difficult for beginners. In writing, he is meticulous, pragmatic, and never indulges in falsehoods or exaggerations. A eulogy written for the national medical master Zhu Liangchun reflects the medical ethics of ancient and modern famous traditional Chinese medicine practitioners like Zhongjing. "A giant star has fallen in the field of traditional Chinese medicine, and the apricot forest is filled with sorrow. He has saved countless lives throughout his life, but in the end, no one could save the old doctor. He had a broad mind and a kind heart, managing clinical practice during the day and writing at night. He was always seen smiling on the podium, how could he bear to leave everyone behind tonight." Like Zhongjing, all these ancient and modern famous traditional Chinese medicine

practitioners possess the above three virtues—saving lives without regard for wealth, educating without seeking rewards, and writing without the desire for fame. They have no fame or fortune in their hearts, just like Fan Zhongyan said, they would rather be a good doctor than a good official. They have dedicated their lives to the medical profession, and the book "Shang Han Lun" perfectly embodies Zhongjing's life values of establishing virtue, achieving merit, and expressing ideas, integrating the three virtues of saving lives, educating, and writing. The importance of medical ethics for a beginner is evident, as one cannot speak of medicine without understanding the principles of the three talents. Medicine is a field that requires exploration of its origins and development from various classics and histories; it requires participation in the essence of Laozi and Zhuangzi; and it requires a thorough understanding of the true meanings of the Tripitaka. Thus, the significance of medical ethics for a beginner is clear.

4. "Shang Han Lun" uniquely blends healing and philosophy in medicine

4.1. "Shang Han Lun": Balancing medical expertise with ethics

When discussing "Shang Han Lun," one cannot help but mention its medical techniques. Although Zhang Zhongjing's insights into medical skills are discussed after medical ethics, his views on medical skills are even more profound. Following the narrative of "Shang Han Lun," for Zhongjing, medical ethics are more important than medical skills, which is why he placed medical ethics at the forefront, aligning with the ancient notion that one should possess medical ethics before acquiring medical skills, and ultimately using them to save lives. The medical techniques in "Shang Han Lun" pursue a simple ideal of healing the nobles' and relatives' diseases from above, aiding the poor and humble from below, and preserving one's own health and nurturing life in general. The discussions on healing not only treat the body but also the mind, which corresponds with the modern scientific understanding of health that includes physical, psychological, and social well-being. He pointed out that many diseases of his time were due to people's excessive pursuit of externals, neglecting the fundamentals, adorning the outside while withering within, and neglecting their essence in favor of material possessions, leading to a precarious state as if in a valley of ice. This echoes the "Inner Canon" which states that with a tranquil and empty mind, the vital energy follows, and the spirit guarded within, where would disease come from? This also shares common ground with ancient Confucian and Daoist philosophies. He skillfully integrated these ancient humanistic thoughts into the treatment of diseases, reflecting the similar guiding role of the unity of heaven and man in medicine and ancient philosophy.

4.2. "Shang Han Lun" innovations: Meridian syndromes and precise prescriptions

Zhang Zhongjing summarized the general process of externally contracted diseases and systematically proposed the theoretical system of the Six Meridian Syndrome Differentiation, using the laws of disease transmission and change as the writing order. This is quite different from the symptom-based writing order in traditional Chinese diagnosis, allowing beginners to quickly grasp the pathogenesis when seeing patients, instead of feeling overwhelmed by the vast number of diseases as if they were learning only from traditional diagnosis. "Shang Han Lun" also developed the connotation of the Six Meridians, not only as the pathways of the viscera and collaterals but also creatively proposing the superficial and deep locations and transmission rules of each meridian, making the abstract phenomenon of pathogenic invasion into the body more concrete. This reflects the idea that great complexity can be simple. He vividly described the progression of the disease with clear symptoms such as fever, chills, severe headache, and fullness in the stomach, using few medicines with accurate dosages, giving people a simple and clear feeling. Although there is less theoretical explanation, all the explanatory parts are easy to understand but thought-provoking. Hence, there is a saying that one can practice medicine alone after thoroughly reading "Shang Han Lun." He diligently sought ancient teachings and widely collected prescriptions, working hard for decades to extract the essence and discard the dross, narrating very complex principles with extremely concise language. For example, the brief 14 characters in the general outline of Tai yang disease clearly describe the key points of syndrome differentiation for Tai yang disease, every word seems to be full of blood, and a decade of hard work is not ordinary. "Shang Han Lun" extensively uses the method of leaving blank, omitting many symptom reasoning processes, such as "those with diarrhea and no thirst belong to Tai yin, because the

organ has cold," which only states that Tai yin disease with diarrhea and no thirst belongs to internal cold syndrome, but does not provide a detailed reasoning process. There are many similar passages, and they are not listed one by one. This not only inspires later generations but also gives them more space to explore without restricting their thinking. The variety of medicines he used is minimal, and the changes are complex. A few medicines or different dosages form prescriptions for treating various diseases. For example, the use of cassia twig in different prescriptions such as Gui Zhi Tang, Gui Zhi Jia Gui Tang, Shao Yao Tang, Dang Gui Si Ni Tang, and Wu Ling San is very good. This not only shows his deep research on these few medicines and the number of cases treated but also shows that Zhongjing never recorded medicines that he was not familiar with, rarely used, or had poor efficacy, which would confuse later generations. The medicines he recorded, both in compatibility and quantity, are extremely precise and reliable. For example, the dosage and compatibility of Ma Huang Tang and Da Chai Hu Tang found by modern medical researchers have no better alternative schemes.

5. The timeless legacy of "Shang Han Za Bing Lun": The sage of medicine, Zhang Zhongjing

When it comes to the academic value of "Shang Han Lun," one must mention "Huang Di Nei Jing" (The Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor). Although "Shang Han Lun" has inherited some aspects from "Huang Di Nei Jing," it is still quite different. The following comparison gives us a general understanding of "Shang Han Lun." "Huang Di Nei Jing" and "Shang Han Lun" are very different; one is graceful and leisurely, the other is intense and full of urgency; one has the demeanor of a noble emperor, the other has the worries of a folk doctor; one is a collection of the sages' thoughts on meridians and qi-blood, the other is a solitary strategy on the deployment of various medicines; one is a model of supporting yang and consolidating the foundation, the other is a template for cold, damp, and diarrhea; one is about upward balance, nourishing the true essence, and practicing the ideals of a real person or a supreme person, the other is about downward balance, attacking to defend, and aspiring to fulfill the ordinary person's desire to preserve life and form.

"Shang Han Za Bing Lun" has the advantages similar to religion. The greatest role of religion is to guide people to do good and give faith to those who have no faith. "Shang Han Lun" can become the faith of our students of traditional Chinese medicine. It not only truly cares for the interests of patients, but its most important thought is to teach students of traditional Chinese medicine to regard saving the world and helping people as their ideals, and to realize their own life value in the process of helping others. It allows them to experience a sense of honor and satisfaction that fame and wealth cannot bring, enabling students of traditional Chinese medicine to touch the true meaning of medical practice more quickly.

However, this book, which discusses medical ethics and medical skills so perfectly, has been used by many later generations as a stepping stone to compete for glory and power, and its faith and spirit have been completely forgotten, which is really a pity. This "Shang Han Lun," which condenses the life's blood of Zhongjing, has a perfect unity in morality and technique and even reaches the height of the Tao. No wonder some people say that there are no medical classics after "Shang Han Lun" (only medical books are left). Tao means the path, and the ancients believed that learning medicine needs to go through the three major steps of medical ethics, medical skills, and medical people. Having faith and noble spirit is undoubtedly the only way to reach the medical people. Yang Quan of the Jin Dynasty said in "Wu Lun Li" (The Theory of Things): "A doctor, if not a person of benevolence and love, cannot be entrusted; if not intelligent and reasonable, cannot be appointed; if not honest and kind, cannot be believed."

Thus, it is evident that "Shang Han Lun" should not only be a technique for our students to make a living but also a guiding light for our lifelong medical path.

6. Conclusion

The value of "Shang Han Lun" lies not only in its precise diagnosis and effective treatment of diseases but also in the humanistic care and philosophical thinking it embodies. It teaches us that medicine is not just a technique but an art, a respect for life, and a commitment to the maintenance of health. The medical thoughts of Zhang Zhongjing, like a bright beacon, illuminate the path of traditional Chinese medicine students and guide them towards the noble realm of a healer's benevolence.

Today, we should cherish the teachings of "Shang Han Lun" even more, integrating its spiritual essence into modern medical practice, centered on patients, aiming for therapeutic effects, and continuously improving medical technology and service levels. At the same time, we should inherit and promote Zhang Zhongjing's medical ethics and style, treating every patient with a heart of benevolence and striving for the highest realm of medicine.

"Shang Han Lun" is not only the crystallization of Zhang Zhongjing's wisdom but also a treasure in the medical repository of the Chinese nation. It has spanned thousands of years, still shining with the light of wisdom, inspiring generation after generation of medical practitioners to contribute to the health and well-being of humanity. Let us take "Shang Han Lun" as a mirror, remember our original aspiration, keep our mission in mind, and continue to forge ahead on the path of medicine.