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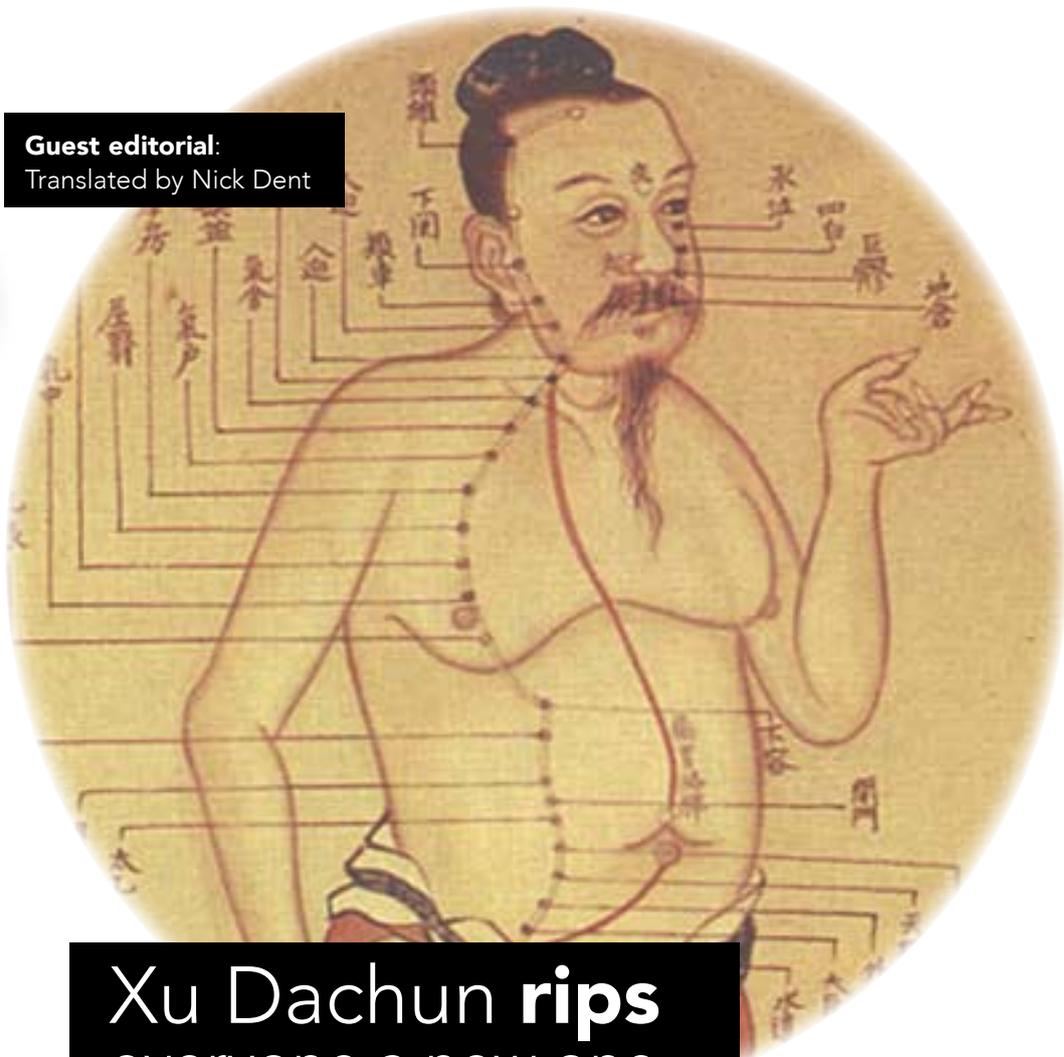
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Guest editorial:

Translated by Nick Dent



Xu Dachun **rips** everyone a new one

In the second half of his book *On the Origins and Development of Medicine*, in the chapter entitled Discussion of the Sources of Medical Theory (醫學淵源論),¹ Xu Lingtai (Xu Dachun) writes:

1. *Yixue Yuanliu Lun* (醫學源流論 On the Origins and Development of Medicine), 1757 by Xú Dà-Chūn/ Xú Líng-Tái (徐大椿/ 徐靈台). I finished the translation before I realised the whole thing had already been published by Paul Unschuld in his book *Forgotten Traditions*. Anyway, this translation has a somewhat different flavour.

IF THE OLDEST medical book is the *Nei Jing*, then the ancestors of medicine are Qi Bo and Huang Di. Nonetheless, the *Ben Cao* began with Shennong who preceded Huang Di. Thus we know that medicine actually begins with the medicinals themselves.

When medicine reached Huang Di it began to speak of the origin of channels, collaterals and organs, the differences between inner damage and external exposure, along with chief, deputy, assistant and guiding herbs, and the preparation of large, small, even-numbered and odd-numbered formulae.

All this clarifies in a miraculous way the principles underlying the use of herbs. Once this was provided, medicine then went on to discuss the shape of the organs in the human body, exposure to the seven emotions and six external factors, and the many and varied techniques in moxibustion and needling. But



the actual formulas were still few.

It was only by the time of Yīyīn and his *Tāng Yè* that we had methods of treating illness, but all we had was the whisper of tradition, there was no actual book to consult. It took until Biān Qùe and Cāng Gōng² before herbal decoctions began to gradually spread out.

At the emergence of Zhang Zhongjing, miscellaneous and cold damage diseases were treated exclusively with herbs in formulas; thereafter he became the ancestor of a thousand generations of formularists. And those formulas were all based on the essential ideas of Shennong and Huangdi, and all had been passed down from high antiquity: Zhang Zhongjing had but collected them.

From this time on, physicians emphasised herbs in formulas, and little considered the pathways of Heaven, Earth, yin-yang, channels, collaterals and organs, or the myriad techniques of acupuncture and moxibustion.

And the methods of treating illness changed from then on, through the Tang and Song, until the Yuan dynasty when such as Liú Héjiān³ and Zhāng Jiégǔ⁴ emerged.

They never slighted study of the *Nei Jing*, and whenever they discussed illness they were careful to always quote the classical texts before adopting the theories of others and only then adding a treatment method; it seemed as if they were following the guidance of the sages.

The problem is that none of them was totally conversant with Confucian studies and so they were unable to deeply comprehend the deep meaning of the Classics, while as for the principles underlying the design of Zhang Zhongjing's formulas they were again incapable of deeply considering their source. Thus their theories were either vague or overcomplicated, each believing their own bias and not returning to the middle path.

But the most skewbald of all was Li

Dongyuan who in the main used only warm drying of Spleen and Stomach: not a shred of proper standards. Because at the time he lived there was no real true learning, so he could bluff his way to a reputation, and that is why his teachings are still hanging on even today.

Then we get to the Ming dynasty and Xuē Lizhāi⁵ (薛立齋) who is especially shallow and preposterous (浮泛荒謬 *fúfàn huāngmiù*). It was as if the learning of the sages turned into putrid debased writing. And of course he'd say I understand the classics and learned from the ancients! But when he actually had to go out and treat anyone did he get results like they did in ancient times?

Since he didn't know the essential meanings in the writings of Shennong and Huangdi, he of course didn't know the origins of the qualities of herbs, the organs, the channels and collaterals.

He also didn't know the standards by which Zhang Zhongjing designed formulas, and so he was oblivious to the ways to effect treatment when illnesses change. He only said "Use such and such a formula for such and such an illness, and if that doesn't work, then change to such and such a formula."

So he would pick a formula and give 20 or 30 packets, drawing it out until the patient just got better by themselves. He had no idea, no firm grasp of what is going on; the main principle was "simple and easy".

And it has just gone downhill since then! Every day, malpractice gets worse and the bodies of patients pile up along the way.

When will someone actually study the *Ben Cao*, investigate the *Nei Jing*, become familiar with the *Shang Han* and *Jin Gui*? Then they can come out and correct these abuses so that people can live out their lives.

The problem is all because those who study medicine are poor and not scholars, they use it just to clothe and feed themselves, so they memorise a few formulas and start practice, going no farther in looking for other methods. That's the cause of all the problems.

Translator's note: We all know someone like this. I have one who lives in my mirror.

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2. AKA 淳于意 (215BC to 140BC) a famous ancient doctor. His family name is Chún yú, his given name is Yì, and his honorific Cāng Gōng. *The Record of History* contains 25 of his cases, the earliest clinical records in China.

3. 劉河間 also known as Liu Wansu (劉完素), 1100-1200, founder of the Cold and Cool school.

4. 張元素 Zhāng Yuánsù (zi-name 張潔古 Zhāng Jiégǔ), 1151-1234, founder of the Yì Shuǐ (易水) school which attributed ascending, descending and channel-tropic qualities to herbs. Li Dongyuan was a student.

5. 薛己 Xuē Jǐ (hào-name Lizhāi 立齋) 1487-1559, became an imperial physician in his 20s, and was a founder of the warm tonification school.

■ Xu Lingtai (Xu Dachun) (徐大椿 / 徐靈台) 1693-1771, was a prolific Qing dynasty medical author.