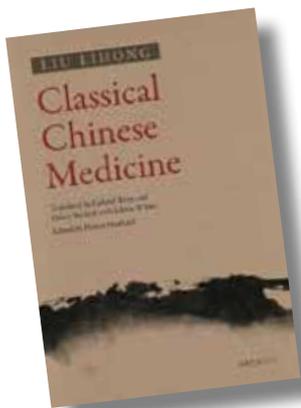


# Reading is believing ... or is it?



**CLASSICAL CHINESE MEDICINE** by Liu Lihong, edited by Heiner Fruehauf, translated by Gabriel Weiss, Henry Buchtel and Sabine Wilms, Chinese University Press, Hong Kong, 2019, 644 pages, hardback.

*Read not to contradict and refute; nor to believe and take for granted; nor to find talk and discourse; but to weigh and consider.*

– Francis Bacon

*When reading the classics, you should view comprehending the meaning as most important, and examination of the words as a secondary consideration. The meaning is like the taproot and the words used to signify this meaning are like leaves in the upper canopy of the tree.*

– Zeng Guofan<sup>1</sup>

**Review:** Steve Clavey

**C**LASSICAL CHINESE MEDICINE is a great book, and I say this after having read every word (and some portions a number of times), but it is not a book to believe.

1. A quote from page 77 of *Classical Chinese Medicine*. The original Chinese reads: 讀經以研尋義理為本，考據名物為末。Zeng Guofan (1811-1872) was well-loved by scholars for his literary works but was also a fierce military leader during the Taiping rebellion.

To be perfectly clear, anyone who is drawn to take a deeper look at Chinese medicine theory should own and read this book. But it should not be read as a bible, or to “find out what is true” or to memorise. It is not, as I said, a book to believe.

In fact the author, I think, would agree: the point is to *think about* Chinese medicine. Indeed the title of the Chinese version is *Contemplating Chinese Medicine* (思考中醫 *Sī Kǎo Zhōng Yī*). The choice of *Classical Chinese Medicine* for the English title was initially puzzling, especially because every other Chinese book mentioned within has the pinyin title supplied except this one.

There is only a single reference to the original Chinese name, found on the last page of the book proper; another is referred to obliquely in the appendix “Nine Questions on Contemplating Chinese Medicine.” But in the end I thought the English title was sufficiently justified by the content to let the question rest.

**Translation and layout**

The translation, done by Gabriel Weiss and

Henry Buchtel with Sabine Wilms, and edited by Heiner Freuhauf, is excellent: readable, accurate and—for a book of more than 600 pages—surprisingly few if any errors.

Furthermore the layout of the English version is in my opinion much better than the original Chinese paperback, which included almost cartoonish symbols such as a 19th century pointing hand in the margins with notes meant to “assist” the busy reader. The hardcover English version is more formal and much more in keeping with the content.



### Structure and content

After an initial chapter discussing Chinese medicine and its general situation in China and the world and its relation to culture, the remaining chapters use the *Shang Han Lun* (Treatise on Cold Damage) as a framework to discuss a wide range of interesting, useful and in some cases crucial concepts in the appreciation of Chinese medicine.<sup>2</sup>

The three yin and three yang are inspected and dissected, one long chapter each, in regard to their timing, nature, significance and associated concepts.

For example, in “The Essentials of Yangming Disease” not only are the meanings of the *yangming* channel and *yangming* bowel explored, but also the meaning of *yangming* in *yunqi* (the cyclical transformation of universal qi), the meaning of dryness, why dryness is associated with metal, and the difference between dry heat and damp cold.

Only then does the author proceed to discussing *yangming* disease as such, going far beyond the usual and bringing in explanations of Spleen constraint (脾約 *pí yuē*), *zhengyang yangming* (正陽陽明 *zhèngyáng yángmíng*) and the Stomach family (胃家 *wèi jiā*). This is followed by an in-depth look at timing and treatment as it relates to *yangming*.

2. One such concept is the idea of “internal experimentation” that the author describes on pages 45-47. Another is the idea of “form” (體 *tǐ*) and “function” (用 *yòng*) discussed on pages 99-100. This is a common concept in Chinese philosophy but often causes confusion for Western readers. A good example is to consider “water” as “form” while all of the various and different manifestations (such as rain, rivers, ice, snow, oceans, mist etc) are example of the “function”.

### Reminiscent of the Zohar

Not everything is covered in depth, however; for example the topic of ministerial fire is left pretty sketchy, but that just means we have to think for ourselves! The approach Liu Lihong uses in understanding the classics of Chinese medicine is very similar to that used in the masterpiece of Jewish mysticism, the Zohar: “Underlying every page of the Zohar’s reading of Torah is a rich ‘ear’ for associative links and plays on words, a constant search for ‘hints’ within the text that will allow for an opening to deeper levels of interpretation.”<sup>3</sup> This is exactly how *Classical Chinese Medicine* approaches its own topic.

Opening *Classical Chinese Medicine* at random, I come across this phrase: “Looking briefly at the simplified form of the character *mai* (脉), the original meaning of the character *yong* (永) was ‘long’. When this concept of ‘long’ is placed within the frame of reference of history, it might be taken to mean ‘eternal’. When placed in the context of the natural world, this idea naturally resonates with the image of a river, long and constantly flowing ...” and so the passage continues, linking pulse to the flow of water and to the moon, and the link between the moon and water, with its tides and cycles, rise and fall. This is the type of thinking that can plumb deep and draw to the surface meaning unavailable to shallow dippers.

### Lightbulb moments

The author repeatedly surprised me. Here is an example, from his discussion of warp and woof, *jīng* and *wéi*.

The ancients often spoke of heaven and earth in terms of *jīng* and *wéi*, referring to the lengthwise and side-to-side threads used in weaving.<sup>4</sup> In the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, we often come across the phrase “heaven *jīng* and earth *wéi*”. *Jīng* was used to refer to heaven and *wéi* to earth.

*Jīng* connects north and south, above and

3. From *A Guide to the Zohar* by Arthur Green, Stanford University Press, 2004; chapter 18, “The Language of the Zohar”.

4. I.e. *Jīng* 經 (a character that as well as “lengthwise threads” also means “channels” and “longitude” and “classics” as well as the “conformations” of the *Shang Han Lun*) and 緯 *wéi* “side-to-side threads” or the woof and weft of weaving. 經緯 *Jīngwéi* as a compound word means “longitude and latitude” or “an outline of a subject”.



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## Listening is not easy

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below; and *wei* connects east and west, right and left. The concept of *jing* and *wei* is seemingly simple, but can we use this simple concept to contemplate some deeper issues in Chinese medicine? Let us consider for a moment why we are the most favoured among the myriad things. Among animals, with the exception of humans, all crawl on four legs, with the body horizontal. Humans are the only creatures that stand upright. From this perspective, humans are the only creatures aligned with *jing*; all the other animals walk aligned with *wei*. In terms of the amount of *qi* that we receive, humans receive the greatest amount of celestial *qi*, and the rest of the creatures receive relatively little. This is an important factor influencing how humans became the most favoured of all creatures. ... Human beings walk aligned with *jing*, the axis of heaven. We are endowed with the greatest amount of celestial *qi*, and the head corresponds with the heavens. Why do humans have such a well-developed intellect?

This excerpt—which is far from the end of the discussion in the book, as it continues over several pages—gives the flavour of how the author will worry at a topic like a dog with a bone, taking the time to extract the marrow.

And it is not just a bit of mental self-stimulation either, but leads to this:

So why is six conformation [i.e. 經 *jīng*] differentiation superior? For the very reasons we just discussed: it is a longitudinal method of differentiating syndromes, it traverses both heaven and earth, and it truly is a *jing* method of differentiation in all senses of the word. For these reasons, this particular method of differentiation is best matched to the essential nature of human beings, it is most capable of reflecting that which makes humans human, and therefore it is best able to reveal the essence of disease.

### Cheap shots

There are a couple of places where Liu Lihong makes assumptions I believe are unworthy, for example in his discussion of the word “Treatise” where he says:

Zhang Zhongjing himself was very modest. He did not append the distinction of “classic” to his books, avoiding the mistake made by Huangfu Mi and Zhang Jiebin (two authors who included the word “classic” in the title of their writings).<sup>5</sup>

Now I can't speak for Huangfu Mi, but for Zhang Jiebin (Zhang Jingyue) I will without hesitation stand up in defence: Liu's statement is a misunderstanding of Zhang's intent.

Here is what Zhang Jiebin himself says about the naming of his book in the introduction to the *Lèi Jīng* (類經 which should, in my opinion, be translated as *The Classics Classified*):

So I researched the two classics [i.e. the *Suwen* and *Lingshu*], first looking for solutions to the difficult questions, repeatedly investigating for over a year before I could sort all the complications out to some extent. After that I combined the two classics into one which I called the *Classics Classified*. The meaning of “classified” was that the *Lingshu* explained the subtleties of the *Su Wen* while the *Su Wen* clarified the mysteries of the *Lingshu*: they were like shell and kernel to each other, a mutual explanation of the other's meaning. While the two classics were combined [i.e., as the *Lei Jing*], they were divided into 12 classifications.<sup>6</sup>

So the “Classic” in the title is not by any means an assertion of pride in his own work, but an essential reference to his source material and its importance.

Since Zhang Jiebin is one of my most trusted references for annotations to the various classics, I am surprised that Liu Lihong has not apparently availed himself of the wonderful resource that is the *Lei Jing*—or if he has, he must not have read the introduction.

5. “但是，作为张仲景自己，他是很谦虚的，他并没有把他的著作叫《伤寒杂病经》，这一点他要比后世的皇甫谧、张介宾高明”The translation (quoted above) is found on p. 87, English edition.

6. 由是遍索兩經，先求難易，反復更秋，稍得其緒，然後合兩為一，命曰類經。類之者，以靈樞啟素問之微，素問發靈樞之秘，相為表裏，通其義也。兩經既合，乃分為十二類。

### Kiss

In a number of cases Liu draws a long bow in making his point, for example in order to demonstrate that dampness is water dispersed by yang—which while an initially unfamiliar idea is not in fact hard to defend with a bit of thought—he looks to the composition of the character 濕 (*shī* damp).

The *Shuowen* dictionary he frequently quotes defines the character *shī* (濕 damp) as “water flowing east into the sea” (說文水出東郡東武陽入海<sup>7</sup>) so instead he separates the water radical 氵 and looks at the remainder *xiǎn* (冫) and how *xiǎn* is often used with the character *míng* (明) which is made up of sun and moon and ...



... both [sun and moon] signify yang. And so, yang is in a way synonymous with *xiǎn*, and *xiǎn* synonymous with yang.

Once we understand the meaning of the character *xiǎn*, the meaning of dampness (*shī*) is easy to discern. What is damp? How is damp formed? Water added to yang becomes damp. The action of yang upon water, causing it to steam upward into vapour becomes damp. Where, after all, does dampness come from? It comes, quite obviously, from water. Therefore many places are considered to be watery and damp. However, there is a clear difference between water and damp, and this difference lies with *xian*, in other words, with yang.

Now I hasten to say I agree with the conclusion; as I mentioned before it is not hard with a bit of thought to see that the action of yang lifting and dispersal on moisture will cause a fog of dampness, and this is a valuable insight. And maybe his original audience of Chinese readers may have needed the extended explanation involving different characters.

But the original character breakdown provides all the clarity needed to demonstrate his point, for the *xiǎn* portion of *shī* is made up of the sun shining down upon silk (e.g. the silken ribbons of rivers glittering in the sunlight) and so yang is implicit in the

7. Literally “water flowing out from the eastern prefectures of the country of Yan into the sea”. Yan bordered what is now the Bohai Sea.

original character—there is no need to bring in *míng* and its sun and moon.

On the other hand, I probably would not have had this insight on my own, and this is why this book is so important. But it takes me back to the opening quote from Francis Bacon: “Read not to contradict and refute; nor to believe and take for granted; nor to find talk and discourse; but to weigh and consider.”

This is a book to weigh and consider, and rather than take it as dogma we should be considering and *attempting to verify its conclusions* in our lives and practices.

Of course, that takes thought, and everything around us these days encourages us to leave the thinking to someone else.<sup>8</sup>

### So, in the end

I won't be depending upon this book for delivering truth. But I *will* be frequently returning to it for inspiration while I take passages from the *Su Wen* or other classics and think about them slowly, mulling over the implications, in ways that I would not have been likely to do without Dr Liu's demonstration of the nutrition that can be extracted by doing so.

Well worth not only the price but the time spent reading it.

8. Like that old but ever more relevant Perfect Circle song *Pet*.

### Real Chinese sayings

*There are roads through the mountain of texts,  
hard work finds the path;*

*The sea of learning is boundless but suffering is one's boat.*

書山有路勤為徑，學海無涯苦作舟

*Shū shān yǒu lù qín wéi jìng;*

*xué hǎi wú yá kǔ zuò zhōu*