



Medicine is no minor **art**

By Dr Allen Tsaur

醫非小道記 "Medicine is no minor art" comes from 景岳全書 *Complete Compendium of Zhang Jingyue*. In this more personal writing, Zhang (1563-1640), a medical luminary of the Ming dynasty, recounts an encounter with an extraordinary person in Korea. It questions the meaning of being a practitioner. Is the purport of medicine simply about the act of practising? Furthermore, what is the ultimate aim of medicine? These questions were asked and etched in ink more than four centuries ago. May they still bring inspiration to practitioners today.

醫非小道記三十二

予出中年，嘗遊東藩之野遇異人焉，偶相問曰：子亦學醫道耶？醫道難矣，子其慎之。予曰：醫雖小道，而性命是關，敢不知慎，敬當聞命。

AFTER REACHING MIDDLE age, I once travelled in the wilderness of the eastern vassal state,¹ where I

1. "東藩 eastern vassal state" most likely refers to the Joseon Kingdom (Korea), as it is historically a

encountered an extraordinary person. By chance, he asked me, "Are you also learning about the art of medicine? The art of medicine is difficult, you must attend it with care."²

I responded, "Even though the medicine is a minor art,³ it is the key for inner nature and life. How dare I act without caution? Respectfully, I shall heed your advice."

tributary state to the Ming dynasty and Zhāng Jǐngyuè is known to have travelled there. Other possibilities are the Ryukyu Kingdom (Okinawa Islands) or the general northeastern region of China, both are also called 東藩 eastern vassal state from time to time.

2. This is reminiscent of Zhū Dānxī's last words to his son, "醫學亦難矣，汝謹識之。The study of medicine is difficult, you must carefully remember this" as recorded in 故丹溪先生朱公石表辭 Funeral Ballad for the Later Master Dānxī, the Respected Elder Zhū in 丹溪心法 *Essential Teachings of Zhū Dānxī* (1481).

3. "小道 Minor art" comes from 論語子張 the *Analects*: "Zi Zhāng" (4th century BCE), "雖小道，必有可觀者焉，致遠恐泥，是以君子不為也。Even in minor arts, there is something worth being looked at; however, when one attempts to reach a far [goal], there is a danger that one may be restrained by them. Therefore, the noble ones do not practise them." For this, 朱熹 Zhū Xī (1130-1200 CE) notes, "小道，如農圃醫卜之屬。The minor arts are the likes of agriculture, gardening, medicine, and divination."

異人怒而叱曰：子非知醫者也！既稱性命是關，醫豈小道云哉？夫性命之道，本乎太極散于萬殊，有性命然後三教立，有性命然後五倫生。故造化者，性命之爐冶也。道學者，性命之繩墨也。醫藥者，性命之贊育也。然而其義深其旨博，故不有出人之智，不足以造達微妙。不有執中之明，不足以辨正毫釐。使能明醫理之綱目，則治平之道如斯而已。能明醫理之得失，則興亡之機如斯而已。能明醫理之緩急，則戰守之法如斯而已。能明醫理之趨舍，則出處之義如斯而已。洞理氣於胸中，則變化可以指計。運陰陽於掌上，則隔垣可以目窺。修身心於至誠實儒家之自治，洗業障于持戒誠釋道之自醫。身心人已理通於一，明於此者必明於彼。善乎彼者，必善於斯。故曰：必有真人而後有真知。必有真知而後有真醫，醫之為道豈易言哉？若夫尋方逐跡齷齪庸庸，椒疏殺疥，芻蕘散風，誰曰非醫也？而緇衣黃冠總稱釋道，矯言偽行何匪儒流？是泰山之與丘垤，河海之與行潦，固不可以同日語矣。又若陰陽不識虛實悞攻，心粗膽大執拘偏庸，非徒無益而反害之之徒。殆又椒疏芻蕘之不若，小道之稱且不可當，又烏足與言醫道哉！醫道難矣！醫道大矣！是誠神聖之首傳，民命之先務矣。吾子其毋以草木相渺，必期進於精神相貫之區，玄冥相通之際，照終始之後先，會結果之根蒂，斯於斯道也。其庶乎為有得矣。子其勉之！子其勉之！

The extraordinary person became angry and shouted, “You are not someone who understands the medicine! Since you claimed that [the medicine] is the key of inner nature and life, how can the medicine be a minor art as you have mentioned? For the way of inner nature and life, it is rooted in the supreme polarity and it is disseminated to the ten thousand different [manifestations]. With the inner nature and life present, subsequently, there is the establishment of the three teachings.⁴ With the inner nature and life present, subsequently, there is the beginning of the five cardinal relationships.⁵

4. i.e. Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism.

5. From 孟子滕文公上 Mèngzǐ: “Téng Wén Gōng I” (3rd century BCE), it is stated, “聖人有憂之，使契為司徒，教以人倫，父子有親，君臣有義，夫婦有別，長幼有序，朋友有信。As the sage worried about it, he appointed Xiè as the Minister of the Masses to teach the relations of humanity, so that, between father and son, there should be affection; between sovereign and minister, righteousness; between husband and wife, separate duties; between old and young, a proper

“Thus, the nature’s creation is the smelting furnace of the inner nature and life. The study of Dao is the rules and regulations⁶ of the inner nature and life. The medicine is what assists and fosters the inner nature and life. Nevertheless, its meaning is deep and its purport is broad; thus, without extraordinary wisdom, it is insufficient to access its subtlety and ingenuity; without impartial clarity, it is insufficient to identify and rectify a fine hair’s difference in width.

“When one is able to clarify the headropes and outlines of the medical principles, the art of governing and bringing peace⁷ is the same as such. When one is able to clarify the successes and failures within the medical principle, the mechanism of [a nation’s] rising and falling is the same as such. When one is able to clarify whether [a disease] is urgent or non-threatening by the medical principle, the method of battling and safeguarding is the same as such. When one can clarify whether to accept or reject [opinions] according to the medical principle, the meaning of the origin⁸ is the same as such.

“By penetrating the principle within one’s chest, [all] transmutations and transformations can be calculated by one’s fingers. By wielding yin and yang within one’s palm, one is able to see what is behind the wall.⁹

“Cultivating the body and mind with the utmost sincerity, this is truly the way of self-governing by the Confucians; cleaning one’s karmic hindrance through observing the precepts, this is truly the way of self-healing by the Buddhists and Daoists. For the mind and body, others and oneself, all principles converge at one [source]. By understanding

order; and between friends, fidelity.”

6. Lit. “carpenter’s straight-line marker”.

7. i.e. This is alluding to Zēng Zǐ’s (曾子) “國治而後天下平 By governing the state well, all under the heavens are able to enjoy peace.”

8. i.e. By understanding the medical principle and developing a critical mindset, one’s clinical reasoning is close to that of the canonical literature.

9. This is a specific reference to Biān Què 扁鵲 from 史記扁鵲倉公列傳 *Records of the Grand Historian: “Biography of Biān Què and Cāng Gōng”* (94 BCE), where it is recorded that after Biān Què took Chángsāng Jūn’s (長桑君) secret formula for 30 days, “視見垣一方人。以此視病，盡見五藏癥結，特以診脈為名耳 he was then able to see the person behind a wall. With this vision, he was able to see the concretions and binds of the five zang organs. [To cover up his ability,] he often pretended to diagnose with pulse as a front.”

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this [principle] within oneself, one will certainly understand it in other people; by being adept at [treating] others, one will certainly be adept at [treating] oneself.

“Therefore, it is said, ‘There must first be true persons before there can be true knowledge.’¹⁰ Likewise, there must first be true knowledge before there can be the true medicine. For the medicine as an art, how can it be easily explained? Just like those who search for formulas and pursue the vestige, who are overly cautious and mediocre, [knowing only to] dispatch scabs with pepper and sulfur as well as disperse wind with scallion and shallot, will anyone deny them as physicians?

“Whenever [people wear] black robes and yellow caps, others call them Buddhists and Daoist [priests].¹¹ Whenever people are pretentious in speech and hypocritical in conduct, how can they be anything but Confucians?¹²

“Just like comparing Mount Tàì to small hills and mounds, comparing rivers and seas to the flowing water on the roadside, undoubtedly, they cannot be mentioned in the same breath.¹³

“Furthermore, if they attack by mistake due to the inability to recognise the yin and yang, or if they are careless, reckless, stubborn, obstinate, biased, and mediocre, then not only will they not bring any benefit, but they will be the ones who harm people instead. Most likely, they are even inferior to [those who know about] pepper, sulfur, scallion, and shallot. As they are already unworthy of bearing the title of [practising] the minor art,

are they even qualified to be instructed in the art of medicine?

“The art of medicine is difficult! The art of medicine is vast! This is truly something that was first transmitted by the divine sages, as it is the paramount matter regarding people’s life.

“My friend, you should not regard [the art of medicine] as something insignificant because it is simply grass and wood. You must expect yourself to work diligently to reach the state where your essence and spirit are linked together, to the realm where the mysterious profundity is interlinked; [so that you may] illuminate the beginning and the end of what is at present and what is from the origin, and reunite with the fruit-bearing root and stalk; only then will you arrive at this Dao,¹⁴ so that you will attain the knowledge.

“You need to strive for it! You must strive for it!”

予聞是教，慚悚應諾，退而皇皇者數月，恐失其訓因筆記焉。

After I heard his instruction, with shame and angst, I promised that I would undertake [his instruction]. Nevertheless, I avoided [thinking about] it, as I was in great anxiety for several months. Since I was afraid that I would forget about his admonishment, I later wrote it down with my brush.

14. Alt. “as such, you have arrived in our path/profession”.

10. From 莊子內篇大宗師 *Zhuāngzi Inner Chapters: “The Great Ancestral Master”* (3rd century BCE).

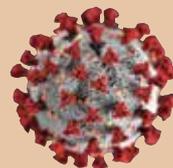
11. “緇衣 black robes” are worn by both Buddhist monastic members and devotees who have taken the three refuges. “黃冠 yellow caps” are worn by Daoist priests.

12 Note: This sarcastic statement may require explanation, as it is difficult to understand without the context. In short, it is saying that people often misidentify those with superficial knowledge of medicine as physicians, just as they assume whoever wears religious attire to be religious members, or they wrongly associate any hypocrite to be a Confucian. This is asking the existential question of what constitutes a person of faith; is it about the external attire and what they talk about, or is it about the internal learning and cultivation? To be a physician, is it simply the act of practicing medicine, or is it something more internal and deeper?

13. Lit. “one must not speak of the two things on the same day.”

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There must first be true knowledge before there can be the true medicine.



A compilation of articles on covid-19 is free to download from our website. We aimed to produce an informed, how-to guide to approaching covid-19 as a *wen yi* 瘟疫 epidemic pathogen. We may add to this document as case histories and modifications come to light, so advise practitioners to check for updates.

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