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# Remembering my teacher Cao Ying-Fu



## By Qin Bo-Wei

Before I did a clinical internship with Ding Gan-Ren, I had attended the Shanghai Technical College of Chinese Medicine from 1919-1923. During that time Cao Ying-Fu had a teaching post there due to his skill in both poetry and medicine. As I loved literature I would often seek him out to discuss medicine, and would end up talking poetry. Even after graduation I would frequently go to Teacher Cao's house, together with classmates Xu Ban-Long, Yan Cang-Shan and Zhang Ci-Gong, to ask questions and learn more. This was 30 years ago now, but still I retain a deep impression of the effects these visits had on me.

CAO YING-FU IS an exemplar of the Classical Formula School; his formulas and ways of employing herbs are all according to the rules laid out in the *Shang Han Lun* (Discussion of Cold Disorders) and the *Jin Gui Yao Lue* (Golden Cabinet). He maintained that the medical books subsequent to these two classics by Zhang Zhong-Jing were too insignificant to be worth discussing.

What was my position on this? Zhang Zhong-Jing differentiated patterns and sought the cause, specified boundaries and established set formulas with stringent

guidelines for their use, and this is certainly of value in clinic. However, due to the restraints of historical conditions, I thought, their range of applicability could not help but be somewhat limited. I did not agree that we should discard without reason all of the many excellent later formulas derived from experience.

Because we held different opinions, there were occasionally arguments among the students. At their height, when Teacher Cao could see that we were missing the point, he would purposefully lead the discussion away from medicine into poetry, by setting



*The Lantern* is a journal of Chinese medicine and its related fields with an emphasis on the traditional view and its relevance to clinic. Our aim is to encourage access to the vast resources in this tradition of preserving and restoring health, whether via translations of works of past centuries or observations from our own generation working with these techniques. The techniques are many, but the traditional perspective of the human as an integral part, indeed a reflection, of the social, meteorological and cosmic matrix remains one. We wish to foster that view.



■ The poet Wang Yu-Yang.

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This spirit of ‘what I know I will declare, what I don’t know I will also declare’ is Teacher Cao’s most distinguishing feature.

us a topic and challenging us to each supply a line with matching rhyme for the poem we were creating. This would cool our passions in the most gentle way possible.

I remember once in the winter of 1924 he and I were discussing the controversy about whether *Bai Shao* (*Paeoniae Radix alba*) was sour and constricting [as Li Shi-Zhen and most material medica say it is] or whether it was bitter and draining [as the earliest *Divine Husbandman’s Materia Medica* states]. We had bought some wine, and were tasting different teas, facing each other under one lamp, when before we knew it the cock was crowing the morning’s dawn. Before I left that morning he used calligraphy ink to paint a plum blossom, with the words “passing the time under a light snow in discussion with you” as the dedication, and he presented it to me. Thinking of it now, it was extremely witty.<sup>1</sup>

Actually, Cao Ying-Fu knew that all of us students *did* use classical formulas, and he also was very willing for us to search out modern formulas that were based on classical formulas in order to expand our knowledge base. On the other hand, Teacher Cao himself often used *Bu Zhong Yi Qi Tang* (Tonify the Middle and Augment the Qi Decoction), *Liu Wei Di Huang Wan* (Six Ingredient Pill with Rehmannia) or *Xiao Yao San* (Rambling Powder), and similarly would employ herbs that Zhang Zhong-Jing never knew, such as *Niu Bang Zi* (*Arctii Fructus*) and *Qian Hu* (*Peucedani Radix*). He certainly did not write off modern formulas.

1. Witty, because Cao had borrowed a phrase from a plum blossom painting by the famous near-contemporary artist Jin Xian-Lan 1841-1909 and altered it slightly but cleverly to suit their situation.

My friend Zhang Ci-Gong, who was Cao’s private student, explained it once like this:

*Cao Ying-Fu is expert at using Gui Zhi (Cinnamomi Ramulus) and Ma Huang (Ephedrae Herba) but hates Sang Ye (Mori Folium) and Ju Hua (Chrysanthemi Flos) with a passion. So in his mind the dispute between classical formulas and modern formulas all comes down to the difference between those two pairs of herbs. Yet he knows, too, that pungent-warm exterior releasing is not appropriate for use in some disorders, but after he noted that Huang Yuan-Yu<sup>2</sup> used Fu Ping (Spirodelae Herba), Fu Ping then became his main herb to cause sweating in warm disease patients.*

Zhang Ci-Gong knew Cao Ying-Fu intimately, better than I, and it can be seen from what he said that Cao Ying-Fu was not inflexible in his ideas.

Most practitioners are familiar with the idea that classical formulas are the foundation for all formulas, and that the formulas developed during subsequent generations for the most part developed directly from classical formulas. It is like a tree: only by having a root can there be branches, leaves, flowers and fruit, none of these things can exist by themselves without a pre-established root. On the other hand, a single tree is not a forest. Cao Ying-Fu’s determined advocacy for the study of classical

2. Huang Yuan-Yu (1705-1758). After losing his left eye to a bad doctor he studied medicine himself and taught widely throughout central and northern China. He was an expert in the “Four Sages”: Qi Bo, Huang Di, Bian Que and Zhang Zhong-Jing, writing eight tomes on their teachings that continue to influence Chinese medicine scholars to this day.

formulas while not stubbornly opposing the study of modern formulas was based on the recognition of this fact. He took the time to point out that research into Chinese medicine should begin at the root, rather than ignoring the root and picking the flowers. This may be why, in poetry, he admired the poet Wang Yu-Yang<sup>3</sup> and encouraged us to read the Yuefu poetry of the Han and Wei dynasties. He even wrote a book on the subject, “Ancient Yuefu Annotated.”

All of this is in the same vein.

Cao Ying-Fu was a very learned man, but his business was not very busy; you could even say it was unusually slow. At the time, my late uncle ran a charitable organisation in Shanghai that every summer would regularly provide access to medical care and medicines to the working classes. Ding Gan-Ren went through me to recommend Cao Ying-Fu for this position, which he held for three years or so. Much of the material for Cao’s book *Jin Gui Fa Wei* (Explicating the Subtleties of the Golden Cabinet) came from his case histories during this time (although a few were from other venues). His *Jin Gui Fa Wei* is only one of his works, but what is most valuable about it is how it is different from the clichéd method of quoting earlier experts in investigating more and more recondite points, or alternatively giving more and more forced interpretations to make oneself look clever. Cao Ying-Fu wrote in a very down-to-earth fashion about just what his own experience had shown him; if he had no personal experience he would rather leave it out than construct some half-baked theory just to fill in the space. This spirit of “what I know I will declare, what I don’t know I will also declare” is Teacher Cao’s most distinguishing feature, both in his life and his study. It is also the fundamental quality present in his *Jin Gui Fa Wei* (Explicating the Subtleties of the Golden Cabinet).

As far as I know, one of Cao Ying-Fu’s early teachers for the imperial examinations when he was young also understood medical theory. Later, his teacher at the Nanqing Academy of Classical Learning, the renowned Huang Yi-Zhou, was also an expert physician. So we can see that Cao Ying-Fu’s knowledge of medicine had a solid source. But through

his practical diagnosis, patients would either respond immediately to his treatments, or feel improvement with the first bag of herbs and be cured with the second. These results became known far and wide, and the dismissive tone that many of his colleagues had been taking toward classical formulas quickly changed. It cannot be denied that Cao was the motive force in this change of attitude.

When the Japanese invaded the south of China, Cao Ying-Fu’s hometown of Jiangyin, Jiangsu Province, fell into enemy hands and he died heroically resisting the invaders. We heard about this only the next year, and I wrote a poem commemorating him in 1938. The current republishing of his two books, the *Jin Gui Fa Wei* (Explicating the Subtleties of the Golden Cabinet) and *Shang Han Fa Wei* (Explicating the Subtleties of Cold Damage) brings home to me Cao Ying-Fu’s inexhaustible energy in educating young people in Chinese medicine, and the accuracy of his educational principles. The works he has left behind help us explore and organise the precious resource that is the medicine of our ancient country.

Of course, we can not be content with this as it is,<sup>4</sup> we must take the overall legacy of our mother country and the remnants of the People’s Culture and move from classical formulae to modern formulae, from decoction to single herbs, and extract the best while excising the least, demolish factionalism, and develop Chinese medicine and herbs into ever better effectiveness.

To close, I would like to quote the old saying that “Zhang Zhong-Jing studied medicine from an elder relative in his home town, and before long everyone felt that he had surpassed his teacher in use and understanding.” However, in my case, I cannot feel that my few medical accomplishments (aside from the number of patients) have entitled me to “assume the mantle” of Cao Ying-Fu, and even less am I worthy of his well-deserved praise. Besides, we still have a few differences of opinion.

On those occasions when his disciple Zhang Ci-Gong and I get together, we find we both have the same feeling of gratitude, and the same sense of having failed to live up to a high standard.

3. A poetic genius during the reign of the early Qing emperor Kangxi who emphasised the importance of the ancient tonal patterns on the creation of poetry.

4. Says Qin Bo-Wei at the dawn of the Communist era in China, when “new development” was on the lips of all, and the old was beginning to be suspect.