

Drugs, Destiny, and Disease in Medieval China: Situating Knowledge in Context*

Michael Stanley-Baker

Abstract

This paper examines the therapeutic use of drugs and ritual as recorded in a 4th-century scripture and the ways different notions of destiny affected treatment. It also offers methodological considerations of the ways contemporary scholarship has separated medicine and religion as discrete fields in early imperial China, and proposes methods for closer engagement with these early materials. A standing theory in the field argues that because rituals of confession and therapeutic drugs were understood to operate on different principles, these two interventions were mutually exclusive. Confessional rituals relied on a moral accounting system and manipulated one's "count" of allotted life, whereas drugs simply worked empirically, and therefore disrupted the ritual accounting system.

The author investigates this theory by reading the *Zhen'gao* 真誥 (DZ 1016), as an ethnographic source, one of the best of the period. It was also an important source used by proponents of the argument outlined above. Comparison of different revelations indicates that, contrary to the above

Michael Stanley-Baker is Post-Doctoral Fellow jointly at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science and at the Berlin Center for the History of Knowledge.

* My thanks go to reviewers of this paper in earlier forms: Terry Kleeman, Stephen Bokenkamp, Catherine Despeux, Johnathan Pettit, Vivienne Lo, and Pierce Salguero. Chang Chaojan 張超然 patiently and generously read the *Zhen'gao* with me over many months. Dolly Yang helped edit the abstract. Funding for the research leading up to this paper was provided by the Wellcome Trust and the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation. Institutional support was provided by Academia Sinica, the Needham Institute, and the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science.

findings, drugs and ritual were used together over time to treat the same people with the same complaints in what appears to have been a regular protocol. The paper further describes an etiological theory in the text that connects a causal chain that crosses various domains, including ritual and drug therapy. This section of the paper concludes that the hard separation of religion and medicine imagined in earlier scholarship deserves to be re-examined on the basis of actor categories.

How did the protagonists of the *Zhen'gao* actually organize their knowledge in practice? Looking beyond theoretical models of disease and cure, this organization is visible in the ways social and institutional practice structured the flow and hierarchy of knowledge. Rather than distinguishing between the ritual and the empirical, the protagonists of the text placed much more emphasis on differentiating the esoteric from the exoteric, secret knowledge intended only for initiates versus that circulated to the laity. Very clear distinctions mark these as two different methods of transmission, treatment styles, medical cultures and notions of disease.

A concluding methodological reflection argues that attention to the situatedness of knowledge is useful for tracing the emergence of stable systems, whether religious or medical. It argues that this method reveals a two-level notion of destiny as a critical distinguishing feature of Shangqing knowledge.

Keywords: Shangqing, medicine, religion, drugs, destiny