

Summary on the Studies of the Unearthed Bamboo Medical Books for the Past Forty Years

—Take *Prescriptions of Fifty-Two Diseases* and *Han Medical Books of Wuwei* for Example

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Abstract

For the past forty years, the study of the unearthed bamboo medical books has always been a very valid concern and many important achievements have yet been achieved. However, the lack of standard handwriting in addition to seriously being destroyed when unearthed, it's not that easy to read them. The purpose of this article is to sort through and correct some commonly occurred interpretation mistakes from the previous studies.

Keywords

Characters, Interpretation, Mistake, Unearthed Bamboo Medical Book

1. Introduction

Mawangdui Han tomb silk book (unearthed in Changsha, Hunan Province) and *Han medical books of Wuwei* (unearthed in Gansu Province) both are important ancient medical literatures and as well as *Zhang Jiashan bamboo medical book* (unearthed in Jiangling, Hubei Province), they have great values in traditional Chinese medicine, clinical Medicine and Chinese philology, those books represented the ancestor's great medical practice and contained lots of precious experiments, therefore, ever since their excavation, scholars from different fields were all showed great concerns and many achievements have yet been achieved. The publishing of *Mawangdui Silk writing in Han dynasty* (under [Qiu Xigui's General Editorship, 2014](#)) and *Research collection of Han medical books of Wuwei* (under Li Shenghua and Zhang Tingchang's general editorship, 2014) symbolized

the studies on those unearthed medical books had reached a higher level, whether on collection, correction or interpretation are all becoming better and approaching perfection as time goes by.

However, those medical books were all made long before the application of printing, they were either scribed on bamboo or wrote on silk, besides, without a unified writing standard and several damages when being excavated and a rich reference of many subjects, such as philology, linguistics, traditional Chinese medicine and sexology, all those feature amplified the difficulty in understanding them. Like Professor Li Xueqin pointed out: “All those lost books are hard and obscure and reading them is a time consuming thing, this is not something which you can achieve in a short time. The publishing of report or review can only symbolize the beginning of our research.” (Li Xueqin, 1992).

2. Shortcomings of Previous Studies

Three major problems exist in previous studies, they are: incorrect textual interpretation, subjective word explanation and questionable punctuations. They are mainly caused by the low comprehensive qualities of researchers, on one hand, scholars who work on medicals only have limited knowledge on philology and linguistics, so they cannot understand the medical books comprehensively which explained the mistakes in their published papers, on the other hand, scholars who specialize on philology and linguistics don't know too much medical, they often interpret the medical terms laterally, what's more, some of those scholars also made lots of low level mistakes such as confusing later graphs with primitive writing, or using borrowed words to explain ancient words. The purpose of this article is to summarize some of those mistakes.

2.1. Using Later Graphs Interpret Primitive Writing

The earliest writing form of character is “primitive writing”, compared with the “later graph”. Because of “character-transfiguration” (Xu Shen, 1963), often one same primitive writing has many later graphs. In early days, only primitive writings would be used, then people tended to use the later graphs and therefore forgot the original forms. When it came to interpreting unearthed books, one of the most commonly made mistakes was using often-used characters to explain everything, for example: in chapter injuries, *Prescriptions of fifty-two diseases*, line two, 𩚑 in 日壹 𩚑, the silk version (帛书本) (Mawangdui Han Dynasty Tomb Bamboo Books Research Group, 1985) interpreted as 饮, and Compiling version (集成本) (Qiu Xigui, 2014) interpreted it as 𩚑(饮), all fell into the category we just listed.

2.2. Using Modern Character Interpret Ancient Character

“Ancient and modern characters” is special philology term which means “source character” and “later graph”. Source character is literally like the mother's body for all those later graphs therefore it often has many entries, to differentiate those entries, different new characters were made. For example, the original form for 燃 is 然, original meaning is “burn”, extended meanings are “to flare, to comprehend, to permit, to form, to fit” etc., with the purpose of divide its original meaning, people started to add radical part on 然, like 燃, therefore 然 and 燃 became a pair of “ancient and modern characters”. In *Fifty-two diseases* all 燃 were written as 然 yet got changed as 燃 in all annotated editions. Another example, 孰 from different chapter “煮之令孰” 之 “孰”, one of the annotated editions (考释本) (Ma Jixing, 1992) said “孰假为熟”. Based on Zihui (a traditional glossary in China): “孰, 古惟孰字, 后人以此字为谁孰, 而于生孰字下加‘火’以别之”, which means: “the character 孰 is the ancient form yet later be added 火 radical to differentiate meanings”. Another scholar Duan Yucai (Qing Dynasty) also said: “后人乃分别熟为生熟, 孰为谁孰矣。曹宪曰: “顾野王《玉篇》始有‘熟’字。””, which means: “the later generations started use 孰 indicate 熟, yet according to YuPian, there was no 熟 till the Southern Dynasties”; what's more, 尉 and 熨, another chapter of *Fifty-two diseases*, 尉 in 以尉头, silk book edition (帛书本), Kaozhu edition (考注本) (Zhou Yimou & Xiao Zuotao, 1988), Jiaoshi edition (校释(壹)本) (Wei Qipeng & Hu Xianghua, 1992) and Jaoshi edition (校释本) (Zhou Zuliang & Fang Yilin, 2014) were all interpreted as 熨. In the original copy of *Fifty-two diseases*, all 熨 were written as 尉(尉) which is a valid proof why use 熨 as a substitute is incorrect.

2.3. Using Cognate Character Interpret the Original Character

“Cognate character” is a philology term. Professor Wang Li said: “As long as two characters have similar or

same pronunciations as well as meanings, they can be treated as cognate characters. They were either showed up at the same time or one after another, for example 牦 (yak) and 旛 (a flag decorated by yak's tail). Cognate characters often indicate several conceptions which are related in meanings centered around one specific one." (Wang Li, 1982). According to the unearthed medical books of *Prescriptions of fifty-two diseases* and *Han medical books of Wuwei* we can tell that the original character of 洗 is supposed to be 洒. 洒 as in 以洒痲. The silk book edition (帛书本) interpreted it as 洒, yet the integration edition (集成本) changed it as (洗). 洒 means "to clean" in general yet 洗 specially means "to wash feet", they are cognate characters (Wang Li, 1982) and only overlapped in "wash" yet are not exchangeable.

2.4. Misusing Phonetic Loan Character

"Phonetic loan" is not a philology term, it is used to describe those "wrong using characters". "Phonetic loan character" is deprived from "phonetic loan", it is more like a integrated conception, as formed by the "loan" and 'borrowed' characters. The borrowed character existed in the original copy and is a "wrongly written character" for sure; the loan character is the one which supposed to be used and is a "correctly written character" (can also be named as "original character"). About this, there used to be a fancy term 'phonetic loan' which actually is "incorrect wrote character", as for its reason, we already gave a detailed illustration in "'Guyin tongjia' shuo de lishi fansi" (Zhong Ruxiong & Hu Juan, 2015) and not explained here.

In those bamboo and silk book, the use of "phonetic loan character" is pervasive. Professor Yu Suisheng said: "Characters in Warring States and Qin and Han Dynasties is later than small seal style stage, yet because of their forms, many scholars categorized them as paleocharacters. Among the unearthed books, the number of loan characters are larger than those handed-down books." (Yu Suisheng, 2014). Therefore, extra attention must be paid to those loan characters, but we cannot overuse them to interpret the unearthed medical books. But this had become an endemic in previous interpretations, especially in *Interpretation of Mawangdui medical books.*, for example, 空 in 以傳伤空 is the original character of 孔, yet the silk book edition interpreted it as 空(孔), the other editions were all followed its interpretation, one edition even directly changed as 孔. But in those unearthed copies, there were no 孔.

2.5. False Interpretation on Character Forms

Literal emendation is the basic skill for whoever studies traditional philology, Duan Yucai once said: "Many classic books were lost due to lack of interpretation, yet many more were wrecked by ill interpretation; the former can easily find a solution yet the later is not so. Another scholar once said: 'It's always better to appropriately ponder, I've never heard to appropriately modify'" (Duan Yucai, 1987), so no one would indiscreetly modify ancient books. But when the form of characters were not clear and the context was ambiguous, some subjectively assumptions would be made, for example there's a chapter in *Prescriptions of fifty-two diseases* "某蚤[早]病痲, 我直(值)百疾之【口】。我以明月舩若, 卷(券)若; 以柞檜(櫂)程若, 以虎蚤(瓜)抉取若", 蚤 in 蚤[早]病痲, the original scripture was written as 蚤, even though the writing is blurry, the character of 蚤 can still be recognized and looked a lot alike the following 蚤. In *Prescriptions of fifty-two diseases* the writing form of different 蚤 were mainly the same, the silk book edition falsely interpreted is as 幸, then this saying had been adopted by other editions even professor Qiu Xigui (a well known scholar in China) was agreed with it. "上引释文的注一说: '某幸病痲'句, '幸'字上疑脱一'不'字, 甚是。". 蚤 in 蚤若 is not 焯, the silk book edition misinterpreted it as 焯, 程 in 程若 was misinterpreted by professor Qiu as 柱.

2.6. Dropping Certain Parts from the Original Scriptures

Sometimes the interpreters would accidentally dropped certain parts from the original scriptures, for example, 槁 in 槁三升(in *Han medical books of WuWei*), YiJian edition (医简本) (Co-Edited by Gansu Provincial Museum and WuWei Pavilion of Culture, 1975) interpreted as 楼, with further explanation as: "the former character before 三升 in the original copy should be 楼, meaning 栝楼." Annotation edition (注解本) (Zhang Yanchang, 2006), Jiaoshi edition (校释本) adopted its saying. Giving a carefully observation for the rubbing, we can notice that the original text is 槁(槁), 槁 is the variant form of 葛, according to ShuoWen (the most authoritative ancient dictionary in China) "葛, 寄生也。从艸鸟声。《诗》曰: '葛与女萝'。槁, 葛或从木。" So there shouldn't be any misinterpretation of 槁. Another example from the same book, 六壬 in 六壬尚房 is pretty recognizable

in the original scriptures yet was dropped in many editions. 六壬 was one of the methods ancient people used to tell future, along with 遁甲 and 太乙, Wuxing (the five elements) starts with Shui (water), 壬 and 癸 belong to Shui (water) (those two can be categorized into Tian Gan, the Celestial stem), 壬 is Yang Shui and 癸 is Yin Shui (Yin and Yang are two opposing principles in nature), drop Yin and leave Yang then get 壬, this 壬 appeared six times when combined with Dizhi (the Twelve Earthly Branches) so the name 六壬, here 六壬 indicates a male suffered the disease 七疾.

2.7. Altering the Original Scriptures with No Hard Proof

A famous scholar Ye De Hui in Qing dynasty once said: “死校者，据此本以校彼本，一行几字，钩乙如其书。一点一画，照录而不改，虽有误字，必存原本。” Roughly translated means: “We must stick to the original scriptures even if it has wrongly written characters.” Such attitude should be adopted when we interpret the ancient books. However, those previous interpretations were full of subjectively assumptions of interpreters, the above mentioned *Interpretation of Mawangdui medical books* in particularly. For example, “尤：取蔽蒲席若藉之弱(弱)绳之，即燔其末，吹久(灸)尤末，热，即拔尤去之。” Those three 尤 were interpreted as 尤 (疣) in the silk book edition, Kaoshi edition 考释本 directly changed it as 疣, with further explanation “疣與尤上古音均匣母，之部韻。同音通假。”, as a matter of fact, 尤 is the original character of 疣 and should be interpreted as 尤 according to the original scriptures, another example from *Han medical books of Wuwei*, 附 in 置其 附 中 (based on the following context 横木 附 上), 附 in 横木 附 上之” and 附 in 卧其附上, some editions interpreted as 坑. However, according to the rubbings, 坑 in all those previous interpretations like 横木坑上 and 卧其坑上 is supposed to be 附, even if the previous 坑 in the previous context 置其坑中 cannot be recognized, but it’s not hard to deduce, 附 is the wrongly written form of 坑 therefore we should changed it as 附(坑).

3. Conclusion

All of those are typical problems when studying unearthed documents. In order to achieve ideal result, here are some basic rules we must follow:

Firstly: Be faithful to the original versions and don’t change them without a valid reason.

Secondly: Seeking truth from historical facts instead of jumping to conclusions arbitrarily.

Thirdly: Eliminating the false and retain the true, instead of distorting the truth.

Fourth: Rectifying whatever is wrong instead of accepting everything blindly.

Due to the early period of those unearthed medical books, lots of ancient and phonetic loan characters had been used, in addition to that, severely damages caused underground environment amplified the difficult in reading them, so any carelessness would cause misinterpretation for the original scriptures, interpretations should be done with great care.

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