
Stephan Peter Bumbacher

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Within the last thirty or so years, quite a number of "medical" texts have been discovered during archaeological excavations in China. They were mostly found in tombs of the period of c. 220 BC to the first century BC, and there is hope that more may come to light in the future. Unfortunately, a serious problem is the increasing number of — by now almost omnipresent — grave robbers who not only demolish the sites they are plundering, thus destroying vital information that would be extremely important to academically trained archaeologists, but who also keep quiet about the exact location of their booty in order to secure further plundering. As in most cases the unearthed manuscripts bear no date of composition or copying, it may often only be possible to indirectly date the mss. by relying on datable grave goods, as long as the sites of the caches are investigated scientifically under controlled conditions. Once the context of an unearthed ms. is lost, this possibility is, of course, no longer available.¹

Among the more important text caches excavated are those found at Fangmatan 飛馬灘 (Gansu; dated c. 230-220 BC), Shuibudi 琴虎地 (Hubei; c. 217 BC), Mawangdui 馬王堆 (Hunan; before 168 BC), Shuanggudui 雙古堆 (Anhui; before 165 BC), Zhangjiashan 張家山 (Hubei, before c. 150 BC) and Wuwei 武威 (Gansu; first century BC). By far the most prolific source was tomb no. 3 at Mawangdui yielding as it did no less than forty-five texts of which some fourteen are categorized as medical. What makes these texts so important is the fact that they, although related to the oldest received classic of medical theory, the Huangdi neijing 黃帝內經 or Inner Scripture of the Yellow Emperor,² are

¹ This seems to be precisely the case with the dozens of mss. written on bamboo strips that were robbed from tombs in Southern China in the 1990’s. They were illegally brought to Hong Kong, bought back by the Shanghai museum (Shanghai bowuguan). And one volume of these has now been published.

² The best study so far in any Western language concerning the Huangdi neijing is Keegan's doctoral thesis of 1988, cf. David Joseph Keegan, The "Huang-ti nei-ching": The Structure of the Compilation; the Significance of the Structure, University of
older than it. One of these, the Wushi'er bing fang 五十二病方 (Recipes for Fifty-two Ailments), had already been presented as a hand-written transcript of the Chinese text together with an introduction ("prolegomena") and an annotated English translation by Donald Harper in 1982 as his doctoral thesis. Sixteen years later, in Early Chinese Medical Literature Harper has accomplished the task of being the first to translate into a Western language all the Mawangdui medical texts (with ample annotations).

The book is divided into two main parts. The first consists of the so-called prolegomena (183 pp.) in five sections, including an introduction, and serves to contextualize the Mawangdui texts. The second includes an introduction, the translation of the fourteen texts, the transcription of three texts (appendix 1), revisions to the transcription of characters as they are published in Mawangdui Hanmu boshu 馬王堆漢墓帛書 (Silk manuscripts from the Han Tombs of Mawangdui), vol. 4 (Peking 1985), and a list of Han dynasty weights and measures. Apart from the compulsory bibliography and a minimal "general" index (lacking, e.g., entries like "hemerology," "homocopathy" etc.), three very useful indices of the materia medica (both Chinese and English terms are listed side by side), physiological terms (do.) and ailments that occur in the mss. are appended.

The five sections of the first part analyse a series of topics related to the manuscripts. Section one is concerned with the texts; it gives an account of the discovery of the mss., provides a survey of all texts found at Mawangdui including an abstract of their content, puts the medical mss. into the context of other recently excavated early medical texts, and addresses hermeneutical issues.

In the second section, Harper discusses the emergence of a new type of learned and literate physicians. Basing themselves on texts (handed down secretly from master to disciple) they increasingly took into account the growing rationalizing and theorizing tendencies in thought, in contrast to priests of local cults and "shamans" who seem to have based themselves more on oral folklore. These physicians with their recipes and techniques are then put into the context of other "technical specialists" of the late Warring States and early Han times, such as astrologers and diviners. The example of tomb no. 3 shows, however, that not only the innermost circle of initiated physicians received these texts and participated in their dispersion and transmission. The author, therefore, gives

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California, Berkeley, 1988 (University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, order number 8916728). A few years ago, Prof. Unschuld and his collaborators of the University of Munich announced that they will publish a critical edition with complete concordance of the Chinese text. The scholarly world is waiting for it with great anticipation.

3 Donald John Harper. The "Wu Shih Erh Ping Fang": Translation and Prolegomena, unpublished Ph. D. diss., Univ. of California, Berkeley, 1982 (UMI, Ann Arbor, order number 8312837).
some thought to the wider circle of the literate elite who participated in these medical (and other) secrets.

Section three focuses on medical aspects proper, such as illness, physiology, therapy, as well as *materia medica*. Distinction is made between ailments that are caused by external agents like demons or bugs, and diseases that were the result of improper circulation of free-flowing blood and vapour in the vessels. Accordingly, some space is devoted to vessel-theory and how it developed in later times.

Whereas section three thus deals with the malfunctions, as it were, of the body and the various kinds of therapy to be applied, section four concentrates on "prophylactic" aspects of the mss., namely their concern with macrobiotic hygiene, as Harper calls it. Here we find a discussion of yoga-like exercises, breathing techniques, sexual cultivation, dietetics, in short: "activities that promote a healthy, enjoyable, and long life." The underlying ideas and concepts are properly put into the context of their intellectual tradition.

It is section five dealing with "magic" that the present reviewer is somewhat unhappy about. As Harper rightly says: "Lively debate continues to focus on the relation between science, magic, and religion in a pre-modern context and on the question of what constitutes rationality. A number of earlier theories and interpretations have been put to rest, among them: that magic and religion are fundamentally different; that magic is failed science; and that scientific "progress" already separated science from magic in ancient times ..." (p. 8f.) Nevertheless, though Harper holds to the category magic, he refrains from explicitly defining it: "Any attempt to discuss magic encounters formidable problems of definition. Without minimizing the importance of theory and definitions, I propose to take a primarily descriptive approach with the Mawangdui medical manuscripts. One does not need a definition in order to recognize that the two recipes just cited are relevant to the investigation of magic in early China" (p. 149). This means that he must have an implicit, and therefore not reflected, definition of magic in mind — otherwise he could not label any operation or device magical. Understanding magic, as he does, as "concern[ing] human actions undertaken in the belief that spirits and divine powers were present in nature" (p. 149), is far too vague to be of any use, but seems to indicate that he belongs to the tradition of scholars following James George Frazer who offered "ontological" or substantial (*inhaltliche*) definitions of magic. In contrast to those who, in the wake of William Robertson Smith⁴ and Marcel Mauss⁵, defined magic in sociological terms. Smith, when investigating the religions of

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the Semites, made a distinction between rituals that were performed in public and were aimed at securing the well-being of the society as a whole, and privately executed rituals that were considered magical. Marcel Mauss, too, defined magic sociologically: according to him, ideas and actions not accepted by a religious denomination are to be considered magical. Mauss showed that the same rites or notions that are commonly accepted by a religious group at one time may be excluded — and thus to be taken as magical — at another. Any "ontological" definition, therefore, has to be rejected. On the other hand, Harper is at variance with Frazer who explicitly states that "... magic ... assumes that in nature one event follows another necessarily and invariably without the intervention of any spiritual ... agency."6 In fact, whereas belief in magic represents, according to Frazer, the earliest phase in the evolution of human culture, belief in spirits or gods belongs to a later one in which human beings sought refuge in religion (before they turned towards natural science in the third and last phase).

This necessarily short account of only a few different concepts of magic may already give an idea of the vast variety of definitions to be found in the scholarly literature, most of them contradicting each other in one or more aspects. There is small wonder, then, that one author, although working in another domain than sinology, summarised the situation in his own field as follows: "We are far away from any theory of magic in the religion of Judaism."7 From this statement there is only a small step to the conclusion that "magic is a category in decay" (der Zerfall der Kategorie Magie).8 It is difficult to rid oneself of the impression that most scholars who are still using the category magic simply dispense with trying to analyse on a deeper level the phenomena they are interested in. Once the category "magic", which is of no analytical value whatsoever, is put aside, one may be able to explain these phenomena in terms of their own native tradition at a level of detail formerly undreamed of.9

Harper bases himself on his own critical revision of the published transcripts of the manuscript texts — unfortunately, only three of his revisions are provided in this book (appendix 1). Transcribing Chinese texts from pre-Han and Han manuscripts into normalized traditional Chinese characters is no trivial matter. As Susan R. Weld has shown, one single pre-Han character may occur in no less

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than ninety-seven handwritten variants. The solution of palaeographic problems lies still almost exclusively in the hands of Chinese scholars. These problems are, firstly, how to exactly transcribe any given handwritten character by taking into account all its elements, secondly, how to identify the character thus characterized in terms of the normative characters that became standard from Han times on, and, thirdly, how to emend the text in order to eventually obtain a critical edition of the ms. in question. In those rare cases where Western scholars have prepared an — at least — partial assessment of Chinese editions, considerable differences between the Chinese and the critical Western readings have occurred. As Harper, with special regard to the Mawangdui mss., says: "... the Mawangdui medical manuscripts present interpretive difficulties. The texts predate script normalization which tended to designate specific graphs as the standard graphs for specific words; in numerous instances the words and meanings intended by the graphs written in the texts are not obvious. Vocabulary can be technical and arcane, some of it obsolete and unattested outside of the manuscripts. And the idiom is sometimes puzzling." (p. 40) Accordingly, Harper, being well aware of the necessity of textual criticism, offers "a number of revisions of the transcription of individual graphs" as published in Mawangdui Hanmu boshu, vol. 4, and, as in 1983 editions of three of the medical texts came to the light in a ms. excavated from Zhangjiashan tomb no. 247, he uses these "to prepare a new transcription of the Mawangdui texts." (p. 11) This revised transcription is provided in Appendix 1. The scholarly world must be most grateful for this. However, one would have preferred a more readable presentation, as inserting the sigla into the text proper can prove distracting. For critical editions of Chinese texts, Thompson and, more recently, Ryden have set the standards to be emulated. It is an urgent desideratum that more Western sinologists with some training in the Western Classics and Western textual criticism (e.g. New Testament studies) become immersed in this task, so that they will be able to assess the results of their Eastern colleagues or to establish alternative hypotheses to their suggestions.


One would like to hope that this marvelous example of decent sinological scholarship will find the wide audience it deserves. Actually, it should stand on the desk of everybody interested in Chinese culture from the late Warring States to the Han and not only of those who are specializing in the history of Chinese medicine, but, alas, an exorbitantly high price — although the book appeared in a series generously supported by the quite wealthy Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine — in all probability will make sure that this will not be the case.