Healing and Ritual Imagination in Chinese Medicine: The Multiple Interpretations of Zhuyou

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*Abstract:* In the Chinese medical corpus, ritual healing largely fell under the rubric of *zhuyou* 祝由 to uncover and expel the unknown, imperceptible, and occult causes of illness. Often dealing with uncertain or incurable cases, *zhuyou* remained at the cutting-edge of contemporary medicine. For a rising medical elite after the Northern Song, *zhuyou* was the branch of medicine to flexibly incorporate and critique the variety of ritual therapies into orthodox practice. *Zhuyou* employed prayer, incantations, talismans, gestures, and drugs in a nuanced clinical encounter to reveal the hidden root of disorder ranging from a blockage of qi, spirit possession, emotional imbalance, or loss of virtue. These rituals opened an imaginative space for therapeutic play where patients and healers could use spiritual proxies and props to address difficult emotions or issues that were often the hidden cause of affliction. The development of *zhuyou* also reflected the changing role of ritual in the history of Chinese medicine and the exchanges among physicians, Daoist priests, and other ritual healers. The significance of ritual in Chinese medical history has largely remained unclear as most editions of medical classics republished since the early twentieth century excise relevant chapters and *zhuyou* manuscripts, until recently, were uncatalogued.

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Historians of Chinese medicine and religion have sought to decode how healing rituals conveyed hidden symbolic meanings or structured social interactions to produce efficacy. Recent studies have also quantified the frequency of philosophical and ritual terms in an attempt to statically define key concepts as having a single meaning per count. However, what is clear from a careful reading of the vast textual corpus is that multiple meanings simultaneously persisted even within a single illness narrative, clinical encounter, or ritual performance.

Rather than searching for definitions etched in stone, scholars have increasingly turned towards rituals as contexts for generating meaning through imaginative play. Seligman and others emphasize the subjunctive context of rituals in which participants interact as if the symbols and performances held meaning, creating a virtual space for patient and healer interaction where different conceptions of medical reality could co-exist.\(^2\)

Zhuyou祝由 rituals and symbols created a virtual space in which educated physicians, priests, ritual masters, patients and their families could engage with one another. At the heart of the zhuyou tradition were healing rituals to pray and manipulate the imperceptible or occult causes of illness. Unlike other branches of medicine or healing, zhuyou specifically dealt with the realm of the hidden and unknown. Its rituals were a space for play with a plurality of simultaneous meanings about the causes of illness including demons, blockages in the flow of qi, emotional imbalances, or the concealment of immoral vices festering in the heart. The interpretations of the rituals and its objects of play such as talismans, incantations, gestures, and drugs, increasingly widened within different social settings from the Imperial Medical Academy to temples and homes.

Healers and patients used ritual props and spiritual proxies in therapeutic play to work through difficult emotions and issues within a safe context of imagination and make believe. Talismans, mudras, and gestures provided a pseudolinguistic glossolalia to express emotive power when words could not yet name the cause of affliction. Participants could flexibly interpret zhuyou rituals as having multiple meanings and modes of efficacy. Although various groups might debate and claim to know the true meaning of zhuyou, in most cases doctors acknowledged that patients may have different understandings and that these alternative notions needed to be at the very least entertained. Regardless of the interpretative meaning, participants in the ritual could engage one another to imagine that therapeutic actions would make the sick feel better.

The development of zhuyou also reflected the interplay between an emerging medical elite and religious healers. From the twelfth century

\(^2\)Seligman 2008.
onwards, the practice came to encompass charms, ritual movements, and later drugs. To incorporate the techniques of influential ritual masters, physicians of the newly established Imperial Medical Academy created an office of zhuyou for praying about the cause of illness based on medical theory. They synthesized religious and medical explanations of how demons could attack the physical body by blocking the flow of qi. Zhuyou rituals could open these obstructions and restore somatic balance. This synthetic interpretation attracted the ire of bureaucrats in the Board of Rites (libu 禮部) over the orthodoxy and efficacy of these rituals. Their attacks were primarily an expression of growing concern over the influence of Daoist priests and ritual masters in the court, and not a general refutation of ritual healing itself. The growing medical elite in fact continued to discuss how prayer and rituals could be efficacious and incorporated into orthodox medical practice.

Under a climate of religious persecution by the sixteenth century, Daoist priests at the Temple of Supreme Mystery in Suzhou rewrote the origin myth of the practice to distinguish themselves from heterodox ritual healers. At the same time, the rise of classicism influenced some physicians to interpret the art as a means of treating emotional disorders caused by hidden vices. Such cases were particularly hard to treat and some patients refused to place their faith in drugs. Hence, prayer or simply discussion was useful to draw the patient out and enlighten him about the underlying cause of his illness. At the heart of many of these interpretations, including both exorcism and sagely enlightenment, lay the patient’s participation in naming the affliction and decision on when treatment had been efficacious.

**Early Interpretations of Zhuyou for Expelling Occult Causes of Disease**

The accommodation of plurality in zhuyou can be seen in the tradition’s long textual history from the second century BC through the twentieth century. Sources range from medical and religious texts, local government and temple records, to pocket manuals. Editors of twentieth-century editions of classical medical texts excised much of this textual history as superstitious. Prior to this recent enforcement of scientific sincerity, the historical narrative is one of flexible negotiation and mutual acknowledgement. Physicians, Buddhist, and Daoists were not pitted against each other in a face-to-face spiritual turf war over plagiarizing sacred texts.

As early as the second century BC, the *Inner canon of the Yellow Emperor* (*Huangdi neijing 黃帝內經*) records dialogues in which the legendary physician Qi Bo 崎伯 (n.d.) educated the Yellow Emperor on how
incantations to pray about the cause of illness could be used to cure illness, whose causes were so minute and subtle that they could not be detected by the senses. This was only as if ghosts and spirits were the cause of illness. The true cause, Qi Bo explains, is a blockage of qi due to unharmonious lifestyles. References to zhuyou in the texts of the Inner canon of the Yellow Emperor reflect interplay between elite classical explanations about the hidden or occult causes of disease and popular belief in ghosts. A compilation of texts written between the first century BC and first century A.D., the Inner canon of the Yellow Emperor has come down in three distinct versions and other related texts, all of which discuss ritually expelling the cause of illness: the Divine pivot (Ling shu 靈樞), the Basic questions (Su wen 素問), and the Grand basis (Tai su 太素) as well as the related Yellow Emperor's A-B canon (Huangdi jia yi jing 黃帝甲乙經).

The authors of these classical medical texts clearly acknowledge that demons could cause illness and discuss them in other chapters, especially on interdiction (jin 禁). According to these sources, zhuyou was a method of using incantations (zhou 咒) to "move the vital essence and transform qi" (yi jing bian qi 移精變氣) in the body. This was based on a classical view of health and the body in which a person’s proper circulation of qi depended on being in harmony with the cosmos by living in accord with the seasons and environment, as well as being unperturbed by harmful emotions such as worry, fear, or greed. The passage explains that in ancient times, people lived pure and simple lives and were not vexed by the worries and troubles of later ages. Rituals to move and transform the body’s spiritual essence (jingqi 精氣) were sufficient to treat illness. Drugs, acupuncture, and other methods of healing became necessary only as life

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4 The two identical passages in the Grand basis and Divine pivot interchange the characters zhu 祝 and zhou 呪. The passage in the Grand basis is “疾毒言語輕人者, 可使唾癰呪病.” The character zhou 呪 can also be written as 咒. The same passage in the Divine pivot uses the character zhu 祝 instead of zhou 呪. See Huangdi neijing Taisu 黃帝內徑太素, juan 19, 372; Huangdi neijing Lingshu 黃帝內徑靈樞, pian 73, 475.
5 Other early medical texts such as the Prescriptions for fifty-two ailments (Wushi'e bing fang 五十二病方, second century BC) also use the character zhu 祝 to mean “to use incantations.” For example in a section on “Various injuries,” (zhu shang 諸傷) the book mentions, “If a wound is bleeding say the incantation 'Dry up [the bleeding] of men, stop [the bleeding] of women.' Then draw five lines on the ground [and spit?] on them.” (shang zhe xue chu, zhu yue, nan zi jie nü zi zai, wu hua di [blank] zhi 傷者血出, 祝曰, 男子竭女子截, 五畫地□之).” Zhou Yimou 周一謀 notes that the character zai 截 is probably a misprint for jie 截, making the structure of the two lines parallel. In discussing the meaning of the word zhu in the Prescriptions for fifty-two ailments, Li Ling lists passages in which the character appears, but also includes passages in which it does not. Zhang 1988, 55-56; Li 2000, 330-340.
styles degenerated. This is explained in chapter 13 of the Basic questions on “Moving and transforming qi.” The same passage also appears in the Grand basis under the heading “Knowing about expelling the source [of disease]” (zhi zhuyou 知祝由).

The Yellow Emperor said, “I have heard that in ancient times curing illness only required moving the vital essence and transforming the qi to exorcise the cause of illness. Now, to cure sickness physicians use drugs and medicine to treat the interior and use acupuncture and minerals to treat the exterior. Why are some patients cured and others not?

Qi Bo replied, “In ancient times people lived among the animals, exercising to avoid the cold and living in secluded places to avoid the heat. Inwardly, they were not troubled by envy or desire. Outwardly, they appeared unperturbed. In such a serene world, pathogens could not penetrate far into [the body]. Hence, [people] did not use drugs or medicine to cure the interior, nor [did they use] acupuncture and minerals to cure the exterior. Hence, all [they] needed to do was to move the vital essence and expel the cause of illness. However, contemporary society is not like this. Worry and anxiety hurt the interior and [external] hardships damage the exterior of the body. Moreover, [people’s lives are in such disarray that] they no longer follow the four seasons and go against what is suitable for summer and winter. [Hence] malignant winds and depleting pathogens come morning and night and harm the five visceral systems, bone and marrow of the interior, and the bodily orifices and flesh of the exterior. As a result, minor illnesses become more severe and serious illnesses result in death. Hence, even expelling the cause of illness cannot stop it.

In another passage from the Divine pivot’s discussion of “Thievish winds” (zei feng 賊風), the author explicitly argues against the popular belief that ghosts are a hidden cause of disease. Instead of expelling ghosts, zhuyou was particularly apt for treating disorders whose origins were so minute and subtle that they resulted in a stagnation of pathogens in the body that

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6 Huangdi neijing Suwen 黃帝內經素問, pian 13, 79-82.
7 Huangdi neijing Taisu, pian 19, 332-335.
8 See Sivin, 1987, on the five visceral systems.
9 Huangdi neijing Lingshu, pian 58, 389-391.
could not be seen nor heard. Discussions of zhuyou often describe the disorders it treated by the terms wei 微, meaning minute, profound, and subtle, or qian 潛 meaning hidden, latent, or potential. These terms, like xuan 玄, meaning dark, subtle, or abstruse, did not imply that the causes of such illnesses were unknowable. In the pre-Han classics, these terms referred to the profound knowledge that only someone with deep insight into the workings of the cosmos could fathom. In this sense, the hidden and mysterious causes of sickness, which rituals were particularly suited to treat, were occult.

In the passage, Qi Bo replies that the wu 巫 of the past were able to cure by simply knowing the occult causes of illnesses. An almost identical passage appears in the Grand basis under the heading “Miscellaneous discussions on various wind disorders” (Zhufeng zalu 諸風雜論) and in the Yellow Emperor’s A-B canon.

The Yellow Emperor said, “You, my teacher, say that evil winds and pathogenic qi harm people, causing them to become sick. In current times, there are those who do not venture outdoors or leave their rooms. They suddenly become sick, [even though] they have not encountered any evil winds or pathogenic qi. What is the reason for this?” Qi Bo replied, “This is all because in the past these people had been injured by damp qi (shiqi 濕氣) which was stored in the blood vessels and between the flesh, remaining there for a long time and stagnating. If it sinks down (duozhui 墮墜), the pathological blood (exue 惡血) settles in and is not expelled and [the afflicted] suddenly swings from feeling happy to feeling angry. [If his] eating and drinking is unsuitable, and [he does not live in accordance with] the cold and warmth of the seasons, the space between the skin and muscles (cuo 臉) closes up and is not open to flow. If the [afflicted] goes out and encounters wind or cold, then the blood and qi coagulate (ningjie 凝結) and combine (xianghe 相合) with the [old] malignancy, developing into pain or numbness from the cold (hanbi 寒痹). If the [afflicted] encounters heat, then he sweats and catches wind [disorder]. [Hence], even

11 Although physicians have often used wu as a derogatory term, I do not believe it carries a negative connotation here. The author is generally referring to popular religious healers.
12 Huangdi neijing Taisu, juan 28, 294-299.
13 Huangdi jiayi jing 黃帝甲乙經, juan 6, 623-624.
though [he] has not encountered wind or pathogenic qi, there is certainly a reason for the addition of pathogens and the manifestation of illness."

The Yellow Emperor said, "In recent times, what you have said is what patients know for themselves. Even though someone has neither encountered pathogenic qi nor feels anxious (chuti 恐懼) they become sick. What is the reason? Could the only reason be a matter of ghosts and spirits (guishen 鬼神)?" Qi Bo replied, "This is also because the old pathogens lingered [within the patient’s body] and had not yet manifested themselves. When the mind (zhi 志) harbors animosity or envy, the blood and qi become disordered in the interior [of the body] and conflicted. [The condition’s origin (conglaijhe 從來者) is so minute and subtle that even if you look for it, it cannot be seen, or listen for it, it cannot be heard. Hence it is as if [the cause] were ghosts and spirits.” The Yellow Emperor said, “How does expelling and stopping [illness] work?” Qi Bo replied, “The ancestral wu (xianwu 先巫) knew that to overcome the multitude of illnesses, they first [needed] to understand from whence the illness arose, and then were able to expel and stop it.”

14 The language and content of this passage refers to other texts of the Inner canon of the Yellow Emperor, addressing you 由 in the sense of exorcising the root or cause of disease. As we have just seen above, the Grand basis contains both the Divine pivot and Basic questions passages. In the passages on wind disorders that the Grand basis shares with the Divine pivot (and also the A-B canon on acupuncture), ancient spirit mediums (wu 巫) used incantations (zhu 祝) against the origin (see use in main text) or consequence of disease, written as cong lai zhe 從來者 or suo cong zhe 所從者. This way of referring to the cause of disease is consistent with the meaning of you 由, in the passage that the Grand basis shares with the Basic questions. In fact, the A-B canon on acupuncture includes the character 由 after the character zhu 祝 in this line. Even the use of the expression er yi 而已 is consistent. Rather than meaning “and that is all”, yi 已 clearly means “to stop” (zhi 止) because in the Divine pivot 已 is followed by zhe 者 or ye 也, which normally do not follow the 而已 construction if it means “and that is all.” The Basic questions even drops the er 而, leaving only zhuyou bu beng yi ye 祝由不能已也. Compare also the lines. The Divine pivot chapter 58 (also Grand basis chapter 28 and A-B canon on acupuncture chapter 6) says, “其祝而已者， 其故何也? 岐伯曰先巫者, 因知百病只勝, 先知其病知所從生者， 可祝而已也.” while the Basic questions chapter 13 (also Grand basis chapter 19) writes “古之治病，惟其移精變氣，可祝由而已...所以小病必甚，大病必死，故祝由不能已也”. While Chapter 13 of the Basic questions is entitled “On moving and
These early references to zhuyou rituals aim to clarify an important distinction among the imperceptible occult causes of disease. Even the Yellow Emperor himself appears confused about the many mysterious and seemingly unexplainable cases where the cause of illness is so minute and subtle that they could neither be seen nor heard. Ghosts and spirits were clearly a concern.

What is surprising is Qi Bo’s emphasis on zhuyou incantations as a therapy for correcting a disruption in the flow of qi caused by the patients’ improper behavior. This carries moralistic overtones and places the onus of responsibility squarely on the patient who is not living as he should.

The early references reflect a complex and nuanced clinical environment when the cause of illness was uncertain. Although written from the perspective of physicians, as are most medical texts, the focus is clearly on the patient’s own responsibility for his illness. In ritual play, the physician may perform interdiction (jin 禁) against evil spirits as external agents afflicting a more passively portrayed patient. However, zhuyou incantations were for treating the imperceptible causes of illness that only appeared as if by ghosts and spirits. The patient played an active role in uncovering the hidden cause. Doctors and patients might have different explanations for the cause of illness but still engage through ritual play as therapeutic action.

Northern Song Interpretations of Zhuyou Rituals: The Graphical Expression and Sound of the Heart Activated through Movement

By the Northern Song (960-1127), zhuyou encompassed a variety of ritual techniques including incantations, charms, and ritual movements. This had occurred through a synthesis of zhuyou, which had expressly not involved ghosts and spirits, with interdiction (jin 禁), the expulsion of ghosts and protection against spirit possession. From the Tang (618-907) through the Yuan (1279-1368), the academy periodically changed the name of the ritualists office from the “Office of written charm interdiction, zhuyou and interdiction” (fujin zhuyou jinke 咒禁符祝由禁科), to simply the “Office of transforming qi,” the identical passage in the Grand basis is entitled “Knowledge about Exorcising the Root of Disease” (zhi zhuyou 知祝由). The passage from the Divine pivot emphasizes the cause and symptoms of illness. The Basic questions emphasize the treatment, namely, moving and transforming the qi to exorcise the root cause of disease. Both passages discuss how ambition, envy, and anxiety or living out of harmony with the seasons can disorder the circulation of the blood and the qi.
Physicians of the Imperial Medical Academy in the twelfth century then incorporated ritual healing and exorcism techniques associated with contemporary religious movements in an attempt to assimilate and standardize medicine and popular religion under imperial orthodoxy.

Historians have generally treated Northern Song attempts to standardize medicine and popular religion as separate. But the two in many respects were an integrated whole, especially under the reign of emperor Huizong 徽宗 (r. 1100-1125) in the twelfth century. A series of devastating epidemics at the time were accompanied by both government medical reforms and popular religious movements such as the Divine Empyrean (shen xiao 神霄), Pure and Sublime (qing wei 清微), and Celestial Heart (tian xin 天心). Their focus was on therapy and healing, particularly through exorcism. Given the importance of religious practices in popular healing, it is not surprising that emperor Huizong ordered both the collection of medical knowledge into compendiums such as the General record of sage benefaction (Shengji zonglu 聖濟總錄) as well as the collation of religious texts in the first printed version of the Daoist Canon, the Taoist canon of the ten-thousand-fold longevity of the Zhenghe reign period (Zhenghe wanshou baozang 政和萬壽寶藏). Promoting the status of doctors through the creation of medical exams, Huizong also patronized the leaders of religious movements such as Zhang Jixian 張繼先 (1092-1128), Sa Shoujian 薩守堅 (twelfth century), Lin Lingsu 林靈素 (1075-1119) and Wang Wenqing 王文卿 (1093-1153). Even imperial attempts to disseminate orthodox medical knowledge through local medical schools, mirrored the assimilation of local temples and gods into the state sponsored network of

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15 From roughly the tenth through thirteenth centuries, the Office of Zhuyou was also called the Office of Incantations and Interdiction (zhoujin ke 咒禁科), the Office of Charm Interdiction (fujin ke 符禁科), the Office of Written Interdiction (shujin ke 書禁科), and the Office of Zhuyou and Interdiction (zhuyou jin ke 祝由禁科). Chen 1992, 134; Liang 1995, 96. The Compendium of administrative law of the six divisions of the Tang bureaucracy (Tang liudian 唐六典) states, “Erudites of incantations and interdiction (zhou jin boshi 咒禁博士) are in charge of teaching the students of these arts the myriad ways of using incantations and interdiction to expel demons.” Tang liudian, 409. The Yuan combined all these techniques under the rubric of zhuyou, compare Yuan dianzhang, 478.

16 In 1057, the government established a Bureau for Revising Medical Books (jiaozheng yishu ju 校正醫書局) to survey and revise ancient medical texts to conform with medical orthodoxy. For Song medical reforms see Liang 1995, 101; Goldschmidt (2009). For Song attempts at regulating popular healing see Hinrichs (2003).
Divine Empyrean Palace Temples. Huizong declared himself the highest deity. Imperial patronage brought religious and medical traditions into the service of the empire to form a new syncretic order.

Imperial patronage interlinked religious and medical identities. The reinterpretation and synthesis of zhuyou with jin allowed imperial physicians to explain exorcism using medical theory about the circulation of qi. In the chapters (195-197) on charm interdiction in the General record of sage benefaction, Wang Wenqing is a god to whom supplicants must pray. Later zhuyou texts also associate the rituals with other twelfth century religious leaders, all of whom were patronized by Huizong. For example, Zhang Jixian is assigned authorship of the preface to the Supreme discipline of zhuyou (Taishang zhuyou ke 太上祝由科). The Xuan Yuan stele on zhuyou, the thirteenth medical art (Xuanyuan beiji yixue zhuyou shisan ke 軒轅碑記醫學祝由十三科) credits Sa Shoujian, Lin Lingsu, and Wang Wenqing as the creators of various zhuyou rituals and charms.

In contrast to the rest of the General record of sagely benefaction, only a few drug formulas are mentioned. The use of these techniques is summarized as:

In high ancient times there was the method called zhuyou, of using rituals to pray about the cause of illness by moving the vital essence and transforming the qi. It involved deducing the cause of illness and expelling it using incantations (zhu 祝). There was no illness it could not cure. Today’s written exorcism (shujin 書禁) is a remnant of this practice. There are five aspects to this method. First, controlling and using it rests in technique. Second, deducing the cause of illness and applying this method depends on sincerity. Third, to symbolize the disease using the graphical expression of the heart, nothing compares to charms. Fourth, to attack the disease using spoken rites (gui 禱), nothing compares to an

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18 Any healer whether a physician or a ritual master who did not conform was labelled a quack, or wu 巫. Some historians have translated the term wu as shaman or spirit-medium. However, contemporary doctors throughout used it as a general derogatory term for any healer they considered heterodox or illegitimate. It was not a charge of wrongdoing, simply an expression of disdain, which depended on no clear criterion or definition. The Song government did not persecute wu because they practiced “witchcraft,” but because they did not conform to imperial order. See the various views historians have had on this topic. Sutton 2004, 210; Liang 1995, 96; Zeng 1998, 21-60; Boltz 1993, 271; Davis 2001, 54; Hinrichs 2003.
incantation (zhu). The fifth, between the fingers and palm, to grasp and control illness, there are the “eyes” (mu [目]) of hand divination called mudras (yin [印]). The five techniques are complete. How is it not appropriate to take up and apply these therapeutic methods?

These techniques were meant to move the gods. Only someone who had purified himself through ritual could convey his feelings to the gods to stop illness. Otherwise, as the text explains, “if one’s heart is not pure and pious, one could not move even [mere] mortals. How more does this apply to zhu you which uses ritual water and charms to expel the multitude of pestilences?” The section concludes:

Therefore, one must apply this method with a sincere heart and focused mind. To attain this sincerity one must ritually purify the heart and discipline one’s conduct according to ritual restrictions in order for one’s spirit to clearly manifest [one’s] virtue. After this, wield the mudras and use the charms along with the curses (zu [詛]), zhu formulas (zhu), and incantations (zhou). This is the way of zhu you.

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19 Gui is the use of spoken rituals to expel diseases and protect against disasters. Hanyu da cidian (漢語大辭典), vol. 7, 966. In the Zhouli (8:1b) this term refers to rites performed by the Exorcist for Palace Women (nüzhu 女祝).

20 The original text states, “指掌之間執持有目則謂之印”. Here mu 目 refers to the sections of the fingers and palms which correspond to different disorders. By pressing on these sections while making special gestures and chanting incantations, the ritual master is able to expel illnesses and ghosts. This technique for zhu you is different from the hand mnemonics discussed by Marta Hanson, which focus on ideas about phase energetics (wuyun liuqi 五運六氣) that were popular during the Song and especially from the Ming onwards (Hanson 2008). Discussion of phase energetics is prominent in the beginning chapters of the General record of sage benefaction. Although chapters on charm exorcism discuss calendrical timing, I have not yet determined whether these are directly related to the wuyun liuqi theory or derive from divination practices (Cho 2005).

21 Shengji zonglu 1117, juan 195, 2a.
22 Ibid., 9-10.
23 Note that the Pujiifang omits the character 咒 in this line.
24 Shengji zonglu 1117, juan 195, 2a.
Healers used secret hand gestures to complete each ritual. The sections of the fingers and palms, called *mu* or “eyes”, corresponded to different disorders, which the healer controlled by pressing (*nian* 推) and saying an incantation. For example, in order to stop three women from squabbling, the ritualist pressed the “bird *mu*” (*niao mu* 鳥目) and “ghost *mu*” (*gui mu* 鬼目) to command the demons and suppress the unruly scene by making people’s tongues unable to move.

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The correct ritual performance of writing charms, reciting incantations, and gesturing reflected the healer’s perfected sincerity. At each step in the ritual process, the healer moves and transforms his qi as he meditates on this task. So, with every brush stroke when writing a charm and with every ritual gesture, he gathered and focused his emotive power into his performance just as calligraphy, dance, and other arts translated kinesthetic energy to reflect an artist’s inner character. In zhuyou rituals, these activities literally translated energy into words.

S.J. Tambiah’s thesis on the Magical Power of Words is poignant as the symbols of such communicative actions were the middle substance or, as he puts it “materia medica” that conveyed the power of perfect sincerity and moral character to the patient. The “General discussion on charm zhuyou” explicitly explains this metonymic transformation.

Speech is the sound of the heart and writing is the graphical expression of the heart. With perfect sincerity, [the healer] stores all his affect within the charms and incantations. Expressed within the sounds and symbols
[is the power] to make even something humble the most splendid and something coarse the most refined. How can such a practice then only be the worn out as a legacy of immortals and masters of the Way? As zhuyou was fundamentally an art of moving and transforming the occult circulation of qi, this implied that qi itself was not just the material and energetic basis for all things and their transformations, but, understood within the ritual context, it was also the object of intention that healers manipulated, reflecting the power and authority to heal. In other words, the ritual process gave qi its meaning. How these ritual techniques, charms, and later drug formulas were differently interpreted also defined the relationship between healer and patient. Efficacy was a negotiated process that emerged from this interaction. Among the various interpretations of zhuyou rituals, the role of the patient in naming the affliction, and finding the power to heal from within, became a central part of this process.

The Politics of Ritual Healing in the Imperial Medical Academy

From the thirteenth century till no later than 1571, zhuyou became the thirteenth office of the Imperial Medical Academy, known as zhuyouke. Those who wished to study the art were required to read the synthetic interpretation in the General record of sage benefaction, along with the Basic questions (Su wen), the The Yellow Emperor’s canon of the eighty-one problems (Huangdi bashiyi nan jing 黃帝八十一難經), Shen Nong’s materia medica (Shen Nong bencao 神農本草), and the Expanded formulas worth a thousand (Qian jin yi fang 千金翼方). The curriculum was established by Wang You 王猷 and Wang Anren 王安仁 in the mid-thirteenth century. The Ming Imperial Medical Academy continued the office of zhuyou with the same curriculum

26 The original text reads “言為心聲，書為心畫，以夫精誠交感寓於符祝，聲畫之間，若徼而至妙，若粗而甚精。” Note that here 祝 is used as 咒, Jiao 微 is a textual error for wei 微, meaning humble or small. The word wei makes more sense with the rest of the line. The Pujifang corrects this error. It also substitutes 精誠 with 精神, meaning that the healer places all his affect and vital essence into the charms and incantations. The Shengji zonglu reads “言為心聲，書為心畫，以夫精神交感寓於符祝，聞聲畫之間，若微而至妙，若粗而甚精。” is an error for 畫, but 閱 adds more to the meaning.

27 This passage alludes to Yang Xiong’s 揚雄 (53 BC-AD 18) discussion on the occult nature of the spirit.
until no later than 1571, when it eliminated both zhuyou and massage (anmo 按摩) as offices. 28

Almost as soon as zhuyou became an office in the Imperial Medical Academy, officials in the Board of Rites, in charge of imperial ceremonies and rituals, objected. One Yuan dynasty official on the Board, Chen Li 陳樑 (1252-1334; also known as Chen Dingyu 陳定宇), argued that zhuyou originally meant “to cut off” (duanjue 斷絕) the cause of illness by moving the six qi. However, the art had been corrupted into a form of temple prayer, whereby the word zhu had come to mean “to pray” (daozhu 祷祝) or “to curse” (zuzhu 詛祝). He further claimed that the medical classics like the Basic questions (Su wen) considered such activities unorthodox. Expressing his contempt for such heterodoxy, Chen concluded his argument by disparaging those who interpreted zhuyou as prayer in a statement that later critics such as Chen Minzheng 陳敏政 (1445-1499) and Zhang Jiebin 張介賓 (1563-1640) would repeat.

One cannot discuss the highest virtue with those who dogmatically believe in ghosts and spirits; nor can one discuss matters involving perfect skill with those who disdain acupuncture and mineral drugs. 29 The commentaries say that people whose minds are corrupt like to pray (qidao 祈禱). Moreover, how can prayer be applied as a medical cure? 30

Critics rarely questioned the existence of ghosts and demons as factors causing diseases. Instead, their attacks were focused on who had the authority and spiritual power to administer the proper rituals to expel them. Court officials increasingly saw this role as being taken over by Daoist priest.

Reflecting the growing influence of Daoists in the Ming court during the fifteenth century, the General record’s chapters on interdiction and zhuyou were republished in the Formulas for universal benefaction (Pujifang 普濟方), with the noted addition of passages associating the ritual practices with the

28 Qinding rixia jiuxun kao 欽定日下舊聞考, juan 71, 122-123. See also Qinding xu wenxian tongkao 欽定續文獻通考, juan 42, 267. See Tushu bian 圖書編, 493. According to this source, during the Jiaqing 嘉靖 period (1522-1566), medical arts were divided into 13 sections, including zhuyou. The final note mentions that both massage and zhuyou were not continued (“末三科不傳”) but is unclear exactly when or why they were eliminated. The date 1571 comes from Da Ming huidian 大明會典, juan 224, 2963. Its description of the Imperial Medical Academy’s offices in 1571 does not mention zhuyou or massage.

29 Original text: 拘於鬼神者不可與言至德, 惡於針石者不可與言至巧.

30 Dingyu ji 定宇集, 207-209.
Celestial Masters. In 1455, the Jingtai 景泰 emperor (1449-1457) ordered Daoists to court, to question them and collect knowledge about secret rituals, especially those concerning thunder ritual. Not coincidentally, most of the rare books and manuals on zhuyou claim that they were collated by a Xu Jinghui 徐景輝 from Linqing 臨清 during the Jingtai reign and many of the charms reflect the influence of thunder magic.

This rising influence ignited a storm of criticism from court officials who objected both to general Daoist involvement in imperial ceremonial affairs and to their specific role in ritual healing. Chen Minzheng, an official in the Board of Rites advised emperor Xiaozong 孝宗 (1488-1506) that according to the authoritative ancient model of good governance in the Rites of Zhou, the government was originally responsible for administering zhuyou rituals. Orthodox Unity Daoist priests who currently performed zhuyou were usurping the power and authority of the government which would only lead to calamity and misfortune (huo 禍). Later in 1497, another Board official, Xu Bo 徐溥, further warned Xiaozong against following the example of emperor Huizong, whose religious fervor and support of ritual masters led him to neglect state affairs, even as the Jin armies massed at the capital gates.

After the Great Rites Controversy (1524) and the death of both emperor Shizong 嘉靖 (1521-1567) and his favorite priest Tao Zhongwen 陶仲文, the influence of Daoist in the court came to an abrupt halt with no more imperial promotions of the Celestial Masters of Mt. Longhu. In contrast to emperor Shizong’s zeal for Daoism, his son Muzong 穆宗 (1567-1572) expelled all Daoist priests from the court and even stripped some of their posthumous titles. After the fifth year of his reign, no mention of the Office of Zhuyou in the Imperial Medical Academy ever appeared again.

Such factional strife over the meaning of zhuyou rituals was largely a proxy for power struggles within the court. In popular practice, however,

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31 Zhu Qiyu 朱祁鈺 (1428-1457).
32 Linqing was a town in Shandong province during the late Ming. A few references depict Xu Jinghui as either an itinerant from Jianghu (江湖) or as a metropolitan graduate (jinshi 進士), the highest rank in the civil service examination system.
33 Huangdun wenji 篳墩文集, juan 11, 187-189. This tale became so popular that even later physicians like Xu Dachun alluded to it.
34 Ming shilu 明實錄, Xiaozong shilu 孝宗實錄, juan 122, 2178-2180. Incorrectly cited as chapter 123 in Liang, 134, note 7.
35 Da Ming huidian 大明會典, juan 224, 2863-2971. This source notes that by 1571 the Imperial Medical Academy no longer had the offices of zhuyou or massage, but does not provide any details on why these two offices were eliminated. The Ming shilu 明史錄 and the Ming jingshi wenbian 明經世文編 provide no further information.
physicians, priests, and other healers often played overlapping roles as ritual specialists. Regardless of how the healer interpreted zhuyou, the rituals remained a primary context for engaging patients in cases when the cause of illness was unknown. The rituals signaled a beginning of group play during which healer and patient could explore the root of the patient’s problem and together work towards its resolution. This exploration might simultaneously be multilayered as a discussion about possessing spirits, unexpressed desires, fears or anguish, and interpersonal conflicts. Even when a few Qing physicians sought to clarify zhuyou’s origins and place in medical practice, their discussions focused on the role of the physician in morally guiding the patient. Guiding the patient was more an act of persuasion rather than a denial of alternative beliefs. Such persuasion could only begin through ritual.

The Interaction of Healer and Patient

Healers and patients including family members engaged in ritual play to negotiate the cause of illness. This could take the form of a clinical encounter in the doctor’s office or an exorcism ritual. The efficacy of the incantations, charms, ritual movements and even drug formulas emerged from this negotiated process. As Edward Davis has noted about the Ritual of “Interrogating and Summoning” (kao zhao fa 考召法) the patient’s active participation in ritual became increasingly important after the tenth century. Unlike before, religious texts that explain these rites are addressed directly to the demons, describing the punishments they will receive, rather than serving as a guide for only Daoist priests and ritual masters. In trance, the patient names the spirit and, through a ritual master’s interrogation, explains the reason for possession. In this way both the patient and the healer play a role in identifying the disorder.

From the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, educated physicians, particularly around the Temple of Supreme Mystery in Suzhou, understood zhuyou in a variety of ways including both religious and secular. Local records attest to how Ye Gui 葉桂 (1667-1746), a physician famous for his studies of drug formulas, was also skilled in the use of charms. His discussion on zhuyou and jin (in the Selections and annotations from the Crimson Snow Pavilion on ancient formulas of the thirteen disciplines (Shisan ke jiangxueyuan gu fang xuan zhu 十三科絳雪園古方選注) is nearly

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36 Davis calls this the “Rites of Summoning for Investigation”. Davis, 5, 93-94.
37 Davis, 41-43; Nü Qing guilü 女青鬼律, juan 6, 250; Jinsuo liuzhu yin 金鎖流珠引, juan 29, 354.
38 Davis, 3, 98.
identical to a Celestial Master’s manual on the art.\textsuperscript{39} In these texts, diagnosis is reduced to divination by praying to the god Beidou 北斗 in a ritual similar one also discussed in Song medical examinations.

In many physician’s reinterpretations of zhuyou, the power to heal also lay within the patient’s hands. A sage person, guided by the physician, chose a virtuous life, turning away from vices that afflicted him. Whether the power to heal came from within the patient or from the gods was the very issue Ye Gui and Wang Zijie 王子接 (b. 1658) sought to address in their discussion about zhuyou and jin. Ye Gui and Wang Zijie also objected to the synthesis of zhuyou and jin complaining that everyone, including physicians, confused the two. In their opinion, interdiction used one’s own spiritual power to stop the affliction while in zhuyou one reported to the gods to end the affliction. Illness was caused by transgression that made one guilty in the sight of the gods. In such cases, drugs and acupuncture were ineffective and a person had to repent before the gods and rectify his behavior to receive spiritual blessings. Sages never had to pray because they were without transgression.\textsuperscript{40}

Among the various interpretations of zhuyou rituals, the patient’s participation in naming the affliction or explaining the underlying cause for disorder became a central part of the healing process. This role often varied in degree according to the type of healer as well as relative status and gender of the patient. How different kinds of healers applied the art is reflected in a number of cases.

\textbf{Rituals and Drugs: Questions of Efficacy}

Amidst the religious controversy of the Jiajing reign, discussion among physicians about zhuyou began to centre on the issue of efficacy and the use of prayer and rituals in combination with drugs. The generally accepted understanding was that drugs and ritual therapies complemented each other. In the year 1552, on the eve of the Imperial Medical Academy’s elimination of zhuyou, Xu Chunfu 徐春甫 (1520-1596), Grand Physician of the Academy, defended the practice:

\textsuperscript{39} Zhuyou ke zheng ji si juan, xu ji liu juan 祝由科正集四卷，續集六卷 (The discipline of exorcism, arranged and collected in four chapters with 6 supplemental chapters), (nineteenth century), Nanjing Municipal Library MS. 3006150.

\textsuperscript{40} Shisan ke Jiangxueyuan gufang xuanzhu 十三科绛雪園古方選主, juan Zhuyou ke fujin ke 祝由科符禁科, National Library of Medicine, Washington D.C. MSS HMD OR 005 and HMD 0059 (eighteenth century). To the best of my knowledge, all twentieth-century copies do not include the chapter on zhuyou and interdiction.
To cure illness caused by malignant ghosts, although interdiction and incantations (jin zhou 禁咒) can remove the problem, taking medicine along with them can cure the disease much faster. If one only uses rituals and not medicine, the illness cannot be expelled. This is without principle. If one only uses medicine and does not employ rituals, one can cure the ailment. However, the effect is very slow. So one must simultaneously treat the interior and exterior to have a fast effect. This is why zhuyou was established.41

Both the physician Yu Bian 俞弁 (mid-sixteenth century) in 1522 and the medical historian Li Lian 李濂 in 1568 further added that zhuyou had long been a respected part of the medical canon studied by famous literati doctors such as Wang Tao 王燾 and even Zhu Zhenheng 朱震亨 (1281-1358). Directly referring to Chen Li by name, Li Lian refuted the Board of Rites official’s criticism. Li noted that ancient glosses of the word zhu did not mean “to cut off” but, in fact, meant to curse, zu 詛 or zhou 咒. Moreover, the Basic questions never stated that such practices were heterodox.

The saying that, “One cannot discuss the highest virtue with those who dogmatically believe in ghosts and spirits,” was not a condemnation of people who used prayer and rituals. Instead the statement was a warning against corrupt charlatans who pretended to use such spiritual practices for personal gain. In a thinly veiled reference to the ongoing debate, Li concluded that when doing research, scholars should stay objective and open minded instead of twist the facts to falsely support a politically motivated new interpretation of ancient practices.42

Li Lian discussed zhuyou in an essay on how to judge a good doctor, arguing that a good doctor could not be judged based on whether his patients recovered, but on his grasp of the underlying cause of the disease and his explanation of it based on knowledge of the medical classics. Efficacy of treatment was not based on the survival rate of patients, as had been the standard in the Rites of Zhou for the rank and pay of physicians. Nor did hereditary status as a third-generation physician determine how knowledgeable a physician was. What mattered was a physician’s virtue and classical learning.

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41 Gujin yitong daquan 古今醫統大全, juan 49, 1414-1415.
42 Yibian san shou 醫辨三首, 277-279.
Jiangnan Physicians Reinterpret the Art: Hidden Emotions and Lost Virtue

By the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, educated physicians such as Wu Kun 吳崑 (1552-1620) and Zhang Jiebin 張介賓 (1563-1640) noted that although the contemporary practice of zhuyou involved prayer, its original textual meaning was not exorcism of ghosts. Rather than prayer to inform the gods, these physicians reinterpreted ritual prayer as a means of informing and enlightening the patient of the underlying cause of disorder, often manifest as emotional imbalance.

Despite this emphasis on emotions rather than ghosts as the cause of some disorders, these physicians did not deny the spiritual realm. They still engaged their patients through ritual play in which ghosts and spirits were actors in the performance. Ritual prayer was particularly important for informing and educating patients, especially those who did not believe in medicine.

As Wu Tang 吳瑭 (1736-1820) would later explain:

> In recent times people consider magic as zhuyou, which is one of the 13 medical arts. The Inner Canon (Neijing) says, “Those who believe in magic (wu 巫) and not medicine cannot be cured.” How can magic be a medical art? To save people whose hearts are full of pain, dare to inform [and enlighten] those who come to you. Zhu祝 means to tell (gao 告). You由 means the cause of disease … The doctor must first thoroughly inform the patient of the cause of disease to allow the patient to understand and not dare to repeat the same offense (fan 犯). He must also thoroughly understand how to transform abnormal behavior into normal (bian feng bian ya 變風變雅). He must thoroughly investigate a fatigued person’s or grieving widow’s hidden feeling of distress. [Kind and gentle (wan 婉) words are used to open up and direct the person. Serious words are used to startle (zhen jing 震驚) the patient. Scary words are used to frighten the patient.] The doctor must make the patient earnestly and sincerely believe him. Afterwards, zhuyou is miraculously effective. In my life, the power I have gained from this has not been little. 43

Emotional disorders were particularly difficult to treat using drugs. Citing Ye Tianshi 葉天士 (1667-1746), Wu Kun further notes that plants, not

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43 Yi yibing shu 醫醫病書, pian 17, 150.
having emotions (wu qing zhi cao mu 無情之草木) were incapable of curing emotional disorders. (bu neng zhi you qing zhi bing 不能治有情之病). According to a popular proverb, there were four types of people difficult to cure: old monks, widows, virgins, and young men. And there were four disorders difficult to treat: alcohol, lust, greed and qi.

Wu Tang, famous for his systematic studies of drug formulas and his cases on emotional counter-therapy, also found that such ritual prayer was important to balance the emotions and to allow the qi to flow.

Healers clearly look at the outward appearance of emotion (qing 情) and as is needed pray (zhu 祝) about the cause of disease (bing you 病由). It is said that when the emotions (zhi 志) are unbalanced (pian 偏) then the qi has a complementary illness. Order the emotions by using a preponderance of one (zhi yi suo sheng 治以所勝) emotion to harmonize the imbalance in another, according to the production order (he yi suo sheng 和以所生) [of the five phases]. Moving and changing the vitality transforms the qi of the interior organs, and channels to the constructive and defensive qi (dao yin ying wei 導引營衛), re-stabilizing the patient.  

Citing the Divine pivot, Zhang Jiebin emphasized that the cause of disorder is so minute and subtle that its effects cannot be seen or heard. Yet, as he notes, “how could the use of charms and incantations to cure disorders not be about ghosts and spirits?” Instead, he somatizes the cause of so-called possession or stagnation disorders (zhu 注), according to the Discussions on the origins and symptoms of all diseases, and links this with an argument about virtue. According to Zhang, the root cause lay in a person’s immoral proclivities and the long harboring of a vice such as lust or greed that manifest as emotional and physical disorder. As he states:

So one may say it is as if there were ghosts, but this is not so. Speaking of cases of malice or envy means that ghosts arise from within the heart. Knowing what overcomes [illness], knowing from whence it arises, and being able to expel and stop it mean to seek out the [underlying]

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44 Suwen Wu zhu, juan 4, 238-239.
45 Ibid., 205.
cause of disorder and expel the ghosts within the heart. How can this be?

Peoples’ seven emotions are born of [their] likes and dislikes. If these likes and dislikes are inclined (pian 偏), then [the body’s] qi is likewise inclined. [If this happens] then one emotion dominates over the others (you sheng fu 有勝負) and the spirit and emotions are easily thrown into chaos. If the spirit and emotions are thus inclined, then pathogens can return and take hold, giving rise to ghosts in the heart.


In other words, when orthodox qi is depleted then malignant qi can overcome it. So the five ghosts arise. This is the so-called cause of [ghost] pathogens.

Those whose hearts harbor (bi 覆 literally “to cover or hide”) [thoughts of] fortune and misfortune, efficacious ghosts (ling gui 灵鬼) attract them (she zhi 收之). Those whose hearts harbor lasciviousness (nan nü zhe 男女者),60 lustful ghosts attract them (jin gui 淫鬼). Those whose hearts harbor overwhelming sorrow (you you 幽憂), depressing ghosts (chen gui 沈鬼) attract them. Those whose hearts harbor wantonness (fang yi 放逸), manic ghosts (kuang gui 狂鬼) attract them. Those whose hearts cannot let go of dead relatives (xin bi meng zu zhe 心蔽盟祖者), then strange ghosts (qi gui 奇鬼) attract them. Those whose hearts harbor [thoughts of] drugs (yao er 藥餌), material ghosts (wu gui 物鬼) attract them.

[So], this means if the heart is possessed (zhu 注) by something then the spirit has something it depends on

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47 Literally, “to be slanted or divergent.”
48 Literally, “to have victory and defeat.”
49 The term jian 見 can mean “to see,” or “to encounter” as well as “to show” or “to display.” Based on the entire passage, all these meanings are appropriate because someone who is both drawn to or attracts immoral behavior eventually outwardly reveals his inner voices.
50 Literally, “thoughts of men and women.”
51 Literally, “those whose hearts harbor allegiance to ancestors.”
52 Here the term zhu 注 refers to a stagnation of qi caused by possession.
and follows (yi 依), leading to what is improper and giving rise to pathogens and ghosts. This is called knowing from where the disorder arises. Once you know the root (ben 本) [cause] of the disorder you have a method for curing it. So you must investigate what the patient hates and envies and investigate what is overcoming [the body’s defenses] and from where the affliction arises, then zhuyou is always effective.

Zhang concludes by adding to the debate among Chen Li, Cheng Mingzheng, and Li Lian. Rather than beseeching the gods to drive out demons, interpreting zhuyou as a means of informing the patient to lead a virtuous life, places the teachings of the sages over religious tenants.

So it is said that one cannot discuss the highest virtue with those who dogmatically believe in ghosts and spirits. It is also said that those who don’t believe in medicine or believe in wu are incurable. Ah! People are born of this earth but their fate is in heaven. Ghosts and demons are lower than the highest virtue of heaven and earthand lower than yin and yang’s beneficial functioning. So ghosts and spirits cannot disobey heaven’s command and hurt or benefit people. So even if one placates the ghosts and spirits, how can that help one avoiding calamity?

Confucius says, “If one has already transgressed heaven then prayer is of no use. Respect the demons but keep them at a distance.”

Despite Zhang’s downplay of spiritual disorders, in clinical practice he may still entertain his patient’s notions as an opening to discussion and persuasion. How this was to be ritually achieved often differed based on gender. For gentlemen, this could be done through rational discussion but for women, and men of lesser virtue, ritual prayer and performance was still necessary.

For example, in his fourth case, Zhang treats a scholar who is vexed because he believes that ghosts are haunting him even though he has not committed any sin. Zhang’s somatic explanation of depletion causing hallucinations is enough for the scholar to have a revelation. Realizing that the cause of illness was not ghosts, the scholar then took his medicine and was cured.

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53 Literally, “to depend on, to rely on,” or “to obey and to comply with” something. I believe this describes something like an obsession or compulsion.
54 Suwen Wu zhu, juan 4, 205.
55 Ibid., 207.
However, in the two cases involving women, the physician utilizes ritual prayer. The first involved a young woman who ran about naked, screaming profanities. Zhang used some severity to counter her profanity in a binding ritual, possibly like the Ritual of Interrogating and Summoning. Only then, was she willing to take the cooling medicine to overcome the hot qi that had invaded her abdomen. In another case where a woman was grief-stricken by the death of her mother, the doctor had to bring in a spirit medium to impersonate the spirit of the deceased.

At the end of narrating these cases, Zhang once more emphasizes:

“In various cases like these, the ghosts are all born from the heart (e.g. are imagined) and are not real. Hence, the [Divine pivot] says, ‘as if there were ghosts and spirits.’ Since ghosts are in the heart (imaginary), [even] the sincere have difficulty using drugs and acupuncture to achieve an effect. So, zhuyou is a must.”

**Zhuyou Manuals**

A large number of zhuyou manuscripts and rare books describe the objects and performances of ritual play that included charms, incantations, ritual movements and drugs. Most of these rare manuals share a common origin myth and overlap in content.

According to a variety of manuals, zhuyou was a method of invoking the gods to expel the cause of illness. The *Supreme discipline of zhuyou* (*Taishang zhuyou ke*; eighteenth century) manual states the meaning of zhuyou best as:

“Zhuyou” is a ritual ceremony (li 禮) to pray about the cause of illness. This discipline entirely depends on the honesty and respect [of the supplicant which] can move the spirits. Those who apply this method first perfect [their] honesty, respect, and sincerity, then pray [about] the illness. If [the supplicant] is honest and faithful, then the heavenly physician descends, each time in the middle of the night, [and bestows techniques for using] charm

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56 Ibid. The original states, “諸如此類，皆鬼從心生，而實非鬼神所為，故曰似鬼神也。然鬼既在心，則誠有難以藥石奏效，而非祝由不可者矣。”

57 See bibliography for listing of extant manuals and editions.

58 Chapters 2 through 5 of the *Supreme discipline of exorcism* are almost identical with pages 358 through 374 of the *Yellow Emperor’s manual*, which is not divided into chapters. I translate this passage as a prayer to the heavenly physician who
water, medicine, mineral drugs, blowing and breath, or massage, that immediately cure the illness. 59

Most of the texts share variations of the same origin myth, which closely associates zhuyou with the rise of religious movements in the twelfth century. As I mentioned earlier, many of the rituals invoke the names of twelfth-century ritual masters. 60 According to the origin myth, in ancient times medicine was divided into 13 branches, one of which was zhuyou. The Yellow Emperor created charms and mystic writings to treat all diseases. In 1174, a commissioner (jiedushi) 61 named Ya Qi 雅奇 unearthed stone tablets engraved with mystic charms while carrying out orders to repair the banks of the Yellow River. A “Man of the Way” (dao ren 道人) 63 from Shaanxi named Zhang Yicha 張一槎 was the only one who could decipher the charms and declared that they had been given by the Yellow Emperor to cure the diseases of the people. During the Jingtai reign (1450-1457), Xu Jinghui 徐景輝 from Linqing 臨清, finding the charms remarkably efficacious, collected and added to them.

The majority of charms are composed of three Chinese characters. The top-part of the charm is the character shang 尚, meaning “to be in charge of” (主). Reflecting the influence of thunder magic, this top character is bestowed magical healing methods because in all the manuals, the supplicant must through prayer inform (qi gao 禱告) the gods of the patient’s name and his specific circumstances. Some copies of chapter 1, page 4 of the Supreme discipline of exorcism (see Beijing University manuscript copy) use the term “worship” (feng 奉) to invoke the goddess, the Dark Lady (Xuan Nü 玄女). The Numinous heaven stabilizing qi rituals in the Yellow Emperor’s manual, the goddess Mazu 马祖 (probably a textual error for Mazu 媽祖) descends and bestows (賜) the secret charms. Xuanyuan beiji yixue zhuyou shisan ke, 345.

59 Taishang zhuyou ke 太上祝由科, preface, 2.
60 For example, see the Yellow Emperor’s manual, 377.
61 An honorific for a few distinguished personages or for non-Han chieftains who submitted to imperial rule.
62 According to the Yellow Emperor’s manual, the commissioner was named Luo Qi 雍奇. This is most likely a textual error. Note that the commissioner is in other manuals named Mu Qi 穆奇 or Qi Zhen 奇珍 (see discussion below).
63 Although some early uses of this term referred to Buddhists, I think here a Man of the Way is a general term, like dao shi, for someone who claims to follow a way and to have special knowledge about the cosmos. See Sivin 1995c.
64 According to the Yellow Emperor’s manual, the “Man of the Way” is named Zhang Yicuo 张一搓. This is a misreading of the wood radical in cha 楂, which in many zhuyou manuscripts sometimes looks like a hand radical, making the character cuo 搓.
65 The Yellow Emperor’s manual errs by writing tai 太 in the phrase “Ming Jingtai zhung 明景泰中”.
often replaced by the character for thunder (雷). Almost always beneath is the character 食, meaning “to eat.” The third character often names the cause of illness such as a ghost (鬼).66

All the zhuyou texts use a military metaphor to explain the symbolic structure of the charms. “The character 尚 is the general (將). The character 食 is the army (兵). The various other characters are the vanguard (先鋒).” According to Wang Zijie, burning and consuming the charm is “like commanding spirit generals and the armies of shades to eat the disease demons raw (如令神將陰兵血食病魔).”67

The folklorist Chen Xiangchun has suggested two interpretations of these charms. In the first, the characters 尚 and 食 refer to the official title 尚食, the Chief Steward of the Palace Food Service. In this sense the charm is “in charge of” eating the ghost or disease named by the variable character. A second interpretation is that 尚食 is synonymous with 尚饗, a common ending to sacrificial prayers (祭文), meaning “May this offering be acceptable to you (the deity or spirit).” The character 饗 means to host a banquet. In this sense, 饗 and 食 (note the different pronunciation, compare Hanyu da cidian, vol. 12, 479) would be synonyms referring to the offering of food to the gods, the spirits or the afflicting ghosts. Chen suggests that in addresses to ghosts and demons the character 食 is used instead of 饗 because ghosts are less deserving of respect than gods or spirits. Thus prayers cannot end with 尚饗. Chen 1942, 51-52

The edition of the Yellow Emperor’s manual in the Zangwai daoshu uses the character 先鋒, meaning advanced guard or vanguard. Many other nearly identical copies of the same edition misprint it as 先峰, meaning “advanced summit” which makes no sense.

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68 Shisan ke Jiangxequyan gufang xuanzhu, juan Zhuyou ke fujin ke, 11. See heading on Xingjin yong zizhuan zhicheng shuo 行禁用字篆治病說.
Figure 3. Three-Character Charms and Drug Formulas in Different Zhuyou Manuals

A  Yellow Emperor

B  Most High

C  Imperial Medical Academy

D  Myriad methods
Figure 4. The art of incantations with jujubes: Charms written with the finger on top of jujubes from the Reformation of the myriad methods 萬法歸宗, chapter 1, pages 12 and 14.1 The same rituals and charms appear in two collections of the Yellow Emperor's manual pages 377 and 383.

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1 Reprinted in Xuxiu siku quanshu 續修四庫全書, ce 1064, 694-695.
Preceding groups of charms are brief ritual instructions or in some cases biographical information of a particular ritual master such as Sa Shoujian. The origins of many of these rituals and charms are eclectic, derived from a variety of sources like Li Chunfeng’s 李淳風 (602-670) Reformation of the myriad methods (Wanfa guizong 萬法歸宗).69

In stark contrast to the General record of sage benefaction, every application of charms in the manuals is accompanied by drug formulas. Different texts give varying details on the preparation of drugs. In some of the manuscripts there are even handwritten notes on prescriptions as well as on mudras. For example, the Yellow Emperor’s manual mentions 112 drug formulas, of which most of the identifiable ones can be traced to Northern Song texts, particularly in the General record but also up through the late Qing (Appendix A).

**The Possession of Madam Wu: An Illness Narrative of Reincarnation, Marriage, Money, and Betrayal**

We have a glimpse of the social context of how Daoist priests applied the art through a unique set of manuals, The Supreme discipline of zhuyou. In these manuals, the origin myth is rewritten to make it part of the tradition of a Mount Qionglong 穴隆山 line of Orthodox Unity (zhengyi 正一) priests, whose members by the 17th century resided in Wu county 吳縣, Suzhou prefecture 蘇州, Jiangsu. Written ostensibly in the first person by the 30th Celestial Master, Zhang Jixian, the preface describes how in the primordial time of Pan Gu 盘古 there were 13 branches of medicine. However, the ancient sages could do little to help people. The Yellow Emperor and Qi Bo 岐伯 felt sympathy for the people whose lives were destitute and short. The Yellow Emperor’s sister (mei 妹)71 thus created the method of zhuyou exorcism, which included 170 charms and seals to expel demons and ghosts. This method was little known and disappeared after 221 BC. In 114, the Yellow Emperor descended on Mount Crane Call (Hemingshan 鶴鳴山) in Sichuan and transmitted the charms to Zhang Daoling 張道凌 who, at Mount Yangping 阳平山, ascended and became immortal. His descendants lived at Mount Dragon and Tiger (Longhushan 龍虎山) and spread this

69 The way these particular charms are used in the Correction/Right application of the myriad methods is different from the zhuyou texts. See also the Taipingjing 太平經, a much earlier source that also contains these three-part charms. The Lu Ban jing contains charms attributed to Li.

70 A legendary physician who is one of the Yellow Emperor’s five interlocutors in the Huangdi neijing.

71 This may be a textual error.
method of curing. In 1174, Commissioner Mu Qi 穆奇 received the method in Shanxi province in the southern part of “Auspicious Water Circuit” (Jishui dao nan 吉水道南). The three sons of metropolitan graduate (jinshi 进士) Gao Yijiang’s 高一江 and their descendants recorded the method and carried it on.

Following the introduction is a record of the lineage through which the text was transmitted beginning with Zhang Daoling, followed by Zhang Jixian, Shi Daoyuan 施道淵 (?-1678), and Pan Yuangui 潘元珪 (?-1735). These names suggest that the text could not have been written before the early eighteenth century. Zhang Jixian could not have written the preface because he died in 1128, before the myth sets in 1174. Shi Daoyuan and Pan Yuangui from Wu county, were ritual healers living between 1662 and 1735.

Temple records contain numerous cases of how Shi Daoyuan applied the art. His disciple Pan Yuangui collected these stories and asked a local official to comment on them as a way of distinguishing their lineage from heterodox popular priests.

One particularly dramatic case illustrates the negotiated healing process. In this example, Shi Daoyuan repeatedly attempted to cure a

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72 During the Northern Song, there were two places named Jishui: an area near a small river in Shanxi (Zhongguo lishi ditu ji 中国历史地圖集, vol. 6, map 12-13, grid square 4 [row]/2-3 //the original designation of the square would be, with encircled row numbers, /2-3) and a town in Jiangxi (map 26, square 4 [row]/3 or /3, below idem//.). According to the Celestial Physician’s charms and seals manual, the commissioner was named Qi Zhen 奇珍 and the Man of the Way, Zhang Yicha 张一槎, was from Yunshui 云水, Shaanxi. No town by the name Yunshui existed during the Northern Song. However, there was a town called Yushui 鈞水, whose first character looks like that in Yunshui. During the Northern Song, Yushui was near a town called Jishui 吉水 in Jiangxi province. Ibid., map 26, square 5[6row]/3// or /3//, and map 1, square 5[12row]/3 //or /3//.

73 The highest rank in the civil service exam.

74 Zhonghua daojiao dacidian 中華道教大辭典, 206, 212. Daojiao da cidian 道教大辭典 (1995), 741. Many Qing authors and commentators on zhuyou such as Shi Daoyuan, Pan Yuangui, Wang Zijie, Ye Tianshi, Xu Dachun, and Yu Bian were from Wu county. A few Qing legends associate zhuyou with Hunan province and the Complete collection of miraculously efficacious charms and incantations (Lingyan fuzhou quanshu 靈騐符咒全書) is attributed to a Xu Zhefu 徐哲夫 from Chenzhou 辰州, Hunan. The stories most likely associate zhuyou with Hunan province because the ancient kingdom of Chu 楚, legendary for its magicians, was located in this area. Contrary to Donald Harper’s suggestion, please refer to a book and page the possible association with the kingdom of Chu, however, has no bearing on zhuyou in the Ming and Qing over two millennia later.

75 Yuanmiao guanzhi 元妙觀志, juan 9, 11-12.
possessed woman, Madam Wu 吳, who was trapped with her husband and a maidservant named Guihua 桂花 in a cycle of reincarnation, betrayal and revenge over several lifetimes. When a black shadow entered Madam Wu’s window, she fell ill and became confused. Delirious, she claimed to be possessed by the spirit of an immortal turtle called Haixi Dawang 海西大王. When the family’s prayers failed, Madam Wu’s father-in-law Wang Bian 王抃 sought Shi Daoyuan at the Temple of the Supreme Mystery.

Entering Madam Wu’s chambers, Shi Daoyuan was surprised when the spirits did not obey to his charms and incantations. This had never happened before. Could it be, he mused, the spirit was holding on to an injustice and ought to be heard? Madam Wu was then possessed by a second spirit, a man named Xi Zhaozhen 奚兆禎. He woefully recounted a sordid tale of deep injustice and expressed his gratefulness for the opportunity to speak.

Xi Zhaozhen explained that in a former life, he had been Madam Yang, who dutifully supported her husband Zhao Yuanxi 趙元禧 through years of study. After Zhao Yuanxi had passed his exams to enter the academy and became fabulously successful, he took a younger and more beautiful bride. Alone and grief-stricken, Madam Yang hung herself. She was reborn as a man, Xi Zhaozhen (the narrator), and Zhao Yuanxi reborn as a woman, Miss Qiu 裘. The two were engaged as infants, but as Xi Zhaozhen’s family was poor, the Qiu clan broke off the engagement and married off Miss Qiu to Xi Zhaozhen’s wealthy friend Xing Huarui 邢華瑞. Once more jilted by love, Xi Zhaozhen drowned himself in a pond. Miss Qiu was reborn as the currently possessed Madam Wu and Xing Huarui reborn as the maidservant Guihua. Xi Zhaozhen, on the other hand, was saved by a turtle spirit and lurked at the bottom of the pond. One day, when Guihua was by the edge of the water, Xi Zhaozhen seized the moment to exact revenge and dragged her to a watery grave.

The priest lamented over the sad tale and ended the cycle of violence by honoring the turtle with an official title. Placated, the turtle and Xi Zhaozhen departed. Madam Wu recovered for a time, but was then possessed again. This time, the spirit of Madam Yang, the abandoned wife, emerged, to demand thanks for her having supported her husband for many years. Only after Shi Daoyuan led the entire family to kneel in a ceremony to pay homage to her, did the spirit leave and Madam Wu recover.

Anthropologists often interpret possession as a symbolic resistance to social norms that particularly afflicts women who often lack other socially acceptable ways to express discontent. As Mary Douglas suggests, “This is how the fringes of society express their marginality.” 76 Women were

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76 Douglas, 89; Lock (1993), 133-155.
supposedly powerless in the ritual encounter. The doctor determined when therapy was successful. In studies of possession in medieval Europe, Michel de Certeau notes how “the possessed woman’s speech is nothing more than … the discourse of her judge, her doctor, the exorcist or witness,” giving the patient little say about her illness.\footnote{As Michel de Certeau notes, “… the possessed woman’s speech is nothing more than the words of her ‘other,’ … she can only have the discourse of her judge, her doctor, the exorcist or witnesses.” \textit{de Certeau, 252}.}

The opposite is true in the cases at the Temple of the Supreme Mystery. Madam Wu was clearly in charge of deciding when treatment was successfully completed. Only through the voices of different possessing spirits could she express a complex mix of guilt, indignation, anger, loss, and hurt. As in puppet therapy, the priest or exorcist assisted Madam Wu to face and work through these difficult emotions by talking to each spirit as proxy characters in ritual play or theater. Although the priest wielded divine power and authority, contrary to expectation, he mostly acted as a mediator and sympathetic listener, rather than a final judge. The patient was the primary author of her illness narrative.

**Conclusion**

The history of \textit{zhuyou} reflects how different healers and patients engaged in ritual play having multiple meanings and modes of efficacy. \textit{Zhuyou} rituals opened a virtual space for negotiating the imperceptible or occult causes of illness, including the blockage of \textit{qi}, spirit possession, emotional imbalance, and a multitude of vices. In theory, such causes were too minute and subtle to be detected by the senses and required a sage to elucidate them. In practical terms, a sage physician needed to uncover the hidden issues in patients’ lives, which were often too difficult for them to discuss, except through ritual play.

Engaging in ritual play allowed patients and healers to communicate even when they did not share the same explanatory models or narratives for an illness. In the murky process of naming an illness, words might fail to bridge the gap between a patient’s and healer’s understandings. Instead, charms, incantations, and gestures were a pseudolinguistic glossolalia conveying emotive power and intent. These scripts and props for ritual play aided in constructing meaningful and multilayered illness narratives for the application of drugs to enhance placebo expectation. As some astute doctors noted, drugs worked better with rituals, than alone. Some physicians even explicitly stated that this was the very reason why the discipline of \textit{zhuyou} had been established.
Zhuyou’s multifaceted dimension as therapeutic play emerges from an overview of a variety of sources ranging from medical and religious books, imperial records, medical case histories, exorcism manuals, pocket books, temple records, and popular tales. Much of this history had been lost because many twentieth century editions of classical medical books excise key chapters on zhuyou therapy, which are often overlapping with other sources such as popular ritual manuals. This projected backward an impression that doctors after the Song primarily employed classical medicine and only occasionally dabbled in rituals, which was supposedly the purview of priests, monks, and itinerate healers. As a result, historians of medicine have tended to marginalize ritual healing. Likewise, historians of religion have focused on sectarian debates over ritual healing among Buddhists and Daoists, but overlooked how these discussions included doctors within a wider society. The problem may have as much to do with the contemporary boundaries of academic disciplines and their historical actors of interest, as with missing textual sources. A broad perspective reveals that nearly all types of healers engaged with patients through ritual play to create meaningful contexts for different therapies. Ritual proxies and props allowed for simultaneous narrative imaginings about the hidden underlying causes of unexplainable illnesses and the efficacy of different cures. An analysis of the previously missing texts on zhuyou and the various sources in which the art is discussed, is a key to understanding how ritual healing crossed many boundaries.
## Appendix A: List of Drug Formulas Mentioned in the *Yellow Emperor’s Manual* and their Origins in Medical Texts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>书名</th>
<th>年代</th>
<th>方名</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>《金匮要略方论》</td>
<td>成书于东汉建安年间</td>
<td>生姜半夏汤</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>《补阙肘后百一方》</td>
<td>约成书于公元五世纪末六世纪初</td>
<td>膏药(太一膏)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>《备急千金要方》</td>
<td>652</td>
<td>当归汤</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>《外台秘要》</td>
<td>752</td>
<td>石膏汤，桃仁汤</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>《太平圣惠方》</td>
<td>992</td>
<td>厚朴汤，茯苓汤，陈皮汤，陈皮汤，橘仁服，厚朴汤，木香汤，木香汤，吴茱萸汤，吴茱萸汤，当归汤，茯苓汤，茯苓汤，车前子汤，木瓜汤，羌活汤，黄连汤，陈皮汤（男）</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>《圣济总录》</td>
<td>1111–1117</td>
<td>厚朴汤，木香汤，木香汤，吴茱萸汤，吴茱萸汤，当归汤，茯苓汤，茯苓汤，当归汤，茯苓汤，茯苓汤，车前子汤，木瓜汤，羌活汤，黄连汤，陈皮汤（男）</td>
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<td>《类证普济本事方》</td>
<td>1132</td>
<td>紫苏汤，川芎汤，刘寄奴汤</td>
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<tr>
<td>《鸡峰普济方》</td>
<td>1133</td>
<td>吴茱萸汤，姜汤或酒，枸杞子汤</td>
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<tr>
<td>《三因极一病证方论》</td>
<td>1174</td>
<td>香附汤</td>
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<tr>
<td>《杨氏家藏方》</td>
<td>1178</td>
<td>黄连汤</td>
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<td>《妇人大全良方》</td>
<td>1237</td>
<td>香附汤</td>
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<td>《严氏济生方》</td>
<td>1253</td>
<td>茵陈汤，葛根汤</td>
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<td>《兰室秘藏》</td>
<td>1276</td>
<td>芍药子汤</td>
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<tr>
<td>《活法机要》</td>
<td>1315</td>
<td>酒洗当归汤（异名：丁香楝实丸）</td>
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<td>《理虚元鉴》</td>
<td>1323</td>
<td>煨黄酒</td>
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<td>《局方发挥》</td>
<td>1347</td>
<td>乳香汤</td>
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<td>《普济方》</td>
<td>1406</td>
<td>白芷调和灰茶汤</td>
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<td>《门医心法》</td>
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<td>六君子汤</td>
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<td>芍药汤</td>
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<td>《幼科折衷》</td>
<td>1641</td>
<td>使君子汤</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>《医政》</td>
<td>已亡佚</td>
<td>吴茱萸汤</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>《证治宝鉴》</td>
<td>1650</td>
<td>黄连白术汤</td>
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<td>《嵩崖尊生》</td>
<td>1696</td>
<td>枣汤</td>
</tr>
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<td>《医学心悟》</td>
<td>1732</td>
<td>木香汤</td>
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<tr>
<td>《杂病源流犀烛》</td>
<td>1773</td>
<td>香附汤</td>
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<tr>
<td>《医学心悟》</td>
<td>1790</td>
<td>乳香汤</td>
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<td>《回春集》</td>
<td>1820</td>
<td>再续汤</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>《金鉴方论》</td>
<td>1866</td>
<td>当归人参汤，厚朴汤，吴茱萸汤</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix
References

1. **Zhuyou Manuals in Rare-Book and Manuscript Collections**

   BU=Beijing University Rare-Book Room (Beijing daxue gujibu 北京大學古籍部)
   NJ= Nanjing Library Rare-Book Building (Nanjing tushuguan gujilou 南京圖書館古籍樓)
   NL= National Library of China, Beijing (Guojia tushuguan 國家圖書館)
   NM=National Library of Medicine, Washington D.C.
   NY= Nanjing Chinese Medicine University (Nanjing zhongyiylao daxue 南京中醫藥大學)
   PC= Personal Collection
   RC= Library of the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland
   ST= Shanghai Library (Shanghai tushuguan 上海圖書館)
   SZ= Suzhou Municipal Library (Suzhou shi tushuguan 蘇州市圖書館)
   ZY= Research Institute of Chinese Medicine (Beijing) (Zhongguo zhongyi yanjiuyuan 中國中醫研究院)


   *Mizang yishu zhuyou shisan ke* 秘藏醫書祝由十三科, RC: As Dr. Fleetwood Churchill’s Book of Charms. 1840’s.

   *Shisan ke jiangxueyuan gufang xuanzhu* 十三科绛雪園古方選注 (Selections and Annotations from the Crimson Snow Pavilion on Ancient Formulas of the Thirteen Disciplines). Wang Zijie 王子接 (b. 1658). 1731. NM: HMD OR 005; HMD OR 0059. (Both eighteenth century copies).

   *Taishang zhuyou ke* 太上祝由科 (The Supreme Discipline of zhuyou). Eighteenth century, six chapters. (Sometimes under title *Zhuyou ke zhufu mi* 祝由科諸符秘. Listed as the *Supreme* manual in XXX
dissertation), ZY: MS. 西 4-1911 附, NL: MS. 131451 (incomplete); MS. 131285; MS. 130524; MS. 130519 (Under the title Zhuyou ke mifu 祝由科秘符). ST: MS. 51482-14; MS. 487072-82; MS. 487073-82; MS. 長 20082. SZ: MS. 399429. BU: Microfilm MSS copy listed under Zhuyou ke. (See additional notes, formulas, and diagrams in this copy.)


Tianyi fulu 天醫符籙 (The Celestial Physician’s Charms and SealsXXX /zhuan or Lu, seals or registers?) and Tianyi yishisan ke fu mi quanjuan 天醫一十三科符秘全卷 (The Secret Complete Chapters of Charms of the Celestial Physician’s 13 Medical arts). Both 1124. ZY: MS. 西 4-1123

Tianyi zhuyou ke liuchuan aozhi 天 醫 祝 由 科 流 傳 奥 旨 (Transmitted Profundities of the Celestial Physician’s Discipline of zhuyou). ZY: MS. 西 4-1911 附.

Weisheng zhuyou ke 衛生祝由科 (The Life-Preserving Discipline of Exorcism). Late nineteenth century. NJ: MS. 3006220 (87 pages).


Zhuyou ke 祝由科 (The Art of zhuyou). ST: MS. 487200 (extensive, not divided into chapters).


Zhuyou ke zhengji si juan, xuji liu juan 祝由科正集四卷, 續集六卷 (The Discipline of zhuyou, Arranged and Collected in Four Chapters with 6 Supplemental Chapters) 5 Volumes. Late nineteenth century. NJ: MS. 3006150 (160 pages).

2. Other Rare-Book Materials


3. Chinese Sources Before 1900


Huangdi neiijing, Lingshu 黃帝內經靈樞 (Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor, Divine Pivot). First century BC. Wang Bing 王冰 ed. 762. Reprinted in Guo Aichun 郭鷺春, Huangdi neiijing Lingshu jiaozhu yuyi 黃帝內經靈樞校注 語譯 (Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor, Divine Pivot:


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4. Collectanea


5. Other Sources


Chen, Xiangchun. “Examples of Charms Against Epidemics with Short Explanations.” In Folklore studies 1 (1942): 37-54.


