

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

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Abstract

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

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

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

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

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

Keywords: Shangqing, medicine, religion, drugs, destiny

The story is set in the Buckle-bent Hills (Gouqu shan 句曲山) outside of Jiankang 建康 (modern day Nanjing) in the late 4th century. The detailed transcriptions preserved in Tao Hongjing's 陶弘景 (456–546) *Declarations of the Perfected* (*Zhen'gao* 真誥, DZ 1016) record the visions, dialogues, letters, diaries and ritual petitions which circulated between ca. 373 and 370 among the southern gentry family of Xu Mi 許謐 (303–?), and his two sons Xu Hui 許翮 (341–ca. 370) and Xu Lian 許聯 (328–404).¹ The majority

¹ The dates of some portions of the *Zhen'gao* may be much earlier, in particular *j.* 5. On the transmission of the manuscripts, most recently see Feng Lihua 馮利華, “*Zhen'gao* banben kaoshu” 《真誥》版本考述, *Guji zhengli yanjiu xuekan* 古籍整理研究學刊 4 (2006): 29–34. References to texts in the *Daoist Canon* (*Zhengtong daoang* 正統道藏) use the DZ code to refer to their index numbers in Kristofer Marinus Schipper, *Concordance du Tao-Tsang: titres des ouvrages* (Paris: Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient, 1975).