MERCHANTS OF MEDICINE:  
HUIZHOU MERCANTILE CONSCIOUSNESS,  
MORALITY, AND MEDICAL PATRONAGE IN  
SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY CHINA

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The original version of this paper set out to answer, in a preliminary way, one question: why did publishers in the Huizhou region begin to publish a new genre of medical literature — namely self-sufficient handbooks and comprehensive textbooks — in the mid-sixteenth and seventeenth centuries? Such textbooks had become common not only in medicine but in every field of instruction by the seventeenth century. There are both spatial and temporal reasons for the emergence of this new genre of medical texts. Spatial, since these texts were first published in Huizhou, where they were inextricably woven into the fabric of Huizhou’s mercantile culture. The timing of their publication directly responded to the major social, demographic, and economic changes which occurred in the last century of the Ming dynasty (c. 1550-1650). These changes included the spread of literacy, a significant rise in population, and relative levelling of degree quotas. The rise in population, coupled with fewer official appointments for examination graduates, also meant that a large group of highly educated men had to seek career alternatives to government service. As one of the more highly respected alternatives, medicine came the closest, for some scholars, to practicing the Confucian virtue of

1. To keep this paper short, I have focused only on the ethical aspects of medical publishing discussed in the original version and have excised evidence for all other arguments. This question was stimulated by reading, Nathan Sivin, “Text and Experience in Classical Chinese Medicine” a paper presented at the Conference on Epistemology and the Scholarly Medical Traditions, McGill University, Toronto, Canada, May 1992. I wish to thank Nathan Sivin, Susan Naquin, Ellen Widmer, Lowell Skar, and Elisabeth Hsiu for their comments on an earlier draft.


3. For the rise in literacy and changes in publishing see Evelyn S. Rawski, Education and Popular Literacy in Ch’ing China (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1979) and her later essay "Economic and Social Foundations of Late Imperial Culture" in David G. Johnson, Andrew J. Nathan, and Evelyn S. Rawski (eds.), Popular Culture in Late Imperial China (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 3-33.
benevolence. By the end of the Ming, self-sufficient medical handbooks and comprehensive textbooks comprised a genre well-suited to a new readership of unemployed licentiates and upwardly mobile young men.

These types of medical texts also signal a change in the mode of transmission of medical knowledge away from the ritualised initiation and apprenticeship intrinsic to the master-disciple relationship toward the published text written for the novice reader. The social relationship between the publisher and audience became more important than it had ever been previously. Although medical texts may not have surpassed ritual initiation into a medical lineage as the dominant mode for transmitting medical knowledge, publishers opened a new avenue and in the process changed the way that knowledge was transmitted, as well as expanded the range of people who had access to it.

Texts are products of social relationships, and as such they reveal striking contrasts between publishing contexts, motivations, and the structure of the texts themselves. In this essay I will discuss five excerpts from medical texts published by Huizhou merchants which show how differences in motivation directly relate to contrasting types of medical texts published. In one case, the choice to publish medical texts was an ethical one and in another, the popularising of medical knowledge was cast in ethical terms. These excerpts have been selected to show a range of possible reasons, beyond the fundamental and central goal of healing, for publishing medical texts.

The first three passages relate to a book merchant, Wu Mianxue 吳勉學, who published many genres of books including medical texts. His interest in medicine did not arise from either a family tradition or personal experience in medical practice, but apparently from a combination of elite respect for orthodoxy and a religious interest in accumulating spiritual merit. The last two textual examples highlight the differences between the two phases in the history of a seventeenth-century bookstore in Hangzhou called the Huanduzhai 還讀齋. The two members of the Wang family who had the most significant role in the bookstore, Wang Qi 汪淇 and Wang Ang 汪昂, each had their own publishing style. Whereas Wang Qi sold medical books as one of several profitable genres, his younger successor Wang Ang simplified and systematised medical knowledge to make it more accessible to a broader readership.


7. Chart 1 summarises the ethical spectrum along which each of these textual examples can be placed. Chart 2 highlights the important differences between the five examples and succinctly presents the main points about each one argued more in depth in the original version. Both may be found at the end of this essay.
Wu Mianxue represents the many Huizhou merchants who made a career publishing during the late Ming. Although we do not know about Wu Mianxue’s life before publishing, many Huizhou publishers were originally bureaucrats or scholars who gave up an official career to manage a publishing business. Such a choice did not run counter to Confucian learning for in Huizhou culture merchants considered themselves to be gentlemen who combined a respect for learning with business acumen. Wu could certainly turn a profit but his publications expressed conventional Confucian ideals.

Wu’s most influential compendium of medical texts was titled Yitong zhengmai (The Orthodox Vein of the Medical Tradition). One of the books in this compendium, significantly titled Rumen shiqin (Confucians Serve [Their] Kin), highlights the connection between Confucian morality and medicine.

This book is what Zhang Zihe wrote particularly to serve [his] kin. The commentary is profound and subtle, the restorative [medicines] methodical. His skill was transmitted down from Dong yuan 東垣 and Danxi 丹溪. The meaning of each treatise came from the deepest corners of [the] medical world. If you are not Confucian, you cannot understand [how to use] the raw drugs, wine, or food [medicines]; if you are not filial, you cannot prepare [them properly]. Thus it is said that to become a gentleman, one cannot [afford to] not understand medicine.

Although Wu Mianxue published in all genres of Chinese literature of interest to scholars and those who sought “to become a gentleman”, he was most prolific in the medical field. One possible reason for this focus is suggested in an anecdote which gives an account of Wu Mianxue meeting an official of the underworld in one of the courts of Hell. The account was recorded in the Jiyuan jisuo ji 寄園寄所記 (Transmissions from the Abode at Ji Garden) by Zhao Jishi 鄭吉士, also a native of Huizhou.

Wu Mianxue of She [county] dreamt that he was being registered by an official of the underworld. He kowtowed, begging [for his] life. Before [him] there was a judge who reported, “Wu your life in the Yang world has not [yet] come to an end?” Wu, kowtowed repeatedly and said, “I would like to do a good deed.” The official from the underworld asked, “What good deed would you like to do?” Wu replied, “I have noticed that most medical works are full of errors. [They] ought to be corrected and rectified and then printed in great quantities.” The official from the

11. See Xu Xuelin, 83; Li Yun 李雲, Zhongyi renmin cidian 中醫人名辭典 (Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Medicine) (Beijing: Guoji wenhua, 1988); p. 359.
12. Referred to in Widmer, 10. She remarks that Wang Ang of the Huanduzhai bookstore also recorded this anecdote in a collection of jottings titled Ren’ian Bian 認亻 元便 (Occasional Jottings).
underworld asked, “How many books will you have printed?” Wu replied, “I will print all [of the books in my] family!” The official of the underground asked, “How much [money] do you have in your family?” Wu said, “30,000 [silver ounces]!” The official of the underground approved, and thereby released him. [After] Wu awoke from his dream, he published many medical books. Because he received benefit, he searched in ancient and contemporary sources, gathered them together and published them. For the printing costs, he raised up to 100,000 silver ounces.\(^\text{13}\)

This anecdote illustrates the strong Buddhist connotations of religious benefits reaped from individual acts of charity which was the basis for a general tradition of communal altruism.\(^\text{14}\) Although official recognition of charitable acts was given in times of famine, such as the seal which Qing officials granted to donors of charity to put on their doors for legal protection from starving looters,\(^\text{15}\) social recognition of altruism was also possible by publishing medical books in times of prosperity. In this anecdote Wu receives approval from the gods of the underworld for his intention to do a good deed and could accumulate merit by carrying out this deed in the human world.\(^\text{16}\)

Wu does not refer to this dream in his own writing, rather he emphasises the orthodox nature of the medical lineage he has canonised in *The Orthodox Vein of the Medical Tradition*. The “Medical Tradition” refers to the canonical works of the *Huangdi neijing* 黃帝內經 (Inner Canon of the Yellow Lord) and the *Shennong bencaojing* 神農本草經 (Divine Husbandman’s Materia Medica), as well as their direct successors. The “Orthodox Vein” represents the unbroken continuity of the tradition based on these founding texts and included more therapeutic-oriented works from the Jin, Yuan, and Ming dynasties. Wu Mianxue’s preface reveals that he thinks the lineage he presents is the only correct lineage. In short, he has reconstructed a medical orthodoxy.

During this luminous age, the accomplishments of authors have flourished. [Being] dimwitted [I], Mianxue, have little learning, so I have paid special attention to medical studies alone. I would venture to say that medicine has a tradition and a vein. [Only when one] has discovered the orthodox vein can [one] stay continuous with the [real] tradition of medicine. The orthodox vein of medicine began with the Divine Husbandman and the Yellow Lord. Later worthies directly associated themselves with it to continue the tradition and prevent its decline. [This] can be compared to the Buddhist lineages and lineages of the immortals which for innumerable generations carried on their traditions and kept them from dying out.

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15. See Will, *Bureaucracy*, pp. 50-51 on the provision of security in exchange for charity.

16. See Brokaw, *Leggers*, for the most complete analysis to date of the increasing popularity of legends of merit and demerit during the unstable decades of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The legends consisted of lists of good and bad deeds with merit or demerit points assigned respectively to each.
I could not allow the gaps [in the lineage] to remain open leaving those who are
interested without a way to consult it. Therefore [I] arranged the texts in [their
proper] sequence, organised them into volumes, called it the *Orthodox Vein of the
Medical Tradition*, and printed it.\textsuperscript{17}

Social recognition was especially sought after by families who had not yet gained
elite status. Non-elite merchant families particularly made claims of orthodoxy as
gestures of social aspiration.\textsuperscript{18} This was most likely the case for the Wu family.\textsuperscript{19} Wu
Mianxue also expressed the conventional values of elite scholars who could afford to
purchase the forty-four titles in the large compendium which, in its entirety, was only
suitable for a scholar’s library.\textsuperscript{20}

In contrast to Wu Mianxue, the proprietors of *Huanduzhai* bookstore chose
medical texts which would appeal to a more general audience. *Huanduzhai* became both
a bookstore open to the public and a meeting place for Ming loyalists and unemployed
scholars during Wang Qi’s active involvement from at least 1636 to his retirement in
1668. His publishing interests were diverse ranging from drama and fiction to history and
military science. In contrast, Wang Ang surrounded himself with local physicians and,
during his involvement from the 1670s to 1694 following Wang Qi’s retirement, he only
published medical texts.\textsuperscript{21}

Wang Qi, more of a self-promoter than Wang Ang, boldly pushed his books
through advertisements on title pages and praise in prefaces and forewords. In the fore-
word to his *Jiyin gangmu* 津陰綱目 (A Systematic Gynecology), Wang Qi wrote the
following endorsement:

This book is in fact a secret treasure of the medical world. Since the original
woodblocks have not been preserved, for generations people who wanted to buy
it had to look for extant copies. This is true for the alchemical classics and the
records of the immortals. One can think about them, but one cannot obtain them.
My company has remounted [the text] onto woodblocks without changing the
original by one character. [We have] used the finest quality paper and the most
renowned craftsmen. Because of this, every prescription prolongs the life of people
and the book prolongs the life of generations. I have not shirked from the highest
quality of workmanship; those who are knowledgeable [will] naturally appreciate
[this book].\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{17} See *Yüong zhengmai*, j. 1: p. 3b. LHML 1158. See Chart II, text 3.

\textsuperscript{18} See Brokaw, *Ledgers*, pp. 61-109, for the literati use of ledgers of merit and demerit to advance their
social status in the sixteenth century. In the seventeenth century, she argues that they were used more
to preserve the social hierarchy than to advance social status, pp. 157-228. Also Will, *Bureaucracy*, p. 140.

\textsuperscript{19} There is no evidence that either received an official degree.

\textsuperscript{20} The librarian at the Takeda Science Foundation in Osaka, Japan could not even fit the complete set
on two book trolleys.

\textsuperscript{21} This is a much condensed summary of what can be found more amply in Widmer, "Bookstores;"
pp. 1-3.

\textsuperscript{22} See *Jinyin gangmu* j. 1, p. 2b. This was largely composed of sections taken from the *Zhengzhi
zhunsheng* 註治准繩 by the famous imperial physician Wang Kentang 王肯堂 (1549-1613). See Chart II,
text 4.
Instead of claiming its orthodoxy, Wang Qi emphasised its secret nature and rarity. Wang Qi used the aura of previously secret knowledge to sell this medical text which potential buyers may otherwise view as uninteresting, or worse, common.\(^{23}\)

Wang Ang turned to medicine late in his life because of what he expressed as a deep need to serve others in his old age.\(^{24}\) In the 1670s, Huan Du Zhai published two medical works which were clearly the products of the physicians working under Wang Ang’s patronage.\(^{25}\) The medical texts Huan Du Zhai published in the 1680s and 1690s, however, show the distinctive mark of Wang Ang’s increasingly populist approach.

Wang Ang thought that since medical knowledge helps cure disease, it should not be kept secretly in the domain of hereditary families and the properly initiated but should be widely circulated amongst the general populace. He ensured that his ideal would be realised by restructuring the contents of the medical texts he wrote to make them more accessible. In the Bencao bei yao 本草備要 (The Comprehensive [Corpus] and Essentials of Materia Medica), he made a clear distinction between the materia medica which were comprehensive (bei 備) and those which had simplified the complete corpus down to its essentials (yao 要). In the following excerpt he raises problems with both.

The ancient and contemporary authors of materia medica are without a doubt numbered in the hundreds. Among the most subtle and detailed, none surpass the [Bencao] gangmu 本草綱目 (Systematic Materia Medica) by Li [Shizhen 李時珍]. Its research is profound and wide and the information [given] complete and clear. [It has been] a great boon to me. [I say [this] sincerely. But it is [so] voluminous, in the end it is [too] difficult to master. It is [also] a hardship to take it along in boats and vehicles. Comprehensive it may be, but [you] cannot [extract] the essentials [from it]. As for other examples, the “Handbooks to principal treatments” and “Mnemonics for drug traits” are meant to help beginners memorise basic medical knowledge. [They may have] the essentials, but they are not comprehensive.\(^{26}\)

The Systematic Materia Medica may be comprehensive but it is too voluminous “to take along in boats and vehicles”. Travelling merchants, officials, and other itinerant people could not carry it on their travels as a guide to drug therapy. Wang Ang shortened Li Shizhen’s text so that it was not only more portable - his five volumes could be held in one hand - but also more practical. He did this by making innovations in the presentation of the text itself which made it easier for non-medically trained readers to understand

\(^{23}\) Wu, Mianxue used a similar tactic by including in his Compendium a text with a long transmission in the Yu family of hereditary physicians in Huizhou. This text is titled the Mi chuan zhengzi yao jue 祖傳正字要略 (Secretly Transmitted Essentials for Manifestation-Type Determination, 1443) by Dai Sigong 彭思恭 and was edited by Yu Shiyu 李時雨 possibly for inclusion in the Compendium.


\(^{25}\) Two of these physicians were Zhu Benzhong 朱本中 and Cheng Lin 樑林. Both were Huizhou natives. See Li, Yun, pgs. 161 and 878, respectively.

\(^{26}\) Bencao bei yao 本草備要 Jinbun kagaku kenkyujo edition, Kyoto University. LHML 02303. See Chart I, text 5.
the content. A headnote system, comments adapted to explain each line of text, and lists of the drug products discussed on that page in the margin of each page all functioned to make this materia medica more accessible to the novice than all previous ones.27

Wang Ang published the Bencao beiyao with several other medical texts in commemoration of his eightieth birthday and had them distributed freely. Such charitable acts were not uncommon amongst elderly members of Huizhou merchant families who wished to acquire spiritual merit in preparation for the courts of Hell. And so we return to the suggestive anecdote about Wu Mianxue's dream. Such charity was also a means by which merchants established their social position in an arena where the most coveted symbols of political power and social prestige, the highest examination degrees, were controlled by a small elite class and were largely unattainable to them. The Wang family clearly wanted an examination degree in the family, for example, but this did not happen until Wang Ang's son was awarded the lowest xiucai degree in 1684.28 Yet charity presumed economic power and, over time, the generous charity Wang Ang gave must have accrued significant social prestige since the Wang family later developed into a well-known family of hereditary physicians. Like other merchant families who had not achieved elite status through the imperial examination system but wanted it, Wu Mianxue and the Wangs found a socially respectable, economically sound, and morally resonant alternative through publishing, patronage, and medicine.29

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHART 1</th>
<th>SPECTRA OF MOTIVATIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Merit GONG 供</td>
<td>Spiritual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Approval by peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approval by peers</td>
<td>Spiritual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prestige</td>
<td>Approval by gods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefit LI 利</td>
<td>Merit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profit</td>
<td>Charity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take from society</td>
<td>Give to society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social recognition MING 名</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By one's patients</td>
<td>Within one's social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and disciples</td>
<td>group, colleagues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By social group</td>
<td>one aspires to enter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


### CHART 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text 1: Morality</th>
<th>Text 2: Merit</th>
<th>Text 3: Orthodoxy</th>
<th>Text 4: Profit</th>
<th>Text 5: Charity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Rumen shi qin</em></td>
<td><em>Jiyuan jisuo ji</em></td>
<td><em>Yitong zhengmai</em></td>
<td><em>Jiyin gangmu</em></td>
<td><em>Bencao beiyao</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>儒門事親</td>
<td>寄園寄所寄</td>
<td>醫統正脈</td>
<td>濟陰網目</td>
<td>本草備要</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pub. 1262</td>
<td>pub. 1698</td>
<td>pub. 1601</td>
<td>pub. 1665</td>
<td>pub. 1694</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhang Congzheng</td>
<td>Zhao Jishi</td>
<td>Wu Mianxue</td>
<td>Wang Qi</td>
<td>Wang Ang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1156-1228)</td>
<td>(late 17C)</td>
<td>(late 16C)</td>
<td>(1600?-1670?)</td>
<td>(1615-1699)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Integrate Confucian morality with medical knowledge
- Synthesise morality with medicine
- Appeal to values of Confucian gentlemen
- Use knowledge to do good
- Accumulate spiritual merit
- Appeal to gods
- Appeal to elite values
- Chose to publish medical texts to accumulate merit
- Chose orthodox and erudite medical texts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text 4: Profit</th>
<th>Text 5: Charity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Make secret knowledge public</td>
<td>Make complex knowledge simpler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meet demand for new knowledge</td>
<td>Increase access to medical knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appeal to market demand</td>
<td>Appeal to novice readers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chose rare and popular medical texts</td>
<td>Chose practical and simplified medical texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Published genres which sold well</td>
<td>Restructured texts to improve distribution: made a new synthesis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Medical canonical works of the Han
2. Explanations of the Han to Ming canon
1. Gynecology
2. Pediatrics
1. Complete corpus
2. Essential points