Li Shizhen and *The Grand Compendium of Materia Medica*

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Li Shizhen (courtesy name: Li Dongbi, assumed name: Li Binhu; 1518–1593) was from Qizhou (present Qichun County, Hubei Province). He came from a family lineage of physicians. His grandfather, an itinerant healer usually walked the streets to treat poor people, and his father was a famous physician in his hometown. He was brought up and nurtured by his family tradition and he expressed keen interest in medicine. Since childhood he started to study Confucian teachings, and at 14 he passed the imperial examination at the county level. When he failed the further imperial examinations three times, he gave up the thought of pursuing an official career and decided to study medicine. When his father was visiting patients, he learned the healing arts from him. At 26 he began to see patients independently. Gradually he enjoyed a widespread reputation for his superb practice. In 1551, he was engaged by the Prince of Chu to be his family physician. During his term of office, he rescued the Prince’s son who was attacked by a sudden syncope. In 1556, he was recommended to serve as an imperial physician in the capital. But one year later he resigned his post and came back to his hometown because he did not care for wealth and fame. Afterward he devoted himself to medicine and wrote scholarly works.

In clinical practice he found that there were many problems in the ancient classics of materia medica, e.g. muddled classification of medicinals, varying in illustrations and texts. He thought if these problems were not solved, there would be unforeseeable trouble to physicians and patients. With above enlightenment he conceived the idea to compile a new book of materia medica. He read previous works extensively, and when he had got some perceptions he would make notes and in this way he accumulated a large amount of knowledge. Meanwhile, he did not stick to the saying of the ancient people and adhered to “seeing is believing”. He traveled around the country, traversing deep mountains and forests and wading rivers to do field investigation. He interviewed old farmers, fishermen, woodmen, carters and hunters, and acquired plenty of herbal specimen and folk recipes, which helped lay a solid foundation for the compilation of the new book. What is more, he certified the effect of herbs by tasting them himself.

For example, Datura flower with anesthetic effect had different names because of localism, so it was difficult for people to recognize it. Li made multiple experiments according to the description of it in ancient classics. Tradition has it that when one with smile collected it and made wine with it, then he would laugh after he drank the wine. If one collected it with a dancing posture and movement, and made wine with it, then he would be dancing after he drank the wine. Li’s experiments proved that these were all caused by its anesthetic effect. In addition he finally found Datura flower only combined with Cannabis Flower had the anesthetic effect. He made a description of what he had found. He said: “collect Datura Flower in August and Cannabis Flower in July. Process them into powder and mix them in equal dose. Take 15 g and mix it in alcohol. This is for each dose.” From the above we know only after multiple painstaking experiments could he find out the method of processing and the dose one takes. After working on the book for 27 years and revising it for three times, he eventually completed *The Grand Compendium of Materia Medica* in 52 volumes in 1578.

It consists of 1892 medicinals, 374 newly added ones, over 1000 illustrations and 11,096 formulas. *The Grand Compendium of Materia Medica* records medicinal substances with their name, production area, species, shapes,
processing, nature and taste, action and indication. Under the section of "Invention", he often talked about his own experience in clinical use of medicinals and commented on predecessor’s experience. Li divided medicinals into 16 parts based on natural properties, such as water, fire, earth, metal and mineral, grass, cereal, vegetable, fruit, wood, insect, scale, crab shell, bird, animal and human beings. Categories are arranged under them ranging from inorganic to organic, from lower to higher, thus, establishing a very advanced classification system in the world. It is not only an epo-making monumental work on herbalism, but also an ancient encyclopedia because it covers botany, zoology, astronomy, geography, geology, mineralogy, etc. Since it contains abundant knowledge, it is inevitably viewed important references in research into natural sciences and it enjoys great prestige both at home and abroad. Joseph Needham, a famous expert of history of science and technology, speaks highly of the book, saying that beyond all question, Li Shenzhen's *The Grand Compendium of Materia Medica*, a monumental work, was the greatest achievement of the Ming Dynasty.

Li was an outstanding specialist of medicine and pharmacy of the Ming Dynasty. His name has been deeply imprinted in the heart of the Chinese people, and he has been highly honored by world people.

*The Grand Compendium of Materia Medica* is regarded the gem of the world medicine treasury. After publication the book has been translated into many languages, such as English, French, German, Latin, Japanese and Korean, and spread widely. On the world arena it displays the brilliance of the development of the traditional Chinese medical science.

References


Translated by Tingyu Fang