Sun Simiao, super physician of the Tang Dynasty

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Sun Simiao (58–682 AD) was a celebrated physician of the Tang Dynasty, whose hometown was Huayuan, Jingzhao (today’s Yao county, Shaanxi province). Known as the most long-lived physician in the Chinese medical history, he died in 682 AD at the age of 102 according to precise record. He went through three dynasties, i.e. the Northern Zhou Dynasty (557–581), the Sui Dynasty (581–618) and the Tang Dynasty (618–917). He was worthy of longevity in terms of today’s perspective. When he was young, he devoted himself to the study of Taoism and many other schools of thought instead of accepting government offers to be an official in the Sui and Tang dynasties. Sun worked as a physician for the general public in his whole life. He was also the teacher of Song Zhiwen, Meng Shen and Lu Zhaolin, who were renowned scholars in the early Tang Dynasty.

But no one can imagine that such a long-lived man was in frail health in boyhood. He sought for medical help time and again, for which he nearly exhausted his family property. At that time China was bogged down with chaos caused by war. The masses lived in dire poverty as they had to bear exorbitant taxes and corvee, and epidemic disease was widespread. Sun witnessed the land was strewn with corpses because of shortage of medical workers and medicine. With his own sufferings from disease, he determined to study medicine. He was intelligent and eager to learn and at seven years old he could learn a thousand of words every day, for which he was called the “holy kid” by Du Gu, the local military head. Around 20 years old, he had a good knowledge of the hundred schools of thought, especially good at the philosophy of Lao Tzu (later years of the Spring and Autumn Period, 475–221 BC) and Chuang Tzu (about 396–286 BC), and comprehension of medicine. To improve his medical level, he gathered proved recipes from men of insight at handsome rewards. He often traveled thousands of miles to gather herbs and see patients, from which he accumulated rich experience. He was highly esteemed by the emperor, generals and ministers, and common people. He was several times invited to be an official by the government, but he refused resolutely. He was indifferent to official career, and devoted himself consistently to medical career.

In the reign of Tang Tai Zong (627–649) an expeditionary military officer was shot by an arrow deeply on the back. He searched for renowned practitioners over China, and no one could pull out the arrowhead. Pus was running out all the time from the wound. In the winter of 650 Sun was ordered to heal the wound. He thought muscular contracture must be around the wound, so he first prescribed Qaumi Pills to the patient to relieve contracture. After taking the medicine for several months, muscles relaxed and the arrowhead was removed easily. At last it was found that the arrowhead was 3.5 cun in length.1

Beside practice of medicine, Sun was diligent in writing medical books. He advocated that “human life is invaluable”, from which, at 71 he wrote the *Invaluable Formulas for Emergencies* based on the great medical achievements before the Tang Dynasty. It is a comprehensive work embodying knowledge of internal medicine, external medicine, gynecology, pediatrics, five sensory organs, detoxification, acupuncture, diet therapy, prevention of diseases and so on. Thirty years later The Supplement to the ‘Invaluable Formulas for Emergencies’ was written by him to make up previous deficiency. There are 30 volumes in each book, and the former contains more than 4500 formulas, and the latter about 2000 formulas. The two books are titled *The Invaluable Formulas*, infused with
Sun’s personal medical experience, his academic ideas and medical knowledge from abroad. It is rich in content and practical, acclaimed as the pioneer medical encyclopedia in extant.

Sun is a lustrous pearl in the development process of Chinese medicine, leaving behind indelible achievements in medical history at home and abroad. He had rich experience in herbal cultivation, planting, collection, storage and processing. He successfully refined Taiyi Pellets, the components of which included cinnabar azuritum, orpiment, realgar, magnet and omar. Because the combination of these ingredients could produce arsenic, he mixed jujube paste in it to avoid poisoning, showing his super wisdom. In the treatment of malaria, he changed the dosage of the Taiyi Pellets according to condition, which was consistent with the method to treat malaria with arsenic liquid in later ages. This was adopted by the British doctors in the late 18th century, over one thousand years later than Sun’s practice.2

Sun was a first-class physician with superb ethics in Chinese medical history. In the preface of his Invaluable Formulas for Emergencies under the title of Importance of medical knowledge and medical ethics for a physician he talked about how to be a physician with profound medical learning and noble character. In terms of medical ethics, he summarized as follows: (1) Physicians’ duty is to heal the wounded and rescue the dying, and relieve their sufferings. No matter how rich and how poor they are, patients are treated equally. (2) Never be afraid of difficulties and danger and wholeheartedly rescue patients. (3) Never disgust for filth and stench in the treatment of patients. (4) Give careful and accurate diagnosis, keep calm, and pay attention to patient’s safety. (5) Show great respect for peers and never be jealous of others. What he said about medical ethics still has social significance today. Moreover, he practiced what he preached, and he always patiently treated those who suffered from wounds or dysentery with stench odor or infectious diseases. He himself treated several hundred leprosy-like cases and brought them to recovery.3

Sun was one of the great super physicians in ancient China. He was not only clever, studious and extremely knowledgeable, but had expert knowledge in medicine and noble ethics. His writings have been honored as the treasure of medical literature, which brings benefits to posterity. Sun left behind indelible outstanding feat in the world medical history, and his ideology of nature cultivation and health nurturing by virtue has become the motto of physicians and people of the later generation. Sun fully deserves the honorary title of super physician.

References


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