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978-0-521-51662-4 - Pulse Diagnosis in Early Chinese Medicine: The Telling Touch

Elisabeth Hsu

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Pulse Diagnosis in Early Chinese Medicine

This is a study of the earliest extensive account of Chinese pulse diagnosis, or more accurately, the examination of *mai*. Dr Hsu focuses on Chunyu Yi, a doctor of the early Han, and presents the first complete translation into English of his Memoir which appears in *The Records of the Historian* by Sima Qian (d. ca 86 BCE). This Memoir contains twenty-five medical case histories, and constitutes a document of enormous importance to the history of medicine in China.

The analysis covers the first ten medical cases and their rich vocabulary on touch, as used in Chinese pulse diagnosis. The patients treated were mostly nobility of the kingdom of Qi in eastern China, who suffered from the indulgences of court life and were treated with early forms of decoction, fomentation, fumigation, acupuncture and moxibustion. To date there is no book on early China of its kind.

ELISABETH HSU is Reader in Social Anthropology at the University of Oxford. Previous publications include *The Transmission of Chinese Medicine* (Cambridge, 1999) and *Innovation in Chinese Medicine* (Cambridge, 2001).

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978-0-521-51662-4 - Pulse Diagnosis in Early Chinese Medicine: The Telling Touch

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Elisabeth Hsu
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Pulse Diagnosis in Early Chinese Medicine:

The Telling Touch

With an annotated translation of the Memoir of Chunyu Yi
(*Cangong zhuan*) in the 105th chapter of *The Records of the Historian*
(*Shi ji*, ca 86 BCE) by Sima Qian, and an anthropological analysis of the
first ten medical case histories

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Elisabeth Hsu

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

For my mother Ruth (1929–64)

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51662-4 - Pulse Diagnosis in Early Chinese Medicine: The Telling Touch

Elisabeth Hsu

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CONTENTS

<i>List of tables, boxes and maps</i>	page ix
<i>Preface</i>	x
<i>Note on transcriptions in pinyin</i>	xiv
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xv
Part I Framing the field	1
1 Introduction	3
2 The questions	10
3 Diagnosis and medicine in the Warring States and the early Han	22
4 Conceptions of the body in the Warring States and the early Han	29
5 Discussion	45
Part II The Memoir of Chunyu Yi in <i>Shi ji</i> 105	47
6 Outline of the Memoir (<i>Canggong zhuan</i>)	49
7 Translation of the Memoir of Chunyu Yi	71
8 Commentators and commentaries to the Memoir	95
9 Map of Chunyu Yi's itineraries	97
Part III Translation and interpretation of the medical case histories 1–10 in the Memoir of Chunyu Yi	101
10 Text structure semantics	109
11 Case 1: coagulated blood in the liver	120
12 Case 2: <i>qi</i> trapped in the chest	148
13 Case 3: cold waters congealing into a mass	167
	vii

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51662-4 - Pulse Diagnosis in Early Chinese Medicine: The Telling Touch

Elisabeth Hsu

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii	<i>Contents</i>	
14	Case 4: hot waters dispersing as sweat pearls	185
15	Case 5: the queen dowager's overexposure to <i>yang</i>	203
16	Case 6: a body form in dissolution, delirium and death	232
17	Case 7: a lethal constipation	267
18	Case 8: a deadly diarrhoea	294
19	Case 9: the King of Jibei's overabsorption of <i>yin</i>	302
20	Case 10: two cases in one? <i>Qi</i> went into the abdomen	327
21	Discussion of the medical case histories 1–10	342
	<i>References</i>	370
	<i>Index</i>	392

LIST OF TABLES, BOXES AND MAPS

Table 1: Names and titles of Chunyu Yi's clientele	page 54
Map 1: Place names and kingdoms mentioned in Chunyu Yi's Memoir	97
Table 2: The 'name' of the disorder	113
Table 3: The 'cause' of the disorder	114
Table 4: The 'quality' of the disorder	115
Box 1: Did Chunyu Yi say he perceived <i>qi</i> or speak of the meanings implied by his tactile perception?	348
Table 5: Qualities of <i>mai</i> in terms of <i>qi</i>	349
Table 6: Verbs of touch mentioned in the 'Mai fa'	350
Table 7: Verbs of touch that qualify <i>qi</i> in Chunyu Yi's vocabulary	354
Table 8: Verbs of touch that qualify <i>mai</i> in Chunyu Yi's vocabulary	354
Table 9: Verbs that are indefinite and may or may not qualify <i>mai</i> or <i>qi</i> in Chunyu Yi's vocabulary	355
Table 10: Interrelations between the name of the disorder and Chunyu Yi's pulse qualities	365

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51662-4 - Pulse Diagnosis in Early Chinese Medicine: The Telling Touch

Elisabeth Hsu

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PREFACE

When, in October 1986, on my first day at Cambridge, I was asked during the welcome party: ‘And what will the theme of your thesis be?’, I was embarrassed not to know. I had graduated from Biology, disillusioned; turned away from Development Studies, dismayed; and after a year of travelling and searching, decided to enrol in Social Anthropology, General Linguistics and Chinese Studies, which I did for a year before attending the postgraduate course on General Linguistics that began with said welcome. Through reading Joseph Needham’s works, I thereupon found Chunyu Yi’s Memoir in the 105th chapter of Sima Qian’s *Shi ji* (*The Records of the Historian*), which is the first dynastic history of the unified Chinese empire, dating to ca 86 BCE. It contained twenty-five medical case histories. This, I thought, was ‘doable’ in a Master’s thesis.

However, twenty years later I find myself still puzzling over the same text. The time has come to admit that with the material at hand it cannot be conclusively decoded. What then is the contribution of this book to scholarship? First, an attempt has been made to contribute to Chinese medical history with a solid piece of research that attends to questions of methodology and language. Although Yi’s Memoir cannot be classified as a medical treatise and although it is part of a dynastic history, it remains an immensely important text for understanding early Chinese medicine. It is in fact the earliest extant text, which contains a reasonably extensive account of Chinese pulse diagnosis, and also reports fairly frequently on, depending on their definition, ‘acupuncture and moxibustion’ and treatment with ‘decoctions’. As Yamada Keiji points out, pulse diagnosis and decoctions have ever since been intrinsic to Chinese medical practice.

Second, a text critical method, ‘text structure semantics’, was developed for decoding the medical case histories recorded in this text, which, as will be demonstrated in this study, are formulaic. The future will show whether this method can be used for decoding other formulaic premodern scientific texts written in a highly elaborate if not technical vocabulary. The aim was to understand Yi’s rationale in a way that tries to avoid anachronism and ethnocentricity. The detailed word-for-word analysis is meant to make

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51662-4 - Pulse Diagnosis in Early Chinese Medicine: The Telling Touch

Elisabeth Hsu

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface* xi

transparent why certain decisions of translation were made, and also to highlight the range of ambiguities intrinsic to any interpretation of the text.

Third, this study addresses theoretical concerns in medical anthropology by questioning widely held assumptions about illness causation and by highlighting new avenues for thinking about diagnostic procedures. With its focus on tactility during the diagnostic process, the study aims to contribute to the anthropology of sensory experience. The more than forty verbs of touch investigated relate tactile qualities to body internal processes, often in iconic and indexical ways, to use C. S. Peirce's terminology.

Needless to say, this book has seen many reincarnations. The MPhil thesis in General Linguistics 'Lexical Semantics and Chinese Medical Terms' of 1987, conducted under the supervision of Stephen Levinson, was getting dusty when Sir Geoffrey Lloyd read it in 1991 and enthusiastically encouraged me to do an annotated translation of Yi's Memoir. I was then in the final stages of my doctoral studies in Social Anthropology on Traditional Chinese Medicine in the People's Republic of China. I was fluent in modern Chinese, but felt I barely had any knowledge of literary Chinese. Nathan Sivin too emphasised my then limited linguistic fitness in both English and literary Chinese and, in recognition of the importance of this text, published a piece on it himself (Sivin 1995a). Sir Geoffrey nevertheless encouraged me with the motto 'learning by doing'. So, I applied for and received a one-year grant from the National Science Foundation of the United States at the Needham Research Institute in Cambridge, a Charitable Trust adjunct institution to the University, which Geoffrey Lloyd aimed to enliven with innovative scholarship. He probably had in mind an enlightened essay in the style of sophisticated English scholarship, yet was soon to realise that I was an obstinate Chinese and hopeless Swiss perfectionist, trained six and a half years in the humanistic tradition of German philology at high school. The study grew from an unpublished annotated 100-page translation of the 25 medical cases in 1995, to a 400-page Habilitationsschrift in Sinology at the University of Heidelberg in 2001, to this embarrassingly long tome of 200,000 words in 2007.

The translation could never have been done without the most generous help and basic training received from specialists in Chinese Studies, mostly at Cambridge. The very early days had seen the help of Ma Boying, who was a visiting scholar at the Needham Research Institute in the mid-1980s and of Ma Kanwen, who then still oscillated between German and Anglo-Saxon countries. It also benefited from weekly tutorials with Robert Neather on literary Chinese grammar and grammatical particles. Most important, however, was Mark Lewis' critical review of the entire first and second typed out draft translations of the twenty-five cases in 1995. He cracked so many nuts, it has been difficult to acknowledge each in the text. Eventually,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51662-4 - Pulse Diagnosis in Early Chinese Medicine: The Telling Touch

Elisabeth Hsu

Frontmatter

[More information](#)xii *Preface*

however, Michael Loewe became the most constant support for over a decade and answered hundreds of questions on endless details. His bibliographic guide to early Chinese studies makes the entry into this field possible for latecomers, and the transcription of the names of the Japanese commentators in chapter 9 relies entirely on his expertise. Most memorable are our weekly sessions in his study at Granchester, in July 1995, where we scrutinised the names, titles and residence places of Yi's clientele, which inspired him to write his 1997 essay.

At the University of Zurich, where I was employed as Assistant Lecturer in Social Anthropology from 1992 to 1996, Robert Gassmann, as Sinologist mentor to the stipend from the Boral Stiftung, which gave me dispensation from my teaching for nine months, commented extensively on the final 1995 version. Catherine Despeux provided few but excellent comments, as did Donald Harper, who continued to provide occasional but decisive support. To my surprise Lisa Raphals, with whom I shared the office at the Needham Research Institute in summer 1995, as well as an enthusiasm for the text, published more or less verbatim an early draft of my three tables with the clientele's names and the names and causes of their disorders in 1998.

In the late 1990s, while I was Chiang Chingkuo Teaching and Research Fellow in the History of Chinese Science and Technology at the Faculty of Oriental Studies of the University of Cambridge, Charles Aylmer of the University Library's Aoi Pavilion provided most crucial support with bibliographical problems. John Moffett at the Needham Research Institute was also most helpful, particularly in recent years. The seminars I then organised for the Institute gave me an opportunity, when no other speaker could be found, to present select cases to a lively and critical audience. Christopher Cullen, Vivienne Lo, Kim Taylor and several temporary research and visiting fellows provided vital help and necessary challenges. Furthermore, the case histories were presented to clinicians: Dorin Ritzmann, Carsten Flohr and, later, Jeffery Aronson.

The 1995 translation formed the basis for securing further funding from the Swiss National Foundation in 1999–2001, for a Habilitationsschrift in Medical Anthropology, which was made possible with the support of Hans-Rudolf Wicker and Wolfgang Marschall, Professors in Social Anthropology at the University of Berne. When the situation in Berne changed, it was a stroke of luck that in 2001 Rudolph Wagner agreed to examine the study as a Habilitationsschrift in Sinology. My curriculum vitae and former publications were scrutinised, I was grilled for a whole day over the telephone during my stay at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle, and had to travel to Heidelberg to give a seminar, which resulted in a heated three-hour debate from 7 to 10 pm at night. Sinologists at their best! The examination procedure took over a year, during which regulations changed, requiring me to teach the equivalent of a one-semester-long course on literary Chinese, in addition to the usual oral examination, in my

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51662-4 - Pulse Diagnosis in Early Chinese Medicine: The Telling Touch

Elisabeth Hsu

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface* xiii

case, on modern Chinese Studies. The former was one of the most memorable teaching experiences I have ever had, reading Wang Chong's 'Empty Talk about Dragons' and the 'Uselessness of Ritual' with brilliant students; the latter was one of the worst examinations I ever passed. Finally, in December 2002, the process came to a dignified end with my 'Antrittsvorlesung in der alten Aula' on 'Der Ertastete Koerper' (published as 'Tactility and the Body in Early Chinese Medicine' in 2005).

The saga continued after I had become Lecturer in Medical Anthropology at the University of Oxford when, in 2003, William Nienhauser searched for someone to do the translation of the entire *Shi ji* 105. Coincidentally I found myself again generously funded by the Chiang Chingkuo Foundation, having been invited as international expert into a group of Taiwanese anthropologists working on the senses in medicine. It allowed me to attend a conference at the University of Wisconsin on the translation of the *Shi ji* in September 2004, during which I received detailed feedback, in particular from Hans van Ess and Tsai-Fa Cheng. Most importantly it permitted me to employ a research assistant, Yanxia Zhang. Old files were retrieved, Chinese characters retyped, new bibliographical references added, comments incorporated from Rudolf Pfister, Paolo Santangelo, Roel Sterckx, Leslie de Vries, Yili Wu and many others, among them Hermann Tessenow and Wang Zilan, who helped with computer searches. In 2005 the penultimate version of the translation of Yi's Memoir was presented in Robert Chard's reading seminars at the Institute of Chinese Studies of the University of Oxford, where several important issues were clarified and some later followed up by Brandon Miller and Ka Tam. As the end was in sight, Sir Geoffrey, who had initiated the project, kindly provided pertinent critique on the versions of summer 2005 and 2006.

Finally, thanks go to my lifelong friends and loved ones, to Benjamin, who appreciated the case histories as short stories and poetry, to Robert, who checked the entire Habilitationsschrift for its clarity in English but missed so many typos, and also to those who found it hard to see me spending long hours with this text instead of them; to my parents and to my three brothers, Martin, Andrew and Peter, who saw me through some of the most difficult episodes of my life. While I could never have completed this study without the assistance and support of the above colleagues, friends and family, and many more whom I have not mentioned by name, I take full responsibility for this text and translation.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51662-4 - Pulse Diagnosis in Early Chinese Medicine: The Telling Touch

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

NOTE ON TRANSCRIPTIONS IN *PINYIN*

Pre-modern Chinese is transcribed, character by character, in single syllables; standard modern Chinese is given, as usual, in multisyllabic words.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51662-4 - Pulse Diagnosis in Early Chinese Medicine: The Telling Touch

Elisabeth Hsu

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

ABBREVIATIONS

CSJC	<i>Cong shu ji cheng</i> 叢書集成
CY	<i>Ciyuan</i> 詞源
HDNJSW	<i>Huangdi nei jing Su wen</i> 黃帝內經素問
HYDCD	<i>Hanyu dacidian</i> 漢語大詞典
HYDZD	<i>Hanyu dazidian</i> 漢語大字典
MWD	Mawangdui manuscripts 馬王堆
MWD YY	Mawangdui ‘Yinyang shiyimai jiuqing’ 陰陽十一脈灸經
MWD ZB	Mawangdui ‘Zubi shiyimai jiuqing’ 足臂十一脈灸經
OED	Oxford English Dictionary
SBBY	<i>Si bu bei yao</i> 四部備要
SBCK	<i>Si bu cong kan</i> 四部叢刊
SKQS	<i>Si ku quan shu</i> 四庫全書
ZJS	Zhangjiashan manuscripts 張家山
ZJS MSSW	Zhangjiashan ‘Maishu 脈書 shiwen’
ZJS YSSW	Zhangjiashan ‘Yinshu 引書 shiwen’
ZHYH	<i>Zhonghua yaohai</i> 中華藥海
ZYDCD	<i>Zhongyao dacidian</i> 中藥大詞典