The Rare Book Collection on Chinese Medicine in the Gest Oriental Library at Princeton University

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Introduction

When people first come to Princeton's East Asian library, they often wonder why it is called the Gest Library. Therefore it is only fitting to begin with a brief history of the library.

Guion Moore Gest (1864-1948) was a successful American businessman who was an engineer by profession. Once during a business trip to China, he met an American naval commander named I.V. Gillis. It happened that Gest had long been plagued by glaucoma, and Commander Gillis recommended to him a certain Chinese eye medicine which brought great relief to his pain. Although the medicine did not cure him of his illness, and he eventually went blind some ten years later, Gest was so impressed that he supplied Commander Gillis with funds and entrusted him to purchase books on Chinese medicine, especially on the remedies and prescriptions for the treatment of afflictions of the eyes. This was the beginning of the great Gest Oriental Library.

It was with persistence, courage, and unfailing attention to detail that Gillis gradually built up this collection. At first he acquired only rare books on Chinese medicine and Buddhism, but he subsequently broadened the search to other fields. By the time his acquisitions efforts were interrupted in 1932 because of Gest's financial difficulties during the era of the Great Depression, the collection had grown to 75,000 volumes, with more than 20,000 additional volumes on order.

Because of the sheer size of this collection, Gest was confronted with the urgent problem of finding a place to house it. McGill University was chosen as a depository because Gest had a branch office of his engineering firm in Montreal, Canada. The university in 1926 opened the Gest Chinese Research Library. But in 1937, with financial assistance from the Rockefeller Foundation, and with the understanding that it would become a part of the Princeton University library system, the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton acquired the entire Gest Collection.

The newly named Gest Oriental Library was moved two or three times before it was permanently housed in its present building in the year 1972. The library is now in Palmer Hall, where the Department of East Asian Studies is also located. The library is independent of the department, which is nevertheless supportive of its research and educational programs.

Since the days of Mr. Gest and Commander Gillis, the collection has grown tremendously; the library now has 275,000 monographs and microforms in its Chinese collection. But the entire collection is not the subject of the presentation, nor are all of the 40,000 volumes of its rare book collection.
What I shall address in this paper are the 2,000 volumes of rare books on the subject of Chinese medicine in general, and some specific titles in particular.

Rare Books on Medicine

What kind of rare books does the library have on Chinese medicine? First we have to understand that at the time when Gillis was collecting Chinese books for Gest, the most sought after items were Sung (960–1277) and Yuan (1277–1367) editions, especially those from the Sung Dynasty. The Sung period was one of the great peaks of Chinese culture, particularly in the visual arts, and it saw the first and greatest flowering of Chinese woodblock printing. We can imagine that Gillis would have loved to collect as many Sung editions as possible. Eventually he did manage to acquire 700 volumes from that period. But Gillis was a clever man; he realized that with his limited funds it would be impossible for him to compete against collectors from within China and from Japan. Therefore he decided to concentrate on collecting Ming and Ch'ing editions. That is why the great majority of the rare books on Chinese medicine are either from the Ming or Ch'ing period; and that is why the Gest Library’s holdings represent one of the best collections of Ming editions outside of East Asia.

Gillis knew the Chinese language well, but his expertise also lay in the fact that he was a fingerprint and handwriting specialist. Those skills proved very useful when dealing with doubtful editions or spurious manuscripts. And in the course of his career as a collector, he also acquired a profound knowledge of Chinese bibliography and editions. He shied away from lofty scholars, but mingled easily with rare book dealers and learned to know all the tricks of this particular trade. That was how he was able to acquire some of the rarest books at the least possible cost.

Whether by design or by accident, Gillis collected a wide spectrum of Ming editions. They include Imperial editions, noblemen's editions, as well as T'ai-hsueh (National Academy), provincial, local, private, and commercial publications. There are also quite a few manuscripts. As for the subject of medicine, one can see the wide variety of editions, dealing with all branches of Chinese medicine. There are books that deal with general medicine, with acupuncture, with materia medica, with the pulse, with colds, with smallpox and measles, with injuries and ailments of the external parts of the body, with prescriptions and remedies, with eye diseases, with diseases of children; and there are titles that deal with women's complaints. As mentioned earlier, there are 2,000 volumes in the rare book collection that deal with Chinese medicine, and since it would be impossible to discuss every one of them, I have selected only eleven titles, either the subject of which are of vital importance in Chinese medicine, or where the editions are of a rare nature. I hope these few titles can offer you a glimpse of the kind of rare books which the Gest Oriental Library has in its collection.

For instance, we have a title here called "I hsueh ju men" 醫學入門, or "The fundamentals of medicine". The author was Li Ch'an of the Ming Dynasty.
It covers all fields of medicine, and is considered an important textbook for the study of medicine and its practice.

The backing for the book was a collective effort of several financial contributors, and it was published around the year 1575. The blocks are printed on bamboo paper. This item is apparently a rare one, and this particular copy was once owned by Mao Chin, the renowned collector and publisher of the Ming dynasty. It is evidenced by his seal on the first page, which is undoubtedly genuine. This title has seven chüan in ten volumes.

Another title is Ju men shih ch'in, which means "The ways a scholar serves his parents." It is a pathological study and treatise on the diagnosis and treatment of diseases, which has come to be considered the classical text of a certain school of medicine. The book was written by Chang Tzu-ho, a noted physician of the Chin dynasty. What is so different about this book is the author's viewpoint on the learning of medicine. He explained in the preface that the subject of medicine requires such a profound knowledge that only a scholar can hope to understand it. He also stressed that not only men of the medical profession should have the knowledge, but also that a filial son should devote his time to learning about medicine, so that he could know how to serve his parents better in their declining years. This belief led him to call this work Ju men shih ch'in. This title was published by Wu Mien-hsueh, the famous publisher of medical works, around 1541, and was printed on thin bamboo paper. It consists of fifteen chüan in as many volumes.

On children's diseases, we have Hsiu chen hsiao erh fang, "Prescriptions for children." It was compiled by Hsu Yung-hsuan of the Ming Dynasty, and published around the year 1405. The author observed that medicine for children is the most difficult of all because to diagnose a child's ailment is an art as delicate as catching a drop of morning dew from a blade of grass, or a bubble on the surface of calm water. Inside the book there is an official seal of the Han lin yuan in both Chinese and Manchu. This is the original edition used as the basis for transcribing the copy in the Ssu k'u chüan shu and according to a bibliographical expert, Chu Wan-li, this copy was once in the collection of T'ien i ko, one of the oldest (over 400 years) and best private collections in China. This collection had more than 53,000 volumes of rare books, the quality of which was so great that when Emperor Ch'ien-lung of the Ch'ing dynasty issued a decree to build the Imperial Library by amassing and transcribing all the worthy titles that existed in the land the Han lin yuan, which was responsible for this enormous task, selected most editions in the T'ien i ko collection for this imperial endeavor. When the work was done ten years later, the Imperial Library had almost eighty thousand volumes of manuscripts in this Ssu k'u chüan shu.

When one talks about classical works on Chinese medicine, Shang han tsa ping lun chi, "Theories on colds and miscellaneous ailments," cannot be ignored. It is a treatise on the standard classified major
diseases; together with their treatment and the treatment of miscellaneous and minor diseases and afflictions; there is also an extensive dissertation on the pulse. The author of this work was Chang Chi 張 機 of the Han Dynasty. This is a manuscript written on bamboo paper; there is no date, but it was judged by Chü Wan-li to have been transcribed around the year 1750.

Another manuscript in the collection is called I shou yen k'o 易授眼科, a treatise on the eye and its diseases together with prescriptions and remedies for their treatment. There is no mention of the author. The manuscript was dated 1855, and the work is considered to be of considerable merit in its field.

The oldest classical work on Chinese medicine is Huang ti nei ching su wen 黃帝內經素問, a record of questions and answers on medicine between Emperor Huang-ti and one of his subject named Ch'i-po 亥伯. The work was enlarged and commented upon by Wang Ping 王冰 in the T'ang Dynasty. Later, by order of a Sung emperor, the work was again revised and enlarged, with commentaries by various authors and physicians. The copy in the library was published in 1601 by Wu Mien-hau, the famous Ming publisher on medicine. It has twenty-four chüan in eight volumes and is printed on thin bamboo paper.

On the subject of acupuncture, I single out a Ming publication titled Chen chiu wen tui 針灸問對. It is a treatise on acupuncture and cauterization and was written in the form of questions and answers. The author is Wang Chi 汪機 of the Ming dynasty. The Gest copy is the original edition published in 1532. There is an official seal of the Han-lin Academy on the title page. It is obvious that this particular item is another original used as the basis for transcription into the Ssu k'u ch'üan shu.

There was a personage during the Ming dynasty named Wan Chüan 萬全 who, in his youth, tried several times unsuccessfully to pass the national examinations. In desperation, he abandoned his ambition and devoted his time to the study of medicine. He became so knowledgeable in this field, especially on the subject of smallpox and measles, that he wrote several books on this subject. The Gest Library has a number of his works, one of them being Tou chen shih i hsin fa 小際世醫心法. It is a treatise on smallpox and measles, together with remedies and prescriptions for their treatments. This work of twelve chüan in eight volumes is an original edition published in 1549.

Another Ming publication is titled Lei cheng pei yung pen ts'ao 雷證備本草. It is a collection of descriptions of plants, herbs, mineral crystals, and other things used in Chinese materia medica. It is written and richly illustrated by a Sung physician named T'ang Shen-wei 唐慎微. The library copy is a reprint published by a provincial magistrate in 1587; it still retains the preface written by the Ming Emperor Shen Tsung 世宗 himself when the original Imperial edition was first published. It contains thirty chüan in ten volumes.

The next title is Cheng chih chun sheng 程治準譚 “Rules and methods for diagnosis and treatments.” The author, Wang K'en-t'ang 王肯堂 of the Ming
dynasty, wrote many books on medicine, but this title stands out above all of
the others, for it is the total sum of his lifetime accomplishments, and
required ten years (1537-1547) for its completion. The work is massive,
totaling forty-four chüan in eighty volumes. It is a collection of medical
treatises on miscellaneous complaints, classified prescriptions, fevers, etc.

The last title is one of the most important works in Chinese medicine. It is
called Pen ts'ao kang mu 本草綱目 , an encyclopedia of materia medica.
The compiler was Li Shih-chen 李時珍 of the Ming dynasty. This work was
originally published in the late 16th century; however, the library copy is a
19th century reprint.

Li Shih-chen believed that everything in the world, whether air or earth,
water or stone, whether it is plant or mineral, whether it has feathers or
scales, whether it walks on hoofs or on feet, all can be used for the cure of
diseases and ailments of the frail human body. To compile this work, he
consulted more than 800 medical books, and revised his writing three times
before he submitted it for publication. It took him thirty long years to
finish to task.

The work consists of almost two million words; it identifies 1,892 substances
(374 of which were of his own discoveries) and has 1,518 beautifully drawn
illustrations. It also offers more than 1,000 prescriptions.

The above mentioned titles are just a small portion of Gest Library's rare
book holdings on the subject of medicine. There are a few books that are in
rhythmic composition, which make it easier for readers to memorize symptoms
and prescriptions. Then there are books about women's diseases, about
abortion, and miscarriages and child bearing; they are not only fascinating to
read but they also help shed light on the social status of women in Chinese
society 300 or 400 years ago.

Conclusion

Using the rare books as a core, the Gest Library has over the years continued
to build up its collection in this field. It now offers comprehensive
coverage of almost every aspect of Chinese medicine; accordingly, it provides
considerable insight into the historical development of Chinese science.
Scholars who have knowledge of Chinese medicine, or researchers who are
interested in the history of medicine or the history of Chinese science, would
undoubtedly find this collection a treasure, with a wealth of materials and
research resources to work on.

For finding aids to the Gest Library's collection, there is the public catalog
and the 671-page Catalogue of the Chinese Rare Books in the Gest Collection of
the Princeton University compiled by Ch'ü Wan-li 車萬里 . The late
Professor Ch'ü (1907-1979) was the Curator of the National Central Library and
the Institute of History and Philology, Academic Sinica, in Taiwan. He was
also a visiting research scholar at the Institute for Advanced Study and
Princeton University. A supplement to this work is being planned for
publication at the end of this year. The compiler is Peter Ch'ang 昌彼得
of the National Palace Museum in Taiwan. There is also an unpublished
bibliography compiled by Commander Gillis which is available for use on
request.