

Ancient and Medieval Chinese Recipes for Aphrodisiacs and Philters: A Survey of Mawangdui and Dunhuang Manuscripts

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Near the end of a silk-sheet manuscript of recipes from Mawangdui 馬王堆 tomb 3 (burial dated to 168 B.C.), assigned the title “Yangsheng fang” 養生方 (Recipes for nurturing life) by the Chinese editorial team, is an exchange between the Shang ruler Tang 湯 and a teacher surnamed Chen 陳:<sup>1</sup>

[Tang] asked: “When man and woman achieve unison and are a matched pair, how can it be accomplished without injuring the body?” [Chen] replied: “What assists life is eating; what diminishes life is lust. Therefore, the sage must have a model.”

Chen continues with a synopsis of the model for beneficial sex, free of the detriments of lust (*se* 色), in the form of a list: six names of sexual positions, five names of parts of the female genitals, seven terms for different ways the man should thrust his penis, two terms referring to the woman’s state of arousal during intercourse, two terms for the reactions of the woman’s body, and four terms for actions the man must accomplish at various stages of intercourse. A second Mawangdui manuscript, assigned the title “Tianxia zhi dao tan” 天下至道談 (Discussion of the culminant way in Under-heaven), states the same general principle about life and lust followed by a series of sections, each providing

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<sup>1</sup> *Mawangdui Hanmu boshu* 馬王堆漢墓帛書, vol. 4 (Beijing: Wenwu, 1985), “Yangsheng fang,” C199-201. All references to Mawangdui manuscripts are by text title and column (C) or slip (S) numbers in which the passage occurs. See also, Donald Harper, *Early Chinese Medical Literature: The Mawangdui Medical Manuscripts* (London: Kegan Paul, 1998), 355-56.

a fuller record of the terminology and actions referred to elliptically by Chen.<sup>2</sup> It is evident that the content of the dialogue between Chen and Tang in “Yangsheng fang” was drawn from a sexual cultivation guide such as “Tianxia zhi dao tan.” “Tianxia zhi dao tan” and a third Mawangdui manuscript, assigned the title “He yin yang” 合陰陽 (Conjoining yin and yang), are the oldest Chinese guides to sexual intercourse as one of several methods to cultivate body and spirit.

The idea that sex mattered because the right kind of intercourse could benefit life is evident not only in the Mawangdui manuscripts but also in the classification of sexual literature as the third of the four divisions of medical literature in the bibliographic treatise of the *Hanshu* 漢書 (whose contents is based on the catalog of the Han royal library, compiled ca. the late first century B.C.), placed ahead of the literature on other practices to “nurture life” *yangsheng* 養生.<sup>3</sup> That is, by the end of the third century B.C. (the probable copy date of the Mawangdui “Yangsheng fang” is ca. 205 B.C.)<sup>4</sup> sex was already regarded as a category of physio-spiritual cultivation and this categorization affected elite attitudes towards sex (especially elite male attitudes). My presentation today does not focus on sexual cultivation as part of ancient and medieval practices of “nurturing life.” Rather, I propose to examine sex and *se* “lust” as evidenced in recipes for aphrodisiacs and philters in the Mawangdui manuscripts, which occur among the recipes in “Yangsheng fang” and in two other manuscripts, assigned the titles “Zaliao fang” 雜療方 (Recipes for various cures) and “Zajin fang” 雜禁方 (Recipes for various

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<sup>2</sup> Mawangdui *Hanmu boshu*, vol. 4, “Tianxia zhidao tan,” S40-61; Harper, *Early Chinese Medical Literature*, 432-37.

<sup>3</sup> See Gu Shi 顧實, *Hanshu yiwenzhi jiangshu* 漢書藝文志講疏 (Shanghai: Shangwu, 1924), 249-53. Works related to sex are classified as “Fangzhong” 房中 (Intra-chamber); those related to other forms of cultivation are classified as “Shenxian” 神僊 (Spirit transcendence).

<sup>4</sup> Harper, *Early Chinese Medical Literature*, 26.

charms). Related recipes recur in medieval sources, in received texts as well as in Dunhuang 敦煌 manuscripts. Potions to enhance sexual function and fulfill sexual desire were surely transmitted orally. The details found in the written recipes, which appear in medical writings as well as in collections of diverse techniques for use in daily life, testify to the wealth of knowledge concerning aphrodisiacs and philters, and to sexual habits of the ancient and medieval readership for manuscripts that fall outside the program of sexual cultivation.

To be sure, who read the manuscripts and who made use of the recipes is a complex issue that I cannot adequately address today. Let me simply assert that the manuscripts, both ancient and medieval, are intended for general dissemination and that their contents reflect everyday concerns. As I provide examples this assertion will be justified. With respect to sex, there were clearly uses for aphrodisiacs and philters for husbands, wives, and lovers, either in connection with cultivation practices or not. Just as clearly, the knowledge imparted in the manuscripts may reflect on the society of courtesans and brothels as well as on the everyday circumstances in which men and women, married and unmarried, pursued sexual inclinations.

I begin with a section of recipes in the Mawangdui “Yangsheng fang” for preparing “napkins” (*jin* 巾) -- medicated cloths -- that illustrates the connection between aphrodisiacs and tonics that boost vitality in general. The main ingredient in the first recipe is a chicken that is plucked and hung alive on a pole and then rubbed against several bee hives until the bees have stung it to death. Its flesh is finely pounded, mixed with other ingredients to make a paste, and daubed on cloth napkins. The napkins are used to “rub the feet,” with the result that when “the feet have little vapor (*qi* 氣), this

makes a person have an abundance of vapor.”<sup>5</sup> The cloth in the second recipe is soaked in a liquid containing red ants, blister beetles (active ingredient, cantharidin), and a third stinging insect (*yangsi* 楊思) of unknown identity. The finished napkin is stored for use during intercourse: “rub the jade whip (i.e. penis) with it and the horse (i.e. vagina) will then be startled.”<sup>6</sup> The six other extant recipes (there is a gap in the silk sheet and an unknown number of recipes are lost) are also used for intercourse, and the napkins are rubbed on both male and female genitals “when going to bed” (*wo* 臥) in the words of several recipes.<sup>7</sup>

The combination of blister beetles, red ants, and *yangsi* is notable for its causticity. Blister beetle toxin was a well-known drug in the ancient Mediterranean world, and has been valued as a potent but dangerous aphrodisiac in European pharmacy (where it is popularly known as Spanish fly).<sup>8</sup> In “Yangsheng fang,” blister beetle belongs among other drugs that cause the body to become hot (*re* 熱) and to itch (*yang* 癢, written 養 in the manuscript). An aphrodisiac prepared from a concentrate of snails and peaches, again in the form of cloth impregnated with the drug, makes relevant observations about its effect:<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Mawangdui Hanmu boshu*, vol. 4, “Yangsheng fang,” C79-80; Harper, *Early Chinese Medical Literature*, 341.

<sup>6</sup> *Mawangdui Hanmu boshu*, vol. 4, “Yangsheng fang,” C83; Harper, *Early Chinese Medical Literature*, 342. The blister beetle in “Yangsheng fang” is *banmao* 斑蝥 (I use the standard graphs for *banmao* in received materia medica rather than the graphs in the original manuscript), identified as *Mylabris phalerata* Pall. and *M. cichorii* L. in *Zhongyao dacidian* 中藥大辭典 (Shanghai: Shanghai kexue jishu, 1977-79), no. 4730. These beetles have a high concentration of cantharidin, a potent counterirritant and vesicant. The blister beetle in the Mediterranean world is *Cantharis vesicatoria* L., from the Greek *kantharis*.

<sup>7</sup> *Mawangdui Hanmu boshu*, “Yangsheng fang,” C89 and 91; Harper, *Early Chinese Medical Literature*, 343.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 124; John Scarborough, “Nicander’s Toxicology,” part 2, *Pharmacy in History* 21.2 (1979), 73-80; Alan Walton, *Aphrodisiacs: From Legend to Prescription* (Westport: Associated Booksellers, 1958), 106-7.

<sup>9</sup> *Mawangdui Hanmu boshu*, vol. 4, “Yangsheng fang,” C49-50; Harper, *Early Chinese Medical Literature*, 336.

When engaging in intercourse, take a piece (of cloth) the size of the palm and insert it in a nostril. It itches slightly and is hot. If pressed on the arm, the arm itches greatly and is fiercely hot. Do not let it touch the face. If it touches the face, the itching is unbearable.

The double reference of the graph *yang* 養 (“nurture” and “itch”) may be read as evidence of overlap between sexual cultivation and sexual arousal in the sensation of the excited itching of flesh. The same word occurs in “He yin yang” in the account of the “five sounds” (*wuyin* 五音) the woman makes by which the man gauges the increasing intensity of her excitation. My quotation begins with her response to penetration:<sup>10</sup>

When there is continual moaning, the jade whip has entered and “itching” (*yang* 養) then commences; when there is blowing, rapturous craving is intense; when there is biting, her body shakes and she wants the man to continue for a long time. (pp. 419-20)

I skip further discussion of the Mawangdui aphrodisiac recipes and parallels in medieval sources, noting only that male and female genitals are also given separate treatment as are tonics to bolster male vitality in order to increase sexual endurance and permit repeated acts of coition.<sup>11</sup> The extant medieval aphrodisiac recipes mostly occur in medical writings and in association with sexual cultivation. As I noted at the outset, I am looking for evidence of aphrodisiacs and philters in the pursuit of sex as lustful engagement.

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<sup>10</sup> *Mawangdui Hanmu boshu*, vol. 4, “He yin yang,” S125-126; Harper, *Early Chinese Medical Literature*, 419-20.

<sup>11</sup> On multiple coitus see *Mawangdui Hanmu boshu*, vol. 4, “Yangsheng fang,” C31, 32, and 34; Harper, *Early Chinese Medical Literature*, 332-33. For the medieval period, *Ishinpō* 醫心方 (Beijing: Renmin weisheng, 1993), 28.652-53, quotes relevant recipes from the *Yufang zhiyao* 玉房指要 and *Dongxuanzi* 洞玄子.

Let me turn to the Mawangdui philters and medieval parallels. Recipes for five philters occur in “Zajin fang,” a wood-slip manuscript that was found rolled around the bamboo-slip manuscript “Tianxia zhidao tan” when Mawangdui tomb 3 was excavated. Although “Zajin fang” and “Tianxia zhidao tan” are two manuscripts, connections between sexual cultivation, aphrodisiacs, and philters in contemporary sexual habits might explain their physical proximity among the Mawangdui manuscripts. The philter recipe topics, in order of appearance, are:

- (1) To restore affection between a husband and wife who dislike one another
- (2) To “seduce” (*mei* 媚, written with 微 in the manuscript) a noble person
- (3) To “seduce” the intended person
- (4) To “obtain” (*de* 得) the intended person
- (5) To “obtain” the intended person

There is also a recipe to split up a husband and wife.<sup>12</sup> These recipes occur along with several other charms for situations such as silencing barking dogs and crying infants, nightmares, and vanquishing an adversary in a legal suit.

A collection of medieval Chinese philters occurs in the tenth century Japanese medical compendium *Ishinpō* 醫心方 (Heart of medicine recipes), in chapter 26, in a section titled “Xiang’ai fang” 相愛方 (Recipes for mutual love). “Xiang’ai fang” quotes seven different Chinese sources. The uses of the philters match the Mawangdui philters (most often to cause or to restore connubial affection -- or to destroy it -- and to obtain

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<sup>12</sup> *Mawangdui Hanmu boshu*, “Zajin fang,” S1-3 and 7-11; Harper, *Early Chinese Medical Literature*, 423-24 (see Harper for a revised sequence of the original wood slips that make up the manuscript).

the intended person). The recipes themselves include several similar philters, as compare the following pair. First the older “Zajin fang” recipe:<sup>13</sup>

Take four nails from the left claw of a male dove and four nails from the left hand of a young girl. Scorch in a saucepan, combine, and finely pound. Apply it to the person and the person will be obtained.

Now the “Xiang’ ai fang” recipe, quoted from the *Yanling jing* 延齡經 (Canon to extend years of age):<sup>14</sup>

Take the nails from the left claw of a rooster and the nail of the middle finger of a never-married woman. Burn to ash, and apply to the intended person’s clothes.

Among the Dunhuang manuscripts, P2610, a diverse collection of mostly astrological and divinatory techniques, includes a section of thirteen philters under the heading “Rang nüzi furen shu bifa” 攘女子婦人述秘法 (Record of secret methods to seize girls and women).<sup>15</sup> The recipes are notable for thrice specifying that the philter be used when a man seeks clandestine sexual relations (*sitong* 私通) with a woman.<sup>16</sup> Of course we knew that “seduction” (*mei* 媚) -- the term used in the Mawangdui philter recipes -- was an act perpetrated by women and by men, and always with an element of secrecy even between a man and wife or concubines. However, the references in P2610

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<sup>13</sup> *Mawangdui Hanmu boshu*, vol. 4, “Zajin fang,” S9-10; Harper, *Early Chinese Medical Literature*, 424.

<sup>14</sup> *Ishinpō*, 26.602.

<sup>15</sup> P2610, verso, C102-115. For a description of the contents of P2610, recto and verso, see Marc Kalinowski, “Uranomancie,” in *Divination et Sciences Traditionnelles dans la Chine Médiévale*, vol. 1 (*Etudes des manuscrits de Dunhuang de la Bibliothèque nationale de France et de la British Library*), ed. Marc Kalinowski (forthcoming). For the text of the philters I have used the transcription in Liu Lexian, “The ‘Art of Charming’ Texts among the Dunhuang Manuscripts,” in *Mediaeval Chinese Medicine: The Dunhuang Medical Manuscripts*, ed. Vivienne Lo (forthcoming). The philters are also studied by Gao Guofan 高國藩, *Dunhuang gusu yu minsu liubian: Zhongguo minsu tanwei* 敦煌古俗與民俗流變：中國民俗探微 (Nanjing: Hehai daxue, 1989), 216-25; and Liu Ruiming 劉瑞明, “Dunhuang qiulai qishu jiemi” 敦煌求愛奇術揭密, *Dunhuang yanjiu* 敦煌研究 1997.1, 120-26.

<sup>16</sup> P2610, verso, C109, 111, and 112.

to “seizing girls and women” (in the heading) and to seeking “clandestine relations” with women are useful reminders that the notion of the female as the seducer (and therefore dangerous to the male) is not the reality of ancient and medieval Chinese uses of philters.<sup>17</sup>

In the Dunhuang manuscripts, philters also appear randomly in collections of techniques as well as in medical writings, with occasional parallels in *Ishinpō*, chapter 26, “Xiang’ ai fang.” For example, the following philter recipe in “Xiang’ ai fang” is once again from the *Yanling jing*:<sup>18</sup>

Take fourteen strands of hair of a never married woman, make a cord, and wear it.

Whoever sees it -- their guts will be rent.

Compare the recipe in P2661, verso, a manuscript that mostly treats of divination techniques:<sup>19</sup>

On the fifth day of the fifth month, take twice-seven strands of hair of a never married woman, make a cord, and attach it to the foot. Invariably (you) will have the love and respect of a contemporary.

P2666, verso, a medical manuscript of recipes for various medical conditions, concludes with a philter recipe. Rather than the philter, I quote one of two recipes to make an unfaithful wife reveal the identity of her lover:<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Li Jianmin 李建民, “Furen meidao kao: chuantong jiating de chongtu yu huajie fangshu” 婦人媚道考：傳統家庭的衝突與化解方術, *Xin shixue* 新史學 7.4 (1996), 1-32, examines the association of *mei* with the seductive powers of women in pre-Han and Han sources, as well as the use of *meiyao* 媚藥 “seduction drug” to denote a philter in medieval times. Li Jianmin notes that philters were used by men and women.

<sup>18</sup> *Ishinpō*, 26.602.

<sup>19</sup> P2661, verso, C90-91. For a description of the contents of P2661, verso, see Kalinowski, “Hémérologie,” in *Divination et Sciences Traditionnelles*.

<sup>20</sup> P2666, verso, C87-88. For the second recipe, see P2666, verso, C49-50.



When a wife has other intentions, take the dirt from inside the hoof of a white horse and set it under her headrest. Do not let her know. While sleeping she will of herself speak the surname and name.

Compare the following “Xiang’ ai fang” recipe quoted from the *Ruyi fang* 如意方 (As-you-will recipes):<sup>21</sup>

Set dirt from under the right hoof of a white horse beneath the mat and bed where (your) wife sleeps. Do not let (her) know. Of herself she will call out the surname and name of the outside man.

The *Ruyi fang* is the most frequently quoted source in “Xiang’ ai fang.” Its nature as a diverse collection of recipes is evident in the quotations from it in sections of *Ishinpō*, chapter 26, preceding and following “Xiang’ ai fang” (the fifth section of the chapter).

Although not quoted in the first and fourth sections, “Yannian fang” 延年方 (Recipes to extend years of life) and “Yizhi fang” 益智方 (Recipes to increase intelligence), there are several quotations in the second and third sections, “Meise fang” 美色方 (Recipes for beautiful complexion) and “Fangqi fang” 芳氣方 (Recipes to have a fragrant scent). It is also quoted eight times in the sixth section, “Qiufu” 求富方 (Recipes for seeking wealth).

One *Ruyi fang* recipe for wealth states that if a person “buries an ox horn in the house there will be wealth,”<sup>22</sup> which has a corresponding recipe in P2666, verso:<sup>23</sup>

On the fifth day of the fifth month burn an ox horn in the central courtyard and the household will have wealth and nobility.

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<sup>21</sup> *Ishinpō*, 26.602.

<sup>22</sup> *Ishinpō*, 26.603.

<sup>23</sup> P2666, C64.

In regard to the varied contents of the *Ruyi fang*, it is noteworthy that the philter recipe in P2661, verso, occurs in a section of the manuscript that bears the heading “Zhu zalue deyao chaozi yiben” 諸雜略得要抄子一本 (Summation of the various miscellanies that obtains their essentials in a single copy).<sup>24</sup> We also know that the copyist of P2661, verso, is Yin Anren 尹安仁, and that he wrote on the back side of a partial copy of the ancient *Erya* 爾雅 lexicon that had been in the possession of a clan member, Yin Chaozong 尹朝宗, in 774.<sup>25</sup>

I submit that aphrodisiacs and philters were among the “essential” recipes that were copied in medieval recipe collections -- recipes that we now know from the Mawangdui manuscripts were already being recorded in the third and second centuries B.C. The recipes guided their users in their sexual life, and guide us in the study of Chinese sexuality.

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<sup>24</sup> The heading is written in C31.

<sup>25</sup> See Kalinowski, “Hémérologie.”