

Probe into Phenomena of Quack Doctors in Literati's Works of the Song Dynasty

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Abstract—There are two main types of quack doctors written by scholars in the Song Dynasty: one is doctor with inferior medical skills; the other is virtuous doctor. The existence of quack doctors has brought great pain to the patients and their families, also destroyed the image of doctors and hindered the development of medicine. Literatures in the Song Dynasty described quack doctors in a large number, which was related to the backward medical conditions at that time, as well as the subjective factors of literati.

Keywords—quack doctors; literati; profit making; medical skills

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the emergence of human beings, there have been quack doctors. They mingle with the doctors and make up excessive numbers, which is harmful to the good image of doctor and hinders the development of medicine. In the past era when medical skills were given to each other privately, there was a saying of “not take their medicine prescribed by doctors whose family career in art of healing is less than three generations”. The purpose is to warn the sick to choose a doctor carefully.

II. THE IMAGE OF QUACK DOCTOR IN LITERATI'S WORKS

Quack doctor was mentioned in many notebooks, collections and family precepts of the Song Dynasty. The image of quack doctor in literati's works is mainly manifested in the following aspects:

A. Limited Knowledge and Poor Medical Skills

During the Tang and Song Dynasties, the rulers attached great importance to the development of medicine, vigorously revised medical prescriptions, promulgated it in the country, and popularized medical prescriptions to the people. The people can acquire medical prescriptions through texts, but there seems to be some shortcomings if only practicing medicine on the basis of limited textual knowledge. In Volume 10 of *Yijianzhi · Yizhi*, Doctor Zhang Rui mentioned some quack doctors who read only a few prescription books but thought they know a lot. What a terrible thing. ¹It directly

¹ (the Song Dynasty) Hong Mai. *Yijianzhi · Yizhi*. Doctor Zhang Rui, Vol. 10. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1981, P. 263.

points to quack doctors at present who have limited knowledge and poor medical skills, but know nothing about it.

In Hong Mai's *Yijianzhi*, it was recorded that Patient Li had lice tumor, and Qin Deli, a quack doctor, made a random diagnosis and treatment, which resulted in Patient Li's death. ²In real life, not only ordinary people had suffered from quack doctors, but also scholar-bureaucrats who had lost their life because of wrong treatment of quack doctors.

When Cheng Hao's nephew was digging a well, he suffered from typhoid fever. After the diagnosis of local quack doctor, he prescribed medicine indiscriminately, which resulted in the death of the patient. ³In *The Epitaph of Liu Zhiyan*, Lin Jizhong mentioned that Liu Zhiyan had only a minor illness and died in Linan government house at the age of 43 because of a quack doctor's improper prescription of medicine. ⁴

All diseases scholar-bureaucrats mentioned above got were not complicated but common illness. Some of these patients even were at their prime of life. But they died because they were put into the hands of quack doctors. Although these are only a few examples, it also reflects the low level of medical treatment at that time. Scholar-bureaucrats with minor illnesses were misdiagnosed by quack doctors, and the general public's medical status can be imagined.

It is unfortunate that some doctors do not know how to make flexible prescriptions. They know little about the treatment of diseases and only copy the books mechanically, ignoring the actual situation of the patients. Hong Mai's Volume 6 of *Yijianzhi*: Lu Yang, a village doctor, made a prescription wrongly in spite of the patient's actual situation

² (the Song Dynasty) Hong Mai. *Yijianzhi · Yizhi*, Vol. 11. Tumor of Mr. Li, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1981, P 461.

³ (the Song Dynasty) Cheng Yi and Cheng Hao. Collections of Two Cheng Brothers. *Shangxie Shuashuai Zhishu*, Vol. 9, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, P 611.

⁴ (the Song Dynasty) Lin Jizhong. *Zhuxuan Zazhu*. Vol. 6. Letter to Liu Zhiyan. Four Books of Wen(the Yuan Dynasty) Pavilion, P 1140-362.

and strong protests, which led to the death of the patient.⁵ The patient died, or there were many reasons, but did not listen to the views of the patient, is the direct cause of the consequences.

B. *Desperate for Quick Success and Instant Benefit but Killing Patients*

Sun Simiao emphasized in the first volume of his work *Thousand Golden Prescriptions for Emergency* · *On the Absolute Sincerity of Great Physicians*: good doctors grow out of man who are indifferent to fame and fortune and desire for nothing. Good doctors do not pay attention to the wealth of the sick.⁶ This is the requirement and norm of medical ethics. However, not all doctors can achieve "no profit". On the contrary, some doctors in Song Dynasty had poor medical skills. What they were most concerned about was not the urgency of the patients, but the observation of their family's economic situation. In terms of remuneration, they haggle over every penny. When the patient's condition cannot be improved, they would use various excuses to walk through and prevaricate.⁷

Influenced by the traditional medical ethics, the idea of "doctor shall have a heart of benevolence" is the guideline for some doctors to practice medicine. It is a serious bad medical ethic to treat medicine as a way to make profits. With the germination and development of commodity economy, the idea of profit-seeking is serious in society. Even some famous doctors also pursue profits. Fang Shao's *Po Zhai Bian* depicts the image of a mercenary doctor to warn people:

Xiucui Wang Ju'an had hemorrhoids. When the doctor was halfway through the treatment of him, he took the life of the patient as a threat and demanded a lot of money to continue the treatment. In this regard, Fang Biao believed that such over-utilitarian doctors are no different from knife-carrying robbers.⁸ It can be seen that people at that time had no favor for quack doctors who had no medical ethics, no compassion but only greed. Fortunately, the doctor was only greedy for money and did not hurt the patient's life.

In the 4th Xining year, Zhang Jingzui, an official in charge of household and land cultivation, suffered from sores on his hands greatly. Qiu Ding, an imperial doctor, applied medicine on his hands and aggravated his pain, and then applied medicine to treat sores, which led to endless pain and

death of Zhang Jingzui a few days later.⁹ In most people's opinion, the imperial doctor represented the highest medical level at that time. But the level of medical skills is not equal to medical ethics. Qiu Ding, in order to obtain the gratitude of the family of the sick, cured Zhang Jingzui with wrong medicine, resulting in the death of the sick. At the end of the article, it is pointed out that there were not a few people who died because of wrong prescription of medicine. It shows that there were not a few doctors like Qiu Ding who did harm the patient for money. In addition, there are comments on Qiu Ding in Su Dongpo's *Dongpo Zhilin*:

Qiu Ding was known as the best doctor to cure swellings. After the death of Qiu Ding, it is difficult for future generations to reach his level. Zhang Jun's medical skills were also excellent, not inferior to Qiu Ding. But Qiu Ding's conduct was not good, and people were afraid of him. Nowadays, Zhang Jun was a benevolent doctor focusing on saving people. Qiu Ding could never do this.¹⁰ The level of "Zhang Jun" is not referred, but Su Shi praised him for his "benevolence". It can be seen that medical ethics became an important aspect of evaluating doctors at that time.

In addition to the records of quack doctors in various collections and sketch novels of literati, Yin Se, a poet of the Song Dynasty, also described the market quack's behavior of swaggering and cheating in his poem *Quack Practice*. The image of quack doctors in the poem has the following characteristics:

First, they give false propaganda. They boast that they are a good doctor like Bian Que who has the medical skills of resurrection from death. Second, in the use of medicines, they sell seconds at best quality prices and use "tile scraps and grass roots" as precious herbal medicines. Third, they have poor medical skills. As a result, "hardly any patients were not cheated and wrongly treated by these doctors". The last two sentences of the poem describe the image of such doctors who "calculate money as making a prescription. Their hands are like two murderous swords". It reveals the vulgar psychology of quack doctors in seeking interests and ignoring life.¹¹

III. SONG PEOPLE'S FRUSTRATED FEELINGS FOR QUACK DOCTORS

A. *Dissatisfaction and Helplessness of People*

Quack doctors are not only exposed and condemned by people of insight in the medical field, but also criticized in literary works. Zhu Gong was a famous doctor in the Northern Song Dynasty. Both his grandfather and father died

⁵ (the Song Dynasty) Hong Mai (Song Dynasty). *Yijianzhi* · Dingzhi, Vol. 10. Shuiyang Luyi. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1981, P 619.

⁶ (the Tang Dynasty) Sun Simiao. *Thousand Golden Prescriptions. Prescriptions for Emergency*, Vol. 1, Beijing: China Traditional Chinese Medicine Press, 1998, P 15.

⁷ (the Song Dynasty) Kong Wenzhong, Kong Wuzhong and Kong Pingzhong. *Collections of Three Kong Brothers in Qingjiang*, Works of Kong Wuzhong · Doctor, selected by Sun Yongxuan, Jinan: Qilu Book Society, 2002, P 279-280.

⁸ (the Song Dynasty) Fang Shao. *Po Zhai Bian*. Vol. 5. Series of Tang and Song Historical Materials, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1997, P 28.

⁹ (the Song Dynasty) Zhang Shizheng. *Kuoyizhi* · Doctor Zhang, Vol. 2, selected from *Sketch Novels of Song Dynasty*. Vol. 14, Shijiazhuang: Hebei Education Press, 1995, P 530.

¹⁰ (the Song Dynasty) Su Shi. *Dongpo Zhilin* · Doctor, Vol. 3, selected from *Series of Tang and Song Historical Materials*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1981, P 59.

¹¹ (the Song Dynasty) Yin Se. *Quack Practice*, selected from *Songshi Jishi*. Vol. 52, Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1937, P 1341.

in the hands of quack doctors.¹² Since there were so many people who didn't know knowledge of medicine at that time, in order to avoid more people losing their lives to quack doctors, Zhu Gong wrote *Ten Advices on Typhoid Fever* to warn people.

Ye Mengde of the Song Dynasty explained this in detail in his *Bishu Luhua*: "Taking no medicine is better than taking wrong medicine."¹³ The original idea is that patients can get the same effect as a moderate level of taking medicine, so don't take medicine in disorder. It is precisely because quack doctors often misdiagnosed and mistreated, resulting in patients cannot easily believe them, which will inevitably hinder the improvement of medical standards. Not only are people of all kinds strongly dissatisfied with quack doctors in society, but the government has long recognized the seriousness of the harm of quack doctors. According to *History of Song · Shihuzhi I*, when the plague broke out in the capital, the emperor issued an imperial edict to choose the best doctors to diagnose and give medicine, so as to avoid the death of the poor by quack doctors as far as possible.¹⁴

It can be seen that although the government attaches great importance to the treatment of epidemic diseases, the government cannot fundamentally eliminate the phenomenon of quack doctors, but can only reduce the harm caused by quack doctors through administrative means such as approval of medicine, dispatch of medical officers and so on.

B. Attitudes of Family Members: Unwilling to Argue with Quack Doctors

The sick and their families are deeply dissatisfied with quack doctors, but they are reluctant to pursue their responsibilities. Cheng Yi has discussed the reasons in his anthology: firstly, officials have no love for others and are eager to save trouble; secondly, because the family members of the sick, know the doctor, they don't want to file a lawsuit. Thirdly, the family members of the sick are worried about the difficulty of seeking medical treatment after litigation.¹⁵

Hu Zhirou's article *In Memory of Eighteenth Brother in Xiangzhou* mentioned that his younger brother "suffered from hemorrhoids", but did not think that he lost his life because of the treatment of hemorrhoids.¹⁶ After his brother's death, as an elder brother, he did not blame his brother's death entirely on the quack doctor's mistreatment. Instead, he believed that it was his brother's destiny and was doomed to

die in the quack doctor's hands.¹⁷ Hu Zhirou is not alone in the family members of patients with such thoughts.

Hu Zhirou's idea of attributing life and death to fate may represent a part of people's psychology of seeking self-comfort when they were helpless between life and death. As public opinion orientation, scholar-bureaucrats still blame man-made disasters on "fate", and when they encounter disasters, they consider themselves unlucky. Thus, in the concept of people at that time, there was not a strong sense of claiming accountability to quack doctors, but also helplessness in the era of lack of doctors and medicines, which undoubtedly provided a hotbed for the rampancy of quack doctors.

IV. THE ECOLOGICAL ENVIRONMENT OF QUACK DOCTORS

A. Lack of Doctors and Disorder of Folk Doctors

The medical system of Song Dynasty followed the Tang system. Although the Song government set up doctors in local areas, for various reasons, local officials did not seriously implement the court's the medical policy. Doctors in remote prefectures and counties were not given systematic training and mostly practiced medicine at their sweet will. There were not many of doctors and less good doctors. A lot of doctors remained in namely. Even in "big cities", it was still difficult to find a good doctor. The medical environment in remote areas was even worse. It was customary for people to give life and death to witchcraft. This is still the case in peacetime, let alone in the face of major disasters and epidemics.¹⁸

The government had promulgated a series of decrees to set up resident medical officers in prefectures and counties, and set up Anji House and Huimin House for ordinary people. But these policies may not be really implemented. On the contrary, some local officials even murdered for money. For example, in the fourth years of Daguang, the court enforced the Anji Policy, and if a patient was found, Lizheng would be investigated for responsibility. As a local governor, Song Gu, a Chengdu native, was afraid of prosecution. He tricked the sick into crossing Niuyin Bridge in Shuangliu County. If he found that the sick carried property, he took it for himself and pushed the sick off the bridge.¹⁹

With the growth of the citizen class, the number of doctors has increased significantly compared with previous generations, especially in the notebook novels. In Shen Kuo's *Mengxi Bitan · Du Wulang*, rural people were poor, and there were not a few people who make a living by medical divination. It can be seen that the threshold of access for doctors was low at that time. As for the way villagers acquire

¹² (the Song Dynasty) Zhu Gong. Proofread by Tang Yingxue et al. *The Book of Living People with Similar Evidence*, Vol. 22, Tianjin: Tianjin Science and Technology Publishing House, 2003, P 186.

¹³ (the Song Dynasty) Ye Mengde. *Bishu Luhua*. Vol. II, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1985, P 59.

¹⁴ ((the Yuan Dynasty)) Tuo Tuo et al. *History of Song · Shihuzhi I*, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1977, P 4338.

¹⁵ (the Song Dynasty) Cheng Yi and Cheng Hao. *Collection of Two Cheng Brothers*. Shangxie Shuaishuai Zhishu, Vol. 9, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, P 61.

¹⁶ (the Song Dynasty) Hu Zhirou. *Xiangtai Shoumo*. Vol. I, In *Memory of My Eighteenth Brother in Xiangzhou*, Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1937, P 13.

¹⁷ (the Song Dynasty) Hu Zhirou. *Xiangtai Shoumo*. Vol. I, In *Memory of My Eighteenth Brother in Xiangzhou*, Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1937, P 13.

¹⁸ (the Song Dynasty) Huang Huai and Yang Shiqi. *Memorials of Famous Ministers of Past Dynasties*, Vol. 214, Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 1989, P 11272.

¹⁹ (the Song Dynasty) Hong Mai: *Yijianzhi · Yizhi*. *Killer Song Gu*, Vol. 5. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1981, P 73-74.

medical skills, the way they treat diseases, the level of their medical skills and the probability of curing patients, it has not been discussed.

Because there was no examination of the qualifications of medical skills, driven by interests, there were inevitably people making a profit in troubled situation, which makes the composition of the whole medical circle very complex. All three religions and nine streams of doctors could practice medicine at will. This situation indirectly leads to the mixing of the professions of ancient Chinese doctors: both highly reputable and benevolent conscientious doctors; and there are also "quack doctors" with poor medical ethics and low medical skills. Even some "fake doctors" who did not know medical skills at all and cheated people's money under the guise of treating diseases were prevalent in society.

B. Lack of Medical Legal Supervision

The prevalence of quack doctors reflects the lack of medical resources and backward medical conditions, as well as the lack of social supervision of the medical system at that time. In Song Dynasty, although the government promulgated a series of laws and regulations to strengthen the restraint of doctors' professional ethics and the supervision of medical accidents, they were not well implemented because the definition of the law was not clear. Penal Code of Song Dynasty stipulated that:

If a doctor fails to dispense medicines for a patient according to the prescription, resulting in death of the patient, he shall be sentenced to two and a half years' penalty; if he intentionally causes casualties of the patient, he shall be sentenced to the crime of intentional killing, and if there are no casualties, he shall be beaten with a stick for sixty times.²⁰

The legal civilization definitely stipulates that there are two conditions for the punishment of "homicide" caused by "misallocation of medicine". One is "not in accordance with the prescriptions"; the other is that only the consequences of "homicide" can be punished. There must also be a causal relationship between the two. If the doctor is intentional, resulting in the death of the patient, he shall be punished as intentional homicide. The medical prescription stipulated in the law as the basis of law enforcement is inevitably wrong, and the causes of the disease are complex and diverse. Even quack doctors did not know how to diagnose the disease. As long as their treatment was "in line with the prescription", even if the patient was killed, they would not be prosecuted for punishment.

According to Confucian Cheng Yi of Song Dynasty, the reason why this law has not been widely used is that even if doctors did not prescribe medicine according to the prescriptions, it led to many murders, but the officials may

save trouble, so that quack doctors have the chance to get away with nothing to fear.²¹

In addition, *Penal Code of Song Dynasty* stipulated that if doctors violate medical prescriptions for extracting money, they shall be punished as larceny. This is a code of conduct for medical practitioners in terms of medical ethics. However, the law still did not have its specific standards, nor did it have a specialized agency to determine whether a doctor was using medicine in violation of the prescription. In addition, patients were not all people who understand medicine. It was not easy to judge whether a doctor violated the prescription and extracted property.

There is no absolute criterion for the classification of quack doctors. For most patients, those who cannot cure diseases are quack doctors. But not all the doctors who cannot cure the disease are quack doctors. The results of treatment are not entirely dependent on the doctors. The treatment effect may be affected by various causes of the disease, such as the cooperation between doctors and patients, the quality of medicine, the overall level of medical treatment and other factors. As quack doctors, the severity of the adverse consequences can be divided into different levels.

V. CONCLUSION

In the literary works of Song Dynasty, "quack doctor" does not necessarily refer to quack doctor itself. The intention of these works discussing quack doctor may be lie not on quack doctor but on the other purpose. For example, they used quack doctors as an irony to other social problems. In my opinion, the existence of such phenomena can be attributed to the following reasons:

Firstly, the phenomenon of quack doctor was not unique to the Song Dynasty, which was also mentioned by predecessors. However, there were more records of quack doctor in the Song Dynasty than in the previous dynasty, which did not mean that the phenomenon of quack doctor in the Song Dynasty was more serious and widespread than that in the previous dynasty. On the one hand, quack doctor existed widely at that time. Because of the great promotion of medical education by the government and the change of the attitude of people towards medicine, the overall level of people's medical knowledge has been improved, people are deeply aware of the serious consequences of quack doctor, and they are deeply disgusted with it. On the other hand, because of the development of science and technology, people already have conditions for recording their ideas and opinions they have generated.

Secondly, the status of doctors is low. Even in the Song Dynasty, when the rulers vigorously developed medicine and the status of doctors improved, doctors are still in a situation of being looked down upon. In front of "the stronger" like scholar-bureaucrats, doctors, as the technological personnel, were still lowliness. Because of their disadvantaged position, the image of quack doctors is presented in various texts, and

²⁰ (the Song Dynasty) Penal Code of Song Dynasty, Noted by Xue Meiqing. *Miscellaneous Laws*, Vol. 26. Beijing: Law Publishing House, 1998, P 466.

²¹ (the Song Dynasty) Cheng Yi and Cheng Hao. *Collections of Two Cheng Brothers*. Shangxie Shuashuai Zhishu, Vol. 9. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1981, P 611.

it is not surprising that doctors become clowns in literati talks.

Thirdly, because Confucians in Song Dynasty were gradually involved in medicine, in order to elevate their status, they excluded other doctors.

Among the scholar-bureaucrats in the Song Dynasty, most of them had very limited experience in clinical diagnosis except a few of them had certain medical ability. In order to seize the discourse power in the field of medical treatment, it is inevitable for scholar-bureaucrats to artificially elevate the importance of medical science and maliciously vilify or exaggerate the negative image of other doctors.

Finally, under the development of commodity economy, it is the need to hide evil and promote good.

Since the Song Dynasty, "emphasizing agriculture over commerce" has been the mainstream of social development. Influenced by the development of commodity economy in Song Dynasty, there were many ways to get rich, like practicing medicine. For example, *Doctor Wang and Doctor Li* recorded Doctor Li became very rich after practicing medicine for ten years.²² Social thought began to change from "attaching importance to righteousness and interests" to "attaching importance to righteousness and interests" or even "attaching importance to interests and ignoring righteousness". One of the main reasons for it was the relaxation of people's moral concepts in the society at that time. In many works, monks appear as compassionate and divine beings. The poet Qiang Zhi of the Song Dynasty described a quite different monk in his poem *See Master Yuan Shi Off* who had no benevolence and compassion but was a gainful merchant. The monk practiced medicine for the purpose of accumulation of wealth rather than saving life of people.²³

The appearance of quack doctors in the texts is not only the reason for the deterioration of the personal morality of the doctors, but also the reflection of the social profit-seeking thought under the development of commodity economy in Song Dynasty. In addition, the exposition and criticism of quack doctors were the external manifestation of the scholars' worries about the internal and external troubles in the Song Dynasty, people's yearning for good and stability, the correction of social atmosphere, and the moral and ethical education and propaganda for ordinary people. This is not only a true portrayal and criticism of the medical school at that time, but also is practically significant for today's medical ethics and medical ethics education.

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- ²² (the Song Dynasty) Hong Mai. *Yijianzhi · Jiazhi, Doctor Wang and Doctor Li*, Vol. 9. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1981, P 73.
- ²³ (the Song Dynasty) Qiang Zhi. *Cibuji*. Vol. I, *See Master (the Yuan Dynasty) Shi Off*, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1985, P 3.