



LI Shizhen

Lǐ Shízhēn 李时珍

1518–1593 Ming medical scholar and naturalist

Li Shizhen 李时珍 was a scholar of medicine and natural history who flourished during the late Ming dynasty (1368–1644). Though he wrote several poems and medical treatises, Li is best known as the author of the *Compendium of Materia Medica* (*Bencao gangmu* 本草纲目, 1596), an encyclopedic work on Chinese medical drugs.

Li Shizhen was a scholar of medicine and natural history who flourished during the late Ming dynasty (1368–1644). Li was born and raised in the district of Qizhou (now in Hubei Province), where his family enjoyed a comfortable reputation in the medical profession. His grandfather had made his living as a traveling bell doctor, a class of physicians that was looked down upon by some for openly peddling medical skills to make money. Li's father, Li Yanwen, had enjoyed a relatively secure reputation as a medical scholar, treating patients and composing a number of treatises on diagnostic methods and local products such as mugwort and ginseng.

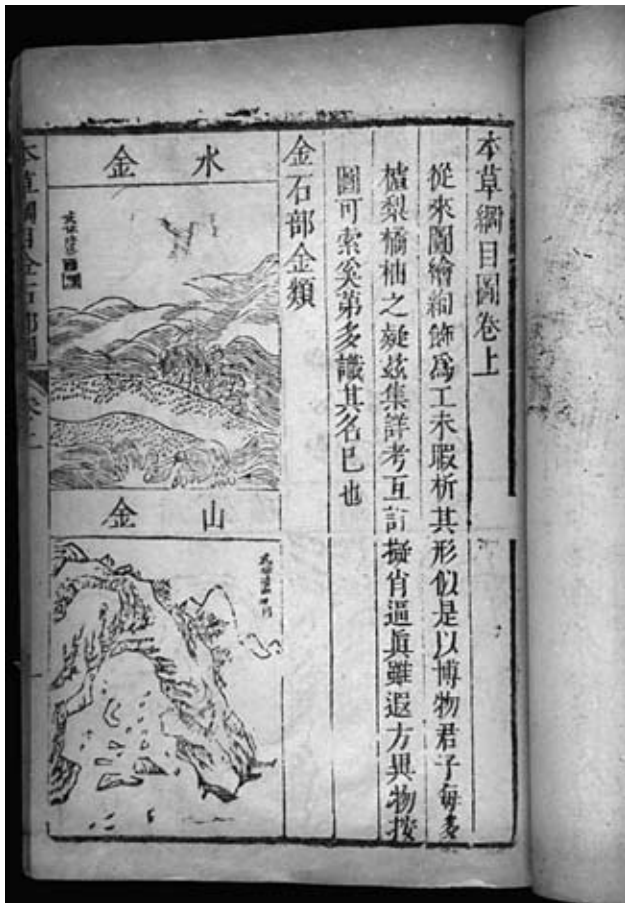
Li was briefly installed in a medical position at the imperial palace but spent the majority of his young adulthood treating local patients and traveling extensively in order to compile research for his medical works. Li moved back to Qizhou in 1561. He lived in a garden house that he dubbed “a hermit's dwelling” after a favorite line in the *Classic of Poetry* and took the *zi* (or courtesy name, a two-character pseudonym that replaced a given name,

but was never used in conjunction with a family name, of an educated Chinese man) of “Binhu” (Near the Lake) to mark this new phase of his life.

Li spent the remainder of his life writing such varied texts as a volume of poetry, a treatise on a dappled snake indigenous to Qizhou, and monographs on several topics of medical theory. Only a few of these works have survived, including three treatises on pulse diagnosis: the *Binhu maixue* (Binhu's Study of Vessels), the *Qijing bamaikao* (Studies of the Eight Irregular Vessels), and the *Maijue kaozheng* (Rhymed Investigation into the Vessels). Only two of Li's poems, both written for close friends and fellow scholars from Hubei, are extant.

The work for which Li is best known is *Compendium of Materia Medica* (*Bencao gangmu*, 1596), an encyclopedic work on Chinese medical drugs. Li intended to update, correct, and expand current knowledge of Chinese medical drugs and to that end spent thirty years researching medical and nonmedical texts, interviewing local people, and conducting experiments with plants, animals, and stones. The result was a massive text of fifty-two *juan* (roughly equivalent to chapters) and almost 2 million characters, including descriptions of 1,892 medical drugs. Li died before the work was published, with his family overseeing its printing and distribution.

Li Shizhen and his work continued to gain notoriety after his death. Li was reinvented as the figurehead of traditional Chinese medicine under Mao Zedong's rule of the Chinese Communist Party. He was reimaged as a model barefoot doctor in books and propaganda posters and in films such as *Li Shizhen* (1956). He is currently



Page from the *Bencao gangmu*, or the *Compendium of Materia Medica*, written by the physician Li Shizhen (1518–1593). This edition was published by Tai he tang in 1655.

hailed in China as a founding father of Chinese science and medicine and has been memorialized in stamps, statues, and television programs.

Carla NAPPI

Further Reading

- Li Shizhen. (2002). *Bencao gangmu* [Compendium of materia medica] (2 vols.) (Liu Hengru & Liu Shanyong, Eds.). Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe.
- Li Shizhen. (2003). *Compendium of materia medica* (6 vols.) (Luo Xiwen, Trans.). Beijing: Foreign Languages Press.
- Li Shizhen yanjiu lunwen ji [Collected essays on Li Shizhen research] (1985). Wuhan, China: Hubei kexue jishu chubanshe.
- Métailié, G. (2001). The *Bencao gangmu* of Li Shizhen. In Elisabeth Hsu (Ed.), *Innovation in Chinese medicine* (pp. 221–261). Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.
- Qian Yuanming (Ed.). (1984). *Li Shizhen yanjiu* [Research on Li Shizhen]. Guangdong, China: Guangdong keji chubanshe.
- Sivin, N. (1973). Li Shih-chen (1518–1593). In *Dictionary of scientific biography* (Vol. 8, pp. 390–398). New York: Scribner.
- Tang Mingbang. (1991). *Li Shizhen pingzhuan* [Critical biography of Li Shizhen]. Nanjing, China: Nanjing daxue chubanshe.
- Unschuld, P. (1986). *Medicine in China: A history of pharmacapeutics*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Wang Jian (1996). *Li Shizhen xueshu yanjiu* [Academic research on Li Shizhen]. Beijing: Zhongyi guji chubanshe.
- Xia Kuizhou. (Ed.). (1996). *Li Shizhen yixue quanshu* [Complete medical works of Li Shizhen]. Beijing: Zhongguo zhongyiyao chubanshe.



LIANG Qichao ►