

A Study on Su Shi's Connection with Medicine Centered on "Su Shen Liang Fang"

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Abstract: *Su Shi was a representative figure of Meizhou, Sichuan Province. Throughout his life, he made many friends and had interactions with many medical practitioners. He was fond of traditional Chinese medicine and was proficient in health preservation. He had unique insights in the field of medicine. "Su Shen Liang Fang", compiled by an anonymous person from the prescriptions collected by Su Shi and Shen Kuo, contains Su Shi's main medical-related literature and plays an irreplaceable role in the prevention and treatment of diseases in traditional Chinese medicine. This article mainly focuses on "Su Shen Liang Fang" and preliminarily explores some of Su Shi's insights in medicine from aspects such as traditional Chinese medicine, health preservation, elixirs, and disease prevention and treatment.*

Keywords: Su Shi, "Su Shen Liang Fang", Sheng San Zi Formula, Alchemy, Health Preservation.

1. Introduction

Meizhou is located in the Sichuan Basin. It was established in the third year of Jianwu of the Southern Qi Dynasty (496 AD) and is known as "the fertile land of the west and the secret area of Min and E". The traditional Chinese medicine culture of Meizhou is an important part of the traditional Chinese medicine culture of Sichuan and Chongqing. Meizhou has a rich cultural heritage and enjoys a high reputation both at home and abroad. Historical records show that more than 800 jinshi (high-ranking scholars) have come from Meizhou, including the "Three Sus" of the "Eight Great Prose Masters of Tang and Song". In ancient times, it was characterized by "scholars' interest in medicine". For example, Su Shi, a great literary figure, was also known as Su Dongpo. He was a famous writer, painter and statesman of the Northern Song Dynasty, and was proficient in poetry, prose, calligraphy and painting. Su Shi had a strong interest in medicine and had unique insights in the fields of traditional Chinese medicine, health preservation, elixirs and disease prevention and treatment. According to incomplete statistics, there are more than 200 poems, essays and letters related to medical culture that have been preserved. For instance, in "Xianzong's Tea Decoction", it is recorded: "Emperor Xianzong of Tang gave Ma Zong a prescription for treating diarrhea and abdominal pain. The prescription was to cut ginger and its skin into small pieces like millet, and use one large cup of it, mixed with an equal amount of tea, and boil it for drinking. In the second year of Yuanyou, Wen Lu Gong got this disease and no medicine worked. But I passed on this prescription and he got better." It also recorded folk remedies and Taoist secret prescriptions. Especially the health preservation ideas contained in his medical works have been highly valued by medical scholars throughout history. The "Su Shen Liang Fang", compiled by an anonymous person from the prescriptions collected by Su Shi and Shen Kuo, includes Su Shi's main medical literature. This article mainly focuses on "Su Shen Liang Fang" to initially explore some of Su Shi's insights in medicine.

The ten-volume "Su Shen Liang Fang" has been passed down in various editions to this day. This study mainly focuses on the "Liu Suanzhai Medical Series" edition, while also taking

into account other editions, to examine the literature. It is confirmed that the 45 prescriptions written by Su Shi are the first 9 and the 44th in Volume 1, the first 4 and the 10th in Volume 2, the first 3 in Volume 3, the 1st and the last 3 in Volume 4, the 7th and the last one in Volume 5, the first 8 and the 11th, 12th, 14th, 17th, 18th, 19th, and 20th in Volume 6, the 1st, 2nd, and 8th and the last one in Volume 7, and the 11th and 12th in Volume 8 [1]. This article takes this as a starting point to explore Su Shi's potential influence in the field of medicine.

2. About Traditional Chinese Medicine

Su Shi believed that prescriptions must be tested through practice rather than relying solely on theory. Most of the records he made were based on his own personal verification. For instance, in "Record of Sea Lacquer", it states: "For a long time, I suffered from white turbidity in my urine. Recently, my large intestine became slippery. All medicines failed to cure me. I took tender leaves of the sticky substance and steamed them, then dried and ground into powder. I made pills with wine paste and swallowed them a hundred times. Both of my intestines returned to normal. Then I realized that this was a miraculous medicine." Therefore, I recorded it [2]. Moreover, he clearly pointed out that sea lacquer has a sharp and powerful purgative property. He pioneered the method of reducing toxicity by "lime pickling". For example, in "Record of Eating Potatoes", it describes: "I was extremely hungry at night and went for a long walk, eating two roasted potatoes. I found them very delicious." He also pointed out that they could replenish energy and relieve hunger. In "Record of Cynoglossum", it says: "Its flowers, leaves, and roots can all be eaten. Eating them is like eating vegetables and can also treat diseases. They are toxic substances. They can be made into pills, powders, or decoctions. There is no limit to how they can be used. Eating more benefits, and over time, they can fill the bones and make the skin like jade. They are the elixir of immortality. They can also treat goiter, wounds, and so on." It pointed out that cynoglossum has the effects of dispelling wind, clearing cold, and removing rheumatism, and also reflects the ancient experience of combining medicine and food. Moreover, Su Shi emphasized that when using medicine, one should pay attention to the preparation method,

flexible combination, and emphasis on the dosage method. For example, in “Sayings about Taking Fuling”, it mentions: “Fuling is naturally an elixir of the immortals. However, there are red veins in it. If these cannot be removed, taking it for a long time will be detrimental to the eyes or cause the eyes to become smaller. It should be peeled, cut into square pieces of about one square inch, boiled in silver and stone containers with clear water, and then kneaded and spread with melted butter until it becomes a gelatinous powder. Then, it is filtered through a fine cloth bag and washed with cold water until the powder is obtained. The veins remain in the cloth bag and are discarded. The powder should be mixed with honey and eaten. It is especially delicious after steaming.” It detailed the preparation method and dosage method of fuling. In “Eulogy on Taking Fuling”, it mentions that fuling has the effects of strengthening the spleen, removing dampness, calming the mind, and soothing the nerves. It opposes the Taoist deification of its efficacy. It advocates using it raw and opposes excessive processing (such as the absurd method of “refining fuling”). And it should be adjusted according to the condition. For example, it can be combined with ginseng for calming the mind, or with zephyr for diuresis. It is recommended to take it in honey pills rather than swallowing it in large quantities blindly. In “Method of Taking Millettia”, it mentions the method of taking millettia: “Wash it clean and dry it, then crush it into powder. Mix it with the powder of rhubarb soaked in honey, or make it into pills or powders. It has no restrictions. Taking more benefits, and over time, it can fill the bones and make the skin like jade. It is an elixir of immortality. It can also treat goiter, wounds, and so on.” It pointed out that millettia has the effects of dispelling wind, clearing cold, and removing rheumatism, and also reflects the ancient experience of combining medicine and food. Moreover, Su Shi emphasized that when using medicine, one should be cautious about tea.

3. Regarding the San Sanzi Formula

During the Yuanfeng period of the Northern Song Dynasty, Su Shi was exiled to Huangzhou. His friend Chao Gu rushed to Huangzhou to visit him. At that time, there was a widespread epidemic in Huangzhou and the surrounding prefectures. Just at this time, Chao Gu used his family’s secret recipe, the Sheng Sanzi Formula, to cure patients with critical conditions. Su Shi then sought this recipe from Chao Gu. Chao Gu regarded this formula as a precious treasure. Under the condition that Su Shi swore by “pointing at the water of Songjiang and making a vow not to pass it on to others”, Su Shi finally obtained the formula. In the Sheng Sanzi Formula, he praised it as follows. “If an epidemic spreads, regardless of age, status, or social class, boil a pot in the morning and drink a cup each. Then the epidemic will not enter the body. When there is no matter to do at home, take one dose on an empty stomach. Then you will have a pleasant appetite and no diseases will occur. This is truly a precious treasure for saving the world and keeping people healthy.” Later, Su Shi used this formula in major epidemics in Huangzhou, Yunzhou, and Hangzhou, saving countless people. To prevent the formula from being lost, Su Shi, despite violating the oath he had made to Chao Gu, passed the formula on to Pang Anshi, one of the four famous doctors in eastern Hubei [3]. Pang Anshi included this formula in his work “General Theory of Febrile Diseases”. The composition of the Sheng Sanzi Formula is

“cardamom, wood polyporus, stone calamus, high ginger, dogwood, cinnabar, perilla, hawthorn, perilla, peony, jujube, chaihui, zexie, atractylodes, fuji, magnolia, cinnamon, paeony, licorice, and fuling. Crush them into the size of sesame seeds, take five grams each time, boil with one and a half cups of water, extract eight parts, remove the residue, and take it hot. The remaining residue is taken as one dose and combined with two doses, re-boiled, and taken on an empty stomach in the morning.” The formula uses cinnabar, high ginger, and wujujie to warm the yang and dispel cold, and invigorate the yang qi; perilla, cinnamon, and chaihui to warm the exterior and relieve the exterior symptoms; perilla, cardamom, polyporus, stone calamus, and houpo to promote qi, eliminate turbidity, and have an aromatic and purifying effect; atractylodes, polyporus, zexie, and fuling to strengthen the spleen and promote diuresis and remove dampness; gaofu, dogwood, fengshui, and fengwu to dispel wind and relieve dampness; and banxia, peony, licorice, and jujube to relieve phlegm, stop coughing, and soothe the stomach and stop vomiting. This formula is mainly characterized by its warm and pungent dispersing, and diuretic and eliminating turbidity properties. Based on the formula’s analysis, it is clearly designed to treat cold-damp diseases. The formula contains many warm and hot ingredients, just as Chen Wuzhe pointed out in “San Yin Ji Yilv Bing Lun” [4]: “The Sheng Sanzi Formula is used to treat cold epidemics. Its effect is like a god. Once upon a time, Su Shi was in Hangzhou and faced a major epidemic. He used this formula to save many people.” This was the first time that Su Shi proposed the use of this formula for treating cold epidemics. Pang Anshi said in “General Theory of Febrile Diseases” [5]: “The Sheng Sanzi Formula is used to treat cold epidemics. Its effect is like a god. In the past, Su Shi was in Hangzhou and faced a major epidemic. He used this formula to save many people.” He pointed out that this formula should be used based on a correct diagnosis and treatment of the syndrome. Yu Bian said in “Xuanyisi” [6]: “However, it is necessary to have a true cold syndrome... If one does not distinguish between cold and heat, deficiency and excess, and applies it without caution, it is rarely not a failure.” He emphasized the importance of using the formula based on a correct diagnosis and treatment and not for warm-epidemic diseases. Therefore, the Sheng Sanzi Formula is mainly used for cold epidemics. When using this formula, it is necessary to strictly distinguish between cold and heat epidemics and not to abuse it.

4. Regarding Alchemy

Su Shi, due to his weak constitution, studied Taoist alchemy and health preservation techniques to achieve the goals of curing diseases, strengthening his body and prolonging his life. His connection with Taoism can be traced back to multiple levels: Firstly, he was born in Sichuan, a place with a strong Taoist atmosphere; Secondly, during his youth, he studied under the Taoist priest Zhang Yijian. Furthermore, by nature, he is close to Taoist thought, diligently studies Taoist classics, and has a deep understanding of the philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi. Su Shi had profound attainments in the theory of alchemy for health preservation and achieved remarkable results in his health preservation practices. Su Shi’s pursuit of alchemy was not merely for immortality, but was based on the exploration of the essence of life and the practice of health preservation. He regarded alchemy as a

comprehensive activity integrating philosophy, medicine and natural science, emphasizing the goal of “nurturing both body and spirit” through the combination of material transformation (such as lead and mercury alchemy) and the cultivation of body and mind. In “The Good Prescriptions of Su and Shen”, Su Shi put forward the core concept of “suppressing evil and maintaining sincerity, refining qi and nourishing essence”, believing that alchemy should be based on “mental regulation”, and achieve internal and external balance by controlling desires and harmonizing qi and blood. This ideology not only inherits the Taoist view of “the unity of heaven and man”, but also incorporates the ethical connotation of “self-cultivation and nurturing one’s nature” in Confucianism. Su Shi recorded in detail some methods of alchemy in “The Good Prescriptions of Su and Shen”. As described in “Yangdan Jue”, take an appropriate amount of yellow earth and jujubes from the stove heart, make them into the size of Wutong meatballs, hollow them, and swallow them with wine. As recorded in the “Yin Dan Jue”, the breast milk of healthy first-time male infants should be selected, and both parents should be free from diseases. Moreover, the mother needs to pay attention to dietary adjustment to ensure the quality of the breast milk. Take one liter of breast milk every day, with a minimum of no less than half a liter. For making utensils, tripods and spoons should be made of cinnabar silver. If cinnabar silver is not available, ordinary mountain and marsh silver can also be used as a substitute. Pour the milk into a silver cauldron and simmer it over low heat, stirring constantly to prevent burning. Turn off the heat when the milk thickens to a light golden paste. Roll the paste into pills the size of a paulownia seed, and take them on an empty stomach with warm wine. Not only that, Su Shi also deeply integrated alchemy with health preservation. In his “Su Shen Liangfang”, he emphasized that “the spleen is the foundation of the body after birth” and proposed to use elixirs supplemented with grains and herbs to strengthen the spleen and stomach. It is also required that the alchemists “sit in a critical position at night and take these four herbs”, achieving the state of “clarity is the ultimate, and the essence of the elixir is born” through the simultaneous practice of sitting in meditation, regulating the breath and taking the elixir. This way of cultivation is in line with yoga and Buddhist meditation, reflecting the view that “refining the body is refining the mind”. Of course, Su Shi did not think that all alchemy was good. In “The Theory of Dragon, Tiger, Lead and Mercury”, he explicitly opposed the claim that “golden elixirs do not die”. For instance, “Gold and stone are toxic. People do not understand this. They only see that alchemists say they can ascend easily and thus willingly take them. Countless people have ruined their families and lost their lives.” In conclusion, Su Shi’s description of alchemy is essentially a microcosm of the exploration of life sciences by scholars in the Song Dynasty. The health preservation system he constructed through “Su Shen Liangfang” is not only a passionate concern for individual life but also a profound interpretation of “following the way of nature”. This kind of thought that integrates Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism and takes into account both the metaphysical and the physical still provides an important reference for the study of traditional Chinese medicine health preservation and traditional culture to this day.

5. Regarding Health Preservation

Su Shi also had profound expertise in the field of health preservation. His approach to health preservation not only focused on his own physical and mental well-being, but also through his practice and summary, left valuable health preservation cultural heritage for future generations. In the Ming Dynasty, Wang Ruxi “compiled Su Shi’s letters, treatises on health preservation, and other people’s records about Su Shi” into “Dongpo Health Preservation Collection” [6], covering a wide range of content. The “Zu In · Shang Guan Tian Xin Lun” states: “Follow the principles of yin and yang, harmonize with the laws of nature, have a balanced diet, maintain regular rest, do not engage in excessive labor, and the body and spirit will be in harmony, thus living out the full span of one’s life, and reaching the age of a hundred years before passing away.” This profoundly expounds the essence of the health preservation methods of the time. Su Shi not only earnestly practiced it, but also formed unique insights in terms of diet, exercise, and mental health care.

5.1 Dietary Care and Maintenance

Su Shi attached great importance to the nourishment through diet and advocated a diverse diet, avoiding any distinction between meat and vegetables. For instance, in “Record of Yuan Xiu’s Vegetables”, it is stated: “There is a type of vegetable in Sichuan that is small like peas and is very delicious to eat.” In “On Kadsura”, it is said: “Its flowers, leaves, roots and seeds are all edible. Eating them is like eating vegetables, and they also have therapeutic effects. They are non-toxic. They can be cooked, ground into powder, or made into pills or powders. They can be used in any way. Eating more of them is beneficial. Over time, it can fill one’s bones with marrow and make one’s skin as smooth as jade, making them a longevity tonic.” For instance, the well-known delicacy “Dongpo Pork” was created by Su Shi when he was demoted to Huangzhou. At that time, pork was relatively cheap, so he personally cooked it and wrote a ballad: “The pork in Huangzhou is delicious, its price is as cheap as dirt. Rich people refuse to eat it, and poor people don’t know how to cook it. Wait until the fire is low, add less water, and when the cooking time is right, it will be naturally delicious. Every day, I go to the kitchen and prepare a bowl of it. I am so full that I don’t need to worry about my family.” Moreover, Su Shi also paid attention to dietary details and advocated moderation in eating. In “The Theory of Health Preservation”, he proposed “When you are hungry, eat; when you are not full, stop.” He pointed out that one should not eat too much. He advocated a slow diet. In “The Theory of Health Preservation”, it is said: “When eating noodles, you must chew them thoroughly and slowly. There should be no quick swallowing before you have finished chewing.” This indicates that chewing slowly and carefully is beneficial for health preservation. It is in line with modern health preservation theories that chewing thoroughly and slowly helps saliva effectively break down food, thereby protecting the stomach and facilitating the secretion of digestive juices in the pancreas, liver, and stomach. He advocated a light diet, believing that “sweet, crispy, fatty, and thick foods are the poisons that damage the intestines.” He once said, “Vegetable dishes surpass the eight delicacies.” And he boasted, “I am always full of vegetables, even the rice and meat cannot compare.” He believed that eating vegetables can “keep oneself content to cultivate good fortune, relax the stomach to

nourish qi, and save expenses to accumulate wealth.” [7] Additionally, Su Shi also had his own unique insights on tea and wine.

5.2 Physical Conditioning

Exercise-based health preservation refers to the practice of using traditional sports activities for exercise, aiming to enhance physical fitness and prolong life. Traditional Chinese health preservation theories classify exercise-based health preservation methods into categories such as guidance exercises, martial arts, walking, and climbing, etc. In the field of guidance exercises, Su Shi was good at making friends and had interactions with many Taoist priests. He often summarized some insights on training, as stated in “The Secret of Health Preservation to Tuan An Dao”: “Recently, I have paid much attention to health preservation. I have read many books and consulted many Taoist priests. There are hundreds of methods, and I have selected the simple and easy-to-follow ones. Occasionally practicing them has yielded certain results.” It also detailed the methods and key points of practicing internal exercises, such as “After the hour of Zi (after 3:00 am to 5:00 am), . . . comb your hair over 100 times, spread your hair and lie down, sleep soundly until morning.” He proposed that “The way of health preservation is based on the cultivation of the fetus energy,” and wrote articles such as “The Secret of Health Preservation to Tuan An Dao,” “The Continued Theory of Health Preservation,” “The Theory of Health Preservation,” and “The Theory of Dragon and Tiger Yin-Yang.” In martial arts health preservation, in “The Strategy of Teaching Warfare and Defense,” Su Shi pointed out that due to the long-term ease and comfort of the common people, their “muscles and bones became weak.” He proposed that they should imitate the “in the autumn and winter farming breaks, teach the people to fight and defend” of the Three Dynasties, advocating that through folk martial arts practice (such as archery, boxing) to strengthen the body and resist foreign enemies. Additionally, Su Shi believed that daily labor is also health preservation. During his exile in Huangzhou, he personally farmed (such as on the East Slope of Huangzhou), and wrote in “The Records of East Slope”: “Farmers and common people work hard all year round but never take sick leave.” He believed that farming is a natural form of exercise, which can both move the muscles and nerves and regulate the mind. Moreover, he emphasized moderate exercise and opposed excessive fatigue. In “Questions on Health Preservation,” he proposed: “Those who are good at health preservation should be able to rest and work.” He pointed out that the human body needs a combination of movement and stillness, neither should be sitting still for a long time nor overexerting oneself. Furthermore, Su Shi believed that exercise should follow the natural laws. In “The Theory of Health Preservation,” he stated: “Go to bed early and get up early, along with the chickens.” He advocated that exercise should be in line with the changes of the four seasons, such as rising early in spring to stretch and in winter to avoid cold and retain warmth. This is consistent with the concept of “cultivating yang in spring and autumn and cultivating yin in winter and autumn” in the “Yellow Emperor’s Inner Classic.”

5.3 Mental Care

Su Shi was influenced by Confucianism and the philosophy of Zhuangzi. He had his own insights on spiritual health preservation, believing that a good mood and a peaceful state of mind are conducive to health. He once said: “When one is at peace, the things that affect me are lighter; when one is in harmony, one’s response to things is smooth. Being outwardly light and inwardly harmonious, one’s physical health is well maintained.” “Taking advantage of illness to have leisure is not bad at all. Being at peace is the medicine that has no prescription.” “Having a disease and being at peace is the prescription.” He pointed out that the calmness of emotions and the tranquility of the heart are the key to spiritual health preservation. He advocated resolving worries and hardships by “adapting to circumstances as they arise”, and transferring emotions through poetry, making friends, and enjoying the pleasures of nature, avoiding excessive emotions that harm the body. Su Shi suffered multiple exiles, but he could remain optimistic and say: “Everything has something to be observed. If there is something to be observed, there is something to be enjoyed. It is not necessarily the strange, wonderful, or magnificent things that matter. Drinking fermented rice wine and drinking diluted wine can both intoxicate one; fruits, vegetables, and plants can all satisfy one’s hunger. By extending this reasoning, where can I go to be happy?”. Furthermore, Su Shi advocated for “less thinking and fewer desires”, believing that excessive pursuit of fame and wealth would consume one’s mental energy. One needs to balance desires through contentment. In “The Manual of Health Preservation”, it is stated: “If the mind is in harmony, the Tao can be attained. The Tao is not in agitation; it is possible to not think about clothing, food, pleasures, victories or defeats, gains or losses, honor or disgrace. When the mind is free from agitation and the body is not overly exhausted, and one combines it with exercises and supplements it with medicinal foods, there is no one who does not achieve immortality.” In conclusion, Su Shi advocated that regardless of one’s circumstances, one should maintain inner peace and a clear state of awareness. Only in this way can one calmly cope with changes in the world, transform the hardships in life into nourishment, and ultimately achieve harmony and well-being of the body and mind.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, Su Shi’s concept of health preservation, although spanning thousands of years of time and space, still exudes unique vitality to this day. As a model of health preservation for scholars, his health preservation ideas hold a significant position in traditional Chinese medical classics such as “Su and Shen’s Prescriptions”. This erudite and optimistic, upright and incorruptible literary giant not only practiced health preservation methods himself but also deeply engaged with the people with a compassionate and healing spirit. His years of exile took him across the vast land of China, and his poems and writings were filled with the simple and sincere flavor of life. Many anecdotes are still being passed down to this day. The modern value of Su Shi’s health preservation ideas lies in two aspects: Firstly, he rooted himself in traditional health preservation culture and through personal practice formed a set of effective health preservation systems, which still have guiding significance for contemporary healthy living; Secondly, his unique cultural influence gave his health preservation methods a

demonstration effect. Proper utilization of this can effectively enhance modern people's health awareness and promote health preservation practices, thereby improving the quality of life. This combination of traditional cultural wisdom and personal charisma is precisely the key to its enduring relevance.

In conclusion, under the cultural atmosphere of "scholars all knew medicine" in the Song Dynasty, Su Shi, due to his tumultuous life experiences, frail and often ill body condition, as well as his profound cultivation of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, developed an indissoluble bond with medicine. Although his medical expertise could not be compared with that of professional doctors, his influence in the field of medicine had unique cultural value. As a literatus who was passionate about the study of traditional Chinese medicine, Su Shi not only made extensive connections with medical experts, deeply explored the principles of health preservation, but also proposed many innovative ideas in medical theory. The medical works and clinical prescriptions he left behind are still highly valued by the Chinese medical community and have made an undeniable contribution to the development of traditional medicine.

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