

The Historical Value of Huangdi Neijing and the Tracing of Its Patriotic Genes

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Abstract: *Throughout the millennia-long historical transmission of Huangdi Neijing (The Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon), its stratified developmental history embodies profound historical value. The cultural subjectivity manifested through national wisdom and the tracing of its spirit of undertaking social responsibility constitute a deep-seated patriotic significance, which is worthy of our study and inheritance.*

Keywords: Huangdi Neijing (The Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon), Historical Value, Patriotism, Cultural Heritage.

1. Introduction

Included in the Memory of the World Register, Huangdi Neijing (The Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon, hereafter Neijing) exemplifies multidisciplinary research and stands as a foundational classic of Chinese medicine. Throughout its millennia-long historical transmission, it has accumulated into the cultural DNA of the Chinese national spirit. The historical value it embodies, along with its cultural subjectivity and the origins of its spirit of compassionate service and social responsibility, converge to form a profound patriotic significance.

2. The Stratified Developmental History of a Classic and its Historical Value in Civilizational Inheritance

Neijing underwent a prolonged process of textual sedimentation, solidification, and historical development. As the earliest extant medical classic in China, it evolved through temporal and spatial expansion, and the accumulation of knowledge and values, until its form was established and subsequently continuously developed by later generations. We must grasp its developmental trajectory and rich connotations with a spirit of historical initiative. Firstly, the interplay of temporal and spatial expansion. Temporally, throughout the long river of history, Neijing continuously absorbed, integrated, and transformed medical experiences and philosophical ideas accumulated from preceding eras. It was constructed under the banner of “attributing antiquity to Huangdi,” which allows us to move beyond a purely medical interpretation of Neijing and instead examine it within the dynamic flow of history and a broad socio-cultural network. Propelled by the outstanding continuity characteristic of Chinese civilization, Neijing is a medical-historical document formed dynamically, a comprehensive text integrating medical knowledge and values. Neijing originated during the Warring States period—a time of contending philosophical schools—underwent preliminary compilation in the Western Han Dynasty, had its title first recorded in the Book of Han · Treatise on Literature, received large-scale additions and revisions in the Tang Dynasty, and was systematically collated and finalized by the Bureau for Revising Medical

Books in the Northern Song Dynasty, followed by continual innovation and development in later periods. Spatially, the period from the Warring States to the Western Han Dynasty coincided with the peak of expansion and continuation of Huaxia civilization during the Axial Age of human civilization, and was also a critical period for the Huaxia nation moving towards reunification and great unity. Through its transmission as a life medicine classic, Neijing innovated the format of dialogues between the sovereign (Huangdi) and ministers (like Qibo), synthesizing medical experiences and philosophical concepts from various regions such as the Central Plains, Qi-Lu, Jing-Chu, and Ba-Shu into a single crucible. It advanced a “pluralistic integration” (duoyuan yiti) within medicine, providing a civilizational significance and value logic rooted in life sciences for the national identity embodied by “standardizing writing scripts and axle widths” (shu tongwen, che tonggui) since the Qin and Han Dynasties. From the opening of the ancient Silk Road to the current practice of the “Belt and Road” Initiative, Neijing and the values and diagnostic & treatment modalities of Traditional Chinese Medicine it advocates have gained increasingly widespread recognition. Its inclusion in the Memory of the World Register signifies its status as a spiritual treasure shared by all humanity. Secondly, the accumulation of knowledge construction. The academic system of Neijing is life-centered. It absorbed the doctrines of Essence-Qi (jingqi), Yin-Yang, and the Five Phases (wuxing), integrating philosophical ideas from Confucianism, Daoism, the Yin-Yang School, Mohism, and others. It encompasses achievements in natural and social sciences such as medicine, astronomy, geography, meteorology, and psychology. It is an encyclopedia extending from the question of life, a theoretical system encompassing medical knowledge, health governance, and disease prevention. It states: “The four seasons and yin-yang are the root of all things,” and humans are “formed according to the laws of the four seasons.” Neijing employs a systemic concept, understanding the laws of the natural world from the relationship between the seasonality and periodicity of agricultural production and natural timeliness (shiling), and utilizes knowledge of astronomy, geography, meteorology, etc., to guide disease diagnosis and treatment. Only by understanding its essence as a “stratified classic” can we more profoundly grasp the complexity of its text, the richness of its thought, and the unique and profound value it carries in the

history of Chinese medicine and even Chinese civilization.

3. Cultural Symbols of National Wisdom and the Inheritance of Patriotic Genes

The collective memory of safeguarding health and preventing and treating diseases forms the practical foundation for defending cultural sovereignty and achieving national wellness through medicine. Firstly, it serves as a spiritual Great Wall for defending cultural sovereignty. The millennia-long history of civilization development of the Chinese nation is also a history of glory forged through adversity. Having faced countless outbreaks of diseases such as smallpox, plague, and cholera, the Chinese nation has continuously explored and innovated methods of disease prevention and treatment by relying on the wisdom of traditional Chinese medicine. Zhang Zhongjing, moved by the losses of the past, wrote the “Treatise on Cold Pathogenic and Miscellaneous Diseases,” while Wu Youke proposed that pestilent factors “enter through the mouth and nose” and created effective formulas for treating epidemics. Their theories both trace their origins to Neijing, collectively narrating the epic struggle of the Chinese nation against diseases. From the prevention and treatment concepts and methods recorded in Neijing and “Treatise on Cold Pathogenic and Miscellaneous Diseases” to the continuous advancements of modern medicine, including the fight against SARS and the triumph over the COVID-19 pandemic, each step embodies the relentless efforts of the Chinese nation in combating diseases. During the eastward spread of modern Western medicine, Neijing became a core instrument in the debate over the preservation or abolition of traditional Chinese medicine, serving to defend its medical discourse. While Western medicine explains physiology through anatomy, Neijing interprets it through Qi transformation^[1]. Concepts such as “Yin-Yang balance” and “strengthening the body’s resistance to eliminate pathogens” offer an Eastern approach for modern society in addressing issues like antibiotic overuse and the prevention and management of chronic diseases, highlighting the contemporary value of Chinese medicine. Secondly, it exemplifies the patriotic practice of “treating the nation as a great physician.” Neijing, incorporating ancient Chinese philosophical thought, integrated astronomical calendrics (Five Cycles and Six Qi) and geographical phenology (regional variations in diseases) into its medical system. This reflects the ethos of “healing the nation as a great physician,” embodying a sense of familial and national responsibility as well as ethical principles that align the physician’s aspirations with the ideals of the state. It stands as an exemplary model of the integration of science and humanism. As stated in the Lingshu·Shichuan: “The superior healer tends to the people, the inferior to the body, ensuring that the common people remain free from illness... without end.” This juxtaposes the medical practice of “healing the sick and saving lives” with the public function of “governing the nation,” requiring physicians to “upon entering a state, inquire about its customs; upon entering a household, ask about its taboos; upon entering a hall, learn its etiquette; and when approaching a patient, understand their preferences.” Whenever arriving in a new region, a physician must first understand the local environmental conditions and societal customs before applying acupuncture, herbal medicine, or other healing arts. This approach integrates national sovereignty and cultural

identity into medical practice, elevating the art of healing to the height of governing and stabilizing the nation, exerting a profound and lasting influence on later generations. Later generations largely inherited Neijing’s ancient emphasis on “duty above all” while pioneering a new ethos of “valuing righteousness over profit.” As articulated in the preface to the Treatise on Cold Pathogenic and Miscellaneous Diseases: “Above, to heal the ailments of rulers and parents; below, to relieve the suffering of the poor and lowly; in the middle, to preserve health and nourish the self.” This calls upon physicians to dedicate themselves to the nation, society, and the well-being of the people. Sun Simiao, in Beiji Qianjin Yaofang (Essential Formulas for Emergencies Worth a Thousand Gold), stated: “The great physician heals the nation, the intermediate physician heals the people, and the lesser physician heals diseases.” His concept of the “Great Physician for All” embodies the practical realization of Neijing’s ideal of “relieving the masses and cherishing benevolence.” During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Zhang Lu, a physician from the Jiangnan region, practiced the vow to “universally relieve the suffering of all sentient beings” as documented in his work Yitong (Comprehensive Medical Understanding). He viewed medical practice and national destiny as inseparable and personally went to the front lines to treat soldiers and civilians during anti-Qing resistance, fully demonstrating his steadfast commitment to and continuation of Neijing’s spirit of serving the world and patriotic sentiment.

4. The Mission of the New Era: Activating Cultural Genes

Amid the backdrop of “two overarching situations,” we must endow Neijing with new meaning and shoulder the mission of activating cultural genes in the new era. Firstly, it represents a global memory amid cultural challenges. “The origin of medicine traces back to the Yellow Emperor.” By attributing its authorship to the “Yellow Emperor,” Neijing anchors the origins of medicine to the progenitor of Chinese civilization, inherently embedding in medical practitioners a cultural identity as “descendants of Yan and Yellow Emperors.” The medical philosophy of Neijing is expressed through dialogues between the Yellow Emperor and Qibo. From the Warring States period to the Qin and Han dynasties, the transmission of Neijing sustained the national lifeline. From Wang Bing’s annotations in the Tang Dynasty to the block-printed publication by the Bureau of Medical Texts in the Northern Song Dynasty, and from the iconoclastic context of the New Culture Movement and the institutional marginalization of Chinese medicine to the modern struggle against the “abolition of Chinese medicine” based on Neijing, each crisis prompted medical scholars to return to Neijing, achieving dual cultural and scientific self-preservation. As Yun Tieqiao pointed out: “If Neijing survives, the Chinese race survives; if the Chinese race survives, world medicine will thereby achieve grand completion.” This underscores the defense of culture within the context of national survival. Today, against the backdrop of accelerating unprecedented changes unseen in a century, Western cultural trends pose significant challenges to the mainstream ideology and values in the process of China’s great national rejuvenation. The theoretical system of Traditional Chinese Medicine, represented by Neijing, serves as a source of cultural confidence for China and stands as a bulwark against historical nihilism and cultural nihilism. The

inclusion of “Acupuncture and Moxibustion of Traditional Chinese Medicine,” nominated by China, into the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity underscores its universal value as a cultural legacy for all humankind^[2]. Furthermore, the successful inscription of Neijing into the “Memory of the World Register,” the establishment of the Technical Committee on Traditional Chinese Medicine by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO)^[3], and the incorporation of traditional medicine, represented by TCM, into the World Health Organization’s International Classification of Diseases (ICD) fully demonstrate the profound significance and enduring value of this commitment. Secondly, it serves as a wellspring of wisdom for both the “Healthy China” initiative and the global community of health for all. Domestically, the “Healthy China 2030” Blueprint explicitly calls for “giving full play to the unique strengths of traditional Chinese medicine,” aiming to build a TCM health service system that covers all population groups and all stages of the life cycle. This transforms the ancestral “genetic map” into a national strategic practice for “Healthy China.” From the discovery of artemisinin to the successful UNESCO inscription of acupuncture, and the incorporation of “equal emphasis on Chinese and Western medicine” into the Basic Healthcare and Health Promotion Law, the core concepts of Neijing are being translated into the protection of national health. In the new era, practicing Neijing’s concept of “preventive treatment”—including “preventing disease before it arises, preventing deterioration after onset, and preventing recurrence after recovery”—provides a foundation for safeguarding public health and offers a model for the Healthy China initiative. At the prevention stage, traditional Chinese medicine wellness methods are leveraged to enhance population resilience; during treatment, TCM pattern differentiation and treatment are integrated to prevent disease progression; in the rehabilitation phase, TCM conditioning approaches are employed to facilitate patient recovery. Its theory that “when righteous qi is stored within, pathogenic factors cannot invade; where pathogenic factors accumulate, righteous qi must be deficient” underscores the fundamental importance of strengthening the body’s own vital energy to resist external pathogens. This has provided critical insights for pandemic responses—emphasizing the enhancement of public physical fitness, boosting immunity, and promoting balanced diets, moderate exercise, and regular routines. The concept of “nurturing both body and spirit” offers a localized solution for mental health issues, with TCM emotion-based therapies being incorporated into depression treatment guidelines. These advanced treatment, prevention, and management concepts and practices are helping shift the focus of national public health from treatment to prevention. From an international perspective, traditional Chinese medicine has consistently served as a vital force in advancing the global community of health for all. When Chinese medical aid teams drew on the civilizational wisdom of Neijing to bring acupuncture, moxibustion, Baduanjin exercises, and prevention concepts to Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and when Belt and Road TCM centers were established worldwide, the vision of “great harmony under heaven” from classical Chinese medicine began radiating renewed vitality and dynamism in the modern era.

In this new era and on this new journey, exploring the

historical value and patriotic genes embedded within Neijing, safeguarding this millennia-spanning cultural heritage, and defending its historical significance and its relevance as a civilizational code for the new era constitute the deepest practice and most rational expression of patriotism.

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