

GREAT DISPLAY: A NOTE ON HUMAN DISSECTION AND SPECTACLE IN HAN CHINA

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Dissection was a particular form of spectacle in ancient China. One such case in first-century China is revealing for what it tells us about the ancient idea of 'display' and the nature of dissection. In this case, a usurper attacked his former political rival by violating his corpse in the name of improving medical knowledge. Can we grasp his motivations? A Chinese proverb says, "A man's heart is hidden in his belly," meaning that one cannot tell another's intention from his visage. But perhaps in this case, we can see into the minds of those determined to look into the bellies of others.

I shall focus on the only recorded instance of dissection in ancient China. This singular occasion took place in 16 A.D., when the usurper Wang Mang provisionally assumed power. According to the *History of the Han Dynasty (Hanshu)*, compiled in the first century, Wang Mang finally captured his rival, Wangsun Qing, after years of effort. The latter had been one of the main obstacles to Wang Mang's quest for power, and to avenge himself Wang Mang not only had Wangsun executed but also sent his personal palace physician, artisans from the Directorate for Imperial Manufactories, and skilled butchers to dissect Wangsun's body. These craftsmen measured and weighed his five viscera, and used bamboo strips to trace the course of his mai (vessels) to see where they began and ended. The knowledge derived from this experiment, they claimed, was valuable for curing illnesses.

Unfortunately, the results of this "experiment" were lost by at least the twelfth century when, in his *Bintuilu*, Zhao Yushi mentioned that the records of Wang Mang's experiment no longer existed. Nevertheless, this incident has inspired many Chinese medical historians of the past century. They considered this case to be evidence that their forefathers had practiced anatomy in antiquity. Furthermore, some scholars believed the information derived from this dissection is reflected in some passages about the structure of the human body in the *Yellow Lord's Inner Canon*, an ancient Chinese medical text.

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During his reign, Wang Mang was obsessed with standardizing various aspects of Chinese culture. The above-mentioned attempt systematically to observe the human body was, perhaps, a part of Wang's plan to standardize medical knowl-

edge. However, I want to emphasize that his reason for ordering the dissection of Wangsun was not merely intellectual curiosity. The way Wang Mang punished his rivals followed a clear classical pattern. As he pointed out in his decrees, he learned from the ancient text *Zuozhuan* to make a 'great display' (*jing guan*) of his rivals' corpses by exposing them to the public. When Wang Mang took his revenge upon another of his toughest rivals, Zhai Yi, he also had Zhai's body dissected exactly like Wangsun Qing's, although this dissection was not justified on medical grounds. By performing this ritual, Wang Mang utilized the 'great display' to declare his mastery over the new dynasty. Despite the classical basis for Wang's actions, his contemporaries criticized him for his cruelty. In his *Xinlun* (New Treatises), Huan Tan censured Wang Mang, saying, "Wang mutilated the dead and observed their five viscera. This was not harmful to the living. Nevertheless, people do not like such actions, because they are a display of cruelty."

In ancient times there must have been countless dissections that took place without being recorded. As a sentence in the Chinese medical classic *Linshu* states, a man "could be dissected after his death." This being said, dissection of the corpse never became a common part of the practice of Chinese medicine. When a doctor diagnosed a patient, he determined the illness by signs or symptoms observable from outward appearance without anatomical knowledge. We can find clues of this method in the *Yellow Lord's Inner Canon*, which employs a methodology of "from outside to inside" or "knowing the problems inside by observing the signs outside." As the famous eighth-century medical scholar Wang Bing put it, observable signs are "*xiang* (images/ simulacra)." When a doctor diagnoses a patient, it is essential for him to regard the patient's appearance to detect problems.

While there are some records of men in ancient China who studied human organs by performing dissections, the results of such dissections-- e.g., observing the shapes of some organs-- did not help doctors to understand their functions. Traditional Chinese doctors considered the organs numerologically rather than anatomically, and viewed the numerological body as a sympathetic microcosm characterized by 'temporal spaces.' Therefore, the five viscera and twelve mai vessels were primarily defined by temporal relationships. Very often, the observer had numerological presuppositions in mind. That is why Chinese doctors liked to compare the human body to a *Mingtang* (Bright Hall), an imperial building which simultaneously symbolized temporal and spatial order. This was not just a rhetorical gimmick, but a major model that Chinese doctors adopted to envisage the human body. For example, the early Republican doctor Yun Tieqiao (1878-1935) characterized the five viscera mentioned in the *Yellow Lord's Inner Canon* as the "viscera of the four seasons," instead of the "viscera of a human body." The ancient Chinese conceived of the body as a temporal space in which they constantly experience vari-

ous sorts of rhythms and cycles modified by *qi*.

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To return to Wangsun Qing's case, as the texts indicate, Wang Mang's imperial physicians used bamboo strips to trace the course of Wangsun Qing's *mai*, the principle conduits of *qi*. But no other contemporary sources suggest the intention of such an unusual act. Nevertheless, it does seem clear that to Wang Mang the *mai* was not only visual, but also tangible. By Wang Mang's time, the concept of the *mai*, especially that there were twelve cardinal tracks, had already been well established. Furthermore, the twelve cardinal tracks as a system had developed and matured. In other words, when they dissected Wangsun Qing, imperial physicians were performing an experiment based on certain preconceived medical doctrines.

One such doctrine involved numbers. In some medical classics, such as the *Yellow Lords' Inner Canon*, we are presented with a formula of the human body based on numerology. This text indicates, for instance, that everyone's body has 365 loci and twelve major *mai*, or "vessels for conducting *qi*." This system is based on numerology, and it is impossible to construct such a system simply by observing a dissected body. For ancient specialists in Chinese medicine, there was little point in dissecting the body since the components of the body that interested them could not be seen. When a body was opened, it was because it in order to glimpse some special or unusual figure. Wangsun Qing's case belongs to this tradition. From this perspective, the case of Wangsun Qing's dissection is not as exceptional as it first appears; instead, it should be considered as typical in the history of Chinese anatomy.

Qi is a fundamental element of traditional Chinese medical knowledge, and also related to questions about which parts of the human body could be seen and which could not. When discussing this issue in Wangsun Qing's case, the Qing physician Wang Xuequan (1728-1810) compared the human body to a leather bladder. He explained that the *qi* in the human body is not observable, just as it is impossible to see air and water flow in a leather bladder. Again, traditional medical doctrines did not admit the validity of examining the human body by dissecting it.

What was the purpose of dissecting the human body in ancient China? What did Wang Mang hope to find inside Wangsun's body?

There is a tradition in ancient China that the ruler exposed corpses of criminals or his enemies to insult them and also display his power. We can see such examples from the *Zuozhuan* and other ancient sources. Therefore, even when dissection did explain medical knowledge, the display of the human body was first and foremost a means of punishment and humiliation. With this context in mind, Wang Mang's punishment of Wangsun Qing, in addition to its explicitly medical purpose, was also a symbol to proclaim Wang Mang's ultimate political authority.

In sum, dissection was never an important component of traditional Chinese medicine because it was not considered useful for developing traditional knowledge of how the body worked. Furthermore, even in the few cases in which the body was dissected, the motivation for doing so was at least as much political as medical.