Epidemics and Medicine during the Northern Song Dynasty: The Revival of Cold Damage Disorders (Shanghan)

Asaf Goldschmidt
Tel Aviv University

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The history of the Northern Song dynasty (960-1127 CE) reveals a steady increase in the number of recorded epidemics as the dynasty progressed. From the imperial perspective these epidemics were very disturbing, especially in the eyes of the emperor. The following incident, taking place during the second half of emperor Renzong’s reign (1023-1063), provides one such example:

Once, due to a great epidemic in the capital, emperor Renzong ordered the Imperial Physician to prepare medications. He also instructed [him] to chop two rhinoceros horns that were in the palace [for the same purpose]. The emperor himself supervised this. Once one horn was chopped to pieces, a palace eunuch named Li Shun ޕစ entreated Renzong to spare the other horn so it could serve as an offering at the imperial altar. Renzong replied to him saying: “How can I value expensive and unique artifacts and belittle the common people?” He then ordered to finish chopping the second horn.¹

The following abbreviations are used in the notes:
SS: Song shi 宋史
SHY: Song huiyao jigao 宋會要輯稿
CB: Xu zizhi tongjian changbian 續資治通鑑長編
SYQQJK: Okanishi Tameto 岡西為人, Song yiqian yiji kao 宋以前醫籍考

Complete citations are provided in the end bibliography

¹ SS, 178, 4338.

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As this anecdote suggests, emperor Renzong was willing to sacrifice rare and sacred objects if this could aid somehow in curing the people's epidemic. In addition to destroying sacred objects for a possible cure, however, the Northern Song government also provided financial and medical relief to areas affected by the pestilence.

This essay focuses on mapping the occurrences of epidemics during the Northern Song dynasty. It also suggests that a particular incident of recurring epidemics, more precisely a wave of epidemics occurring over a decade and a half during the eleventh century, brought emperor Renzong and his government to implement an innovative and unorthodox policy to cope with them. It is unclear what caused this wave of epidemics: it may have been the ongoing population shift to south China, which would create a new epidemiological frontier as the region hosted a larger number of endemic diseases than the northern part of China; it may also have been the rising volume of trade, or the increasing length of trade routes, or even the growing urbanization. Or it was some other unrelated reason, even possibly a random coincidence. What we do know, however, is that emperor Renzong and his government and officials took these epidemics as a serious threat which had to be dealt with swiftly in order to preserve the emperor's heavenly mandate.

The imperial government's response was to establish a new bureau—the Bureau for Revising Medical Texts (jiaozheng yishu ju 檢正醫書局, hereafter "the Bureau")—devoted to the task of revising and printing medical literature. The Bureau's official editors, according to their own testimony, searched for medical texts that could address the epidemics—or "Cold Damage Disorders" (shanghan 冬寒), as they

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2 At first glance it might seem that the imperial government established the Bureau to complement the expanding medical education and examination system by revising and printing new medical literature (see Chen Yuanpeng 1997). However, a closer observation shows a more complicated picture. If indeed the Bureau's goal was to complement the education system, then it should have been established twenty years earlier, during the 1040s, when that system was set up. The 1060s certainly show an expansion of the medical education system, but this does not explain the establishment of a unique institution for revising medical literature, nor does it explain the particular selections of medical literature it published.