

Bian Que

Biǎnquè 扁鹊

Legendary early physician

The name “Bian Que” 扁鹊 refers to a legendary early physician who is traditionally credited with the founding of the four methods of diagnosis in Chinese medicine—looking, listening/smelling, asking, and pulse-taking—as well as with the authorship of *Nanjing* (难经 *Classics of Difficult Issues*), an important classical text of Chinese medicine.

Early Chinese literature abounds in anecdotes about the skills of a physician named Bian Que. One such anecdote, found in Chapter 5 of *Liezi* (a Daoist text), tells of how he treated two male patients suffering from mind (heart)-body imbalances; one of them had a mind (heart) that was too weak and hesitant for his body, whereas the other had the opposite problem. Bian Que put both men to sleep with a drug and exchanged their hearts. The surgery was said to be so successful that each man, upon waking, headed straight back to the other’s home.

Bian Que was revered by generations of Chinese physicians as the father of diagnosis by the pulse (sphygmology), as the author of *Nanjing* (Classic of Difficult Issues), one of the core classical texts of Chinese medicine, and as the founder of the so-called Bian Que School, which counted among its members such renowned physicians as Hua Tuo (c. 141–208 CE). But modern scholarship has raised significant doubts as to when and where Bian Que lived or even whether he lived at all.

The first full biography of Bian Que, which was also the earliest biography of a Chinese physician, was composed by the historian Sima Qian (145?–86? BCE) in his *Shiji* (Records of the Grand Historian). It states that Bian Que was a man from Zheng in Bohai District (in modern-day Hebei Province) and that his real surname was “Qin” and personal name “Yueren.” It was said that he was initiated into the healing arts by an immortal who gave him many books of taboo recipes and made him take a medicinal concoction that subsequently enabled him to see objects on the other side of a wall. Thus, when examining his patients, Bian Que could see clearly the obstructions and nodes in their internal organs and vessels. Sima Qian’s biography recounts several highlights of Bian Que’s medical career, stressing his remarkable abilities as a diagnostician and acupuncturist, and these highlights provided the core of the life of Bian Que known to subsequent centuries. But as an historical document Sima Qian’s account is fraught with difficulties. First, it places Bian Que in historical contexts that stretched across vast geographical distances and spanned from the late sixth to the third centuries BCE. Second, the text ascribed to Bian Que some of the medical concepts that are now known to have been absent during those early times.

The consensus among modern scholars is that “Bian Que” was a common laudatory title given to superior healers in ancient China and that one of those receiving the title may have been Qin Yueren, whose life and accomplishments may have partially corresponded to Sima Qian’s narrative. “Bian Que,” literally referring to a bird, once was the title of the official in charge of regulating

therapeutic stone needles (used in acupuncture and moxibustion) in the small state of Tan during the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE), a title that may have totemic roots going back to the era of Yangshao culture (3200–2500 BCE). In the 1970s a stone relief was discovered in the hills of Weishan County, Shandong Province, dated to the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), depicting a figure with human's head and bird's body holding a stone needle to perform an acupuncture. Some scholars see this relief as a confirmation of the totemic origin of Bian Que, and the relief has since been called *Bian Que Performing Acupuncture* (*Bian Que xing zhen tu*). Some other scholars, however, suggest that “Bian Que” may have been a sinicized version of the mythical *gandharvas*, the human-headed birds known in India since Vedic times that were traditionally regarded as skilled physicians. In this interpretation both the bird-man disguise and some of the healing techniques of Bian Que may have resulted from maritime cultural contact between the East China coast and India that had occurred in high antiquity. Despite the mystery surrounding the historicity of Bian Que as an individual, there is no doubt that, as the

stuff of legend, he enjoyed an eminence in the history of Chinese medicine unparalleled by any other physician.

Qiong ZHANG

Further Reading

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