

# The Historical Roots of Technical Communication in the Chinese Tradition



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By

Daniel Ding

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To Karen Lo:  
My Lovely Wife and Supporter

“Thy fruit abundant fall!”  
—*Classic of Poetry*



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## CHAPTER ONE

# TECHNICAL WRITING IN CHINESE ANTIQUITY: AN INTRODUCTION

### **The Chinese Conception of Technical Writing**

It is no easy task to give an account of the Chinese conception of technical writing (*jishu xiezu* 技术写作) because the Chinese word 技术 (*jishu*) has several denotations, according to the authoritative *Unabridged Dictionary of Sinitic*<sup>1</sup> (*Hanyu Da Cidian* 汉语大辞典). First, it means ‘technology’ (技术) which refers to medical, scientific, industrial, or engineering technology, as used in: “Due to advanced technology (技术), doctors can easily diagnose the causes of headaches.” Second, it means ‘technique’ (技巧) which suggests a particular way of doing something with some special skills, as used in: “The flute player employs several techniques (技巧) in her performance.” Third, it means ‘trick’ (窍门) which implies a good way of doing something, as used in: “The trick (窍门) is to set all the numbers to zero before choosing ‘double space’ from the drop-down menu.” Fourth, it means ‘magic art,’ which refers to the performance of producing illusions to entertain people.

What makes the task even more daunting is that China does not have a national organization of technical writing, such as the Society for Technical Communication in the US. Thus, an official definition of technical writing does not exist in China, whereas in the US, the Society for Technical Communication has clearly defined technical writing. According to the Society, technical writing is a broad field and includes any form of communication that exhibits one or more of the following characteristics:

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<sup>1</sup> Zhufeng Luo, ed. *Hanyu Da Cidian* (Shanghai, China: Shangwu Yinshu Guan, 1994).

- Communicating *about technical or specialized topics*, such as computer applications, medical procedures, or environmental regulations.
- Communicating *by using technology*, such as web pages, help files, or social media sites.
- Providing *instructions about how to do something*, regardless of how technical the task is or even if technology is used to create or distribute that communication.<sup>2</sup>

The above definition of technical writing by the Society of Technical Communication suggests that any type of writing that is done in the workplace might be classified as technical writing, such as a technical report on upgrading the air-conditioning system in the CEO's office, or a memorandum communicated via email by a secretary to the office manager about scheduling the latter's meetings with customers. It could be very technical, like a technical report, or not technical at all, like a memorandum. In the US, the definition given by the Society of Technical Communication is the rubric with which we can easily classify a piece of writing as technical writing, or not.

But in China, such a rubric does not exist. Instead, we can only look for definitions of technical writing in the literature on technical writing. Generally speaking, technical writing in China refers to writings about science and technology by scientists, technicians, or engineers for other professionals.<sup>3</sup> A recent survey among practicing technical writers in Chinese corporations and technical researchers in Chinese colleges corroborates the above-mentioned definition of technical writing in China as found in the literature.<sup>4</sup> The survey indicates that technical writing in China requires specialist knowledge within specific technological fields, such as the machine-building industry, information technology, and medical science.

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<sup>2</sup> STC, "Defining Technical Communication," the Society for Technical Communication, accessed March 21, 2018 at <https://www.stc.org/about-stc/defining-technical-communication/>.

<sup>3</sup> Patricia Tegtmeier, Sylvia Thompson, Ron Smith, Deb L. Scroggs, and Sam Dragga. "China is Hungry: Technical Communication in the People's Republic of China," *Technical Communication* 46, no. 1 (1999):40-41; Daniel Ding, "When traditional Chinese Culture Meets a Technical Communication Program in a Chinese University: Report on Teaching Technical Communication in China," *Technical Communication* 58, no. 1 (2011): 38-43.

<sup>4</sup> Li Shuangyan and Cui Qiliang, "Survey on the Current Status of Technical Writing in China and Its Implications on MTI Education," *Foreign Language Research* 201, no. 2 (2018): 51-52.

Thus the survey suggests that technical writers are professionals who either create or translate documents by using technical vocabulary. It also claims that technical writing in China “is at the nascent stage of its development, and it has not become a profession yet, so its importance has not been generally recognized.”<sup>5</sup> This definition, as given by the literature on technical writing in China, is also evidenced by the fact that technical writing education in Chinese colleges stresses language proficiency in so-called English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classes, by teaching professional terms and phrases to students who major in science and engineering programs.<sup>6</sup>

On the one hand, it is not easy to give a definitive definition of technical writing in China; on the other hand, technical writing in China is not at its nascent stage of development as the survey claims it is. It should be pointed out that technical writing as a college discipline is at the nascent stage of its development; however, as a genre, technical writing has been practiced in China for at least 2,500 years, as Ding shows in his analysis of the *Classic of Changes (Yi Jing 易经)*.<sup>7</sup> The *Classic of Changes* is one of the earliest technical writing artifacts in the Chinese tradition. In addition, the Chinese term for ‘technical writing’ 方伎之书 (*fangji zhishu*) appeared for the first time between 104—91 BCE in Sima Qian’s 司马迁 (ca. 145—ca. 86 BCE) *Records of the Historian (史记 Shiji)*.<sup>8</sup>

### *Records of the Historian*

The Chinese term ‘技术写作’ (*jishu xiezu*) is usually used to translate the English term ‘technical writing’. But, as I have discussed in the above

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<sup>5</sup> Li and Cui, “Survey,” 51.

<sup>6</sup> Huiling Ding, “Technical Communication Instruction in China: Localized Programs and Alternative Models,” *Technical Communication Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (2010): 305.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Ding, “The Emergence of Technical Communication in China—Yi Jing (I Ching) the Budding of a Tradition,” *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* 17, no. 3 (2003): 321-322.

<sup>8</sup> Sima Qian 司马迁, *Records of the Historian*, [in Chinese,] (Shanghai: Hanfenlou Publishing House, 1930), vol. 25, p. 45. Some translate Sima Qian’s book as *Records of the Grand Historian*, *the Grand Scribe’s Records*, or simply *Historical Records*. I prefer Sarah Allen’s translation because it is precise and concise: see Sarah Allen, “Narrative Genres,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Classical Chinese Literature (1000 BCE—900 CE)*, eds. Wiebke Denecke, Wai-ye Li, and Xiaofei Tian (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 274.

All the translations in this book are mine unless otherwise indicated.

section, the extensions of the Chinese and the English terms encompass different types of writing. The Chinese term refers to writings about science and technology by scientists, technicians, and engineers, for other scientists, technicians, or engineers. The English term, as the Society for Technical Communication defines, refers to almost any type of writing that is practiced in the workplace.

We should not take the academic construction of the West, like the definition of technical writing by the Society of Technical Communication, and attempt to refer that to the Chinese conception of what we call ‘technical writing.’ More importantly, we should not take the contemporary academic construction of the West and attempt to refer that back to the 500 BCE Chinese conception of what we call ‘technical writing’ when we are attempting to define ‘technical writing’ in Chinese antiquity. This is essentially taking a category of one tradition and looking for it in another. However, the Chinese term for ‘technical writing book’—方伎之书 (*fangji zhi shu*)—did appear in Chinese antiquity. It appeared for the first time in Sima Qian’s 司马迁 (ca. 145—ca. 86 BCE) *Records of the Historian* (史记 *Shiji*), completed between 104—91 BCE. In the “Biographies of Bian Que and Cang Gong” (“扁鹊仓公列传” “*Bian Que Cang Gong Liezhuan*”), Sima Qian recounts stories of two famous physicians in Chinese antiquity, Bian Que 扁鹊 (407—310 BCE), a highly skilled physician during the Warring States Period 战国 (481—221 BCE), and Cang Gong (ca. 210—ca. 140 BCE), a well-known physician during the Western Han period 西汉 (203 BCE—8 CE), also known as Chunyu Yi 淳于意 in the text of the ‘Biographies’. Cang Gong, a petty official in charge of Imperial granaries in the State of Qi (齐国), learned medical skills through reading medical works by Bian Que and other physicians. One day, Cang Gong received an edict from the King of Qi (齐王) which required him to name individuals who possessed ‘technique’ (方伎) so that they could diagnose diseases, and who had the authority to decide on a patient’s survival or death.

方伎所长，及所能治病者？有其书无有？皆安受学？受学几何岁？  
尝有所验，何县里人也？何病？医药已，其病之状皆何如？具悉而对。<sup>9</sup>

What specific technical skill do you have? What illnesses can you cure?  
Have you read any technical writing books? (方伎所长，及所能治病者？  
有其书无有？ *Fangji suochang, jineng zhibingzhe? You qishu wuyou?*)

<sup>9</sup> Sima Qian *Records of the Historian*, vol. 25 p. 50.

Where did you learn the technique? For how many years? Who have you cured? Where are the patients from? What illnesses did they suffer? What medicinals did you use?<sup>10</sup> What is the patient's condition now? Please answer these questions in detail.

The above account of the inquiries made by the King of Qi epitomizes two crucial points: First, 方伎 (technical skill), at its roots, referred specifically to medical practice. Second, the edict also mentioned 'technical writing books' (方伎之书), meaning writings on medical practice. It is the earliest mention in Chinese literature of the term that is equivalent to what we would use today, when we are discussing similar type of writing. It is obvious that in *Biographies*, Sima Qian, by employing the term 'technical writings on that topic,' refers to medical writings only. Indeed, in the *Biographies*, several medical writing texts are noted: *Pulse Book* (*Mai Shu* 脉书), a text that discussed how to diagnose diseases based on pulse taking; *Upper Channels* (*Shang Jing* 上经), a text that identified and discussed the air channels (thought to exist at that time) in the upper body; *Lower Channels* (*Xia Jing* 下经), a text that was intended as a sequel to *Upper Channels*; *Diagnosis Based on Five Complexions* (*Wuse Zhen* 五色诊), a book that discussed diagnosis of diseases according to five different colors of the skin on a patient's face; *Miracle Ways of Suppressing Coughs* (*Qike Shu* 奇咳术), a book that described various methods to efficaciously diagnose diseases through listening to a patient's voice; *Calculation* (*Kui Duo* 揆度), a book that showed how to estimate seriousness of an illness; *Yin and Yang* (*Yin Yang* 阴阳), a book that introduced *yin* and *yang* elements and their impacts on human health; *External Changes* (*Wai Bian* 外变), a book that discussed effects of changes in nature on the human body; *On Medicinals* (*Yao Lun* 药论), a book that described various herbal, mineral, and other medicinals; *Miracles of Stone Needles* (*Shi Shen* 石神), a text that described uses of stone hammers, stone knives, and stone needles in medical treatment; and lastly, *Secrets of the Bedchamber* (*Jie Yin Yang* 接阴阳), a book that discussed the art of sexual intercourse as a way of absorbing nutrients from male and female bodies.<sup>11</sup>

These medical texts were rare books (*jin shu* 禁书) that contained 'secret prescriptions' (*jin fang* 禁方) from Chunyu Yi's master—Qing

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<sup>10</sup> "Medicinals" refers to Chinese medicines including herbals, minerals, dried insects, and animal bones.

<sup>11</sup> Sima Qian, *Records of the Historian*, vol. 25, pp. 50—51.

Yang's (阳庆) private collection.<sup>12</sup> Those books were usually given by master physicians to their disciples or apprentice physicians to study. Unfortunately, they are no longer extant today, but from Sima Qian's narrative in the *Biographies*, we get a glimpse of some of the content of these books. For example, in one of the stories, Sima Qian tells of how Chunyu Yi diagnosed an Imperial official's headache by employing the strategies he had learned from the *Pulse Book*, *Upper Channels*, and *Lower Channels*. Chunyu Yi was called to examine an Imperial official of the State of Qi (齐国), who had complained of a splitting headache. After taking the official's pulse, Chunyu Yi explained to the official's brother that an ulcer was growing between his stomach and intestines. He suggested that it was not curable. The ulcer would grow larger in five days, and in eight days, he would vomit thick blood and die. The official died as Chunyu Yi had predicted. When asked how he could predict the official's death, Chunyu Yi declared that the official's pulse had suggested a liver disease because the pulse was irregular and feeble, indicating a serious inner problem that did not manifest externally. Chunyu Yi then invoked the *Pulse Book*:

脉长而弦，不得代四时者，其病主在於肝。和即经主病也，代则络脉有过。<sup>13</sup>

A long and strong pulse that does not change according to the four seasons indicates liver disease. A long and strong, but regular, pulse indicates a disease arising from the damaged vertical channels of the liver; a long and strong, but irregular, pulse indicates a disease arising from the damaged horizontal channels of the liver.

Chunyu Yi went on to explain that an irregular pulse indicated damaged vertical channels that ran throughout the body. The damaged vertical channels led to death. When the horizontal channels were damaged, an irregular pulse occurred one tenth of an inch above the left median point. At this point, heat was trapped in the body and thick blood could not be channeled away. When the irregular pulse occurred half an inch above the left median point, close to the point of the hand channel, then the patient would vomit thick blood and die. When the irregular pulse occurred one fifth of an inch above the left median point, pus would develop in the ulcer. When the irregular pulse occurred near the point of

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<sup>12</sup> Sima Qian, *Records of the Historian*, vol. 25, p. 51.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 51—52.

the hand channel, the ulcer would grow large quickly and then break, leading to death. The trapped heat ruined the stomach and intestine channels, injuring the horizontal channels, leading in turn to swollen and thus rotten vertical channels. Therefore, vertical and horizontal channels blocked each other. But heat had already invaded the official's head, so it was trapped there, causing his splitting headache.<sup>14</sup>

### ***Providing Instructions: The Nature of Technical Writing Books***

The above account indicates that the medical books contained technical instructions that showed how to take and interpret a pulse. They also guided readers to examine the upper channels and analyze and interpret their symptoms. These technical writing books were not for the general public, because they were rare, and contained 'secret prescriptions' from a private collection. The secret nature of these books suggests that only a very limited number of people had access to them. These people had to be qualified professional physicians.

In the *Biographies* we also find uses of medical instructions, the 'how-to' texts. When he was managing an inn that served the nobility, Bian Que met with a guest by the name of Chang Sangjun 长桑君, whom Bian Que recognized as a man with unusual qualities. Chang Sangjun also recognized Bian Que's talents, so he wanted to make Bian Que his successor, to carry on his medical business. He gave Bian Que a book of medical instructions from his private collection, together with some herbal medicinals. He then urged Bian Que to take the herbals and observe the instructions from the medical book so that he would be able to "understand everything in thirty days" (*sanshi ri dangzhi wu yi* 三十日当知物矣).<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Bian Que, by following the instructions from the book and taking the herbs, acquired the ability to see through a wall. In other words, he could see a patient's internal organs and thus internal diseases.<sup>16</sup> He could work like a modern-day X-ray machine.

We should not dismiss the above narrated story as merely a legend, but instead we should look at it in a way that suggests the significance of medical instructions. Clearly, Chuyu Yi's and Bian Que's stories suggest that people of Sima Qian's period believed in the power of education, especially self-education through following instructions. Both Chuyu Yi and Bian Que became well known physicians through self-education by

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

reading the medical books given to them by their masters. People of Sima Qian's time knew how to use medical instructions to improve their professional careers as well as their lives. They gave people the power to control their lives. They also defined health problems and standardized treatment methods. Actually, Bian Que acquired much of his medical knowledge from the book given to him by the hotel guest. Bian Que became a famous physician only after reading the book. People in China, men and women, old and young, all know that a Chinese four-character proverb (*chengyu* 成语)—讳疾忌医 (*huiji jiyi* - hide one's sickness for fear of treatment) has its roots in Bian Que's story, as is narrated by Sima Qian in the *Biographies*. When Bian Que was passing the State of Qi, Marquis Huan of Qi (*Qi Huan Hou* 齐桓侯) kept him as a guest. When he went to visit the Earl in his court, Bian Que remarked to him, "A disease is attacking you now, but it is only in the muscle. If you are not treated immediately, it will become worse." "We are not sick," responded the Marquis. Then Bian Que left. The Marquis told his attendants that "physicians seek profits, so they all want to treat healthy people as patients." Five days later, when seeing the Marquis again, Bian Que informed him the disease was attacking his blood. The Marquis replied again with "We are not sick." After Bian Que left, the Marquis showed his annoyance. After another five days, Bian Que saw the Marquis again. "The disease is attacking your intestines. It will become even worse if you refuse treatment." The Marquis did not respond to Bian Que this time, and he was furious. After five more days, Bian Que saw the Marquis again, but left as soon as he saw him. The Marquis sent an attendant to inquire why. Bian Que responded,

“疾之居腠理也，汤熨之所及也；在血脉，针石之所及也；其在肠胃，酒醪之所及也；其在骨髓，虽司命无奈之何。今在骨髓，臣是以无请也。”後五日，桓侯体病，使人召扁鹊，扁鹊已逃去。桓侯遂死。<sup>17</sup>

"When the disease attacks the muscle, it can be cured with warm water and moxa treatment (*tang yun* 汤熨); when it is in the blood, it can be treated with acupuncture and stone instrument (*zhen shi* 鍼石); when it attacks the intestines and the stomach, it can still be treated with herbal decoction mixed with alcohol (*jiu lao* 酒醪); however, when the disease attacks the bone marrow, even the Life God (*Si Ming* 司命) feels quite helpless. Today, the disease is attacking the Marquis's bone marrow, so I have no idea what to do." When feeling sick five days later, the Marquis sent for

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 47-48.

Bian Que, who had already taken off. The Marquis died, as Bian Que had said.

This anecdote spells out the four stages through which Bian Que thought a disease would attack the human body: the muscle, the blood, the internal organs, and the bone marrow. Certainly, it also shows how Bian Que diagnosed the disease in that particular situation—as a four-step process. This four-step process could be a standard treatment method employed by physicians of that period. As we can see, Bian Que possessed the ability to see through the Marquis's body, just like a cat-scan machine or an X-ray machine. Whether the story is true or not is not very important; what is significant, is that it demonstrates what people at that time believed medical instructions could do, and it shows that people knew how to take advantage of medical instructions. In other words, Bian Que could not have diagnosed the Marquis's disease without benefiting from the medical instruction book from Chang Sangjun.

### ***Attached Reports: China's First Attempt to Classify Technical Writings***

In 26 BCE, Emperor Cheng of Han 汉成帝 (r. 33 – 7BCE) commissioned a team of experts and scholars led by Liu Xiang 刘向 (79 – 8 BCE) to develop China's first book catalogue which was intended to organize and classify mounds of messy writings and texts, which totaled 13,219 volumes in all. Liu Xiang classified these writings and texts into six large groups: Jing Zhuan 经传 (Confucian scriptures), Zhu Zi 诸子 (masters); Shi Fu 诗赋 (poetry and rhapsodies), Bing Shu 兵书 (military writings), Shu Shu 算术 (divination), and Fang Ji 方伎 (technical writings). A specialist was designated to address his own field of expert knowledge: Liu Xiang himself worked on Confucian scriptures, masters, and poetry and rhapsodies; Commander of Infantry (*bubing xiaowei* 步兵校尉) Ren Hong (任宏) annotated military writings; Grand Historical Officer (*tai shilling* 太史令) Yin Xian (尹咸) edited divination texts; and Imperial Physician (*shi yi* 侍医) Li Zhuguo (李柱国) classified technical writings. After editing and classifying one text, Liu Xiang would submit it to the Emperor for review. He also composed an informative report which recounted the author's life, summarized the content, assessed its scholarly values, and reviewed the process of annotation and collation. He attached the report to the classified text which he submitted to the Emperor. Later, he edited all the reports into a single collection titled *Attached Reports*

(*Bie Luo* 别录). This *Attached Reports* championed the cataloguing principles for later Chinese scholars and experts to follow in classifying writings and texts.<sup>18</sup>

What is especially noteworthy is that the catalogue classified technical writings as a single category of its own. In other words, technical writings, appeared in the Chinese history of literature as an independent category of texts and writings for the first time. Certainly, at that time, it was a category of texts and writings, not a field of scholarly research. That is why ‘writings’ is inflected to have the ending ‘s.’ Unfortunately, Liu Xiang’s *Attached Reports* was lost during the Tang dynasty 唐朝 (618—907). Today we can only read a description of how it classified texts and writings as preserved in the *History of the Former Han* (*Han Shu* 汉书) by Ban Gu 班固 (32—92 CE).

Liu Xiang did not finish the huge project of classifying and cataloguing writings and texts, though he had been working on it for twenty years. His son, Liu Xin 刘歆 (50 BCE—23 CE) completed it. Liu Xin simplified his father’s descriptions and accounts in the *Attached Reports* and edited them into a descriptive catalogue titled *Seven Fields* (*Qi Lue* 七略). It carried on the textual tradition of the *Attached Reports* and observed its editing and classifying principles. The catalogue was titled *Seven Fields* because there were seven parts in it—a general introduction, and six parts devoted to the six categories of texts and writings as classified in the *Attached Reports*. The only difference between the *Attached Reports* and the *Seven Fields* is that Liu Xin added a general introduction, in which he reviewed his entire schemes of classification. Unfortunately, like the *Attached Reports*, the *Seven Fields* is long extant. Today we read a description of its classification schemes in Ban Gu’s *History of the Former Han*. It provided the foundation for the bibliographical chapter “Monograph on Arts and Writings” (*Yiwe Zhi* 艺文志) in Ban Gus’s *History*.

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<sup>18</sup> Glen Dudbridge, “Libraries, Book Catalogues, Lost Writings,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Classical Chinese Literature (1000 BCE—900 CE)*, eds. Wiebke Denecke, Wai-yee Li, and Xiaofei Tian (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 148; “Attached Reports (“*Bie Lu*” 别录,” *Baidu Encyclopedia* (*Baidu Baike* 百度百科), Baidu, accessed August 10, 2018, <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E4%B8%83%E7%95%A5%E5%88%AB%E5%BD%95/15757489>.

## Monograph on Arts and Writings

“Monograph on Arts and Writings” (*Yiwen Zhi* 艺文志) is the bibliographical chapter in Ban Gu’s *History of the Former Han* (*Han Shu* 汉书). Drawing data and strategies for classifying texts and writings from the *Attached Reports* and the *Seven Fields*, this chapter classifies texts and writings found in the Imperial library into six large categories, supported with a bibliography of the texts and writings classified into each category. Basically, it employs the same classification schemes as used in the *Seven Fields* and maintained the same six large categories of texts and writings as classified in the *Seven Fields*.<sup>19</sup> This chapter is the earliest surviving bibliographical and cataloguing work that systematically collates and classifies texts and writings in the Chinese tradition. Of particular significance to our discussion is its cataloguing of technical writing texts and books (*fang ji* 方伎), the sixth largest category of texts and writings which Ban Gu classified in the chapter. Ban Gu further classified technical writing into four sub-categories: medical writing (*yi jing* 医经), pharmacopoeias writing (*jing fang* 经方), art-of-bedchamber writing (*fang zhong* 房中), and immortal writing (*shen xian* 神仙). Ban Gu defined each subcategory and elaborated on the purposes of these four sub-categories of texts and writings.<sup>20</sup>

Medical writing, according to Ban Gu, is the texts that study physiological features, blood vessels, meridian channels, bone marrow, *yin* and *yang*, external and internal symptoms. The purpose of medical writings is to pinpoint and elaborate on the causes of various diseases. Medical writing helps physicians investigate and improve treatments by using acupuncture, stone needle, herbal decoction, and moxibustion. It also helps physicians concoct medicinals proportionally.

Pharmacopoeias writing helps produce medicinals by spelling out the cold, cool, warm, and hot natures—the four properties (*si xing* 四性)—of various medicinals; by considering how the human body responds to the four seasons; and by figuring out how human organs react to the four properties and various flavors of medicinals.

Art-of-bedchamber writing refers to the texts that are intended to help men and women consummate their love affairs and turn their love into

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<sup>19</sup> Ban Gu 班固, *Han Shu* 汉书 [*History of the Former Han*], in *Ershiwu Shi Diyi Juan* 二十五史第一卷 [Twenty-five histories, vol. 1] (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubenshe and Shanghai Shudian, 1988), 527.

<sup>20</sup> Ban Gu 班固, *Han Shu* 汉书, 533.

advanced ways of preserving health (*yang sheng* 养生) and supply nourishment in the art of the bedchamber.

Immortal writing teaches humans to preserve primordial or vital energy (*yuan qi* 元气) by employing natural resources to help preserve health.

## Ban Gu's Classification of Four Types of Technical Writing

Ban Gu's bibliographical chapter, "Monograph on Arts and Writings" represents the first extant catalogue in the Chinese history of textual culture, which formally gives an ordered structure to the category of technical writings in a catalogue of texts and writings, explicitly in a section devoted to 'technical writings,' and specifically, in his fourfold classification scheme. To be more specific, he classifies technical writings into four types of writings:

医经者，原人血脉经落(络)骨髓阴阳表里，以起百病之本，死生之分，而用度箴石汤火所施，调百药齐和之所宜。至齐之得，犹慈石取铁，以物相使。拙者失理，以愈为剧，以生为死。

经方者，本草石之寒温，量疾病之浅深，假药味之滋，因气感之宜，辩五苦六辛，致水火之齐，以通闭解结，反之于平。及失其宜者，以热益热，以寒增寒，精气内伤，不见于外，是所独失也。故谚曰：“有病不治，常得中医。”

房中者，情性之极，至道之际，是以圣王制外乐以禁内情，而为之节文。传曰：“先王之作乐，所以节百事也。乐而有节，则和平寿考。及迷者弗顾，以生疾而陨性命。”

神仙者，所以保性命之真，而游求于其外者也。聊以荡意平心，同死生之域，而无怵惕于胸中。<sup>21</sup>

Medical writings study human blood, meridian channels, bone marrow, *yin* and *yang*, and exteriors and interiors, in order to pinpoint the causes of various diseases, and distinguish between life and death. They also explore and develop ways of using acupuncture, stone needles, herbal decoction, and moxibustion. Finally, they intend to figure out the best ratios of various herbal agents to each other in herbal decoction, so that the agents

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<sup>21</sup> Ban Gu 班固, *Han Shu* 汉书, 533.

react to each other in such a way as to enhance their effects, as a magnet reacts to iron.

Pharmacopoeia writings describe various ways to prepare medicinals of cold, cool, warm, and hot properties in order to open clogged meridian channels, to relieve symptoms of stagnation of the circulation of the vital energy, and to restore the bodily balance between *yin* and *yang*. Thus, pharmacopoeia writings must help determine the cold, cool, warm, and hot properties of different herbs and minerals; calculate and measure the seriousness of diseases, and consider the human body's response to the four seasons and the weather. They also determine how the five viscera and six bowels (*wuzang liufu* 五脏六腑) react to the properties and flavors (*wei*) of the medicinals.

Writings on the art of the bedchamber help men and women consummate their love affairs by defining the most advanced strategies for preserving vital energy, and supplying nourishment in the art of the bedchamber. In antiquity, wise kings composed music outside the bedchamber to control lust inside it, and refrained from expressing it explicitly. *Zuo Commentary* (*Zuo Zhuan* 左传) states, "The wise king composed music to put everything under control." The art of the bedchamber makes it possible for people to enjoy love affairs, and, if they practice moderation, they will be able to nourish their blood and vital energy, thus leading to longevity.

Writings on immortality teach humans to preserve primordial or vital energy (*yuan qi* 元气) and to employ nature as a source of nourishment for supplying primordial or vital energy. They purify one's soul and calm one's emotions. Writings on immortality treat life and death as two sides of the same coin, so they wipe out the fear of death in one's mind.

Ban Gu's "Monograph on Arts and Writings" is a crucial textual inflection point where technical writings in the Chinese tradition became an independent classification in a Chinese catalogue. These four types of technical writings, as classified by Ban Gu, are perhaps rooted in the need for taxonomy and order, and Ban Gu's classification satisfied that need by answering the questions "how many types," and "where to find them." In this classification, the four types of technical writings share one common major feature. That is to say, they are all concerned with preserving human life. This common feature suggests to us that the nature of technical writings at its nascent stage in Chinese antiquity was to help extend life expectancy.

## Ban Gu's Theory of Technical Writing as Revealed in "Monograph on Arts and Writings": Its Beginning

Ban Gu's fourfold classification of technical writing also suggests the readership and purpose of technical writings in Chinese antiquity: to help people preserve health. Actually, towards the end of the bibliographical chapter of "Monograph on Arts and Writings," Ban Gu does clearly describe the readership and the purpose of technical writings. More important, while attempting to describe the readership and the purpose of technical writing, he actually discusses its origin, though perhaps he was not aware of it:

方技者，皆生生之具，王官之一守也。太古有歧伯、俞拊，中世有扁鹊、秦和，盖论病以及国，原诊以知政。汉兴有仓公。今其技术晦昧，故论其书，以序方技为四种。<sup>22</sup>

Technical writing (*fangji zhe* 方技者) refers to texts that guide humans to achieve longevity. Achieving longevity is an Imperial court duty, performed by a designated Imperial court official. In antiquity, there were Qi Bo 歧伯 and Yu Fu 俞拊. In the middle ages, there were Bian Que 扁鹊 and Qin He 秦和. By drawing inferences from examining the monarch's illnesses, they were all able to get to know the domestic situations of the kingdom. Based on their analysis of the monarch's symptoms, they were able to know the political affairs of the kingdom. (*Gai, lunbing yi jiguo, yuanzhen yi zhizheng* 盖, 论病以及国, 原诊已知政.) After the Han dynasty was established, there was a famous physician Cang Gong 苍公 (aka Chunyu Yi 醇于意). Because the medical skills of the above mentioned famous physicians are obscure, and little-known now, (*anmei* 晦昧), it is my duty to collate, annotate, and classify technical writings into four categories of medical writings, pharmacopeias writings, writings of the art of the bedchamber, and writings on immortals.

This passage is short, but it is loaded with much information about the origin of technical writings in Chinese antiquity. First, 'technical writing' refers exclusively to texts that helped humans to extend their life expectancy. Second, the job of extending life expectancy was performed by designated physicians who held Imperial court official titles, such as Grand Physician (*tai yi* 太医) and Imperial Physician (*shi yi* 侍医). Because an Imperial physician worked in the Imperial court, and only handled the medical needs of the monarch and other important high-

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 534.

ranking imperial officials, technical writing was usually employed by the Imperial physicians within the Imperial court. Third, only Imperial physicians were qualified to treat the monarch, so the only users of, or readership of, technical writing texts were the Imperial physicians. Fourth, examining a monarch's illnesses and analyzing the symptoms were politically oriented. By checking a monarch's health, an Imperial physician was able to discern the political situation of the Imperial State. In other words, the monarch's health was symptomatic of the situation of the State. Technical writing then, served as a tool with which Imperial physicians might analyze not just the monarch's illnesses, but also, more importantly, the situation of the State, perhaps through divination. Technical writing in Chinese antiquity at the earliest state of its development was a political tool as well as a medical tool. However, the medical skills of the Imperial physicians of the previous generations became obscure by Ban Gu's time, so Ban Gu decided to collate and classify technical writings into four categories, which would clearly guide readers to acquire the skills needed in their own fields of expert knowledge, be they medicine, pharmacopeias, the art of the bedchamber, or immorality. Here, we can see that technical writings arose from the need to train highly skilled Imperial physicians who could examine and analyze not only a monarch's illnesses but also the situation of the Imperial State. Technical writers were the highly skilled physicians appointed by the Imperial court.

### **A Modification of Ban Gu's Theory of the Beginning of Technical Writing**

As I discussed in the above section, Imperial court physicians could employ 'divination' (*shu shu* 数术) while analyzing the monarch's symptoms and advising him what to do. In Ban Gu's biographical chapter, '*shu shu*' is an independent category of writings and texts which consist of writings on astrology (*zhan xing* 占星): writings and texts which, based on the positions of stars, the sun, and the moon, record auspicious and ominous manifestations to help monarchs make political decisions; writings on almanacs or calendars (*li pu* 历谱); writings and texts which determine the four seasons and twenty-four solar terms, such as 'spring equinox' and 'summer solstice,' whereby monarchs could get to know the Mandate of Heaven; writings on the five elements (*wu xing* 五行), which discuss how metal, wood, water, fire, and earth (*jin mu shui huo tuo* 金木水火土) manifest the five constants (*wu chang* 五常) of kindness, duty, rituals, wisdom, and credibility (*ren yi li zhi xin* 仁义礼智信), so that if

these five constants are lost, then the five elements will be thrown into chaos; writings on divination by milfoil and turtle plastrons (*shi gui* 蓍龟); writings and texts which guide people to predict auspicious and ominous events and activities; miscellaneous divination (*za zhan*, 杂占); writing and texts which keep track of manifestations of all on the earth to help people examine auspicious and ominous events; and finally, writings on geomancy and physiognomy (*xing fa* 形法), which study features of the land and human facial features, and by extension, the features of all objects and lives, to determine auspiciousness, ominousness, nobleness, and lowliness.

Ban Gu did not group those writings in the same category as technical writing (*fang ji* 方伎), but they are closely related to each other, as some Chinese scholars have pointed out.<sup>23</sup> *Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine* (*Huangdi Neijing* 黄帝内经), a technical writing book on medicine, cited by Ban Gu in his catalogue of technical writings, employs a lot of rhetoric of the principles of the five elements, astrology, and divination, which correspond to those described in writings and texts on the five elements, astrology, and divination. The authoritative *Sources of Sinitic Words* (*Ci Yuan* 辞源) suggests that in Chinese antiquity, technical writings referred to writings and texts on both medical writings and astrology and divinatory writings.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, *History of the Three Kingdoms* (*San Guo Zhi* 三国志), *New History of the Tang* (*Xin Tang Shu* 新唐书), *History of the Song* (*Song Shi* 宋史), and *History of the Ming* (*Ming Shi* 明史) all present biographies of experts on medicine, astrology, calendar, divination, and physiognomy, under the general category of "Biographies of Technical Experts" (*Fangji Zhuan* 方伎传).<sup>25</sup>

Thus, I propose that we modify Ban Gu's theory of the beginning of technical writing. Technical writers have their origin in Imperial court physicians, astrologers, and diviners.

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<sup>23</sup> Wan Fang and Zhong Sheng, *Reflection on Development of Traditional Chinese Medical Theory and Technology* 中医药理论技术发展的方法学思考 (Beijing: Kexue Press, 2011), 2.

<sup>24</sup> He, Wang, and Dong, *Ci Yuan* (Beijing: Shangwu Yinshu Guan, 2015).

<sup>25</sup> Pei Songzhi, *San Guo Zhi*, (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Publishing House, 1988), 97-100; Song Qi, "Biographies of Technical Experts," in *Xin Tang Shu*, ed. Ouyang Xiu (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Publishing House, 1988), 619-622; Tuotuo and Alutu, *Song Shi* (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Publishing House, 1988), 1528-1532; Zhang Tingyu, Xu Yuanmeng, and Liu Bao, *Ming Shi* (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Publishing House, 1988), 832-835.

Technical writings in Chinese antiquity consisted of the following categories of texts and writings: medical writings, pharmacopeias writings, writings on the art of the bedchamber, writings on immortals, astrological writings, writings on almanacs or calendars, divinatory writings, and writings on the five elements.

### **Spirit of Technical Writing at Its Nascent Stage of Development**

Ban Gu describes in “Monograph on Arts and Writing” the context that gave rise to technical writing and explains the reasons why it should exist. That is, there were no skilled physicians, and medical skills were almost lost in oblivion, so medical skills should be rescued from obscurity, and highly skilled physicians should be trained and guided by texts and writings that helped humans achieve longevity. Thus, it was imperative and significant for Ban Gu to clearly define and catalogue technical writing texts and books.

In *Monograph*, Ban Gu stresses that using technical writing books is a duty performed by an Imperial court official. In Chinese Imperial dynastic histories, all Imperial court officials were appointed by emperors, so either Grand Physicians or Imperial Physicians must have been designed by emperors as specialists to practice technical writing, either to practice medical treatments or to compose texts on medical technique. An Imperial court physician did not just handle the medical needs of the emperor and other high-ranking court officials, but he had to perform another, more important, court duty: discussing and managing state affairs in the same way as he discussed the emperor’s symptoms and managed his medical needs. It seems that a court physician also served as a political advisor to the emperor. This suggests the way in which technical writing has to take on a life of its own: to help the monarch run the state, and should not be regarded simply as an extension of other Chinese classics.

How could an Imperial court physician help the emperor run the state? Physicians employed medical skills in conjunction with ‘shu technique’ 数术 (divination) so that he could advise the monarch on what to do by keeping track of the correlations between the monarch’s health, the court activities, and natural phenomena such as the movements of the moon and the stars. As Varsano rightly points out, “the task of [technical writers] was to help the ruler do the right thing at the right time.”<sup>26</sup> Divination,

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<sup>26</sup> Paula Varsano, “Moments,” in *Classical Chinese Literature (1000 BCE—900 CE)*, eds. Wiebke Denecke, Wai-ye Li, and Xiaofei Tian (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 406.

particularly its *yin-yang* principle 阴阳学说, at the nascent stage of its development, was closely related to Chinese medicine. The *Classic of Changes (Yi Jing 易经)*, completed between 3500 BCE and 500 BCE, is “a book of oracles and divination.”<sup>27</sup> This book of divination most comprehensively expounds the principle of *yin* and *yang*. The *yin-yang* principle, together with the principles of the five elements (*wu xing 五行*) and primordial energy (*qi 气*) constitute the roots of Chinese traditional medicine.<sup>28</sup> In other words, when an Imperial court physician treated the monarch, he might also apply divination theory, the principles of *yin* and *yang*, and the five elements, to his diagnosis of the monarch’s symptoms, which helped him predict what would happen and what would not happen to the monarch’s health, the Imperial court, and the State. Based on the prediction, he could inform the monarch what to do and what not to do. So at its nascent stage, technical writing served the Imperial court and helped the monarch run the state.

### Ethical Issues in Technical Writing at Its Nascent Stage

Ban Gu, while he defines the four sub-categories of technical writing, also brings up some issues in technical writing practices in Chinese antiquity. He is especially concerned with the sources of unethical practices and their negative effects on human beings. He discusses ethical issues as they exist in the four areas of technical writing practices:

拙者失理，以愈为剧，以生为死。

及失其宜者，以热益热，以寒增寒，精气内伤，不见于外，是所独失也。故谚曰：“有病不治，常得中医。”

及迷者弗顾，以生疾而隕性命。

然而或者专以为务，则诞欺怪迂之文弥以益多，非圣王之所以教也。孔子曰：“索隐行怪，后世有述焉，吾不为之矣。”<sup>29</sup>

Poorly skilled physicians do not observe medical ethical principles [described in medical writings], misdiagnose patients’ illnesses, treat a

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<sup>27</sup> Ding, “Yi Jing,” 320.

<sup>28</sup> Giovanni Maciocia, *The Foundations of Chinese Medicine E-Book: A Comprehensive Text* (Edinburg: Elsevier Health Sciences, 2015), 2-74.

<sup>29</sup> Ban Gu, *Han Shu* 汉书, 169.

patient with a minor illness as one with a serious illness, and treat a curable disease as an incurable one.

A mediocre physician, [because he fails to follow instructions from the pharmacopeias] to restore bodily balance between *yin* and *yang*, prescribes medicinals of cold property for symptoms of cold nature and prescribes medicinals of hot property for symptoms of hot nature, only to cause interior injuries to vital energy, though the injuries do not reveal themselves externally. So a proverb goes, “Better to recover on one’s own than to be treated by a mediocre physician.”

In the art of the bedchamber, if one practices moderation, then he will be able to nourish his blood and vital energy. If, addicted to sex and ignoring the strategies for preserving health, he will become sick or lose his life.

Immoral people make a profit by producing writings that pretend to achieve immortality, so more and more absurd, deceiving, bizarre, and enigmatic writings are generated. That is not what wise kings have taught us to do. Confucius once declared, “History does record people who behave absurdly and who pursue enigmatic matters, but I shun them.”

In the above passage, Ban Gu discusses several ethical issues in technical writing practices in Chinese antiquity: failure to follow ethical principles, not being professionally qualified, pandering to one’s basest emotions, and seeking profits. Ban Gu points out that these are the four reasons why unethical technical writing practices occur. First, poorly skilled physicians misdiagnose illnesses or treat a minor illness as a major one or a curable one as an incurable one, because they do not follow ethical principles as spelled out in medical writings. Ban Gu seems to tell us that all the cases of the medical malpractice he lists in his message are caused by the physician’s failure to observe ethical principles. The reason why they choose not to follow ethical principles appears to be profit seeking. Recall a story Sima Qian narrates in his seminal *Records of the Historian* (*Shiji* 史记) about Bian Que, the famous physician: When Bian Que saw Marquis Huan of Qi (*Qi Huan Hou* 齐桓侯), he told the Marquis that he was sick, but the Marquis told his attendants that they should not believe Bian Que, because as a physician, Bain Que was not credible. Why? The Marquis himself explained that that “physicians seek profits, so they all want to treat healthy people as patients.”<sup>30</sup> Probably it was a common problem in Sima Qian’s time that physicians made profits by

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<sup>30</sup> Sima Qian, *Records of the Historian*, 93.

violating ethical principles. Thus, he warned us about these cases of malpractice.

A physician may also prescribe wrong medicinals if he fails to follow the rules as laid out in pharmacopeia. The result could be that a patient's symptoms become more serious. Such a physician is at best a mediocre physician (*shi qi yizhe* 失其宜者). Clearly, for Ban Gu, such a physician is not professionally qualified to treat a patient. Thus, Ban Gu suggests that a patient should not see a mediocre physician; instead, the patient should recover slowly on his own. Wrong medicinals may cause more serious health problems or even death. In Ban Gu's condemnation of mediocre physicians, an issue is raised: Does it imply that every time a physician prescribes wrong medicinals, unethical medical practice occurs, or he who prescribes wrong medicinals must be professionally unqualified? In cataloguing writings on the art of the bedchamber, Ban Gu seems to condemn individuals who are addicted to sex and who ignore the ways of preserving health as recommended by writings on the art of the bedchamber. Does Ban Gu suggest to us that it is not ethical to indulge in sex without considering one's health? As least, we can claim with certainty that for Ban Gu, it is not wise to do so, because he invokes wise kings in his message who control their lust by employing music. It is not wise because such indulgence could lead to death. Perhaps, Ban Gu is criticizing the writings and texts on the art of the bedchamber that do not warn the readers of the negative or even disastrous consequences of indulging in sex.

Ban Gu is loud and clear when he condemns "absurd, deceiving, bizarre, and enigmatic writings" on immortality. People who composed these writings and texts only intended to confuse the readers, instead of helping them to achieve longevity. They made profits from the confused readers. Again, Ban Gu invokes wise kings who teach people not to make profits by deceiving others. He also invokes the sage—Confucius—who shun[s] (*bu wei* 不为) people who intend to make profits by deceiving others.

## CHAPTER TWO

# THE ORACLE BONE INSCRIPTIONS (甲骨文): THE EARLIEST ARTIFACT OF TECHNICAL WRITING IN CHINA

As my discussion in Chapter One suggests, Ban Gu (班固) in his “Monograph on Arts and Writings” (*Yiwen Zhi* 艺文志) classifies the category of technical writing into four sub-categories: medical writings, pharmacopeia writings, writings on the art of the bedchamber, and writings on immortality. In Chapter One, I also argued, with some success I hope, that technical writing in Chinese antiquity was closely related to writings on divination (*shu shu* 数术), including divination by milfoil (*shi* 著) called *shi* (筮) and divination with tortoise plastrons (*qigui* 耆龟) called *bu* (卜), writings that helped people predict auspicious or ominous astronomical events and human activities, or writings that recorded divination activities that people performed for such predictions.

Long before Ban Gu composed his “Monograph on Arts and Writings” and Sima Qian (司马迁) composed his *Records of the Historian* (*Shiji* 史记), people in the Shang dynasty (c. 1765—1121 BCE)<sup>31</sup> had learned to respond to illnesses and astronomical events in oracle activities through communicating with the world of divine spirits, like ancestors and other divine forces, to find out the causes for illnesses, and the astronomical events to determine a course of action for appropriate treatments of the illnesses, and predict the impacts of the illnesses or the astronomical events on their daily life. The activities were then inscribed on the plastrons of tortoises or scapulae of oxen by ‘literate diviner groups’.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the very first artifact of technical writing in China was generated—

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<sup>31</sup> James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, vol. III, pt. 1, 184.

<sup>32</sup> Imre Galambos, “The Chinese Writing System,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Classical Chinese Literature (1000 BCE—900 CE)*, eds. Wiebke Denecke, Wai-ye Li, and Xiaofei Tian (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 40.

the oracle-bone inscription (*jia gu wen* 甲骨文). The oracle-bone script is the earliest known form of Chinese writing (*hanzi* Sinographs).

### **The Oracle-bone Inscriptions: Communicating with the World of Spirits**

People in North China (*Hua Bei* 华北) learned to use cattle scapulae for divination as early as the Xia dynasty (2204—11765 BCE).<sup>33</sup> At that time, people just heated the shoulder blades until they cracked and then they interpreted the crack lines to find out the answers to their questions about the future. This divination practice reached its height by Shang times.<sup>34</sup> In the Shang dynasty, people began to use tortoise plastrons as well as cattle scapulae for divination activities. Why did the Shang people start to use tortoise plastrons for divination practice? Tortoises were considered divine animals in Chinese antiquity.<sup>35</sup> So, Cao Cao (曹操), a statesman and a military strategist during the Three Kingdoms period (220-280 CE), described ‘the divine tortoise’ in one of his famous tetrasyllabic (*siyan* 四言) stanzaic poems “Divine Tortoises Enjoy Longevity (*Shengui Suishou* 神龟虽寿).”<sup>36</sup> For the Shang people, the tortoises represented the cosmos, “the sky and the earth with four pillars in the northeast, southeast, northwest, and southwest.”<sup>37</sup> The divine tortoises were thought to have a special connection to the world of spirits such as gods, ancestors, and other divine forces. When Lady Fu Hao (妇好), a famous consort of King Wuding 武丁 (r. ca. 1200 BCE), the twenty-second king of the Shang dynasty, was sick, for example, a diviner (*buguan* 卜官) working for the King used tortoise plastrons to communicate with spirits in order to find out the causes for Lady Fu Hao’s

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<sup>33</sup> Julia Ching, *Mysticism and Kingship in China: The Heart of Chinese Wisdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 6; Xing Lu, *Rhetoric in Ancient China, Fifth to Third Century, BCE: A Comparison with Classical Greek Rhetoric* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 51.

<sup>34</sup> Ching, *Mysticism and Kingship*, 6; also see Lu, *Rhetoric in Ancient China*, 51.

<sup>35</sup> Kwang-chih Chang, *The Archaeology of Ancient China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 316, 314; *ibid.*, *Shang Civilization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 54-55.

<sup>36</sup> Cao Cao, “Divine Tortoises Enjoy Longevity,” in *Selected Poems from Every Dynasty, Vol 1*, eds. Ji Zhenhuai, Feng Zhongyan, Chen Yixin, and Ni Qixin (Beijing: Beijing Youth Press, 1980), 152.

<sup>37</sup> Sarah Allan, *The Shape of the Turtle: Myth, Art, and Cosmos in Early China*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 101.