

Praise for Sex in the Yellow Emperor's Basic Questions

This book is fascinating, deep, essential reading for anyone interested in sex as the hidden force ruling bodily and spiritual health. Adepts of Daoist sexology, Oriental and Western doctors, sex therapists, psychologists, energy worker; scholars, archeologists, poets, and historians of Chinese culture or simply curious lay readers—all will feel they have been erotically and psycho-sexually sated.

Human culture here is a vast jigsaw puzzle, with sex as the key piece linking cosmology, empirical and magical medicine, the popular culture of love, its diseases and its euphoric desires, Confucian family dynamics, bi-sexual emperors, eunuchs, longevity qigong, and Daoist philosophy.

I have been reading works in this field for thirty years and was amazed at how much new Jessica Leo had to teach me. Who would guess that Confucius was sired during an orgiastic Spring Fertility Rite? Her penetrating research deftly illuminates and vivifies the often inscrutable Yellow Emperor and Mawangdui manuscripts of 2200 years ago. This is a book you will literally take to bed.

—Michael Winn, Healing Tao USA

Jessieca Leo examines a part of the Chinese classical medical tradition that has until now received little attention. The author's broad scholarship and familiarity with the tradition and the text allow her to explore social and historical themes while examining philological and medical issues. This book deserves a place on the shelves of all scholars of the ancient Chinese medical traditions. It is also essential reading for modern scholars and practitioners who are part of the neoclassical revitalization of Traditional Chinese Medicine.

—Stephen Jackowicz, Adelphi University

In her work about sex and longevity in the *Huangdi neiijing*, Jessieca Leo presents an excellent and detailed study of the earliest systematic thought about the physical, physiological, psychological, and environmental aspects of sexuality and how they are related to longevity.

This comprehensive volume is a superb introduction to the medical theory of sexuality, beginning with the different terms used in speaking about sexual interaction, the anatomy and energetics, up to reproductive physiology and pathology. Based on her own new translation of the relevant passages in the *Suwen*, the author offers a new and deeper understanding of the earliest fundamentals of sexuality not only in terms of Chinese Medicine, but also how sexual cultivation and health care are practiced within bedchamber arts and longevity techniques. I highly recommend it to everyone interested in the sexual culture of China.

—Dominique Hertzner, University of Munich

Jessieca Leo has opened our eyes to a fascinating aspect of early Chinese thought that Westerners seldom have access to. Using Chinese medicine as the background, she traces the developing understanding of sexuality, and the part it plays in life and society, while the analysis always returns to the balancing nature of Chinese philosophy. Much is surprisingly relevant to today, from the pursuit of pleasure to the warnings of mixing sex and alcohol. Anyone interested in Chinese history and culture will find it hugely enlightening.

—Richard Bannerman, BBC

Jessieca Leo traces sex and sexuality in early China in sources that have long been neglected. Clear language and new translations from the *Yellow Emperor's Basic Questions* guide readers on an interesting track into a basic aspect of Chinese history and culture. The book is an absolute must for anyone interested in traditional China and the history and culture of human sexuality.

—Rodo Pfister, University of Basel

Jessieca Leo's *Sex in the Yellow Emperor's Basic Questions* is a truly remarkable achievement. Leo successfully combines philological precision with fresh analyses, questioning the received *communis opinio* on sexuality, medicine, and sexual culture in early China. It is easy to read and a pleasure to digest. Highly recommended.

—Burkhard Scherer, Christ Church University

Sex
in the
Yellow Emperor's
Basic Questions

Sex, Longevity, and Medicine
in Early China

Jessieca Leo

Three Pines Press

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Foreword

Unlike many studies of Chinese sexual culture that have tended to focus on Chinese erotic literature, Jessieca Leo's work examines medical texts to find information on human sexual culture. Her study opens completely new vistas: her approach not only allows readers to become more familiar with the question of how sexuality is understood from the point of view of traditional Chinese anthropology, it also leads to a discussion of sexuality in the wider perspective of human health and life.

The text at the basis of this study is the *Suwen* (Basic Questions) which belongs to a body of texts dedicated to the Yellow Emperor—the mythical progenitor of ancient Chinese civilization. Issues of the origin and transmission of this body of texts are complicated: the books include the accumulation, amendment, and reshaping of scripts, together with annotations by various medical schools covering well over 500 years. Despite these variations in form and content, the *Suwen* became the canonical text for medical reasoning and shaped the medical tradition.

Rather than focusing on diagnostics and therapy of distinct diseases, Jessieca Leo discusses questions regarding the effective functioning of the human body and possible disturbances. Her presentation provides insights on how human action and behavior are conceptualized in early Chinese thinking. The *Suwen*, she convincingly shows, exposes the deep concern of the ancient Chinese for prolificacy and fertility in the service of securing a greater number of offspring to continue the ancestral line. Rich in content, the work presents an impressive array of ancient China's knowledge about the inner functions of the human body.

Although core layers of the *Suwen* may go back to the 1st century BCE, its content shows a rather elaborate conceptual framework defined by the interaction of yin and yang as well as the flow and movement of energetic constellations (*qi*) along fixed circulatory systems or vessels (*mai*). This shows a tradition of medical thinking that focuses on preserving a great and deep body of knowledge about the human body.

However, striking as it is, this detailed framework of medical thinking is not detached from a more basic outlook on nature and human society. Chinese medical language, although highly specialized and rather technical, is not separate from a broader understanding of nature and society. Instead, medical thinking of human functions parallels beliefs

and observations of cosmological actions, natural phenomena, and human organization.

As the author shows, from their linguistic expression, parallel concepts belonging to different levels of discourse can be described as a kind of metaphorical extension of meaning. For instance, physical circulatory systems are called *mai*, thus matching landscape formations of river valleys and mountain ranges; physical parts and functions are said to belong to yin or yang, which denote a great range of natural phenomena. On a deeper conceptual level, however, the correspondence of the human body to the forms and structures of nature rests in the strictly functional view of human and natural actions by stressing the interplay of complementary powers. Thereby, the text shows the strong natural tendency to balance powers and maintain regularity and resilience.

Earlier, non-medical literature provides some evidence that human sexuality and reproduction were understood in terms of cosmic action. From this we can trace the ideological background of the *Suwen*. As Stephen Owen points out in his "Reproduction in the *Shijing* (Classic of Poetry)" (HJAS 2001), ancestral hymns conceptualize human fertility and reproduction alongside the cultivation of land, growth, and production of seeds and food supplies. Regularity of the seasons and the cycle of sowing and harvesting match the continuity of the ancestral line through succeeding generations. Early Chinese rulers were held in esteem regarding their knowledge of how to participate in the natural cycles of nature, bringing fecundity to the fields, and protecting their fruits from harm. Rituals and sacrifices were conceived as a means to secure the progeny of the clan and the resources of the people.

That is to say, reproduction does not only require a profound knowledge of the operations of heaven and earth but also an expertise in helpful methods. The well-known definition, according to the Chinese tradition, of the human being as part of nature means that, by means of intelligence, humanity is capable of co-operating with the productive cycle of heaven and earth.

Consequently, sexuality and the knowledge of the methods of reproduction should be seen in their life-sustaining function. In early Chinese anthropological thinking, ethical norms and regulations of social behavior are expressed in the strict separation of sexes during social intercourse. The tradition of separation of sexes is not conceived as a move away from sexuality, rather as means to control and guide human sexual

behavior in certain ways believed to be consistent with the dualistic scheme of nature.

The belief, moreover, that the individual's body is inherited from, and given by, the ancestors, as Jessica Leo emphasizes, is crucial for the understanding of some traditional ideas of sexuality. For instance, preservation of the body and its physical functions shows respect for the parents. Ample offspring manifest the clan's strength and its good fortune: it is a tribute to this donation. Passages in the *Suwen*, speaking of fecundation and gestation, demonstrate the belief in the ancestral bestowing of the faculties of fecundation and conception on individuals. As a social consequence of this belief, the Chinese make sure of the partners' family descent before marriage. In addition, their belief in the inheritance of sexual capacity from the ancestors contributes to the understanding of the equation of sexual potency and child bearing capacity with human life preserving forces. Preservation of the body thus also means taking care of the functional abilities of the genitals, using exercises, dietetics, and abstinence from any excessive and unrestrained behavior.

Jessica Leo presents a meticulous study of the language of sex in the *Suwen*. She identifies different layers of sexual language, finding some that matches earlier medical texts and health care manuscripts used in the later medical tradition. However, since sexuality is not a well defined issue in the early Chinese medical texts, her work functions hermeneutically as a key to understanding and interpreting concepts that brings various propositions on bodily functions together.

Sexual language in the *Suwen* comes in many linguistic forms. Jessica Leo presents expressions of a common language denoting reproduction or human genital instruments, as well as common expressions like *ru* or *nei*, "entering" or "going inward," used in the special sense describing phases or types of sexual intercourse. Expressions of a more refined metaphorical language like "jade stalk," denoting the penis, stand side by side with an established vocabulary in medicinal discourse like "vessels," as part of a more systematic medical terminology.

Finally, the technical language of non-medical discourses describing complex interactions of various entities, actions or qualities, for example, in the realms of social government or cosmic operation, becomes sexualized by transposing it into the context of the reproductive organs. The organization of the medical material in this book along various aspects of human sexuality shows a great and fascinating picture of early Chinese

sexual thought which is seldom treated elsewhere. Comments on the cultural background as well as on the Chinese medical and health care tradition enrich the presentation and exhibit their points of difference and continuity. Annotations relating to modern bio-medical knowledge help the understanding of the matter and build a bridge over time and cultures.

—Dennis Schilling, Ludwig-Maximilians-University, Munich

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Dennis Schilling for his guidance and patience whenever I throw some crazy ideas at him. No less deserving thanks go to Rodo Pfister for putting me on the right track whenever I veered too far off. However, any errors in the book are mine and mine alone. Special thanks also go Etain Addey, Richard Bannerman, Dave Campbell, Ute Engelhardt, Marta Hanson, Thomas Hoellmann, Shih-shan Susan Huang, Irmgard Enzinger, Dominique Hertzler, Lena Kennerknecht-Hirth, Iris Huck, Angie Lee, Ulrike Middendorf, Maria Schreibweis, Hermann Tesenow, as well as the readers for Three Pines Press, for their generous contributions one way or another; and last but very importantly, the person who made this publication a reality—Livia Kohn.

Preface

Why sex and sexuality in the *Huangdi neijing suwen* 黃帝內經素問 (The Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic: Basic Questions)? When I first read the beginning of the text, I was fascinated by just how much knowledge the early Chinese had of sex and sexuality in the realm of reproductive physiology and health care principles. The *Suwen* is the oldest Chinese medical textbook, compiled between the 1st centuries BCE and CE, but it includes materials from as early as the 4th century BCE. Already over 2000 years ago the Chinese were working with such complicated and abstract physical, physiological, psychological, and environmental concepts within well-defined and systematized medical theories.

In this study, I show that the *Suwen* represents a stage in the development of medical theories where they became empirical, i.e., physicians diagnosed and treated diseases by using appropriate techniques and healing processes they observed and recorded. I achieve this by tracing how Mawangdui teachings of *yangsheng* 養生, the arts of nourishing life or longevity techniques, influenced the development of vessel theories in the *Suwen*. Sexual cultivation or the bedchamber arts formed an important branch of *yangsheng* teachings; they were a bridge for the cross-over from spirit-based magical medicine into well-defined and systematized theories.

The medical texts from Mawangdui indicate that sex was an integral part of health, longevity, and medicine. To set the study in a diachronic dimension, I compare the *Suwen* with the Mawangdui corpus and various materials from pre-Han and Han literature; and I also present the latest archaeological findings of erotic objects from the Han period. They all reveal sexual culture in different historical, intellectual, and social contexts. The synchronic dimension of this study, on the other hand, is represented by an evaluation of the materials pertaining to sexuality in other medical works, notably the *Maijing* 脈經 (Classic on Vessels), *Nanjing* 難經 (Classic of Difficult Issues), and especially the *Lingshu* 靈樞 (Spiritual Pivot) because of its historical connection to the *Suwen*.

By looking at how the *Suwen* depicts sex in association with medical theories, I hope to come closer to understanding how the early Chinese viewed sexuality. It seems appropriate to start with the *Suwen* not only because it is the earliest Chinese medical text but because it is central to

Chinese medicine both traditionally and today. Almost every post-*Suwen* medical text quotes something from it and for any student embarking on the study of Chinese Medicine today, they would have heard of the *Suwen* in one form or another from textbooks that make selective references to *Suwen's* theories.

Since this study attempts to show how the *Suwen* portrays sexuality in the realm of medical knowledge with reference to the social and literary context of the Han period, a large part of the book is given over to the semantics of describing the sexual act, sexual anatomy, and the procreation process. The work traces how the notion of sex is expressed in early writings and the semantics of sexuality in the *Suwen*. It deals with health care pertaining to sex, sexual maladies such as erectile dysfunction, and the consequences of over-indulgence in sex, food, and alcohol. It outlines traditional visions of the reproductive process, including concepts of sexual maturity, conception, fertility, and decline as depicted in the *Suwen*. Finally, it looks at sex and health within *Suwen* medical theories as part of the emerging medical faculty.

Chapter 1 has three parts that present an overview of the research and study of sexual culture in ancient and early China. First, I review the current state of research on Chinese sexual culture. Next I show the various categories of early literature that reveal sexual culture in different historical, intellectual and social contexts. They include historical documents, medical texts, court literature, and sexual manuals. In the last part, I present archaeological finds of erotic objects from the Han that divulge more information on sexual culture.

After this, Chapter 2 sets out to present the history of *Suwen* studies and the methodology used in this study. It also presents the textual history of the *Suwen*, its compilation process, and the ways in which Wang Bing created his copy, the main edition of the text.

Chapters 3 and 4 explore the connection between the *Suwen* and the various longevity techniques in sex, health, and medicine. It looks at how Wang Bing connects *yangsheng* doctrines to medical theories and how he uses them to bridge spirit-based magical medicine with systematized and empirical medicine. This part of the work examine whether sexual cultivation as a branch of *yangsheng* has anything in common with Daoist culture. It compares the development of proto-medical theories as seen in Mawangdui medical texts to those that are systematized in the *Suwen*. The discussions of the different pathological factors and different

health professionals show how the *Suwen* formulates, develops, and systematizes medical theories. Chapter 4 in particular examines the roles of diagnostics mentioned in the *Suwen* and how they contributed to the healing methods that demonstrate the development of medical thoughts.

Chapters 5 and 6 examine the language used in speaking about sexuality. They focus on how sex is conducted and how sexual intercourse is described. Chapter 5 begins by discussing how pre-*Suwen* texts and the *Suwen* express desire. This is followed by how ancient and early writers-scholars communicate the sexual act to its readers using imagery, euphemism or direct references. It examines the sexual act at its various stages using materials mostly culled from the Mawangdui manuals. Chapter 6, in close conjunction with this, conveys the different terminologies used to describe sexual interaction in the *Suwen*. It shows that not only sexual vocabulary was codified but it has changed by the time that the *Suwen* was compiled.

After establishing the role of the sexual act in the *Suwen* medical theories, Chapter 7 explores sexual energetics such as the binary power of yin and yang. I discuss the roles that essence (*jing*), *qi*, the kidneys, and the three extraordinary vessels (Conception, Governing, and Penetrating) play in medical theories relating to sex and sexuality. Their functions in the dynamics of sexual physiology in TCM today are basically still the same as those propagated in the *Suwen*.

In Chapters 8 and 9, I deal with sexual and reproductive anatomy, the physiology of producing progeny, as well as with obstetrics and gynecology and how they factored into the medical theories of the *Suwen*. The chapters also look at historical concepts such as the “ancestral tendon” and “heavenly stock.” Both concepts are fundamental to sex and sexuality in the *Suwen* but do not appear in other medical texts or literature.

Chapter 10 discusses the effects of overindulgences and intoxication. The first part shows how sexual Dao is integrated into medical theories and how adhering to its rules can prevent diseases and achieve longevity. The classic troll of health—the foolish act of “having sex while intoxicated” is the proverbial malaise of the upper classes and it is discussed in the next two sections. The combination of sex and alcohol was and is still the scourge of health and longevity.

Chapter 11 presents the effects of sex on health. It is concerned with sexual excesses caused by lust and how human follies produce overin-

dulgence of sexual activity, which ultimately affects health. The next section studies sexual dysfunction in the form of erectile dysfunction and other problems affecting the sexual act and sexual health. This chapter ends with a short discussion on the use of aphrodisiac in the Mawangdui texts and *Suwen*. Sexual health has clearly become part of the medical equation of the *Suwen's* medical theories.

Overall, the book shows that the Mawangdui medical texts represent a transitional phase in which medical theories were unfolding, while the *Suwen* presents medical theories that are already well-developed and systematized. I hope to show students and scholars a view of sexuality within the boundaries of these systematized medical theories that relates to the causes and etiology of diseases as advocated in the *Suwen*, thus giving sex a role in medical theories as formulated in the Han. However, given that *Suwen* studies have such a long history, I do not pretend to pass this off as an exhaustive work. Rather, I hope it is the opening salvo for more fireworks to follow.

—Jessieca Leo, January 2011

