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28 | Sima Qian, “Account of the Legendary Physician Bian Que”

BIAN QUE, traditionally said to have lived sometime during the fifth–fourth centuries B.C.E., is the most celebrated of early Chinese practitioners of the medical arts and is considered the father of diagnosis by the pulse. His skills are legendary, as are the many stories about him in early Chinese writings. For example, one anecdote relates that he performed such a successful exchange of hearts between two men that upon recovery each took possession of the other’s household. Somewhat less dramatic is Sima Qian’s account of Bian Que’s life included in his *Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji)*, where it precedes the account of the historical physician Chunyu Yi (216–ca. 150 B.C.E.). Itself somewhat of a pastiche, Sima Qian’s account translated below is the primary biography of Bian Que; but it too comes up short on historical verisimilitude. It begins by telling how secret arts and recipes were transmitted to Bian Que by a mysterious man known as Changsang Gong, Venerable Tall-Mulberry (a legendary transcendent who is mentioned in other literature as the transmitter of arcane arts); indeed, Bian Que acquires special abilities after ingesting a secret substance passed to him by Venerable Changsang. The rest of the account is overtly anecdotal and places Bian Que in historical contexts that range over several hundred years. There once may have been an actual man called Bian Que, or Qin Yueren, but the Bian Que esteemed for more than two millennia in traditional Chinese culture is the stuff of legend. A further problem with the Grand Historian’s account of Bian Que is hermeneutical in nature. There are inconsistencies between the biography’s recounting of medical concepts and terminology and those of early Chinese medical theory and practice, at least as far as either is presently envisioned and understood. The Grand Historian’s recounting of events and dialogue could contain specific usages and vocabulary that had been preserved intact from earlier materials that now are nowhere else attested, perhaps conflated with contemporary understanding and jargon. But it may be more likely that the text reflects the editorial effects of years of literary iterations of anecdotes featuring Bian Que, with some specialized vocabulary perhaps used in places more for literary effect than for literal signification. While the text has been translated with primary attention to philological integrity, as well as to a suitable correspondence to the conceptual and practical systems of early Chinese medicine, the reader should bear in mind that numerous passages have had any number of contending interpretations over the centuries. The word *qi*, for instance, is variously translated as “vapor,” “air,” “breath,” “vital energy,” or “life force.”—AB

Biography of Bian Que

Bian Que was a man of Zheng, of Bohai district (in northeastern China), whose family name was that of the Qin clan and his given name was Yueren (Surpassing Others). In his youth he acted as manager of a lodging house. Whenever the lodging guest Venerable Changsang passed by, Bian Que alone found him to be unique and would regularly meet him with respect. Venerable Changsang equally recognized that Bian Que was no common man. He came and went for more than

ten years, and only then did he call Bian Que to sit with him privately. He leisurely conversed with Bian Que, then spoke with him thus, "I am in possession of taboo recipes; as I am old in years, I wish to pass them down to you. Do not divulge anything." Bian Que said, "I respectfully consent." Then, taking out some medicinal substance that had been concealed under his clothing, he gave it to Bian Que. "After drinking this mixed with waters of the pool on high (i.e., dew) for thirty days, you then will be able to comprehend material phenomena." Then he took out all of his books of taboo recipes and gave them all to Bian Que. Suddenly he disappeared: most probably he was not a mortal man.

Bian Que followed his instructions and drank the medicinal concoction for thirty days, and then upon looking he could see a person on the other side of a wall (i.e., he could see through a wall). Using this ability to examine ailments, he could completely see the obstructions and nodes in the five visceral "storage organs" (corresponding to heart, liver, spleen, lungs, and kidneys). But he especially achieved fame for examining the vessels (i.e., diagnosis by the pulse). Some of the areas where he practiced medicine were located in Qi, and some in Zhao. When in Zhao he was known as Bian Que.

Just at the time of Duke Zhao of Jin (ca. 531–526 B.C.E.), when the various grandees were becoming powerful and the ducal clan was weakening, in his position of grandee Jianzi of Zhao was monopolizing the state affairs. Jianzi became ill (in 501 B.C.E.) and was unconscious of others for five days. The grandees were all fearful, and so they summoned Bian Que. Bian Que entered and examined the ailment, then left. Dong Anyu (one of Jianzi's servants) questioned Bian Que, and Bian Que said, "The blood vessels are in order, so what is unusual? In the past, Duke Mu of Qin (r. 659–621 B.C.E.) once was like this for seven days and then he awoke. On the day he awoke he informed Gongsun Zhi and Ziyu (both of whom were in his service), 'I went to the residence of the (Celestial) Emperor, and it was extremely pleasing. The reason I stayed long is that there happened to be something to be learned. The emperor told me, "The state of Jin will soon be in great disorder. For five generations they will find no peace. Thereafter there will be a hegemony, but this man will die when not yet old. When the son of the hegemon is to command, in the state there will be no separating the men and the women."' Gongsun Zhi recorded it and stored it away. The Qin prophetic writings originate with this. The disorder of Duke Xian (r. 676–651 B.C.E.), the hegemony of Duke Wen (r. 636–628), and Duke Xiang (627–621) defeating the Qin army at Xiao and giving free reign to licentiousness upon returning home: these are things you have heard about. Now, the ailment of the ruling lord (Jianzi) is the same as that. Without going three days there is sure to be a break (in his condition). At the break, he surely will have something to say."

Remaining in that state for two and a half days, Jianzi then awoke. He recounted to the various grandees, saying, "I went to the residence of the (Celestial) Emperor, and it was extremely pleasing. With the hundred spirits I roamed in the Creator's Heaven. The Expansive Music, the Nine Arrangements, and the pantomime dances there cannot be classed with the music of the three (earthly) dynasties: their sounds moved the heart. There was a bear who wished to draw me away. The (Celestial) Emperor commanded me to shoot it; I hit the bear, and the bear died. There was (another) bear that approached. I again shot it; I hit the bear and the bear died. The (Celestial) Emperor was greatly pleased, and presented me with two baskets. Each (of the above) was a symbolic surrogate. (Similar to that of Duke Mu above, Jianzi's "ailment" actually was a prophetic dream trance. In Jianzi's trance, the two bears are surrogates for the totemic ancestors of two dignitaries Jianzi would vanquish in 490 B.C.E., and the two baskets represent two "barbarian" principalities.) I saw a child at the (Celestial) Emperor's side. The (Celestial) Emperor entrusted me with a dog of the (northern) Di tribe, and said: 'When it comes that your son has

grown strong, bestow it upon him.' The (Celestial) Emperor told me that in the state of Jin the generations soon will weaken, and in the seventh generation it will be lost (indeed, the seventh ruler was deposed in 376 B.C.E.). The Ying clan (of the state of Zhao, i.e., Jianzi's clan) will greatly defeat the Zhou clan (of the state of Wei) to the west of Fankui, but they nevertheless will not be able to take possession." (In 372 B.C.E. Marquis Cheng of Zhao attacked Wei, taking seventy-three cities, but Wei did not give up its territories until 150 years later.) Dong Anyu received these words; he recorded them and stored them away. He told Jianzi the words of Bian Que, and Jianzi bestowed on Bian Que forty thousand *mu* of field lands (a bit less than five thousand acres).

After that, when Bian Que passed by (the state of) Guo, the heir designate (apparently) had died. Upon arriving at the Guo palace gates, Bian Que asked a palace cadet (an officer in the charge of the heir designate) who happened to appreciate arcane arts, "What was the heir designate's ailment? Throughout the state preparations for the exorcistic sacrifice (for burial) have taken precedence over all other affairs." The palace cadet said, "As for the heir designate's ailment, his blood and *qi* were not timely. Being intermixed and intermingled, they did not get to drain off. They were violently emitted on the exterior, and this as a consequence occasioned internal injury. The vital forces were unable to arrest the noxious *qi*; the noxious *qi* accumulated and built up, and did not get to drain off. On account of this, the yang was slackened and the yin excited. Therefore, with violent convulsions, he died." Bian Que asked, "How has his death been in terms of time?" "From cock's crow until the present." "Has he been removed yet (for burial)?" "Not yet. His death has not yet lasted half a day." "Say that I am Qin Yueren of Bohai district in Qi. As my home is located in Zheng, I have never yet gotten to gaze upon the pure brightness (of His Majesty's countenance), nor in service pay a visit before Him. I have heard that the heir designate most unfortunately has died. I, your subject, am able to make him live."

The palace cadet said, "Can it be that you, master, are not boasting of it? On what basis do you say that the heir designate can be made to live? I have heard that in the times of high antiquity, of physicians there was Yu Fu. In curing an ailment he did not use decoctions or fermented brews, sharp lancets or joint manipulation, pressure massages or medicated ironings. With one glance he would discern the bodily correspondences to the ailment. Following the incipencies of the five storage organs, he then would cut open the skin and dissect the flesh, open up the vessels and knot the sinews, take hold of marrow and brain, pick out the fat and claw at the membranes, wash and bathe intestines and stomach, rinse the five storage organs, refine the vital force and transform the physical form. If, master, your arcane arts can match these, then the heir designate can be made to live; if, however, they cannot match these yet you would wish to make him live, then never could you convince even a cooing infant."

After some time, Bian Que looked up to the heavens and said with a sigh, "The way you practice healing arts is just like peeping at the sky through a tube, or looking at designs through a small crack (i.e., seeing only a small part of the whole). As to the way I, Yueren, practice healing arts, I need not wait to press on the vessels, observe the facial color, listen to the sound of the voice, or take note of the physical form to say where an ailment is located. Hearing about the yang of an ailment I can discuss its yin; hearing about the yin of an ailment I can discuss its yang. The bodily correspondences of an ailment are seen on the greater exterior. Without going a thousand tricents, the cases I've decided reach a multitude; it simply cannot be disputed. If you consider my words to be untrue, then for verification enter and examine the heir designate. You should perceive his ears resounding and his nostrils flaring. Follow his two thighs and reach his concealed parts: they should still be warm."

When the palace cadet heard Bian Que's words, his eyes revolved in their sockets and did not blink, and his tongue thrust upward and did not come down. Then he announced the words of

Bian Que to the Lord of Guo. When the Lord of Guo heard them he was greatly alarmed. He went out to see Bian Que at the central gate tower and said, "Long have I humbly heard of your high sense of duty, but I have never gotten to pay my respects before you. If you, master, in passing by this small state were to with great fortune raise up the heir designate, then the good fortune of this measly servant in this insignificant state would be extreme. With you, master, then he will live; without you, master, then he will be abandoned and discarded to the ditches and gullies, and for eternity he will be unable to return." Before his words were finished, he was moved to snivel and whimper, his soul and vital force dispersed in all directions, with flowing tears and long weeping streaming over his eyelashes; grieved and unable to stay himself, his countenance and appearance changed and transformed.

Bian Que said, "An ailment like that of the heir designate's is what is called a case of the 'cadaverous convulsions.' This is because the yang enters into the midst of the yin. Activating the stomach, binding up and winding around, it pierces the main vessels and ties up the auxiliary vessels. Separating, it goes below to the 'three heated spaces' and the urinary bladder. For this reason the yang pulse descends and falls off, and the yin pulse rises and contends. At the reunion points the *qi* is obstructed and does not circulate. The yin rises while the yang moves inward. Moving downward and inward, (the yang) drums and does not rise up; moving upward and outward, (the yin) is cut off and not sent out. Above, there are auxiliary vessels with interrupted yang; below, there are vascular nodes with disrupted yin. With disrupted yin and interrupted yang, the facial color is depleted and the pulse is disordered. Therefore, the physical form is still, with an appearance similar to death. The heir designate has not yet died. When it is a case of the yang entering the organs of the myriad yin conduits, one lives. In a case where the yin enters the organs of the myriad yang conduits, one dies. All these several events occur violently during the time when the five storage organs convulse. A good workman removes (the ailment); an unskilled one hesitates in confusion."

Bian Que then had his disciple Ziyang sharpen the needles and smooth the stones, and he selected the five reunion points on the three outer yang vessels. There was a break (in the condition), and the heir designate revived. Then Bian Que had Zibao (another disciple) perform a five-*fen* medicated ironing (i.e., the warming influences of "ironing on" the medicated application would reach to a depth of about one-half inch) and then blend and boil an eight-times-reduced compound and with this once more perform a medicated ironing on the (heir designate's) two flanks. The heir designate rose to a seated position. To once more harmonize his yin and yang, he but ingested a medicinal decoction for two ten-day periods, and then he was returned to his old state. Thus the whole world considered Bian Que to be able to bring to life a dead person. Bian Que said, "It is not that I, Yueren, am able to bring the dead to life. This was simply that I was able to cause someone to rise up who quite naturally was actually alive."

When Bian Que passed by (the state) of Qi, Marquis Huan of Qi retained him as a guest. Entering the court for an audience, (Bian Que) said, "You, lord, have an illness; it is located in the pores and fibers (of the skin). If not cured, it will go deeper." Marquis Huan said, "My humble self has no illness." Bian Que left, and Marquis Huan addressed his attendants, saying, "The way that physicians are fond of profiting is that they desire to achieve merit by way of ones who are not (really) ill." Five days later, Bian Que again had audience, and said, "You, lord, have an illness; it is located in the blood vessels. If not cured, I fear it will go deeper." Marquis Huan said, "My humble self has no illness." Bian Que left; Marquis Huan was not pleased. Five days later, Bian Que again had audience and said, "You, lord, have an illness; it is located amongst the intestines and the stomach. If not cured, it will go deeper." Marquis Huan did not respond. Bian Que left, and Marquis Huan was displeased. Five days later, Bian Que once again had audience.

Observing (from a distance), he looked at Marquis Huan, then withdrew and hurried away. Marquis Huan sent someone to ask the reason for it. Bian Que said, “When an illness is located in the pores and fibres of the skin, decoctions and medicated ironings are what can reach it. When located in the blood vessels, needles and stones are what can reach it. When it is located in the intestines and stomach, alcoholic brews are what can reach it. But when it is located in the bones and marrow, even the Controller of Destiny could not do anything about it. It is now located in the bones and marrow, and for this reason I have no requests (for the marquis in terms of a cure).” Five days later, Marquis Huan’s body began to ail. He sent someone to summon Bian Que, but Bian Que already had fled and gone. Marquis Huan subsequently died.

If it is a given that the Sages can foresee subtleties, then if one could enable good physicians to proceed with their work early on, illness could be arrested and bodies could be kept alive. As for what ails people, they ail over (the fact that) illnesses are many; but what ails physicians is that the ways (of treatment) are few. Thus, of ailments there are six “incurables.” Being arrogant and unrestrained, and not discussing with reason—this is the first incurable. Considering the body as unimportant and placing importance on wealth—this is the second incurable. Being unable to make clothing and food suitable—this is the third incurable. Having yin and yang mingled and the *qi* of the storage organs unstable—this is the fourth incurable. Having an emaciated physical form and being unable to ingest medicines—this is the fifth incurable. Trusting shamans and not trusting physicians—this is the sixth incurable. Having even one of these conditions makes it doubly difficult to cure.

Bian Que’s renown was heard throughout the world. Passing by (the city of) Handan and hearing that they prized women, he accordingly practiced as a physician for matters below the sash. Passing by (the city of) Luoyang and hearing that the people of Zhou held their elderly folk dear, he accordingly practiced as a physician for the ear, the eye, and rheumatism. When he came to enter (the city of) Xianyang, hearing that the people of Qin doted on children, he accordingly practiced as a pediatrician. Conforming to the (local) customs, he effected changes (in his practice). Li Xi, grand officer of medicine in (the state of) Qin, being himself aware that in terms of skill he did not compare with Bian Que, sent someone to stab him to death. Up until the present, all under heaven that is spoken concerning the pulse derives from Bian Que.

—AB