



## The Divine Farmer's Materia Medica: A Translation of the Shen Nong Ben Cao (Blue Poppy's Great Masters Series)

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A translation of the Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing. One of three foundation books of Chinese medicine, no translation of it has been available - until now. The Nei Jing (Inner Classic) established the theoretical foundations of TCM, especially acupuncture and moxibustion. The Shen Nong Ben Cao jing laid the foundation for the study of Chinese medicinals. And the Shang Han Lun/Jin Gui Yao Lue (Treatise on Damage [Due to] Cold/Essentials of the Golden Cabinet) is the locus classicus for Chinese formulas and prescriptions and treatment based on pattern discrimination. Translations of the Nei Jing and Shang Han Lun/Jin Gui Yao Lue have long existed in English. Now, with this book, all serious students and practitioners of Chinese medicine can have access to all of the three pillars of Chinese medicine.

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- Rank: #564770 in Books
- Published on: 1998-01
- Original language: Chinese
- Dimensions: 9.50" h x 6.25" w x 1.00" l,
- Binding: Paperback
- 205 pages

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## **Editorial Review**

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Publisher's Foreword The Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing (The Divine Farmer's Materia Medica Classic) is one of the 10 premodern classics of Chinese medicine selected in the People's Republic of China as nationwide research priorities within the Chinese medical literature. Also referred to as the Shen Nong Ben Jing, the Shen Nong Ben Cao, the Ben Cao Jing, and simply the Ben Jing, it is one of the two most important of these 10 preeminent Chinese medical classics. The Huang Di Nei Jing (The Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic) is the locus classicus of Chinese medical theory and especially acupuncture and moxibustion, while the Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing is the locus classicus of so-called Chinese herbal medicine. All the rest of the Chinese medical literature, both premodern and contemporary, is built on the foundation of these two seminal texts. Therefore, it is not difficult to understand why we have chosen to publish this first English language translation of the Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing as part of Blue Poppy Press's Great Masters Series.

Shen Nong is one of the three greatest heroes of Chinese culture, the other two being the Yellow Emperor and Fu Xi, the revealer of the eight trigrams. These three legendary divine beings are credited as being the fountainhead of Chinese lifearts. The name Shen Nong can be translated as Divine Farmer, Divine Peasant, Divine Agriculturist, or Divine Husbandman. Among his numerous discoveries and revelations, Shen Nong is credited with teaching the Chinese people how to farm -- thus his most common name. The first reference to a connection between Shen Nong and Chinese herbal medicine is found in the Huai Nan Zi (The South of the Huai Master) written by Liu An who died in 122 bce.

"Ancient people ate grasses and drank water. They gathered the fruit from trees and ate the meat of clams. They frequently suffered from disease and poisoning. Then Shen Nong taught people for the first time how to sow the five grains, to observe whether the land was dry or wet, fertile or rocky, located in the hills or in the lowlands. He tasted the flavors of all the herbs and springs, [determining] whether they were bitter or sweet. Thus he taught people what to avoid and where they could go. At that time, [Shen Nong] encountered 70 [herbs] in one day, [determining which were] medicines and [which were] poisons."

This is the first surviving recorded instance in the Chinese literature crediting Shen Nong with determining the medicinal properties of things by tasting them himself. This story has then been repeated and embellished upon down through the centuries. Some versions even give Shen Nong a see-through stomach so he could witness the effects of what he ate on his internal organs!

The words ben and cao mean tree roots and grasses or herbs respectively. Therefore, as a compound term, they generically refer to the Chinese materia medica, and materia medica is the most commonly used translation of ben cao used in English today. Ben and cao are used in Chinese medicine to refer to materia medica in general because the overwhelming majority of traditional Chinese medicinals are derived from vegetable sources. However, since the Chinese materia medica also includes mineral and animal medicinals, we have used the words, "so-called Chinese herbal medicine," above.

As mentioned previously, this work is the locus classicus of the ben cao or materia medica literature of Chinese medicine. It is this literature which describes the ingredients of Chinese medicine, their flavors and natures (i.e., temperatures), their functions, and indications. According to this book, medicinals have five basic flavors -- sour, salty, sweet, bitter, and acrid -- and four qi or natures -- cold, hot, warm, and cool. Hot diseases should be treated with cold medicinals and cold diseases should be treated with hot medicinals. This

book also introduced the first method of classifying Chinese medicinals. Within this classic, all medicinals are classified into three grades or categories: superior medicinals corresponding to heaven which govern the maintenance of life and are without toxicity, medium medicinals corresponding to humankind which benefit human nature and have some medicinal functions, and inferior medicinals corresponding to earth which cure disease and definitely do have some toxicity. Further, medicinals are also categorized into sovereigns, ministers, assistants, and envoys. Hence, one can find all the most basic and elemental theories of Chinese herbal medicine in seminal form in this classic.

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