Understanding Shen in Classical Chinese Texts

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To see a world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour.

--- *Auguries of Innocence* by William Blake (1757-1827)
A patient with SHEN is apt to recover from illness, while a patient losing SHEN has a poor prognosis.

---The Chapter of *Moving Essence and Changing Qi* from *Huang Di’s Inner Classic • Basic Questions*
Outline

- Introduction to Meanings of Shen
  - Etymology
  - Understanding Shen in Classical Chinese Texts
  - SHEN and Psychotherapy in Chinese Medicine
SHEN

- god or supernatural being;
- the law in the nature;
- spirit;
- magic, superb, excellent

--- *Dictionary of Commonly Used Characters in Archaic Chinese*
SHEN

- A collective term for man’s life activities in a broad sense; and
- Man’s thinking and awareness activities in a narrow sense

--- *A Concise Dictionary of Chinese Medicine*
Transformations, changes, and functions of the materials in the nature

All of the activities of man’s life

Thinking and awareness of man
Meanings of SHEN

- Gods
- Laws of the nature
- Gods & Ghosts
  - Spirit
- Marvelous changes
Etymology
The Original Meaning of 示

示：Offer sacrifices to gods or ancestors, or to rites.
申 = 电

雨 (rain)
电 (lightning)

Changeable lightning → 申，神也
The Original Meaning of SHEN

Tian (Heaven) SHEN who induces all things of creation. (Shuo Wen).
SHEN’s Extended Meanings

- The spirits of all things on the earth
  - e.g.: The people is the governor of Shen (the spirits)
- The spirits of dead famous men
  - e.g.: Yao killed Gun, and Gun’s Shen (spirit) transformed into a yellow bear, which went into a deep pool of the mountain.

  --- Zuo’s Spring Autumn Annals

- The mysterious and wonderful changes
  - e.g.: The unpredictable changes of Yin-Yang are named Shen.

  ---The Book of Changes
Summary

1. Lightening in the nature
2. God who created the world
3. The spirits of dead famous men (gods and ghosts)
4. Unpredictable wonderful changes
Gui 鬼

- *The Origin of Chinese Characters*: ‘what the people return to is named Gui, following the part of human and metaphorizing the image of the head of the dead’.
- Duan Yucai: SHEN is yang while GUI is yin.
- Gui originally refers to the spirits of the dead, and is usually translated into ghost. Actually ghost is not a satisfied translation for it is still different from Gui in Chinese culture, and here ghost is used only in a metaphorical way.
Understanding Shen in Classical Chinese Texts

- Gods and Ghosts
- Spirit
- Marvelous Changes
Classification of “Ghosts and Gods” Before Buddhism Travelled to China

- Those who were grateful to somebody and sought ways to return their kindness;
- Those who revenges;
- Those spirits of dead people who had been called back by divining activities.

- Shen ≈ ghosts or spirits of the dead (manifesting in the appearance of personified Shen)

--- Ren Jiyu. History of Buddhism in China (Volume 1)
Confucius and Chuang Tzu

- **Confucius:**
  - Keep gods and ghosts at a respectful distance.

- **Chuang Tzu:**
  - Perfect man | Supernatural (Shen) man | Wise man
  - Shen refers to those who are intelligent, honest, upright, and constant.
Interpretations of SHEN as gods and ghosts: Bending or stretching changes of Qi or Essential Qi

- “Essential Qi (shen or gods) gathers to form the shape, while wandering ethereal soul or Qi (gui or ghosts) results in changes and transformations. And therefore （you） can know the conditions of gods and ghosts.” (The Book of Changes)

- “Qi generates all things of creation, including the five grains on the earth and the stars in the sky (heaven); and that Qi in between the heaven and the earth is ‘gods and ghosts’; and that one who can guard Qi in the chest is a wise man. That’s why Qi is so termed as Qi.” (Guan Tzu)
Interpretation of SHEN as gods and ghosts: Bending or stretching changes of Qi or Essential Qi

- Gods and ghosts are the names of yin and yang. Yin Qi going against the form to return is named ghosts (gui, 鬼), while Yang Qi resulting in the generation of the form is named gods (shen, 神)” (Wang Chong, 27-100AD).
- “Gods (shen, 神) are (those being) stretching, while ghosts (gui, 鬼) are (those being) bending”. (Zhu Xi, 1130-1200)
- “The Qi of the Heaven stretches itself to men and forms and perform its transformations is named gods (shen, 神); while Qi bends and returns instead when man’s life activities terminate is named ghosts. (gui, 鬼) (Wang Fuzhi, 1619-1692)
Interpreting SHEN as Gods and Ghosts

- Gods and Ghosts are metaphors:
- Shen/God is the metaphor of creating, while Gui/Ghost is the metaphor of vanishing.
Spirit

- Chuang Tzu
- Dong Zhongshu
- Huang Di’s Inner Classic
“The king (of Wei Wu Hou 魏武侯) asked, ‘How do you send your best wishes to me’? Xu Wugui answered, ‘I send my best wishes to your body and spirit (SHEN)’.” --- (Xu Wugui 徐无鬼)
The essence and the spirit result from Tao, and the form generates from the essence. (Zhi Bei You 知北游)
Chuang Tzu

“The Tian (Heaven) will follow when SHEN (spirit) moves” (Zai You 在宥).
Dong Zhongshu (179-104BC)

Interaction between Heaven and Man
Man Mirroring Heaven

Chinese political & natural philosophy

Emperor: the son of the Heaven
To unite Heaven and Man into one by analogizing
The virtue of Heaven is to bestow, the virtue of Earth is to transform, and the virtue of Man is to be righteous. ... The essence of Heaven and Earth is to generate beings, among which Man is the most honored. ... In the universe only Man can be analogized to the Heaven and Earth. Man has 360 joints, analogizing the number of the Heaven; Man’s body, bone and flesh analogize the thickness of the Earth. Ears and eyes on the head can listen and look, metaphorizing the sun and the moon; The orifices and vessels of the body are just like rivers and gorges; Happiness, anger, grief and joy of the heart (the gamut of human feeling) are similar to spirits (SHEN Qi). Man’s body is so high, thus analogizes the Heaven. ...
The symbols of the Heaven and Yin-Yang are complete in the body; the body is just like the Heaven, so its numbers accord with the numbers of the heaven; therefore the will of the Heaven (or God’s will) makes them interrelate and interact with each other. The Heaven takes its numbers of a year to make a man; therefore, man has 366 small joints to accord with the days of a year, 12 big vessels to accord with the months of a year, 5 zang organs to accord with the five phases, and 4 limbs to accord with the four seasons; opening eyes and closing eyes accord with the days and the nights; hardness and softness accord with the winter and the summer; grief and joy accord with yin and yang; the heart calculates to accord with moral standard or law; the behaviors observe moral principles to accord with the relationship between the Heaven and the Earth. A man was born with all of the above mentioned, among which those countable take numbers of the Heaven and the Earth and those uncountable analogize and metaphorize the Heaven and the Earth. Anyway, man mirrors the Heaven
- **Yin-Yang Relating to the Sun & the Moon**
- **Pathogens**

  --- *(Ling Shu, or Miraculous Pivot)*

- **Acupoints**

  --- *Su Wen (Basic Questions).*

- *Huang Di’s Inner Classic* can also be regarded as a philosophical classic, esp. in the fields of interpreting the nature, beings and life with qi, yin-yang and five phases it is second to none although it is a well-known classic on Chinese medicine.

--- Ma Boying
"As long as the body forms the spirit will ensue to store the good, the ill, happiness, anger, grief and joy" (On Heaven, or Tian Lun).
Huang Di asked Qi Bo, “I would like to know how a man is conceived, how qi builds and makes the foundations (roots), what establishes and makes the parapets (protective screens), what is lost in death, and what is gained in life”.

Qi Bo answered, “The mother makes the foundations (roots), and the father makes the parapets (protective screens). Losing the spirit (SHEN) is death, while gaining the spirit (SHEN) is life” (SHEN).

Huang Di asked, “What is the spirit (SHEN)”?

Qi Bo answered, “When blood and qi are harmonized, when the nutrient qi and protective qi are dredged, when the five zang organs are formed and matured, when the spirit qi (SHEN QI) houses the heart, and when the ethereal soul and corporeal soul are complete, then forms the spirit (SHEN)”.

--- Huang Di’s Inner Classic • Miraculous Pivot On the Natural Life Span
Huang Di’s Inner Classic

- Losing the spirit (SHEN) is death, while gaining the spirit (SHEN) is life”.
- To maintain a wellbeing of body and spirit” (形与神俱)
Two metaphors on relationship between body and spirit:

- **Candle**
  - the body

- **Fire**
  - the spirit

- **Sword**
  - substance, the body

- **Sharpness**
  - function, the spirit
Shen: superb, excellent skill

Chuang Tzu

e.g.: Gui Fu Shen Gong 鬼斧神工

Cao Zhou Ruo Shen 操舟若神

Mencius

e.g.: good → true → beauty → great → holy → Shen

Xun Tzu: The process of creating all of the beings is unseen, what can be seen is the result of such a process, which is the so-called SHEN”.
The Book of Changes

- The unpredictable changes of Yin-Yang are named Shen.
- three implications:
  - 1) one clue being reasoned out to know and understand the world
  - 2) intrinsic rules lying in the ever-changing phenomena
  - 3) the rhythms of the changes and transformations sometimes being sudden and swift
- Shen in *The Book of Changes* means the rules and laws of the changes and transformations of all things of creation.
“It is not necessary to explain him the medical theory if a patient is superstitious in gods and ghosts; it is not necessary to show him the needling skills if a patient dislikes needling stones; if a patient refuses any treatment, then no matter what the practitioner does, the patient will not get well. This is evidence that healing actually comes from within”. 
Evolution of “医”

Chinese medicine is evolved from shaman’s practice. Wine was used to treat illnesses.
In ancient times ghosts were regarded as causes of some illnesses.

Some illnesses could be cured by Zhu.

“Spirit (SHEN) in excess results in continuous laughing; while Spirit (SHEN) in deficiency leads to being grief.”
Huang Di said, “The causes of which Your Master has said today, all diseased people can know that themselves. But for those who have not encountered any pathogenic influence or have any worry or fear in the mind but suddenly fall ill; what are the reasons for this? Are those only caused by gods and ghosts?”

Qi Bo answered, “The old pathogenic influences retain inside and do not arise. Under the condition that the mind dislikes and admires something, the blood and qi are disordered inside and the healthy qi and the old pathogenic influences battle together. But the manifestations appear in a very subtle way, which are usually ignored by the patients themselves. That’s why those illnesses seem to be caused by gods and ghosts.”

黃帝曰：今夫子之所言者，皆病人之所自知也。其毋所遇邪氣，又毋怵惕之所志，卒然而病者，其故何也？唯有因鬼神之事乎？岐伯曰：此亦有故邪留而未發，因而志有所惡，及有所慕，血氣內亂，兩氣相搏。其所從來者微，視之不見，聽而不聞，故似鬼神。
Huang Di asked, “But those illnesses can be cured by Zhu, (an old medical practice including praying, chanting incantations, holding ceremonies, and shamanism)?”

Qi Bo answered, “In former times, shamans knew what overcome various illnesses, and also knew beforehand where those illnesses came from. Therefore, those illnesses can be terminated by Zhu (an old medical practice including praying, chanting incantations, holding ceremonies, and shamanism).”

--- Pathogenic Wind from Miraculous Pivot
Xu Dachun (1693～1771)

- If a person’s essence and spirit are complete and strong, then no external pathogens dare invade the person. … There is a viewpoint that some illnesses are caused by ghosts. Ignorant and stupid people believe that ghosts can really cause illnesses; while sensible and reasonable people think illnesses manifest their way of development, certainly have nothing to do with ghosts. In reality both are equally wrong. Ghosts are just like pathogenic wind, cold, summer-heat, and dampness. When one’s defensive qi is in deficiency, he is susceptible to be invaded by cold; when one’s nutrient qi is in deficiency, he is susceptible to be invaded by heat; when one’s spirit qi (SHEN QI) is in deficiency, he is susceptible to be invaded by ghosts (or to get mental diseases); because man’s spirit is attributed to yang, when yang is in decline, ghosts will break through at this weak point. …
The Classic of Difficult Issues states that ‘one whose yang prostrates sees ghosts’. Therefore, there are some acupoints named after ghosts, such as Ghost Bed, Ghost Room. These acupoints rely on man’s spirit qi (SHEN QI) to replenish it. ... Therefore, invigorate yang to treat cold; nourish yin to treat heat; then replenish spirit (SHEN) to treat ghosts (or mental diseases) . ... There are also some illnesses caused by phlegm, anxiety, or fright, which should be treated from their root causes. Therefore, sensible and reasonable people will inevitably make a thorough inquiry into everything, and thus have no doubts but evidences. ...
Xu Dachun (1693～1771)

Besides, there are some other illnesses resulting from offending ghosts and gods, which can be cured by praying. Moreover, there are many other reasons for ghosts to offend man, such as ghosts who had been done bad deeds when they were still humans, which may relate to the patient himself or his ancestors by an offence through negligence or deep-seated hatred. ... Indisputable proofs exist for such things, which seems as if the Confucians did not accept this. But there are many examples recorded in both Confucius classics and historical books, such as Gong Zi Peng Sheng and Bo You. I myself have also witnessed some such cases with my own eyes. Such ghosts cannot be expelled neither by medicinal herbs, needling stones, nor by prayings”
Xu Dachun’s Ideas

- Two ideas:
  - Ghosts can really cause illnesses. ✗
  - Illnesses have nothing to do with ghosts. ✗
  - Mental diseases are caused by deficiency of Spirit (Shen) qi.
  - Treating principle: Replenishing Shen Qi to treat mental diseases.
- Treating Methods:
  - Acupuncture: 13 acupoints named after ghost for mental diseases;
  - Chinese herbal medicine;
  - Praying.
Huang Di asked, “I have heard that in ancient times, when practitioners treated diseases, they just moved the essence and changed the qi by Zhu You (the same as Zhu, an old medical practice including praying, chanting incantations, holding ceremonies, and shamanism). While nowadays, when practitioners treat diseases, they employ medicinal herbs to treat the interior and use needling stones to treat the exterior, and as a result, some diseases are cured while others are not cured. Why is this?”

黃帝問曰：余聞古之治病，惟其移精變氣，可祝由而已。今世治病，毒藥治其內，鍼石治其外，或愈或不愈，何也？
Qi Bo answered, “People of the remote antiquity lived among animals, moved and became active to fend off the cold in winter, and stayed in shade places to escape the heat in summer. Internally, their minds were calm and peaceful without any desire or admiration; externally, their bodies were not over-stressed without any suffering. That’s a time without any greed or fame or gain, which prevented the pathogens from invading. Therefore, they did not need either medicinal herbs to treat their interior nor needling stones to treat their exterior. When they contracted diseases, Zhu You could move the essence and thus cure diseases.

歧伯對曰：往古人居禽獸之間，動作以避寒，陰居以避暑，內無眷慕之累，外無伸宦之形，此恬憺之世，邪不能深入也。故毒藥不能治其內，鍼石不能治其外，故可移精祝由而已。
However, people of nowadays are different from those of the remote antiquity. Internally, their minds are affected by worries and sufferings; externally, their bodies are harmed by hard work and heavy labor. Besides, they do not follow the rules of the four seasons, oppose the needs against cold and summer-heat, therefore, they are susceptible to the invasion of pathogenic wind. The pathogens are present from the morning till the evening; internally, they reach the five zang organs, the bones and the marrows; externally, they harm the orifices, the muscles and the skins. Therefore, minor diseases will inevitably develop into serious ones; serious diseases will certainly lead to death. That’s why Zhu You can not terminate a disease any more.”

當今之世不然，憂患緣其內，苦形傷其外，又失四時之從，逆寒暑之宜，賊風數至，虛邪朝夕，內至五藏骨髓，外傷空竅肌膚，所以小病必甚，大病必死，故祝由不能已也。
To sum up

1) Chinese medicine is not superstitious in gods and ghosts, which are used as metaphors (reflecting its rational or scientific approach);
2) Deficiency or excess of Man’s spirit qi (SHEN QI) is one of the major causes of mental diseases;
3) Zhu You had been a kind of medical practice from the remote antiquity until at least Ming Dynasty. But its indications were very different in different times. Since there are medical records in written forms, Zhu You had been mainly supposed to treat mental diseases;
4) Acupuncture (the 13 Ghosts acupoints) and Chinese herbal medicine instead of Shaman’s practice have been used up till today to treat mania, depression, mental and psychosomatic diseases with the changes in lifestyle;
5) Patient’s self-confidence in healing his illness is vital for his recovery.
Thank You for Your Attention!

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