

Leprosy in Archeologically Recovered Bamboo Book in China

TO THE EDITOR:

The presence or absence of leprosy in various geographic areas in antiquity has been a debated and vexing problem often cluttered with overtones of emotional interpretation. Thus, Feeny in his book *The Fight Against Leprosy* (1964, p. 18) cites the well known Chinese account concerning a disciple of Confucius, Pai-Niu, who had a "horrible disease" which has generally been interpreted as being an early record of leprosy (*Lun Yu*, VI, 8, 6th cent. B.C.). Feeny comments, "There is no proof what the disease in question was, and this illustrates how easy it is to argue backwards. Pai-Niu had a disgraceful affliction, therefore it must have been leprosy, because leprosy is still looked upon in many parts of the world as a disgraceful affliction In other words, leprosy has become a scapegoat for fear and hatred that date back to times when the disease itself may not even have existed."

Lu and Needham (In: *Diseases in Antiquity*, ed. by Brothwell and Sandison, Springfield: Charles C Thomas, 1967, pp. 236-237) reported a detailed entymological study of the Chinese terms used in relation to Pai-Niu's disease and concluded that the term *li* as used referred specifically to leprosy.

A recently reported archeologic finding supports this conclusion and adds original documentation for the presence of leprosy in Chinese antiquity. For 15 years we have subscribed to and perused the Chinese journal *Wen Wu* for its archeologic reports in anticipation of the possibility of such findings. *Wen Wu* (#8, 1976, p. 35) reported the excavation of the tomb of Magistrate Hsi (262-217 B.C.) located in Yun Ming District of Hupeh Province, about 50 miles northwest of the tri-city center Wu-Han on the Yangtze River.

In the tomb of Magistrate Hsi, among other things, there was found an original bamboo book which primarily deals with legal and some related medical matters. This book, as in the fashion of those times, consists of strips of bamboo, each strip containing vertical rows of characters, bound together and well preserved. Though its contents may have been transmitted from earlier times, the book has not been altered or recopied since it was buried in 217 B.C. and is, therefore, original from that time. In the portion of the writing which has been published from this book there occurs a brief passage which seems quite clearly to refer to leprosy. The following is our free translation:

"*Cha* went to a village to see *Bing* and said to *Bing*, 'I think you have *li* [leprosy].' *Bing* replied, 'At age three I was sick, my eyebrows were swollen and nobody knew what the sickness was. I was directed to see a doctor, *Ting*.' The doctor said, 'You don't have eyebrows because they are rootless. Your nostril is destroyed; you cannot sneeze on irritation; your legs are crippled because one of them is broken, and your hands have no hair.' He asked *Bing* to shout and the voice was hoarse. That is *li* [leprosy]."

The term *li*, here translated as leprosy, is the same term noted above as studied by Lu and Needham. The designations *Cha*, *Bing*, and *Ting* are not names of persons but are Chinese designations of units such as A, B, and C in Western usage.

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