



The Biography of Li Shizhen

1. Li Shizhen was a doctor and writer in the Ming Dynasty. He spent 27 years writing a medical book, *Ben Cao Gang Mu* (**Compendium** of Materia Medica), which is a great contribution to traditional Chinese medicine.

Background

2. Shizhen was born into a family of doctors in today's Hubei Province in 1518. His grandfather was a travelling doctor who journeyed from place to place to treat sick people. His father was a doctor and **scholar**.

Early life

3. When Shizhen was young, he followed his father to the mountains to pick herbs and learn about animals, plants and medicine. Also, he followed his father on medical calls. He was fascinated by his father's work. He wanted to become a doctor one day. However, his father would like him to get a job in the government and encouraged him to take the **civil service** exam. At the age of 14, Shizhen passed the exam at the county level. Unfortunately, he failed the exam at the national level three times. He gave up the goal of working in the government eventually.



Career path

4. Later his father took him on as an **apprentice** and passed on his medical knowledge to him. Shizhen studied very hard and read many medical books. A few years later, he became a famous doctor in town.
5. When he was 38, Shizhen cured the son of the Prince of the Chu State. He was then invited to work as a medical official in the **royal court**. Later, he was recommended to the **Imperial Medical Institute** in Beijing as an assistant **president**. While working in the government, he read many rare medical books. He left the government shortly and returned to his work as a doctor.

Achievements

6. Shizhen found that there were serious problems in most medical books at that time, e.g. obvious mistakes, **conflicting** information and **disorderly** organisation. He thought sick people would suffer a lot if doctors gave them the wrong herbs as medicine. He decided to write a medical book and entitled it *Ben Cao Gang Mu*, to provide correct information about herbs in an organised way.

7. It took Shizhen 27 years to compile the medical book. He travelled extensively to collect information for *Ben Cao Gang Mu*. He interviewed people and gained first-hand experience with many herbs and local **remedies**.



Also, he made reference to over 800 medical books (nearly every medical book available at that time). *Ben Cao Gang Mu* listed, **analysed** and described all the plants, animals, minerals, and other objects that were believed to be able to cure diseases. The first draft was completed in 1578. Shizhen died in 1593 at the age of 75. The great medical book, *Ben Cao Gang Mu*, was first published three years after his death.

Other information

Ben Cao Gang Mu remains one of the most important reference books for **herbal medicine**. It has been translated, totally or partially, into different languages. Also, it was recommended for inclusion in the Memory of the World Register under the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in 2011.

Glossary

1. a compendium: (noun) a collection of information on a particular subject, usually in a book
2. a scholar: (noun) a person who studies a subject in detail and knows a lot about it
3. the civil service: (noun) the government departments
4. an apprentice: (noun) a young person who works for a skilled person in order to learn that person's skills
5. the royal court: (noun) (a) the official place where the king and queen live; or (b) all the people who live and/or work in there
6. imperial: (adjective) refers to things or people that are connected to the king
7. an institute: (noun) an organisation that is connected with a particular profession
8. the president: (noun) the person who has the highest position in an organisation
9. conflicting: (adjective) opposing; clashing
10. disorderly: (adjective) untidy
11. remedies: (noun) ways of curing diseases
12. analysed: (verb) studied something in detail in order to understand it
13. herbal medicine: (noun) the use of herbs to treat diseases



A. Read the biography of Li Shizhen. Complete the timeline by choosing the correct event from the table below. The first one has been done as an example.

1518	born into a family of doctors in Hubei Province
1532	(a)
	(b)
	became an apprentice under his father's supervision and read a lot of medical books
1551	(c)
1556	worked as a medical official in the royal court
	(d)
	(e)
	travelled extensively to collect information and made reference to about 800 medical books for writing <i>Ben Cao Gang Mu</i>
1578	(f)
1593	(g)
1596	(h)

worked as an assistant president in the Imperial Medical Institute	died at the age of 75	failed the civil service exam at the national level three times
()	()	()

completed the first draft of <i>Ben Cao Gang Mu</i>	<i>Ben Cao Gang Mu</i> was first published	left the government job shortly and returned to his work as a doctor
()	()	()

began to write <i>Ben Cao Gang Mu</i> to provide correct information about herbs	passed the civil service exam at the county level
()	e.g. (a)

B. Fill in each blank with a word from the reading text. You can find the word in the given paragraph.

1. Egg tarts, sweet red bean soup and black sesame soup are examples of Hong Kong's _____ desserts. (para 1)
2. Five years ago, my brother first _____ to Japan and he liked the tourist spots there very much. Now, he visits Japan every year. (para 2)
3. Victoria Harbour is one of the most popular tourist attractions. Many tourists are _____ by its beautiful night view. (para 3)
4. Peter has a good _____ of Putonghua. His classmates always seek help from him before the Putonghua exam. (para 4)
5. Mary has been _____ for a service award for her great contribution to the Service Club. (para 5)
6. John hurt his left leg during the football match. Luckily, his injury was not _____. (para 6)
7. My sister likes reading a lot. She reads _____ on a variety of topics from fairy tales to scientific papers. (para 7)
8. During the time of the pandemic, it is _____ for us to maintain good personal hygiene. ("Other information")

C. Answer the following questions by circling the best option.

1. Li Shizhen wanted to become a doctor because he ____.
 - a passed the civil service exam
 - b was fascinated by his father's work
 - c followed his father on medical calls
 - d followed his father to the mountains to pick herbs

2. What did Li Shizhen's father want him to become when he was young?
 - a a writer
 - b a doctor
 - c a scholar
 - d a government official

3. Did Li Shizhen like to work as a medical official? How do you know?
 - a Yes, he did. It was because he wanted to become a doctor.
 - b Yes, he did. It was because his father would like him to get a job in the government.
 - c No, he didn't. It was because he failed the civil service exam three times.
 - d No, he didn't. It was because he left the work in the government shortly.

4. Li Shizhen had worked as ____.
 - a a farmer
 - b a reporter
 - c an apprentice under his father's supervision
 - d a president in the Imperial Medical Institute

5. What were the problems of the medical books at that time?
 - a There were obvious mistakes.
 - b The information was conflicting.
 - c The information was badly organised.
 - d all of the above

6. What did Li Shizhen do to collect information for *Ben Cao Gang Mu*? He ____.
 - a interviewed people in different places
 - b gained first-hand experience with many herbs and local remedies
 - c consulted many medical books
 - d all of the above

7. *Ben Cao Gang Mu* was first published in ____.
- a 1551
 - b 1578
 - c 1593
 - d 1596

D. Answer the following question.

What made Li Shizhen a great doctor and writer?

(Answer Key)

A. Read the biography of Li Shizhen. Complete the timeline by choosing the correct event from the table below. The first one has been done as an example.

1518	born into a family of doctors in Hubei Province
1532	(a)
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	(e)
	travelled extensively to collect information and made reference to about 800 medical books for writing <i>Ben Cao Gang Mu</i>
1578	(f)
1593	(g)
1596	(h)

worked as an assistant president in the Imperial Medical Institute	died at the age of 75	failed the civil service exam at the national level three times
(d)	(g)	(b)

completed the first draft of <i>Ben Cao Gang Mu</i>	<i>Ben Cao Gang Mu</i> was first published	left the government job shortly and returned to his work as a doctor
(f)	(h)	(e)

began to write <i>Ben Cao Gang Mu</i> to provide correct information about herbs	passed the civil service exam at the county level
(c)	e.g. (a)

B. Fill in each blank with a word from the reading text. You can find the word in the given paragraph.

1. Egg tarts, sweet red bean soup and black sesame soup are examples of Hong Kong's traditional desserts. (para 1)
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8. During the time of the pandemic, it is important for us to maintain good personal hygiene. ("Other information")

C. Answer the following questions by circling the best option.

1. Li Shizhen wanted to become a doctor because he ____.
b was fascinated by his father's work
(Prompt: You can find clues in paragraph 3.)
2. What did Li Shizhen's father want him to become when he was young?
d a government official
(Prompt: You can find clues in paragraph 3.)
3. Did Li Shizhen like to work as a medical official? How do you know?
d No, he didn't. It was because he left the work in the government shortly.
(Prompt: You can find clues in paragraph 5.)

4. Li Shizhen had worked as ____.
- c an apprentice under his father's supervision

(Prompt: You can find clues in paragraph 4.)

5. What were the problems of the medical books at that time?
- a There were obvious mistakes.
b The information was conflicting.
c The information was badly organised.
d all of the above

(Prompt: You can find clues in paragraph 6.)

6. What did Li Shizhen do to collect information for *Ben Cao Gang Mu*? He ____.
- a interviewed people in different places
b gained first-hand experience with many herbs and local remedies
c consulted many medical books
d all of the above

(Prompt: You can find clues in paragraph 7.)

7. *Ben Cao Gang Mu* was first published in ____.
- d 1596

(Prompt: You can find clues in paragraph 7.)

D. Answer the following question.

What made Li Shizhen a great doctor and writer?

Li Shizhen had clear goals for himself. He wanted to become a doctor and write a medical book to provide correct information about herbs. He had a genuine interest in his work. He was hardworking, determined and patient.

(Accept any reasonable answers.)

