

# Sanskrit roots of medieval Chinese ophthalmic concepts

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## Abstract

Sino-Indian contacts flourished in the first millennium AD through Buddhism. It led to exchange of ideas, both cultural and scientific, between the two neighbors. As the Buddhists were committed to lessening of human sufferings they had an innate interest in medicine and medical practice. It resulted in the introduction of Ayurvedic ideas into Chinese medicine. Medicine-related essays in Chinese Buddhist canon, legends of Medicine Buddha and allusions in historical and popular literature stand testimony to it.

Ophthalmology was the foremost in these medical transmissions. Titles of three ophthalmic works that appeared in China in a relatively short period between eighth and twelfth century AD were connected with India. The very first, *Tianzhu jing lunyan* 天竺經論眼 ‘Indian Classic of Discussion on Eyes’, was part of a medical compilation of eighth century AD. The other two alluded to ‘Nagarjuna’ as their author. There are *Longshu pusa yanlun* 龍樹菩薩眼論 ‘Discourse of Bodhisattva Nagarjuna on Eyes’ of ninth Century AD and *Longmu zong lun* 龍木總論 ‘Nagarjuna’s Comprehensive Discourse’ of late eleventh or early twelfth century AD. Chinese ophthalmology made remarkable progress during this period. New medical concepts, methods of treatment as well as medicines were introduced at this time.

Titles of these Chinese works are not the only indicators of their Indian connection. Major new concepts and methods of treatments of these works can be traced back to Sanskrit medical literature of earlier date. Role of primary elements in the formation and working of human body was stated in the ‘Indian Classic of Discussion on Eyes’. Interestingly, the five elements are analogous with *Pañcamahābhūtas* rather than traditionally accepted five elements of Chinese medicine. The underlying principle behind visual faculty described in the same work is similar to the one stated in *Carakasamhitā*. Susruta’s classification of eye diseases on the basis of eye anatomy and

his naming of five parts of the eye as five wheels are reflected in the two works attributed to Nagarjuna. These are but a few instances discussed here. They confirm the origin of new trends in medieval Chinese ophthalmology in ancient Indian medicine.