
Book Review: *Imagining Chinese Medicine*

Vivienne Lo and Penelope Barrett, eds. *Imagining Chinese Medicine*, Brill, 2018. Pp. xxii, 519, + 339 plates. \$144; ISBN 1570-1484; 978-90-04-35511-1.

It would be impossible to do justice to *Imagining Chinese Medicine*. The editors, Vivienne Lo and Penelope Barrett, have united scholars from Asia, Europe, and North America to provide the first sustained look at the intersection of visual culture and healing in China. By visual culture, I am referring to a wide variety of material related to the body: drawings, diagrams, color illustrations, advertisements, photographs, and cartoons, to name but a few. This volume is thus a formidable undertaking and reflects more than a decade of collaborative work.

The 35 essays and two general introductions are intentionally wide-ranging. The editors have adopted a broad understanding of both China and medicine. “China” refers not only to the imagination of a state centered in the Yellow River Valley, but also a geographic mass that incorporated people of different ethnicities, religious, and linguistic persuasions. By “medicine,” they mean the multiplicity of strategies that people have used to understand and cure the broken human (or animal) body, as well as to promote vitality and to preserve health. The essays thus consider not only practitioners of the learned classical tradition, but also religious healers, veterinarians, Daoist practitioners, and adherents of sexual cultivation. The essays also span many centuries, mediums, and languages, from the Shuangbaoshan figurines and Mawangdui illustrations of the Han dynasty (206 BC–220 CE), to the medieval images recovered from the Dunhuang caves, to the color colophon pictures found in state-sponsored herbals in Ming China (1368–1644), to contemporary comic books. The essays also include a number of papers about the reception of Chinese visual imagery outside of China—for example, an examination of the images that accompany the quotations of the *Classic of Childbirth* (*Taichan jing*) in the medieval Japanese compendium, the *Isbimpô*; and Chinese medical imaginary in the broader East Asian, medieval Persian, early modern Dutch, and colonial Japanese contexts. Sino-Tibetan and Central Asian traditions also receive their share of attention.

The essays diverge in terms of their intellectual styles and goals. Some of the essays provide a useful survey of sources, which will spawn new directions in the scholarship. For instance, the contributions of Zheng Jinsheng and Cao Hui, “Observational Drawing and Fine Art in Chinese *Materia Medica* Illustration” and “Polychrome Illustrations in the Ming *Bencao* Literature,” survey the 40 illustrated *bencao*, which have not until recently

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been available to scholars. Xiong Yongzhi's "Illustrations of Drug Collection and Preparation in *Buyi Lei Fang Paozhi Bianlan*" highlights the usefulness of this late 16th-century *materia medica* to students of Ming material culture. As Xiong points out, the beautiful color illustrations that accompany the text depict "24,000 artefacts representing the whole spectrum of daily life in the Ming, including costume and fashion, food and eating, interior design, transport, and labor and production" (pg. 211).

Other contributions represent more conventional scholarly essays that set out to solve puzzles. Yi-Li Wu, for instance, investigates the predominance of male imagery in the *Golden Mirror* (*Yuzuan Yizong Jinjian*, 1742). As she puts it, the dominance of male imagery is surprising given that classical medicine was fundamentally androgynous. Wu explains this stunning departure through an analysis of the images themselves, which tended to be "male figures who were regularly portrayed with auspicious symbols, particularly those associated with Daoist immortals" (pg. 123). In this way, the images "liken the doctor implicitly to a Daoist sage" (pg. 123) and thus bolster the legitimacy of male practitioners.

A number of themes emerge from this volume. One is the sheer size of the archive. Until I read this book, I had no idea just how many images survived. For the pre-1949 period alone, there are currently 10,000 extant images in the *bencao* genre. But this is not all. As T.J. Hinrichs reveals in her "Picturing Medicine in Daily Life: Court and Commoner Perspectives in Song Era Paintings," tomb art also contains useful and largely under-utilized clues for rethinking the curative traditions in the Chinese context. The archive is still larger if we consider the modern period, where a still greater variety of source material exists. Soyoung Suh, Chang Che-Jia, and Zhou Xun make the case that scholars of modern history should look at health advertisements and changing visual representations of beauty for clues about medical history. The neglect of visual materials, ancient or modern, have furthermore put historians at a disadvantage. As pointed out by Huang Longxiang in "Reading Visual Imagery and Written Sources on Acupuncture and Moxibustion," Chinese medicine has tended to privilege the written word over other kinds of evidence, including the models and diagrams that traditional physicians used to train students and to amend ancient texts.

A second theme lies in the diverging functions of the visual medium. As Roel Sterckx shows us in his "The Limits of Illustration: *Animalia* and Pharmacopeia from Guo Pu to *Bencao Gangmu*," images worked in different ways. Some images are more emblematic or performative in function. While accompanied by text, these captions were subsidiary to the image themselves. Other images, however, were more illustrative, being visual commentarial extensions of the main text that complemented the written word. The diverging use of images thus challenges readers of these works not only to contemplate what the image was, but also "how a reader or user of the *Materia Medica* was meant to look at them" (pg. 148).

A third theme lies in the way that images crossed linguistic, cultural, and temporal boundaries. Images played a role in the transmission of medical knowledge, ranging from tongue inspection techniques to the methods of examining childhood smallpox. As Hu Xiaofeng notes in the case of surgery, "The very nature of these subjects demands the

communication of certain kinds of dexterity and spatial awareness that may be obscured by the textual medium” (pg. 183). Images furthermore had a life of their own, a topic examined at length in Vivienne Lo and Wang Yidan, “Chasing the Vermilion Bird: Late-Medieval Alchemical Transformation.” This contribution treats echoes of the Chinese alchemic tradition in Rashid al-Din’s *Treasure Book*. It is also a theme taken up in Roberta Bivins’ “Imagining Acupuncture: Images and the Early Westernization of Asian Medical Expertise,” an essay that examines Dutch physician Wilhelm Ten Rhijne’s *Mantissa Schematica: De Acupunctura* (1683).

As my brief overview reveals, the volume, which also contains several hundred beautiful plates, is a rare achievement. Vivienne Lo and Penelope Barrett deserve applause for this massive undertaking. Indeed, I have encountered few books in my career that have made me want to run straight to the library. I thus believe that *Imagining Chinese Medicine* will change the field.

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