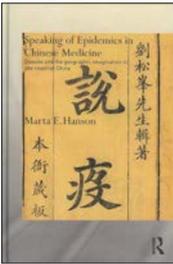


REVIEWS



China



Marta E. Hanson, *Speaking of Epidemics in Chinese Medicine: Disease and the Geographical Imagination in Late Imperial China*

London and New York: Routledge, 2011. 268 pages. Hardback, £90.00; paperback, £24.99. ISBN 978-0-415-60253-2 (hardback); 978-0-415-83535-0 (paperback).

GEOGRAPHICAL DIVIDE and imagination epitomize how the Chinese conceived themselves, the land, the society they occupied and belonged to, and the world in which they assumedly centered. Marta E. Hanson not only writes a very detailed biography of *wenbing*, or “warm illnesses” (warm diseases), a disease category in traditional Chinese medicine from antiquity to the present day, but also explores this opportunity to discuss geographical imagination and epidemiology in late imperial China (basically the Ming-Qing period, 1368–1911). Three intertwined themes are carefully positioned and discussed in the context in which *wenbing* gradually developed into a major Chinese medical category. In doing so, Hanson shares with us a fresh approach with many insights.

The book is organized chronologically by scrutinizing the development of *wenbing* tradition over a period of nearly two thousand years. Hansen first reviews the origins of *wenbing* from the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) when the canonical foundation of Chinese traditional medicine was established. In the beginning, *wenbing* was barely mentioned and only seen as the manifestation of cold damage in the spring and summer by the dominant medical school. It was only after the twelfth century that Chinese physicians began to parallel *wenbing* with cold damage. During the Ming period (1368–1644), it was very difficult to fit anomalous diseases into cosmological categories, and this challenged traditional medical canons, inspiring physicians to criticize, reflect, and revise. A few pioneers came to emphasize locality to integrate these new challenges. During the mid-seventeenth century, *wenbing* grew into a separate disease category from the dominant cold damage narration. By the mid-twentieth century a new tradition had been constructed, as *wenbing* had been taken up as one of the four basic specialities in

Chinese traditional medicine. Continuous efforts have been made to integrate new southern diseases such as SARS into *wenbing* within Chinese traditional medicine. The book is not long (169 pages of text), but extremely informative (659 footnotes, a 40-page bibliography, and a 15-page index). By tracing *wenbing*, Hanson indeed presents a concise and comprehensive introduction to Chinese medicinal thought and schools.

While Hanson has pointed out that the agrarian and non-agrarian regimes sometimes spoke out about ethnic anxiety (14), she indicates a Chinese “social understanding of human variation based on regional rather than ethnic identities” (3). Her emphasis on the role of locality is correct when applied to core areas such as North China in the pre-Song period and Jiangnan in late imperial China. It may be problematic to underestimate the role of ethnic tensions in conceptualizing some historical diseases and regional identities when imperial states began to intensify their administration over new frontiers that simultaneously received large waves of Han migrants. After all, locality often overlaps with ethnicity, especially on the frontiers. The numerous records of the *Zhang* and the *Gu* (chapter 4) in the broad southern areas, including the middle and lower Yangzi and Fujian during the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279), and in southwest China during the Ming and Qing periods, whether medical (or not), official or private, local or regional, highlight the importance of ethnicity in shaping Chinese culture and society. Physicians favored region (and probably climate) as the key, not because of their conscious ignorance of ethnic identity, but because of their lives in a spatio-temporal matrix in which (Neo)Confucian-Han culture dominated, and non-Han ethnic groups had either retreated further south or had been marginalized into mountainous areas, and were thus hardly visible.

Speaking of Epidemics has many implications for medical history and beyond. It was around the eleventh and twelfth centuries that both Confucian intellectuals and physicians began to review and reinterpret classic canons (whether medical or Confucian) with their experience and perspective, respectively. And it was their innovative initiatives that set up the foundations for neo-traditions (Neo-Confucianism and the *wenbing* school) in the Ming-Qing period. Such a simultaneous occurrence could hardly be accidental, but reflected a broad social context, transformation, and trend. As such, the book is recommended not only for medical historians, but also for imperial Chinese historians in general.

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