Yaron Seidman, Zac Patterson, and Lois Nethery (eds)


Doctors who take the lessons of medical history as guidelines for their own practice are rare. This book, written by Chinese medicine practitioners and targeted at their colleagues, argues that modern practice can and should be inspired by historical debate. Taking inspiration from the recent work of historians and anthropologists who have explored how Chinese medical reformers struggled to reconcile science and traditional medicine in the early twentieth century, Yaron Seidman, Zac Patterson, and Lois Nethery have assembled a treasure trove of translated primary documents from that period. But why? As Lois Nethery explains in the preface, the struggles of the early twentieth century ‘to develop the inherent qualities of Chinese medicine harmoniously with scientific knowledge and without losing its essence [remain] ... topical and urgent now ...’.

The lead author/compiler and publisher of the book, Yaron Seidman DA-OM (Doctor of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine), is a specialist in his own Chinese-style fertility treatment, which he names the Hunyuan Fertility Method. The choice of title is interesting. *Hunyuan* 混元 is a Chinese word referring to the origin of the universe, and used metaphorically to mean ‘time immemorial’. Taking the characters one-by-one, they mean ‘to mix or mingle’ and ‘origin’ or ‘element’. The word is a neat allegory: today’s Chinese medicine claims to be as old as time, while surviving by creatively appropriating elements from other medical practices, including modern science. What the authors are attempting with this volume is expressed in the ‘liberation’ of the
title: armed with the historical debates from Chinese scholars deeply versed in both classical medicine and modern science, today's practitioners will be able to liberate themselves from orientalising tendencies in the alternative medicine world and embrace the creative dynamism of modern medicine, whether 'Western' or 'Chinese'.

The book's primary documents are organised into four main chapters: historical background prior to 1920; founding of Chinese medicine schools; debating Chinese medicine versus Western medicine; and ideological, political, and other influences shaping Chinese medicine. The compilers are to be commended for finding and translating many key documents drawn from letters, periodical literature, and later compilations of key writings. Yaron Seidman has inserted very helpful explanatory notes to some of the translations, and occasionally analysis to make sure the reader understands the larger message. For example, when introducing Yu Yunxiu, a Japan-educated MD who spearheaded attempts to ban the practice of Chinese medicine in the Republican era, Seidman writes that Yu's argument 'is priceless for us wanting to research and advance Chinese medicine in the 21st century. Yu's threatening narrative, that Chinese medicine theories are erroneous but herbs are valuable, influenced the early Chinese medicine "scientification" attempts in a grand way' (p. 141).

The first chapter, summarising the state of medicine before attempts to create a modern Chinese medicine, includes a long excerpt from Harold Balme's 1921 China and Modern Medicine (pp. 2-45), the anti-Chinese bias of which is balanced with part of Chen Bangxian's 1936 Medical History of China. Both sources emphasise the influence of Western medical missionaries in China. Quickly we transition to the fractious arguments about what parts of traditional theory (if any) should be retained in a modern Chinese medicine. Modern students may be surprised to discover just how many Chinese physicians considered the Five Elements (or Phases) to be a ridiculous embarrassment and advocated removing this theory from any new textbooks that might be produced for government approval, if only Chinese medicine could be brought within the state education system.

This struggle over medical schools and licenses is the topic of chapter two, which is largely translated from a 1939 Compilation of Discussions about Chinese Medical Education. This book is never properly cited even though a photograph of the Chinese cover page is included. (It is the Zhongyi jiaoyi taolun ji 中醫教育討論集, compiled and published by Shanghai Society for Research into Chinese and Western Medicine and Pharmacy 上海中西醫藥研究社, Shanghai, 1939.) Here we see how much the supporters of Chinese medicine were prepared to compromise in order to formulate a Chinese
medicine that might win inclusion in the national education system. As the authors note, this is very similar to our current debates about the education standards required for modern acupuncture licenses.

Chapter three examines the struggles between abolitionists like Yu Yunxiu and reforming conservatives like Yun Tieqiao. Both these men were formidable scholars, and the translators sometimes struggle to render the classical idioms. For example, ‘That one can explain the five phases and Jia Zi 甲子 theory, that there is discussion with modern scientists about the wind and rain and Ji Ming 鸡鸣. That is what humble me urgently desires to know more about’ (p. 399). The editors have sometimes been too generous in accepting substandard translations from their contributors.

The final chapter, on political and ideological influences shaping Chinese medicine during the Maoist period, returns to a higher standard of translation and contains some key articles detailing the relationships between political theory and clinical change, such as the imposition of ‘differentiating syndromes and selecting treatment accordingly 辨证论治’ (p. 697), and the influence of Pavlovian physiology from the Soviet Union (p. 717). Seidman’s introductory notes to the articles are particularly valuable here in sorting out the various protagonists and their agendas.

With such a huge collection of articles, translated by a large team of volunteer translators, it is perhaps not surprising that there is no index to the volume. Nonetheless, I frequently found myself wishing that this resource had been available to me during my own research into Chinese medical modernisation. It is a significant contribution both to Chinese medicine’s modern history and to the ongoing debates about its future.

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