

*Novel Medicine. Healing, Literature and Popular Knowledge in Early Modern China.* By Andrew Schonebaum, Seattle: University of Washington Press. ISBN: 9780295995182

Andrew Schonebaum has written an insightful and original historical work on popular medicine and literature in late imperial China. This study captures the convergence of two long-standing research themes in Chinese literature, one on vernacular literature as a critique of the overemphasis on the “metropolitan language culture,”<sup>1</sup> meaning the centrally-positioned Neo-Confucian culture, a theme brilliantly developed by the late Glen Dudbridge, and the other on the relevance and importance of medical things in such literature, a topic opened up by the erudite Wilt Idema already in 1977.<sup>2</sup> In this study, Andrew Schonebaum puts vernacular medicine in the fore in analysing the intertextuality of the popular novel and medical genres. This inspiring approach is partly driven by the abundance of recent publications on the history of medicine in late imperial and modern China, and the increasing accessibility to the rich corpus of popular literary and medical genres.

“Novel medicine” invites us to seriously rethink the presumed boundary between medical and literary genres as effective vehicles for popularizing medical knowledge or knowledge of the body in the late imperial and modern periods. While entertaining medical details in popular Ming and Qing novels are quite well known as shown by the many examples provided in this book: from *Peony Pavilion*, *Story of the Stone*, to *Plum in the Golden Vase* and many others, medical texts as entertaining narratives have not been given much thought until the publication of this book. Schonebaum’s contribution is to establish the link between the two developments and to show the impact of popular medical knowledge and practices on the construction of both the medical and literary genres in the period under

---

<sup>1</sup> Glen Dudbridge, *Books, Tales and Vernacular Culture: Papers on China*. Leiden: Brill, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Wilt Idema, “Diseases and Doctors, Drugs and Cures: A very Preliminary List of Passages of Medical Interest in a Number of Traditional Chinese Novels and Related Play.” *Chinese Science* 2 (1977): 37-63. This article was published much earlier than the Chinese book co-authored by a famous modern doctor and a distinguished scholar of literature, Chen Cunren 陳存仁 and Song Qi 宋淇, *Honglou meng renwu yishi kao* (紅樓夢人物醫事考 A study on medical matters related to characters in the *Dream of The Red Chamber*). Guilin: Guangxi Shifan daxue chubanshe 2006.

study. He pertinently shows how even medical classics of this period, like Li Shizhen's *Systematic materia medica*, did not write off popular medical knowledge and practices such as the ritual treatment of demonic influence, and how new medical genres like case history books adopted narrative strategies from fiction to dramatize ailments and miraculous healing so that the cases became entertaining stories to satisfy a growing readership. Without going into the details of the history book publishing, another important related field of research, examples given in this book are lively witnesses of the vibrant book market of this period.

The notion of “novel medicine” is fully embodied in two Qing literary texts analyzed in this book. The novel *Annals of Herbs and Trees*, a playful mid-Qing work in which all the characters are named after herbs and pharmaceuticals in a plot that was supposed to strengthen the readers' knowledge on the natures and interactions of drugs is an extraordinary and unique example. The famous late Qing novel, *Flowers in the Mirror* that could be read like a recipe book, and was actually used as a medical text well into the Republican period is another outstanding illustration of the inter-fertilization of the medical and literary genres. Intertextuality of the novel and medical texts seems to have reached a historical high point from the mid- to the late Qing period.

Schonebaum continues a little into the Republican period by taking up some of the most important medical themes of the time, including illnesses of sex, contagion and depletion by using rare medical manuscripts and archival materials in different national and private collections. The modern notion of “novel medicine”, however, remains nebulous because of the insufficient co-analysis with contemporary literary work in this later period. A separate book probably needs to be written on this period with rapidly changing views on diseases, body, love, life and death, and the emergence of new media.

The main strengths of this insightful book are on the analysis of vernacular medicine as knowledge and practice in popular printed texts in the late imperial period. Historians of medicine and literature would find the book most useful and inspiring.

Angela Ki Che LEUNG

Hong Kong Institute of the Humanities and Social Sciences

University of Hong Kong

Kcleung7@hku.hk