

***Healing with Poisons: Potent Medicines in Medieval China.*** By Yan Liu. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2021. Pp. xiii + 263. \$32.00 paperback.

Few studies in Chinese medicine have been dedicated to the representations associated with therapeutic remedies and, in particular, to the crucial question of their toxicity and their mode of effectiveness. Nearly twenty-five years ago, Frédéric Obringer wrote a pioneering work in French about the medicinal use of poisons in China,<sup>1</sup> with extracts from his thesis, in which he had made an inventory of the remedies considered as *du* 毒 (toxic), in the *Zhenglei bencao* 證類本草, a Song pharmacopoeia.

In this book, *Healing with Poisons: Potent Medicines in Medieval China*, Yan Liu usefully completes the work of Frédéric Obringer by studying the theme of “poison” with two different approaches: on one hand, he focuses on the period from the second to the eighth century, prior to the one chosen by Obringer, and, on the other hand, he uses a method in which he does not have to limit himself to the medical context.

This work comes, furthermore, at the right time as a recent study by Frederick W. Gibbs, *Poison, Medicine and Disease in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2018), drew the attention of specialists to this issue of poison in Europe.

The theme is even more relevant since, for a very long time, not knowing how to position biomedicine and ethnomedicines, the public had tended to qualify the latter as “alternative medicines,” under the premise that natural substances were used and not chemical products, omitting precisely that these medicines could make use of highly toxic remedies and do damage when they were poorly controlled.

This 261-page book, well documented, with rich and abundant notes and a detailed bibliography, reviews the position of various actors in Chinese society, including doctors, religious groups, court officials, and the common people, on the use of poison, which had an ambivalent status and could have been used to kill or save lives, as well as the means employed to reduce their toxicity and make them effective.

Liu analyses the relationship between poison, medicine, and disease, based on philosophical texts on medicine and nature, collections of miracles, hagiographies, and stories of scholars. The diversity of sources and approaches means that he has focused more on the category of “poison” than on that of specific remedy. He, thus, opens up a new field of research that deserves to be developed and raises many relevant questions, without always providing a substantiated or sufficiently developed answer though.

This book is divided into seven chapters grouped into three main parts: the first on the representation of *du* and its ambiguity, the second on the application and use

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<sup>1</sup> Frédéric Obringer, *L'aconit et l'orpiment: drogues toxiques et concept de toxicité en Chine, de l'antiquité jusqu'aux Song* (Paris: Inalco, 1992).

of these poisons, and the third on the effectiveness of these toxic substances in solving a major problem of life—that of the meaning of life and death and the widespread wish to transform oneself, body and mind, into a transcendent being.

In the first part, Liu presents a lexical study and a review of the various uses of *du* in antiquity, showing on one hand that the term could have different meanings depending on the context as well as a positive connotation, particularly in politics, and, on the other hand, that its ambiguity goes back quite far in time. Already in the second century B.C.E., Huainanzi 淮南子 said, “Nothing is worse than the poison of aconite and yet doctors hoard it because it can be useful.” (天下之物，莫凶於雞毒，然而良醫橐而藏之，有所用也。)<sup>2</sup> This development in the use of poisons could not have lasted without technological inventions that had made it possible to reduce the toxicity of some substances.

According to Liu, whether a substance was a poison or a medicine, depended on the techniques of its preparation and usage, its assigned political and social values, and the sensations it induced on a particular body. The techniques used in pharmacopoeias, such as the dosage or the preparation, were well known and had been refined over time, leading to the appearance of elaborate treatises in the fifth and sixth centuries. Another important development in reducing the toxicity of substances was the combination of remedies; the interaction between various ingredients could dampen the power of *du*, and substances like rice water or fermented soybean juice could act as antidotes to poison.

Thus, we must reconsider the link between nature and technology and the opposition between East and West in, on one hand, a natural, pure medicine as an alternative to biomedicine and its side effects, and, on the other hand, a traditional medicine rejected as unscientific, two positions that Liu considers problematic.

The second part begins by quoting the adage so often taken up by doctors themselves “(to fight) Fighting poison (disease) with poison” (p. 61). The research is based on a collection of miracles compiled between the fifth and sixth centuries and shows how the use of *du* was also linked to the eatiology in which the demonic cause plays a preponderant role, especially in times of epidemic. The author, thus, addresses the relationship between *du* and eatiology; nevertheless, the demonic cause is far from being the only one and the link between *du*, and the cause and type of diseases may be the subject of further research. Indeed, it is not only the eatiology, but also the nature of the disease that determined the use of certain substances in any case.

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<sup>2</sup> Liu Wendian 劉文典, “Zhushu xun” 主術訓, in idem, *Huainan Honglie Ji Jie* 淮南鴻烈集解, annot. Feng Yi 馮逸 and Qiao Hua 喬華 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989), p. 292.

Liu shows the importance of *du* not only in the medical field but also in its political ramifications. An ever more obvious link is made between *du* and epidemics, a real scourge for society. Poison was even a cause of anxiety for the government, especially *gu* 蠱, a kind of poisoning and sorcery. According to Liu, growing concern for health on the part of government authorities led to the organized construction of authority and the institutionalization of medicine in the Sui (581–618) and the Tang (618–907) eras. He perhaps does not take sufficiently into account that the preoccupation with health problems was already serious in the authorities during the Six Dynasties, despite the being well-developed yet; and the families of powerful high officials had contributed to this development in a significant way.

Liu studies the practical use of remedies through an examination of poisonous remedies from excavated documents from the Han age and in pharmacopoeias in the *Shennong bencao jing* 神農本草經; he draws distinctions between how literate officials produced medical knowledge and how practitioners like the famous Sun Simiao 孫思邈 (581–682) insisted on practice, experimentation, and experience, going as far as to report some of their cures. It should be noted, however, that during the Six Dynasties, the literate civil servants who produced medical writings were also practitioners, even though medicine might not be their primary function.

The third part poses an interesting question by considering the toxic substance not in the purely medical context, but in its positive effects on the body and on life: how toxic substances can enhance life and sublimate the body. It addresses the whole issue of external alchemy using highly toxic substances as well as the “powder of cold eating” 寒食散, a recipe that became a devastating fashion. The author discusses subjects that are already well investigated, in particular the powder of cold eating, which has been studied in detail by Yu Jiayi, Rudolf Wagner, Joseph Needham, Nathan Sivin, and Frédéric Obringer, in particular; meanwhile, he highlights the medical aspect of this powder, which has indeed attracted less attention from researchers. This helps deepen the representations associated with the use of this powder and its presumed effects. The religious aspect and the imagination around the quasi-magical power of poison and the future of being after death open up a problem that deserves further studies.

The next chapter tackles external alchemy. Needham focused on its practical aspects, while Nathan Sivin and Fabrizio Pregadio rather on the theory of external alchemy, but few have studied the medical implications of these techniques, which, despite the dangers, had been developed for more than a millennium and lasted until very recently. Several points are discussed here. Liu first studies the fact that these substances promised eternal life or transformation into an immortal (*xian* 仙), a semantic category that the author questions.

He relies for this on the interesting texts by Ge Hong 葛洪 (ca. 283–ca. 343), which shows how a person is conditioned to persuade oneself that eventual death is only a transformation, in particular by stressing the necessary preparation before ingesting such substances.

We are, therefore, in the presence of a fine work of synthesis of certain aspects already well studied and new lines of thought that are proposed. The interest of this book, which is also its weakness, is to not have limited the study to the medical field, but to have included the political, social, technical, and religious dimensions. Without preconceived ideas, any substance was considered as a potential remedy and any remedy as malleable, an idea that has its roots in Chinese antiquity in the way that all things are perceived as being in perpetual change, a central idea in the pharmaceutical practices of medieval China.

This openness has made it possible to highlight the fluidity of knowledge and knowledge which, far from being fixed, was adapted by doctors concerned about the effectiveness of remedies and relying on their own experience to determine the useful formulas. The making of new medical knowledge was a dynamic negotiation between political authority and local demands, between textual authority and practices.

By not limiting himself to medical knowledge, Liu encompasses the use of toxic substances to transform the body into a higher state of being. These substances, which were supposed to enable one to radically change the body and transcend death, yet also threatening to shorten life, had widespread uses among the Daoists and the scholars of the Tang.

By bringing together medicine, politics, and religion, Liu is able to examine the disparate groups engaged in medical practice and the production of new knowledge about cures. Nevertheless, his sociological analysis of groups practising medicine deserves to be refined.

The relativity of toxicity depending on many factors has been demonstrated in several places in the book. We understand how much toxicity is not defined quantitatively in relation to the substance itself, but in its interaction; this can indeed change according to the particular body on which it has an effect. It is evaluated mainly according to the effectiveness recognized not scientifically but by society at a given time and, therefore, varies according to contexts and times.