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Howard Y.F. Choy (2016). *Discourses of Disease: Writing Illness, the Mind and the Body in Modern China*. Leiden: Brill. 272 pp., ISBN 978-90-04-319202.

So few are high quality explorations of the medical humanities and illness narratives in China (and East Asia more broadly) that I was very interested to see the publication of this new edited volume. In what appears to be a highly personal project (the book is dedicated to Choy's wife Shelley, who is disabled and contributes her own chapter), editor Howard Choy has brought together nine very different studies, which range across time, geographical location and, of course, illness and disease, to offer a fascinating examination of the way in which discourses of disease have developed in China from the late nineteenth century on. The contributors are a mix of well-established names and newer scholars from institutions in the US, Hong Kong and Australia, and from several disciplines—predominantly Chinese Studies-related, but also comparative literature and education—which allows for a range of approaches and perspectives. The subjects covered in their various chapters include mental illness, drug addiction, cancer, disability and AIDS, offering much to those interested in the medical humanities and China.

In the introduction, Choy sets out the volume's objective, which is to trace "the pathological path of the 'Sick Man of East Asia' (*Dong Ya bingfu* 东亚病夫) through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries into the new millennium" (p.1), through a reconfiguration of an ambitiously broad number of fields listed as film, literature, history, psychology, anthropology, ethnography, gender and cultural studies. While I feel that more could have been done in this section to engage with broader theories of psychiatric and bodily illness and disability (individual chapters are much more engaged in this regard), Choy follows an established approach that emphasises the way in which disease and illness (used interchangeably) are "historically situated, socially defined, and culturally meaningful" (p.2). He sets the scene by exploring the way in which Chinese understandings of disease and diagnosis are essentially discursive, and

highlights the inevitable intersectional nature of disease—it is never merely medical, but intersects with notions of imperialism, nationalism, revolutionary romanticism, and marketisation, as well as aspects of individual identity and experience.

Stephanie Villalta Puig's exploration of "James Henderson's *Shanghai Hygiene and the British Constitution in Early Modern China*" opens the volume proper. Although very interesting, it is something of an anomaly in the book, being the only study to examine British, rather than Chinese, discourses of hygiene and health. It is only in the concluding remarks that Puig introduces the way in which other expatriates and locals in treaty ports elsewhere appear to have drawn heavily upon these emerging understandings of health and disease to develop what Ruth Rogaski (2004) terms "hygienic modernity", ideas that would become increasingly central to Chinese conceptions of *weisheng* 卫生. This is a real shame, as the chapter potentially offers insight into British medical imperialism and, with better framing, could have spoken more directly to the new discourses of disease in China that emerged as a consequence, and which form a backdrop to subsequent chapters.

Wendy Larson's chapter, "Curing Unhappiness in Revolutionary China: Optimism under Socialism and Capitalism", moves on in time to explore the way in which "revolutionary optimism" (*geming leguanzhuyi* 革命乐观主义), became a key element of Maoist social practice. An attempt to "cure" what was medicalised as the "absence of happiness", mandated happiness, argues Larson, should be seen to be part of a larger spread of cheerfulness around the globe from its origins in nineteenth-century Europe. Her chapter spends much time tracing these journeys, with an initial focus on the reception of Émile Coué's "conscious suggestion" in the US, followed by the development of Maxim Gorky's optimistic "New Socialist Man" in the USSR, before moving on to Mao's revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism, which combined to produce "an exuberant lyricism that pushed out unhappy thoughts and expressions" (pp.78-79). While more time could perhaps have been spent on China as promised by the title, the concluding section offers food for thought about the political usefulness of promoting optimism under both capitalist and socialist conditions.

Birgit Bunzel Linder's chapter, "Metaphors unto Themselves: Mental Illness Poetics and Narratives in Contemporary Chinese Poetry", offers an intriguing journey into "illness poetics". Through the poetry of Guo Lusheng (literary name Shi Zhi 食指), diagnosed with schizophrenia in 1972, and Wen Jie 温洁, chronically depressed since childhood, Linder examines the way in which these distinctive poets reflect and explore their respective mental illnesses. Their poetry is shown to offer a rare window into the subjective and cultural nature of pain and illness, where the continued stigmatisation of mental illness in China provides ample opportunities for metaphors of personal alienation and a diseased society. One minor irritation was the use of untranslated German terms—*Grenzerfahrungen* and *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*—which sent me scurrying for my dictionary at various points; but this is a minor quibble about a chapter that sets up useful foundations for future explorations into the "nexus between medicine/psychiatry and literature" (p.91).

In "Unmaking of Nationalism: Drug Addiction and its Literary Imagination in Bi Shumin's Novel", Haomin Gong begins to unpick the way in which writing about illness and disease in China has been so often intertwined with national conditions and seeks to present a more diverse way of understanding drug addiction in China today. With *The Red Prescription (Hong chufang 红处方, 1997)* by Bi Shumin 毕淑敏 forming the central case study, Gong charts the changing narrative of drugs, from nationalistic "preaching" (a reaction to China's humiliation as "The Sick Man of East Asia") to the "ideological ambivalence and complexity" of post-socialist China (p.131), and demonstrates how the novel reflects these new understandings. Following Keith McMahon (2002), Gong also argues that the novel offers further evidence as to the way in which "gender constitutes an indispensable dimension in articulating drug addiction in particular and other diseases in general" (p.140).

Howard Choy's own contribution—"Narrative as Therapy: Stories of Breast Cancer by Bi Shumin and Xi Xi"—continues many of the threads from the previous chapter to understand how "fictional treatments" are overturning the political appropriation of narratives of disease and illness to become personal vehicles for therapeutic storytelling. For Bi Shumin's *Save the Breast (Zhengjiu rufang 拯救乳房, 2003)*, it comes in the form of "narrative therapy"—the therapist-author reveals how her clients reclaim their sense of self and voice. In

Elegy for a Breast (*Aidao rufang* 哀悼乳房, 1992) by Xi Xi 西西, by contrast, the first-person narrative offers us a process of self-therapy and self-discovery—“narrative as therapy” if you will. In both, Choy reveals the way in which individuals counter the “problematic identity” of a patient who is subordinated to medical diagnosis and, in doing so, he elucidates the complex biopolitics of breast cancer “as both social stigma and physio-psychic trauma” (p.153).

In “Narrating Cancer, Disabilities and AIDS: Yan Lianke’s Trilogy of Disease”, and in contrast to previous chapters, Shelley Chan argues that under the pen of satirical fiction writer Yan Lianke 阎连科 “the nightmare of being a sick man” continues to haunt China (p.178). Through a study of *Streams of Light and Time* (*Riguang liunian* 日光流年, 1998), *Pleasure* (*Shouhuo* 受活, 2004) and *Dream of Ding Village* (*Dingzhuang meng* 丁庄梦, 2006), Chan shows how Yan’s depictions of cancer, disability and AIDS should be read as metaphors for the morbidity of contemporary Chinese society where “the malpractices of materialistic modernization is driving people to self-destruction” (p.194). While I agree with Chan’s argument, her understanding of disability is not at all embedded in China-specific research leaving it to straddle somewhat awkwardly between Western disability studies and Chinese fiction. Note also that the Chinese word for disability is no longer *canfei* (残废) – this term has long been supplanted by *canji* (残疾) and, more recently, *canzhang* (残障).

The last three chapters focus specifically on AIDS. Kun Qian’s “Reluctant Transcendence: AIDS and the Catastrophic Condition in Gu Changwei’s Film *Love for Life*” (*Zui ai* 最爱, 2011) explores how this filmic adaptation of Yan Lianke’s novel *Dream of Ding Village* is something of paradoxical attempt by the director “to make AIDS a metaphor for the collapse of the social immune system and at the same time to aestheticize it by proposing love as a way of transcendence” (p.204). Li Li’s chapter—“Alone Together: Contagion, Stigmatization and Utopia as Therapy in Zhao Liang’s AIDS Documentary *Together*”—continues directly on from Qian’s study to examine the companion documentary (*Zai yiqi* 在一起, 2010) and the way in which such experimental filmmaking is contributing to the developing discourse of AIDS in China. Firmly embedded in both Western understandings of AIDS discourse and the Chinese sociocultural context, Li ably demonstrates how, while the “fear and fantasy of AIDS contagion in China is always closely associated with the ‘risk group’ considered prone to spread the

disease as well as pollute public morality” (p.233), “immersive” AIDS writing and representation as exemplified by *Together* defies that dominant discourse through faithfulness to the experience of people with AIDS (PWAs).

The final chapter by Kavin Carrico—“The Unknown Virus: The Social Logic of Bioconspiracy Theories in Contemporary China”—investigates the intriguing new phenomenon of “HIV-negative AIDS” (*yinxing aizibing* 阴性艾滋病) or “the unknown virus” (*weizhi bingdu* 未知病毒), whereby sufferers believe they have are HIV-positive despite all medical evidence to the contrary. Like many of the other contributors, Carrico draws on the work of Susan Sontag (1989) to reveal in China the existence of “a new imagining in which social and personal anxieties are articulated through the idea of a simultaneously destructive and elusive illness” (p.257). Here, he argues, China’s “sexual revolution” and continued sexual repression have combined to create an extreme “sociosexual duality” and a disease woven, quite literally, of discourse (p.259). A fitting conclusion to this timely and interesting volume.

References

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