Book Reviews

Zhan, Mei 2009. *Other-Worldly: Making Chinese Medicine through Transnational Frames*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. Pp. 256. US\$84.95 (hbk), ISBN 978 0 8223 4363 9; US\$23.95 (pbk), ISBN 978 0 8223 4384 4

Other-Worldly is a multi-sited ethnography of Chinese medicine which addresses pertinent issues for Chinese, and by extension Asian, medicine within current conditions of increasing globalisation. Zhan's field sites are Chinese medical colleges and conferences in Shanghai, California and elsewhere up the US West Coast. Each chapter describes encounters between various actors in the Chinese medicine network—doctors, students, patients, politicians—portraying the difficulties they face and their creative responses. This work's purchase on widespread contemporary issues of the globalisation of traditional medicine will not only appeal to historians and anthropologists of Chinese medicine, but students and practitioners of Asian medicines will find their own stories partly reflected here.

Using the combined lenses of anthropology and science and technology studies, Zhan draws heavily on post-colonial, feminist, and globalisation theory to make her arguments. She argues that although Chinese medicine and its practitioners appear to be disadvantaged in a fixed global economy of scientific knowledge, in practice her subjects negotiate complex discourses in unstable, emergent points of encounter and identity formation. Rather than there being a fixed “world” of Chinese medicine, the world is constantly being reimagined, or “worlded” by those who live in it as they set about creating or utilising relationships, institutions and knowledge systems to navigate their ways (pp. 7–24).

Practitioners of other traditional Asian medicines will find many of the issues she touches on common to their own traditions: the challenges of communicating indigenous knowledge in the scientific community, of maintaining intellectual, material and cultural consistency when the medicine is produced and consumed abroad, changing gender relations within the tradition, government support or censure, miscomprehension by patients, new forms of commercialisation, and maintaining faith in the tradition by new generations.

Chapter one describes the changing narratives of China's globalisation of its medicine, from a free gift to the world proletariat in the Sixties and Seventies, to privatising health care within China in order to “get on track with the world.” She argues that while these narratives promised homogeneity and class unity, in practice they still reified racial and class hierarchies.

Chapter two points to the cultural reductionism that occurs in scientific extractions of essential properties of herbs and standardised models of the body, while at the same time, offering new directions for scientific innovation. In America, where Chinese medicine is seen as competing with biomedicine on the medical market, its increased demand enables it to thrive; in China, while doctors and patients struggle with the contradictions between medical ethics and new commodification of medicine, commodification also produces new forms of delivery of care.

Chapter three's central point is simple and elegant—while the marking of Chinese medicine by “miracle” cures that biomedicine cannot produce gives Chinese medicine authority and recognition, the “miracle” also reifies and normalises biomedical science as a standard of

measure, marking Chinese medicine as inferior. This point is enmeshed in an historical critique of early constructions of science as a European knowledge in contrast to “indigenous” knowledge, engaging Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard and Latour. Here Zhan asks the core question of the book: “How would our conception of science change if we seriously reconsider and include the knowledge-making efforts by those who have conventionally been marginalized or excluded from social analyses of science[?]” (pp. 100–101)

Chapter four neatly challenges the idea that translation is a neutral “bridge” between Chinese medicine and biomedicine, showing how uneven cross-cultural and cross-discourse encounters produce various racialisms, nationalisms, and concepts of the body, science and Chinese medicine. Through a detailed analysis of exchanges between a doctor, her foreign students, their translator and the patients in a Shanghai hospital teaching room, Zhan portrays the means and contexts by which multiple, contradictory discourses develop alongside one another in a seemingly homogenous context. Particularly interesting is Zhan’s discussion of cultural translation, exemplified in the doctor’s skill at describing her diagnoses in comparison to biomedicine without resorting to apologetics that gave priority to biomedical interpretations.

Chapter five responds to male-centrist histories of Shanghai medicine by writing narratives of women practitioners of Chinese medicine and their navigation of changing gender roles. Zhan tracks how women’s choices to practice Chinese medicine or biomedicine configured them in differing gender roles, even as the gender of Chinese medicine changed over time, and how these women’s career choices shaped their relations with their families and teachers.

Chapter six contests conceptions of Chinese medicine as a homogenous globalised commodity that “flows” easily between locations. Highlighting the different anxieties, interests and ethnic distinctions produced in an American conference on Chinese medicine, Zhan argues that, as a supposed point of confluence in the network flows of Chinese medicine, conferences such as these produce differences and disparities with much more stickiness than implied by models of globalisation emphasising fluid metaphors of circulation, homogeneity and free trade. Zhan also shows the disparities between different actors’ notions of the “authentic” Chinese culture associated with Chinese medicine, expressed in terms of religion or of cuisine.

Zhan’s project is essentially discursive: by first placing her subjects within a discourse of disadvantage and marginalization, and then re-writing them within new discourses of agency and creative response, challenging inherited notions of science, Zhan acts as the advocate ethnographer for her subjects, writing a space of recognition and hopeful possibility. Her writing is lucid, but couched in so much theoretical language that one wonders if it will alienate the very readers she advocates. The intellectual transformations that happen on the page are fascinating, drawing the reader in, but leaving one to wonder at the end, how much of this transformation is limited to the rhetoric on the page, and what real-world advocacy is actually performed?

Zhan’s engagement with globalized science deserves placing in a broader context. In chapter three, Zhan draws on Bruno Latour’s work to point out the historical construction of European science as appropriation and reconfiguration of indigenous knowledges, and the marking of those knowledges as irrational (pp. 95–101). She then neatly turns and critiques Latour for also reinscribing science with an implicitly masculinist, Eurocentric core. However, she does not further reflect that her own choice of field-sites and informants is limited to practitioners of a post-scientised TCM.

In extending the notion of science to include TCM, Zhan steps gingerly around a glaring epistemological difference between Chinese and biomedicine, namely that of *qi*. Although she briefly mentions the term (pp. 77, 115, 167–8), those vignettes are not theoretically load-bearing. *Qi* has played, and still plays, a fundamental role in the construction of difference between Chinese and biomedical physiology. It acts as a linking concept to many other health practices that sit on the margins of the practices Zhan focuses on in this book. This leaves one

wondering what practices of exclusion are also at play in *Other Worlds*. Zhan describes how she censors herself from discussing *qigong* further with a cynical MD (p. 168), but does not provide here the rich analyses that she gives to other practices of silence in the book.

In excluding, for example, temple medicine, shamanic healing, prayer, street massage, fortune-telling, bone-setting, barber shops, folk surgeries, Zhan tacitly normalises a picture of “those who do science” which follows the contours set by Shanghai medical elite and medical colleges of the 1950’s, a shape she contests in other ways through the book. In challenging norms of what gets included in “science,” and attempting to expand that envelope, Zhan avoids problematizing the centrality of science itself, and tacitly reproduces a variety of cultural exclusions that remain unexamined.

In sum, *Other-Worldly* vividly captures scenes which will be familiar to those who study traditional Asian medicine, while at the same time reconfiguring some broadly-held beliefs about the encounter of Chinese medicine with the forces of science, globalization and capitalism. Astutely capturing these trends as they unfold in individual, local contexts, Zhan’s narrative weaves neatly between highly theoretical analysis, and down-to-earth lived experiences of the individuals she meets, inviting the reader to observe how macro-scale forces play out in individual lives, and how individuals respond to them in unexpected, and assumption-breaking ways. The inequalities of hierarchy and discourse, genderings of indigenous knowledge and problematic encounters with Euro-centric science, make this book a must-read, not only for anthropologists of Chinese medicine, but historians and practitioners of Asian Medicine in general.

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