Introduction: Disease and Discourse

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From Freud’s popularization of psychoanalysis to Foucault’s formulation of bio-power, from traditional herbal treatments to modern scientific biomedicine, the meanings of disease have undergone such drastic changes with the introduction of modern Western medicine into China during the last two hundred years that new discourses have been invented to theorize illness, redefine health, and reconstruct classes and genders.\(^1\) As a consequence, medical literature is rewritten with histories of hygiene, studies of psychopathology, and stories of cancer, disabilities and pandemics, etc. This edited volume is developed from an interdisciplinary panel bearing the same title at the 2011 joint conference of the Association for Asian Studies and International Convention of Asia Scholars in Honolulu.\(^2\) Including studies of discourses about both bodily and psychiatric illness in modern China, it attempts to bring together groundbreaking scholarships that reconfigure the fields of film, literature, history, psychology, anthropology, ethnography, gender and cultural studies by tracing 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.

Disease Concepts and Illness Metaphors

Throughout this volume, the terms “disease” and “illness” are often used interchangeably as synonyms since their strict institutional distinction has been deconstructed by Canadian sociologist Arthur W. Frank in the sense that illness as a social experience is an experience in and of disease as a physiological process.\(^3\) In fact, Russian-American medical historian Owsei Temkin has

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\(^1\) A landmark of the introduction of modern Western medicine into China was Dr. Alexander Pearson’s (1780–1874) bringing in smallpox vaccination into Macao and Canton in 1805. See Louis Fu, “The Protestant Medical Missions to China: The Introduction of Western Medicine with Vaccination,” Journal of Medical Biography 21.2 (May 2013): 112–17.

\(^2\) The book title phrase “Discourses of Disease” comes from this panel I organized in early Dec. 2009, two months prior to a call for papers with the exact same title for a special issue of Modern Chinese Literature and Culture 23.1 (Spring 2011) edited by Carlos Rojas, who also served as my panel discussant in Hawai‘i.

redefined “disease” as a spectrum from the ontological to the physiological since antiquity. Researching on the history of disease concepts, British medical historian Adrian Wilson further distinguishes the naturalist-realist perspective of disease as ahistorical from the historicalist-conceptualist approach to disease as contingent. Adopting the latter approach on “the premise that diseases are historically situated, socially defined, and culturally meaningful,” American historian of Chinese medicine Marta Hanson relates disease concepts to individual illness narratives: “Disease concepts both structured patients’ narratives of illness and led physicians to decide what part of what they said was objectively pertinent.”

As Wilson concludes his article with an aspiration for a comparative study of the Western and Chinese or Ayurvedic medical traditions, the Chinese conception of disease remains an emerging field for further investigation beyond the scope of this volume. Where historian of Chinese medical literature Fan Xingzhun (1906–98) has published two pioneering works in this regard in the 1980s, here I just want to trace the modern compound word for

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4 Such spectrum spans from the most general, metaphysical understanding of the nature of disease to the very individual, contextual characterization of the circumstances of sufferers. See Owsei Temkin, “The Scientific Approach to Disease: Specific Entity and Individual Sickness,” in his The Double Face of Janus and Other Essays in the History of Medicine (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 441–55. Duffin, Lovers and Livers, 28, explains that the ontological theory views the cause of an illness from outside the patient (e.g., a god, a germ), whereas the physiological theory attributes it to within the body (e.g., a gene, an imbalance).


6 Marta E. Hanson, Speaking of Epidemics in Chinese Medicine: Disease and the Geographic Imagination in Late Imperial China (New York: Routledge, 2011), 8–9.
