Andrew Schonebaum
Novel Medicine: Healing, Literature, and Popular Knowledge in Early Modern China.
ISBN 9780295995182.

Professor Schonebaum begins his study with a surprising, apparently factual anecdote: a nineteenth-century female healer finds helpful medical advice in the novel Jinghua yuan 鏡花緣 (Flowers in the mirror, 1818), applies it to a suffering patient, and the afflicted man is quickly restored to health. He uses this as the basis for his argument that medical knowledge was fairly widespread in Ming-Qing society, especially among members of its literate elite who frequently turned to the practice of medicine if they failed in the civil service examinations. This same group presumably included those who produced the “literati novels” (wenren xiaoshuo 文人小說), the more literary fictional texts often used to display their authors’ encyclopedic knowledge. Like specialist healers, other writers incorporated medical lore into their narratives. Often it was reliable – by the standards of the day.

This is not necessarily surprising. Ming and Qing era novels regularly conveyed factual information about laws and legal practice as well. Novelists generally accurately referred to the imperial codes (for their own time, at least; there is no indication that any novelist took pains to describe practices in earlier times); descriptions of investigations and trial procedures is often similarly accurate. But these types of specialist knowledge are always subordinated to the needs of the narrative: novelists felt no compunction about exaggerating here, leaving out essential details there, to make their stories work out.1 The same, Schonebaum demonstrates, was true of novelists’ appropriation of medical knowledge as well.

Novel Medicine is an innovative comparison of medical lore and fictional practice. Throughout, Schonebaum takes up a number of scenes from fiction that are well known to students of late imperial fiction to analyze how they compare with diagnoses and prescriptions from medical texts available at that time. His study thereby gives new and exciting insights about how those scenes

1 Legal procedures in the trial of Wu Song 武松 in Shuihu zhuan 水滸傳 (Outlaws of the marsh) are accurate reflections of Ming practice; however, its denouement is unbelievable: despite his confession, the charge of homicide is dropped, and Wu Song is simply exiled. The ever popular tales of Magistrate Bao (Bao Gong 包公) adhere far less to Ming investigative procedures and sentencing guidelines. See my “Introduction,” in Robert E. Hegel and Katherine Carlitz, eds., Writing and Law in Late Imperial China (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2007), 3–24, and especially pages 11–12.
would have been understood by readers familiar with medical practices. He has read very widely in medical materials; many of his translations are from rare medical texts now only available in special collections in Germany and elsewhere. Many of his examples come from Qing period manuscripts that show details of therapeutic practices.

Schonebaum's introductory chapters explore the world of medical knowledge and theories behind therapeutic practices in late imperial China. This is a useful summary, wide ranging and pointed in the contrasts drawn between standard medical practice and “literary logic” by which numerous factors can result in a fictional illness. The format and content of anecdotes used to demonstrate the efficacy of a cure in medical texts such as Li Shizhen's *Bencao gangmu* 本草綱目 (Systematic materia medica, 1596) contrasts markedly with the larger narrative arcs of vernacular fiction and popular plays. Sometimes the medical literature, like fiction, used poetry as evidence, as reflected by their use of the same phrase: *You shiwei zheng* 有時為證 (“There is a poem that gives evidence ...”).

Differences between the two ways of writing are explored in Chapter 2. In the view of medical practitioners, fiction could be dangerous: if a reader who was already weak from other causes became obsessed with the play *Mudanting* 牡丹亭 (Peony pavilion) or the novel *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢 (Dream of red mansions, better known in English as Story of the stone), for example, the outcome could be tragic. Such events paralleled fictional situations, as in the deaths of Du Liniang 杜麗娘 or Jia Rui 賈瑞 characters, both caused by longing and sexual desire. Of course *Mudan ting* epitomized the ‘cult of qing 情’ that characterized late Ming writing, and as Schonebaum observes, *Honglou meng* is really all about emotions – which has made it seem so realistic to generations of readers that they would identify deeply with its protagonists. For this reason, he explains, the medical dangers to be faced when reading fiction were countered by prefaces to the great novels that claimed such texts might be efficacious as “preventative medicine, palliative, and cure for literati maladies” (p. 72).

Chapter 3 discusses the medical lore in a number of fictional texts. One is a bizarre and now virtually unknown early Qing novel, *Cao mu chunqiu yanyi* 草木春秋演義 (Annals of herbs and trees). This novel does not present medical knowledge systematically; instead it is a military romance in which all characters bear the names of medicinal plants, seemingly assigned at random. Its sole function appears to be familiarizing the reader with these names, Schonebaum concludes. Other novels present more useful information. *Honglou meng*, for example, records a game of matching plant names that tests the participants’ medical knowledge and degree of literacy. Even *Xiyou ji* 西遊記