RECENT TRENDS IN THE STUDY OF MEDICINE FOR WOMEN IN IMPERIAL CHINA

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Strictly speaking, women and medicine in Chinese history is not an entirely new field. Historians of Chinese medicine trained during the first half of the twentieth century such as Xie Guan 謝覿 (1880-1950), Fan Xingzhuo 范行準 (1906-98), and Zhao Pushan 趙璞珊 (1926-), who had great influence on subsequent generations of historians of medicine in China, already traced the development of "medicine for women" in their classic works on the general history of Chinese medicine. Both Fan and Xie described the development of medicine for women in the Sui-Tang period, and Xie, in particular, provided a short, clear, and typically insightful historical development of what he called ná fei xué 女科學 (learning on medicine for women), from Tang dynasty to Qing dynasty. Tang works on obstetrics and points out pertinently that the landmark innovation of Song works on fake 稱科 (gynecology) was the emphasis on the regulation of menses. Another important Chinese historian of medicine, Li Jingwei 李經偉 (1929-), more recently gives further weight to the importance of fake development in the Song by providing a detailed account of the representative fake expert, Chen Ziming 陳自明 (ca. 1190-1270). In the 1980s a second generation of historians indicated clearly that by Song times, fake was separated from internal medicine and became a separate discipline. This interest in the development of fake within the framework of the general history of medicine in China paved the way for the publication in 1991 of Ma Dazheng 马大正's book on the specific history of Chinese gynecology. Historians like Zhang Zhibin 張志斌, who published her work on gynecological disorders in 2000, discussed by Ricardo Mak in this issue, represent the third generation of Chinese historians of medicine for women. All of these works come from the modern tradition of Chinese medical history beginning in the early twentieth century, with only marginal interest in the social or cultural background of such history.

The feminist or cultural approaches to the history of fake, and to a broader narrative of women, body, and medicine in history, on the other hand, is a new development that becomes visible only from the late 1990s onwards. Major publications in this field come mainly from America and Taiwan. The present Nan Nü issue clearly shows this trend. A major landmark in this recent and exciting development is obviously Charlotte Furth's groundbreaking work: A Flourishing Tian: Gender in China's Medical History, 960-1665 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). Readers will find that two of the three major articles in this issue (those by Yates and Wilms) are inspired by this book, whereas Lee Jen-der's article, translated from its 1996 Chinese version, is one of Furth's reference works. These three articles treat historical developments prior to Furth's main period of interest. This is interesting because they all address a significant point made by earlier works by Chinese historians of medicine as well as by Furth: the maturation of Chinese fake during the Song. The obvious question they all try to answer is the following: what paved the way to Song fake? Could one in fact talk about the first

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1 Xie Liheang 謝利恆, Zongguo yixue yuanli lun 中國醫學原理 (Taipei: Guoming duijian, 1970); Fan Xingzhuo, Zongguo yixue shilue 中國醫學史略 (Beijing: Zhongyi guji chuban, 1986); Li Jingwei 李經偉, Zongguo yixue shilue 中國醫學史略 (Beijing: Zhongyi guji chuban, 1989) provides ample early examples of discussions of disorders specific to women in both medical and nonmedical texts; see pp. 560-82; Zhao Pushan, Zongguo yixue juyuan 中國古代醫學 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1997); Li Jingwei 李經偉 and Li Zhidong 李忠東, Zongguo yixue juyuan 中國古代醫學 (Xian: Shijie keji chuban, 1990), 187-90.

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formulation of a coherent body of learning on medicine for women already in the Tang period, as Xie Guan had already done.

The Significance of Furth's "A Flourishing Yin"

Furth's book has clearly made its impact on both the study of the Chinese history of medicine and in the cultural analysis of the history of the body, and its influence will certainly expand if it is translated into Asian languages, especially Chinese. Furth's purpose in writing this book is threefold: to write a history of medicine, to address the question of gender in medicine, and to make a discourse analysis relating woman's medical body to her social body. In other words, this book is at the same time a sinological description of fuke as a medical discipline meaningful to traditional historians of Chinese medicine and an analysis of fuke, or the female body as a construct based on words and language in a specific cultural context, a fruitful approach already taken by many Western feminist scholars, notably Thomas Laqueur and Barbara Duden, whose works inspired Furth.6 Furth's book has admirably achieved the difficult goals that the author set for herself, and it is a rich history of fuke not only as a medical practice and a cultural construct, but also as an intelligible social exercise carried out by relevant actors—men, women, scholars, male doctors, midwives, female healers, and so on—and a body of thought closelyarticulated with the development of Neo-Confucianism since the Song. This book is a carefully constructed social history with a sophisticated theoretical framework.

The main arguments of the book build around the tension between the ideal and ahistorical androgynous body that Furth named "the Yellow Emperor's body," and the female gestational body that clearly distinguished itself in the Song. While Furth bases her analysis of the androgynous body mainly on the late imperial interpretations of the medical classic, the Inner Canon, Lisa Raphals has reached a similar conclusion by studying the cases of the early doctor Chunyu Yi 横于耳 (third century BC) described in the Shiji 史記—that there was a lack of emphasis on sexual difference in his medical diagnoses.7 Furth's inspiration, however, seems to have come essentially from Laqueur, although one must be cautious not to confuse her arguments with Laqueur's viewpoints. While Laqueur eloquently discusses the "one-sex" body conceptualized by the Ancient Greeks and lasting through the Renaissance, giving way to the well-bounded, gendered "two-sex" bodies after the eighteenth century, Furth's Yellow Emperor's body was androgynous but not "one-sex," and the development of the female gestational body was not linear like that of the well-gendered body in the modern West. The androgynous body, a generative body containing both yin and yang, was an ideal body in which sex was not the focus of attention, especially towards the later imperial period. The female gestational body of Song fuke, characterized by "Blood as the leader" as distinct from the male-based androgylnous body, on the other hand, retreated after the Ming. For Furth, Ming and Qing fuke specialists stepped back from the Song thesis of "Blood as the leader" characterizing the female body, and, contrary to their Song predecessors, interpreted many female disorders as non-genderspecific. Fuke shrank from concerns of a more general, holistic female body to increasingly specific gestational problems. The ideal of the androgylnous body had returned forcefully under the influence of Ming-Qing Neo-Confucianism. The yin/yang balance of the viscera, common to bodies of both sexes and reflecting the intellectual and mental well-being of a person, became an increasingly important measure of health compared with a decreasing emphasis on unique "Blood" for appraising the various pathological problems of the female body. "Flourishing yin" (yin 活絡) became a late imperial model remedy for a body typically overwhelmed with yang, that is, saturated with excessive desires and mundane activities, a problem that preoccupied Neo-Confucian doctors. Joanna Grant's A Chinese Physician: Wang Ji and the "Stone Mountain Medical Case Histories" (2005), finely reviewed by Marta Hanson in this issue, shows some of such changes in the late imperial period through the clinical experience of the Ming doctor Wang Ji 楊機 (1463-1539).

In fact, the careful reader could make interesting contrasts between

6 Furth admits in the introduction (p. 4) that her book was inspired by works by these two scholars and by Roy Porter et al., Patients and Practitioners: Lay Perception of Medicine in Pre-Industrial Societies. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). In terms of discourse analysis, the works of Duden and Laqueur seem to have greater influence on this book. See Barbara Duden, The Woman Beneath the Skin: A Doctor's Patients in Eighteenth-century Germany (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); Thomas Laqueur, Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

Furth's and Laquer's books. While most discussions and descriptions in *A Flourishing Tin* are on the gestational problems of the female body, *Making Sex* is more on the anatomy of the genitalia and sex itself. Indeed, the question of female orgasm and its relation to conception ran through the entire book. While Furth's book clearly captures one increasingly central concern of post-Song Chinese society, the production of male heirs for ancestor worship, Laquer's discussions reveal the obsession with sex in Western religion and medicine. In China, the technique of prolonged sexual combat and "plucking yin to replenish yang" by rousing female orgasm, central in the Sui-Tang Daoist bodily technique of "nourishing life" for elite males, fell out of fashion in late imperial *yangsheng* discourse. Self-cultivation of Essence, focusing Pyche, and sexual moderation now became the key to the male fertile body central to the perpetuation of the family line in the Ming-Qing period. Indeed, contrary to the modern West, Chinese society viewed sex as increasingly secondary to and inseparable from reproduction.

The richness of Furth's discussions and the originality of her arguments will certainly inspire related works to come in the near future, both in medical history and in gender studies. As clearly shown in the title of her book, the main discussions in the book are on the later imperial period beginning from the Song. Though Furth provides information on developments in medicine for women prior to the Song, the descriptions are necessarily brief. The present issue shows that in the history of medicine, there is still much room for further research on the periods before the tenth century.

*Early Medicine for Women*

The three rich sinological studies in this issue on women, childbirth, and medicine in China from antiquity to the Sui-Tang periods constitute a coherent ensemble nicely complementing Furth's work on the later imperial periods. Even though none of the three papers takes the discourse analysis approach that marks Furth's work, they are useful in revealing the rich and complex tradition that Song *fuke* specialists had inherited. In many ways, they show how the guiding theme of Song gynecology highlighted by Furth, "Blood is the leader," had been constructed during the preceding periods.

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*Furth, A Flourishing Tin, 202.*
recognizing the specificity of the female body emerged. She quotes at length the passage “furen fang” 養人方 (prescriptions for women) in Sun Simiao’s text to show that it “established the notion of gender differences announcing the beginning of fuke medicine.”[^10] A key question is therefore whether Song fuke was truly a different paradigm from the “early fuke” in the Tang, a central theme in Furth’s book. For Furth, one main indicator of the conceptualization of the female body as a gendered and holistic entity is that the old category of daixia, an umbrella covering broad groups of miscellaneous disorders (zahbing 簡病) of the female body, was still maintained in Tang medical texts and was reduced to a specific diagnostic category of leukorrhea only in the Song. Instead, she thinks that only when female zahbing not necessarily related to gestation were discussed as an inherent part of fuke, as they were in the Song, can we consider medicine fully gendered. By looking at the shrinking zahbing category in Ming fuke, Furth concludes that the gendering of medicine went “backwards” in the late imperial period when many of these disorders were reclassified as ungendered ones related to the androgynous body. Because the main focus of these three authors in this issue is on childbirth and female gestational problems and not the other pathological problems of women, no full debate is engaged with Furth on the question of the definition and periodization of the gendering of medicine in China, even though all agree that more attention should be paid to the development of medicine for women in the earlier periods.[^13] In fact, Li Jianmin 李建民 has more recently proposed another angle from which to consider the conceptualization of a gendered body in early China. He suggests that the male body was conceptualized around the functions of the damaici 監視 (superintendent channel, or central vessel) as described in the Inner Canon, especially its role in the early art of “nourishing life.”[^14] While it is still unclear how Li’s point will engage with Furth’s idea of the androgynous body, one


[^11]: This is the term used by Furth, A Flourishing Yin, 64.

[^12]: Furth, A Flourishing Yin, 166-68.

[^13]: Another argument proposed by Furth on the question of gendering is based on the bodily technique of “nourishing life” by inner alchemy, meidan 內丹, analyzed in Ch. 4.

can certainly look forward to more lively and constructive discussions on the issue in the near future.

Other Recent Works on Medicine and Women

Medicine for women in imperial China as a new area of interest is certainly growing. The main scholars in the field are no doubt Furth, specializing in the late imperial period, and Lee, expert on early China to the Sui-Tang period. Since 1993, Lee has published nine sinological articles in Chinese on medicine and women in the early period, of which two, including the present one, have been translated into English and published in this journal. In these articles Lee systematically treats two main aspects of women, health, and medicine from early China to the Sui-Tang period: the role of women as caretakers of health and the female gestational body. Her approach is both medical and social, and many of her conclusions evoke the interesting observation made by Furth that Chinese "bodily gender was a plastic androgyny while social gender was based on fixed hierarchy." For instance, while parts of the female body could be used as ingredients in drugs in the pharmacopoeia, the presence of women was forbidden in the drug-making process because the female body was considered to be naturally polluting and taboo.

When the responsibility of conception was shifting from men to women as suggested in medical texts of the Sui-Tang period, male doctors dominated the discourse on the female gestational body and tended to intervene more directly in childbirth even though many of them were inexperienced technicians in this domain. Female healers, midwives, wet nurses, neighbors, and relatives, on the other hand, continued to play significant roles inside and outside the family as helpers in childbirth, under the suspicious eye of the male doctor. The feminist position of Lee is not arrived at by discourse analysis as in Furth's, but by meticulous scrutiny of all kinds of early texts that show the predicament of early female health caretakers to be not so different from that of today: daughters, wives, and mothers were considered "natural" caretakers of health who often found themselves in conflicting situations in the "inner sphere," whereas sons' and husbands' caretaking responsibility rarely provoked conflicts and was often publicized as virtue that could enhance their public image or career. The well-defined social limits and obligations imposed on female (and male) healers and health caretakers contrast interestingly with the vulnerable and polluting nature of the female body, whose generative role was portrayed by medical texts as an ungraspable problem. Indeed, Lee shows us with numerous concrete examples that while the gendered social hierarchy was stable and fixed, the boundaries of the gendered body were fluid, changeable, and problematic.

The ungraspable nature of the female gestational body continued to preoccupy medical authors well into the late imperial period, as finely analyzed in Yi-li Wu's 2002 article published in this journal, "Ghost Fetuses, False Pregnancies, and the Parameters of Medical Uncertainty in Classical Chinese Gynecology." Wu, whose research on Qing füe will soon appear in the form of a book, is another scholar who has made important contributions to the field of medicine and women in recent years. Specialized in Ming-Qing medicine for women, Wu has enriched our understanding of the female body as described in late imperial medical texts by focusing on its specific

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16 Furth, A Flourishing Tia, 305.
pathological problems. In the 2002 article, her study of ghost fetuses and problematic pregnancies reveals the intriguing question of diagnostic uncertainty about pregnancy in Ming-Qing texts, as well as new etiological analyses of such phenomena by Ming-Qing doctors. Such uncertainty made space for negotiation between female patients, with their subjective narrative of their own bodily experience based on language specific to the Ming-Qing social and cultural context, and male doctors, with their long, rich tradition of fake learning in its own technical idiom. Clearly, like Furtth and Duden, Wu attempts to show the significance of medicine and the female body in late imperial China as a case of an alternative understanding of the body before modern biomedicine dominated our sensitivity, numbed our imagination, and monopolized our language about the body.

Besides the contributions of Lee and Wu on early, Sun-Tang, and late imperial medicine and women, there are also works that are not entirely on medicine but are closely related to the question of the cultural meaning of the female body, especially in regard to bodily techniques. Here the works of Francesca Bray, Dorothy Ko, and again Li Jianmin should be mentioned. In her book on gender and technology, Bray describes abortion and menstrual regulation as gynotechnics, or embodied practices that upper-class Chinese women skillfully manipulated to control their reproductive capacities in order to achieve ideal womanhood or enhance their social role of the mater. While Bray relies essentially on printed medical cases of the late imperial period as sources, reflecting the importance of printing in the circulation of medical knowledge for elite women, other authors, such as Liu Jingzhen and Li Bozhong, emphasize the popular, often oral tradition in the diffusion of the techniques of abortion and contraception in post-Bong China. Even though their concerns are more social or even demographic, their studies fully reveal that the wide spread of medical knowledge and bodily techniques among women since the Song, often independent of the development of the print culture, allowed them to have much greater control of their own reproductive bodies than one could have imagined, often to the disadvantage of the patriarchal line.

Ko's study of footbinding in imperial China focuses on the body “as attire,” an idea obviously inspired by the notion of the body as having fluid and negotiable boundaries as demonstrated by Duden and Furtth. Ko’s point becomes all the more intriguing when Furtth observes in a Ming medical text that the bound foot was identified as “a genital zone of the body.”22 One other interesting bodily technique that has somewhat escaped the attention of scholars of the later imperial period was the women’s use of charm to attract men. Li Jianmin described the use of drugs and magic by women in early China in the “art of charming men” (niu jindao 女金道) to gain or retain the love of men. Techniques for “charming” men and for producing a male heir were two main aspects of the early art of the bedchamber for women.23 It is hard to imagine that such techniques would fall out of fashion in the later imperial period; rather, such knowledge, like that on birth control and footbinding, was not systematically recorded in printed medical texts and should be looked for in other kinds of documents.

On the other hand, the development of another intriguing technique of the female body in the late imperial period, inner alchemy (nvi jindao 女金丹), was apparently more closely related to the publishing industry. While Furtth discusses this technique as an problematic and esoteric religious practice contradictory to the ideal Confucian female body as a robust performer of reproductive functions, Elena Valussi, in a recent doctoral dissertation drawing on printed handbooks about the technique, suggests that this Daoist practice was in fact a “complex and multifaceted phenomenon.”24 According to Valussi, the potentially subversive consequences of the practice (stopping of the menses, resulting in a nonreproductive female body) could be counterbalanced by conservative social and behavioral norms imposed on

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21 Dorothy Ko, “Duoshai, biyun yu jueyu—Song-Yuan-
female practitioners by male collators of the handbooks. Moreover, the subversiveness of the technique varied according to the age, social and religious status, and even occupation of the practicing women. The technique could even be seen as a “practice that centered on the stabilization and refinement of menstruation” along the line of Bray’s argument. In other words, social, religious, and medical norms interplayed in extremely complex ways on the female body in the late imperial and modern periods, further complicating the conceptualization of the gendered body and thus calling for further research in this area.

While studies on bodily techniques practiced essentially by women, including abortion, infanticide, and other techniques that deterred reproduction, seem to support the challenging argument of James Lee and Wang Feng that Chinese reproductive culture produced fertility restraint within marriage, thus having a long-term effect on demographic change, other aspects of medicine for women in the late imperial period are likely to suggest very different conclusions. The persistent concern about the well-being of the reproductive body, male and female alike—as shown in medical texts of Confucian doctors of the late imperial period, such as Wang Ji, discussed by Grant and Hanson in this issue; the changing ideas of “nourishing life” that condemned the restraint of ejaculation; and the reinforcement of the procreative duty imposed on the head of household that “took unquestioned priority over the body’s other uses and aspirations,” as described by Furth—remind us that ensuring the proliferation of offspring remained a major preoccupation of doctors and their patients. It is difficult at this point to make broad generalizations about the significance of various bodily techniques on demographic changes in the late imperial period. Other factors must be taken into account, such as differences between periods and regions, ethnic or religious groups, and socioeconomic situations.

Another relevant topic that has been studied recently is the role of female practitioners of medicine, including healers, midwives, drug sellers, and so on. Both Furth and Lee have treated the topic in their respective historical periods, and I addressed this subject in regard to the late imperial period in an article published in 1999 in the book announcing the launching of this journal. That article stresses the discrepancy between the dominant discourse on the evil influence of unskilled and immoral female healers and the importance of their real social role, especially in a culture of strict gender segregation. While the anxiety provoked by unruly women penetrating the boundaries between the inner and outer social space was increasing in the late imperial period, there was at the same time an interesting development of respectable female literati well versed in medicine, of whom Tan Yuxian (sixteenth century) was a most remarkable figure. Furth has a long section discussing her work and healing principles, and another important Chinese historian of medicine, Zheng Jinsheng, published an article on Tan and her achievements, also in 1999. This article provides a useful summary of Tan’s medical work, especially her skill in acupuncture and moxa, and points out her accomplishments as a document of social history of the late Ming.

While interests in cultural and social studies of medicine and gender continue to grow, especially in America and Taiwan, research on the history of fake with a more traditional and positivist approach continues in China. After Ma Daosheng’s book was published in 1991, Zhang Zhihui, a younger scholar, published her first book on the history of fake disorders in 2000 based on her doctoral dissertation defended in Beijing in 1998. Like Ma’s work, Zhang’s book traces the development of fake pathology from pre-imperial to late imperial times. It is interesting to note the strong conviction she takes in “revealing the true face of history” in writing this book, a position that inevitably makes the result very different from present-day Western research and even that done in Taiwan. As revealed in the review by Mak in this issue, the author clearly takes a clinical approach to the question by discussing what she defines as gynaecological disorders and their medical or technical treatment in each historical period.


Furth, A Flourishing Yin, 202-4.


31 See note 4.
She is sensitive to the appearance of ‘new’ names and categories of disorders, which she often uses as an important measure to evaluate the development of the discipline.

The most interesting difference between this book and those by some of her predecessors is that she places less importance on the development of Song fuke, which she groups together with that in the Jin and Yuan periods. Even though she admits the originality of the focus on ‘Blood as the leader’ in Song medical gynecology, she considers it a heritage from the Tang medical learning, especially that of Sun Simiao. Moreover, she seems to have a much higher opinion of fuke in the Ming-Qing than in the Song, her reasons being ‘the classification of the diseases becomes equitable; the naming becomes appropriate, the ideas are clear and more content is added. On causes, [the] doctors paid attention to the internal ones…’ and criticized some views that diseases may be brought by ghosts and gods.”

I do not intend to criticize this book for its positivist approach, but simply to show the numerous layers of meanings that one can retrieve in old medical texts on woman’s body and the many research possibilities that one can still locate in this field. In fact, many of Zhang’s findings do not differ from those of the authors mentioned above, yet her very different interpretations and conclusions provide an interesting perspective for further musing and reflection.

One last point that should be raised here is that there is relatively little interest among Japanese scholars in the history of Chinese medicine for women. Related to this point, the latest publication of Lee Jen-de is revealing. In this article on the earliest extant Japanese medical work, Ishinpo 聖心方 (Recipes of the heart of medicine), dating to 982, Lee shows how the Japanese compiler Tana Yasuyori 丹波康 輔 (912-95) selected from early Chinese medical classics only those discussions related to childbirth in sections on medicine for women, and leaving out those on other bodily disorders. The compiler was obviously more interested in the strictly gestational aspect of the female body—not surprising as the book’s readers were essentially male aristocrats concerned with the reproduction of heirs. What

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31 Zhang, Guan Zhongyi fuchang jisheng shi (English summary, 424).
33 Important Japanese scholars of the history of science and medicine such as Ishida Hidenori 石田利寛, Sakade Yoshinobu 佐武成邦, Yamada Keiji 山田慶起, Morita Denichiro 萩田登一郎, et al., have written important works on various aspects of Chinese medicine, but none so far has shown any particular interest in the history of fuke per se. Their rare and typically brief mentioning of fuke is often only a minor illustration of the main topics of medicine that they study in depth.
34 Such as Scan Huang’s Lei 雷, “When Chinese Medicine Encountered the West 1910-1949” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1999); and his “How Did
the development of modern Chinese gynecology. The changes in or the "Westernization" of the conceptualization of the female body in China, in medical, sociopolitical, and cultural terms should be a most fruitful topic of research, and hopefully we shall not wait for too long to see work done on this period.

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I can think of only two, Frank Dikotter's Imperfect Conceptions: Medical Knowledge, Birth Defects, and Eugenics in China (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), and his Sex, Culture, and Modernity in China: Medical Science and the Construction of Sexual Identities in the Early Republican Period (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995).