Reviews

China

Liz P. Y. Chee, *Mao's Bestiary: Medicinal Animals and Modern China*

Durham: Duke University Press, 2021. 276 pages. Paperback, $26.95; cloth, $99.95. ISBN 9781478014041 (paperback), 9781478011903 (cloth).

In *Mao's Bestiary*, Liz Chee examines a problem in China's medical field: the rampant and shocking use of animals, often illicit according to international regulations but often given legitimacy by scientific research in China. Chee acknowledges that animal parts feature relatively less in Chinese medicine education in universities; Chee does not argue that the majority of college-trained Chinese medicine doctors routinely use animal parts in medicinal practice. However, Chee argues that in the top-down state-led Chinese economy, the state bureaucracy commandeered Chinese medicine as a unique field while initiating and expanding the industrial-scale exploitation of animals as therapies. Chee traces changes over time from premodern Chinese medicine's use of animal parts to the dramatic escalation of animal use with the Communist Party's rule from 1949 onward.

The dilemma that Chee poses is that the boundaries between the world of widespread use of medicinal animals and learned university-level medicine are unclear when a sizable number of doctors in China nevertheless endorse animal products and help the pharmaceutical companies with their laboratory research. Chee coins the term "faunal medicalization" to analyze this frenetic, horrifying, brutal, and ridiculously performative policy, which is always tied to the imperatives of a state-led economy that claimed medical science as its justified authority. In short, Chee questions what Chinese medicine would look like if we acknowledge the fact that the Chinese state in its various iterations placed a high priority on the exploitation of animals for their body parts and plasma for medicinal use. Such a stark picture aims to correct the established view in the historiography of a state that was largely committed to public health by incorporating Chinese medicine within the wider ambit of socialized health care. Chee does not dispute this narrative but asks us to also understand the PRC socialist state as a bureaucracy driven by the Soviet-inspired mechanisms of material production of goods at the forefront. Authorities saw manufacturing as a priority, and animal use in Chinese medicine nicely served this utilitarian purpose.

Chee also quite bluntly unravels idealized notions of Chinese medicine as practiced in China as somehow based on ideas of a gentler medicine closer to nature and less beholden to the behemoth of global pharma. Chee emphasizes that the state was always

keen to strip Chinese medicine of its traditional theories. The PRC saw medicines as commodities that fit into the new socialist understandings that prioritized science, mechanistically and biologically. Chee debunks any idea of the state as interested in Chinese cultural traditions and the finer points of Chinese medical theory. Mao Zedong's famous statement in 1957, that Chinese medicine is a "treasure house," should be literally translated that Chinese medical drugs (*zhongyiyao*) are "treasure houses." In fact, his guiding principle was to abandon medicine (*yi*), while retaining and expanding on the range of drugs (*yao*).

Chee bases her argument on years of research at Guangzhou University of Chinese Medicine. Since there were no institutional records specifically dedicated to animals, Chee read across a range of sources, mostly pharmacological journals but also industry reports, government documents, and Chinese Medicine Association documents.

Chee's analysis of the significant influence of the Soviet Union provides refreshing and necessary insights. For too long, scholars have neglected the influence of the Soviet Union on science and medicine in twentieth-century China. The Soviets, claiming scientific authority and keen to differentiate their science from that of the West, promoted the extensive use of animal tissues in medicine. Combining nativism with laboratory medicine meant that both the Soviet Union and socialist China claimed scientific justification for faunal medicalization. For example, they shared an obsession with injections as scientific, including injecting serum from animal organs or animal blood. Even today, visitors to China may be astonished at the rush to use injections and intravenous drips for a range of conditions, including the common cold.

The book cover hints at a China that resembles a hellish slaughterhouse for animals. In a possible nod to the Chinese zodiac animals, we see seven jars, each containing a single animal colored mostly in socialist red but most likely indicating blood. In order, we see a rooster, antelope, pangolin, bear, deer, rhino, and tiger. More cynical readers may infer a political metaphor of a socialist China that reduces its inhabitants to caged prisoners. However, Chee does not go there. She restricts her story to the horrifying ways that post-1949 China has mistreated and exploited countless animals in the name of Chinese medicine. Mao Zedong is not Chairman Mao in this telling, but rather a Mao who oversaw a hellscape under his rule. Chee does not discuss, though, the rather telling habit of communist activists cursing their supposedly impure enemies with animal epithets referencing animals such as dogs, cows, and snakes. However, Chee brings new attention to the insanity of medicine in the high Maoist period and questions the characterization in some of the historiography of Maoist medicine as somehow liberating. For example, Chee analyzes the astonishing story of the common practice at the height of the Cultural Revolution in 1967 of the so-called masses injecting fresh chicken blood as an all-purpose therapy as an emblem of high Maoist medicine. Chickens not only signified rural medicine but also were thought to embody some kind of virility.

Chee also argues that Mao's successors, most especially Deng Xiaoping, continued and further refined the industrial-scale use of animals as Chinese medicine. The Deng-era economic reforms saw a renewed emphasis on production for export. Thus, a range of animal products became key, including rhino horn powders and deer antlers. Deer farming, like bear farming, grew as a Soviet-inspired economic project. Potential species extinction—such as of rhinos and pangolins, both of which are killed in large numbers—remains possible. Also, the state identified beetles, centipedes, scorpions, and toads as animals to be promoted for use.

As a Singaporean who grew up using Chinese medicine, Chee explains that her activism to protect wildlife brought her to personally understand the horrific abuse of bears trapped in tight cages. Even today, bear farmers in China insert a tap into bears' gallbladders to collect the bile that is used for medicine. To try to escape, the bears usually rub against the cage-bars, thus causing raw open sores that receive no treatment. Chee marshals a range of evidence to show that such a venture was mostly invented in the 1980s and only tenuously related to any claim of tradition. North Koreans were likely the first to farm bears on such a scale for their bile, but again, the important argument that Chee makes is that of the Soviet influence.

Chee's well-written study ends with an implicit challenge to think about how to end the rampant and unnecessary harvesting of animal parts in medicine. Critics will argue that faunal medicalization should not be conflated with Chinese medicine. Certainly, many Chinese medicine doctors will cry foul. Chee writes not to target Chinese medicine doctors, however, many of whom campaign for medical practice that explicitly excludes using animals. Chee's challenge rests on the problem of the top-down institutions and business entities, mostly based in the PRC, that exploit the authority of Chinese medicine's good reputation to sell animal-based therapies in Asia and the global marketplace in general.

All students, scholars, and practitioners of Chinese medicine need to read this book. It asks us to think about the cost of not speaking up. Chinese medicine does not exist in a vacuum but in a very real sociopolitical context contingent on top-down demands for profit. Additionally, anyone interested in China, including a general audience, will gain insight into the ways that supposed traditional Chinese practices have often been reconstituted for purposes other than therapy. Ironically, the PRC's desire to scientize Chinese medicine has made it more difficult, rather than easier, for Chinese medicine practitioners to valorize their therapies. Political imperatives in China have tainted Chinese medical doctors with a faunal medicalization that has very little to do with historically traditional medicine in China. Unfortunately, Chee reminds us, traditional medicine cannot escape geopolitics.

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