

History of Science in South Asia

Ivette Vargas-O'Bryan and Zhou Xun. *Disease, Religion and Healing in Asia: Collaborations and Collisions* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015)

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Ivette Vargas-O'Bryan, and Zhou Xun. *Disease, Religion, and Healing in Asia: Collaborations and Collisions* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015). Hardcover xi + 173 pp. \$145. ISBN 9781138023659.

This book could have been a very useful required text for courses in medical humanities, history of medicine, and global health, and could have been a valued addition to the personal libraries of many a graduate student and scholar of Asian medicine. But Routledge's notoriously rapacious pricing (nearly a dollar per page in this particular case) has effectively ensured that this book will be purchased only by elite academic libraries in wealthy countries. Unfortunately, that means that, instead of being approached as a collection by students and researchers, it will most often be assigned and read piecemeal in PDF. If I am right about this, it will be a great loss for individual readers as well as for our field as a whole.

It's not that the essays constituting this book have a unitary agenda or a consistent perspective. They do not. Originally presented at a 2010 conference at the University of Hong Kong's Centre for the Humanities and Medicine, the chapters range widely in their temporal and geographic scope. They include, for example, Fabrizio Ferrari on rituals for cholera among Bengali Muslims, Mark Greene on the Hong Kong cult of Daoist immortal Wong Tai Sin, Daniel Cohen on Hindu narratives of ghost exorcisms, and Vargas-O'Bryan on the tensions between state-sanctioned traditional medicine and non-institutionalized healing in Shangri-La [Xianggelila]. The authors are varied in terms of their disciplinary and methodological commitments. Brigitte Sébastia's ethnographic description of a Tamil shrine-hospital dedicated to Saint Anthony of Padua, for example, might be contrasted with Anthony Cerulli's historical literary analysis of Āyurvedic illness narratives, or Nancy Holroyde-Downing's transnational history of the interface between early modern Chinese and European tongue diagnosis. They also differ in terms of their intended contribution to and significance for the field. For example, Helen Lambert uses an ethnography of popular responses to serious illness in Rajasthan to critique and redefine scholarly categories, Vesna Wallace presents a detailed summary of the syncretic "method-and-wisdom" model in early modern Mongolian medicine, and Paula Arai uses her chapter to outline an agenda for proposed future research on the neurology of bowing in Japanese Zen.

Certainly, each of these individual papers, when read in isolation, will contribute much to our thinking about the nexus of religion and medicine in specific Asian contexts. However, one should not miss the forest for the trees: the real strength of this book—and its importance to the field—is as a collection. Its diverse interests, approaches, and authorial goals resist easy summary, and I will not attempt to give one here. Taken collectively, however, it is not the answers they give, but rather the questions the authors raise and how they frame them, that is most significant.

In that regard, this volume is similar to several other edited volumes that have long represented towering landmarks in the study of Asian medicine. What scholar of Asian medicine does not still read and appreciate Charles Leslie's 1976 *Asian Medical Systems: A Comparative Study*, and its 1992 sequel *Paths to Asian Medical Knowledge*? Likewise, Don Bates's 1995 *Knowledge and the Scholarly Medical Traditions* or Linda Connor and Geoffrey Samuel's 2001 *Healing Powers and Modernity*? Specifically for those of us whose work lies in the interface between religion and medicine, who does not have both Jane Marie Law's 1995 *Religious Reflections on the Human Body* and Sarah Coakley's 1997 *Religion and the Body* on our shelves? These eclectic and uneven collections were, and still are, invaluable. This is not because of the merits of any one essay they contain, but rather, because these volumes in the aggregate provided a summation of the interests and accomplishments of the field at a particular juncture in time, a taking-stock of the strengths and weaknesses of certain methodological assumptions that prevailed, and the setting of new forward-thinking agendas that shaped future scholarship.

Vargas-O'Bryan and Zhou's book should be placed on this short-list of must-read edited volumes for all scholars of Asian medicine. Taken as a whole, it outlines the state of the field in terms of our approaches to the interface between religion and medicine in Asia. It presents nuanced assessments of the porous, and in many ways problematic, nature of these categories (and other, related ones such as "disease" and "healing") as tools for the study of Asian medicine. And it outlines pathways toward new ways of interrogating these topics in increasingly sophisticated, interdisciplinary, and non-Eurocentric ways. Not all authors overtly tackle the task of redefining the central categories of the field, but each are in their own way involved in the exciting process of assessing, refocusing, and pushing forward our thinking in this domain. If its eclectic contents, its interdisciplinarity, and its focus on "collaborations and collisions" paint a messy, complex, and entangled picture, the book is nonetheless a vital and timely contribution to the field. One can only hope that the publisher will offer a reasonably-priced paperback soon, so that the field as a whole can benefit from these insights.

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