

BOOK REVIEW

Forgotten Disease: Illnesses Transformed in Chinese Medicine *by Hilary A Smith*

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Futile disputes between historians have shown that information from the past can only be fully understood in terms of contemporary ideas and conversion to today's terminology and knowledge must be done with extreme circumspection. This book exemplifies the problems and the potential value of such an approach by analysing in depth one aspect of Traditional Chinese Medicine.

The Chinese disorder called "Foot Qi" (Jiao qi) is examined in its evolution from the earliest record in the 4th Century AD to the present day in seven chronologically arranged chapters that cite many early and some more recent though relatively unfamiliar Chinese and Japanese sources, include accounts by European travellers and explorers, and end with current understanding in East Asia.

Foot Qi comprised progressive weakness, pains in the feet and legs, and formication – a sensation as if ants were crawling over or within the skin – that gradually extended to the trunk. Sufferers of all social classes were often crippled by the disorder and many died after months or years of paralysis. The prevalence and nature of the disorder and the recommended therapies differed in subjects from the north and south of China. It was generally held to be due to imbalance of the body's inner energies and such treatments as acupuncture, moxibustion and herbal infusions were employed with uncertain success. In the later 19th and early 20th Centuries the apparently identical condition in Japan called "Kakke" was shown to be due to vitamin B-1 deficiency since when Foot Qi has been retrospectively labelled as beriberi.

The author's general thesis is that simple acceptance of the modern Western-style diagnosis of beriberi has constrained our appreciation of what Foot Qi really was as a complex disorder experienced by sufferers and diagnosed and treated by physicians according to contemporary understanding. Only limited detail about the symptomatology and differential diagnosis of Foot Qi is provided. A more comprehensive comparison of our current and their contemporary ideas about pathogenesis and pathophysiology would have been helpful.

Forgotten Disease succeeds in providing a readable pathway into a recurrent problem in medical history that often gets inadequate attention. The book offers many unusual primary sources in Chinese and secondary sources in English about social and political conditions in those times. Its basic concept is of broad importance but the unfamiliarity and inaccessibility of the sources and the scarce clinical information may limit its appeal except to specialists.

Tony Dayan
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