

## BOOK REVIEW

### **Know Your Remedies: Pharmacy and Culture in Early Modern China** *by He Bian*

Hardcover, 240 pages  
Princeton University Press  
May 2020

An entirely novel approach to a known topic, even when it involves another country, can only be stimulating. This is what Professor Bian has provided in her very readable book.

The author discusses in some detail the broad nature of “pharmacy”, taken to be pharmacopoeial materia medica or *bencao*, i.e. official accounts of the general nature of medicines, their sources, and who compiled and promulgated them in Imperial China, from about the Three Kingdoms era of 220-265 AD, through the Tang, Song and Ming dynasties, to the end of the Qing epoch in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The work is based on a large number of unusual scrolls and books, mostly in the vernacular of the day and place, and many rarely explored by Western scholars. These documents are used to explain the fluctuating position of *bencao* as the basis of tribute and taxes owed to the Imperial Court, mediums of exchange, goods traded internally and exported, and sources of revenue to physicians. It is a social, economic and political history of medicines and is little concerned with the exact identity of the plants and other materials from which medicines were compounded or how they might act, except within the notion of rebalancing the humours.

At times, the manufacture, trading and dispensing of medicines and the ownership of pharmacies were an important source of income and influence for physicians and other high-ranking officials. Gradually, this pharmacy became a more discrete activity akin to our modern-day understanding, and sometimes a source of considerable wealth and power. For many centuries, the official *bencao* of the emperor at the time, or of a senior official in a region, were the only accepted sources of therapeutic knowledge. The progression from one era to another, or during a change in power structure, was sometimes a difficult and disputed process.

Read this book with interest and pleasure to begin to appreciate the development of a complex nation over two thousand years of conquering, and being conquered by, people of diverse faiths and national structures. Understand how what we may regard as a professional activity related to the treatment of diseases was closely intertwined with national politics, economics, industry, and personal and societal status. But do not go to it as a direct source of scientific information about pharmaceuticals or herbal medicine as that sort of detail will only be found in its extensive references, which are almost all in the then contemporary languages.

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May 2020

Published online at [www.bshh.org.uk](http://www.bshh.org.uk).