**Leprosy in China: A History**

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This book offers a story of leprosy over many centuries of Chinese history—one that forms a parallel narrative to the better known history of the disease in the Mediterranean and European worlds. As in the West, there is evidence for an ancient, feared and stigmatized disorder that modern researchers identify with leprosy. Literate medicine has left traces of disputes and confusions over its nosology and etiology; the history of Buddhism and Daoism shows how religion played a role in ascribing redemptive meaning and offering solace; the mystery of its mode of transmission provoked popular explanations of contagion and stimulated state and community efforts at segregation. Beginning in the 16th century, one can see a clear resemblance between the clinical descriptions of the Chinese *mafeng* and Western observations of leprosy, along with well documented indigenous Chinese institutional strategies to cope with it. The folklore of leprosy during these centuries linked contagion and heredity, and focused on seductive women as transmitters, figures seen as both bewitching and polluting.

Second, this book puts the history of leprosy in China into global context of colonialism, racial politics and “imperial danger” in the 19th century. It also shows how a battle to contain and eliminate it was an element in the modernizing state-building projects of the late Qing empire, the Nationalist government of the first half of the 20th century, and the People’s Republic down to today. China, as my research shows, lay at the center of controversies over the perceived leprosy pandemic of the late 19th century, as the Chinese diaspora was widely believed to be the source of its global spread. This not only exacerbated racial stereotypes impacting Chinese overseas migration, but it also made the question of disease an especially sensitive one for Chinese nationalist elites. Leprosy control became inextricably integrated into the state building policies of a succession of modernizing regimes throughout the 20th century.
Finally, by linking the pre-modern and modern, the local and the global, this book shows the centrality of the Chinese experience to the history of disease, public health, and the spread of biomedical regimes of power around the world. The social and cultural formations surrounding leprosy as an endemic disease were specific to China, and the historical record surrounding it is particularly rich and detailed. Even after missionary and colonial agents brought 19th century science to China, strategies to deal with it were shaped by traditional ways of considering this mysterious and horrifying affliction believed to have haunted the civilization since time immemorial. This specific history in turn determined Chinese reactions to the late 19th century health crisis leprosy presented as it emerged in the context of both colonialism and an emerging biomedically-governed global public health movement. It is a history that reveals Chinese agency in understanding and attempting to control the disease in the face of the growing hegemony of Western science and medicine. While the modern story casts a critical eye upon public health movements as regimes of power, Chinese engagements with the curse of leprosy also reveal the allure of “hygienic modernity” for elites in societies struggling to overcome the stigma of backwardness with which the disease came to be identified.

China’s history of leprosy provides a particularly informative alternative to the master narrative of modernity as defined by “European” experience. In this sense, this book is an attempt of “provincializing Europe”. The history of Chinese understanding of the ailment and the changes in her strategies to control it should thus be read as one of the “dynamic, multisited histories” of postcolonial medicine. For a civilization such as China, to appreciate her construction of a hybrid modern regime of health management requires not only the grasp of the nature of her unique political regime since the late 19th century, but, above all, the understanding of her long and complex medical, religious and social traditions since Antiquity. The long and unbroken story of mafeng/lai certainly provides one of the most useful keys for such an appreciation.

Beginning in the early Republican Era, all sorts of “inventions” which combined traditional Chinese healing methods with Western technology for the cure of leprosy began to appear. (This illustration was published in the June 1937 edition of The Leper Quarterly.)

In the Republican Era, many Christian missionaries established asylums for patients of leprosy. These asylums were often located in remote mountain areas or on deserted islands. The leprosy asylum on Tai-kom island of Guangdong province was established in 1919, and began publishing its own journal in the 1930s.