

BOOK REVIEW

## Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim, *ReOrienting Histories of Medicine: Encounters along the Silk Roads*

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Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim, specializing in histories of medicine along the Silk Roads, complicates our conceptions of the messy mobility of knowledge and medical syncretism practised across premodern Eurasian space in *ReOrienting Histories of Medicine*. Towards the easterly fringes of her geographic sweep, the author's work is based on her reassessment of the vast cache of Tibetan medical manuscripts uncovered in 1911 in 'Cave 17' outside Dunhuang, Gansu Province, China. Written in Chinese and many Central Asian languages, the texts demonstrated a cross-pollination of therapeutic theories spanning an enormous cross-cultural space. An oasis trading city at the edge of the Taklamakan desert, Dunhuang was popularized by Peter Frankopan as a crucial node in the westward expansion of the Han Dynasty, in the rising importance of the traders from Sogdiana, and in the meshing together of the great conduit he calls the Silk Road. Frankopan did much to popularize Eurasian studies, encouraging Western readerships into thought experiments that pivoted them away from world views emphasizing the centrality of coasts, colonies, ports and archipelagos as the main engines of history.

However, commentators such as Anthony Sattin have criticized Frankopan for replacing Eurocentrism with Persian-centrism. Valerie Hansen argues that the Silk Road did not in fact operate on a grand scale, and networks were far more local and limited. Khodadad Rezakhani goes as far as to attack the efficacy of terms such as 'Silk Road' altogether. To address this, Yoeli-Tlalim synthesizes an impressive range of complex source material and disciplines from history of science and medicine to Tibetan studies and Jewish studies. She makes a valuable niche contribution while simultaneously making big, broad interventions on the Eurasian question.

Despite the British Library's International Dunhuang Project to digitize material, *ReOrienting Histories of Medicine* represents one of the first times many of these medical texts have been brought together and translated into English. Creating an active conversation between collections, Yoeli-Tlalim's methodology is about giving us the tools to 'think about the history of medicine in a more Eurasian way' (p. 4). Riffing on Pamela Smith's work, the author invites us to think about the knowledge extracted from manuscripts not as a static source, but 'created in motion and through motion' (quoted on p. 103).

The book is divided into five chapters, most of them built around micro-historical investigation of manuscripts and artefacts as 'contact zones' between cultures. The introductory chapter begins with the story of the Dunhuang manuscript, and how the implications of its discovery for the history of medicine continue to unfold. A Daoist monk named

Wang Yuanlu stumbled upon the ancient documents in a cave sealed since the eleventh century for reasons unknown. In the scramble for manuscripts that ensued, the European empires grabbed portions of the cache, scattering them to libraries and institutes across the Western world. The author tackles the debate in which the term 'silk road' has been problematized. Taking her cue from Pamela Smith, who helped persuade historians of science to explore the 'materiality of knowledge production', she pinpoints the proliferation of paper making and printing technology as the true engines of any Eurasian history of medicine. Along with Jonathan Bloom, she therefore invites us to think about a 'paper road' as perhaps a more fruitful way of understanding how ideas were exchanged between states and societies (p. 10).

Chapter 1 is a macro-history of the Book of Asaf, a vast collection in Hebrew dated from around the eighth century comprising sections on 'anatomy, embryology, pulse and urine diagnosis' (p. 26). Yoeli-Tlalim demonstrates in forensic detail how the Book of Asaf served as a 'bridge of knowledge' blazing a trail from the Middle East to Northern Europe via southern Italy. In addition to knowledge from the Greeks, Syrians and Persians, the books show evidence of the influence of Indian systems of medicine. The compilers and disseminators of this work were therefore in conversation with a huge breadth of cultures.

Chapter 2 conducts a micro-historical investigation of the Bower manuscript, arguing that its medical texts and 'dice divination texts' blur the boundaries between magic and medicine. Yoeli-Tlalim builds the idea that this text was a 'conceptual contact zone' through which we can unlock other stories about commerce, politics, language and religion. Chapters 3 and 4 more specifically look at the proliferation of elixirs and therapies. Chapter 3 explores the popularity of myrobalan, a panacea the recipe for which was found in manuscripts from China to Cairo. Chapter 4 charts the history of moxibustion, a therapeutic practice.

Chapter 5 rehabilitates the legacy of the Mongol Empire. Yoeli-Tlalim charts cosmopolitan influences on the travelling Islamic physician Rashid al-Din. She builds on recent revisionism by emphasizing that Mongol conquest knitted together some incredibly far-flung cultures, facilitating corridors of knowledge and exchange such as that which flourished between the Italian maritime city states and the Mongol Ilkhanate.

Duygu Yildirim argued that *ReOrienting Histories of Medicine* lacks a fully fledged coherent argument about Eurasian transmissions of medical knowledge. However, Yoeli-Tlalim sets out a humble disclaimer that she makes 'no pretence to provide a Eurasian history of medicine here', but rather to 'bring to the fore a few vignettes of Eurasian encounters' in order to stimulate micro- and macro-historical debates and explorations (p. 24). She admits that there is still a 'vast ocean of entangled histories, waiting to be explored', and her book represents a fantastic archive through which other historians and an English-language readership can build fruitful frameworks that inject ever greater nuance and scale into histories of the Silk Road.

In the aftermath of the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ways in which states and organizations both facilitate and obstruct flows of medical techniques and technologies makes such work as relevant as ever. China's Health Silk Road used logistics infrastructure from the Belt and Road Initiative to provide medical supplies and assistance to some of those same regions and cities that the author explores as ancient Eurasian hubs of medical exchange.