

Church History

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## Needles, Herbs, Gods, and Ghosts: China, Healing, and the West to 1848; Book review

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Needles, Herbs, Gods, and Ghosts: China, Healing, and the West to 1848. By Linda L. Barnes. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005. xvi + 460 pp. \$49.95 cloth.

This insightful and richly documented study by Linda Barnes explores how Western conceptualizations of the healing traditions of China have historically reflected the broader cultural trends and assumptions that have shaped European and American attitudes towards Chinese civilization. Drawing upon an impressive array of writings and correspondence produced over the centuries by Western scholars, merchants, and missionaries, Barnes undertakes a chronological analysis of evolving perceptions of Chinese medicine and associated aspects of Chinese culture from the mid-thirteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries. The primary focus of this investigation is the manner in which changing medical paradigms in the West, along with concomitant changes in the cultural attitudes of Westerners, shaped their understanding and evaluation of Chinese medical practices.

Barnes begins her investigation by examining the journals of some of the earliest European travelers to China, such as the Franciscan friar William of Rubruck, who arrived during the period of Mongol rule over northern China in the mid-thirteenth century. Illustrating how the paradigmatic thinking of Westerners at this time frequently obstructed their efforts to understand Chinese medical theory, Barnes provides a succinct yet comprehensive overview of the early history of medical thought in the Western world, from the theories of Hippocrates and Galen to the writings of Islamic philosophers and physicians such as Rhazes and Avicenna. She also summarizes the history and essential features of China's medical traditions, drawing from a range of classical sources to explain the cosmological underpinnings of key Chinese concepts such as qi and yin-yang theory and explaining how Chinese practitioners applied these concepts in their use of herbal remedies and acupuncture. Barnes also takes this opportunity to explore how both the Western and Chinese healing traditions frequently attributed disease to evil spirits, angry ghosts, or sorcery, and how the differing religious beliefs of the two cultures hindered or distorted Western understanding of Chinese conceptions of health and healing.

As a new wave of Europeans began to arrive in China in the early sixteenth century, developments in both Europe and China set the stage for a new phase in Western perceptions of Chinese society and its medical arts. The scholarly Jesuit missionaries, who resided for long periods in China and learned to speak and read Chinese, collected many Chinese medical works and left highly detailed and informative accounts of the practices and beliefs of Chinese physicians. Barnes skillfully sifts these accounts to uncover numerous descriptions of Chinese medical techniques and remedies. Throughout her analysis, Barnes searches for significant points of intersection between the knowledge and practices of the West and China. Her lengthy discussion of Chinese herbal remedies, for example, emphasizes the great interest that was sparked among traders and missionaries in evaluating the efficacy and potential of Chinese herbal remedies, and the impe-

tus this provided to the cross-fertilization of medical traditions. But Barnes also wishes to reveal how Europe's understanding of Chinese medicine and Chinese society was filtered through the cultural lenses of a society that was itself undergoing revolutionary transformations in religion and science. China was now becoming an idealized frontier of knowledge that, depending on one's interpretation, could either challenge or confirm the conventional beliefs and institutions of European society.

European fascination with China was transformed fundamentally as the decline of the Qing dynasty and the rise of European wealth and power in the early nineteenth century began to reshape Western perceptions. Drawing upon the varied letters and publications of diplomats, merchants, and missionaries living in China, Barnes describes how rapid advances in Western science and an attitude of cultural and racial superiority became the new filter through which Europeans and Americans would understand and evaluate China's healing traditions. Advances in Western surgical techniques and a rapidly expanding knowledge of human physiology meant that medical missionaries, such as the renowned Dr. Peter Parker, could evince greater confidence in dismissing many Chinese practices as superstitious, while at the same time being led by their scientific curiosity to undertake more systematic investigations of Chinese healing methods that seemed to have some value or efficacy. Indeed, the establishment of dispensaries and hospitals by medical missionaries in the early and mid-nineteenth century provided an ideal venue for analyzing and evaluating Chinese medical practices.

Barnes's study of China, healing, and the West makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the complex dynamics of Sino-Western cultural relations. Her vast knowledge of the history of both Western and Chinese medicine and her comprehensive mastery of the cultural history of these contrasting civilizations provide her readers with a convincingly analyzed overview of how Westerners perceived China's healing traditions and related cultural conceptions over a period of nearly six centuries. The major shortcoming of this study is the lack of a clearly discernable narrative to keep the reader fully engaged. At times, Barnes's assembly of citations sometimes seems gratuitous and without the benefit of a coherent and appealing framework to effectively integrate her numerous observations. This book is nevertheless of essential value to anyone interested in exploring the fascinating history of the West's encounter with, and conceptualization of, Chinese civilization.

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