

*Reproducing Women: Medicine, Metaphor, and Childbirth in Late Imperial China*. By Yi-Li Wu. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010. Pp. xiii + 362. \$49.95.

Yi-Li Wu's new book is a major addition to the growing literature on the history of gender and medicine in Imperial China pioneered by such talented scholars as Charlotte Furth, Lee Jen-der 李貞德, and Francesca Bray. This book shows how the complexity of Chinese medicine as practised in the late imperial period could be effectively explained to the modern reader by analysing childbirth as an essential component of *fuke* 婦科 (medicine for women). Yi-Li Wu shows with great clarity and finesse the female body as imagined in major Ming-Qing medical texts, and how such imagination was intrinsic in the social and intellectual trends of the time. Based on Charlotte Furth's groundbreaking *A Flourishing Yin: Gender in China's Medical History, 960–1665*,<sup>1</sup> Wu goes further and deeper in the analysis of *fuke* texts and makes a significant contribution to the understanding of late imperial medicine by shedding new light on several important aspects of childbirth: the subtle relations between literate and popular medical publications producing layered understanding of the proper practice of childbirth and conceptualization of the female body, the uncertainty of pregnancy and its implications, and the controversy surrounding postpartum health. With this book, we now have a solid and comprehensive understanding of how, in medical, social, and intellectual terms, Ming-Qing birthing mothers were observed, managed, and explained. This book will be indispensable for anyone interested in the history of medicine, society, or culture of Late Imperial China.

The book begins with a chapter on the general background of late imperial medicine. The author explains here the development of the literate medical tradition that had been dominated by male authors since medieval times, and had become part of Confucian scholarly culture since the Song, when medicine for women matured as a specialized subfield. The scholar-physicians, moreover, considered themselves superior to female midwives in matters concerning women's illnesses and childbirth. Wu reconfirms Furth's findings that, while Song *fuke* specialists highlighted the distinctiveness of the female body and its illnesses, late imperial doctors emphasized its similarities with the male body. Claiming that the physical constitution of men and women was basically similar, late imperial doctors increasingly attributed the particularities of female illnesses to social causes, "thereby muting the idea that women's bodies were inherently sickly" (p. 45). However Wu disagrees with Furth on the explanation of this important change (see below).

In the second chapter, Wu introduces the reader to the social reality of childbirth in the late imperial period by going through popular *fuke* manuals such as *Treatise on Easy Childbirth* (*Dasheng bian* 達生編) and formulas of the Bamboo Grove Monastery 竹

<sup>1</sup> Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999.

林寺。Inspired by recent research on the history of books in China, Wu shows how the flourishing publishing industry in this period helped to disseminate medical knowledge of various levels, and in collated forms edited by authors whom she qualifies as “amateur.” Compared with those written by scholar-physicians, these texts, compiled typically by lower-level literati, contained methods and remedies that were considered to be “vulgar” but effective. *Treatise on Easy Childbirth* was a typical and particularly influential text as shown by its numerous editions in the Qing and early Republican period, and by its translations into several European languages. These texts reveal the “deep confidence in the layperson’s ability to assess medical knowledge based on personal experience” (pp. 81–82). In the context of the literate amateur as medical compiler in the late Qing publishing market, Wu mentions with good reason another influential work, *New Compilation of Tested Prescriptions* (*Yanfang xinbian* 驗方新編, 1846), which also had multiple editions (with revisions and additions) in the late Qing and early Republican period. In Lu Xun’s 魯迅 1933 article on his experience of Jennerian vaccination when he was a child, he mentioned that the only two medical texts that were kept in his family’s sizable book collection were none other than *Treatise on Easy Childbirth* and *New Compilation of Tested Prescriptions*. Obviously these texts had become some of the most common medical handbooks in literati families when China was at the threshold of modernity.

The third and the fourth chapters, respectively on the function and structure in the female body, and on the uncertainty of pregnancy form the core of this book. Here Wu formulates her own interpretations of the conceptualization of the female body by Ming-Qing doctors and medical authors. While Furth focuses on the discourse of Blood as the foundation of the female body (as opposed to Qi 氣 for the male body) and Blood regulation as the key to women’s health since the Song, Wu stresses the womb (*bao* 胞) or as compounds of *bao*, such as *baogong* 胞宮 (womb palace), *baotai* 胞胎 (womb-fetus), *baozang* 胞臟 (womb organ), or as *zigong* 子宮 (child-palace) as the distinctive female reproductive organ. Moreover, to Wu, the womb is not only the childbearing container and the space where the exchange of new and old Blood occurs, it is also the place where pathogens could enter and affect the body. Women’s illnesses, which are mostly caused by badly regulated Blood, therefore, are closely linked to the womb. By stressing the womb, Wu challenges the analytical narrative that Chinese medical thought is interested in function, not structure. This chapter thus proposes a more fruitful approach that asks the question “how did perceptions of function and structure mutually shape one another?” (p. 118)

Wu goes on to explain in chapter 4 two challenges that late imperial doctors had to face: the difficulties of determining pregnancy, and the prevention of difficult childbirth. The former was a common difficulty faced by all pre-modern doctors, and Ming-Qing Chinese doctors’ differentiation of true pregnancies from false ones relied increasingly on the discourse on Blood regulation, while the uncertainty about the length of pregnancy, believed to last up to several years, further complicated the diagnostics. On the other

hand, under such uncertainty, the doctors placed the responsibility of preventing difficult birth on the mother. The scholar-physician would argue that delivering a child should be as natural as the falling of a ripe fruit and that only improper behaviour and ill health of the mother would jeopardize the outcome.

The next two chapters are essentially examinations of important late imperial texts and formulas related to childbirth and postpartum healthcare. In Chapter 5, the above-mentioned early eighteenth-century text, *Treatise on Easy Childbirth*, is given in-depth historiographical and textual analysis. Wu justifies the importance given to this text by saying that it “essentially crystallized a set of optimistic perspectives that had become increasingly salient in late imperial doctors’ views of childbirth” (p. 150). Drawing from medieval texts stressing easy birth, Ye Feng 葉風, author of the popular text, formulated the central theme that birth was innately easy and was made difficult only by the unnecessary and aggressive intervention of ignorant midwives. Central ideas in this text could also be found in Ming-Qing medical books authored by scholar-physicians, clearly suggesting the established division of labour between female midwives, experienced but often illiterate women of the community, called upon to assist in common childbirth, and male literate doctors, authors of childbirth texts, who were summoned only when there was an emergency. The “discourse of cosmologically resonant childbirth” embodied by the *Treatise*, according to Wu, “provided an important intellectual resource that male doctors could use to legitimate themselves as superior overseers of women’s gestational bodies” (p.187).

The last chapter on postpartum health is a meticulous study and fine analysis of the history of several concoctions or remedies for postpartum health, and a detailed account of the technique of “doing the month” after childbirth, when the mother was considered to be most vulnerable. Such remedies and techniques are still used and practised today. The controversies over the efficacy of the various concoctions developed around the contending currents of medical practice in the Ming-Qing period with the rise of the *wenbu* 溫補 (translated here as “supplementing through warmth”) approach to maintaining health, inspired by the great Yuan scholar-physician Zhu Zhenheng 朱震亨. The relative popularity of the various concoctions depended on whether cooling or warming foods and drugs were in fashion or whether depletion or stagnation of Blood was considered the cause of the vulnerability of the postpartum body. Wu here explains with clarity and depth the rise and fall, and the change in content, of various postpartum formulas during the Ming-Qing period. The chapter ends with a discussion of a nineteenth-century text by a cholera specialist, Wang Shixiong 王士雄, who maintained that the greatest threat to postpartum health was heat, not cold. Criticizing the practice of stifling mothers under heavy blankets even in the summer for a month to keep off the cold, Wang demonstrates the popularity of such a practice in the Jiangnan 江南 region.

Wu’s book, the fullest account in English on the history of childbirth in Late Imperial China, is a rich mine of information on the traditional understanding and management of the reproductive female body. It also provides insightful links to the study of childbirth

in modern China. As described in the epilogue, traditional medicine for women was still valued by doctors in China as a better alternative to Western obstetrics in the early twentieth century. The postpartum care meticulously analysed in the last chapter is still practised today and some of the concoctions are even globally commercialized.

In theoretical terms, Wu brilliantly revises Furth's notion of the androgynous body and proposes another way of imagining the body as "infinite," "one that serves as the basis for all human bodies, to be conjugated into male and female, young and old, robust and delicate, Southern and Northern, depending on circumstances" (p. 232). The invention of *fuke* in the Song was thus not a production of gender difference, but a new way of explaining gender differences. Such differences were minimized in literate Ming-Qing medicine except for illnesses pertaining to childbirth. For Furth, late imperial doctors were "stepping back" from the Song distinctive female body. For Wu, these doctors simply saw this female body as just a variation of the infinite body. In other words, it was no longer a question of the androgynous or the gendered body, but that of a distinct individualized body that late imperial doctors came to be interested in. This notion of the infinite body further liberates our imagination of the body from all possible boundaries.

ANGELA KI CHE LEUNG  
*University of Hong Kong*

*Sound and Sight: Poetry and Courtier Culture in the Yongming Era (483–493)*. By Meow Hui Goh. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010. Pp. xi + 192. \$50.00.

*Sound and Sight* is the latest contribution to the growing body of interpretive scholarship by means of which we have been reassessing the cultural heritage of the Six Dynasties over the last twenty years. In this book, Meow Hui Goh constructs a picture of the life of the courtier-poet in the Southern Qi 南齊 (479–502) through a close reading of selected poems by Shen Yue 沈約 (441–513), Xie Tiao 謝朓 (464–499), and Wang Rong 王融 (467–493), commonly recognized as the three foremost poets active in the decade-long reign of Emperor Wu 武帝, when Qi court culture reached its zenith.

Looking back over Six Dynasties literary scholarship of the past decade, one feels that a book-length treatment of these three major poets was simply waiting to be written. Richard Mather's magisterial compendium of annotated translations of the poetic corpora of all three<sup>1</sup> furnished a basis for comparison in making new interpretations; Cynthia

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<sup>1</sup> Richard B. Mather, *The Age of Eternal Brilliance: Three Lyric Poets of the Yung-ming Era (483–493)* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), in which he builds upon the work begun in *The Poet Shen Yüeh (441–513): The Reticent Marquis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), a detailed study of Shen Yue's life, thought, and writings.