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Abstract

[Review] Liz P.Y. Chee. *Mao's Bestiary: Medicinal Animals and Modern China*. Duke University Press, 2021. 288 pp. The COVID-19 pandemic has secured its place as a 21st century global public health disaster. It has killed more than 6.2 million and infected close to 500 million people worldwide (Worldometer). Acknowledging Wuhan's wildlife market as the ground zero of the pandemic and the devastation caused by SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) 17 years earlier, China's Communist authorities made the long overdue decision on February 24, 2020 and outlawed wildlife breeding and trade for the country's exotic food market (National People's Congress of China). This decision was commendable. Yet, breeding of wildlife for the exotic food market was only one of the five-piece captive farming operation that generated a revenue of \$78 billion a year (Ma Jianzhang et al.). What the Chinese authorities have retained is captive breeding for Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), the third largest component of the country's controversial industry. Called a 'national treasure', TCM, in the minds of many, brooks no questioning (see for example, 'Xi Jinping Calls'). Liz P.Y. Chee's *Mao's Bestiary: Medicinal Animals and Modern China* (Duke University Press, 2021) steps in this minefield with questions not about the efficacy of TCM but about the drivers of its faunal medicalization in the last seven decades.

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The COVID-19 pandemic has secured its place as a 21st century global public health disaster. It has killed more than 6.2 million and infected close to 500 million people worldwide (Worldometer). Acknowledging Wuhan's wildlife market as the ground zero of the pandemic and the devastation caused by SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) 17 years earlier, China's Communist authorities made the long overdue decision on February 24, 2020 and outlawed wildlife breeding and trade for the country's exotic food market (National People's Congress of China). This decision was commendable. Yet, breeding of wildlife for the exotic food market was only one of the five-piece captive farming operation that generated a revenue of \$78 billion a year (Ma Jianzhang et al.). What the Chinese authorities have retained is captive breeding for Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), the third largest component of the country's controversial industry. Called a 'national treasure', TCM, in the minds of many, brooks no questioning (see for example, 'Xi Jinping Calls'). Liz P.Y. Chee's *Mao's Bestiary: Medicinal Animals and Modern China* (Duke University Press, 2021) steps in this minefield with questions not about the efficacy of TCM but about the drivers of its faunal medicalization in the last seven decades.

Mao's Bestiary is a timely contribution to the scholarly exploration of the human-animal relations in the People's Republic of China (PRC), a subject that has attracted an increasing number of scholars in China and overseas. *Mao's Bestiary* stands out in its focus, 'the use of animals as drugs in the state medicine of modern China' (1). While TCM use of ingredients of animal parts including those from protected species is no secret, the rise of an expanded list of animal drugs and the driver underlying the inclusion of a greater number of animals in Chinese medicine had not been addressed. Tracing the drivers and the politics behind the Chinese enthusiasm for animal remedies calls for a keen understanding of Chinese politics and native

speaker fluency in the Chinese language. The author's ethnic Chinese background and her Western education have enabled her to deal with the mounting materials often written in archaic and technical terminologies.

The book is outstanding in several aspects. For decades, scholars who study contemporary China have been pulled in two directions in their interpretation of Chinese behaviours and politics. Some believe that contemporary China is a replica of the country's dynastic past. China today is nothing but a pawn of its cultural tradition. Others believe that contemporary China is a culture-changing modern state. Blaming problems of today's China on its past is not only unfair but misleading. In tracing the rise of the state interest in the medicalization of animals, *Mao's Bestiary* is not culture-deterministic. The book focuses on modern China, specifically the politics of the PRC in three distinctive stages: the 1950s culminating in the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and the post-Mao reform era. The book connects the prevailing politics of the 1950s-1970s with the many 'innovations' in animal use for medicines under the Party's leadership (126). The use of injection, a modern mode of treatment, for injecting chicken blood and bear bile (125), is not ancient Chinese either. The captive breeding operations and the inclusion of a greater number of animal parts were conscious acts under state deliberate guidance (160). The book therefore attributes the embracing of animal parts for medicinal use to China's contemporary state, not the country's dynastic past or Chinese ancestors. In other words, what explains the faunal medicalization enthusiasm is not Chinese culture or tradition, not Chinese ancestors, but the contemporary state and the prevailing politics serving the political objectives of the ruling élites in Communist China.

Traditional Chinese Medicine or Chinese medicine has never been a simple subject of medicine or medical science. The debate on the need to 'abandon Yi (Chinese medicine), retain Yao (Chinese drugs)', started in the Republican era mirrored a tug-of-war between two forces in the Chinese society (19). The emerged policy position to 'scientize Chinese medicine and sinicize Western medicine' reflected the prevailing politics of the newly built People's Republic of China that vowed to rid the Chinese society of pro-West sentiments. The subsequent opposition to active ingredient identification and clinical trials of TCM drugs was therefore not surprising. To the defenders of TCM, the tissue of animals used in Chinese medicine was too

chemically complex to be studied like biomedicines (37). In other words, why should TCM be subjected to Western methodologies of effectiveness evaluation? Defending Chinese medicine and drugs was not purely a scientific action; it was a political act against worshipping Western medicine. Short supply of biomedicines and the new regime's inability to satisfy the medical needs of the Chinese people may also explain the place of the Chinese medicine in the state public health system (38-39).

Throughout the book, readers will see an intimate connection between faunal medicalization and politics of the modern Chinese state. The attraction of the Soviet 'blood science' and its influence on Chinese experiment in cross-species blood transfusion in the pre-reform era (107-108) bore clear footprints of inter-state politics. At that time, the PRC adopted a foreign policy that was dominated by the Sino-Soviet alliance. The subsequent decline of the Soviet influence and the state call for mass participation in medicinal experiment (100) and in searching for folk remedies had in the background the Sino-Soviet split and the intensifying power struggles between Mao and his associates who believed in professionalism of the country's medical establishments. The practice of chicken blood therapy during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution (112-114) could hardly be separated from the eccentricity of the Chinese politics at the time.

Demand reduction campaigns launched by international conservation organizations are buying the claim that demand for wildlife for food or for medicine is driven by the consumers. The created perception of, for example, the 'Asian super consumers' has been criticized for racial bias and misleading intervention strategies (Margulies et al.) *Mao's Bestiary*, with the help of 'a wealth of untapped' Chinese sources of information spanning seven decades (16-17), has helped, perhaps unintentionally, to debunk the consumer-driven myth. The author points out that there were only 27 animal-derived substances in the Chinese pharmacopoeia of 1954 (46). However, that number began to climb, not out of demand but rather as a result of state plan, in the subsequent two and a half decades. During the Great Leap Forward, for example, demand for medicinal animals was 'created at the point of production, based on quota'. 'This was driven partly by the push to increase exports of materials for consumption by an ever-more-prosperous Chinese diaspora, but also by the logic of the Great Leap Forward' for catching up with Great Britain in medicine production. Consumption played a secondary role (82).

There are other instances in the book that challenge the demand-driven claims.

'Farming was thus sometimes presented as furthering "conservation", although their effects on the targeted wildlife generally had the opposite effect, stimulating the market for even wild examples of the same species' (83). The book makes another important revelation that 'although concentrating on antlers, farmers also began to collect and "medicalize" many other deer body parts such as sinew, penis, and blood, all of which were now processed and sold as medicine...' (84). 'Once a medicinal animal was farmed, there was pressure or incentive to justify the use of all of its parts, regardless of previous traditions that had often been quite selective as to which part should actually be taken as medicine and for what purpose' (90). Improvising or innovating medicinal use of animal parts seemed to be a common practice during the Mao era. 'As musk's identity as a medicine began to reassert itself at the point of production, it became possible to imagine more elements of the animal also serving a medicinal purpose' (93). Farm workers were encouraged to 'innovate new uses for the animal parts and tissues they handled' (p.93). Unsurprisingly, innovation led to increased production and expanded the range of consumption (94). This mass innovation of medicinal use of animal parts has never been public knowledge.

Innovation was not limited to terrestrial animals. 'Pearl had been mentioned in classical medical texts, but the medicinal properties of many marine animals were considered new discoveries' (135). The author points out that only 70 of the more than 2000 medicinals recorded in *Bencao Gangmu Shiyi* of 1765 were marine-based. Marine animals sold for medicine in one market in South China, according to the author, were overwhelming in quantity (135). In 1977, the *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Chinese Pharmacology* reportedly recorded 5,767, out of which 754 were animal parts and tissues exceeding the number of animal-based drugs recorded in the Ming-period materia medica, *Bencao Gangmu* (137). The two-volume *Chinese Medicinal Animals* published in 1979 and 1983 contained a greater number of animals designated as medicinal (137). One defining nature of supply-driven consumption is active product promotion by the producers. To the author, bear bile is no less a supply-driven product since it is promoted as having many alleged curing properties for all illnesses and as a 'health supplement', 'capable of not just curing disease but sustaining a healthy lifestyle' (155). Unsurprisingly, some bear farm owners are good at seizing opportunities to promote their drugs. In 2003 and 2020,

Guizhentang, the controversial bear farming pharmaceutical company, made two high-profile trips to donate bear bile as a drug allegedly good for fighting SARS and COVID-19 ('Guizhentang Donates').

As the author observes, 'the increased presence and profile of medicinal animals' in TCM was indeed 'the result of deliberate state engineering' (160).

Mao's Bestiary does incredible work in filling a gap in our understanding of China's seemingly insatiable appetite for animal medicines, but also in other areas. The book is not a political analysis of the drivers of faunal medicalization in modern China. Yet, it does a great job in dissecting the politics behind the 'innovation' and the mass search for folk therapies at a time when biomedicines were in short supply. If the book has anything that it could have emphasized or shed more light on, I would point to the instrumental function of TCM to the PRC's Party-state in all three eras under study. TCM seemed to be more intimately linked with the Party-state's political objectives in those eras. Chapter Five on Deng's reform and animal medicinal development could have included two stakeholders, i.e., the bureaucratic interests and the wildlife business interests, when addressing the bear farming industry to help explain the 'continuing power' of China's wildlife breeding industry. Deng Xiaoping's economic reform, laudable for its lasting contribution to poverty reduction and the rise of controlled participation by society in policymaking, has allowed a lopsided influence to the bureaucrats in charge of wildlife and of business interests. Admittedly, these could fall outside the scope of the book and explaining the 'continuing power' is not the purpose of the book.

Overall, the book is a valuable source of information for policy scholars, wildlife activists, teachers and students in disciplines such as East Asian politics and culture, animal studies and wildlife conservation. Critically for campaigners and conservation NGOs involved in designing and improving intervention strategies to fight illegal wildlife trade, *Mao's Bestiary* reveals supply-driven markets and consumption that are less rooted in cultural tradition than in 'deliberate state engineering'.

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