The way that can be realised is not the lasting Way, the names that can be uttered are not the lasting Name.

These famous first lines from Laozi's *Daode jing* incorporate a whole theory of representation, one that has been immensely influential throughout Chinese history. This originary formula, contemporary with the beginning of the written history of Chinese medicine, teaches us that all efforts to understand ultimate realities through any form of representation will fail. The lasting Way, the permanent names, may be approached, but they cannot be captured by mere human devices. Language and all forms of representation necessarily fall short of ultimate realities, and Laozi teaches us to forego all ambitions of taming reality by naming it.

At the same time, though, this ancient formula paradoxically invites us to think about representation in a different way. The idealism of the Laozi text is rigorous, no doubt: if the goal is to achieve harmony with elusive cosmic patterns, to become one with the Dao, human ethical systems and the names on which they rely can only fail short. In the text as a whole (as is well known), the ethical principles taught by Confucian thinkers are depicted as especially misleading, substituting hypocrisy, arrogance, and ungenerous calculation for directness, surrender, and spontaneity. Mere mortals armed only with a familiar morality and conventional classifications (names), will never become one with the lasting Dao; in fact our ethical practice leads us ever further from it. Most of us, however, are not world-renouncing Daoists. Under these circumstances, we might as well abandon any more properly 'Daoist' aims of converging with cosmic process. The way that can be realised is not the lasting way. Shouldn't we, then, concern ourselves with the realisable? On the question of names, in what follows I want to trace in modern forms of representation a more properly 'ethical' (or Confucian?) question: what can human language achieve? How should names be improved to encourage virtue or wisdom in mere mortals? What are the forms of representation that can be both uttered and realised? If the great names known to metaphysics necessarily miss their always-transforming cosmic referents, then we must ask what a more concrete and particular naming process can achieve.

For present purposes I want to add a line to the first chapter of the *Daode jing*: 'Hua kehua fei chang hua' – the picture that can be drawn is not the lasting picture. Pictures have their own ways of assigning names and limiting reference, their own generic shortcomings in efforts to reach the Dao. A picture may be worth a thousand words, as the English proverb has it, but if words fundamentally fail to tell us the truth, if they fail to name the 'lasting Way', then pictures also fail. The philosophical point holds for all forms of representation. At the same time, pictures, words, and conventional morality do something. It is this 'something', this humble functionality of words and images, which can be approached through a reading of popular graphic versions of Chinese medicine and philosophy. The comic books I consider in what follows are examples of a popular genre of publishing devoted to the classics of Chinese thought, as I will describe below. I will ultimately argue that these humble and unpretentious cartoons are effective in surprising ways. This effectiveness is limited, but interesting for an ethnography of reading and for a study of visual rhetorics. So I argue there that cartoons are as successful as many other genres in capturing and conveying the meanings – and perhaps especially the practical implications – of ancient Chinese medical and metaphysical works; and where they fail it is for similar reasons. In other words, I will conclude with a return to Laozi's scepticism about the powers of language and representation, but I want to suggest that in practice there may be syntheses a philosopher cannot dream of.

In what follows, I will maintain a focus on both the successes and failures of visual representation in medical materials published for popular consumption. Successes and failures are here conceived in relation to the goal of representing – making present again – a reality. As often as not, this might be conceived of as producing a full and accurate idea of something for a knower, making a sign that fully evokes its referent. I adopt this definition in an effort to remain true to the representational goals of the language of the *Daode jing* rather than in relation to contemporary semiotics or literary realism. The concerns of linguistic semiotics have informed this chapter to some extent, but I have avoided technicalities while attending more centrally to indigenous Chinese approaches to language and representation. After some historical preliminaries, I will provide a reading of a few examples from medical classic comics from the point of view of content analysis. I will then turn to some popular appropriations of these comics drawn from field research in Beijing in 2003.
linking texts to practice and thus back to the question of ‘realising the Dao’.

Medical classic comics constitute a relatively ephemeral genre of medical illustration: widely available cartoon versions of classical writings from the history of Chinese medicine. Examples are several versions under the title (Huangdi neijing yangsheng tudian) Yellow帝内经养生图典 (Classic Comic of Life Nurturance in the Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon),1 Manhua xuedao anmo yangsheng shu 漫画穴道按摩养生术 (Arts of Nurturing Life Through Acupressure Massage in Comic Form),2 and Zhongyi yaoshi tudian 医药食图典 (Classic Comic of Chinese Medicinal Foods).3

We begin by placing illustrated books like these in historical context, presenting some other cartoon and illustration genres to which they can be compared, especially with reference to the effectiveness of images and words. These comparative materials include cartoons that developed in mid-20th-century Chinese print media, Maoist propaganda comics, and the illustrations used in relatively ‘serious’ publications about Chinese medicine. Each of these genres forges its own relationships between image, word, and referent; none is as popular as ‘classic cartoons’. We then turn to a close reading of the typical representational strategies of a few cartoon versions of Chinese medical knowledge, and close by commenting on how books like this are being used in contemporary Beijing. Reading practice returns us in the conclusion to some of the concerns of the Daode jing.

20th-Century Illustrated Genres

As materials presented in this volume make abundantly clear, the history of conjoined text and image in China is as long as the history of the nation itself. In fact a Chinese picture that incorporates no words at all is rare, as we are reminded by genres as diverse as technical illustrations and Song-dynasty landscape painting. Indeed, one could argue that any theoretical divide between words and pictures for the Chinese linguistic tradition would be illegitimate. For many Chinese thinkers, words are pictures. Modern publishing, with its standard machine fonts and separation of calligraphic dedications or illustrations from the text itself, have made the arbitrariness of the sign a more plausible linguistic theory for the 20th and 21st centuries. But it might still be unproductive to explore ‘the text-image relationship’ in China as if the two modes of representation were really distinct.4

The modern popular genre of cartoons (漫画 manhua) has a particular and rather lengthy pedigree in East Asia, but in China as in the United States the history of modern cartoons proper – published in the mass media and made for general consumption – is not long. The precursors of the modern mass market comics in China who produced New Year woodblock prints and illustrated fiction were influential in the development and styles of manhua,5 but most historians link the rise of the genre to the availability of lithography and the rapid development of newspapers in the late 19th century.6 The modern terms for comics, manhua and lianhuanhua, are recent, having been coined in the 1920s.7 The 20th century saw a vast expansion in cartoon genres and venues, some included in newspapers as a few frames and others published as ‘little books’ (xiaoshu or xiaorenshu 小人书) or broadsides. In Shanghai in the late 1930s, there were at least 17 magazines devoted almost entirely to the genre.8 By the 1930s it had become possible to theorise, and at the same time politicise, the efficacies of words and images in the popular genre of the cartoon.9 Nebiolo quotes the influential left-wing writer Lu Xun 鲁迅, for instance, on the propaganda potential of the comics:

Not long ago in the review Modern Age, I read an article by Su Wen, the art critic, condemning the comics from an aesthetic point of view…. In the art histories to which

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4 Mitchell has extensively explored and critiqued Western modernist criticism, which has given the appearance of a ‘battle of text and image’ (Mitchell 1986, p. 154). In his own interpretive project he occasionally mentions both ‘Chinese calligraphic landscape’ (Mitchell 1994, p. 98) and cartoons as modes of suturing word and image (ibid., pp. 91–4). The approach he advocates explores ‘the problem of the image/text’, allowing genres and works to be seen as historically and formally particular in the relations they materialise between images and texts. Such a critical project would not, perhaps, be needed in relation to classical Chinese linguistics and literary theory.

5 Bai et al. (eds) 1993.

6 See Hung 1993, pp. 28–9; Isao 2001, p. 127; Nebiolo 1973, pp. viii–xvi; Schodt 1983; Shandong Illustrated Press Editorial Group (eds) 2002; Wong 2002, pp. 11–16; Zhang 2001.

7 See Hung 1994; Shen 2001; Xiao 2007; The first free-standing ‘comic’ with narrative in the United States appears to have been ‘The Yellow Kid’ in 1895 (Blackbeard 1995).

8 Wong 2002, pp. 14–15.

9 Ibid., pp. 13–15, argues that a genre of political cartoon critical of Qing policies had already begun to flourish in Hong Kong in the late 19th century. Until 1949 there was a great deal of exchange among artists, intellectuals, and publishers including Hong Kong and all the coastal cities of the mainland.
we are accustomed we find no reproductions from comic books, and in exhibitions we see only such things as ‘Rome at Twilight’ or ‘Western Lake at Dusk’. Obviously, comic books are considered too low-brow to belong to such respectable company. But if you visit the Vatican... you will find that all the marvellous frescoes fundamentally tell stories from the Old Testament and the Acts of the Apostles. When an art historian reproduces one of them under the title ‘The Creation of Man’ or ‘The Last Supper’, no one considers it vulgar or propagandistic. And yet the originals are fundamentally of a propagandistic nature. The same thing holds true in the East... Both the life of the Buddha and the [Analects] of Confucius are obviously propagandistic publications, in which pictures are meant to stimulate the reader’s interest.10

This is not a surprising interest on Lu Xun’s part, given his simultaneous involvement in reform of both visual and linguistic genres of art and his concern with the politics of representation practices. Folklorist Qu Qiubai also argued for the revolutionary potential of cartoons (along with ‘opera and spoken dramas, songs and ditties’) because the numbers of the literate are so extremely small.11 As the Japanese mobilised to occupy Chinese cities in the 1930s, a number of publishers and artists involved in comics production openly cast their mission as political and committed their work to public education and mobilisation.12 As Japanese control over Chinese cities tightened, mass media artists moved their work and publications ahead of the front. Controversies surrounding particular
cartoonists and individual works attest to the power of these combinations of images and words.

After the founding of the PRC the new propaganda apparatus took up Lu Xun’s advice to exploit the educational and populist potential of images: the cartoon story, often in the form of books small enough to be carried in a pocket, became an important propaganda genre directed at people of all ages (Fig. 1).

If the high artistic quality of the drawing in these books is any indication, the ‘little book’ was meant to educate and entertain, but not to amuse in a comic sense. The informal and irreverent styles of drawing that had been popular in cartoon genres before 1949 were replaced by a more traditional aesthetic incorporated into the ‘revolutionary romanticism’ propagated by the state.13

An experience reported by Gino Nebiolo, an Italian visitor to China in the 1960s, attests to the popularity and appeal of these xiaorenshu, despite or even because of their

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10 Nebiolo 1973, p. xiii. See also Hung 1994, p. 31; Xiao 2007.
11 Wen and Ye (eds), 1997, p. 124, cited in Bohnenkamp 2005. A recent study of 1930s woodcut narratives (lianhuankhua) by Tie Xiao is particularly illuminating about the political climate of the time among artistic activists (Xiao 2007).
12 See Hung 1994, pp. 31–5, 93–153; Shen 2001; Zhang 2001, p. 135.
13 See Anderson 1990.
ponderousness. On an overnight train in the late 1960s, all passengers received a little cartoon book when their tea was delivered by the train staff. Passengers traded books as they finished them, and most stayed awake all night reading. Nebiolo reports:

All through the night we exchanged comic books, without ever speaking... The comic books did not tell heroic tales or episodes from history alone; some of them reflected everyday life, particularly in the country. One that fell into my hands was entitled ‘A Paiful of Manure’, whose peasant heroine, Qien Er-xiao, was, to be sure, a conscientious worker, but was corroded by the subtle poison of bourgeois selfishness. From her personal latrine she removed a paiful of potential manure for use in her own vegetable garden. Fortunately her husband was a good citizen, ready to give up the manure for the good of the community and, indeed, to scatter it over the collective field... Around the smelly pail the entire village took part in a doctrinal dispute, and social considerations, quite rightly, won. Qien Er-xiao understood what she was supposed to do, happily gave in to her altruistic husband, and thanked the villagers for opening her eyes.\[14\]

In the reform period the amount of this kind of state-produced cartoon material has diminished drastically, at least in the domain of adult reading. The ‘little book’ format, with its elegant drawing style, persists as boxed sets illustrating classics of pre-modern Chinese literature. But more ‘commercial’ and – once again, ‘comic’ – uses of cartoons for adults started to appear in the publishing boom of the late 1980s and 1990s. Nowadays, of course, unlike the era of the xiaorenshu, little of what’s published could be classed as state propaganda. Even works of serious scholarship and political thought have difficulty finding a publisher, as most presses need to turn a profit, so they seek genres that sell. In fact, bookstore stocks reflect publishers’ market research rather closely, as any books that don’t move are sent back at least bi-weekly to the presses. The new entrepreneurial publishing field in China tries not to make the same mistake twice about an author or a genre. Cartoons appear to sell. The bigger Xinhua Bookstores in Beijing now have whole departments devoted to cartoon books, stocked with works ranging from facsimile reproductions of Qing dynasty illustrated manuals to imported and translated black humour and dirty jokes. Among these are the very popular ‘classic comics’ to which I now turn.

**Classic Comics**

The materials I present here belong to a thoroughly contemporary genre. Unlike the propaganda materials discussed above, and unlike some other kinds of illustrated popular books on Chinese medicine, they make few pretensions to including ‘good art’.

Cartoon versions of classic philosophical works, originally produced by the well-known Taiwan animator Cai Zhizhong 蔡志忠 (Tsai Chih Chung), began to appear in the late 1980s and 1990s as a vehicle for popularising ‘traditional Chinese culture’. Cai published cartoon versions of the classic philosophical works of Zhuangzi 庄子 and Laozi 老子, the Confucian four books, Shijing (The Book of Odes), the Han Feisi 韩非子, and even Song poetry. The genre is called ‘classic comics’ or ‘pictorial classics’ (jing dian manhua 经典漫画, tudian 图典), and following the immediate popular success of Cai’s first publications the genre as a whole caught on in the book market throughout sinophone East and Southeast Asia.\[15\] Cai’s books and those of his mainland imitators have been translated into Japanese, Korean, and English, and they are printed in runs of up to 20,000. Most recently Cai has produced hard-bound books with colour illustrations which include both a DVD and a CD-ROM.\[16\]

Once the Chinese philosophical and poetic classics had been represented as comics, Chinese medicine presented itself as a natural body of literature to be handled in this way.\[17\] An artist named Zhou Chuncai 周春才 began to produce Chinese medicine ‘pictorial classics’ as early as the mid-1990s, but the Chinese medicine branch of this publishing field became really active around 1998. Publishers clearly thought that many readers who might be intimidated by the classic works and medical textbooks would both want to know more about classical Chinese medicine and would prefer to read a cartoon version of its famously abstruse canonical works. This expectation is made clear by the following description from the back cover of Zhou Chuncai’s 1994 Huangdi neijing yangsheng tudian (Classic Comic of Life Nurturance in the Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon):

The *Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon* is a wellspring of our fatherland’s medicine and an exotic flower of human wisdom. Its theoretical system of ‘resonance of man and heaven’, and ‘Yin-Yang and Five Phases’ is not only a cen-

\[14\] Nebiolo 1973. p. viii.

\[15\] Wei 2001.

\[16\] For example, Cai 2003.

\[17\] The presentation of science in cartoon form was not entirely unprecedented. In 1952 palaeo-anthropologist Jia Lanpo published a serial picture book, ‘Our Ancestors 500,000 Years Ago’ (see Schmalzer 2008).
sketching the dao

In fact, do ordinary non-specialist readers actually find the comic form of medical classics ‘so enjoyable to read’? A closer reading of the content of these books, as well as a consideration of how they are actually received, can begin to answer these questions.

Images

I noted above that these cartoon classics make no pretensions to offering beautiful art. The cartoon images differ somewhat depending on the artist, but all are sketchy and unpretentious. The drawings themselves have a ‘comic’ character. Though actual jokes are relatively rare in the classic comics genre, the mere act of depicting something so ancient and dignified as classical medicine and metaphysics through sketches of ordinary people doing ordinary things is amusing enough. In these pages we have perfectly recognisable modern individuals discussing cosmic processes in words that sometimes depart relatively little from 2,000-year-old classical language. Most of these classic comics include the original text (usually as a fragment), some commentary or modern Chinese translation, and not quite reverent remarks from the cartoon ‘characters’, often in speech balloons.

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Figure 36.3  The Yellow Emperor and his teacher Qi Bo

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Though Huangdi 黄帝 and Qi Bo 岐伯, the chief interlocutors of the Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon (Fig. 3), are in dressed in cartoon versions of Han Dynasty clothing,
and display a certain ancienness in their serenely seated postures (but isn't Qi Bo’s moustache rather suspiciously 20th century?), the many ancillary characters are aggressively modern.

The gestures, facial expressions, and spontaneous comments of these ordinary men and women, workers and farmers, are purposely anachronistic (Fig. 4); they certainly lack the gravitas of actors one would think of as 2000 years in the past. This temporal dissonance, the source of the comic sense of the genre as a whole, is clear in a frame where a Han dynasty mother, committed to the ancient idea of preventive medicine, takes her baby for a vaccination shot (‘The highest doctor treats the not-yet-ill’ 上工治未病) (Fig. 5).¹⁹

Then there’s the one of the person afflicted with stomach troubles hogging the neighbourhood w.c.²⁰ The overall impression given by the cartoon style is similar to that of the many Han and Tang dynasty soap operas on Chinese

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¹⁹ Nanjing College 1979, p. 163.
²⁰ Shen and Chen 2005, p. 95.
television. The message is, ‘except for their clothes and hairstyles, those ancients were just like us’.

Perhaps this visual depiction ironically persuades modern readers to take the science of the Chinese medical classics more seriously than they otherwise would. If Qi Bo is just like us – even if he is a little more educated about the ways of the universe and more practised at living in accord with the Dao – then his advice should be directly relevant to the ways we live our lives today. After all, knowing the Dao of health and long life should not go out of style; even if words and images cannot grasp it, the most lasting Dao toward which these representations are oriented should never get relegated to the dead past. Looking through these comics with Beijing friends, I’ve noticed that they find a comic quality in the casual everyday language that is juxtaposed with the formally intoned correspondences of the original text. When a mother with wet hair gets struck by wind pathogen, and her bathing baby cries out, ‘妈妈，你怎么了?’ (Ma, what’s the matter?), this is occasion for a chuckle. When a cartoon time-keeper urges the sluggish drugs tianzhuhuang 天竹黄 and huomaren 火麻仁, to wake up and get to work, and the soldiers representing these drugs rub their eyes and say, ‘I’m sleepy,’ this brings a comfortable and pleasant recognisability to the vast technical field of herbal pharmacy. In these images the authority of the past is brought at least halfway down from the Olympian heights of the sage kings and their interpreters, with their difficult classical language, to a level where consumers of medical knowledge can connect each fragment in a straightforward way to some aspect of their own (possibly just as fragmented) modern lives.

The kind of immediate bodily relevance sought by these books is consistent with the pedagogical-popular aims of the genre. But the images provide a different kind of mnemonic technique than the classic texts themselves ever could, even in the modern translated and annotated versions most specialists read. An interesting example of a divergence in message between classic and comic forms is clear in a page depicting the ‘twelve officials’ corresponding to the visceral systems (wuzang liufu 五脏六腑) (Fig. 6).

21 Zhou and Han 1994, p. 94.

22 Ibid., p. 174.
In this cartoon depiction of the metaphorical ‘ministers’ who classically divide responsibility for the body’s visceral bureaucracy, the various officials are arranged in a way that corresponds to the spatiality of a modern Western-medicinal or anatomical body. This depiction hardly follows a classical Neijing (Inner Canon) understanding of the hierarchy of the visceral systems, the five zang and six fu. There are two little officials for the lungs and two for the kidneys, for example, though these visceral systems are not usually spoken of as dual in the classics; the heart is given the highest position, though many would accord priority to other viscera; the physiological importance of the kidney system, the spleen, and the liver system are curiously minimised; the Triple Burner – one of the six fu – is forgotten altogether; and the urinary bladder, depicted as a relatively large and fierce navy, looks a lot more important than classical medicine would normally claim. Modern organs known through an anatomical medicine are a dominant, if unstated, referent for this cartoon spatialisation of the functional body. Moreover, with the exception of the spleen and stomach, who seem to collaborate a bit, these bureaucrats all appear as free-standing individuals rather than interrelated functional systems. One might also note that the arithmetic doesn’t even work: there is no way to count these officials so that they add up to 12! If lungs and kidneys are counted as one, and spleen and stomach are (properly) kept separate, there are 11 officials; if lungs and kidney are counted as two, and even if spleen and stomach are combined, there are 13! A reader who recalls the spatial and functional relationships of the viscera from this illustration, as she reads about the zangfu in later parts of this book, will continue to see the ancient material through a certain anatomical lens, and will strive to turn profoundly interrelated systems into discrete individuals with distinct domains of responsibility. This cartoon, then, is a potent (mis)representation of a central form of knowledge found in the classical sources.

I am not here simply arguing that comic books over-simplify and distort the correct meaning of the medical classics. A moment of reflection would persuade us that any pictorial representation of the bureaucratic metaphor for the zangfu as used by the Neijing would reduce the allusiveness of the original text and necessarily miss the dynamic functionality of the visceral systems. Any picture that could be designed would occlude some aspects of the body and cosmos found in the Inner Canon even as it presented – perhaps very persuasively – those aspects deemed to be most central. There’s another way of saying this: every picture is about the same as a caricature (or a cartoon?) when it is compared with the richness of the medical concepts and realities, and even the medical classical language, at which it aims. If the hierarchy of visceral functions in the Chinese medical body is a dynamic and recursive one (and it is, of course), then a list of bureaucrats who ‘rule’ various functions is a very remote metaphor indeed. Even if a tacit understanding of the interactivity of the bureaucratic process is presumed (as it is by the original texts), these ‘twelve’ officials are at best only mnemonic devices that can place the zangfu in relation to each other, spatially and functionally. This sort of picture falls very far short of the ‘lasting Way’. But perhaps, as concepts become more abstract, art can be more successful, more comprehensive? Is a casual sketch an especially good medium for a broad abstract notion? Oddly enough, in my reading of the comics this seems to be the case. A sequence from Zhou Chuncai’s Zhongyi yaoshi tudian can leave the purist feeling a bit more positive about the power of images. This book is a bit unusual in that it provides no textual extracts from classic books. Instead it explains the lessons about food and medicines, or medicinal foods that can be derived from Chinese medicine’s classic sources. With a cheerful, bearded, and very old Chinese doctor – perhaps meant to be Shen Nong神农, the Divine Farmer, though he is nowhere identified – as our guide,
we mainly find here a catalogue of medicinal foods. The book is organised according to medical principles (rather than, for example, botanical principles), much as a textbook would be organised. Most of it is very concrete. But in a few introductory pages on ‘Origins’, a strong statement is made that this kind of information relies on the theoretical system of Yin-Yang and Five Phases derived (it is claimed) from the Book of Changes (Fig. 7).

The cosmic scope and totalising ambitions of this theory are represented by asterisms in the sky; its dynamism and limitlessness are emphasised by ocean waves; and the intimate connection of both knowledge and knowers to these cosmic processes is represented by the string-bound Huangdi neijing floating on the ocean as well as by the sage-king riding his flying bamboo mat high above mountains and clouds. This depiction of ‘theory’ is both witty and effective. It opens a window on to the cosmos, leading the reader imaginatively far from the cloistered study or the dusty herbal pharmacy. It urges her to see the relatively humble question of what to eat for health as linked to ultimate questions of order and harmony in the universe.

The next few frames (Fig. 8) draw the eye back down to some well-known diagrams that graphically put Yin-Yang and the Five Phases, time and space, into conventional relationship with each other, but the section concludes cosmically again with a lovely image and an ambitious thought (Fig. 9).

Like a dragon, the theoretical system of Yin-Yang and the Five Phases, as well as ancient knowledge of medicinal foods, leaps across the millennia. These philosophies have lost none of their cosmic connection and none of their relevance for us today. In fact, as the twice-repeated formula 无出其外 ‘there is nothing beyond it’ insists, these principles, and the dragon of ancient Chinese wisdom, will always be with us, and they are everywhere meaningful.

It doesn’t really matter, for present purposes, whether such images of origins and the cosmos are historically accurate (they are almost surely not what a historian would find in the literature); nor need we be concerned with any limitations in the ideas about China, the heritage, and Chinese medicine that might be encouraged by these images. Rather what interests me is the success of a cartoon in representing something like metaphysical theory and something like the flow of cosmic processes. Though this is not great art, it aims in these few frames to open our horizons; though this is not detailed information, it offers a background against which the herb and food information to follow can be found significant. These drawings and their accompanying text interrupt the ordinary instrumentalism of daily food consumption and rituals of illness prevention.
to give us a vast sea of dynamic process, a look back up at the heavens, a glimpse of a dragon.

Reading

The question thus far has been, how do cartoon images capture (or not) a concept, an intellectual aim, the deeper or more complex meanings of a source text? Now I turn to a different sort of relationship between sign and referent, asking: how do cartoons reach out to the body and life of the reader? How do they achieve saliency for readers? These questions are generally classified under the heading of ‘reception studies’, and they are not easy to answer. When we ask how an image or a piece of text is incorporated into the life or opinions of a reader, we venture into a generally unspoken region of everyday experience. Reading takes place, but its particular efficacy in making meaning and influencing readers is difficult to track in ordinary conversation. So here I can only speculate a bit about how Chinese medical comics are received by readers, based on field research I have been doing over the last decade in collaboration with Prof. Zhang Qicheng 张其成 of the Beijing University of Chinese Medicine. We have conducted interviews with a number of Beijingers who practise some form of yangsheng 養生, or the arts of nurturing life. These interviews, and our less formal interactions with city-dwellers interested in yangsheng, provide insights into how Chinese medical knowledge is received and understood by non-experts in contemporary China.

There are many popular media representations of Chinese medicine, ranging from drug advertising to formal lectures in neighbourhood committee offices, from TV documentaries to magazine articles, and including a wide range of inexpensive books that turn Chinese medical expertise into easily-understood public health advice. The cartoon books that are the subject of this chapter are prominent in this media mix, and publishers specialising in health and medicine are enthusiastic about the genre. They say people do buy these books and the publishers are anxious to keep producing them. In general, looking for them in bookstores, I found them less often displayed with other comic books and more often in sections devoted to personal healthcare or traditional medicine. This supports the suggestion made above, that the comic version of the Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon is seen more as pedagogy than entertainment.

Sharing Chinese medicine cartoon books with ordinary city-dwellers I know, I can get them to say that they are ‘interesting’, or ‘a good idea’. They often see books as full of information that they should probably take seriously. I haven’t been able to elicit commentary on precisely how the combination of classical language, informal modern commentaries, and the pictures themselves actually speak to the lives and values of these acquaintances, however. The most interesting responses I have got from non-specialists have singled out isolated practical facts – such as the uses of a particular drug for common ailments – and taken issue with it. Teachers of Chinese medicine, on the other hand, are very enthusiastic about comic classics in the field. They seem to view them as a sort of Cliff’s Notes that will no doubt help their struggling students to prepare for exams.

Readers of this Chinese medical knowledge take up particular facts or principles according to needs, experiences, and assessments of their own. In our interviews and more casual conversations, we have noted a certain scepticism about information that can be found in books or advertisements. Asked about where they learn the most reliable health information, Beijingers usually tell us they find their friends’ advice the most useful. This kind of freely shared common sense about bodies, food, medicine, costs, and reliable expertise is more important, for example, than newspaper articles, lectures organised by the street committee, or commercials on TV. Further, when we asked about the management of diet or the desiderata of exercise regimes, people told us over and over, ‘you should do what feels good’. These two orientations – a reliance on informal lore and a tendency to listen to one’s own experience – impress me as very important for understanding the reception of authoritative health advice and even classical knowledge about bodies, nature, and the cosmos. Both of these preferences take embodied experience to be more important than formal knowledge. Surely, people will say, my friend who has had to control her diabetes with dietary changes, and whose life is so much like my own, really knows more that is useful than any handbook that can be picked up in the clinic. Surely the pleasure I derive from eating oily griddle cakes and twice-cooked fatty pork is as good for my health as any unsatisfying bland diet the doctors might recommend. Though curiosity about good techniques for health maintenance runs fairly high, and Beijingers are always willing to hear advice from any quarter about how to be ‘healthy, wealthy and wise’, the people we talked with...
nevertheless preferred common-sense to science, present experience to authoritative traditional wisdom. The matrix within which Chinese medical information takes on significance for ordinary city-dwellers is a complex mix of health experience, friendly conversations, rumours and urban legends, and ways of being embodied.

This sort of experience could be thought of as a taken-for-granted world toward which the text quite self-consciously gestures. Unlike the tight and beautifully illustrated xiaoren shu narratives shared by train-riders in the 1970s, which were read with absorption, classic medical comics (and most other public health publishing) are designed to be nibbled rather randomly. Readers flip through looking for titbits they can use or share with friends. Short snatches of text, engaging subheadings, and – of course – pictures catch the eye but do not demand a continuous reading. So much miscellany could make for a bad book, one supposes. But it is precisely this parcellisation that allows the cartoon genre to articulate so well with people’s everyday lives. Readers pick and choose bits of lore that accord with their own embodied and untheorised experience; they don’t expect a comprehensive account of everything that can be known, or that they should know, about medicine and bodily life. They wouldn’t trust such a vision if they got it.

On the other hand, there is something about the comic sketch that has a particular efficacy. It draws attention to itself, generically, as a rapid approximation, not a ponderous realistic representation. A few lines, a gesture, are enough to point toward that outside world of experience and embodiment, that excess over the text, that informs the reading process. There is no need to fill out the frame with more detail; this would only limit the usefulness of the parcels of information that are made livelier through illustration. The very down-to-earth cartoon people who romp through the pages of the Huangdi neijing yangsheng tudian or the Zhongyi yaoshi tudian, despite their pre-modern clothing, may be more reminiscent of a Beijing reader’s friends and neighbours than the figures of Huangdi, Qi Bo, and Shen Nong the same reader might imagine as she scans a non-illustrated text. These cartoon figures may bring the Dao of the medical classics a little closer to the apartment complexes and hutongs of the modern city. But everyone knows that their own dimensional, changing, stubbornly material life is not a cartoon. And they know that habits of ‘daily eating and drinking, rising and resting’ have an impact on the degree of satisfaction they can find in life. So for these readers, too, both words and images fall short of the lasting Way.

Conclusion

Thus it can be argued from two points of view that the picture that can be drawn is not the lasting picture. The first is the point of view of content analysis, which has shown us how much of the rich body of Chinese medical understanding is missed or – at best – rendered quite abstract by the cartoon form. The second is the scepticism of the people who actively assemble their understanding of health, medicine, and ways of forging a wholesome bodily life from experiences that exceed all forms of representation. At least in the comic genre, books are treated more as resources and diversions than as authorities; yet they offer images of everyday life and ordinary problems resolved by the theory and techniques of Chinese medicine, and so they can always provide grist for the experiential mill. For some readers, Shen Nong and Qi Bo – only allusively sketched – might become just as much companions in the nurturance of life as one’s neighbours, family, and friends.

Comparing medical classic comics with the more systematic, even ‘scientific’, texts of Chinese medicine, as well as with the beautifully drawn propaganda illustrations of the xiaoren shu, it is tempting to feel that much has been lost in contemporary graphic publishing. But these other forms of representation have their shortcomings too. Scholars of formal Chinese medicine lament that the classic textual materials are ‘too abstract’ and alienate today’s scientifically-trained youth. No ordinary reader turns to the official editions of the Huangdi neijing or the Bencao gangmu for everyday health advice. In fact, fewer and fewer medical student actually read these classics; indeed I know a teacher in a Shanghan lun 伤寒论 (Treatise on Cold Damage) department at a college of Chinese medicine who was delighted when I gave her a comic book version. She intended sharing it with her students immediately, feeling it would make the material so much more accessible for them. As for the ‘better’ pictures we have considered, the beauties and warriors, model workers and conscientious cadres of both old and new ‘little books’ may seem quite remote to readers, subjects of an imaginary if sometimes pleasurable other world. It is important to recall, then, that the inadequacy of images and words to capture or guide experience is not specific to just a few, relatively ‘popular’ or ‘vulgar’ genres. Every form of representation enables some readings while preventing others. There is no total picture, and the way that can be realised is not the lasting Way.
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