

Centre for the Humanities and Medicine
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Convergence and Collisions: Disease, Religion, and Healing in Asia

Leprosy and Contagion in Late Imperial China

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As its Chinese name of *mafeng* ('numb-Wind') suggests, in early classical medicine leprosy and its lesions (*lai*) were imagined as caused by malignant Wind, and not as directly contagious. A late 14th century Daoist text was one of the first to describe the transmissibility of the ailment within the family and outside of it in toilets, bedrooms, and by clothing and bedding. This text should be understood in the long tradition of Daoist texts that imagined disease as communicated within kingroups as moral communities and recommended medicines or rituals to break the chain of transmission. In the Southern Song period, Daoist liturgical texts began to describe rituals and medicines to halt contagion outside the lineage context. A contemporary medical text first used the term contagion (*chuanran*, lit. transmit-dye) for *lai* without further explanation. The first medical author who described the process of contagion of *mafeng* in medical terms was a marginal doctor from a Daoist background in the mid-sixteenth century. From then onwards, mainstream Confucian doctors gradually appropriated the non-conventional idea of *lai* contagion in their medical texts. *Mafeng* was thus described as contagious in the 1742 imperial compendium. By this time, the contagiousness of *mafeng* was a widespread and well established popular belief. While many nineteenth century Europeans claimed that leprosy was hereditary among inferior races in the tropics, the Chinese were more convinced than ever that it was contagious and prevalent in the hotter provinces of their own country.