



## ***Barefoot Doctor: A Novel*, by Can Xue. Translated by Karen Gernant and Chen Zeping. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2022**

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Accepted: 8 November 2023

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Can Xue is the pseudonym of Deng Xiaohua, born in 1953 in Changsha, China. She is one of the best-known contemporary Chinese writers, known for her experimental writing. She was a barefoot doctor herself for a short time. The novel *Barefoot Doctor* was first published in Chinese in 2018 in the literary magazine *Huacheng* with the title *An Almost Vanishing Profession*, then published as a stand-alone novel in 2019.

China's barefoot doctor program was introduced in 1968 as a way to quickly train paramedics to meet rural health needs. In 1985, the title of barefoot doctor was canceled by the Ministry of Health. Even though their typical healing methods are thought to be “one silver needle and a bunch of herbs”—symbols of Chinese medicine, in reality, rather than herbs and acupuncture, antibiotics and Western medicines were prescribed, and simple surgical operations were common (Zhang and Unschuld 2008, 1866). Therefore, the barefoot doctor program has actually “led to the marginalization of Chinese medicine” by “facilitating the entry of Western medicine into villages hitherto dominated by Chinese medicine through scientization, institutionalization and professionalization” (Fang 2012, 3).

However, in Can Xue's novel *Barefoot Doctor*, this extinct profession continues to attract young people. All barefoot doctors in the novel treat their patients with particular herbs and acupuncture; although they do deliver babies, instead of vaccinating villagers and improving the sanitation of their villages, they treat patients with cancer and mental problems with herbs and discuss with them the meaning of life and death when cure is impossible. So, this is, after all, Can Xue's surreal world, a world different from the real world of the barefoot doctor era. The image of the barefoot doctor in the novel is, therefore, the projection of an ideal “healer.”

*Barefoot Doctor* is regarded as Can Xue's “easiest-to-read” novel by Chinese critics. It has a clear plot: Mrs. Yi is a compassionate and devoted barefoot doctor in her 50s and is regarded as the patron saint of Yun Village. She lost her only child at the age of two. Since barefoot doctor is an “almost vanishing profession” and Mrs. Yi has no “heir,” she is constantly looking for a successor and has successfully got two: Gray, a “world-weary” (Can Xue 2022, 6) young man who likes herbs but does not like people (69), and Mia, a capable but insecure young woman from the neighboring Deserted Village. They are drawn to

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this profession first by Mrs. Yi's herb garden, then by her dedication and healing work. In the process of becoming barefoot doctors, they have to struggle constantly with their own weaknesses and have learned to appreciate what this profession has brought them. Two other barefoot doctors, Kay and Angelica, join in, and the cause is expanding.

However, the book is more intricate than this simple plot. This is a novel about dreams, about growth, about female power, about relationships, about harmony between man and nature, about the acceptance of death, and about the ideals of the healing profession. All is beautifully written in poetic language. Can Xue is confident that she is one of the few writers who can write fiction as poems: "I use uncanny narratives to condense poems into fiction, to tug on the readers' deepest heartstrings" (Can Xue 2017, 124).

Readers cannot help but be enthralled by this poetic world. It is a world in which sickness and herbs are lovers, where the living and the dead cross paths frequently, and dreams and reality intermingle. Plants, animals, and humans understand each other. Mrs. Yi regards herbs as her brothers and sisters. "She bred them, put them into the human body, and blessed them as mankind's best friends" (Can Xue 2022, 5). Gray works in Mrs. Yi's herb garden with passion, as if the herbs were his lovers (95), and wonders whether the herbs grow in the garden and on the mountains because they love people (75). Growing and picking herbs are ways for the barefoot doctors to understand their connection with nature, with their ancestors, and with their own identities. People understand and respect the love between the chicken and the weasel; they know the tortoise and wolf are the messengers of the mountains; and the snake loves the newborn baby so much that it moves in to live under the cradle to watch it (54).

In this poetic world, everybody is a natural philosopher. Patients such as Gray's father and Wang play games with their illnesses and overcome them or learn to live with them. Both healers and patients accept death with graceful calmness. They know when to stop. The barefoot doctors listen to their patients, empathize with them, and understand their stories. They go to great lengths to help their patients. For example, Mrs. Yi goes up the mountains and finds the mountain cypress "in the crevices of the earth in a stone cavern" (Can Xue 2022, 9), which is thought to be able to absorb Uncle Ma's ascetic fluid. Even though she cannot cure him, she is the person "he most admires" (11).

This novel is ideal for teaching, researching, and understanding the medical humanities and narrative medicine. As mentioned earlier, rather than depicting the actual work of actual barefoot doctors, it highlights the role of a genuine "healer," who has to deal sincerely with the four relationships in her medical career—relationships with patients, with self, with colleagues, and with the communities they live in (Charon 2006, 150–151).

The intricacies of the healer-patient relationships in the novel can be instructive to the understanding of caring for individuals in rural communities or from different cultures. A genuine healer is able to establish a trusting relationship with her patients through empathic attention to and representation of her patients' stories. In the process of becoming a mature healer, she frequently has to struggle with her own weaknesses and even her dark sides. With the support of other healers and inspiring role models in medicine, she finally identifies herself as a healer and finds satisfaction in her healing work. Finally, the barefoot doctors—or healers—are somewhat the conscience of their own communities. They bear the expectations, responsibilities, and burdens of their communities and are granted the privilege of shaping people's life stories with them. Through their work, their communities become better places to live in.

Unlike her other "dark" novels, Can Xue has created an idyllic world in this novel. Expect to feel hopeful, peaceful, and delightful after reading.

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