AT FIRST GLANCE, MEDICINE AND POISON MIGHT SEEM TO BE OPPOSITES. But in China’s formative era of pharmacy (200–800 CE), poisons were strategically deployed as healing agents to cure everything from chills to pains to epidemics. Healing with Poisons explores the ways physicians, religious devotees, court officials, and laypeople used powerful substances to both treat intractable illnesses and enhance life. It illustrates how the Chinese concept of du—a word carrying a core meaning of “potency”—led practitioners to devise a variety of techniques to transform dangerous poisons into efficacious medicines.

Recounting scandals and controversies involving poisons from the Era of Division to the early Tang period, Yan Liu considers how the concept of du was central to the ways people of medieval China perceived both their bodies and the body politic. Liu also examines a wide range of du-possessing minerals, plants, and animal products in classical Chinese pharmacy, including the highly poisonous herb aconite and the popular arsenic drug Five-Stone Powder. By recovering alternative modes of understanding wellness and the body’s interaction with potent medicines, this study cautions against arbitrary classifications and exemplifies the importance of paying attention to the technical, political, and cultural conditions in which substances become truly meaningful.

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“Beautifully written, this book makes a major contribution to Chinese medical history.” —MARTA HANSON, Johns Hopkins University

“Blows the lid off the myth that Chinese medicine is the opposite of Western medicine in every conceivable regard, showing that medieval Chinese doctors not only treated acute illnesses but also commonly used potent drugs, fully aware of the potential to damage the health of the body.” —MIRANDA BROWN, University of Michigan

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