The purpose of this book according to the opening sentences of its foreword is “to assess the place of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) in the context of the immense advances in scientific knowledge.” Its intended audience is defined as broadly sympathetic to Chinese medicine as a therapy but concerned about its lack of scientific grounding. Such readers are to be introduced to “the valuable relationship between TCM and modern medicine in recent decades” and reassured that a synthesis capable of integrating Chinese medicine into a science-based health care system may eventually be achieved. These introductory remarks make clear that this Comprehensive Guide is no disinterested survey but a text with a distinctive political agenda. It also can be read, therefore, as a historical document in its own right. The book’s editors and the majority of its seventeen contributors are overseas Chinese who work in academic institutions in Hong Kong, Australia, and the United States. Most appear to have a background in the natural sciences. As I will show in the course of this review, the book thus provides as much insight into the values and orientations that inform the culture of this group as it does on the subject they examine.

In its fourteen chapters the Comprehensive Guide seeks to provide an overview of everything that an interested lay person may wish to know about contemporary TCM and its scientific development. The first three chapters introduce readers to Chinese medicine as a distinctive medical system, with one chapter each on the “Intelligent Use of Chinese Medicine,” its diverse “Modalities,” and its “Theoretical Framework.” These chapters seek to present Chinese medicine as a coherent medical system in a style familiar from a multitude of similar introductory texts. No attempt is made to engage with the historical and contemporary diversity of Chinese medicine, clearly betraying the authors’ modernist ideological orientations.

Chapters 4 to 7 provide an overview of current research with two chapters each devoted to the therapeutic modalities of herbal medicine (“Problems and Challenges of Chinese Herbal Medicine,” “Biochemistry and Herbs”) and acupuncture (“How Does Acupuncture Work” and “More Theories about Acupuncture”). While these chapters provide useful summaries of current research they make no attempt to place such efforts into their cultural or historical contexts. The fact that only science can validate Chinese medicine is accepted as a given and not further questioned.
Chapters 8 to 10 analyse “The State of Chinese Medicine in China Today,” “The Globalization of Chinese Medicine” that has diffused its practice to more than 100 countries around the world, and “Practice and Research on Chinese Medicine Outside of China.” Once more, the emphasis is on the factual, while the construction of facts is not itself viewed as problematic. From this perspective the scientization of Chinese medicine appears to the authors not only desirable but also the inevitable consequence of the evolution of human consciousness. Analyses like the following passage from Chapter 9 (pp. 221-222) are typical of this view: “During the past century, Western medicine has made major advances in treatments for many human diseases. This rapid rise of Western medicine has been driven by many factors, including: The evolution of the dedicated scientific spirit that defines the essence of the inquisitive, inquiring need to know about the universe around us; … the enthusiastic support given by society and government to further our understanding of human biology …”

The next two chapters show the essential tension at the heart of the modernization project in which the authors are engaged. Chapter 11 (“Clinical Trials Using Chinese Medicine”) looks at the difficulties of validating Chinese medical practice through the paradigm of evidence based medicine. The authors broadly endorse the objectives of this paradigm but are aware, too, of the difficulties in using it to evaluate Chinese medicine. They seek to resolve these difficulties by means of a process perspective. Even if at present Chinese medicine is not evidence based, moving towards such practice should be seen by the wider scientific community as a commitment to shared principles. Chapter 12 (“Modernisation of Chinese Medicine: An Anthropologist’s View”) by Ting Hor is the only chapter written by a social scientist, an anthropologist with a background in biomedicine. Based in France, the author has developed an acute sensitivity for the cultural forces that drive the development of Chinese medicine in different contemporary societies. In China, Ting notes, Chinese medicine could not but modernize if it was to survive at all. In the West, on the other hand, it was the appeal to tradition that helped Chinese medicine to carve out a place for itself in an already thoroughly modern society. Ting Hor himself endorses modernization but also warns of its pitfalls: if carried through to its end traditional Chinese medicine will disappear. In the concluding paragraphs he places this warning into the context of his own life story: “The author was trained as a practitioner of Western medicine and has grown up in a Chinese society estranged from its tradition, he feels the need to express more respect for Chinese medicine and other traditional skills” (p. 323).

Chapter 13 is a matter-of-fact review of “Information Systems in Chinese Medicine” as a practical example of technological innovation. Chapter 14 (“The Future”) is a brief epilogue that envisages mainstream medicine as an integrated medical system that has assimilated Chinese medicine as one discipline among others. The authors unashamedly hanker after a totalitarian “system of genuine sharing [among specialties that] offers an unexemptable integrated treatment programme, rather than leaving the choice to patients” (p. 349). In this system,
so-called “pure practitioners of Chinese medicine” will be relegated to the fringes, their services only accessible via referral by gate-keeper experts.

In 350 pages the book thus provides a wealth of information in a style that avoids jargon and remains accessible to the non-specialist at all times. The quality of this information is mixed, however. It is strongest when the authors present facts in a descriptive manner. It is weakest when they analyze the social and historical processes that drive the transformations they describe. The bibliographies provide a hint as to the reasons. While authors have consulted a wide range of sources that present quantitative and descriptive data, their nonchalant disinterest in the historical and ethnographic literature on Chinese medicine even as they pronounce on complex issues like modernization is an inexcusable omission. The result is a curiously one-sided perspective that hides as much as it elucidates.

All of the authors unhesitatingly embrace the modernization of Chinese medicine, by which they mean its transformation by biomedical science and technology as well as the forces of a liberal market economy, as necessary and desirable. Phrases like “science and technology have demonstrated overwhelming successes in all directions of daily living” (p. 4), and “Of the four major systems of traditional medicine, viz. Chinese, Indian, Greek (European) and Egyptian, perhaps the most sophisticated one is the Chinese” (p. 5), point to the roots of this perspective in May Fourth nationalist scientism. Few of the contributors appear to be aware of this bias. The majority depict the historical development of Chinese medicine through the lense of a Darwinian evolutionist narrative in which social actors are deprived of any input, leading to the endorsement of scientific totalitarianism. The authors’ vision of Chinese medicine’s future thus is as predictable as it is dated. A “future new medicine” (p. 242; see also p. 349) will integrate Chinese medicine and biomedicine into a single system. The historically aware reader will hear echoes of Yu Yunxiu’s failed medical revolution of the 1920s, of the various other medical reform movements of the Republican period, of Mao Zedong’s attempts to fuse Western and Chinese medicine, and of the “new medicine” that was intended to emerge during the Cultural Revolution. This enduring vision may yet be realized—or it may continue to fail. For the moment, this book provides a unique insight into the enduring intellectual currents that drive the modernization of Chinese medicine within the overseas Chinese community.