An old disease, a new disease or something in between: evidence from China

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In a recent *Science and Society* article by A. Rosalie David and Michael R. Zimmerman (Cancer: an old disease, a new disease or something in between? *Nature Rev. Cancer* **10**, 728–733 (2010))¹, the evidence of cancer in the literature and palaeopathological specimens primarily from ancient Egyptian and Greek societies, as well as the evidence of cancer in fossilized animals and early humans, was discussed. Based on this evidence the authors proposed that cancer was rare in antiquity. However, this conclusion might need further verification as they neglected the literature and evidence from China.

Cancer in ancient China was first documented in oracles, written in about the fourteenth to the eleventh centuries BCE. In *Inner Canon of Yellow Emperor* (475–221 BCE)², the aetiology, pathology and symptoms of cancer were well documented, and it was proposed that tumorigenesis was associated with maladjustment, dietary factors, body deficiency and depression. *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* (before 221 BCE)³, recorded the medicines used for the treatment of cancer, such as seaweed and *Thallus Laminariae*, which is still used in China

today. Documented in *Jin Shu* (648 CE)⁴ is the first recorded exauresis (removal) of cancer.

It should be noted that infection with cancer-associated viral agents such as the Epstein–Barr virus and human papilloma-virus, for example, might also lead to an increase in the proportion of cancer mortality in modern societies.

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Competing interests statement

The authors declare no competing financial interests.