

UC Santa Cruz

Graduate Research Symposium 2018

Title

Hansen's Disease Patient's Body as an Arena of the Cold War: The Case of Korean Poet Han Ha-Wun

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3c03v5jb>

Author

Yoo, Ka-eul

Publication Date

2018-05-14

Data Availability

Associated data will be made available after this publication is published.

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Introduction

- ▶ **AIM:** Investigating how and why Hansen's disease patients' bodies came to represent ideological Cold War battlegrounds during the American Occupation (1945-48) in Korea
- ▶ **HOW:** Focusing on the movie *Litany of Hope* (1962)
 - ▷ Examining U.S. overseas Hansen's disease controlling policies
 - ▷ Comparing U.S. policies to Japanese imperialist practices in Korea

Key Concepts

- ▶ **Hansen's Disease (Leprosy)**
 - ▷ Norwegian physician Gerhard Armauer Hansen discovered leprosy in 1873, classifying it as "a mildly communicable and chronic bacterial disease caused by *Mycobacterium leprae*" (Moran 4) that could be cured easily.
- ▶ ***Litany of Hope* (1962)**
 - ▷ This film is directed by the United States Information Service (USIS) in Korea, which centers upon the biography of the poet Han Ha-Wun.
- ▶ **Han Ha-Wun (1920-1975)**
 - ▷ Influential Korean poet who had suffered from Hansen's disease, defected from North to South Korea, and had campaigned for Hansen's disease patients' rights in his old age.

The U.S. Imperial Policies on Hansen's Disease

- ▶ **Rediscovered Disease**
 - ▷ Owing to cross-immunity, Hansen's disease became hard to find in Western countries; however, it was a commonplace disease in the rest of the world, especially in tropical areas such as Asia, Africa, and the Pacific islands (R.S. Kim 569).
 - ▷ For example, the British "rediscovered" and paid special attention to Hansen's disease in India and the U.S. did so in Hawai'i in the 1870s and in the Philippines during the Spanish-American War.
- ▶ **Racialized Disease**
 - ▷ Western colonizers labeled Hansen's disease a "tropical disease" (Moran 27) or the "Asian disease" (R.S. Kim 569).
 - ▷ Used the political discourse of hygiene, the "unsanitary" colonized vs. the "hygienic" colonizer.
- ▶ **Connections to Communism**
 - ▷ Contagious
 - ▷ Foreign (un-American)
 - ▷ Criminality
 - ▷ Social Outcasts
 - ▷ Threat to the National Security



Hansen's Disease in Korean History

Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910)

- Treated Hansen's disease patients as objects of pity and sympathy
- Not severely isolated from the society
- In the late Joseon Dynasty, Hansen's disease patient was one of the main characters of the commoner's folk play



Japanese Colonial Era (1910-1945)

- Mandatory quarantine in "leper camps" on Sorok Island, opened in 1916
- Forced patients to live in a Japanese style building and adopt Japanese clothing and diet
- Control over space and time, forced labor, and castration or abortion resulted in more deaths



American Occupation (1945-1948)

- The U.S. military government in Korea established a policy that allowed for self-governance by patients on Sorok Island
- However, the quasi-expatriation continued
- Hansen's disease patients became a showcase of American democracy



Litany of Hope (1962) : Han Ha-Wun's Semi-biographical Film sans Han Ha-Wun

▶ Plot Summary

- ▷ *Litany of Hope* is a semi-biographical film of the poet Han Ha-Wun
- ▷ Based on Han's biography *Na ūi sŭlp' ū n pansaengi* (My Sorrowful Midlife Memoir, 1957).
- ▷ The film traces Han's life from his ordinary childhood in the countryside and the breakup with his girlfriend due to his disease, to the reunion with her after he had completely recovered from the disease, which was symbolized by his newly implanted eyebrows and reconstructed nose, which were made possible with the American doctor's help.

▶ Problems

- ▷ The film erases and distorts Han's personal, educational, and career background in order to emphasize on the typical images of "lepers."
- ▷ The film highlights the inferiority of Korea's primitive medical treatments and Japanese medicine.
- ▷ The film distorts his treatment records and exaggerates the effectiveness of the Western medicine.



"The Leper Prince" Han Ha-Wun and his Red Complex

▶ "Cultural Red Spy"

- ▷ Han's first book of poetry, *Han Ha-Wun Si'cho* (Han Ha-Wun's First Collection of Poems, 1949), was published with the help of an underground leftist, Byung-chul Lee.
- ▷ After the armistice in 1953 when the book went into its second printing, his past history with Lee earned him the title of a political spy from the North.
- ▷ Critics claimed that the second printing of Han's book is the "sign of attack by culture commies from the North" (Jeong 172).
- ▷ Critics doubted Han's existence by portraying him as a fictional character made up by Lee Byung-chul.
- ▷ Critics questioned Han's pen name Ha-Wun, which means a "wandering cloud."
- ▷ This incident was a result of the marginalization of both "lepers" and North Koreans (or "commies") in South Korea as key threats to national health and safety.



Conclusion

- ▶ *Litany of Hope* is not made only for educating the public, but for the United States as they exploit their imperial politics toward Korea through Hansen's disease patients' bodies.
- ▶ The United States exploited the rhetorical and social dynamics between Hansen's disease and Communism.
- ▶ The U.S. policy around Hansen's disease functioned as a form of biopolitical control and psychological warfare.
- ▶ **While presented as a humanitarian alternative to colonial Japan's strict quarantine policy, in reality the U.S. Hansen's disease controlling policy was just one element of the U.S. empire-building project in the Asia Pacific.**

- Jeong, Woo-Taek. "Lee Byung-Chul and the Meaning of the Case of Han Ha-Wun's Anthology (1953)." *Sanghur Hakbo - The Journal of Korean Modern Literature* 40 (2014.2): 147-184.
- Kim, Ryeo-sil. "The Cold War and Philanthropy: American and the Case of USIS Korea's Film *Litany of Hope*." *The Study of Modern Literature* 13.5 (2012): 565-596.
- Moran, Michelle. *Colonizing Leprosy: Imperialism and the Politics of Public Health in the United States*. North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press Chapel Hill Press, 2007.