

UC Berkeley

Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review

Title

Medicinal Meditations on Korean History and Society

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3tv4h82x>

Journal

Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review, 1(26)

Author

Nelson, Laura C.

Publication Date

2018-03-01

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

REVIEW ESSAY

Medicinal Meditations on Korean History and Society

Laura C. Nelson, University of California, Berkeley

Soyoung Suh. *Naming the Local: Medicine, Language, and Identity in Korea since the Fifteenth Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2017. 244 pp. \$40 (cloth).

Eunjung Kim. *Curative Violence: Rehabilitating Disability, Gender, and Sexuality in Modern Korea*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017. 312 pp. \$100 (cloth); \$26 (paper).

Through the concerted efforts of government policy makers, corporate strategists, and scientific researchers in recent decades, South Koreans have invested significant energy and resources in establishing a global reputation for technological and scientific achievement. This endeavor applies not just to the arena of engineering commercial products, such as automobiles, computer chips, and smart phones, but also particularly to the domain of medical technologies and services. South Korea is a popular international destination for biomedical tourism focused largely on cancer and cardiovascular treatments and an array of surgical procedures (yes, including cosmetic surgery), as well as for “wellness” tours emphasizing *hanbang*, or “traditional Korean medicine.” Domestically, South Koreans benefit from universal health insurance (established in 1989 and operating as a single-payer system since 2004), and—particularly for those living in a major city—plentiful, easily accessed, high-quality medical services. (For example, South Korea currently has almost three times the hospital bed capacity, normed for population size, as the United States and about an equal number of physicians per capita.) Indicators of improved health include the fact that younger South Koreans are, on the average, perceptibly taller than their parents and grandparents, and that life expectancy continues to lengthen.

Not long ago, however, Koreans were plagued with the probability of brief, hard lives, ill health, and high risk of injury. The recent achievements of the medical field in South Korea have consolidated institutional and cultural practices that have transformed society itself. This transformation has not escaped the notice of scholars: during the past few years, several excellent works have shed light on the history and impact of these processes. Todd Henry's *Assimilating Seoul: Japanese Rule and the Politics of Public Space in Colonial Korea, 1910–1945* (2016) examines, inter alia, the ideas of sanitation and hygiene in the contact zone of colonial Seoul.

Colonial encounters in medical and population control are also the topic of Theodore Jun Yoo's *The Politics of Gender in Colonial Korea: Education, Labor, and Health, 1910–1945* (2008) and *It's Madness: The Politics of Mental Health in Colonial Korea* (2016). John P. DiMoia focuses on the postwar transnational relationships undergirding the reframing of South Korean medicine in his *Reconstructing Bodies: Biomedicine, Health, and Nation-Building in South Korea since 1945* (2013). Additionally, over the last decade, the journal *East Asian Science, Technology and Society* has published a number of excellent English-language articles on various aspects of historical medical practice and society, including (in chronological order of the era of interest) Dongwon Shin's "How Commoners Became Consumers of Naturalistic Medicine in Korea, 1600–1800" (2010), Eun Jeong Ma's "The Medicine Cabinet: Korean Medicine under Dispute" (2010), Sonja Kim's "'Limiting Birth': Birth Control in Colonial Korea (1910–1945)" (2008), Eduardo Zachary Albrecht's "Embodying Progress: Aesthetic Surgery and Socioeconomic Change in South Korea" (2016), and So Yeon Leem and Jin Hee Park's "Rethinking Women and Their Bodies in the Age of Biotechnology: Feminist Commentaries on the Hwang Affair" (2008). It is also true that studies of science, technology, and medicine have yielded a fairly rich Korean-language bibliography in recent years, but to date only a small fraction of this scholarship has infiltrated English-language scholarship of Korean history and society.

The two excellent works on health and medicine in Korea under review here were published in 2017: Soyoung Suh's *Naming the Local: Medicine, Language, and Identity in Korea since the Fifteenth Century* and Eunjung Kim's *Curative Violence: Rehabilitating Disability, Gender, and Sexuality in Modern Korea*. The books are dissimilar in tone and approach, but each adds importantly to our understanding of how Korean ideas of embodiment have contributed to the development of Korean society and culture more broadly.

In *Naming the Local*, Suh's central argument is that, over the last five centuries, Korean physicians and scholars have thought through the medium of medicine to shape a field of "the local" that is at once distinct from the knowledge and practices of foreign origin but also productive of complicated considerations of purity, difference, and heterogeneity. In five chapters, Suh focuses on the tension between universalizing authoritative discourses of first Chinese—and later Japanese and "Western"—health and medicine and Korean physicians' assertions of the importance of the Korean local as distinct in environment, embodiment, expertise, and philosophy while also remarking on the artificiality of that distinction. Suh is interested not so much in the conclusions as in the processes of consideration. In the end, she writes, "It is not merely the unequivocal enthusiasm to name and thereby fix the pure ground of 'Koreanness' in medicine but the murmuring skepticism about the category of Koreanness itself over the centuries that this book has traced" (167).

Suh structures her book as an examination of five terms of medical distinction in historical Korea, each the focus of a chapter that moves forward in time: *hyangyak* (local botanicals); *tongŭi* (Eastern medicine); *Chosŏn* (embodied Korean ethnicity); *hwalmyŏngsu* (lifesaving water); and *hwabyŏng* (fire illness). Her goal is to identify, in each case, the impulse to give a vernacular name to the phenomenon in question, and to trace the effects of this naming. For example, her first chapter, on *hyangyak*, explores in historical detail Koryŏ- and Chosŏn-era scholarship on medicinal materials. Suh departs from conventional Korean accounts of early Korean medical knowledge that emphasize the distinctiveness of Korean medicine. She warns against anachronistic attribution of a recognition of or desire for Korean elite identity distinct from China's influence and instead documents significant trade and exchange of medicines, medical personnel, and ideas between the Koryŏ and Chosŏn Korean courts and Song, Yuan, and Ming China. She also takes note of the circulation of medical materials that travelers brought from Arabia and Japan. By situating Koryŏ and Chosŏn scholarship and medical practice within intercontinental circulations, Suh repositions writings on local botanicals not as an attempt to delineate national distinctiveness, but as an assertion of local confidence in the mastery of authoritative and widely circulated medical practices.

Subsequent chapters provide additional examples of this process. The second chapter considers *tongŭi*, a term coined by sixteenth-century Chosŏn physician and court official Hŏ Chun. As a scholar and clinician learned in Chinese medical knowledge, Hŏ dedicated himself to

the study of Korean medical practices and medicinal herbs. He argued that medical practices ought to take into account the specificity of local populations and their environment and advocated for the dissemination of knowledge of what he termed “Eastern medicine” (referring to Korea’s location in relation to China) distinct from the established Chinese practices of Northern medicine and Southern medicine. Suh notes, “The imagined East as an appropriate location for Chosŏn’s medical tradition legitimated elite physicians’ positionality in producing medical knowledge and practice” (8). Suh traces an extended discussion of “cold-damage disorders” from Hŏ Chun through late Chosŏn physician Yi Che-Ma to the Japanese colonial period (1910–1945), demonstrating how the identification of this diagnostic category was transformed from a cosmopolitan exercise of scholarship to a defense of national honor and distinctive local expertise in the context of Japanese threats to local Korean medical authority.

Suh also analyzes a debate during Japanese occupation over whether and how to represent “Chosŏn” Koreans as a racial type (and how to get around the problematic biometric association of poor health with racial weakness), the development and exploitation of local Korean identity by commercial interests in patent medicine in the context of colonial regulation on medications, and the dramatic growth of consciousness of a disease known as *hwabyŏng*, a psychological disorder associated with anger and oppression and specific to Koreans. For each of these examples, Suh takes care to draw in multiple approaches, considering technologies and situating discourses in the structural contexts of regulations and markets. Her discussions often emphasize the lack of consensus, focusing on messy trends and instabilities rather than definitive trajectories. Suh’s goal is to demonstrate a Korean intellectual predilection for “purity, separation, and clarity [which] simultaneously entailed interweaving, connections, and even confusion” (167) exhibited through the label “local” in medicinal texts and practices. She concludes, “This book has tried to capture the probing of questioning minds rather than definitive, assertive convictions” (167).

Suh’s approach is a refreshing take on the theme of how Koreans have developed and defended a sense of nationality, focused as much on the porousness of that conception as on its slippage into xenophobia. Yet although the introduction declares that “it is worthwhile to trace the Korean composition of indigenous medicine as a source of self-fashioning” (7), rather than *tracing* indigenous medicine, the volume illustrates this point through multiple examples. This structure produces a book that reads more like a collection of essays on a theme than a sustained

narrative argument. Moreover, at times it would have been helpful to offer an explanation of whether the examples were influential or merely indicative of a way of thinking. For example, after the extended discussion of the scholar Hō Chun, we are told that despite Hō's fame and stature, his major work *Standard Prescriptions* seems to have made little impact on Korean medicine and was not in great demand, constraining any generalizations one might draw from it. Similarly puzzling is what to make of the statement that only two medical texts published in Korea before 1900 use the phrase "Eastern medicine" (*tongŭi*) in their titles after Suh devotes several pages to a discussion of it. Lastly, given that the methodology of the book is largely philological, it is unfortunate that the book does not include *hangul* and Chinese characters alongside the transliteration for Korean terms. These criticisms notwithstanding, *Naming the Local* engages essential writings in the subdiscipline of the history of medicine and science, particularly writings that examine postcolonial positionality and "localization," to bring new insights into the ways "the supposedly particular nature of the body, soil, regimen, and medical lineage gained significance beyond the realm of medicine, thereby providing a source for conjuring the cultural and national identities of Korea" (4).

Eunjung Kim's *Curative Violence* shares Suh's interest in the intersections of scholarship, treatment, and meaning around health and medical practice, as well as the ways "health" and "medicine" become symbols through which other social and cultural issues are covertly disputed. Kim, however, engages more directly the interplay of concepts with social structures and cultural practices, directly confronting how eugenicist, ableist, and natalist discourses in colonial Korea and contemporary South Korea, often working through the practice of "cure," have produced interlinked systems of inequalities. Throughout this volume, Kim mobilizes a range of theoretical perspectives drawn from feminist, queer, and disability studies to closely analyze discourses and practices entwined around "health" and value. The book is a vivid examination of cultural encounters with disability in Korea, with the ultimate goal of making possible "life with disability without violence," which, she argues, "depends on...reimaginings of time and space that recognize and challenge the power relations that govern our bodies" (234). The materials Kim reviews (literary fiction, narrative and documentary film, journalism, and ethnographic encounters) demonstrate the historical connections of contemporary issues of ableism and patriarchy to precolonial, colonial, and developmentalist-period ideas and practices. She focuses on family shame regarding disability, as well as the pressure on women in a family

to sacrifice themselves to care for and cure those family members. In particular, Kim is able to show how sexuality, morality, and eugenics are invoked in convoluted packages, in configurations that change over time but result in consistently gendered, classed, and disabling effects. Her central project in the book is to reveal the ways “cure” often becomes a form of epistemological, as well as structural and physical, violence:

Curative violence occurs when cure is what actually frames the presence of disability as a problem and ends up destroying the subject in the curative process. ... The violence associated with cure exists at two levels: first, the violence of denying a place for disability and illness as different ways of living and, second, the physical and material violence against people with disabilities that are justified in the name of cure. (14)

Kim opens her book with a reference to the infamous cloning research of South Korean research scientist Hwang Woo Suk and its pre-scandal aspirations to eradicate all disability through patient-specific stem-cell therapy. She situates this promise within wider discourses of health and strength in modern Korea as personal desires and nationalist goals that are often articulated through particularly gendered idealizations of embodiment. Hwang’s research foundered during revelations that he had manipulated data, but those revelations followed charges that his laboratory had unethically secured the eggs used in the research from vulnerable female graduate students. Invoking Dr. Hwang’s research, Kim conjures up themes of eugenics and the pursuit of “cure” as situated within the human context of exploitation of bodies, particularly women’s bodies. This example establishes the book’s structure, which reveals how the ambition to cure is often entangled with sexuality, fertility, and feminized self-sacrifice in the name of caring.

Within the field of Korean studies, gender and sexuality have been key domains of analysis for several decades, but scholars of Korea have only recently become interested in how health, ableism, and disability are embedded in the social and cultural processes of difference-making. Kim’s contribution is unique in English-language Korean studies not just because she attends to issues of disability and ableism, but also because she deftly interweaves feminist and queer concerns into her inquiry into the political and cultural effects of disability in Korea. Moreover, in bringing a disability studies lens into the Korean context, Kim is careful to adopt a decolonial perspective that facilitates attention to the ways disability in South Korea is materially

and culturally distinct from elsewhere, in particular the relatively privileged locations of North America and Europe. For example, European and North American scholars and activists in the field often embrace an affirmative identity for disability and reject the idea of “cure.” However, Kim—along with Nirmala Erevelles (2011), whom she cites, among others—points out that when basic health is insecure and treatments are difficult or impossible to access, anti-ableism may take on forms that differ significantly from mainstream Euro-American-centric scholarship. Although she is informed by North American and European theories, Kim’s perspective is nuanced and is grounded in the work she has undertaken with disability activists in South Korea. Kim’s awareness of the inapplicability of universal disability studies claims allows her to analyze South Korean framing of disability as responsive to the local context.

The range of topics Kim examines span the early twentieth-century literary and film depictions of disability as standing metaphorically for Korea under Japanese colonial rule, policies and norms around enforced infertility for women (and their partners) with disabilities, the motivations apparently legitimizing violence (particularly gender-based and sexual violence) against people with disabilities, and the “problem” of sexuality for disabled people in South Korea. She devotes a chapter to how shifting practices associated with Hansen’s disease (leprosy) illuminate aspects of public health discourse and practice that have simultaneously become more effective and caring, yet reproduce the stigma of illness. Kim takes the time to describe her materials in detail, unearthing implicit and explicit meanings embedded in the content and the structure of the films, stories, and documents she examines. Her close readings show how—even within a narrative of increasing South Korean public awareness, “acceptance,” and accommodation of people with disabilities—policies and habits continually reframe disability, often through pity, as the Other of an ideal defined in the service of complex, intersectional hierarchical structures of authority, power, and value.

The insights of *Curative Violence* resonate beyond the field of Korean studies. Although the examples are specific to colonial and South Korea, Kim’s book demonstrates the intellectual value of placing ableism and differences in embodiment as central elements in understanding the complex resilience of social structures of inequality, within specific historical, political, and cultural contexts.

Taken together, and particularly situated in the context of related studies of science and medicine in Korea and the East Asian region, *Naming the Local* and *Curative Violence* illustrate

the productive power of ideas of health and wellness in the formation of Korean culture, society, and institutions. Medicine and medical care obviously are central elements of biopolitics, but the reach and complexity of their effects are often overlooked. Given the massive social and financial investments in health, it is no wonder that looking at South Korea through these lenses illuminates whole aspects of Korean society with new light.

Laura C. Nelson is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Gender and Women's Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. She is also on the editorial board of Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review.

References

- Albrecht, Eduardo Zachary. 2016. "Embodying Progress: Aesthetic Surgery and Socioeconomic Change in South Korea." *East Asian Science, Technology and Society* 10 (1): 29–49.
- DiMoia, John P. 2013. *Reconstructing Bodies: Biomedicine, Health, and Nation-Building in South Korea since 1945*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Erevelles, Nirmala. 2011. *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts: Enabling a Transformative Body Politics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Henry, Todd. 2016. *Assimilating Seoul: Japanese Rule and the Politics of Public Space in Colonial Korea, 1910–1945*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kim, Sonja. 2008. "'Limiting Birth': Birth Control in Colonial Korea (1910–1945)." *East Asian Science, Technology and Society* 2 (3): 335–359.
- Leem, So Yeon, and Jin Hee Park. 2008. "Rethinking Women and Their Bodies in the Age of Biotechnology: Feminist Commentaries on the Hwang Affair." *East Asian Science, Technology and Society* 2 (1): 9–26.
- Ma, Eun Jeong. 2010. "The Medicine Cabinet: Korean Medicine under Dispute." *East Asian Science, Technology and Society* 4 (3): 367–382.
- Shin, Dongwon. 2010. "How Commoners Became Consumers of Naturalistic Medicine in Korea, 1600–1800." *East Asian Science, Technology and Society* 4 (2): 275–301.
- Yoo, Theodore Jun. 2008. *The Politics of Gender in Colonial Korea: Education, Labor, and Health, 1910–1945*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . 2016. *It's Madness: The Politics of Mental Health in Colonial Korea*. Berkeley: University of California Press.