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Essay Review

Engaging with a genealogy of health: Biopolitics and Korean medicine

Curative Violence: Rehabilitating Disability, Gender, and Sexuality in Modern Korea, Eunjung Kim. Duke University Press, Raleigh NC (2017). 312 pp. Price \$ 94.95 cloth, ISBN: 978-0-8223-6277-7

Naming the Local: Medicine, Language, and Identity in Korea since the Fifteenth Century, Soyoung Suh. Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA (2017). 244 pp. Price \$ 39.95 hardcover, ISBN: 9780674976962

1. Introduction: interrogating categories

For many observers, the dominant impression of the two Koreas has been shaped by images deriving from the Korean War (1950–1953), whether of the material destruction, or of the human impact, especially as measured in terms of refugees and migrants. In turn, the conflict allowed “Free World” intervention on a mass scale, and a multilateral effort provided material and medical relief not only through the duration of the war, but also well into the 1960s, as South Korea continued its recovery. The challenge, however, is to penetrate beyond this set of framing images, which reflects a recent history, and a particular vision of the peninsula’s diverse set of medical traditions. Such a statement holds for much of East and Southeast Asia, moreover, where many national health systems accommodate multiple forms of healing—e.g. in China and/or Vietnam—sometimes uneasily, within a plural system of care. The two books under review here each confront this dilemma in different ways, but they share a common set of concerns, expressing dissatisfaction with an understanding of the body based upon a mid-twentieth century approach to Korean geopolitics. Together, they interrogate a cluster of categorical issues centering on treatment, especially in relation to the power to define one’s self concept or identity against the perceived restrictions of biomedical classification.

For Soyoung Suh, author of *Naming the Local*, the start point comes much earlier, dating to early Chōson (1392–1910) and the corresponding formation of a Korean medical canon distinct from that of the Ming (1368–1644). This approach is one deeply informed by area studies, especially the overlapping fields of Chinese studies, East Asian studies, and Korean studies, even as it engages with the more recent history of medicine in the later stages of the book, and issues a challenge to fixed terms. As Suh points out, the geographical and political circumstances of the Korean peninsula have linked it with dense layers of textual tradition—a range of Chinese sources, Japanese colonial documents, and the American/international presence—creating a problem for the narration of the story: “has the Korean articulation of local distinctiveness in medicine entailed a quest for epistemological equality?” (p. 5). The decision to work primarily with Korean sources, and particularly new and rare materials, certainly those receiving less exposure in the English-language scholarship, makes sense with this justification, seeking to let the sources speak to the historical accumulation. *Naming the Local* is a work arguing that Koreans have redefined, struggled with, and renegotiated the terms of their bodies, treatment, and lives, even while situated within a turbulent political history.

Placing her work within the discipline of transnational disability studies, Eunjung Kim critiques the recent biomedical legacy in a different fashion in *Curative Violence*, arguing that the “cure”—the impulse to place confidence in the ability of biomedicine to achieve a satisfactory result, thereby restoring the patient to a default or “normal” state—limits the scope of our understanding for a range of bodies, especially in terms of thinking about disability. Although Kim’s take is not strictly a history, and is motivated much more by a theoretically-driven intervention, her work clearly pushes back against the vast infusion of biomedical aid during and following the Korean War.¹ During this period, Korean bodies, many of them civilians, became part of an international economy of patients, joined by orphans and refugees, enrolled in the circulation of new treatment patterns driven by Cold War networks of medical practice.² For Kim, there is a disruptive violence associated with the curative impulse, and she seeks to reframe a number of categorical questions shaped by its aims. Opening her work with Hwang Woo Suk’s stem cell visions of the early 21st century, she points out that Dr. Hwang’s ambitious project continues to hold forth the prospect of a wheelchair-bound patient who may soon stand and walk, when in fact this hope might not be the best option available (p. 3).³

In fact, this image of a patient standing in increments, reaching an ambulatory state, before rejoining the family for a celebratory hug, comes from a South Korean stamp issued in 2005, at the height of Hwang’s brief international appeal. Post-colonial South Korea invested a great deal in its scientific infrastructure since the early 1960s, with this activity focused on the life sciences in particular since the late 1990s and the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis.⁴ For Kim, the problem lies not so much with these funding patterns, but with the epistemological frames they validate,

¹ Rusk (1972). See also Kim (2010) and Oh (2015) for the context of adoption.

² Hong (2015). *The National Medical Center in Korea* (1971).

³ Kim (2008). See also Leem and Park (2008).

⁴ See the forthcoming dissertation of Jaehwan Hyun, (UCLA), 2017.

effectively denying the status of a patient who deviates from any condition defined as the “norm” (pp. 4–5). This rhetorical gesture elides the very personhood, ambitions, and sexuality of an entire range of patients, and Kim seeks to provide advocacy on their behalf, re-opening a conversation about identity and debility.⁵ Similarly, Suh’s project, though distributed over a much wider range for its periodization, seeks to narrate the healing practices common to Koreans by examining highly specific moments when the local engaged with and reshaped its lexis, responding to intense regional and market pressures to define itself.

2. Resituating the local

Naming the Local opens with precisely this problem, the challenge of distinguishing a set of practices, “Eastern Medicine,” for a Chōson Korea embedded within a complicated geopolitics, essentially a Sino-centric world. If the work starts with Hō Chun, a famous sixteenth century Korean physician associated with the *Tōngui pogam*, Suh explains that her intent is explicitly not foundational, but rather, more exploratory, contingent, in its aims. Whereas the category of the “indigenous” tends to be identified with the nation-state, especially since the nineteenth century, this work seeks to track the “multiple origins of the indigenous and their connections with other localities over time” (p. 7). This awareness translates into a different project, one concerning the twin motives of making distinctions and self-fashioning, or identity, on behalf of multiple “Koreas,” potentially. Certainly Korean practitioners sought to craft their practice through the use of local botanicals, especially when plants known through Chinese texts were not available. However, this emphasis on creating a corpus of knowledge, and arguably a shared community for their use, should not be regarded as the formation of a static entity, that is, a fixed, trans-historical canon and along with it, an exclusive, professional body.

With this gesture, Suh pursues not a singular body of Korean “tradition,” but instead, a complex process of negotiation and bargaining, with this dynamic motivating a series of historical encounters with imperial—China, Japan; colonial—Japan; and post-colonial—United States—formations across roughly six centuries. That the first four chapters devote themselves to the predominance of East Asian powers, China and Japan, should not be surprising, given the former’s seminal influence in shaping literacy and cultural institutions, and the latter’s impact as a colonizer from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. At the same time, Suh restores her Korean actors to the center, meaning that the work is motivated less by an examination of the dense politics of medical exchange/encounter, and more by a desire to explore and recognize Korean agency in selecting from among the elements available. In this respect, questions of power are always present, but remain at a curious distance, as the main interest lies in exploring how selected elements have served as the focus of the debates shaping medical practice at particular points in time.

With this governing dynamic, Suh moves from her opening case of Hō Chun through a succession of five chapters, and it bears repeating that the challenge lies in a willingness to engage with “the aspirations and limitations of registering the local in the existing configuration of medicine” (p. 4). Explicitly set against “the contemporary nationalist framework” (pp. 3–4), *Naming the Local* uses the Korean case to consider the origins of a specific term within each chapter (in order: *Hyangyak* (materia medica), “East”/Tōngui (geography), Chōson (body), patent remedies or medical commodities, and *hwabyōng* (illness)), looking at how different groups have used naming practices—whether of objects or a specific relation—to position themselves “within wider networks of people, material entities, and traditions of medicine” (p. 7). In this respect, the “irresolvable dualism” (p. 9) at the work’s core touches not just on East Asian questions of identity and category formation, but extends the discussion to global questions of marginality and universalism, probing the viability of the humanist project since the mid-seventeenth century. This point is made clear with an analogy to the use of the vernacular versus Latin for botanicals, with corresponding tensions shaped by this linguistic choice.

With this last thread, it becomes clear that the work has a dual function, repositioning Korea within East Asia, certainly a worthy project in itself; but more importantly, directing the larger questions back to the academy. The introduction closes with a statement regarding a need to negotiate the naming of the object “in a particular linguistic form,” facing challenges from “the Chinese, Japanese, and North American authorities who had largely shaped the knowledge grid” (p. 10). The first of these three should be familiar from East Asian studies, but one senses that the core of the project lies with the last two (see Chapters Three and Four), bringing the legacy of Korean practice through Japanese colonization (1910–1945) and the present. These two chapters in particular along with Chapter Five possess some of the richest material, given the charged intersection with external forms of intervention. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Korean drug-sellers were making strategic use of a range of tropes appealing to the indigenous, pushing back against the challenge of a growing market and an influx of Japanese products (pp.105–106).

In a mini-study, encompassing Chapters Three and Four, we receive a thorough exploration of the term “Chōson” followed by the surrounding drug market, referencing the term’s contested usage by Korean practitioners and competing Japanese sellers, along with the accompanying debates about biomedicine and its role. The early twentieth century, leading up to the 1920s and 1930s, appears nuanced, dense, and wonderfully crowded with an eclectic set of actors, as evidenced from the discursive practices shown in advertisements. Other recent work, by scholars including Hoi-Eun Kim, Jin-kyung Park, and Tim Yang, offers a similarly complicated picture, indicating that there remains much to say.⁶ This is not to diminish the project of the final chapter, Chapter Five, and its move to the category of a culturally specific illness, *hwabyōng*.⁷ However, the most recent period, in documenting Korean agency, might also recognize that at least some of this exploratory work derives from contested interactions with external factors, with numerous scholars now recognizing the limitations of the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual), the central work responsible for naming and cataloguing “Western” categories of psychological disorders.⁸

In its overall project, *Naming the Local* stretches the notion of “Korean” to include a set of very different periods and polities, and presumably that is part of the point, as this work remains very much concerned with the making of specific language choices and the relation of this act to identity formation. Moreover, the aim is not fixed, but rather, an emphatic embrace of slippage, leakage, and recognition of the actors playing a contributing role in “destabilizing the linguistic and clinical grounds of the medical terminologies” (p. 164). This tension or play between movement, verging on free play, on the one hand, and a foundational impulse, on the other, runs through the five chapters. If the motivation behind the first impulse is rooted at least partly in Korea’s historical vulnerability, the politics of canon-formation requires further explication, as questions of power are hinted at frequently, but ultimately deferred.

⁵ Kim wants to explore the link between debility and related forms of marginalization within Korean culture, including sexuality. For Korea, see Henry (2017); and see also Han and Chun (2014). For the broader Sinophone context, see the work of Howard Chiang (UC Davis).

⁶ Kim (2013). See also Park (2017b) and Yang (2013).

⁷ Yoo (2016). Yum (2014).

⁸ Greenberg (2014).

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