



Reviews

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).

3. Contesting the cure: metaphor and cultural violence

Curative Violence takes a more confrontational approach than *Naming the Local*, quite deliberately so, as it deals with the conspicuous violence, often corporeal, mobilized around questions of disease, illness, and various forms of disability. Based in Women's and Gender Studies and Disability Studies at Syracuse University, Eunjung Kim blends cultural studies, historical references, and critical readings of key films and literary texts to explore discourse surrounding the body. If the violence referred to in the title is associated with the curative impulse, by implication, it is also a legacy of historical violence, one associated with the transition from colony to post-colonial nation. At points, Kim names specific referents to this violence, although more often, the narrative focuses on the social relations and institutions surrounding and defining the body: family, marriage, one's sexuality. With this approach, she analyzes the curative impulse as a “process through which the complicated moral relations between normality and the otherness of disability are produced and reconfigured” (p. 24).

As in Suh's case, this undertaking represents an extremely ambitious project, and Kim acknowledges this in her introduction, naming the cure as “largely tied to capitalist economic development, [which] emerged as the primary goal of post-colonial South Korea” (p. 4). With this claim, she narrows in on the techno-optimism associated with scientific research and investment in regenerative medicine, observing that this gesture holds both symbolic and material overtones: “the power to transform a physically disabled individual though biomedicine becomes part of the branding effort of the normalized ethno-nation-state” (p. 4). If this statement cites a recent impulse, Kim locates the project over a longer periodization, drawing from the colonial period and the post-colonial in the four chapters which follow. From this perspective, the problem lies not only with the limitations of biomedicine, but also with South Korea's developmental ambitions, that is, the desire to cure a domestic constituency, and also to be able to offer the same service in return, serving as a potential model and donor nation.⁹

This incisive style of critique calls for a combination of a historical and a theoretical underpinning, and the introduction proceeds to offer a condensed, but nonetheless, thorough account of key moments, motivated to link the construction of disability “with gender and otherness at specific times” (p. 31). With late Chōson and the transition to colonialism as the base, Kim draws upon Bruce Cumings, and the recurring metaphor of wounding or injury, with the nation taking on the burden of this uncomfortable metaphor. This is important because the theme of victimization is not the goal; and in fact, *Curative Violence* seeks to deconstruct the internal processes often obscured by the problematic colonization narrative. As Kim notes, “actual violence against disabled bodies within the nation” (p. 32) is elided, otherwise, regardless of whether the agent of this violence happens to be the colonial state, or still later, the post-colonial state. This second point is key as well, with Kim targeting the Park (1961–1979) and Chun (1981–1987) governments, among others, for their deployment of colonial rhetoric, and strategic mobilization of bodies to further their own developmental ambitions.

Kim shares this last concern with Suh, questioning the viability of the post-colonial state, or at the very least, the stability of its medical institutions and their claim to representativeness or universality. Whereas for Suh, this gesture refers to the colonial and wartime (1907/1951) institutionalization of Korean practice alongside biomedicine, Kim focuses in particular on the national registration system (1988) used to track those with disabilities, a problematic database from the perspective of many scholars and activists. This point is key, moreover, because it hints at the powerful eugenic impulse continuing to inform beliefs and practices about the body. The second chapter opens with precisely this theme, linking reproduction with tensions surrounding heredity, with this history of ideas heavily indebted to Taisho Japan and its colonial legacy. Further, Kim argues that these 1920s and 1930s debates directly influenced the codification of Korean reproduction regulations in the 1970s (1973), suggesting an uneasy continuity.¹⁰

The means of addressing this fascinating question is less historical, however, than discursive as Kim contextualizes the conjoined issues of marriage and heredity within a set of three colonial period short stories, constituting a unique hybrid of cultural history. With these texts, Korean mothers at different points in time receive pressure not to bear children with disabilities. Similarly, strong disapproval of marriage to a disabled person holds a lengthy history within the Korean context, and Kim addresses the two issues as a pair to explore the extent to which heredity/family becomes entangled with questions of the disabled body. Her approach proves powerful and convincing, drawing upon additional source materials through film and documentary in the post-colonial era. The argument suggests a reciprocal relationship between the undesirable, marginalized body, and the perceived norm, in the sense that the former's presence is needed to define or constitute the boundaries marking the two categories.

In Chapters Two and Three, Kim continues to develop new threads, straddling the colonial period to the present, and again, the choice of texts is based around clustered themes, rather than a structured, linear history. The gender under development proves fascinating, with Chapter Two invoking the notion of the proxy, someone who sacrifices or stands in for the disabled individual, often a close family member or a partner. The idea, at least from the perspective of this party, is that he/she can function as a surrogate for, and complete the disabled individual's life, thereby filling a lack. On the other side of this spectrum, Chapter Three investigates the violence surrounding disability, especially the forms of violence directed at or against members of the community. This violence is not confined to acts meant to harm, but equally, those acts presumably motivated by a restorative impulse, the desire to “cure” and bring the outlier body back within communal norms. The intertwining of these threads again suggests a blurring or overlap, as the proxy might easily engage in excessive or harmful forms of sacrifice, while in their mind, doing it for the benefit of another.

Chapter Four takes up a well-known case for the Korean context, Hansen's disease, perhaps better known as leprosy, and its treatment regime since the colonial period. This disease has been the subject of other scholarship for the East Asian region, and this is precisely why Kim chooses it for re-examination. Ironically, she claims, the perceived “success”—low rates of transmission, acceptance of former patients within the community—of the effort to treat the disease “maintains the stigma associated... to this day” (p. 40). Placing the history in conversation with several texts, she uses this as a counterfactual, a means of examining the alternatives for patients experiencing “livable conditions for life” (p. 40), without necessarily resorting to the cure. This chapter, in particular, proves extremely effective, as Hansen's and other colonial era problems often lead to a teleological historiography, one in which the present-day South Korean health system is mobilized as the logical remedy for addressing previous ills.

The final content chapter, Chapter Five, takes up the sexuality of the disabled, examining how it continues to be rendered as a “problem,” and equally, how the proposed solutions tend to reinforce expected norms for heteronormativity and being physical able. Kim notes that this has been the most recent of the developments to emerge, with surrogacy and other “outlets” appearing as alternatives since the 1980s. Again, the violence in the title here exists at two levels. In the “solution,” the violence attaches to the marginality, lower socio-economic status, and conditions of lack/

⁹ South Korea's aid policy, although officially associated with KOICA (the ROK's international aid agency), has its roots in the early 1960s. See Harrison and Ying (2017).

¹⁰ Park (2017a), pp. 1–20. For Japan, population, and eugenics, see Homei (2016) and Lee (2017). For work on demography in Korea, see Paul Chang (Sociology, Harvard) and Hyunjoon Park (Sociology U Penn).

deprivation surrounding such an arrangement, details which are then elided. At the same time, the goal or aspiration of expressing sexuality for the disabled serves to valorize the norm of a family and a heteronormative marriage, an extremely important social unit within the Korean context. Marginalized at two levels, the disabled individual and his/her would-be partner are stranded at the periphery. The history of the Korean family, especially since the transition from the extended to the nuclear ideal (1950s-1980s), holds enormous significance in this setting, supporting many of the ROK state's ambitious economic and labor schemes.¹¹

This last observation makes sense in the context of Kim's conclusion, which juxtaposes two images of a leprosy center, opening up a space for questioning existing representations of the "cure." Ultimately, *Curative Violence* advocates the possibility of "a life with disability without violence" (p. 234). However, such an ambition requires considerable work, she argues, and this motivates the close readings of the numerous film and literary texts. In spatial terms, the Korean family remains problematic if it permits only certain types of relationships, and embeds the disabled individual within these to forcibly elicit a return to able-bodied status. Similarly, Kim reads temporal understanding as a problem if it suggests only a linear progression, a change towards restoration and a constructed notion of physical completion. These tropes, moreover, stand in not only for the disabled and their relationship to the abled community within Korea, but also to the US-South Korea relationship, wherein the latter is understood as somehow lesser, injured, and requiring additional care, an offering made on behalf of the former.

4. Alternatives and contesting biomedicine

Although Suh and Kim have used very different approaches and sources, their works represent part of a growing trend in recent work on East Asia, urging an engagement with area studies-specific contexts and sources, and equally, new questions that challenge nation-centered accounts of healing, biomedical, and scientific knowledge. For Korea/South Korea specifically, there is a good deal of work covering from mid to late Chōson to the present; and in addition to the two works here, Kyung Hwang Moon's *Rationalizing Korea* (2016) and Theodore Jun Yoo's *It's All Madness* (2016) examine the late nineteenth and early twentieth century contexts, respectively looking at emerging bureaucratic forms of state practice and the engagement with academic psychiatry under Japanese colonialism.¹² The Science and Civilization project at Chonbuk National University (SCK) publishes volumes in Korean and English-language versions, devoting at least one volume to Eastern Medicine.¹³ Moreover, a recent edition of *Asian Medicine* co-edited by Tae-woo Kim and Yi-li Wu, focuses largely on Korean medicine, here looking at practice prior to, or coinciding with the initial stages of, the engagement with biomedicine.¹⁴ These and other works are increasingly grappling with a more complicated Korea, challenging an older, nationalist historiography.

Neither author seeks to reintegrate the elements of Korean medicine into a unified picture, so much as to subject them to new forms of inquiry, engaging in an act of disassembly. Kim, with her project of a medical practice that allows and accepts disability without seeking to remediate it, proves the more radical. In an explicit fashion, she calls not just for a re-envisioning of the medical community, but an entirely different South Korean society, one distinct from the hyper-capitalist form emerging out of the Korean War. Suh's project, with its conjoined emphasis on the temporal—long *durée*—and the lexical—contested vocabulary—does not necessarily offer a replacement, but rather, a major shift in orientation. The canon of medical practice is no longer the focus, and instead, process and debate move to the center, with local actors playing a participatory, generative role. If these two projects ultimately leave us with far more alternatives than ready answers, this should not be a problem, as this brand of scholarship represents a challenge to static, fixed accounts.

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¹¹ Bae (2012). See also Park (2017c).

¹² Moon (2015).

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¹⁴ Hanson (2016).