

Book Note

Imperatives of Care: Women and Medicine in Colonial Korea by Sonja Kim. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019. viii, 232 pp.

Bridging Korean Studies and the History of Medicine

Opening with a vignette from a newspaper, *Cheguk sinmun*, Sonja Kim's *Imperatives of Care* takes up a female candidate for medical education at the close of the nineteenth century mobilizing her circumstances within a public forum. As reported, the female applicant receives a denial from authorities in charge of the Government Medical School, but the newspaper's recounting of her ambitions praises the attempt, leaving space for further discussion (1). For Kim, this 1899 incident represents a small subset of a series of events within late Chosŏn-period Korea, offering a means of entry into a larger discussion. Not only were Koreans increasingly invested in questions of reform and modernity, broadly construed—indeed, the import of new technologies, ideas, and the corresponding role of print as a venue for their dissemination has informed a good deal of literature within Korean Studies—but also Korean women, specifically, played a prominent role in driving this activity. The perceived “special relationship” between arriving missionaries and the Koreans with whom they interacted therefore provides a personal dynamic to focus this set of questions, especially concerning emerging roles for women, whether in terms of domestic or professional opportunities.¹

1. Hyae-weol Choi and Margaret Jolly, eds., *Divine Domesticities: Christian Paradoxes in Asia and the Pacific* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2014).

By framing her set of questions in this fashion, Kim locates her Korean actors at the intersection of two major issues: improving the health of the population and the corresponding problem of enabling women to acquire new skills, thereby contributing to and participating actively in society. By addressing these issues as related, the ensuing text takes up the question of medical education in the Chosŏn and colonial periods, while also hinting ahead to the post-colonial legacy, especially for issues like family planning.² In a tightly contained four chapters, Kim narrates the initial foray into the domestic sciences and the increasing interest to follow, exploring growing professional opportunities within medical education and various fields: the female physician, the nurse, and the nascent field of gynecology. In conversation with the field of history of medicine/the body in Korea (Soyoung Suh, Theodore Jun Yoo, Jin-Kyung Park, Eunjung Kim), the volume equally engages with questions of modernity and colonial labor practices, in this respect, echoing some of the questions previously raised by Kyung Moon Hwang's *Rationalizing Korea*.

If Hwang's project concerns the Chosŏn state and the establishment of a fully functioning bureaucracy prior to the colonial counterpart, Kim's concern has less to do with reinforcing priority and more to do with placing gender in conversation with the question of medical modernity between the late nineteenth century and early to mid-1930s. This second question, effectively linking material and technical change, modernization, and Korean agency—the Taehan period has been a concern of historians for more than two decades now, especially at UCLA—allows Kim a forum through which to explore a rich, if consciously restrained, contribution, capturing the inner world of the first cohorts of Korean female medical professionals (midwives, nurses, and doctors), and the types of health problems they confronted most frequently.³ As noted previously, these actors often trained with missionaries, and this additional thread forms the second major historiographical tradition from which the volume derives, building especially upon the work of Hyaewoel Choi, among others.⁴

Collectively, these emerging groups of medical professionals found themselves

2. For Family Planning and the postwar in East Asia, see Aya Homei, "Between the West and Asia: 'Humanistic' Japanese Family Planning in the Cold War," *East Asian Science, Technology and Society* 10, no. 4 (2016): 445-467; and Chikako Takeshita, *The Global Biopolitics of the IUD: How Science Constructs Contraceptive Users and Women's Bodies* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

3. Dong-no Kim, John Duncan, and Do-hyung Kim, eds., *Reform and Modernity in the Taehan Empire* (Seoul: Jimoondang, 2006).

4. Hyaewoel Choi, *Gender and Mission Encounters in Korea* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

not simply in a dialogue, but embedded in a more complicated three-way relationship, which the volume characterizes in terms of “Korean nationalism, Japanese imperialism, and Christian mission evangelism” (10), thus setting up the prospect of oppositions, or at least, a diverse spectrum encompassing possibility and constraint. In other words, the expectations of gender permitted new conversations and professional opportunities through pedagogy, even as these same concerns also served to shape and bound women’s roles. By the 1930s, for example, the debates taking place over reproduction began to increasingly reflect a pro-natalist agenda, one linked to the imperial ambitions of expansion into northeast China. For Kim, this case represents neither celebration nor a cause for alarm, as the same space offers contrasting possibilities, here indicating a “basis for advocacy for women’s health concerns” (10).

Korean Women: Pedagogy and Professional Growth

The first of the content chapters, “Sanitizing Women and the Domestic Sciences,” approaches the question of changing roles through an examination of textbooks designed for the promotion of new kinds of moral and domestic pedagogy, including selections from the late Chosŏn and early colonial periods. In both cases, the central issues focus on intersecting conceptions of home and family, with an emphasis placed on the combined moral and hygienic expectations expected of individuals and space. *Wisaeng*, “The new sanitary and public health practices mobilized for nation-building purposes” (37), became linked as an expectation with regard to young women, included among their critical household duties. If the foundational work of Ruth Rogaski and others has placed this term in its current position with respect to ports and quarantine, here Kim crafts an ethical conception of *wisaeng* as a task associated with the home, one specifically crafted in terms of gendered expectations.⁵ In this role of guardian and caregiver, women prepared for the next change, the professionalization of their roles through new forms of medical work.

Chapter two approaches this issue, tracking the movement from midwife to the first female physicians, with this set of developments coming at a problematic time. With the arrival of colonialism, Japanese licensing systems sought to document and curtail the expression of Korean forms of practice, meaning that a diverse set of medical acts was translated through an external category. There

5. Ruth Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-Port China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Jeong-Ran Kim, “The Borderline of ‘Empire’: Japanese Maritime Quarantine in Busan c.1876–1910,” *Medical History* 57, no. 2 (2013): 226–248.

has already been a great deal written about this period (1897-1910, 1913) and its dense concentration of reform-related movements. Kim's point here is not to revisit these debates in terms of challenging the imposition of a theoretical framework, but more to understand how Korean practitioners, especially women, fit themselves within a hybrid system dominated by the colonial state. If the numbers were low, there was nonetheless a call for trained professionals able to address the needs of a female clientele, many of whom expressed discomfort with a male physician attending. Characterizing these circumstances as a "doubled-edged sword" (71), Kim notes the ambivalence felt by families of candidates fortunate enough to receive such training, along with the difficulty of gathering statistics for a largely male-dominated set of categories.

Chapter three captures the tensions of medical work in stark fashion, especially as nursing, or "the heavenly task" (78), saw its professional growth take place largely under colonialism, with accompanying restrictions and expectations. Framed as a moral mission, nursing—and the related work of the midwife—emerged as a category in the context of infant care and welfare, a necessary and vital task. At the same time, groups of Korean nurses and new professional societies found their work frequently challenged by the Government General in Korea (GGK), which sought to control these activities in the name of closer regulation. Indeed, as Kim points out, Japanese nurses, drawn from among the settler population, outnumbered their Korean counterparts for the entirety of the colonial period, for a wide variety of reasons. Moreover, missionary supervisors sometimes also enforced their own sense of hierarchy, meaning that nurses often found their work alternately valued and yet, equally, unrecognized. In these terms, Kim characterizes these professional and social relations as both collegial and tense, and points to the legacy beyond the 1930s.

Indeed, chapter four, or "Negotiating Gynecology," while marked in its brevity, holds some of the volume's richest material, especially regarding the pursuit of historical links across the divide of 1945. Here Kim starts with *puinbyōng* (women's ailments), characterized in terms of the reproductive cycle, especially menstruation and its associated symptoms. If a number of popular texts and even the pedagogy from the period tended to address this material in terms of pathology, Kim takes up the question of relief, as patients sought to mediate their pain through a variety of biomedical and herbal remedies. The chapter next turns to the question of population in the last section, considering the question of "limiting birth" in the language of the GGK's edicts emphasizing the "quality" of the population, thereby linking the issue to the eugenics debates of the 1920s and 1930s. Although the coming of warfare (1931) meant an emphasis on a pro-natal policy, Kim hints ahead to a post-1945 era when this

policy would change dramatically, with many of the same individuals taking up a prominent role within South Korean family planning, whether as private actors or as part of a national effort.

Moving Beyond Colonial Korea

In terms comparable to chapter four, the brief epilogue also holds significance, as it continues to emphasize the durability of the volume's central themes and questions—here including “quality,” eugenics, population, maternal care, and infant care—through a closing story of a maternity clinic opening in the late 1930s. Interestingly, there is the convergence of seemingly divergent forces, as the GGK now held an even greater interest in the care and welfare of its colonial population, especially with wartime contingencies. Kim remains careful to suggest the postwar as a possibility, while acknowledging that “one cannot argue for seamless continuity into the present regarding birth control or other reproductive practices” (137). As she notes, the political forces would be quite different with new leadership and the arrival of American and international interests associated with family planning. As she points out, though, the major point of continuity lies with state mobilization of reproduction, with women's roles being tightly circumscribed, tied to their roles as wives and mothers.

This last point, referring to the South Korean state and its problematic gender politics, a remark relevant to the present, suggests a narrative built around the nation-state, and that is how Kim has conceived this work, presumably intended primarily as a work of Korean Studies. Acknowledging those strengths, however, does not mean that it cannot be read as a regional, or even transnational, work, with obvious points of comparison to Republican China (both mainland and Taiwan) and Japan (imperial and the postwar LDP state). Certainly family planning holds significance for the entirety of South, Southeast, and East Asia, even as the individual polities possess very different trajectories and politics. The story of these Korean women and their pursuit of a diverse set of careers as health professionals has its origins in questions first generated within Korean Studies, but the implications for breaking boundaries and offering new stories and insights is what makes it an even more valuable addition to a growing literature.

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