

Bodies and Viruses: Biomedicalizing Hepatitis B in Shaping South Korea's Nationhood*

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Hepatitis B was a stigmatizing disease because of its reputation as a problem of underdeveloped countries and marginalized people. Biomedicine, including vaccination and science-based sanitation, was regarded as the only effective measure against it. Hence, some scholars have assumed that bodies and the disease were merely objects of biomedical intervention essential for nation-building. Challenging this assumption, I argue that Korean bodies and hepatitis were instrumental in forming biomedical and nationalistic discourses and exercises in South Korea during the 1970s and 1980s. In a developmental dictatorship situated within changing Cold War politics, hepatitis B and bodies, with their biological and cultural relations, contributed to shaping biomedical investigations, enterprises, and practices that were interpreted and appropriated with nationalistic metaphors. Therefore, hepatitis B, alongside those who carried it, came to evoke the contradictory imageries that symbolized both the progress and backwardness of the country.

Keywords: hepatitis B, nation, South Korea, biomedicine, bodies

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