

SOYOUNG SUH:

Naming the Local: Medicine, Language, and Identity in Korea since the Fifteenth Century.

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The connection between language and identity, broadly defined, is an intriguing topic with an immense scope, which has been approached by diverse research traditions. In the Korean context, the many connections between the Korean language and identity at different points in time (e.g. the creation of the Korean writing system in the fifteenth century, the vernacularization movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the language purification movements in both the ROK and DPRK from the mid-twentieth century) are undeniable. As a Koreanist and linguist, the promise of this work in addressing this topic explicitly is huge, however, upon reading it appears more appropriate to situate it in the field of medical history rather than linguistics. From that perspective, though, Soyoung Suh's achievement in collating large, varied collections of sources drawn from different eras and areas of East Asia that span five hundred years of medical history and cogently analysing them to provide thoughtful insights into the processes of interaction between what is characterized as ever-shifting, near-ineffable forms of Korean identity and traditional East Asian medical thought is both stimulating and informative.

The book is organized into seven chapters which are supplemented by a bibliography, index, and list of characters corresponding to words which appear Romanized from Chinese, Japanese, and Korean throughout the text. The meticulous referencing of primary and secondary sources which underpins each chapter is dealt with in endnotes, the consultation of which can disrupt the flow of reading, but is essential on occasion for clearly distinguishing the points made by the author in this work from those made by other researchers elsewhere.

The introduction identifies a central task of illuminating “an irresolvable dualism at heart of the Korean endeavour to define linguistic, geographical and cultural specificities as indispensable elements of medicine” (p. 10), which is explored in each main chapter through one item of medicalized vocabulary apiece, each of which is linked to a specific moment of medical innovation. Thus, each chapter explores a negotiation between Korean indigenous conceptual frameworks, their constant recreation and development, and multiple hegemonic, externally imposed systems of medical knowledge in different historical contexts.

The first chapter examines the characterization of *materia medica* in premodern Korea in premodern texts as *hyangyak* (local botanicals). It reveals how the term's scope fluctuated, being applied to herbs available in rather than exclusively native to the Korean peninsula. It further emphasizes the tensions between the Korean and Chinese languages, observing the continued preference of the latter for botanical nomenclature even as state support for the cultivation of *hyangyak* played a role in establishing a geocultural distinction between Korea and China.

Chapter 2 ranges from the mid-nineteenth to early-twentieth century. It demonstrates how the geographical and conceptual connotations of *tongjii* (Eastern medicine) evolved with Korea's changing circumstances. That is, from a school of medicine which advocated recognizing the authority of the medical sages of the

past while reacting to diseases and the demands of practising medicine particular to a place and time, to a field at odds with the introduction of biomedical thought and practice imposed by Japanese colonial authorities as a representative of the West. The focus on this purported main theme, though, is overshadowed in this chapter by discussion of ‘cold damage disorders’, which is noted in the acknowledgements to have been the original topic for the paper upon which this chapter is based.

Colonial-era Korea (1910–45) is the setting for chapter 3, which dissects the use of the term *Chosŏn* (Korea(n)) in medical and biometric discourse, initially by Japanese researchers emphasizing *Chosŏn* distinctiveness, then more widely as it came to be used by researchers without this agenda. It expands on the conflict between traditional medicine and the biomedicine introduced to Korea during this period.

In contrast to the focus on the relationship between identity and the production of medical knowledge of the preceding chapters, the fourth moves on to the production, advertisement, and consumption of biomedical commodities, most especially patent medicines such as *hwalmŏngsu* (life-saving water), in the early twentieth century as a means of both depicting and performing Korean identity as well as conflating it with individuals’ commercial identities.

The final main chapter raises several issues related to the psychological condition *hwabyŏng* (fire illness) in contemporary Korea, supposed to be connected to the pathological manifestation of the culture-specific Korean emotion *han* (deep melancholy resentment). In addition to its etiology, its universalisation through modern psychiatric discourse and practice, along with the attendant tension between the global and the local, and the difficulty of reconciling medical and vernacular language in its diagnosis and treatment are touched upon.

The brief epilogue not only reviews the preceding content, but contains some of the stronger linguistic claims to appear in the book. Most notably, it asserts that specialist medical vocabulary is inherently transitory, and that this instability was exacerbated by “the inferior status of the Korean vernacular among the elites” (p. 165). These statements are presented unequivocally as temporally and situationally invariant, but would have benefited from the more nuanced treatment which characterize many of the book’s contentions.

Four of the five main chapters have appeared separately elsewhere, and they read well autonomously; context is provided at their onset by historical narrative vignettes before progressing to more theoretically rigorous discussions, themselves divided into well-delineated subsections presenting neatly self-contained arguments. As a result, a slight lack of cohesion may be felt between the chapters, although the chronological structure and the arguments advanced in the introduction and conclusion draw the reader’s attention to the themes which the five main chapters do share, such as medical indigenization and the contingent nature of the field’s terminology. Taken together and given the knowledge assumed on the part of the readership, this book is most suited to specialists in medical history with an areal interest, although it remains approachable by anyone with a general background in East Asian studies.

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