

BOOK REVIEW

John P. Dimoia, *Reconstructing Bodies: Biomedicine, Health, and Nation-building in South Korea since 1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013)

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It is a delight to encounter new books on the history of medicine in Korea by a foreign scholar. John P. Dimoia's book is particularly welcome given the scarcity of scholarly work on the topic, even within the Korean academic community. The book covers the period from the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK, 1945-1948) to the emergence of plastic surgery in contemporary Korea. At first sight, the breadth of topics covered in the book was a source of concern. However, the author cleverly weaves the diverse subjects along the axes of the transfer of biomedical technology, nation-building, and reconstruction of the body. Furthermore, these subjects are presented against the backdrop of the emergence of "invasive" technologies in South Korea.

A scholar with a traditional perspective on the history of medicine would not be able to comprehend how the subjects covered in the book, from anti-parasite campaign to plastic surgery, could result in a coherent narrative. From the traditional, or big history, approach, these subjects have distinct characteristics: anti-parasite campaign appears to be an old nostalgic memory of the nation's development; in contrast, plastic surgery is a social illness created by contemporary medicine. However, the author manages to link these subjects through an active acceptance of hybrid technology along with the desire for development and renovation, rather than focusing on their apparent differences.

In *Reconstructing Bodies*, the author selects six sites to make his argument. The first site is the "fragmented" character of the Korean medical community after World War II, which included both biomedical and traditional practices. Second, he focuses on the disease prevention activities of the USAMGIK, including mass inoculation and DDT spraying, in response to the devastated circumstances perceived by the military authorities. Third is the Minnesota Project (1954-1962), an emergent model for modernizing local hospitals through American and international aid, which led to the making of the Korean body as an object of biomedical research. Fourth is family planning, which mobilized the state with new and aggres-

sive technologies, such as birth control devices, and promoted a revised conception of the family and reproductive behaviors under the Park Chung Hee regime. Fifth is the national anti-parasite campaign that enforced thousands of children in the public school system to submit their stool samples for scientific examination. The sixth and final site is the aesthetic and plastic surgery in contemporary Korea, which shows the recent transformation of biomedical practice within the broader historical context.

The strength of the book lies in its unique perspective, which allows the construction of a consistent narrative of the broad field of Korean medicine after 1945. In this research field, the conventional approach was to focus on the remarkable development and expansion of medicine, highlighting the roles of key Korean medical scholars who served as founding fathers. The myth that Korean medicine developed rapidly from the disastrous condition after the war is at the core of the historiography of modern medicine in Korea. Any attempt to counter this central myth would have led to such contradictions as “compressed growth” with the concomitant side effects. However, *Reconstructing Bodies* shows that there can be an alternative to the dichotomy of development and anti-development. While this book does not deny the dramatic development of Korean medicine during the last seven decades, it also focuses on the transformative process of biomedical technology within specific socio-political conditions and the relationship between the subject/bodies and the nation-building ideology. The author explores the experience of the bodies in Korea by tracing the “transfer” rather than the “development” of medicine.

The author makes his argument based on deliberately selected materials for each site. In analyzing each site of inquiry, he chooses the items that show the comprehensive aspects of the site and explores the case at the micro-level. For example, to describe the Minnesota Project, he closely follows Dr. Lee Young-Gyun’s activities and reveals the transformation and transplantation of Western medical knowledge such as heart surgery in Korea through the lens of Dr. Lee. Each description of the site begins with a brief summary and moves toward more detailed descriptions of specific items. To make this item-based approach stronger, the author covers an extensive array of Korean and English sources and uses them thoroughly. In short, the prominent advantage of the book is the meticulous arrangement of the sources that strengthen its item-based approach.

However, arguments on the “sites” seem to be slightly weak in contrast to the strong arguments on the “items,” which are corroborated by plentiful resources. Occasionally, the descriptions of the sites are not based on historical resources. For example, in making the argument on the material basis of the development of medicine, the author explains that biomedical research and autopsy increased in the postwar period. However, autopsy cases in hospitals grew at a much slower rate than the general development of medicine. Moreover, the statistics on autopsy has been excluded from hospital statistics after the 1980s, during which hospitals became for-profit entities. Therefore, further explanation on the distortion of biomed-

ical knowledge and practice within the context of commercialized medicine in Korea would make a more balanced narrative with the distortion under the nation-building ideology. This would have made Chapter 6 (“Reconstructing the Face”) more convincing.

Despite some weaknesses, *Reconstructing Bodies* adds much to the historiography of modern medicine in Korea. Studying the history of Korean medicine between 1945 and the 1960s is difficult largely due to the lack of reliable sources, a difficulty that this book also reflects. Nevertheless, the author manages to unearth an impressive array of resources on the topic. Also, the book provides a useful perspective, other than developmentalism, to analyze the field. The author’s perspective is surely not the only way to analyze the many scenes in the history of Korean medicine in the post-liberation era. However, I hope that new lines of research will emerge based on the richness and uniqueness of this book.