

## BOOK REVIEW

Jaehyung Kim, et al. 김재형 외, ***Eugenics Within Us: Qualification, Disqualification, and the History of Discrimination and Exclusion*** 우리안의 우생학: 적격과 부적격, 그 차별과 배제의 역사 (Seoul: Dolbegae, 2024), 320 pp.

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*Why has eugenics—once notoriously associated with the Nazi genocide—continued to be adopted in many parts of the world, including Korea? What does the genealogy of eugenic thought and policy reveal about Korea’s modern and contemporary history? And how has eugenics shaped the political, economic, intellectual, and cultural landscape of Korean society?*

*Eugenics Within Us: Qualification, Disqualification, and the History of Discrimination and Exclusion* (hereafter *Eugenics Within Us*) is an edited volume that addresses these questions within Korea’s shifting historical contexts. Eight authors contribute distinct but interconnected chapters, making this book an interdisciplinary endeavor grounded in Science and Technology Studies (STS), Korean history, gender studies, and disability studies. It also spans a genealogical arc from racial science under colonial rule to contemporary assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs). Given the limited scholarly work on the history of eugenics in Korea, this volume is a much-anticipated and timely contribution that compels readers to reassess both eugenics and Korean history.

Recent years have seen collaborative scholarship on eugenics in global contexts.<sup>1</sup> These projects typically pursue transnational or comparative histories, tracing how

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<sup>1</sup> The comparable examples of scholarly volumes on the history of eugenics include: Mark B. Adams, ed. *The Wellborn Science: Eugenics in Germany, France, Brazil, and Russia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Yonemoto Shōhei et al., *Yūseigaku to ningen shakai: seimei kagaku no seiki wa doko e mukau no ka* [Eugenics and Human Society: Where Is the Century of Life Sciences Headed?] (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2000); Nils Roll-Hansen and Gunnar Broberg, *Eugenics and the Welfare State: Sterilization Policy in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2005); and Alison Bashford, and Philippa Levine.

eugenic ideas have evolved—from early sterilization campaigns to present-day genetic and reproductive technologies. Their shared aim is to move beyond reductive associations of eugenics with Nazi atrocities, and to illuminate, in Diane B. Paul's terms, its “protean” character:<sup>2</sup> its versatile roles across political, academic, bureaucratic, and cultural domains. *Eugenics Within Us* joins this global conversation by offering a comprehensive account of eugenic ideas, policies, research, and technologies in Korea, revealing how they have intersected with colonialism, nationalism, welfare regimes, racism, feminism, scientific rationalism, and ableism. Though focused primarily on Korea—especially South Korea after 1945—the volume makes a vital contribution to the transnational historiography of eugenics, particularly given Korea's relative marginality in global narratives.<sup>3</sup>

The volume is organized thematically into three parts: First, “Aspiration for National Reform” explores the formation of eugenic discourses in conjunction with nationalism and feminism; second, “In the Name of Science and the State” investigates how eugenic thinking shaped legal frameworks, medical practices, and policy initiatives in postcolonial South Korea; and third, “Those Isolated and Excluded” examines the exclusionary and violent logic of eugenics through case studies of segregated and sterilized populations, including Hansen's disease patients, interracial children, and women with mental illness. These themes effectively challenge the conventional view of eugenics as merely an anti-scientific or pseudo-scientific project aimed at eliminating certain racialized groups. Instead, they reveal a wide array of stakeholders involved in eugenic ideas, policies, and cultures—including the state, scientists and researchers, bureaucrats and policymakers, activists, and even individual citizens who share in the practice of categorizing and hierarchizing bodies. By examining eugenics in this expansive sense, the volume convincingly illuminates it as a set of evolving ideas and practices that have persistently legitimized and normalized the systemic discrimination of certain bodies.

Under these three themes, each contributor examines a specific topic that engages with both transnational and localized narratives of eugenics. In Part 1, Chapter 1 by Jiyoung Park and Chapter 2 by Youngah Lee focus on the emergence of eugenics in Korea under Japanese colonial rule. Park explores the convergence of nationalism

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*The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics* (Oxford, Oxon, England; Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Diane B. Paul, *Controlling Human Heredity: 1865 to the Present* (Amherst: Humanity Books, 1998), 3.

<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that a few English-language works on the history of eugenics in the Korean context have recently been published. These include: Sonja Kim, “‘Limiting Birth’: Birth Control in Colonial Korea (1910–1945),” *East Asian Science, Technology and Society: An International Journal* 2, no. 3 (2008): 335–59; Eunjung Kim, *Curative Violence: Rehabilitating Disability, Gender, and Sexuality in Modern Korea* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017) and Inga Kim Diederich, “Blood of the Nation: Medical Eugenics, Bio-Nationalism, and Identity Formation in Cold War South Korea,” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, 2021).

and eugenic thought, as manifested in the theory of national reform (민족개조론), while Lee exposes an inconvenient truth: the entanglement of feminism, birth control advocacy, and eugenics in colonial Korea.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 in Part 2 address the enduring influence of eugenic thinking in the postcolonial social context. Chapter 3, by Jaehwan Hyun, examines how South Korean scientists and medical professionals legitimized national eugenics (민족우생) as a scientific field between the 1940s and 1960s. Chapter 4, by Hyunsuk So, investigates the forced sterilization and eugenic abortion of people with disabilities under the 1973 Mother and Child Health Act (모자보건법), which aimed to improve population quality. Chapter 5, by Eun Kyung Choi, traces the development of prenatal screening and diagnostic technologies from the 1970s to the 1990s, highlighting how these technologies fueled rising eugenic fears surrounding birth defects and genetic conditions within Korean society.

Finally, Chapters 6, 7, and 8 in Part 3 examine various confinement facilities established to segregate and incarcerate populations deemed eugenically “unfit.” Chapter 6, by Jaehyung Kim, explores the racist and eugenic ideologies that underpinned the segregation and sterilization of Hansen’s disease patients in both colonial and postcolonial Korea. Chapter 7, by Byung Woong Min, analyzes how the intersection of eugenic ideology, Cold War geopolitics, and (anti)racism helped legitimize and institutionalize the international adoption of “mixed-race children” (혼혈아) during the 1950s and 1960s. The final chapter, by Jisung Hwang, charts the rise of women’s custodial asylums—facilities nominally framed as therapeutic but in practice functioning as carceral institutions for women with mental illnesses since the 1960s. Together, these final three chapters reveal how violence against “unfit” bodies became normalized, justified in the name of protecting the well-being and security of the “fit” population.

While each article has its own strengths and merits, a few overarching themes across the volume deserve attention. First, *Eugenics Within Us* sheds new light on both modern Korean history and the history of eugenics by reexamining the former through the lens of eugenic ideas and practices, and by exploring the localized deployment of eugenics within Korea’s political, economic, intellectual, cultural, and technological contexts. Notably, the influence of Japanese colonial institutions, eugenic and racial policies, and scientific and medical knowledge (e.g., the Department of Hygiene and Preventive Medicine at Gyeongseong/Keijō Imperial University, as discussed in Chapter 1), as well as the role of U.S. neocolonial institutions and Cold War-era knowledge production (e.g., U.S. military psychiatry’s impact on Korean military and civilian psychiatry during and after the Korean War, as seen in Chapter 8), are key factors shaping Korea’s domestic experiences with eugenics. By attending to both the broader political landscapes of colonial and postcolonial Korea and the specific disciplinary and individual networks operating within them, the volume brings overdue attention to underrepresented narratives in the history of eugenics in modern and contemporary Korea.

Second, the volume critically highlights the systemic violence inflicted on the so-called “unfit” or “inferior” populations in Korean society. In particular, the three chapters in Part 3 center on individuals who have been segregated, discriminated against, and stripped of their reproductive and civil rights—including Hansen’s disease patients, mixed-race children, and women with mental illnesses. As the authors argue, these individuals were not merely passive victims of state violence; rather, they were subjected to surveillance and confinement by multiple stakeholders who shared eugenic and racial logics justifying the elimination of the “unfit” for the sake of national welfare, security, and development. Among these stakeholders, scientific and medical researchers played pivotal roles—objectifying the “unfit” as raw data for “scientific” inquiry and legitimizing medical, legal, and governmental instruments of negative eugenics.<sup>4</sup> These chapters collectively challenge the presumed neutrality of scientific knowledge by exposing its entanglement with systems of population control and discrimination.

Lastly, as the book’s title suggests, *Eugenics Within Us* addresses a fundamental question: *how has eugenics become deeply embedded in Korean society?* Contrary to conventional views that treat eugenics as a historical aberration, the authors redefine eugenics as an enduring mechanism of categorizing the fit and unfit—and eliminating the latter from society. With this broader conceptualization, the volume highlights the ways various sectors of Korean society have perpetuated eugenic ideologies, sustaining their relevance and utility well into the late twentieth century and beyond. As Chapter 5 reminds us, even seemingly personal choices—such as prenatal screening motivated by fear of birth defects—may be shaped by lingering eugenic assumptions. By tracing the genealogy of eugenics, rather than simply demonizing specific events or actors, the volume invites readers to reflect critically on their own complicity in eugenic thinking.

Despite the many strengths and critical insights that *Eugenics Within Us* offers, the volume is not without limitations. Three areas are particularly worth highlighting. First, the volume could benefit from further clarification of key terms within their historical contexts—especially terms that are often conflated, such as eugenics (우생학), race hygiene (민족 위생), and national eugenics (민족 우생). For readers unfamiliar with the varied modalities of eugenic movements across regional contexts, the volume would be enriched by further contextualizing “national eugenics,” the

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<sup>4</sup> Negative eugenics refers to various practices and ideas aimed at reducing or eliminating reproduction among populations deemed to possess “undesirable” traits. Historically, the means of negative eugenics have included forced or coerced sterilization, marriage restrictions, selective abortion, and, in extreme cases, genocide. In contrast, positive eugenics seeks to encourage reproduction among those believed to possess “desirable” traits. In practice, the distinction between positive and negative eugenics has often been blurred, as both have frequently coexisted in efforts to promote racial or population “betterment.” For varieties of eugenics, see Philippa Levine, *Eugenics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 6–8.

term preferred by Korean eugenicists (e.g., the Korean National Eugenics Association [한국 민족 우생 협회], founded in 1946, as discussed in Chapter 3), in contrast with more universal terms like *eugenics* and *race hygiene*.<sup>5</sup> Such clarification would help to delineate both the general contours and specific characteristics of the eugenics movement within Korean history.

This leads to the second point: the potential for more comparative approaches. Situating Korea's eugenics history within transnational or cross-border frameworks could more clearly illuminate its place within global eugenics discourse. Given the international dimensions of population control initiatives, sterilization and abortion policies, and medical and genetic research, the volume could expand its scope to trace the global circulation and localization of eugenic ideas, laws, and popular movements. Such an approach would allow readers to situate Korea's history of eugenics within broader political, institutional, and intellectual movements, extending beyond the dominant frameworks of the Japanese colonial empire and U.S. neocolonial influence.

The third point concerns the tension between the historical fluidity of eugenics and the need for conceptual clarity. In other words, the volume could more clearly articulate the boundaries of what constitutes eugenics, given that its practices have historically spanned numerous disciplines, institutions, and cultural and political campaigns. While one of the volume's great strengths is its critique of the reductive association between eugenics and the Nazi genocide, its expansive definition of eugenics risks diluting the term's analytical precision. A more clearly defined conceptual framework—acknowledging eugenics as a political and scientific project fundamentally concerned with controlling the quality of populations—could enhance the reader's ability to track its protean manifestations, whether overt or subtle, institutional or personal, authoritarian or liberal-democratic.

That said, these areas should not be viewed as shortcomings, but rather as generative directions for future scholarship on the history of eugenics in Korea. *Eugenics Within Us* makes a significant contribution to an understudied field by fostering a critical dialogue between modern and contemporary Korean history and the broader history of eugenics. The eight contributors' use of rich primary sources and their critical engagement with the evolving meanings and practices of eugenics not only enhance our understanding of Korea's past but also pave the way for future studies

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<sup>5</sup> While the term *eugenics*, originally coined by Victorian polymath Francis Galton in 1883, gained wide currency in Anglo-American contexts throughout the 20th century, the notion of *race hygiene* (*Rassenhygiene*) originated in late 19th-century Germany and was introduced by biologist Alfred Ploetz. The difference between these two concepts is not merely linguistic. As Mark Adams notes, eugenics has functioned as an international movement that evolved into various national or regional variants. Therefore, drawing a simple distinction between Anglo-American eugenics and German race hygiene fails to capture the complexity and diversity of global eugenic movements. Mark B. Adams, "Eugenics in the History of Science," In *The Wellborn Science*, 3–7.

on the local specificities and global entanglements of eugenics in Korea and beyond. It goes without saying that this is a bold and much-needed volume, and a vital addition to the ongoing reckoning with the legacies of eugenics.