
It has been a long time since a volume examining medicine and health in Southeast Asia as a whole has been published. This is thus a long-awaited and welcome volume that deals with new and relatively unexplored issues for this region. This collection draws together papers presented at the first International Conference on the History of Medicine in Southeast Asia (HOMEOSEA) held in Siem Reap, Cambodia, in 2006. The editors, Laurence Monnais and Harold Cook, explain that the chapters were chosen for their relevance to ‘the development of modern medicine in non-Western countries’ (p. xii), a topic raised by Hormoz Ebrahimnejad, and ‘the politics of health in Southeast Asia’ (p. xii). They divide the volume into three parts, ‘global health and transnational healthcare initiatives since the early nineteenth century’, ‘the processes of negotiation and appropriation of the biomedical model’, and ‘the construction of national politics of modern health’ (pp. xii-xiii).

Thomas B. Colvin’s chapter focuses on the early vaccination campaign in the Philippines, the *Real Expedicion de la Vacuna*, led by the Spanish king’s court doctor, Francisco Xaxier Balmis, between 1803 and 1807. Colvin’s research sheds new light on the Expedition, showing that there was considerable local cooperation, especially from the influential church, in the propagation of vaccination, as well as tensions between the metropole’s imperial personnel and jealous colonial administrators who participated in the Expedition. While Colvin’s fascinating narrative demonstrates the Expedition’s success in arm-to-arm vaccination, it is unclear whether the Expedition faced problems from arm-to-arm operations, such as secondary infection among the children, which was a serious issue in British India.

C. Michele Thompson examines the Nguyen court’s own initiatives in obtaining effective vaccinia that led to the first successful vaccination in Vietnam in 1821, long before the onset of French colonization. At least one other indigenous court in the region, that of the Konbaung Dynasty in Burma, requested Western doctors to perform vaccination on the royal children before British colonization. Nevertheless, as Thompson stresses, the Nguyen court’s substantial efforts to acquire effective vaccinia and its sponsorship of a vaccination clinic stands out as an unusually determined
endeavor. As the editors mention, while most examinations of the introduction of vaccination focus on those of the colonial period, Thompson’s chapter locates the critical period before colonization but after the beginning of the process of knowledge exchange between the Europeans and the indigenous court. Thus, this chapter raises important questions regarding how Western medical knowledge circulated through the region before colonialism, and in doing so, this chapter conversely encourages a return to the larger question posed by Shula Marks, ‘What is colonial about colonial medicine?’

The next two chapters situate themselves in the early twentieth century when the international charitable/philanthropic organizations concerned with world health, such as the League of Nations Health Organization and the Rockefeller Foundation, began operations in Southeast Asia. Liew Kai Khiun effectively examines the politics and activities of the Rockefeller Foundation’s International Health Board, aiming to ‘contextualize philanthropy’s role in molding public health infrastructure and culture in the region’ (p. 44). Annick Guenel’s chapter focuses on the famous Bandung Conference on Rural Hygiene in 1937. Guenel, by examining the numerous reports of local governments in Southeast Asia prepared by the League of Nations Health Organization’s personnel and local civil servants, demonstrates the diversity of attitudes among the local governments to achieve rural health in the region. Guenel comprehensively shows how the medical landscape of rural life in the region was dissected and evaluated, which highlighted the importance of local medical practices and traditions in attempts to achieve rural health. Persuasion rather than coercion was also emphasized. These issues would become important concerns for later WHO operations in the region.

The next two chapters focus on Western-trained indigenous doctors and their complex relationship with indigenous medical practices especially in the field of women’s reproductive health in colonial medical discourse. Raquel Reyes examines the colonial medical discourse on midwifery in the Philippines, providing an excellent comparative analysis with what David Arnold has characterized as the process of the ‘appropriation, subordination, and denigration’ of the Indian Sub-continent by the British (p. 86). By focusing on the writings of two elite physicians (a Western-trained indigenous doctor and a Spanish doctor) on native midwifery practices by hilot, Reyes convincingly demonstrates the ways in which the Western-trained
medical elites in the Philippines demonized native midwifery practices by intentionally singling out their superstitious/occult nature as unscientific characteristics. In a similar vein, Liesbeth Hesselink’s chapter very effectively analyses a number of writings by Western-trained, indigenous doctors called *dokter djawa* regarding traditional healers called *dukun* in the Dutch East Indies. Hesselink clearly demonstrates the nuanced and complex relationship and interactions between *dokter djawa* and *dukun*, and the varying degrees of acceptance and condemnation towards indigenous healing practices.

Ooi Keat Gin examines the political, social, and economic influence on the anti-opium campaign in British Malaya, focusing on the relationship between the rise of Chinese nationalism and the anti-opium campaign led by three Chinese doctor-activists. This chapter illuminates important themes that relate to public health and the rise of nationalisms in Southeast Asia and the role of the Chinese diaspora in the public health of the region.

Michael G. Vann’s chapter provides a fascinating analysis of the racialized discourse of epidemic diseases in colonial Hanoi. He examines the development of the coercive state health policies in response to a series of outbreaks of the bubonic plague and cholera in the early twentieth century that disregarded the Vietnamese populations’ property and privacy and the importance of the cult of ancestors in Vietnamese culture. By doing so, Vann expertly shows the ways in which mutual distrust and anxiety were created in a constant inextricable spiral, deepening the gulf between the white colonizers and the colonized.

The next two chapters examine critical public health issues in more recent periods. Yu-Ling Huang examines the famous case of Thailand’s campaign against HIV/AIDS epidemics at the turn of the twenty-first century, focusing on the critical aspects of its treatment, such as access to antiretroviral medicines. Huang painstakingly demonstrates Thailand’s difficulties due to limited access to effective drugs against HIV/AIDS, illuminating a new set of contemporary problems that has emerged and are global in nature.

Ayo Wahlberg examines the development and the ways in which the revitalization of traditional medicine in Vietnam especially that of traditional herbal remedies took place in Vietnam’s long twentieth century. Wahlberg persuasively demonstrates the logic of post-colonial efforts to resurrect Vietnam’s medical traditions from the repressed colonial past as part of a resurrection of national self-esteem as well as the 1990s’s shift to
the usage of more plural medicines that included modern medicine as a result of the globalizing influence of the 1980s’s economic reforms.

Chatichai Muksong and Komatra Chuengsatiansup comprehensively and succinctly analyze the historiography of medicine in Thailand from the pre-modern period up to 2000. This includes a fascinating examination of Siam’s medical discourse during the colonial encounter from the eighteenth century until WWII when Siamese kings engineered the domestication of western science and medicine to preserve Siam’s national culture.

This volume suffers somewhat from a lack of a clear focus tying the various chapters together according to particular themes. Each chapter deals with diverse cultures and periods, employing various approaches, but also excludes important countries in the region such as Burma, Cambodia, and Laos. Nevertheless, these limitations are balanced out by the various important themes and critical questions for the field of the history of medicine in Southeast Asia in this pioneering collection. This reviewer highly recommends this volume for both general readership and academics interested in the medical history of Southeast Asia.

Atsuko Naono
Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia, University of Tokyo
Naonolondon@gmail.com