The Anthropology and History of Medicine in Korea
Recent Scholarship and New Directions

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Over the past several decades, the rapid growth of so-called ‘complementary and alternative medicine’ has led to a commensurate proliferation of substantive Western-language publications on the medical traditions of East Asia. While works on China have long dominated the field, an expanding community of scholars has also been generating a critical mass of work on medicine and healing in other parts of Asia, including South Korea. A particularly important goal has been to understand how different medical practices grew out of distinctive local dynamics and within particular institutions. While Chinese medical writings were an important point of reference for literate doctors throughout East Asia, practitioners in Korea, Vietnam, and Japan actively reinterpreted and reconfigured ideas from different streams of knowledge.

Building on an already substantial body of Korean-language studies, recent English-language works are actively using the tools of history and anthropology to delve into the ways that medicine, society, and culture have shaped each

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1 Here it must be acknowledged that the scholarship on North Korea’s medical and public health care systems since the post-Korean War split of the Korean peninsula into North and South is markedly undeveloped. Yet there are a few entry points in English, for instance, through interviews with North Korean refugees summarized in Demick 2010; an article that contrasts the health care systems in South and North Korea from 1945 to 1960 by Shin 2015; and overview of basic public health and medical statistics before the 1970s in Lankov 2015, pp. 66–8, fn. 43–5. For a comparison of traditional Korean medicine in Korea as well as in America, see Park 1994.

2 For a good overview of this particular theme in Korean medical history, see Cha et al., 2007.
other in Korea over time.³ (Key English-language works are listed in a bibliography at the end of this essay).⁴

This double issue of Asian Medicine 11 (1–2) aims to contribute to the broader scholarly conversation while also making the richness of Korean medical studies more easily accessible to a wider audience. We place Korea at the centre of the critical study of East Asian medicine, examining its past and present through nine original English-language contributions from junior and senior scholars: historical and anthropological research articles, translations of primary documents, and field notes. Chronologically, these contributions span the fourteenth century to the present day, delving into diverse topics ranging from Chosŏn gynaecology, court medicine, and unofficial doctors to the impact of government health insurance policies on traditional medicine and transformations of acupuncture practices from within various currents of the East Asian medical tradition itself in the Republic of Korea. The breadth of chronological and topical coverage makes this volume a handy resource for readers seeking to understand major historical trends in the development of medicine in Korea, allowing them to explore important issues, meet key players, and peruse influential medical documents.

### Themes Across Time

Although this volume spans a vast period, certain themes also recur in these diverse articles. One overarching theme is that of practitioner identity—what did it mean to be a medical expert, and how did practitioners affirm their expertise in the face of challenges from their clients and competitors? Closely related is the problem of epistemology: what constituted valid medical knowledge, and how was that knowledge created and acquired? This was an issue for early Chosŏn medical experts thinking about the relative status of local knowledge versus Chinese classical teachings, as well as for twentieth-century

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³ For general overviews of the contours of clinical Korean medicine, see Jong Jae Kim 1995; and Baker 2003; on the historical relationship of Korean alchemy to medicine, see Sang-woon Jeon 1998; for overview of medicine in the Three Kingdoms period, see Pu-yeong Yi 1981; on the history of Korean medicine understood through the lens of the history of disease and specific epidemics, see Magner 1993; Jane Kim 2012; Hyun-sook Lee 2008, 2015; Hyun-sook Lee and In-sok Yeo 2015.

⁴ This bibliography was developed from all of the relevant English-language sources cited by authors published in this issue as well as additional suggestions from James Flowers, Hyunsook Lee, Taewoo Kim, Pierce Salguero, and Soyoung Suh.