Book Reviews

John R. Watt


With Saving Lives in Wartime China, John Robertson Watt has written a compelling account of health administrators who attempted to establish comprehensive systems of Western medical care during the Second Sino-Japanese World. In this cogent and well-written book, Watt shows that an understanding of health and disease is critical to the history of twentieth-century China.

Like Mary Brown Bullock before him, Watt has combined professional work in development with academic scholarship on the history of Western medicine in China. He is the former executive director and current vice president of the American Bureau for Medical Advancement in China (ABMAC) Foundation. ABMAC is the present-day incarnation of an organization with the same name that was founded in 1937 to promote scientific medicine and public health in China; Watt embraces a similar vision of medical modernity that is defined by Western biomedicine, but remains sensitive to the complex relationships between Chinese and Western medicine that affected health administration in the mid-twentieth century. Watt’s background also shapes the sources upon which he has drawn. Watt primarily employs the rich ABMAC archives at Columbia University, but also makes good use of the China Medical Board and Rockefeller Foundation Archives, as well as materials from Chinese archives in Jiangsu province and Shanghai. The book has three primary audiences: historians of military medicine; historians of public health in modern China; and those who study the pre-1949 history of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

The first two chapters give an overview of health administration in China before the war, as the Nationalist Party consolidated power over China and attempted to establish a nationwide health infrastructure. Watt outlines the networks of patronage in which the National Health Administration (NHA)
originated, and identifies tensions between Anglo-American and German-Japanese educational traditions that shaped administrative approaches to health care in China. Watt is one of the first scholars alongside Sean Hsiang-lin Lei and Ka-che Yip to explore in English the discourse of public medicine (gongyi zhidu), or state-sponsored health care, which dominated health policy discussions in the 1930s.

The third and seventh chapters merit special attention because they present an overview of public health administration in the CCP before 1949. This is one of the most significant, lasting accomplishments of Watt’s book. In chapter three, Watt presents one of the first English language discussions of health in the CCP base camps in Jiangxi. His chapter on the base camps at Yan’an is similarly enlightening, especially when read alongside the work of Kim Taylor (2005). Watt suggests that compared to the Nationalist Army, CCP health initiatives valued the lives of poor civilians and stressed preventive medicine and midwifery.

The fourth and fifth chapters discuss Chinese military medicine. Here, Watt claims that administrators of military medicine in the Nationalist army, especially the charismatic Robert Kesheng Lin, came closer to meeting international standards of medicine than their civilian colleagues in the NHA. Watt argues that political ideology hindered scientific and humanitarian reform across China. Chiang Kaishek and the central Nationalist administration did not make public health a priority. Medical reformers who wished to introduce hygiene to the Chinese armed forces had to work in spite of, rather than with, the top military brass.

The sixth chapter addresses civilian public health during the war, when the NHA moved its headquarters to the wartime capital at Chongqing. Watt suggests that the primary wartime contribution of the NHA was its epidemic prevention work in the form of highway health stations, epidemic prevention teams, model health demonstration sites, and support to provincial health bureaus, especially with anti-malarial work in Yunnan. Despite a lack of support from the central government, NHA administrators used financial aid from the United States to launch effective preventive work, support local health administrations, and collect epidemiological data.

Throughout the book, Watt compiles vital biographical and chronological data in a coherent narrative. One of the core strengths of this book is its writing. Watt makes what could have been a dry administrative history engaging; his prose is efficient, clear, and even eloquent at times. Furthermore, the book is novel in that it uses a variety of online Chinese sources, which present unique opportunities and challenges to scholars of twentieth-century China. Watt makes a note of the difficulty in using these sources in the bibliography,