
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 (HOMESEA) 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