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Books

Health Policy and Disease in Colonial and Post-Colonial Hong Kong, 1841–2003 by Ka-che Yip, Yuen-sang Leung and Man-kong Wong


Western Medicine for Chinese: How the Hong Kong College of Medicine Achieved a Breakthrough by Faith C.S. Ho

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(Reviewed by Robert Peckham)

Since Hong Kong’s establishment as a port city in the early 1840s, the territory’s colonial and post-colonial governments have wrestled with a perennial dilemma: how to reconcile policies of openness that encourage the unimpeded movement of people, goods and capital, with a system of state control that ensures the territory’s security. It is a predicament perhaps most evident in the domain of public health and one that has particular purchase in the twenty-first century as global migration, accelerated air travel and economic connectedness place increasing pressure on the ability of state institutions to regulate borders. As a transshipment hub, Hong Kong’s prosperity has long been dependent on interregional and transnational flows. And yet this reliance has made it vulnerable to a range of potentially destabilising health threats: from infectious disease to contaminated food and pollution.

In Health Policy and Disease in Colonial and Post-Colonial Hong Kong, 1841–2003, Ka-che Yip, Yuen-sang Leung and Man-kong Wong, provide an admirably succinct overview of how governments in Hong Kong have responded to—and sought to prevent—disease outbreaks including malaria, smallpox, tuberculosis, venereal diseases, bubonic plague, avian influenza and severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). The authors chart the evolution of public health in Hong Kong from the early colonial state to the Japanese occupation, and from postwar reconstruction through decolonisation to Hong Kong’s anomalous post-1997 status as a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Within this sweeping chronology, the emphasis is both on continuity and change. The book argues convincingly that health policy has historically been produced through pragmatic
accommodations between different vested interests with an economic rationale invariably determining the bottom line. Tracing the history of public health, they suggest, becomes a means of tracking shifting power relations and demonstrating how often fraught Chinese-British relations determined the nature of colonial governance. The authors stress Hong Kong’s complex entanglement with China, and they show how the vicissitudes of modern China’s history have impacted upon the health of Hong Kong from the late Qing period to Mao’s ascendancy in 1949 and the PRC’s liberalisation under Deng Xiaoping.

*Health Policy and Disease in Colonial and Post-Colonial Hong Kong, 1841–2003* fills an important gap in the historiography. Clearly written and scrupulously researched, it provides an invaluable factual history of public health in the territory, which will undoubtedly pave the way for further in-depth studies and furnish a framework for new comparative approaches.

Although they touch on medical developments, Yip, Leung and Wong are explicitly concerned with public health—that is, with the health of the population. Their book touches only cursorily on the development of Hong Kong’s medical institutions and technical expertise. In this respect, Faith Ho’s history of the Hong Kong College of Medicine for Chinese (HKCM) serves as a useful complement to their work. Whereas Yip, Leung and Wong focus on health policy, Ho is concerned above all with the role of individuals or ‘personalities’—in her own words—as catalytic agents driving medical innovation.

A comprehensive history of the HKCM is long overdue and Ho offers an accessible and well-researched overview of events leading to the College’s foundation in 1887, its incorporation into the new faculty of the University of Hong Kong (HKU) in 1912, and its formal dissolution in 1915. Ho shows how the College was conceived as a beacon of enlightenment in East Asia. As Patrick Manson famously declared in his inaugural address as Dean of the College, the aim was for Hong Kong ‘to become a centre and distributor, not for merchandise only, but also for science’. As a former Professor and Head of the Department of Pathology at HKU and an active member of the committee that manages the Hong Kong Museum of Medical Sciences, Ho writes as an insider with a manifest passion for her topic. It is evident that she admires ‘the extraordinary feat’ of her pioneering protagonists and empathises with the trials and tribulations of the College’s founders and licentiates. Although Sun Yat-sen—the father of the Republic of China—remains the College’s most famous alumnus, Ho provides
brief but engaging life histories of many lesser-known Chinese graduates and in this way helps to counter-balance the ‘great men’ litany that dominates most canonical histories. A list of the College’s graduates is contained in the appendix of the volume, together with Manson’s inaugural address.

A latent theme in Ho’s book is the struggle between Western scientific knowledge and traditional Chinese values and practices. The history of the College is told largely as a struggle to overcome the obstacles impeding Western medicine’s acceptance amongst the colony’s Chinese community. This is an approach that differs from the one adopted by Elizabeth Sinn in her history of the Tung Wah Hospital (1989) and indeed by Yip, Leung and Wong who repeatedly stress health as a process of cultural interaction or negotiation. It is also a far cry from recent work by historians such as Bridie Andrews and Sean Hsiang-lin Lei who emphasise the complex coevolution of Chinese and Western medicines in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.1

There is surely room for different approaches, however, and Ho has produced the first full history of an important medical institution that, as she notes, provided a foundation for Western medical training in Hong Kong. In different ways both Health Policy and Disease in Colonial and Post-Colonial Hong Kong, 1841–2003 and Western Medicine for Chinese provide refreshing antidotes to Hong Kong’s persistent global reputation as a hotspot of disease—a reputation reaffirmed with SARS in 2003 where the acronym for the novel viral disease uncannily mirrored Hong Kong’s acronym as a SAR, or Special Administrative Region. Instead, the books show in different ways how Hong Kong became the site of complex health and medical cultures; a place where private and state initiatives, religious and secular interests, Western and Chinese values, and local and global concerns intersected and sometimes collided.

NOTE

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