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History and epidemics in modern Asia

Suddenly the corner of the world map occupied by Asia, formerly painted monochrome, is transformed into a multidimensional colour display with society, culture, economy, and politics as its axes. This display vividly shows how epidemics of infectious diseases, such as plague, malaria, and cholera, as well as the more recent severe acute respiratory syndrome, Nipah virus, and Zika virus outbreaks, contributed—or continue to contribute—to shaping the process of modernisation in Asia, especially east Asia. This is the image that swiftly emerges upon reading Epidemics in Modern Asia by Hong Kong-based historian Robert Peckham. Peckham discusses epidemics within the complex and dynamic interplay of social, cultural, economic, and political factors, examining their effects and causes with respect to important aspects of modern Asian history, such as migration, urbanisation, environmental change, war, and globalisation, connecting setting-specific aspects of each country with the broader interregional context. Readers will undoubtedly be absorbed in the changing and vividly described spectacles offered by this book.

Opposing the west-centric historical portrayals of Asia as simply a source of epidemics and the modernisation of Asia as the result of a simple diffusion of knowledge and technologies from west to east, Robert Peckham attempts to describe how disease epidemics have affected or were affected by the process of modernisation, as seen from within Asia. Concurrently, he rejects the trend towards describing the history of disease epidemics in terms of the continental or planetary level, with no borders or local contexts. He avoids the trap of describing Asia as monotone by instead highlighting the specific contexts of each area, recognising well the way that Asian countries have maintained their social and cultural identities during the process of modernisation, even under colonial rule.

Peckham argues against the traditional view of disease epidemics as episodes or events external to mainstream history; instead he tries to place them at the heart of the story. By doing so, his discussion of disease epidemics integrates the social, cultural, economic and political contexts, creating a multidimensional platform. He succeeds by using not only traditional archived materials, but also press reports, written testimonies, documentary films, and movies, including professional and personal accounts, giving a human touch to the stories. By using popular films such as Contagion to represent the discourse of the western view of disease epidemics, Peckham gives a sharper image to the discussion.

Epidemics in Modern Asia includes chapters on topics such as mobility, cities, the environment, war, and globalisation, structured around cases studies and selected to reflect key aspects in the process of modernisation in Asia. Rather than standalone blocks, the chapters are tightly interrelated, reinforcing each other while delving deeper into the specific issues that they are intended to address. The book should be credited for its successful presentation of epidemics such as plague, cholera, and others through their multiple facets. For example, while the chapter on mobility describes how the movement of people and goods through expanding commercial trade paths was crucial for the spread of epidemics such the 1894 plague epidemic in China, it was interesting to learn in the chapter on cities that anxieties over epidemics, particularly the plague epidemic in neighbouring China, were part of the impetus for the urban planning and modernisation of Hanoi, then the capital of Indochina. The discussion of the outbreak of plague in Manchuria in 1910 and 1911 in the chapter on war is an insightful illustration of how epidemics can be entangled in the centre of both medical and geopolitical and military influences, in this case featuring China, Russia, and Japan.

To our knowledge, this is the first book to describe the history of disease epidemics in Asia while integrating the complex social, cultural, economic, and political contexts. This task is prohibitively difficult for epidemiologists who are not specialised in human history, as well as challenging to historians who are generally unfamiliar with the fields of microbiology or epidemiology. However, there is—as pointed out by Peckham—a danger of overrepresenting the role of epidemics in shaping history by placing them at the heart of the story. Nevertheless, this book is a milestone work that significantly enriches the history of disease epidemics.

This work provides a new model for historians who have an interest in disease epidemics and gives the epidemiologists, who are currently highly medicalised, the opportunity to appreciate the foresight of Rudolf Virchow, a giant in the field of bioscience in Germany in the 19th century and the father of modern pathology, as well as one of the founders of modern public health, who stressed the importance of understanding social, cultural, economic, and political context of epidemics and the social actions needed to tackle them.

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