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Reviewed by Atsuko Naono*

Interest in the medical history of Cold War Southeast Asia has grown slowly over the past decade. The prevention of epidemic diseases and improvement of public health emerged as central concerns during the processes of decolonization and nation building in postwar Asia, prompting a broad range of scholarly inquiries into the intersection of health, politics, and international relations. Much of this literature evaded a focus on Southeast Asia as a region. Bu Liping and Yip Ka-che's *Public Health and National Reconstruction in Post-War Asia* (2015), for example, focused primarily on China and India and included only two chapters on Southeast Asia. These two chapters examined internal politics and cultural/religious factors in the shaping of health policies, an approach that complements the volume under review. More recently, Vivek Neelakantan's *The Geopolitics of Health in South and Southeast Asia* (2023) brought together a collection of chapters on Asia-specific approaches to global health histories with a focus on Cold War geopolitics, international aid organizations, and COVID-19, among other topics, emphasizing the roles and strategies of regional organizations such as SAARC, ASEAN, and SEARO. But here again, the emphasis was divided between South and Southeast Asian countries, favoring the former. Given Southeast Asia's unique regional challenges and experiences during the Cold War, questions remained as to how far the Southeast Asian medical experience during the period could be generalized as part of something else.

Fighting for Health, edited by C. Michele Thompson, Kathryn Sweet, and Michitake Aso, builds on the earlier historiography, but its key strength lies in its focus on local medical and health-care developments and experiences, highlighting the broader social impacts of medicine and the Cold War. In the volume's eight chapters, drawn from presentations at History of Medicine in Southeast Asia conferences, the contributors aim to examine the intertwined nature of medicine and politics in Cold War Southeast Asia. Focusing on six Southeast Asian

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countries, these chapters draw on primary sources in various languages. As outlined in the introduction, the volume is organized around four main themes: (1) Military Medicine for Wars of Decolonization, (2) State Medicine in International Relations, (3) Preventive Medicine as Nationalist Politics, and (4) Local Health beyond the Battlefield. While the volume is centered on health and medicine in Southeast Asia, it does not neglect the various ways in which the region interfaced with developments outside the region. For example, it also engages with the Chinese diaspora, Soviet assistance, and South Korea's civic medical outreach.

Christopher Shepherd's chapter explores the complex ways in which the Portuguese—while resisting the decolonization of Timor during the Cold War—overlaid post-World War II concepts of addressing economic “underdevelopment” and poverty in the Third World onto their revived colonial “civilizing mission” narrative to legitimize their continued control of Portuguese Timor. This process involved Portugal's marginalization and repression of “traditional agriculture, traditional medicine and the attendant traditional animist worldview” (p. 28). Shepherd aptly demonstrates this by focusing on the convergence of post-World War II international development—agricultural research focusing on rice cultivation to entice Timorese into lowland wet rice cultivation, which resulted in a huge increase of malaria cases. Nevertheless, malaria research promoted by the WHO failed to organize an intervention, with a few exceptions.

Por Heong Hong's chapter examines health-care provision in the New Villages established as resettlement areas intended to cut off Chinese Communist guerrillas from support during the Malayan Emergency (1948–60). Por convincingly argues that Britain's announcement of shifting to hearts and minds by providing health care, etc., was just a rhetorical “tool” demonstrating the government's lack of commitment and a shortage of trained health staff. This resulted in the heavy reliance on over seven thousand foreign missionaries expelled from China who stepped in to provide health care. Their knowledge of Chinese dialects and medical training made them effective in winning local trust. Por further examines another local population, Orang Asli. They were recruited for their jungle expertise by the British but suffered greatly after resettlement due to malnutrition and disease. Meanwhile, health care for Chinese and the Orang Asli settlers fostered resentment among rural Malays, who also lacked support and suffered from illnesses such as gastroenteritis and yaws. Por also explores military medicine in jungle warfare, which focused on injuries and tropical diseases. While some diseases like visceral schistosomiasis were well researched, important illnesses such as leptospirosis—one of the most feared by the British—were regrettably overlooked.

Kathryn Sweet's chapter on the history of the health sector's development in Laos traces the evolution of health service management in Laos from 1950, when the French transferred their colonial health service to the Royal Lao Government, through to the establishment of the Lao People's Democratic Republic in 1975. Sweet highlights the emergence of a fragmented health system consisting of “three major civilian health services, two military services and a

modest private sector” (p. 85), all supported by various foreign aid programs, each driven by political agendas shaped by regional and international powers. As a result, these multiple health services separately unfolded their own technical assistance and training, leading not to a unified national health service instead disjointed and messy one.

Oda Nara’s chapter offers a comparative history of the institutionalization of Vietnamese traditional medicine, known as *Đông Y* (constituted of *thuốc Bắc*, northern medicine, which originated in China, and *thuốc Nam*, southern medicine, which originated in Vietnam), in South and North Vietnam. It also serves as a compelling local history, highlighting the different ways in which South and North Vietnam pursued Vietnamese medical traditions in relation to Chinese and Western medicine. Oda skillfully draws on a wide range of sources, including Vietnamese documents and oral interviews, to analyze the contrasting and competing approaches to the institutionalization of *Đông Y*. Oda questions the validity of the prevailing view, noting that while North Vietnam emphasized the importance of *Đông Y* in the context of nationalism and successfully integrated it with Western medicine, South Vietnam struggled to institutionalize traditional medicine. This was due in part to its prioritization of Western medicine and its restriction of traditional medical practitioners. Oda contends that South Vietnam—especially after Ngô Đình Diêm—did attempt to promote traditional medicine. However, the practice in the South was heavily influenced by overseas Chinese, making it difficult to present it as distinctly “Vietnamese,” unlike the more nationally framed approach taken in the North.

Annick Guénel provides an important study of an unexplored topic: Soviet assistance in malaria control in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. North Vietnam’s Ministry of Health invited Soviet specialists in zoology and parasitology to conduct entomological and parasitological studies, as well as to provide technical training and research support in entomo-parasitological methods aimed at controlling parasitic diseases such as malaria. Drawing on archival material from the Centre of National Archives in Hanoi and other published sources, Guénel examines the development of parasitology training and research for malaria prevention, highlighting the significant role played by Soviet assistance, including the establishment of the Malaria Research Institute. At the institute, extensive experiments and data collection were carried out to develop “appropriate and economic” (p. 152) malaria control programs, including a pilot study in Thái Nguyên Province, which was classified into four zones based on entomological and epidemiological surveys. As Guénel demonstrates, the malaria control program developed in Thái Nguyên Province in 1957 was a precursor to today’s “tailor-made” malaria control approaches, which reemerged recently in response to the limitations of “one-size-fits-all” global malaria eradication strategies (p. 153).

Vivek Neelakantan’s chapter reveals Indonesia’s distinct trajectory of nation building compared to the previous two studies on Vietnam. Neelakantan examines how President Soekarno envisioned the role of medical sciences and technology in the postcolonial nation-building

project. Recognizing that widespread food shortages, coupled with a rapidly growing population, threatened his vision of a robust and healthy nation, Soekarno saw science as essential for achieving economic self-sufficiency, a cornerstone for restoring national glory. Neelakantan convincingly shows the pivotal influence of the 1955 Bandung Conference in shaping Soekarno's commitment to placing science at the core of his nation-building agenda while striving to balance competing political forces through *Pembangunan*, "a shared nation-building endeavour transcending political ideologies" (p. 177). Furthermore, Neelakantan examines the contributions of three physicians (Sarjito, Sawwono Prawirohardjo, and Soedjono Djoened Poesponegoro) and illustrates how their legacy in shaping scientific thought endured, as medical research remained symbolically aligned with national imperatives, partly in response to Cold War dynamics.

This book's strength also lies in its coverage of broader international relations such as Southeast Asia's relationships with China and South Korea. As the editors note in their introduction, a deeper relationship with China is one of the characteristics that distinguishes Southeast Asia from other regions. Xiaoping Fang's chapter, focusing on the seventh cholera pandemic (El Tor), which spread across Southeast Asia and China in the 1960s during the Cold War, provides an excellent case study of how the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia was caught up in the transnational politics of the Cold War which politicized the intersection of the movement of people, disease transmission, and pandemic control. Fang eloquently outlines the historical context of the Chinese diaspora, who endured diseases linked to harsh sea journeys and poor living conditions while simultaneously being stigmatized as the culprits of epidemics. These conditions led to forced quarantine and deteriorating relations with host countries and local communities in Southeast Asia. Fang also traces the movement of a large number of Chinese emigrants returning from Indonesia to the PRC after facing an anti-Chinese campaign, often departing from the key port of Makassar, where the El Tor cholera outbreak escalated rapidly. Notably, Fang highlights how the Chinese Communist Party leveraged the return of the overseas Chinese for political and ideological legitimacy, offering them privileged treatment while distancing itself from international health networks.

John P. DiMoia's fascinating chapter examines the "free haircut" offered to Vietnamese villagers, particularly children, by Republic of Korea troops during the Vietnam War. Drawing on South Korea's meticulously documented photographs, cartoons, and statistics related to these services, DiMoia skillfully analyzes the multiple meanings and intentions behind the free haircut initiative. These included an obvious medical outreach effort aimed at providing reassurance and building friendly relations with the Vietnamese, medical activities such as pest control and disease data collection, and a form of psychological outreach shaped by South Korea's own experiences with US troops during and after the Korean War (1950–53). DiMoia's concluding discussion on how the free haircut initiative reflects broader concerns about South Korea's

developmental ambitions in Southeast Asia is particularly insightful.

This volume is recommended for students and scholars of Southeast Asia. It is also an important contribution to the literature on the history of medicine and science, as well as Cold War history. In addition, it is timely and will be particularly valuable for understanding how public health responses to COVID-19—including lockdown, vaccine choice/hesitation, etc.—in various Southeast Asian countries were shaped by health and medical policies developed during the Cold War. A major strength of this volume lies in its focus on the history of local societies and communities in relation to medicine and health, especially given the significant variations in how different countries responded to COVID-19. Many of those differences reflect each society's historical relationship with medical authorities and health policies.

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