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Imperial Contagions: Medicine, Hygiene, and Cultures of Planning in Asia ed. by Robert Peckham and David M. Pomfret (review)
Angela Ki Che Leung

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Imperial Contagions: Medicine, Hygiene, and Cultures of Planning in Asia.


This collection of essays edited by two history professors of the University of Hong Kong is an important addition to the growing literature on colonial medicine and public health in Asia. The book is interdisciplinary, with contributions from historians, geographers, and architects working mostly on British colonial cities in different parts of Asia (Hong Kong, Shanghai, Singapore, Delhi) and French Indochina in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It sheds new light on the spatial management of colonial Asian cities, a set of arrangements designed to tackle epidemiological threats that simultaneously articulated deeply seated social, racial, and political conflicts and anxieties.

In the afterword, Priscilla Wald summarizes neatly the book’s main contribution: it illustrates the “pathologization of places by the colonial state and the spatial responses instigated to curtail the diffusion of disease” (p. 217), although the word “disease” has to be interpreted broadly to include social and moral pathology. The two editors highlight “enclavism” as a key idea underlying the spatial responses described in this book. It characterized the reaction to the threat of contagious diseases even when colonial states were apparently shifting toward more “open” modern public health strategies. Robert Peckham’s analysis of Alexandre Yersin’s matshed laboratory in Hong Kong during the 1894 plague epidemic is an inspiring example of how the re-invention of an indigenous makeshift structure created a perfect modern “techno-scientific enclave” for exploring cutting-edge bacteriological knowledge in the field. Here Yersin was no less resourceful than urban elites of contemporary neighboring Canton city in Qing China where “a temporary plague hospital was put up in the western part [of the city], which had the merit of being thoroughly ventilated, and was kept very clean. It was a large mat shed built on piles over the water” (observation by American doctor John Kerr, working in the Canton Hospital, in The China Medical Missionary Journal 8, no. 4 [1894], p. 180).

Pomfret’s description of the segregated, hygienic enclave in Victoria Peak in Hong Kong and in Dalat (Annam) for British and French children, on the other hand, addresses not only the threat of contagious diseases but above all racial and political tensions in the colonial context. This intriguing example echoes most interestingly the studies on housing and politics of property in colonial Singapore and Hong Kong by Jiat-Hwee Chang and Cecilia Chu, and that on urban planning in India by Stephen Legg. These papers highlight contradictions inherent in the colonies’ sanitary and
housing needs that could not be easily generalized along simple racial or
class lines. The volume successfully demonstrates that the “outward” shift
from enclavism to public health was not a straightforward history that
some earlier colonial studies wanted to show, but a complicated process
involving variegated indigenous traditions and their interactions with
changing politics of the metropole.

The pathologization of places, another main theme of the book, is
clearly illustrated in Laurence Monnais’s paper on malaria control in
French Indochina. Monnais convincingly shows how the French colonial-
ists’ civilizing mission, focusing on improving the economic life of the in-
digenous population, resulted, in fact, in the wider spread of malaria,
largely due to the expanding railroad network. While the colonial govern-
ment worked hard to make sure that natural resources and goods circu-
lated efficiently through modern technology, it never paid as much atten-
tion to the distribution of quinine in the region.

The inspiring studies in this volume, while inviting readers to reflect
more deeply about the complex historical processes of hygienic modernity
in colonial Asia, stop short at making more critical comparisons with other
colonial sites, including Taiwan, Korea, and Manchuria in the Japanese
Empire, the Philippines under the Americans, the Dutch East Indies, or
China as a “semicolonial” region. But the research momentum gathered on
health issues in colonial Asia in recent years does suggest that the field may
soon be ready for a new phase of dialogues to explore this important period
of Asian history from the perspective of biopower. The authors of Imperial
Contagions should be thanked for having taken us a step closer toward that
exciting phase.

ANGELA KI CHE LEUNG

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Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Hong Kong. She is the coeditor of Health and
Hygiene in Chinese East Asia (2010).

Everyday Technology: Machines and the Making of India’s
Modernity.


This book is about small technologies in India. In particular, it focuses on
several factory-produced goods that became embedded in the everyday
lives of Indians. Through these goods, David Arnold narrates the story of
Indian modernity and the making of its various utopias. He identifies the
period between 1905 and 1914 as India’s “technological watershed” (p. 20),
marked by the influx of various new machines, such as sewing machines,