
This book consists of papers presented at an International Research Workshop at the University of Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia, in December 1996, entitled Healing Powers and Modernity in Asian Societies. One additional paper on socialist China is added to the current volume. Authors are mostly anthropologists who are interested in the state of healing practices in contemporary Asian societies. The interaction between indigenous healing practices and the modern medicine is investigated through several case studies. The peoples studied include minority and majority populations in several Asian nation-states. There are three parts in this book.

Part I concerns about the transformations of traditional medicine in modern states of Korea, Malaysia, and South India. In Korea, shamanismrevives because it signifies a distinctive Korean cultural identity. Among the majority Malay population, a female shaman finds a successful answer to the double challenges of modernity and Islamic religion by combining antiquity and modernity, magic and religious orthodoxy. Midwives in Tamil-speaking region, South India, respond flexibly by incorporating both traditional and modern healing resources. Ayurvedic ideas about diet are used to counter defective modernization and its effects in Karnataka State, South India.

Part II explores indigenous healing traditions among four minority groups within three nation-states of Malaysia, Indonesia, and China. Temiar shamans of the Malaysian rainforest use traditional means of trance and music to engage the modernity and the majority of Malay society. The Iban community of Sarawak, Malaysia, maintains spirit-based healing procedures to preserve their tribal identity. Muslim Sasak villagers of East Lombok, Indonesia, similarly maintain local understandings of illness against modernity. The Naxi minority's relations with the Chinese state over three political periods are expressed through their therapeutic practices.

Part III concentrates on Tibetan societies. Traditional Tibetan medicine in Tibet is described as a mode of articulating and dealing with the stresses of life under Chinese hegemony, as well as a way of expressing a special Tibetan version of modernity. Among the refugees in North India, Tibetan medicine is understood as a
resource for dealing with ailments and troubles for which modern medicine as locally delivered can not heal, as well as a means to seek international recognition of the Tibetan political struggle against the Chinese.

Among these diverse peoples, one finds many types of healing, including shamanic ritual and herbal medicine, as well as formalized literate and textual traditions such as Ayurvedic, Chinese, and Tibetan medicine. Conflicts and cooperation between indigenous healing practices and the modern medicine are observed. This book does not provide textual information of traditional medicine, instead it explores their practices in the political and anthropological contexts: how the state legitimizes and transforms certain healing systems, and how institutional power relations shape healing in local areas.

This book contains some interesting information about the traditional medicine in these Asian societies. However, most of the papers are written from a perspective which is ambivalent to modernity. The indigenous healing practices are used as examples to depict power struggles between ideologies, classes, and genders. One would like to see more of factual and statistical information about how the traditional medicine is used to improve public health and to alleviate the illness and suffering in Asian societies. Since the discipline of anthropology is different from that of epidemiology and public health, most papers in this book, because they are based on case descriptions, are more culturally subjective and interpretative, rather than scientifically objective and statistically factual.

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