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The History of the World in 1900

April 6, 2018

### Reviewing Rogaski's *Hygienic Modernity*

*Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-port China* is a historical monograph written by Ruth Rogaski, a professor at Vanderbilt University who specializes in the history of Qing and modern China, the history of medicine and science, the history of women and gender, as well as nineteenth and twentieth century social and cultural history.<sup>1</sup> Her book begins by outlining the practices of traditional Chinese medicine, giving a background of what exactly *weisheng* entailed for those unfamiliar with traditional Taoist views on health and “the practice of guarding life”. She concisely and informatively describes the characteristics that all food and medicine have, (yin and yang for example),<sup>2</sup> the role that seasons have on health,<sup>3</sup> and the idea of jing,<sup>4</sup> or semen, being the essence of life (according to Taoist thought.)

Rogaski describes these practices as *weisheng zhidao* which literally means the knowledge of life preservation. She puts great emphasis on the meaning of this word, and how it evolved through time, as well as the meaning of the English word “hygiene” which is the word the author believes to be most analogous to the term *weisheng*.<sup>5</sup> Through this linguistic lense, Rogaski analyzes how the perception of health and disease transformed in both Europe and

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<sup>1</sup> Vanderbilt College of Arts and Science. "Ruth Rogaski." History Department. 2018. Accessed April 6, 2018. <https://as.vanderbilt.edu/history/bio/ruth-rogaski>.

<sup>2</sup> Rogaski, Ruth. *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-port China*. CA: University of California Press, 2004, (53-54.)

<sup>3</sup> Rogaski, Ruth. *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-port China*. CA: University of California Press, 2004, (17.)

<sup>4</sup> Rogaski, Ruth. *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-port China*. CA: University of California Press, 2004, (57.)

<sup>5</sup> Rogaski, Ruth. *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-port China*. CA: University of California Press, 2004, (19.)

China. She mentions that “hygiene” in Europe, before the popularity of germ theory, actually referred to a much broader practice of maintaining health. “Hygiene” could be refer to practises as different as brushing one’s teeth as well as doing daily exercise, whereas today, the term is almost exclusively used for activities that are for managing and eliminating germs.<sup>6</sup>

*Weisheng*, in contrast, referred to practices related to the Taoist methods of preserving life. Like “hygiene”, *weisheng*’s meaning would also change significantly with the introduction of modern medicine to China, but this change would make the word more general, while “hygiene’s” transformation made the definition more narrow. *Weisheng* is currently closest to the modern meaning of hygiene, but it can also be used to describe the jobs of food inspectors as well as sanitary science, and even the same ideas that comprised *weisheng* in the past.<sup>7</sup> These changes highlight the profound change that the discovery of modern medicine had for both European and Chinese societies.

Most of the book is centered around the treaty-port city of Tianjin, a city that has long been an asset to the Qing dynasty because of its proximity to Beijing, and because it, unlike Beijing, is located on China’s coast it has proven invaluable as a hotspot for trade in the past. After the Boxer Rebellion, many of the belligerents in the conflict were given a region of the city which would function as a small semi-colony.<sup>8</sup> Rogaski focuses on Tianjin because it was one of the most cosmopolitan regions in China, meaning that its exposure to the outside world, and therefore western medicine, was unmatched.

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<sup>6</sup> Rogaski, Ruth. *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-port China*. CA: University of California Press, 2004, (24.)

<sup>7</sup> Rogaski, Ruth. *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-port China*. CA: University of California Press, 2004, (19.)

<sup>8</sup> Rogaski, Ruth. *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-port China*. CA: University of California Press, 2004, (30-31.)

This book contributes to the understanding of the world in 1900 by further exploring three themes associated with the time period. These themes are the rapid technological advancements achieved by European scientists and inventors (or in this case biologists,) the racism that saw unprecedented prevalence during this time, and the rise of nationalism along with cultural identity that Europeans had cultivated both in the west and abroad. Rogaski explores these themes in different ways, and they are all tremendously important in understanding China's transition to modern medicine at this time, as well as the greater themes affecting the world in this time period.

Rogaski mentions that the Europeans used their knowledge of medicine to claim racial superiority over Chinese.<sup>9</sup> The Europeans used modern medicine to contribute to the idea of social darwinism, or the idea that the white race was superior to others. This idea was justified by the ability of Europeans, and no other race, to conquer and colonize the world. Believers in social darwinism used the invention of modern medicine to strengthen this notion since it meant that Europeans were able to overcome disease before the Chinese who were perceived as dirtier and less civilized.

Especially because of European racism, the introduction of modern medicine to the colonies represented a potential loss of pride to the victims of imperialism. This was especially true because of the nationalism (for their native countries, not those of the colonizers) that Europeans managed to instill in the populations that they conquered. The spread of European technologies and values raised the question of whether or not these new things could be adopted by a society without the society losing its identity. Although Europe itself would not achieve particularly good public health until decades after the colonization of Tianjin, the potential that

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<sup>9</sup> Rogaski, Ruth. *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-port China*. CA: University of California Press, 2004, (144.)

germ theory brought to the world was real, and to ignore it would be counterproductive. Germ theory did however, unfortunately for natives of European colonies, have an unmistakably European perception. Rogaski describes China as relatively open to the adoption of these new technologies, but it does not rule out the factor of national pride. Rogaski mentions that in India, the British had to distribute smallpox vaccines by force, and to the indigenous Indians, this was seen as a humiliating use of coercion against them,<sup>10</sup> but in Tianjin, the cowpox bureau did not have a reputation of spreading medical imperialism. Rogaski argues that the Chinese were able to westernize without the sorts of reservations that India had, because China was presented a model of how to westernize through Japan. Japan, during the Meiji Restoration, illustrated to China how an Asian nation could, with dignity and while maintaining its cultural identity, adopt some European customs. This caused China to more readily adopt western medicine, and Japan even contributed to the spread of these customs through their section of the city in Tianjin.<sup>11</sup>

Rogaski's book does a phenomenal job at describing the transition of traditional to modern medicine in China, and it provides valuable insight as to how China's transition relates to themes typically associated with the world in 1900. The book is interesting, not only in its portrayal of medical history, but also because of how it depicts Tianjin at a unique time in its history.

### **Bibliography**

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<sup>10</sup> Rogaski, Ruth. *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-port China*. CA: University of California Press, 2004, (107.)

<sup>11</sup> Rogaski, Ruth. *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-port China*. CA: University of California Press, 2004, (34.)

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