

[Wan on Kim, 'Curative Violence: Rehabilitating Disability, Gender, and Sexuality in Modern Korea'](#)

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The following book review from H-Disability may be of interest to some H-Women list members.

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Shu Wan

Eunjung Kim. *Curative Violence: Rehabilitating Disability, Gender, and Sexuality in Modern Korea*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. Illustrations. xii + 300 pp. \$25.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-6288-3; \$99.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-6277-7.

Reviewed by Shu Wan (University of Iowa) **Published on** H-Disability (September, 2018) **Commissioned by** Iain C. Hutchison (University of Glasgow)

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Eunjung Kim's *Curative Violence* is the first book-length volume discussing the proximity between curing and disability from a feminist perspective. Kim meticulously examines gender norms, traditional conceptions of sexuality, and family values in curing practices of disability in modern Korea.

In the first two chapters, Kim begins her discussion of disability in modern Korea around the reproduction of disabled bodies and women's status as caregivers in traditional Korean households. As Kim points out, reproduction is an important function where curative intervention is made. As seen in performance dramas portraying the eugenics movement, legislative debates over abortion, and recent use of genetic screening, Korean mothers with disabled children have been continuously blamed for "irresponsibility, ignorance, and immorality" (p. 81). Moreover, female suppression is justified by women's stereotyped status as caregivers. In her analysis of the folk story about Sim-Chong, who sells herself to pay for her disabled father's medical treatment, Kim harnesses the innovative term "proxy" to express how a healthy and able-bodied family member is expected to sacrifice herself or himself to enable the treatment of a disabled family member, and in the name of filial piety, women are especially expected to sacrifice themselves for the care of senior male family members.

Kim then turns to leprosy during the transition from the colonial period to the Cold War era. In colonialist and nationalist discourse, "Hanson's disease" has been perceived as a stigmatized, fatal epidemic, even though medical professionals have recognized it as a curable, and not deadly, illness. In the late nineteenth century, Korean patients afflicted with leprosy were segregated at Omado

Island, a strategy initiated by American missionaries in the late 1880s when leprosy was viewed as a deadly infectious disease. During the Cold War, the intrusion of American culture in Korean society contributed to the destigmatization of leprosy and those afflicted. Kim proceeds to examine sexuality and gender in the therapeutic rehabilitation of people with leprosy in Korea today, seeing leprous patients as symbolic of curing leprosy and of ending segregation. As seen in the alienation of disabled people in mainstream society, their “normal” sexual desire is criminalized and stigmatized. In reality, Korean disabled women are presumed to be potential victims of sexual exploitation and violence while disabled men are assumed to be nonsexual.

Following her examination of the intersectionality between gender and disability, Kim analyzes descriptions of madwomen’s vulnerability to able-bodied violence in contemporary arts in Korea. Multiple Korean film directors have portrayed disabled women as victims, which has resonated in the photography of Park Young-Sook. In their visual and motion-picture representations, disabled women have been shown as subjects upon whom sexual violence is inflicted, and have been oversimplified as being victims without agency. Indeed, the shared intention of these films and images is to expose the plight of oppressed disabled women and to pursue social justice. Even so, their creators actually become accomplices to the oppression and abuses by contributing to the stereotypical perceptions of disabled women’s helplessness and weakness. Therefore, able-bodied artists, commentators, and law enforcement authorities’ efforts to emancipate abused and oppressed disabled people strengthen the emotional bond restraining disabled people’s independence.

An important contribution that Kim makes to current scholarship on disability and therapy is her manifestation of the intersectionality between gender, sexuality, and disability. Exemplified in Korean mainstream debates on disabled people’s sexual needs and behavior, and disabled women’s presumed incapacity for reproduction and parenthood, disabled women in Korea are victims of gender and sexuality oppression. Using multiple sources, including films, literature, news reporting, and legal documents, Kim examines the “asexualization” of disabled men and their stereotyped perception and representation in modern Korean society. This stereotype has been projected on to government policy. Criminalizing voluntary services to match disabled men with sexual partners as sex trading, the Korean government has deprived disabled men of their right to engage in sexual activity. In other words, disabled men’s “normal” sexual needs have been policed and stigmatized as crimes because of the dismissal of their legal claim for sexual relationships, and denial of their sexual normalcy.

Along with Kim’s emphasis on the role of indigenous Korean culture, some portions of her argument are controversial, for example, that therapy in modern Korea is distinct from approaches in North America and western Europe. Throughout the volume, Kim consistently emphasizes the uniqueness of Korean people with disabilities in light of their indigenous culture. As Kim argues, “in Korean culture, placing responsibility on mothers not to reproduce disabled children has a history of eugenic campaigns and postcolonial nation-building and of cultural representations of heredity drama” (p. 79). However, family values were integrated into Cold War ideology in ways similar to the United States. In consort with interactions between family and disability in Korea, as seen in Wendy Kline’s volume, *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom* (2005), positive eugenicists also highlighted the significance of able-bodied parenthood and disabled women’s incapacity for motherhood in the United States, pointing to the similarities between Korean and American eugenic questions. Although Kim acknowledges the limits of Korean

indigeneity in forging therapy in her conclusion, she tends to interweave arguments about Korean heritage in most parts of the book. Indeed, controversy over treatment of mentally disabled patients was a worldwide issue following World War II. As seen in Allison C. Carey's *On the Margins of Citizenship: Intellectual Disability and Civil Rights in Twentieth-Century America* (2009), mental patients' parents and families were engaged in advocacy for deinstitutionalization in the United States. Overall, Kim's groundbreaking study of disability and rehabilitation in Korean society expands our horizon of disability in Korean culture and will stimulate future debate and exploration.

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