

BOOK REVIEW

Kingdom of the Sick: A History of Leprosy and Japan

By Susan L. Burns

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viii + 334 pages.

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Although there is already a massive body of literature on the history of Hansen's disease in Japan, Susan L. Burns' meticulously researched *Kingdom of the Sick: A History of Leprosy and Japan* is a welcome addition to the existing research, with its focus on the comprehensive history of leprosy policies, and its nuanced approach.

The history of Hansen's disease and of policies aimed at it became the subject of scholarly and public interest particularly in the 1990s, with the abolition of the Leprosy Prevention Law in 1996 and the leprosy survivors' first collective lawsuit against the Japanese government in 1998. This and other lawsuits that followed were accompanied by extensive media coverage, fact-checking at leprosaria, research into people and ideologies that supported certain policies aimed at the disease, and interviews with survivors. As Celeste Arrington points out, a government survey in 2003—two years after the Kumamoto District Court's landmark ruling that recognized Japan's isolation and quarantine policy as unconstitutional—demonstrated that “97 percent of respondents had heard of Hansen's disease,” and it is not surprising this interest led to the publication of a wide range of scholarly and popular works.¹ Given the nature of the lawsuits, many of the works that appeared in the 1990s and the first decade of the twentieth century focused on quarantine policies in the twentieth century, as well as vasectomies and other forms of reproductive control aimed at patients. Perceptions of leprosy in the premodern period, on the other hand, were often left out.

Burns discusses not only the twentieth century, but also looks back to the medieval and early modern periods (chapters 1 and 2), demonstrating leprosy's associations with karmic retribution and the exclusion of leprosy sufferers, as well as its later associations with “bad blood” and heredity, a view which survived well into the twentieth century. As Burns points out, “[t]his long and evolving history of exclusion has been effectively erased from social memory in Japan” (p. 45), and any mention about premodern forms of stigmatization of the disease is often met with criticism since it is perceived as a justification for exclusive policies of the twentieth century. These perspectives are nonetheless important for understanding

1 Arrington 2016, p. 90.

how attitudes towards leprosy changed over time, and whether they had an influence on policies in the modern period.

Chapter 3 of this monograph focuses on the history of leprosy in the last three decades of the nineteenth century, unearthing the story of journalists and entrepreneurs who were advocates of new leprosy policies at a time when the Meiji authorities were more concerned about acute infectious diseases such as cholera, and had little interest in leprosy.

The remaining chapters of the book, dedicated to the most discussed and contested pages in the history of leprosy policies, explore the creation of the Leprosy Prevention Law of 1907 in chapter 4, the establishment of sanatoria and the issue of sexuality and reproduction within the sanatoria in chapter 5, and media campaigns aimed at leprosy prevention, the 1931 redefinition of the Leprosy Prevention Law, and patient writing in chapter 6. In these chapters, Burns gives a more nuanced and complicated picture than other works on the topic. She demonstrates how resistance from local communities influenced the choice for remote locations for sanatoria, how inability and ignorance in dealing with children born to cohabiting patients led to the advocacy of measures such as vasectomy, and how patients themselves contributed to the public discourse on leprosy by their writings.

Chapter 7 describes how the *muraiken undō* (leprosy-free prefecture movement) led to overcrowding and deteriorated conditions in the sanatoria, which was followed by patient protests and unrest. What followed were stricter policies and a view of patients “as potentially dangerous others who had to be controlled and contained” (p. 213). Burns also discusses the contested issue of sterilizations in sanatoria, pointing out that the issue was complicated. Although sanatoria records claimed that sterilizations were consensual, numerous studies have demonstrated that patients were often forced to undergo sterilization or abortion in order to marry or cohabit. Burns shows another side of the story, in which patients sometimes passively agreed with sanatoria policies about their reproductive choices. She does not do so in order to justify the policies in question, but in order to demonstrate how patients’ reproductive choices were sometimes constrained and mediated by sanitarium regulations, as well as the dominant ideologies of the time about family and reproduction.

The focus of the final chapter is the postwar leprosy policy in Japan, probably the most politically charged moment in leprosy history in Japan. Many authors, above all Fujino Yutaka, have discussed the issue of leprosy confinement and sterilizations in the postwar period, when the lifesaving drug Promin was already available, and when the democratic constitution was supposed to protect patients’ rights. Fujino concludes that these policies were implemented not despite democracy, but in the name of the democratic notion of “public welfare.”² Burns also discusses these issues, but with a focus on questions that have been overlooked. For instance, she points out that while in the prewar period vasectomies were more common, in the postwar period tubal ligation and abortion became commonplace, i.e. the responsibility for reproductive control shifted to the female body. Burns explains that the drug Promin made it possible for patients to envision the possibility of a cure, and male patients “became less willing to compromise their reproductive potential” (p. 233), while having no concerns about their female co-patients. Burns also shows that many patients, despite having the opportunity to be discharged from sanatoria, chose to remain due to such factors as their inability to find employment or severed family ties.

2 Fujino 2006, pp. 58–59.

As the author herself points out, this account of leprosy history in Japan “is likely to anger some readers” (p. 257), as it challenges many of the established narratives, including those about patient autonomy with regard to reproductive choices and sanitaria confinement. However, it offers a nuanced and complicated story, which will be of interest to a wide range of scholars.

REFERENCES

Arrington 2016

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