



Global Medicine in China: A Diasporic History, by Wayne Soon

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Modern medicine in China cannot be understood without studying the contributions of Overseas Chinese medical personnel. *Global Medicine in China* demonstrates this transnational flow of medical knowledge through well-educated doctors from the Chinese diaspora who decided to create new institutions to improve the education and practice of biomedical science in China. The book starts with a plague that affected the Northeast regions of China in 1911, and the laudable efforts made by Dr. Wu Lien-teh (Wu Liande 伍連德) to counter it; it ends with references to Covid-19 in both the PRC and Taiwan. Dr. Wu's

recommendations to wear masks to reduce the spread of the pandemic in 1911 (as well as other hygienic measures) still resonate today.

The first chapter is a fascinating overview of the contributions of doctors and entrepreneurs from the Chinese diaspora in the making of modern Chinese biomedical institutions. The transnational character of these path-breakers allowed them to act as mediators between the centers of knowledge and education in the West and China, although these transfers were not carried out without problems. The author brings to light the racist milieu in which they worked, the difficulties in getting financial aid, and the problems facing the reception of modern biomedicine in China. One of the surprising conclusions of the book is that military medicine in Nationalist China—from Sun Yat-sen’s revolution until the withdrawal of the government to Taiwan in 1949—was dependent on Overseas Chinese capital and other forms of foreign investment.

The focus of the book (four chapters of five) is on the long decade of war that affected China between 1937 and 1949: first in China’s war against Japan and, next, in China’s civil war. During this difficult period, a notable figure stands out: Robert Lim (Lin Kesheng 林可勝) who led the creation of major medical institutions that receive close attention in the book: The China Red Cross Medical Relief Corps (CRCMRC, Chapter 2), the Emergency Medical Service Training School (EMSTS, Chapter 4); and the National Defence Medical Center (NDMC, Chapter 5). Indeed, Dr. Lim’s contribution to the modernization of Chinese medicine is important, and has already been researched by other authors. The merit of Wayne Soon’s scholarship lies in his emphasis upon transnational networks as key to the success of these institutions through the transfer of financial capital, technology, and personnel.

Robert Lim’s broad social networks, professional skills, good character, and commitment to help China made him a natural leader. His successful role as a mediator (despite all difficulties and setbacks) was possible thanks to a mix of relationships that were partially a product of good luck and family connections: some were inherited from the pioneering activities of his father Lim Boon-keng (Lin Wenqing 林文慶), in South-East Asia and China, while Lim also strengthened relations with doctors and institutions in Great Britain and the United States. Back in China, he became a well-known professor at the Peking Union Medical College (PUMC). Furthermore, he committed to modernizing Chinese military medicine after China’s war with Japan. The institutions he created (or helped to create), like China’s first blood bank (the focus of Chapter 3), pioneered the practice, innovation, and formation of biomedicine in China in times of war.

The book relies on a wide range of primary and secondary sources. However, a greater engagement with recent literature in Chinese and English might add nuance to some broad-brush comparisons and assumptions. The author states, for instance, that the institutions formed by Dr. Lim “have been largely forgotten in contemporary China” while scholarly attention has focused on the Canadian doctor Norman Bethune.¹ Here, the book could have benefited from recent literature, published in both the People’s Republic of China

¹ Wayne Soon, *Global Medicine in China: A Diasporic History* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2020), 77.

and Taiwan, that deal with Robert Lim and the China Red Cross Medical Relief Corps (CRCMRC).² In addition, the archives of CRCMRC in Guiyang (in both the Guizhou Provincial Archives and Guiyang Municipal Archives) provide new insights about Dr. Lim and the institutions he created during the war. While physical access to archives is rather limited, some selected primary sources have been published that would contribute additional depth to the book.³ Additionally, other migrants, not only Overseas Chinese, also participated in these organizations: more than 20 European doctors of Jewish origins who were escaping the Holocaust were also recruited by Dr. Lim. Some of these doctors published amazing memoirs with detailed descriptions about their work and their relationships with Dr. Lim. Thus, the book could have been enriched by such experiences that deal with other diasporic networks.⁴ Finally, the aforementioned doctor Norman Bethune is markedly absent from the chapter on blood banks. Before going to China, Bethune created one of the first blood banks in the history of medicine: in 1936 Spain. Therefore, the institution of blood banks did not emerge in 1937 in Chicago.⁵

These potential additions aside, the book gives a compelling picture of the influence of Overseas Chinese on the modernization of biomedicine in China. It relies on archival data from different countries that enriches our understanding about this network of elites that crisscrossed the continents, bringing new medical methods and adapting them to the realities of China. The book is also easy to read and extends beyond the war period to more recent times. The contribution of the book, however, lies in the wartime period, when a group of Overseas Chinese decided to move to China and help modernize its medicine.

Author Bio

Carles Brasó Broggi is a Spanish Sinologist and economic historian. He has investigated issues of knowledge and technology transfers between China and other countries in the 20th Century. He wrote a book about China's textile industry from the 1920s to the beginnings of the reforms (*Trade and Technology Networks in the Chinese Textile Industry: Opening Up before the Reform*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) and is now working on a book about a group of international doctors who worked in both the Spanish civil war and China's war with Japan. He has published several articles on Chinese fashion (*China Perspectives*), China-Spain relations (*Modern Asian Studies*), and China's economic planning (*Economic History of Developing Regions*).

² See, for instance, He Bangli 何邦立, *Lin Kesheng. Minguo yixue shishang diyiren 林可勝. 民國醫學史上第一人* [A collection of essays in memory of Dr. Robert Kho-Seng Lim (1897-1969)] (Taipei, Zhonghua kejishi xuehui, 2017); Dai Binwu 戴斌武, *Kangzhan shiqi zhongguo hongshizihui jiuhu zongdui yanjiu 抗战时期中国红十字会救护总队研究* [Research on China's Red Cross Medical Relief Corps during the war against Japan] (Tianjin, Tianjin gujichubanshe, 2012).

³ Liu Lei 刘磊, ed., *Zhandi hongshizi. Zhongguo hongshizihui jiuhu zongdui kangzhan shilu 战地红十字, 中国红十字会救护总队抗战实录* [The Red Cross at war: Reports on China's Red Cross Medical Relief Corps] (Guizhou, Guiyang shi dang'anguan and Guizhou renmin chubanshe, 2009).

⁴ Robert Mamlok, *The International Medical Relief Corps in Wartime China* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2018).

⁵ Wayne Soon, *Global Medicine in China: A Diasporic History* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2020), 103.