

Shin Tong-Won 신 동원, Han'guk Ma Ŭihaksa 韓國馬醫學史 (*a History of Equine Medicine in Korea*)

Seoul: Korea Equine Museum, 2004. 380 pp

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This work deals with an unusual yet topical subject, the history of equine medicine in Korea. It is welcome because many may not have imagined that there was a sophisticated understanding of how to treat equine ailments in the remote past. At the same time, it is topical because our recent experiences with global epidemics showed that the diseases of animals, in particular, those of livestock, are not only “their” problems but “our” problems as well. As far as I know, this book is quite unique. The author summarizes his tasks to three. The first is to take in the history of equine medicine and its institutions against the context of the general management of horses. The second is to describe the same subjects against the broader backdrop of all of veterinary medicine. The third is to depict the history of Korean equine medicine in the East Asian context. So, the point of the book is to see Korea’s equine medicine against a series of quite distinct disciplinary and geographic contexts.

The book consists of two parts, and each part comprises two chapters. The first part deals with the institutional history of equine medicine, which spans almost 2,000 years. Because of the tremendous value horses long had for mankind, a great deal of attention has been paid to horse rearing and tending since horses were first domesticated. In Korea, the central government created a specialized department to raise and take care of horses, and equine doctors belonged to this department. Understandably, few historical records concerning this branch of medicine have been found that antedate the tenth century. In spite of this problem, Shin has attempted to draw a picture of the early period based on the few and fragmentary texts that have survived. He traces a ritual honoring the ancestor of all horses as far back as the Koryo dynasty (CE 918–1392) and into the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910). The elements of the rite are described in detail, but Shin makes no effort to explain its origin or its meaning, and the absence of any sort of speculation about its cultural background is keenly felt. Since cows would have been much more important than

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horses in an agricultural society, readers will wonder why the rite honoring horses was established much earlier than that for cows.

The second chapter of the first part reviews livestock epidemics in history, a topic especially interesting and suggestive in the time of avian flu and swine flu. Human beings and cattle have been mutual sources of infection, and most of the epidemics described in this chapter are related to bovine—the remainder involves swine. Important as cattle have historically been to human societies, this is a book about the history of equine medicine, so it's a shame that so few equine epidemics are mentioned. It is a pity that we do not have any reliable statistics regarding the number of horses and cows until quite recently. But given their role in transportation, the number of horses could not have been small. According to Shin, the number of meadows under government control set aside for grazing horses was about 200 in the fifteenth century, and during the same time, the number of horses exported reached 60,000. The number may have varied over time, but it was never small.

The second part of the book is dedicated more specifically to equine medicine, though discussions of treatments for cattle and hawks appear as well. Shin's sources are principally the specialized books on equine veterinary practice that were published in Korea between 1399 and 1682.

A glance over the titles of the chapters reveals that the book is not exclusively medical. In addition to discussions of diseases and their treatments, one finds such information as how to distinguish good horses from slow and lazy ones, how to raise them, and so on. Books of bovine medicine share the structure of those on equine medicine, but in at least one case—a pair of books published together, [[[Sin pyŏn jip sŏng u ūi bang]]] 新編集成牛醫方 (*A New Collection of Prescriptions for Cattle*) and [[[Sin pyŏn jip sŏng ma ūi bang]]] 新編集成馬醫方 (*A New Collection of Prescriptions for Horses*)—there appears to have been far more research into equine maladies: the book is three times the size of its bovine companion volume. The equine book contains rich theoretical considerations such as the meridian system as it applied to a horse, and horses' acupuncture points, physiology, and pathology. *Prescriptions for Cattle* lacks these theoretical considerations and goes straight to symptomatic prescriptions. One can't help but wonder why bovine medicine was less developed.

Books on equine medicine were richly illustrated. In particular, the 36 illustrations of horse diseases in *Prescriptions for Horses* convey pathological symptoms, which must have been very useful to those in charge of tending horses.

In a chapter about horse medicine in the late Chosŏn period (seventeenth–nineteenth century), Shin ventures away from medical treatises to consider essays to encyclopedic works of the time. Such diverse sources tell us that raising horses became more popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The inclusion of an entry on equine care in an encyclopedia that also covers fields such as international relations, history, the bureaucracy, economics, and mathematics shows that a basic understanding of how to tend horses was necessary for Confucian literati.

Another important source for this chapter is an encyclopedic work on rural life, which naturally includes sections on the rearing of livestock such as horses, cows, sheep, swine, and poultry. As Shin underlines, the horses raised in rural areas were used mainly for transport rather than warfare.

Along with the encyclopedic works—which played an important role in spreading equine medical knowledge—a seventeenth-century work devoted exclusively to equine medicine was [[[Ma kyōng dae chōn]]] 馬經大全 (*The Comprehensive Edition of the Horse Classic*). The original book, which was published in China in 1604, bears a different title; the Korean edition appeared 30 years later. A condensed version of the book, [[[Ma kyōng ch'o chip ōn hae]]] 馬經抄集諺解 (*The Horse Classic, Condensed and Commented*), probably appeared soon after *Comprehensive Edition of the Horse Classic*. It became the standard work on equine medicine during Chosŏn period upon publication. Systematically organized, the book includes sections on diagnosis by pulse and by oral examination. The largest part of this book is dedicated to discussions of the “56 major diseases,” with descriptions of causes, symptoms, diagnosis, prescriptions, diet, and contraindications. Each disease is accompanied by an illustration of a horse showing acupuncture points.

Shin argues that the most comprehensive account of equine medicine in the Chosŏn period appears in a huge encyclopedia by Seo Yu-ku 徐有榘 (1764–1845) titled [[[Im wŏn kyōng chae chi]]] 林園經濟志 (*A Treatise on Rural Life*). Shin believes that the merit of this work—it draws on almost every source published to that date in Korea and China—is strictly its vast grasp, since it does not contribute anything new.

Before concluding, I would like give some suggestions for further studies. One of the main tasks that Shin imposed on himself was to place the history of Korean equine medicine in the East Asian context. While he has shown the influence of several Chinese books, he could have gone far further, and much research remains to be done on the dynamic relations between Korean and Japanese specialists. In short, the East Asian context was not fully explored. As a result, the particularity of Korean horse medicine cannot be evaluated. I am not suggesting that one can ascribe to “Koreanness” a distinctive medical practice, but at least we can expect the sort of “localism” very often emphasized in the history of East Asia’s traditional medicine.

Han'guk ma ūihaksa is the first attempt of its kind. Therefore, we cannot expect it to be exhaustive. Among its many virtues, it affords us a general overview of the history of equine medicine in Korea, it summarizes major works and reproduces many valuable illustrations, and it ushers us into a new field where much future study will be done. One yearns to grapple with the fundamental questions in the history of equine medicine: How was the human meridian system applied to horses? How was the analogy justified? How were the acupuncture points on horses determined? Of course, so many questions about the human meridian system remain to be answered that one can hardly hope for immediate answers to the equine meridian system. *Han'guk ma ūihaksa* deserves to be read as an essential reference by anyone interested in the subject.