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Book Review:

The Enigma of Obesity in the World's Fittest Nation

Masculinity and Body Weight in Japan: Grappling with Metabolic Syndrome, by Genaro Castro-Vázquez, Routledge, 2020, 324 pages, 978-0-367-34057-5, £120 (Hardcover), £33.29 (eBook).

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This monograph by one of the most advanced scholars in the world in Japanese biomedical culture asks a post-structural question of how Japanese society shapes a new culture of fighting with obesity and body shapes regardless of its world's no. 1 status as the healthiest nation in terms of life expectancy. Castro-Vázquez's unison answer is simple: the biopedagogical power or cultural supremacy of the West over Japan is felt every corner of this ancient country that is proud of anything about their culture and science, except those of the West, namely, Western Europe and the U.S. The overall cultural sensation in the 21st c. Japan is not much different from that of the West and the U.S. in that most middle aged and senior citizens, both men and women, spend zillions of dollars in what many call the benefit of the West – new body shaping exercises and pills that go with them. The Japanese government, like its Western counterparts, has also declared war against obesity, when in fact the number of the overweight is far less than the Western average. The author thinks that the main drive toward this new cultural fad in Japan is its cultural tradition of putting mind and body as equals (i.e., fitness equates with sound mind), in addition to the class-based consciousness among the middle-class Japanese who fear of falling behind others in the upper echelon of society and white people who seem to do their best to remain fit.

However, the book fails to answer some of the puzzling aspects of Japanese culture in the realm of medicine, body, and personal care. First, why did Chinese medicine still survive and do better than some types of Western medicine in Japan, especially in the realm of personal care? Where is Foucault here? In fact, many of those pills are based on the biopedagogy deriving from the ancient wisdom from China, not the West. One example as such is that having a chubby body and face was a sign of sagaciousness, not laziness, in Japan. Sumo wrestlers in Japan are still revered and adored by the Japanese as strong, traditional, and ethical, as long as they remain super obese with full of adipose tissues. What is interesting is the fact that this Sumo culture is now being exported to the West and other part of the world.

Second, the book preemptively rejects the view of culture that underlines its material conditions. Metabolic disorder, which is counted by many as a new medical discovery that is threatening the 21st c. men and women in the developed world, has in fact been debated among critics of the pharmaceutical industry as a planned marketing of its new pills, including the hypertension pills (e.g., amlodipine besylate), which many doctors consider as unwarranted medicaments.

Ingyu Oh is a Professor of Sociology at Kansai Gaidai University, Osaka, Japan, and the editor of Culture and Empathy. As the former president of the World Association for Hallyu Studies, he has written several articles and books about Hallyu.