Abstract:

In late nineteenth and early twentieth century Korea, with the arrival of Japanese colonialism and Western missionaries, and alongside the emergence of Korean nationalism, Western biomedicine was becoming institutionalized and a plethora of novel biomedical knowledge about the female body and women’s health and disease was emerging. Puinbyŏng—women’s diseases, usually gynaecological ones, including venereal diseases, infertility, irregular menstruation, and frigidity—was one of the most widely discussed sets of illnesses among both biomedical professionals and intellectuals in colonial Korea (1910-1945). These women’s diseases were known to have a detrimental effect on sexual reproduction and the health of the fetus, and provoked anxieties among both Koreans and Japanese. For Korean medical scientists, social reformers, and nationalists, the management of puinbyŏng was a major subject of debate, as they believed that Korea’s future independence would depend upon the reproduction of healthy Korean subjects. Simultaneously, among Japanese colonial health officials and medical scientists, puinbyŏng was the subject of intense biomedical research. They considered it to be a window through which to reveal the truths about the Korean nation, race, tradition, and pre/modernity, as well as a formidable disease to manage for the purposes of securing the reproduction of human resources for the Japanese Empire. In my talk, I will in particular focus on Japanese obstetrician-gynecologists’ clinical and social-scientific studies on puinbyŏng in 1920s and 1930s Korea. I will show that for the Japanese, puinbyŏng served as grounds for a scientific differentiation of Korean bodies from Japanese bodies, and for specific scientific mechanisms that constructed Koreans as racially and biologically “other.”