

The Role of Culture in Making Psychiatric Diagnosis:  
Hwabyung (火病) and Neurasthenia (神經衰弱)

My paper looks at two psychiatric illnesses and discusses their social and cultural dimensions. The two illnesses to be compared are the Korean affliction called *hwabyung*, and the once-popular Western malady labeled neurasthenia, a common ailment in 19th century America.

Neurasthenia was defined as “a disorder characterized by feelings of fatigue and lassitude,” which is caused by the nervous system. That definition could fit most people at some time or another. *Hwabyung*, on the other hand, means “fire illness.” Koreans believe that chronic distress can cause the onset of *hwabyung*, which manifests itself mainly through somatic symptoms of chest pressure, unease and fatigue. It, too, could afflict many people.

While focusing on symptoms and relevant diagnoses, psychiatric knowledge unfortunately fails to explain the social and cultural dimensions of the illness process. Using neurasthenia and *hwabyung*, in this paper I examine the ways gender, class, and medical knowledge intersect with each other and produce psychiatric diagnoses in two distinctive historical times and cultures. This form of illness analysis lets us take a new perspective in order to understand psychiatric illness not as a cluster of symptoms but as a product of culture and the social, cultural, economic, and political conditions of a particular time.

Key words: Hwabyung (火病), Neurasthenia (神經衰弱), Culture, History, Psychiatric Diagnosis