Michelle Tien King (2014). ***Between Birth and Death: Female Infanticide in Nineteenth-Century China*****. Stanford: Stanford University Press. xiii + 250 pp., ISBN 9780804785983.**

It seems obvious and trite to discuss female infanticide in China. Female infanticide has long been regarded as a product of backward cultural practices and gender inequities under an authoritarian, patriarchal regime bent on enacting and enforcing a "birth" sub-regime. Along with footbinding, female infanticide becomes a marker of traditional China's decadent culture and regressive past. This perception of China is reinforced by first a single-child policy and then a prevalent desire to have even smaller, nuclear families in an increasingly affluent society, which have "amplified the effects of a long-standing societal preference for sons, derived from a traditional Confucian value system that still lingers in present form" (p.2).

The common perception of female infanticide as a uniquely Chinese feature is perplexing. As Michelle Tien King has observed, examples of infanticide abounded throughout the classical world and Western history. Her book aims to dismantle the historical fixture of a "naturalized and eternal relationship between female infanticide and Chinese culture and [to build] that association instead as a product of historical processes of the nineteenth century" (p.3). Looking at perceptions rather than practices of female infanticide, King examines male attitudes toward infanticide; men discussed female infanticide whose most intimate actors—mothers, midwives, mothers-in-law—were "almost never addressed in written sources" (p.3). She argues that we have anachronistically projected our understanding of female infanticide onto a complex set of conditions in late Qing China, where infanticide was a response to unwanted children—an undesirable yet unavoidable result of normal sex relations (p.7). Female infanticide had been a "local, moral, philanthropic issue"—a localized "vulgar custom" perceived by Chinese male elites—before it became a "cross-cultural, political, scientific issue of international concern" in the nineteenth century, after Western diplomats, missionaries, and travelers wrote about female infanticide in China and helped shape the worldwide perception of female infanticide as a "totemic marker of Chinese society" (p.10). Such writings dismissed more nuanced Chinese interpretations of female infanticide, perpetuating instead for their agendas a sense that female infanticide was, almost without censure, prevalent in China. Foreign religious missions organized humanitarian actions to rescue the unwanted Chinese children, but they met strong Chinese resistance, galvanized in the larger milieu of Chinese-foreign antagonism and geopolitics. The book is a history of silence, of the absent bodies of the ephemeral infant girls hijacked by both imperialistic and nationalistic discourses with global resonance in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

The book opens with the "infanticidal mother" woman Ye, a late imperial Chinese woman who described her own experience of infanticide. Ye chose to drown her own infant daughter given her helplessness and poverty. Late imperial Chinese morality books reveal that women killed their own daughters because they foresaw the "pains and miseries" the latter would have to suffer in a patriarchal world (p.45). Chapter two turns to elite men's moral reform of their local communities. Female

infanticide was a regionally specific custom, and scholars such as Yu Zhi (1809-1874) had tried to discourage it in their didactic writings and village lectures.

Chapter three is the beginning of what I see as part two of the book: the advent of self-taught foreign Sinologists and missionaries in China. While Chinese sources emphasize morality and local acts of philanthropy, Western sources were "exercises of 'scientific' investigation, with the general purpose of informing European and American audiences about the cultural mores of an exotic land." Female infanticide was one of many Chinese cultural markers in the Western—predominantly British and French—"textual excursions to China" (pp.78-79). Western writers, most notably members of the Royal Asiatic Society, regarded female infanticide as a synecdoche of the entire Chinese civilization, passing off their judgmental observations as objective facts. The irony came when they deployed Chinese anti-infanticide moral tracts as evidence of the prevalence of female infanticide in China. Missionaries created data, illustrations, and tales to explain the extent of female infanticide in China to instill compassion and passion in the hearts of a Western audience, which would further their cause of proselytizing their religious and scientific ideas. Chapter four analyzes the sympathetic efforts at saving unwanted Chinese children by American and European Catholic schoolchildren, who had been exposed to the Western literature on Chinese infanticide. These schoolchildren became missionaries who aimed to "create an indigenous army of Christians to spread the message of salvation in China" by "saving, baptizing, and rearing unwanted Chinese children to adulthood" (p.118).

Chapter five examines the change in perception of female infanticide from a local custom to a "transgression against the nation's population, robbing it of potentially productive female citizens and threatening China's survival on the world stage" (p.150). Foreign orphanages vied with the Chinese for the right to save Chinese children. The competition extended to labor, land, and other resources at the provincial and prefectural levels. After the Tianjin Massacre in 1870, Chinese villagers grew suspicious of foreign intentions of rescuing and caring for unwanted children. Chinese and foreigners accused each other of infanticide, and King argues that the Tianjin Massacre articulated the issue of unwanted Chinese children as one "requiring a particular *Chinese* solution" (pp.158-159). As a result of exposure to Western "secular" ideas and shifting geopolitics, husbands, not wives alone, were now blamed for committing infanticide. Physical brutality rather than karmic retribution was emphasized. As China became republican, female infanticide became highly politicized, and was at once an issue of women, population, and nation building. The book concludes with an analysis of the One-Child policy in light of the nineteenth-century experiences of female infanticide in China.

The book has explained how female infanticide was problematized as a uniquely Chinese phenomenon. It has successfully reconciled empirical data comprised of multiple and sometimes divergent strands. Highly readable, it deserves to be read by both specialists and students of cross-cultural exchanges and late imperial Chinese society.

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