

# CROSS-CURRENTS



## EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

### REVIEW ESSAY

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#### **Gender and the Politics of Female Infanticide and Prostitution Regulation**

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Michelle T. King. *Between Birth and Death: Female Infanticide in Nineteenth-Century China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014. 264 pp. \$50.00 (cloth/e-book).

Elizabeth J. Remick. *Regulating Prostitution in China: Gender and Local Statebuilding, 1900–1937*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014. 288 pp. \$45.00 (cloth/e-book).

The two works under review are both compelling historical studies that use gender as a category of analysis to make important contributions to our understanding of the construction of the modern Chinese state, the periodization of modern Chinese history, and the political and cultural significance of controlling the female body. While both books engage with gender as broadly construed, they adopt different approaches. Michelle King's analysis focuses on discursive representations that took place, for the most part, outside the context of the state—what Confucian elites, foreign experts and missionaries, and Chinese nationalists wrote about female infanticide over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This discursive approach has been used before but rarely to such insightful effect. King's research deepens our understanding of gender and imperialism in the nineteenth century by illustrating how imperialist notions of China as a backward and heathen place were constructed in part on dubious claims that identified female infanticide as an emblematically Chinese cultural practice. Elizabeth Remick's gender analysis, in contrast, centers on the state institutions that were developed in the early 1900s to regulate prostitution, including tax policies, licensing fees, zoning regulations, medical examinations, and police supervision. Her study of the newly erected local and provincial government regulatory regimes is a pathbreaking demonstration of how the regulation of gender roles was at the heart of state-building efforts in early twentieth-century China.

King's book focuses on the nineteenth century (a period that has received far less attention from gender historians of China than the twentieth century), while Remick focuses on the early twentieth century. The two books' combined temporal coverage reveals a discernible shift in the regulation of gender relations: from a framework anchored by Confucian morality, in which gender relations were primarily subject to moral instruction and regulation, to one anchored by the nation-state, in which gender relations came under the purview of institutional regulation. The modern regulatory institutions were arguably more intrusive and direct.

Ultimately, what is at stake in both King's study of perceptions of female infanticide and Remick's study of government policies toward prostitution is the female body and competing claims over it. Apart from the violent physical acts of control to which the female body was subjected, including death by drowning and sexual penetration on a commercial basis, both books highlight the multiple ways in which the female body bore far more political weight than any corresponding male body. As shown by the discussions of infanticide, the infant bodies that were extinguished shortly after birth were already inscribed with cultural significance. Even though boys were not spared the fate of infanticide (*ninü shangzi*, or "drowning daughters and harming sons," was, after all, the full rendering of the term), it was female infanticide that generated the most highly charged moral and political exhortations. Prostitution, too, was not limited to female prostitution—male prostitution thrived during late imperial China. But in the early twentieth century, only the bodies of female prostitutes were subject to the modern regulatory regime that required submission to photographic identification and intrusive physical examinations, and only the figure of the female prostitute emerged as a symbol of the nation (Hershatter 1997). In addition, as Remick points out, the identities of prostitutes' male customers remained largely anonymous, and their bodies remained free from the scrutiny of public health inspections.

From the Shang dynasty era (ca. 1500–1045 B.C.E.), when oracle bones deemed the birth of a daughter to be "inauspicious," to 2010, when census estimates put the gender ratio at birth in China at as high as 118 males to 100 females, son preference seems to be a particularly enduring and distinctive feature of Chinese civilization. King wants to change this perception of gender bias, son preference, and female infanticide as timeless and emblematic features of Chinese culture. She aims to denaturalize the association between female infanticide and China by powerfully demonstrating how ideas of female infanticide as a particularly Chinese practice

(female infanticide as irrefutable proof of Oriental cruelty) arose quite late, in the context of the imperialist nineteenth century, and by showing that unwanted children constituted in fact a worldwide problem, rather than a mostly Chinese one.

King's fascinating book includes an introduction, conclusion, and five carefully researched chapters that address female infanticide from the perspective of five different groups: women, Confucian scholars, Western China experts, Western missionaries, and Chinese nationalists. King draws on a variety of primary sources, including late imperial morality books (*shanshu*) and morality plays (*shanju*), generally written by elite men for commoner men for didactic purposes; missionary tracts, such as Jesuit Fr. Gabriel Palatre's 1878 work on infanticide in China; and major newspapers, such as Shanghai's *Shenbao*. The book is also richly illustrated with images from nineteenth-century Confucian morality books and Christian missionary publications. All the chapters feature conscientiously framed discussions and arresting vignettes that are absorbing and accessible to undergraduates.

Instead of asking about China's "missing girls" and trying to calculate how many of them there were, King asks questions about how those around the dead infants talked about them. She describes female infanticide as a "hidden social practice" (3) and a "hidden demographic practice" (6) that does not lend itself particularly well to a historical study of practice or demography. Unlike previous scholars who have approached female infanticide from the perspective of critiquing Chinese patriarchy or demography, King's approach focuses on the discourse of female infanticide. She justifies her focus on representations by arguing that only a study of changing perceptions of female infanticide can succeed in historicizing the subject. By examining what different groups of people said about female infanticide over different periods of time and for different audiences, King is able to trace shifting perceptions, thereby showing that female infanticide was not a static feature of Chinese life from the earliest times to the present. She delineates several significant changes in her historical overview. In the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.), reasons cited for infanticide ranged across a much broader range of issues than just son preference, including poverty and birth deformities. As late as the Song dynasty (960–1279), infanticide (both male and female) was believed to have stemmed from economic pressure. Only in the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties did female infanticide become the rule, with male infanticide an exception. The implication of King's periodization is that it was during the Ming-Qing that Chinese gender hierarchy reached its peak. Here, her

findings dovetail with the work of historians Kathryn Bernhardt (1999) on restrictions on women's property rights, Janet Theiss (2004) on the cult of chastity, and Weijing Lu (2008) on the faithful maiden cult, among others. China's encounter with the West in the nineteenth century took place on the heels of this period of contracting gender restrictions.

In chapter 1, King outlines the basic beliefs surrounding female infanticide. In late imperial China, stories of female infanticide were largely told as morality tales, in which the mother, father, midwife, neighbors, and sisters were all subject to karmic rewards and punishments for their role in either enacting or preventing infanticide. Midwives and mothers-in-law who ruthlessly encouraged infanticide most often served as the villains of these stories, punished by various kinds of physical torment or deprived of a son. Meanwhile, kind neighbors or sisters who interceded to stop a drowning emerged as the heroines whose karmic rewards were almost always linked to the birth of a son who would go on to enjoy success on the civil service examinations. Chapter 2 examines the ways in which Confucian scholars and philanthropists, like the schoolteacher Yu Zhi (1809–1874), condemned the practice of infanticide, which they viewed as a vulgar local custom. Yu Zhi delivered village lectures, wrote morality plays, compiled school readers, and provided instructions on establishing charitable institutions to combat the practice of infanticide.

Chapters 3 through 5 trace the transformation of perceptions of female infanticide as a result of cross-cultural interactions with the West. Chapter 3 turns to the observations of Western sinologists, like those who participated in the Royal Asiatic Society's 1885 debate on female infanticide. These Western scholars held themselves out as experts and tried to adopt a scientific approach to infanticide, although, as King points out, their evidence was fragmentary and their methods were seriously flawed. Significantly, they were also the first group of commentators to interpret female infanticide, alongside Chinese customs like foot-binding and legal punishments like death by slicing, as markers of Chinese barbarism. Chapter 4 moves from Western sinologists to missionaries (with some overlap between the discursive categories), who also condemned female infanticide and singled out the supposed prevalence of female infanticide as evidence of China's heathenism. King explores the ways in which the Holy Childhood Association, in particular, trumpeted the cruel aspects of female infanticide, like the fascinating but gruesome "baby tower" images of mini pagoda-like structures with small openings into which piles of baby corpses were supposedly deposited, in order to galvanize Euro-American

supporters, including children, to contribute to the missionary cause. Chapter 5 focuses on the early twentieth century, when older notions of moral retribution, centered on the karmic rewards and retributions that accrued as the result of an act of infanticide, gave way to newer Nationalist concerns about the effects of female infanticide on the well-being of the nation. The early twentieth century also gave rise to reinterpretations of female infanticide as a women's issue—reformers cast it as one of the many ways in which Chinese women were victimized by patriarchal traditions. One wishes that this chapter also included a discussion of Nationalist (and Communist) government regulations prohibiting infanticide. The conclusion delves into the contemporary resonances of female infanticide, including the gender ratio imbalance noted earlier, sex-selective abortion, and international adoptions of Chinese girls.

King's decision to focus on the discourse of female infanticide reaps significant rewards but also falls short. Female infanticide is a fascinating topic for this type of discursive treatment, because it intersected with so many issues over time, including Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian notions of retribution; poverty and survival; foot-binding and the discourse of female victimhood; and contemporary controversies over sex-selective abortion. King's discerning research reveals the periods in which the topic took on highly charged significance (as opposed to other time periods, when it was simply treated as one of the bundle of things it meant to be poor). However, one of the major disadvantages of focusing on perceptions rather than practice is that the discursive changes alone can seem isolated from the socioeconomic changes to which they were related. For example, the book might have included a sustained discussion of escalating dowry demands and increasing rural poverty and their intimate linkage with infanticide during the Ming-Qing. In light of the survival logic identified by historian Matthew Sommer (2000) in his work on the eighteenth century, King would have enriched her examination of the elite discourse on female infanticide by underscoring infanticide as a last resort of the destitute. One other shortcoming is the substantial overlap between the discourse of infanticide in general and that of female infanticide in particular that sometimes blurs King's gender analysis.

Finally, King's discursive treatment of female infanticide is short on female voices (though the mewling sound of the baby girl described by poet Su Shi [1037–1101] in the opening anecdote is utterly unforgettable). This is no fault of the author, who does her best to bring female voices into the conversation, especially in chapter 1. Yet one wishes that there were

extant poetry that expressed the web of emotions women felt about such acts. This would have been a fascinating place to explore the emotions that were associated with this practice—pain, disappointment, anger, sadness, and regret, among others. There are some hints of these emotions in the material that King presents, such as the confession of a woman named Ye from the seventeenth century about the shame she felt at having to kill her first-born daughter; Yu Zhi's descriptions of sorrowful and heartbroken mothers; and Su Shi's eleventh-century letter that describes how parents had to close their eyes and turn their faces in order to complete the deed of drowning their baby. The confession of infanticide by one of the elderly subjects of the seminal documentary film *Small Happiness* (1984) suggests that the emotions behind such acts might be a rich topic for future study.

In the second book under review, Remick boldly asserts that “gender needs to be written into the story of statebuilding in China, even though women, usually barred from political life at that time in China, were not visible political actors” (2). In pioneering fashion, Remick sets out to do exactly that. She convincingly demonstrates that the regulation of gender roles was at the heart of the Chinese state's transformation from a system in which local governments performed a set of relatively circumscribed functions related to collecting taxes and administering justice to a modern state engaged in a full panoply of regulatory functions. Remick carefully shows how, as the modern state expanded to assume services in the areas of public education, social welfare, public safety, public health, and public transportation, among others, prostitution revenues became crucial to the funding and creation of a web of institutions that carried out these new functions. In fact, she argues, the extent of prostitution regulation undertaken by a municipal government helped determine the reach of the state.

Remick's book is clearly written and organized. She draws on, as her main sources, municipal revenue and spending records, as well as Civil Affairs Bureau records gathered from several municipal and provincial archives. The majority of the book consists of three case studies that illustrate different types of prostitution regulation regimes. Hangzhou exemplified the first and most common approach, light regulation, entailing light taxation and monitoring. The light taxes collected on prostitution left the city without the means to fund new state institutions. Guangzhou represented the second, revenue-intensive, approach. Here, heavy taxes formed an important source of funding for a wide range of local government activities, including the establishment of schools and hospitals. Remick goes so far as to argue that prostitution-related

income created a “crucial source of state revenue without which there could not have been a fully articulated modern state” (20). Kunming exemplified the third model, the coercion-intensive approach. This last form of regulation featured police-monopolized, state-run brothels and was not very common. Remick’s reasons for not selecting Shanghai as a case study seem clear given the number of previous prostitution studies based there, but why she did not choose Beijing or Tianjin as a case study is less clear. Beijing, especially, seems like it would have been a good case study, since it served as a model for reform by other cities, and it would also have provided some regional balance between north and south China.

Chapter 1 traces the trajectory of the policing model for prostitution from its origins in nineteenth-century Europe to Meiji Japan and then to late Qing China. In the international context, China was a relative latecomer, adopting a regulatory regime in the early 1900s when it was already on the decline in Europe. The general model of police regulation of prostitution entailed several aspects: registering with the police, paying licensing fees, submitting to health inspections and zoning and other operating regulations, and establishing rescue homes and industrial training schools to “reform” prostitutes and provide them with other means of livelihood. Certain modifications came about in China, where the regulations applied solely to brothel prostitution, as opposed to independent prostitution; the regular police, rather than special morals police, administered the regulations; and the prostitute rescue organizations were run by the state rather than by private charitable organizations.

Each of the three case studies in chapters 2 through 4 includes a brief local history before turning to the regulation of prostitution. Chapter 2 introduces the light regulatory approach of Hangzhou, described by Remick as a “failed treaty port” eclipsed by Shanghai (57). During the late Qing, prostitution was subject to occasional taxation. In an attempt to modernize its government structure, the Hangzhou municipal authority passed a set of police regulations in 1914 that formally regulated prostitution. The resulting stream of revenue raised from prostitution was small and earmarked for police use. Chapter 3, perhaps the most important chapter of the book, addresses the revenue-intensive approach to prostitution regulation adopted by the city of Guangzhou. In Guangzhou, taxes on prostitution “produced vast quantities of revenue,” second only to the house tax (98). In addition to the registration tax on brothels and prostitutes levied by other cities, Guangzhou also levied a per-trick tax that operated like a transaction tax. On top of the Guangzhou City taxes on prostitution, Guangdong Province placed

an additional surtax. For both municipal and provincial governments, the prostitution revenues were “indispensable” (146), as they helped fund important state-building projects like new schools, roads, and militias. Chapter 4 delves into the uniquely coercion-intensive regulation regime of Kunming. Here, brothels were legal and state-operated.

Chapter 5, on prostitute rescue institutions (*jiliang suo*), examines state efforts to reform prostitutes by finding suitable husbands to marry them off to. Somewhat surprisingly, Remick finds no Qing precedent for these *jiliang suo*, identifying the Shanghai Door of Hope Mission as the main source of inspiration for these homes. This is also surprising because the rest of the prostitution regulation apparatus derived from modern-style police reform models. Unlike with female infanticide, late imperial Confucian elites did not condemn prostitution or devote morality books to reforming prostitutes; rather, they broadly accepted the flowery world culture of prostitution. It was only during the twentieth century that modern state-building efforts formally regulated prostitution, and around the same time that modern notions of public health and women’s rights led to movements demanding the prohibition of prostitution. Overall, the long history of prostitution in China tells us much about the state regulation of gender as a matter of class during the Ming-Qing, as a matter of gender performance after the mid-Qing, and as a matter of institutional regulation in the early twentieth century.

To sum up, female infanticide and, to a lesser extent, prostitution must be counted among the bleak topics that feed assumptions about the plight of Chinese women. King and Remick should be admired for the exemplary way in which they have written these rather depressing subjects into fascinating histories.

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