

Imperfect Conceptions: Medical Knowledge, Birth Defects and Eugenics in China



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himself on Kropotkin's opposition to Marx, Shifu criticized Marxist ideas in great detail, in the process making Marxist principles quite well known (albeit negatively) to Chinese readers. Though many have argued that Marxist ideas were not introduced into China until 1918, Krebs shows that well before this time, socialist and Marxist thought had become familiar to most Chinese intellectuals, in no small part because of the writings of Shifu.

Shifu did not live to see the groundswell of interest in the various ideas he pioneered in China. He died in early 1915, just as *New Youth* was set to begin publication. Dying early, Shifu never faced the choice of those colleagues who lived on, most of whom eventually had to choose sides between the Guomindang and the Chinese Communist Party. Because of his early death, his ideas and his reputation have come down to us relatively unsullied, although somewhat ignored. This book provides a valuable service in reacquainting many with Shifu's life and putting his ideas in perspective.

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FRANK DIKÖTTER. *Imperfect Conceptions: Medical Knowledge, Birth Defects and Eugenics in China*. New York: Columbia University Press. 1998. Pp. ix, 226. \$27.50.

In early 1995, the People's Republic of China proposed a "Eugenics Law" aimed at discouraging reproduction by the physically or mentally impaired. Chinese leaders, who considered these "inferior births" a substantial fiscal burden on the society and state, seemed unprepared for the resulting uproar in the West. A change in title to the "Maternal and Infant Health Law" did not prevent denunciations by newspaper and journal editorialists or boycotts by a number of national genetics societies and many individual scientists of the International Congress of Genetics held in Beijing in August 1998. Because the law included provisions permitting doctors to sterilize individuals with (undefined) serious hereditary disorders, it was said to contravene the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that all adults have the right to found a family, and to violate basic norms governing the provision of genetic services, according to which no reproductive decision is right or wrong, and clinicians should be scrupulously neutral in their dealing with clients.

From the intensity of the reaction, it might seem that the principle of procreative liberty is long established in the West. However, as Frank Dikötter notes in his short but extensively researched account of the history of eugenics in China, the view that the larger society and state would be better off if certain kinds of people did not reproduce was common in the United States and Europe not just during the interwar period but into the 1950s, when on many conventional accounts of the history of eugenics, the movement was

dead. Thus, sterilization rates in some Scandinavian countries reached their peak after World War II.

As the reference to the Scandinavian states implies, the idea of controlling reproduction appealed not just to Nazis but to many political progressives. Dikötter notes that eugenics was not a well-defined doctrine but rather a way of talking about social problems in modern, scientific terms. It everywhere appealed to those with a modernizing agenda. Although eugenics in China has roots stretching back to the late Imperial period, it blossomed during the Republican period, which was characterized by a deep faith in the power of science to counter tradition and to regenerate society.

A number of factors converged to make China fertile ground for eugenics; these include a patrilinear culture that stressed the need to regulate reproduction for the sake of protecting the lineage, a holistic approach to medicine, and the priority given to the needs of the collectivity. Of course, as in any culture, opinion is not monolithic. But it does seem that among important sections of the urban elite, support for eugenics is strong. Even euthanasia of impaired infants is seriously discussed. As with many earlier eugenics movements in the West, the meaning of "inferior births" is shaped by race and class bias. Thus, urban elites fear being swamped by ethnic minorities and peasants, who are considered intellectually poorly endowed. Such views are promoted in a wide variety of fora: eugenics symposia, health manuals, articles in learned journals, popular magazines, even the *People's Daily*. Since the late 1980s, they have also been expressed in provincial-level sterilization laws and local marriage regulations.

General histories of the movement (my own included) do not even mention China, although it is clear that eugenic currents in that country run both wide and deep. This book is thus a valuable contribution to the comparative history of eugenics, as well as essential reading for anyone interested in contemporary Chinese attitudes respecting eugenics and nature-nurture issues. I do wish it were more reflective about the history, meaning, and value of the principle of respect for individual autonomy, whose superiority over communitarian values is simply taken for granted. The book also repeats some conventional but dubious claims about eugenicists' scientific errors. For example, it is said that sterilization would not significantly reduce the incidence of mental illness, since most of those affected as the result of heredity will have normal parents. As illustration, the author cites Lionel Penrose's conclusion that eliminating the gene for the recessive condition PKU would require sterilizing one percent of the British population. But this is a misleading example of the futility of eugenics, both because eugenicists rarely if ever aimed to reduce the incidence of the target trait to zero and also because PKU is a very rare disorder, and the efficacy of selection against a recessive depends on its initial incidence. In any case, the attempt to show that eugenics has been discredited on technical grounds runs against the grain of the

book, which rightly stresses that science can not provide a basis for normative claims about the social order. But these are small reservations. Dikötter provides a generally nuanced and certainly much-needed historical perspective on contemporary Chinese eugenics. His book should do much to raise the level of discussion of policies that are decried more often than understood.

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GREGORY SMITS. *Visions of Ryukyu: Identity and Ideology in Early-Modern Thought and Politics*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. 1999. Pp. 213. \$47.00.

The history of the Ryukyu as a quasi-independent state with a semicolonial status vis-à-vis shogunal Japan via the Satsuma domain, whose military presence was carefully kept out of view from China (with which Ryukyu had a tributary relationship), that Gregory Smits presents us in this excellent study is chronologically framed by 1609, when Satsuma invaded the kingdom and whisked its king off to Japan for two years, and 1879, when it was annexed to Japan but in fact became Japan's first colony. Well armed with Prasenjit Duara's insights in the narrative historical forms in which premodern "nations" can be cast (a refinement of Benedict Anderson's theories of "imagined communities"), Smith explores the various ways in which the tension resulting from the ambiguous political status of Ryukyu with China, fountainhead of culture and grantor of investiture to its kings, and with Satsuma, militarily dominant and economically indispensable, was translated into Ryukyu politics and visions of identity, always unstable, precarious, adjustable, and contestable. This balanced and well-documented study is a fine example of a new area of Japanese history that has recently opened up, where the themes of marginality, colonialism, the history of representations, and relevant new theories come together. Along the way, Smits presents us with an interesting variety of Confucianism in thought and action in a "borderland" situation hitherto unexplored in Western scholarship.

Smits distinguishes a number of early modern visions of Ryukyu as they draw upon Buddhism or Confucianism, introduce Sinitic modes of ceremonial organization or take Satsuma as their model, or try to carve out a more autonomous course centered on Ryukyu itself. In these constructions, culture, polity, policies, and politics were invariably intermixed: the most influential visionaries were also powerful political figures. Thus Shō Shōken, who became prime minister in 1666, was well aware of Satsuma's military power and of the trade benefits with Japan, and he introduced reforms modeled on the Satsuma domain, reorganizing villages and seeking to extricate the king from religious ceremonies where he functioned in a subordinate role to high priestess-shamanesses. Tei

Junsoku, on the other hand, scholar of Chinese studies, poet, diplomat to Edo and Beijing (who spent many years in China during the course of five visits), and royal advisor, Confucianized the administration around the turn of the eighteenth century.

Although the government, starting in 1392, had maintained a group of China specialists, originally immigrants, in Kumemura, a settlement near the capital, their knowledge of China was geared toward diplomatic and trade relationships and had no influence on the royal government, where ceremonies were controlled by Shingon monks from Japan until well into the seventeenth century. By that time, the Kumemura community had fallen into decline, but its fortunes were turned around by Tei Junsoku. Between 1650 and 1729, its population increased five-fold, attracting talent from throughout the kingdom. National Confucian rites were established, and Chinese studies were reoriented toward policy formulation. Sai On (1682–1761), instructor to the king and specialist in geomancy, pushed Confucianization further. According to Smits, "He deployed Confucian ideology, sometimes in unique ways, in an attempt to minimize the impact of Satsuma's political power on Ryukyu while simultaneously empowering Ryukyuan to become masters of their own destiny" (p. 71). He took the initiative in introducing forestation policies, making a new land survey, regulating village life and customs, banning prostitution (thereby angering the nobility), outlawing shamanism (which angered the peasants), and building a national university in the capital (which caused the Kumemura Confucians, marginalized and threatened in their livelihood, to riot). He even introduced a limited civil service examination for lower and mid-level specialists. Ryukyu's eighteenth century, although obviously not without its tensions and conflicts, was economically and culturally a golden age. By the time the Japanese imperial government replaced Satsuma and China, however, the Ryukyu economy and the "Confucian state" were in shambles.

Throughout his analysis, Smits pays also special attention to the ways Ryukyu's past was refashioned again and again by the protagonists of his narrative. In his introduction and epilogue, he traces this further by discussing the fluidity of the fragmented visions of the Ryukyu past that continues to mark the history of the islands to this day. This reduces considerably the importance of the premodern/modern divide that informs our understanding of the last couple of centuries and provides a welcome historical perspective on contemporary Okinawan politics.

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SERÇUK ESENBEL. *Even the Gods Rebel: The Peasants of Takaino and the 1871 Nakano Uprising in Japan*. (Monographs of the Association for Asian Studies, number 57.) Ann Arbor, Mich.: Association for Asian Studies. 1998. Pp. 415. \$38.00.