

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



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Imperfect Conceptions: Medical Knowledge, Birth Defects and Eugenics in China, by Frank Dikötter. London: C. Hurst and Co., 1998. ix + 226 pp. £25 (hardcover).

When I was a small child, I would visit my grandmother, who would spend several minutes each visit pulling the lobes of my ears with force, hoping that I would be endowed with wealth and wisdom. This book helped me to understand why. Frank Dikötter discusses the art of physiognomy and how Chinese have attempted to determine personal destinies through facial features (pp. 15–16). He also notes how the Chinese have sought to develop techniques aimed at assuring healthy sons. While it would be extreme to suggest that my late grandmother was doing her bit for race improvement for the Chinese community in Australia, it does make us think about what extent tradition informs present-day attitudes to the body, even within the diaspora.

Dikötter provides general readers with an accessible study that requires no specialized knowledge. It begins with the promulgation of a controversial law in the People's Republic in 1995 aimed at restricting imperfect births. The book is devoted to situating this law within the broader context of the history of eugenics in China. At a time when the country's one-child policy continues to attract attention, the study usefully links the law with the spread of medical knowledge on reproductive health, and more generally with Chinese attitudes to the body. Both eugenics and the one-child policy represent government attempts to control the sexual and reproductive lives of the people. While the one-child policy has more to do with quantity, eugenic concerns are aimed at improving the "quality" of the population.

Dikötter's main argument is that while we might prefer to think of discontinuities in modern Chinese history, recent developments owe a debt to a "eugenic vision" that emerged between the wars. He suggests that modernity may not necessarily involve a rupture with tradition, but rather what he calls "cultural reconfigurations". This may help us to understand what it means to grow up being "Chinese". And in terms of my other persona, there are enough insights and footnotes to satisfy historians of science like myself. A bibliography, glossary and index found at the back of the book also help.

Although this small book is divided into five chapters, there are really only three main chapters sandwiched between an introduction and brief conclusion. The first substantive chapter examines medical theories and birth defects in late-imperial China. Based on an analysis of medical handbooks, Dikötter argues that the unborn child embodied a convergence of interests of the mother, father, medical experts, scholars and government officials. He manages to present complex ideas in a lucid and engaging manner, careful not to overgeneralize or, much as he might be tempted, sensationalize sensitive topics such as infanticide. He draws our attention to the importance of the spread of medical publications from the mid-16th century and shows how some writers used medical terms that drew an analogy between the human body and the body politic (p. 23). Even the lunar and menstrual cycles were correlated, suggesting linkages between the macro and micro. The pregnant woman was linked with her environment. A key

point is that medical knowledge in the Ming and Qing periods increasingly made reference to birth defects (p. 29), something that was interpreted as reflecting broader social and moral ills.

The next chapter, devoted to Republican China, begins with how things did go wrong. The display of “freaks” and “monsters” at exhibitions and fairs attracted much media attention in the 1930s. They were reminders of racial degeneration and how society and the physical quality of the population had deteriorated, prompting calls for the regulation of reproduction. Dikötter shows that ideas of racial hygiene were widespread in the interwar period, but he is careful to point out that not all scholars agreed (p. 111).

The final major chapter examines eugenics in the PRC and the close relationship between science, medicine and the state. There were very real illnesses such as cholera, smallpox and tuberculosis to fight. In the 1950s and 1960s, Lysenkoism was dominant, namely the belief that acquired characteristics could be inherited and external influences could be manipulated. Genetic research was neglected.

With Deng Xiaoping’s rise to power in 1978, attempts to limit births were put into place. Dikötter suggests that the economic reforms and population policies that have been enacted have made for an environment that is more accepting of eugenic discourse. The 1995 law reminds us, though, that in China “quality” has been just as important as quantity.

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Anti-Drug Crusades in Twentieth-Century China: Nationalism, History, and State Building, by Zhou Yongming. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999. xii + 195 pp. US\$64.00 (hardcover), A\$22.95 (paperback).

Today, China, like many other countries, is facing a drug problem, one that has been resurgent in the People’s Republic since the late 1970s and is becoming more and more acute. Drug problems have a long history in modern China, dating back to the 19th century or earlier. Throughout the 20th century, anti-drug campaigns were launched sporadically, with varying degrees of success. What began as an opium problem over a century ago has become a problem of heroin and other narcotic drugs. The book under review is the first comprehensive study of those campaigns, beginning in 1906 during the last years of the Qing Dynasty and covering the Nationalist period and the first decade of Communist rule through to the close of the 20th century.

This is a useful and readable book. Zhou Yongming challenges the paradigm that has often been applied to drug studies in the West. He does not treat the drug problem in China as a form of social deviance that harms society and the health of drug addicts. Instead, he analyses the anti-drug campaigns within a framework that takes account of Chinese nationalism, history and state building, treating the