

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



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perspective of the field which would make it simpler for readers to keep track of the rather detailed articles that follow and enable them to place these details in a European context. When Hsia in one paragraph opens with the fall of the Mongols, moves to the Ming and concludes with the fall of the Yuan dynasty, the reader must expect that a broad canvass is about to be unfolded. But the overview never appears. Instead the reader gets a rehash of rather well-known facts intermingled with more obscure pieces of information without any attempt at synthesis. Merely to state that Ricci came from a tradition of Hermeticism without any attempt to define the term (p. 11), or saying (p. 18) that when the Chinese rites were pronounced idolatrous, this 'was softened by the eight permissions in the ancestor cult in 1720' without further explanation, seems to me to treat most readers rather shabbily. This lack of consideration is also evident in the rendering of names. Why render a Portuguese name as if it were a cross between Italian and Spanish (Pereira is in the introduction called Galeotto Perera, and in later essays Pereira), and why not aid the reader with either the same form of that name (and quite a few more names) throughout the volume, or an index at the end of the book? In ch. ix the difference between the original article and this reprint is that the footnotes were originally at the bottom of each page, here they are collected at the end of the essay; not necessarily an improvement. Sometimes the bibliographical information is not complete. According to the reference at the beginning of ch. vii, it is a reprint from Quarterly bulletin. However, the same essay was also reprinted in 1965 in *Nine dragon screen, being reprints of nine addresses and papers presented to the China society 1909-1945*.

In Qian Zhongshu's article on 'China in the English literature of the eighteenth century' the author says (p. 159): 'Common sense and literary ethics seem to agree on the point that compilation is one remove less from original composition than translation, notwithstanding that there may be more fundamental brainwork in a conscientious translation than in a perfunctory compilation'. Unfortunately it must be said that this is a perfunctory compilation, in so far as it is a coming together of various articles on a very interesting theme, without any brainwork going into either editing, indexing or making this into a scholarly book.

ELISABETH EIDE

FRANK DIKÖTTER: *Imperfect conceptions: medical knowledge, birth defects, and eugenics in China*. x, 226 pp. London: Hurst & Company, 1998. £35.

Frank Dikötter's *Imperfect conceptions: medical knowledge, birth defects, and eugenics in China*, is in many ways a logical continuation and combination of his earlier works on evolving concepts of sexuality and race in China. Eugenics is a potent locus where anxieties about sexuality and (pseudo-)biological identity meet. The work is a thoroughly researched and

insightful treatment of a topic of both current and historical interest and, with the development of new genetic technologies, increasing importance.

Dikötter's work spans the years from the Ming to the Eugenics Law of 1995, dividing his book into eugenic concepts in the late empire, the Republic, and the People's Republic. He is to be commended for his nuanced and balanced treatment of all of these periods, rather than creating a simplified tradition as a backdrop for the modern. His great strength is his erudite mastery of a vast range of sources, both primary and secondary, in many languages, and his skill at placing the Chinese situation in a global context.

His chapter on medical theories in the late imperial period is based on a survey of a large number of medical textbooks from the Ming and Qing. From this survey Dikötter synthesizes a view that the birth of healthy offspring was dependent on parental moderation and self-control, particularly on the part of mothers. Emotional and physical restraint of the individual was for the sake of the lineage.

Some issues, such as the portrayal of deformed children and people with disabilities, are not thoroughly covered in the pre-modern chapter because of a lack of material. In this regard there are a few minor points where his research could be augmented: there are scattered references to people with disabilities in *biji* and, more problematically, literary tales of the strange. In the Tang tale 'Du Zichun', the hero in the course of a test of a vow of silence is born as a mute woman. The story illustrates the potential consequences of such difference: she must silently bear the insults of her relatives, and she is considered unmarriageable. She is finally married to a man who at first considers silence in a woman to be a virtue, but in the end grows furious enough to kill their only child. (Li Fuyan, *Xu xuguai lu*, in Wang Bijiang, *Tangren xiaoshuo*, Shanghai: 1957, 230-3.) *Liaozhai zhiyi* contains more than one story of a congenital defect (idiocy in 'Xiaocui' and underdeveloped genitals in 'Qiaoniang') cured by the intervention of foxes; the hero of 'Abao' has six fingers, as a mild mark of his oddity, to underscore his lovesick folly. (Pu Songling, *Liaozhai zhiyi huixiao huizhu huiping ben*, Shanghai: 1978, 7.1000-08, 2.256-4, 2.233-9.) This fictional use of deformities as another variety of strangeness, manipulated or cured by supernatural forces, is only tangentially related to medical knowledge but could be analysed to reveal cultural attitudes.

The texture and tone of the book change dramatically with the shift to the Republican period. The dense specifics of the earlier period seem to give way to more unified ideas, as medical knowledge becomes systematized as science. In the twentieth century the monster became the object of a new kind of more detailed knowledge, and the subject of public display. In fact this occurred somewhat earlier, in the late nineteenth century, as documented in the newspaper *Shenbao* and the pictorial *Dianshizhai huabao* (see an account of a three-armed man, 'San bi ren' *Shen bao*, 3 June 1876.) This more visible and specifically defined monster is the embodiment of anxieties about national degeneration. Dikötter argues that the

new language of medical knowledge is put in the service of older ideas of the link between mind and body which emphasize individual, and especially female, emotional and intellectual self-control as essential to the conception of healthy children. The ideal of self-cultivation appears in new guise as the individual is extolled to self-control to produce superior births, not for the family, but for the nation, as improvement in births is linked to the project of modernization. As opposed to the earlier medical textbooks, which still dealt with individual births, in this period the language of eugenics is directed to groups, as socially and genetically undesirable traits become linked.

In the section on eugenics in the People's Republic of China since 1949, primarily since 1979, the focus shifts again. There is a shift from dispersed discourse to the centralized state's efforts to control reproduction, while elite discourse supports those efforts. The first half of the chapter deals with the medical discourse on eugenics from both learned and popular sources, and the second with eugenics legislation. The book becomes more openly political: Dikötter hopes and doubts that his critique can help to shake the hold of eugenic ideas on contemporary China. The values which anchor his critique are these: the individual should be favoured over the collective, and genetic knowledge should provide choices, not simply responsibility. He criticizes the current state of eugenics in China not only as limiting individual choice, but as scientifically unsound, based on poorly defined ideas of genetic perfection and deformity.

There is an interesting relationship between the state's imperative to control reproduction and the population's own interest in having exceptional offspring. Dikötter cites popular publications on conception, and elsewhere cites tantalizing data from a public opinion survey which indicate that the Chinese population has a wide range of views on the proper treatment of handicapped infants. Although Dikötter insists the importance of such differences should not be exaggerated in the face of the power of a one-party state, one interesting area of future research his work suggests is ideas of eugenics at the popular level. How do the interests of the state and élites in controlling reproduction interact with individuals' interests in their children and the popular market of ideas? Dikötter has told a story of increasing control: will that trend continue in the coming decades, or are there unruly forces working against it?

Dikötter excels at depicting both complex continuities and changes in the periods he examines. The primary continuities are the lack of a clear distinction between mind and body, and the emphasis on collective control of reproduction. The changes are the nature of the group to which the individual must be submitted, and the power of science as rhetoric (185–6). As Dikötter notes, eugenics seems to be a global issue for the twentieth century. For both China and the world as a whole, issues of the relationship between medical knowledge, culture, and power can only become more urgent in the coming years with the explosion of genetic and reproductive technologies. Dikötter's final conclusion is that 'scientific knowledge cannot be relied upon to solve social

problems' (185), an argument which will become more relevant and controversial in the future.

RANIA HUNTINGTON

JOHN DE FRANCIS (ed.): *ABC Chinese–English Dictionary*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, and Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1996. xx, 897 pp.

JOHN DE FRANCIS (ed.): *ABC Chinese–English Dictionary*. Pocket Edition. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, and Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999. xx, 897 pp.

Since the idea of a dictionary keyed exclusively to the sounds of Chinese has struck some as a retrograde step, it is gratifying to see that this work has now been issued in a format which will be quite undeniably useful. Who, after all, can object to a dictionary which can be toted about discreetly in a Chinese-speaking environment so as to allow the language learner to check unfamiliar items of vocabulary quickly and easily? Only, I suspect, those who are concerned about their eyesight: in the good old days students had to wait until they started to use the notorious reprint of the ultimate *Peiwen yunfu* dictionary—the equivalent of the reduced-size *Oxford English Dictionary* without the magnifying glass—before their sight was irreparably harmed. The thought of a more fluent but more myopic generation of Chinese speakers inspires mixed feelings.

It is also to be regretted that the pocket edition simply represents a photographic trick played on its sturdier forebear, without any apparent corrections whatsoever. Even if one does not quibble over definitions, one simply cannot affirm that 'Kong Ming' (p. 342) was the 'name of Zhuge Liang on reaching manhood'. In fact, this particular error is all the more surprising, since the original larger printing has some claim to be used as a desk dictionary not on the grounds of its arrangement (most people read books and write at their desks, though some may listen to the radio) but on the grounds that it does take the problem of the concatenation of pinyin syllables seriously, and has condensed into a useful Appendix (pp. 835–45) the most authoritative pronouncements on this topic. Until a fuller set of criteria are published in a convenient and accessible format this appendix will doubtless form the first port of call for many authors and editors who cannot evade this thorny problem. Doubtless, too, the limited nature of the information given will continue to dissatisfy librarians, who will (I suspect) prefer to carry on not concatenating pinyin at all rather than catalogue books in a way that will create further work in future.

But every lexicographer soon learns that it is impossible to satisfy all of the people all of the time. At least the computerization of the very full data upon which this dictionary (or ostensibly these dictionaries) are based should allow for advances to be made more smoothly in