

project did not include the arts of modern and contemporary China, but perhaps another *Companion* is in the offing.”

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Sold People: Traffickers and Family Life in North China. By JOHANNA S. RANSMEIER. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2017. ix, 395 pp. ISBN: 9780674971974 (cloth).
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According to Chinese government estimates, 10,000 children are trafficked in China every year. Johanna Ransmeier's meticulous and highly engaging study of the trade in people in the late Qing and Republican periods provides an invaluable historical context for understanding the contemporary problem, while also revealing the changing dynamics of the family unit from an entirely fresh perspective. Drawing on new material from police and court records from 1870 to the 1930s, she shows that families at every level of society engaged in buying and selling wives, concubines, child brides, prostitutes, servants, apprentices, and adopted children. While the volume of sales increased at times of crisis, selling a relative was not, as it was generally presented and as has been assumed, a last resort countenanced only by the poorest families. It was rather a socially sanctioned choice facilitated by the universal acceptance of what Ransmeier terms “the transactional family.” Marriage was generally secured by the exchange of money—bride price or a dowry—and concubines were gained through payments in exchange for their “reproductive labor” (p. 12). Matchmakers arranged such transactions for a fee. This way of introducing women into the household normalized other transactions in human beings.

Ransmeier examines the trade in people from three perspectives: the legal framework that increasingly sought to contain it, yet enabled it to continue; the ordinary people who bought and sold relatives or were sold themselves; and the criminal world of professional traffickers. Her approach is to focus on a number of microhistories of individuals to bring the trade to life and render it comprehensible, and she presents these historical characters in surprising detail. Ransmeier justifies her focus on North China partly by the wealth of material she identified there, but also by the importance of demonstrating the full range of the trade in people, beyond the sex trade associated with port cities further south and the sale of *mui tsai* or slave-girls that is well-documented in Hong Kong. Ransmeier herself avoids the term “slavery,” almost excessively.

The first chapter focuses on the daughter of an official who was sold up to four times between 1870 and 1872, demonstrating that it was not only the poor who were traded. Ransmeier insists that “at no point was she ever sold as a slave” (p. 57), even though her husband apparently sold her to a man who kept the proceeds of her work as a seamstress. Arguably someone who was sold as property and who could not keep the income derived from her work was a slave, but Ransmeier maintains that the complex hierarchies of Chinese society cannot be reduced “to a binary of free and slave” (p. 8). Instead, she

advocates understanding “bondage as a process rather than a status” (p. 315), hence the book’s focus on transactions rather than victims’ lived experience as sold people.

Chapters 2 and 3 chart the changing legal landscape in the late Qing, as high-ranking officials like Li Hongzhang took a harsher line against people trafficking than local magistrates and ordinary people. In 1910 the government prohibited all trafficking with laws that remained in force after the collapse of the dynasty the following year but that set out limitations and loopholes that undermined attempts to eliminate the trade in people. Language was also changing, from the association of “slavery” with the subjugation of Han Chinese by Manchus and China by the Western powers to the imported vocabulary of “citizens” and “free people” in the young Republic. Buying and selling people was at odds with the new order. Ordinary Beijingers were aware of the new laws and reported their neighbors to the police for buying, mistreating, and selling young women.

Chapters 4 and 5 examine the new kinds of public spaces in which trafficking thrived, like Beijing’s Tianqiao marketplace and areas opened up by the new railways, which were largely beyond the reach of the law. Traffickers isolated victims from their families physically and psychologically.

More organized trafficking emerged in the 1920s with large gangs, such as that run by the widow of a warlord in Tianjin, described in chapter 6. The militarization of society contributed to increased criminality, including the illicit trade in people. The police pursued the gang through extensive detective work, but struggled with how to handle more ambiguous cases, such as the practice of purchasing child-brides-in-waiting by families who would otherwise not be able to afford a good marriage for their sons.

Chapter 7 explores the persistence of such traditional practices even as the popular notion of what constituted a household was shrinking to an increasingly intimate conjugal unit.

Chapter 8 is perhaps the most interesting, drawing on the records of a female sociology student in 1930s Beijing who interviewed traffickers in jail over three years. We get to know two individuals representing different kinds of traffickers: charmer and seducer Zeng Shunde, who could trick women into offering themselves for sale, and widow Cheng Huang, who sold people to provide for her five children. Both were motivated by profit but took pride in their skills. Cheng was the more typical trafficker: it was often a women’s crime, not only because most of the victims were female but because matchmakers so easily became traffickers.

The conclusion brings the study of trafficking up to the present, charting how the trade in people was eliminated under Mao but returned as population control and marketization in the reform era created a supply of unwanted babies and the demand for reproductive, sexual, and other labor.

This exceptionally well-executed monograph provides the first social history of trafficking in China and sheds new light on how the family and society changed in the late Qing and Republican periods. *Sold People* deserves a wide readership among historians, sociologists, and anthropologists.

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