

Western Thinking in Social Reform of Family Life in China, 19th and 20th Century

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1. Introduction

This paper compares two of the sources given in Patricia Ebrey (ed.), *Chinese Civilization: a Sourcebook*, New York: The Free Press ²1993, namely one from 1869 about infanticide (no. 69, “Infant Protection Society”, pp. 313-317) and one from 1920 about slave girls (fourth part of no. 74, “Ridding China of Bad Customs”, “On Freeing Slave Girls”, pp. 345-347).

While these two texts deal with different subject matters, both are occupied with social reform in the sector of family life, so that they may be said to have enough in common to make a comparison interesting. Furthermore, the hypothesis shall be put forth that the first text, written from experiences made in the years from 1843 to 1853, is probably largely free from the influence of Western thinking, while the second one will show the result of the impact of Western thought upon Chinese intellectuals. The comparison should either verify or falsify this hypothesis and shed more light on details concerning the differences in general assumptions and premises behind the actual suggestions made in both texts.

2. Infant Protection Society (No. 69)

The present text is less an “account” (as the editor has it in the introduction, p. 313), but rather an appeal to the readers to follow the author, *You Zhi*, on the path of abolishing the custom of infanticide. This custom seems to have been spread in China of the time of mid-19th century in the countryside, where poor families frequently drowned new-born babies, especially girls, because they judged that they were not able to raise them. *You* attacks this custom on several grounds, which will be discussed further below, and proposes that concerned people set up a society as he himself has done some time ago.

The regulations that should govern such a society for the rescue of infants are then detailed in 17 points, encompassing concrete details about who should be aided with how much money and for how long a time (2., 3., 4., 6., 7., 8., 9., and 11.), which basically stipulate that only the most poor should be aided in the first few months after birth, and also about actual procedures of the society (1., 5., 10., and 15.), as well as about what to do in special cases, e.g., when a child gets sick (12. and 13.). The remaining three rules deal with indirect effects of the

society, such as the effect on families which intend to kill infants although they are not extremely poor (14.), that on advancing the conditions of women in general (16.), and how families get used to infants that are not drowned so that they lose the intent to do so (17.). As the proposed rules have already worked in practice, they would seem to be rather reasonable; *You* restricts the activities of the societies to a certain area and also limits the number of eligible families strictly, while on the other hand being very flexible about the amount of assistance then actually allotted to the eligible families, so that the system should be very efficient in practice. This is even more so the case as he also assumes cooperation with the government which is to prohibit infanticide, thus including the possibility of punishing violators with the help of the law.

More interesting perhaps than the actual regulations *You* draws up are his remarks before and afterwards about what makes people think about this as a problem at all. There seem to be two different strands of argumentation: The first one draws more on the absolute value of life and the evilness of killing following naturally from this. While he does, e.g., in the opening line complain about how common infanticide has become, so that nobody thinks of it as being unusual anymore, the underlying premise is that killing is, of course, an evil thing; he calls infanticide “murder” (313, II), a “crime” (314, I), and “evil” (314, I); it is something which affixes “guilt” to those who commit it (314, I). Life, in contrast, is something that is encouraged by “Heaven” (314, I) and the “most serious matter in this world” (316, II). These absolute values, together with the mention of the relationship of parent and child (314, I), appear to point to a Confucian orientation, with Heaven providing mankind with values to adhere to.

You does also, on the other hand, use a wholly different kind of arguments, aiming less at absolute values rather than at a notion of getting retributions for doing good or bad deeds on earth. This line of arguing seems to him to be especially fit for convincing people incapable of reason (317, II). He explicitly talks about “divine retribution” (315, II and 317, I) awaiting those committing infanticide, and, on the opposite, about the “chance of doing good” (317, I), the “opportunity to accumulate good deeds” (317, I), or the “chance to accumulate good” (317, II). It becomes most clear that this reasoning is based on a Buddhist world view when he sums up his thinking in the end:

“If a man takes the life of another, not only will he be executed for the crime in this world, he will be punished in the other world as well. Wicked forces result from grievance; together they form the wheel of retributions, and misfortune will certainly befall the guilty. On the other hand, if a man saves a life or a score of lives, even hundreds of lives, imagine the bountiful reward he will receive!” (317, II).

In this way, the values represented by the Confucian Heaven and the Buddhist cycle of retributions work together as the source of motivation for doing good in the social sphere.

3. Ridding China of Bad Customs: On Freeing Slave Girls (No. 74)

This text is written explicitly as an appeal to its female readers to engage themselves in the freeing of girls who have been sold at young age by poor families as household slaves to wealthier families, apparently a widespread practice in China at the time of writing (1920).

The author, *Hu Huaican*, points out that in his time three type of women need “liberation”, namely prostitutes, concubines, and slave girls. While the freeing of all constitutes pressing problems, the last one is the easiest to carry out, so he decides to attack this one first (346, I). The actual act of freeing the girls is conceived to be rather simple: Either oneself as an owner simply lets the girl go, or as acquaintance of a slave owner one puts forth one’s persuasion effort (346, II). The real problems, according to *Hu*, start only after liberation because simply returning the girls to their natural parents may just result in their being sold off again (347, I). His solution lies in the suggestion that whoever has liberated a girl (in most cases that would be the former owner) shall keep her in his home as a family member and treat her as a daughter (346, II). For the actual realization of these goals he proposes the founding of a “Society to Free Slave Girls”, the rules of which only stipulate that the female members shall commit themselves to freeing slave girls.

Again looking at what seems to motivate the author, we find that he himself describes his position as the “humanitarian point of view” (345, II) and claims to speak “in the name of humanity” (346, I). The people whom *Hu* expects to understand him are “modern educated women” (347, II) or those “imbued with new ideas” (345, II), although their ideas “tend to be too lofty” (345, II), so his proposals explicitly focus on practicability, which is apparent throughout the treatise, starting from his argument that the freeing of slave girls should be the first problem to be solved simply because it is the easiest to do (346, I). Furthermore, he also considers the effectivity of his suggestions in terms of practicability, as when he argues that a minimum number of people should act as an example for others to follow (347, I) and also when he says that the liberation of some is better than that of none, even if the success of the undertaking should turn out to be less than overwhelming (347, II). Thus a certain disparity between the alleged modernity of the target of his proposals and his abundant usage of the rather abstract term “liberation” (346, I; 347, I; 347, II) on the one hand and a practical outlook,

as mentioned above and as is also visible in his desire to create a society (347, I) to attain his goals, on the other hand may be said to be discernible in *Hu*'s arguing.

4. Comparison/Conclusion

As was seen in the descriptive part above, both texts have a similar structure: They both frame the actual appeal with general remarks about their motivation. On a surface level, it might also be interesting to note that the authors of both texts advocate the founding of a society for the pursuit of their goals, although this is certainly more important in the case of the "Infant Protection Society".

Concerning the substance side, there should be no fault in stating that both texts concentrate on the practical realization of their concrete plans, calling for change in a very specific area and not so much in general terms. Yet it is the more abstract arguments that seem to attach value to a comparison.

In contrast to the first text, we do not find explicitly Confucian or Buddhist arguments in "On Freeing Slave Girls", unless one wants to consider the emphasis put upon the function of the role model—both that of the liberator for other potential liberators (347, I) as well as that of slave owners for the slave girls (345, II)—as a remnant of Confucianism. This is replaced by rather vague references to "humanity" and "modernity", not naming the values that those terms might be standing for. This failure to name any concrete values does, however, in itself point to something else, namely the apparent self-evidence that *Hu Huai'ang* seems to attach to his arguments. Just the "humanitarian point of view" alone suffices to be able to judge that girl slavery is "bad" and "wrong" (345, II). Also, those "people imbued with new ideas understand these arguments" (345, II).

From this the question arises whether it is really only the "new ideas" (certainly pointing to Western influence) that make people understand. It would rather appear by looking at "Infant Protection Society" that earlier thinking, before the impact of Western influence, very well allowed abstract values that might even be phrased in such terms as "humanitarian". Thus, in the light of the fact that a tradition of individuals' standing up for universal rights very well exists, be it based on Confucianism, Buddhism or just some non-committed "Heaven"ly authority, whose presence was nonetheless felt, it might be concluded that China's stand in the

current controversy about the different morality of East Asia, allegedly emphasizing duties over rights, comes to ring hollow, too, although further investigation concerning the actual contents of those rights that are being disclaimed will surely be necessary before reaching such a conclusion with certainty.