

Contextualizing Female Infanticide: Ming China¹ in Early Modern European Travelogues

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One of the essential components of the early modern European² response to China was an emphasis on the fabulous wealth and social organization of Chinese society. Despite their knowledge of the wide-scale abandonment and killing of newborns within the society, and despite the categorization of infanticide as a great moral sin by the early Christian church,³ the European travelers to China commented on infanticide dispassionately, without any moral revulsion, and continued to project an image of China as a virtual utopia for its residents. One reason for the detached descriptions of abandonment of children and infanticide in China might be the fact that conditions with regard to children in Europe were no superior to those in China and were probably far worse; the vast numbers of abandoned and dead children in Europe blunted the edge of criticism with regard to Chinese customs.⁴ Another might be that infanticide was practiced within Europe contemporaneously, even though the killing of newborn children there was practiced much more surreptitiously, and public opinion had firmed up connections among single women, illegitimacy, concealment, and murder.⁵ However, the dire social circumstances within their own countries had not prevented the Europeans from soundly criticizing and morally reproving cannibalism or infanticide in other cultures. In order to understand their acceptance of this “sinful” practice in China, we must look elsewhere.

A number of European observers commented favorably on the fact that the Chinese women were practically invisible outdoors, and attributed the lack of their visibility in the public sphere to their great virtue, though they also understood that it

was the successful implementation of patriarchal pressures that kept the women confined. The Portuguese, Italian, and Spanish travelers who first visited China in the Ming era had left behind societies in which women were similarly expected to remain indoors, but who were comparatively much more visible. Once the Europeans became aware of the Chinese practices of foot-binding, concubinage, and polygamy, they arrived at a fuller understanding of gender dynamics within the Chinese society, but they did not revise their vision of China as a golden society.

In this essay, I am primarily interested in discovering exactly when and how awareness of the customs of infanticide, specifically female infanticide, and the selling of children filtered through in the travel writing by the Europeans and what impact, if any, these discoveries had on their understanding of Ming and early Qing China. In so doing, I discuss the ways in which issues related to family and gender dynamics are reflected in these writings. Based on the observations about prostitution, infanticide, and the isolation of women in the early modern European travelogues to China, I argue that it is precisely the visible subjugation of women that exculpates the Chinese, in the Europeans' views, and allows for a projection of China as a virtual utopia, despite the serious moral and religious reservations about China that Europeans could be expected to have. Patriarchally controlled women, who did not rebel openly and who were valued for their subjugation, made China a paradise, even though female babies were routinely and visibly killed within its borders.

China mesmerized the first European visitors in medieval times with its magnificence, its vastness, its organization, and its riches—visitor after visitor testified to huge cities spanning a “circuit of one hundred miles,”⁶ thousands of bridges, and enough food and clothing for all people. Having lived within its shores ostensibly for over a decade,⁷ Marco Polo could assert with confidence that “this Great Khan is the mightiest man, whether in respect of subjects or of territory or of treasure, who is in the world today or who has ever been from Adam our first parent down to the present moment.”⁸

If this statement receives verification from details of the Khan's wealth and his perfectly ordered control over his

kingdom, it does so as well through a detailing of the ways in which the kingdom is run on principles of welfare. Besides noting his general beneficence to the poor, Polo is impressed by the fact that “every year he paid for the rearing of 20,000 little children” who had been exposed at birth. There were carefully considered decisions supporting the lives of these children: they were available for adoption to rich men or, if not adopted when they reached adulthood, were married off to one another and provided with gainful employment. Polo notes that despite this munificence, most of the “poor and needy sell some of their sons and daughters”⁹ in order to support themselves.

The picture of Chinese society and customs that was available to early modern European travelers hence included some understanding of the practices of abandoning and selling of children by the poor. Despite this, the picture of an overwhelmingly well-run society prevailed, as is evident from Queen Elizabeth’s letter to the Emperor of China in 1596: “Whereas also the fame of your kingdome so strongly and prudently governed, being dispersed and published over the face of the whole earth, hath invited these our subjects not onely to visite your Highnesse dominions, but also to permit themselves to be ruled and governed by the lawes and constitutions of your kingdome.”¹⁰ This persistence in identifying China as a utopia continued in the course of the travels from the 1550s to 1670, even though travelogues also commented on the practice of infanticide, specifically female infanticide, by the needy.

The lack of moral or religious revulsion in response to infanticide in China can be understood in the context of the various components of the Chinese superiority to Europe, as the travelogues depicted them: the comparative wealth, the social welfare system, and the lack of any visible gender struggle made Chinese society eminently desirable. Mesmerized by Chenghis Khan’s unending supply of women, Marco Polo provides a glimpse into the intricate system that supposedly assured that the Khan was entertained, sexually and otherwise, only by the most beautiful women, and that he had access to six new women every three days. The rating system, the repeated examinations of body and behavior, could not have been pleasant for the young women concerned, but Polo is at

pains to assure the reader that both the women and their families look upon selection as the Khan's concubine as a "great favor and distinction."¹¹ He also mentions the vast number of prostitutes living in the suburbs who plied their trade without any taxation from the state except for an occasional call to entertain a visitor. Polo's utopia is built on a supply of happy and independent women who are willing to satisfy male desire either as prostitutes, concubines, or wives.

Marco Polo's portrait of Chinese women as willing servants of their men is replaced in the sixteenth century by Gaspar da Cruz,¹² whose representations of the Chinese include their treating the women as slaves. Even though he does not condemn the practice of foot-binding, regarding it as only a custom defining beauty, he understands that prostitutes are simply girls who were sold by their mothers and have no choice but to practice this sexual slavery.¹³ He observes that women have to pay their masters every month and that the masters pay a share of the profits to the state officer who keeps a roll of all prostitutes, underlining the state control over prostitutes.¹⁴ He goes so far as to assert that "in this country of China there is no greater servitude than that of these wenches."¹⁵

Cruz's response to "common women" is a continuation of his understanding of gender relations in China because he sees all Chinese women as being sold, the only difference being that some are sold as wives and others as prostitutes: "Commonly the men have one wife, whom they buy for their money, more or less, according as they are, from their fathers and mothers."¹⁶ While he stresses that most common men have only one wife, Cruz is also aware of the practice of widespread polygamy. He mentions almost dispassionately that the women, especially upper-class women "keep themselves close, so that through all the city of Cantam, there appeareth not a woman, but some light huswives and base women. And when they go abroad they are not seen, for they go in close chairs."¹⁷ In addition, Cruz provides information about poor widows selling their children in order to support themselves, underlining the gender disparity within the society. Cruz maintains that girls sold thus become prostitutes but boys only had to serve their masters until they were adults. If China emerges as a utopia in this

account, it is only so for the men; women are decidedly seen to be patriarchally controlled.

Bernadine of Escalante follows him in almost all the details regarding the women, though with a greater degree of moral indignation, and is at pains to establish that the jealousy of the men is the single cause for the isolation of women within the household.¹⁸ He also points to the fact that the women are surrounded by servants and male relatives when they are outside, but they still cannot be seen because the chairs have curtains protecting them from the gaze of strange men. There is a growing understanding of the patriarchal pressures that keep women secluded.

Mendes Pinto's representation of China is also aware of the gender disparities within the society.¹⁹ Pinto comments on the preponderance of girls in the numbers of abandoned children, and finds it fitting that they are supported by the "property forfeited by women who have been accused of adultery by their husbands."²⁰ Pinto's observations about the number of abandoned girls and the punishments handed out to unchaste women reinforce the conclusion about Chinese women's status in Cruz's narrative. However, none of the narratives challenge the portrait of China as a haven for disabled, sick, or indigent little children, who are supposedly well cared for by their extended families or the state: "But if it hath no parents, or they be so poore that they cannot contribute nor supply any part thereof; then doth the king maintaine them in verie ample manner of his owne costes in hospitalles, verie sumptuous, that he hath in everie citie throughout his kingdome for the same effect and purpose."²¹

The co-existence of this portrait of state munificence with a new level of moral disapproval of foot-binding, as in Juan Gonzalez de Mondoza's "best-seller" history of China,²² must give us pause. Mendoza finally introduces the perspective of the young girls who "suffer it [foot binding] with patience."²³ In addition, the reader is, for the first time,²⁴ made aware of the connection between patriarchy, foot-binding, and the seclusion of women: "They say that the men hath induced them unto this custome, for to binde their feete so harde, that almost they doo loose the forme of them, and remain halfe lame, so that their

going is very ill, and with great travel: which is the occasion that they goe but little abroad.”²⁵ The enforcement of foot-binding through law, social ostracism, and punishment makes Mendoza rightly venture that this practice will continue for a long time. The emphasis on the women’s lameness, their forced disability, is a new note in European responses to China. Combined with the references to concubines, death as a punishment for adultery, and the selling of wives for adultery, these observations start to construct an image of China that might be ripe for some social reform, except for Mendoza’s implied suggestion that “the great crueltie” imposed on women might be one of the reasons why “there is lesse vice used than in any smaller countries.”²⁶ Chinese society is seen as flourishing precisely because it is able to keep its women domesticated and contained through foot-binding.

Mendoza adds to the portrait of a harmonious society through his discussion of women receiving dowries at the time of marriage. If Cruz saw men as buying their wives (like slaves), Mendoza makes this custom seem benevolent by painting a rosy picture of a woman receiving her dowry after the wedding feasts, which she then hands over to her parents “for the paines they tooke in the bringing her up.” He goes so far as to assert that in this society, “those that have most daughters are most richest; so that with the dowries their daughters do give them, they may well sustaine themselves in their necessitie.”²⁷ Chinese men might enforce foot-binding and forced isolation of women, but women are still valued members of the community, countering any sense of the necessity for a radical shift in social relations.

A corroboration of this understanding of the economic bases of Chinese marriages was made available by Matteo Ricci, who comments: “The wife brings no portion, and although when shee first goeth to her Husbands house the street-full of household attends her, yet is all provided by his costs which sends money some moneths before as a gift to her for that purpose.”²⁸ Ricci maintains that women are not fettered by having to bring a dowry, even though he is aware of the selective infanticide practiced by the poor, and even though he is careful to note that

a significant part of the population suffers from poverty, poverty serious enough for people to kill their children.

The practice of infanticide in China was first mentioned in Europe in Matteo Ricci's diaries which were published in 1615:²⁹ "A worse evill in some Provinces is theirs, which finding themselves poore, smother their new-borne Babes, specially females, by an impious pietie and pittlesse pitie preventing that sale to slaverie, by taking away that life which even now they had given."³⁰ Infanticide is attributed to a desire to prevent having to sell children, and because of the religious belief in metempsychosis, to a desire for a better future for the babies being smothered. There is no reason offered for the selective killing of female children, and Ricci notes in the longer version of the diaries that the practice is carried out widely and with public knowledge.

Ricci maintains that the selling of children as slaves results from the male sexual drive and improper preparation for married life: "Some will make themselves servants to rich men, to have one of the hand-maydes become his Wife, so multiplying issue to bondage. Others buy a Wife, but finding their family become too numerous sell their Sonnes and daughters as beasts."³¹ The implication is that men and their sexual appetites are responsible for the slavery of children, and that there is no gender distinction in the selling. Ricci rescues his portrait of China as an almost utopia by blaming the poverty on individual appetite rather than the society.

Ricci's narrative remained the byword for the European constructions of Ming China, even though a lightly discordant note was introduced to a glowing portrait of China by the Spanish friar, Domingo Navarette, in the Qing era. Describing in vivid detail the horror of a female child left to die in "great misery and pain" in her own parents' presence, Navarette underlines the cruelty of the family exposing the child: "Her little feet and arms drawn up, her back upon hard stones in wet and mud" while "she that had pierced my heart with her cries could make no slightest dent in the bowels of those tigers."³² What makes the emotional impact multiply exponentially is the fact that he claims, obviously with significant exaggeration, that there are at least "10,000 Female Children murdered thus every Year

within the Precinct of the city of Kan Li where I lived some time.”³³ The Christians, including Navarrete himself, begged to rescue and convert some of these girls, though they were often refused. The enormity of the situation is fully apparent to Navarrete and the reader: if one province sees the murder of ten thousand girls, “How many then must we imagine perished throughout the whole Empire?”³⁴ The moral revulsion created by female infanticide, however, is swept aside in an awareness of the similar crimes committed by the Europeans: “But who will wonder at this, since we know that the same was practiced in Spain upon both Males, and Females, only upon the beastly Motive of satisfying Lust?”³⁵ Navarrete’s cross-cultural awareness, as well as a lack of concern for the specifically gendered nature of infanticide in China, exonerates the Chinese.

Abandonment might have been emotionally easier for parents, but custom had made infanticide an acceptable social, if not legal, way to deal with unwanted children. From its early stages, the practice was directed more at girls than boys. The rapid commercialization and urbanization during the Ming era made female infanticide a more serious problem, especially in densely populated areas, even though as T’ien Ju-K’ang points out, “In the Ming, the statutes of the successive rulers from 1500 to 1585 invariably made this an offence punishable by servitude on a military station one thousand *li* away from home.”³⁶ In rapidly growing areas, like Fukien, apparently even the “wealthiest families killed baby girls after the second one.”³⁷ A gazetteer from the late Ming era reports that many tenants killed their female infants because of an unfair custom that required fathers of new-born girls to give their landlords “a gift of silver before naming her.”³⁸

An account written about 1625 shows midwives as the active agents who killed the female babies: “If it is a girl, she just throws her into a tub and asks the mother, ‘Keep it or not?’ If the answer is ‘No,’ she calls for water and holds the baby upside down by the feet, dipping her head into the water.”³⁹ Most babies were killed by drowning or starvation within the first three days of their lives because “a child’s existence was not officially recognized until the third day after birth.”⁴⁰ Indeed, historians of China refer to open and wide-scale abandonment

and infanticide as ways to control population and family configuration and particularly as birth control techniques limiting family size. However, as the contemporary record referred to above points out, the practice was definitely gender selective.

Girls were more often subject to being drowned. And as Navarrete notes, girls in both poor and well-off families were routinely murdered. The larger devaluation of women in Ming China might have been responsible, but a more specific issue was the expectation of dowry for women at the time of marriage. Even though most Western observers thought that all brides received a dowry rather than the other way around, Chinese sources from the Ming period show that women were indeed expected to bring a dowry, and increasingly so, a more sizeable dowry, if they wanted to marry well and have a position of some authority within their married households. In 1524, Yao Mingluan, a magistrate, issued a proclamation that read, "When the people of Chun give birth to daughters, they often drown and kill them. Prohibitions do not stop it."⁴¹ Lü Kun, a late Ming magistrate and moralist, also commented on the connection between dowries and infanticide. In case the parents were unable to supply a dowry, they could "sell" their daughter to a bidder as a concubine. There was even a custom of betrothing newborn girls and sending them to their new homes in infancy, where they were brought up more as indentured servants or slaves. Even though this might seem to be the least harmful solution, it was not widely adopted because of the social stigma attached to selling one's daughters in this manner. Ann Waltner's study of a variety of sources from Ming and the early Qing eras shows that the need for a dowry for girls was indeed one of the main reasons cited by contemporary sources for the killing of female babies.

The lack of analysis in the travel writings with respect to gender-specific infanticide can be attributed to a limited understanding of the gendered and economic bases of Chinese families. Even though they might not have seen selective killing of girls in their homelands, they were aware of the differences between this society and the ones they had left behind. Hence, it might be useful to examine the way in which the understanding of gender roles might explain the Europeans' implicit acceptance

of female infanticide in China. Ricci, despite his strong religious fervor and missionary zeal, and despite his understanding that the infanticide constituted a “serious evil,” attempts to understand the practice within the context of family relations and gender dynamics. Polo and Cruz similarly try to place the customs of abandonment and selling of children within the context of the communities they visited, and there is no moral indignation attached to the descriptions. The Europeans’ faulty understanding of the way dowry worked in China might explain their acceptance of the status of women, but a large component of the lack of moral revulsion against female infanticide is also the attractiveness of the superficial harmony of gender relations in the society. It is no coincidence that the Dominican friar, Navarette, who paints such a vivid picture of the suffocating child being left to die by her parents, wishes that the rest of the world would adopt the custom of foot-binding to keep their women chaste. Marco Polo’s utopia maintains its contours as “the most Glorious Empire,”⁴² though four centuries later the external observer has had to recognize that this utopia was built on the suffering and killing of its women and children.

Endnotes

¹Following Dorothy Ko, I maintain the distinction between China and Europe based on the “substantive differences in social structure, political institutions, and historical dynamics” (24) and hence, I think it is important to use the term Ming China rather than early modern China. However, unlike Ko, I am interested in exploring the meeting points between the two sets of cultures, based on the Western expeditions to China, especially as they relate to the ways in which the Europeans responded to the disposal of unwanted children in China.

²While I recognize the necessity of distinguishing between various European nations and the problem of collapsing together the rivals for the East (i.e., the Portuguese and the Spanish) as European, it is also true that in the early years of travel, the Jesuits recruited the missionaries to China from various European nations, and that the Portuguese and the Spanish were forced to work together, even though by the mid-seventeenth century, some fissures between them had become

fairly clear. In addition, as Kate Teltscher points out, “until the mid-eighteenth century, it is probably more accurate to speak of a European” discourse of the East, because of the rapid translations of all accounts into various European languages (Hulme and Youngs 191).

³Keith Wrightson, “Infanticide in European History.” *Criminal Justice History*, vol. 3 (1982), 2.

⁴Terpstra demonstrates that the early sixteenth century saw the establishment of specialized orphanages, which had much better success rates in caring for the abandoned children than the hospitals that had formerly cared for them, and which “grew out of some combination of private charitable initiative, government fiat, and clerical encouragement” (66). Interestingly, there is contradictory evidence about the familial status of the foundlings. Viazzo claims that “a sizeable proportion of children abandoned in the fifteenth (and sixteenth) century were not born out of wedlock” (79), whereas Terpstra argues that “most of these children were girls, and most were illegitimate” (36). In China, most children who were abandoned came from married households which could not support additional children.

⁵The only cases of married couples in Europe involving some suspicion of infanticide revolved around children suffocated by their parents during sleep; since it was harder to prove that intention rather than accident was the cause of the death, infanticide by anyone other than single mothers remained invisible (Wrightson 4; see also Trexler).

⁶“An excellent description of the kingdome of China, and of the estate and government thereof: Printed in Latine at Macao a citie of the Portugals in China.” In *The Principall Navigations*. 1599. Vol. 4, 195.

⁷For the controversy about Polo’s presence in China, see among others, John Critchley, *Marco Polo’s Book* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1992); and Frances Wood, *Did Marco Polo go to China?* (London, 1995). Since my concern is with the constructions of China available to sixteenth-century travelers before they reached the country, I am not evaluating the truthfulness of Polo’s history.

⁸*The Travels of Marco Polo*. Ed. Ronald Latham. Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1958. Printed as “The first booke of Marcus Paulus

Venetus, or of Master Marco Polo, a Gentleman of Venice, his Voyages.” In *Purchas his Pilgrimes*, Vol. 11, 113. Since this awe and admiration characterizes most of the European reactions to China before the end of the seventeenth century, I find Mary Louise Pratt’s phrase, “contact zone” to be the closest to describing the exchanges; however, as Pratt underscores, even that phrase is too closely tied to imperial politics. The interactions of the early missionaries with the Chinese were anything but “imperial.” However, after the Spanish and Portuguese conquests of the New World, I believe that all contact with other nations had to be colored by imperialism even though the actual experiences of the Europeans were so radically different in China.

⁹Ibid., 227.

¹⁰An earlier letter to the Emperor of China in 1583 does not have any reference to the well-ordered kingdom.

¹¹*The Travels of Marco Polo*, 123.

¹²Cruz built his accounts of China by combining his brief personal experiences of the country with existing knowledge. Boxer claims that Gaspar Da Cruz’s *Tractado* (1569/70) has the distinction of being the first book on China printed in Europe. Even though it did not circulate widely because of being published in a plague year, it was included in *Purchas his Pilgrimes* (1625).

¹³*South China in the Sixteenth Century: Being the Narratives of Galeote Pereira, Fr. Gaspar Da Cruz, Fr. Martin de Rada*. Ed. C. R. Boxer. London: Hakluyt Society, 1953, 150-151.

¹⁴Pinto’s remarks about the earnings of young prostitutes financially backing the welfare of older prostitutes also construct a picture of the welfare state based on the exploitation of women forced into sexual slavery.

¹⁵Ibid., 151.

¹⁶Ibid., 150.

¹⁷Ibid., 150-151.

¹⁸Bernadine of Escalante. *A discourse of the navigation which the Portugales doe make to the realms and provinces of the east partes of the world, and of the knowledge that growes by them of the great thinges, which are in the dominions of China*. Trans. John Frampton. London, 1579, 22-23.

¹⁹Pinto traveled in Asia from 1537 to 1558 but his memoirs,

Peregrinations, were written between the years 1569 and 1578, and not published until 1614. Once they were published, however, during the seventeenth century, they “rivaled in popularity ... Cervantes’ famous classic” (Catz xv).

²⁰*The Travels of Mendes Pinto*. Ed. Rebecca D. Catz. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989, 231.

²¹*Ibid.*, 67.

²²As Donald Lach documents, this history was commissioned by Pope Gregory XIII and was first published in 1585. It was so popular that in the 15 years after it was published, Mendoza’s work was “reprinted forty-six times in seven European languages”: Spanish, German, Dutch, Italian, French, English, and Latin (744), even though Mendoza never claimed to have set foot in China. Boxer estimates that Mendoza’s book had been “read by the majority of well-educated Europeans at the beginning of the seventeenth century” (xvii).

²³*Mendoza’s Historie of the Kingdome of China*. Reprinted from the early edition of R. Parke (1588). London: Hakluyt Society, 1853, 31.

²⁴Martin de Rada, whose narrative about China was one of Mendoza’s primary sources, commented on the deformity of the bound foot but he still saw Chinese women secluding themselves because of their great virtue.

²⁵*Mendoza’s Historie of the Kingdome of China*, 31.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 62. Even though most critics attribute the book’s popularity to Mendoza’s positive portrayal of China for in an age of trade fever and missionary zeal, it is worth noting that a serious sense of moral condemnation colors his portrayal of foot-binding. Van Linschoten, the Dutch traveler to Asia, also comments on the irony that the “unmeasurable lecherous and unchast” men should be able to force women to adopt foot-binding and esteem it as “beautifying and comlinessse for the women” (136-137).

²⁷*Mendoza’s Historie of the Kingdome of China*, 62.

²⁸*China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matthew Ricci: 1583-1610*. Trans. Louis J. Gallagher. New York: Random House, 1953. Abbreviated as “A discourse of the Kingdome of China,” in *Purchas his Pilgrimes*. 1625. Vol. 12, 449.

²⁹Ricci’s narrative, based on his 27 years of continuous living in China and his fluent use of Chinese language, supplanted Mendoza’s and “provided a new benchmark for the study and

description of China” (Spence 33). Mackerras notes that a decade after its publication in 1615, the diaries were “reprinted four times in Latin and translated into German, Spanish, French, and Italian, and excerpts were translated into English. Like Mendoza’s work, Ricci’s was widely read and popular (31).

³⁰Ibid., 455.

³¹Ibid., 454-455.

³²*The Travels and Controversies of Friar Domingo Navarrete, 1618-1686*. Ed. J. S. Cummins. Cambridge, U.K.: Hakluyt Society, 1962, 180.

³³Ibid., 180.

³⁴Ibid., 180.

³⁵Ibid., 180.

³⁶T’ien Ju-Kang. *Male Anxiety and Female Chastity: A Comparative Study of Chinese Ethical Values in Ming-Ch’ing Times*. New York: E. J. Brill, 1988, 29.

³⁷Ibid., 30.

³⁸Ann Waltner, “Infanticide and Dowry in Ming and Early Qing China.” *Chinese Views of Childhood*. Ed. Anne Behnke Kinney. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995, 201.

³⁹T’ien Ju-K’ang, 30.

⁴⁰D.E. Mungello, *Drowning Girls in China: Female Infanticide in China*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008, 5.

⁴¹Waltner, 202.

⁴²Jonathan Spence, *The Chan’s Great Continent: China in Western Minds*. New York: Norton, 1998, 38.

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