Sold People: Traffickers and Family Life in North China, by Johanna S. Ransmeier

A brilliant study examines the wide variety of markets for trafficked human beings, writes Jonathan Mirsky

May 4, 2017

By Jonathan Mirsky (/content/jonathan-mirsky)

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The Chinese family is “transactional”, argues US-based historian Johanna Ransmeier, and its structure has long encouraged the buying and selling of people. Even today, it trafficks children – almost invariably girls – into other families, into slavery, or abroad. And money has always been at the heart of these transactions.

This brilliant exposé – no other word will do – concentrates on late Qing (or Manchu) China at the end of the 19th century, when trafficking was illegal but the laws were widely ignored or too vague. Ransmeier pursues the subject into the era of the post-1911 Republic, and on to Mao's China, where the Communist Party's one-child policies put a new kind of pressure on the family. As Ransmeier underlines, trafficking was not a system but a process, and it still is.

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In the post-Enlightenment West, she observes, while individual freedom was a great principle, "Chinese people understood their role in family, society, and vis à vis the state through the organizing principle of Confucianism...everyone was embedded in relationships...people (were) fully cognizant of the possibility that they might be sold, resold, traded, or given away...people were an investment. The people most vulnerable for sale were women, children, and the poor."

The market in people was largely for domestic labour, for marriage, and for bearing children. Most of all, Ransmeier emphasises, securing a male heir was all-important. Herein lay the fate of daughters, who could be exposed and killed at birth; although most adult women were likely to be married, females were liable, while young, to be sold as concubines, slaves or prostitutes. There was, she says, a "broad acceptance" that selling a person was legitimate, even if illegal.

A Chinese family was far more than a family. It was, Ransmeier underlines, a household, in which women could be bought, exchanged or hired. In Manchu North China, households typically also included slave girls who worked for the mistress. After 1911, skilled traffickers, sometimes posing as matchmakers or other actors, remained adept at evading the laws forbidding their work.

In the Mao era, as Kay Ann Johnson – cited by Ransmeier – has shown, "extra" births could be handled in various ways, including the giving away of a girl baby to a childless couple, or, of course, selling her abroad. Recent years have seen the re-emergence of brokers – traffickers, in fact – whose methods hark back to practices at least as old as the Qing. There is also widespread kidnapping of girls in the wake of China's growing cohort of single men; 10,000 are kidnapped annually, according to official sources, not just as potential wives but also for labour.

"Nearly one hundred years after China's prohibition of human trafficking," Ransmeier says near the end of her invaluable analysis, "the state again finds itself struggling with definitions of slavery, trafficking, international scrutiny, and questions of criminalization." While the role played by Confucian beliefs has probably lessened in determining the fate of household members, brokers and kidnappers still have a wide variety of markets for trafficked human beings.

The cover image of this otherwise fine book, it should be noted, is misleading. Small print on the inside of the dust jacket admits that the man pictured is not a trafficker. It should be replaced in the next edition.

Jonathan Mirsky was formerly associate professor of Chinese, history and comparative literature at Dartmouth College (https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/dartmouth-college) in the US, and former Far East editor of *The Times*.

Sold People: Traffickers and Family Life in North China
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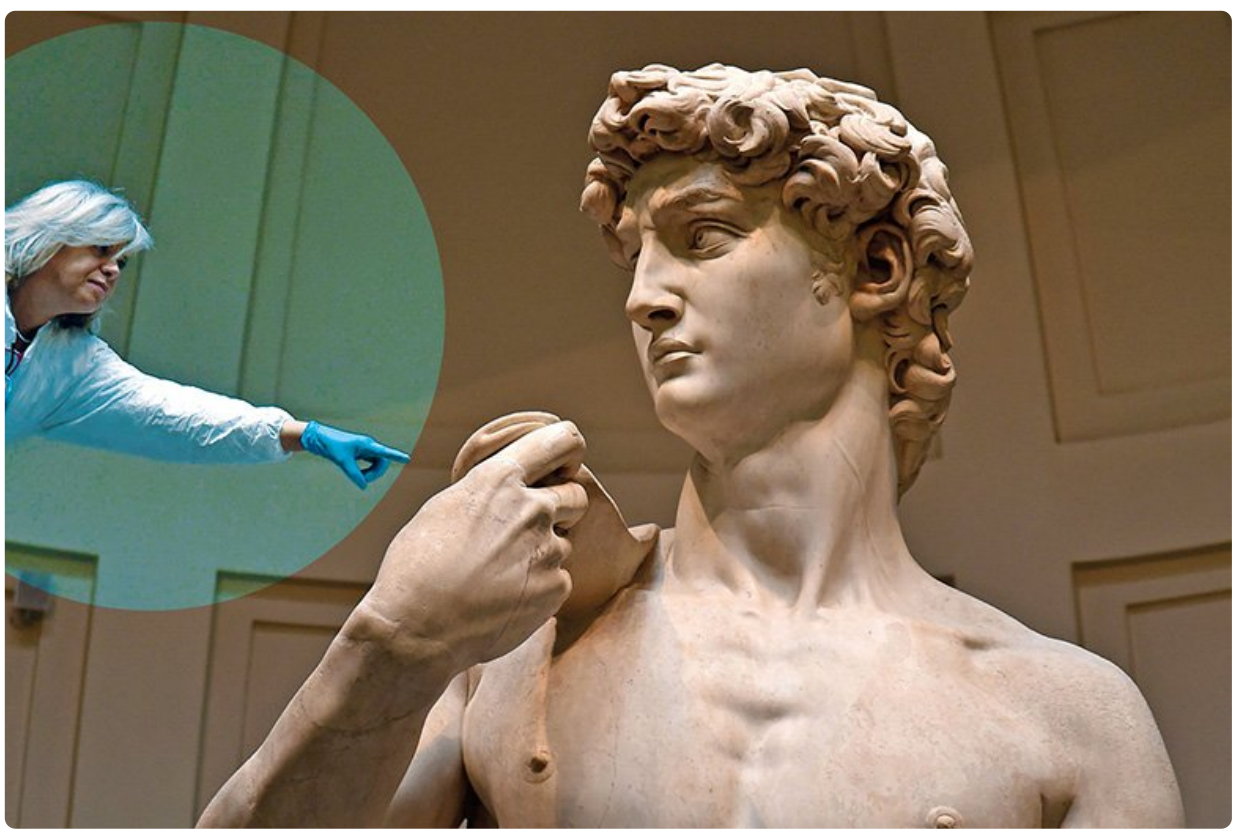

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