

independently, among the “broad array of literati learning.” In Ong’s appraisal, Li’s aggregate contribution is that he “challenged the unity of knowledge” espoused by past generations and “approached diversity seriously and positively. He saw the intellectual enterprises of politics and literature as independent disciplines, each with its own agenda, objectives, and internal divisions of knowledge, warranting customized theories and practices for learning” (113).

Li Mengyang certainly appears to have been an original thinker, but, perhaps unsurprisingly, his contribution to Ming discourse remained minor. In a concluding chapter, Ong deals with the issue of Li’s obscurity. He finds that, in the first place, Li was simply not a member of the dominant Neo-Confucian echelon (288–90), and, as a northerner, he operated outside of any master-disciple relationship more typical of the south, which might have secured for him more active promoters of his legacy (276–77). Secondly, his literary reputation was mostly negative, as he was perceived as a blind follower of forms who had forgotten the primacy of feeling (*qing* 情) in poetry—although in reality, his obsession with forms was part of a search for the best means to express feeling (316). All of which means that Li’s story must count as another case of undeveloped incipience in the late Ming. However, for highlighting diversity and providing counterexamples to predominating thought systems, Ong’s portrait of Li Mengyang is essential.

As for the style of Ong’s work, it tends toward the all-inclusive. Ong investigates every angle and spares no aspect of background. He incorporates long passages of primary material, appending the original Chinese, which sometimes run more than two pages in length. Readers may wish for more concision and compression—but they would be wrong to do so, for Ong is an excellent writer and translator. The embedded translations are especially exquisite and provide much reading pleasure as well as insight into the art of translation. To shorten or summarize them would be to diminish the quality of the book. Finally, Ong employs footnotes, rather than endnotes, and thus saves the reader from always flipping to the end of the book. Chang Woei Ong’s *Li Mengyang* is accessible, absorbing, and richly informative. It is a tremendous contribution to the field.

*Sold People: Traffickers and Family Life in North China.* By JOHANNA S. RANSMEIER.  
Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2017. 408 pp. \$49.95 (cloth).

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We are accustomed, not unreasonably, to think of trafficking as an outcome of economic distress and/or natural disaster: an extraordinary environment that demands abandonment of fundamental human ties in order to ensure survival. Why else, we wonder, would families sell their wives or children? At the heart of *Sold People: Traffickers and Family Life in North China*, however, is one of those insights that makes the reader clap her forehead and wonder why no one has ever framed it this way before. Johanna Ransmeier states without fanfare, and then proceeds to illustrate in great detail, that families in late Qing and early Republican China were transactional, whether or not they found themselves in extreme circumstances. As she puts it on page 2, “With the exception of

childbirth, arrivals and departures from a household involved the exchange of money (or goods) and mediation by an intermediary or broker.”

This was true of every marriage, where a matchmaker shepherded not only the choice of partner but also the amount of a bride price, and where a woman’s family arranged the display of her dowry as part of a wedding procession precisely to show that she was not being sold even if a bride price changed hands. It was equally true of the acquisition of bonded servants, slave girls who performed domestic labor, adoptive sons, and prostitutes. Selling one’s relatives might be understood as a sign of economic desperation, but it was also widely considered as a means of addressing less catastrophic household needs or improving the life prospects of the person being sold.

The conditions surrounding such sales were structured in well-understood ways by hierarchies within the family, as well as between people of higher and lower social statuses outside the household. Heads of household, members of senior generations, and people of wealth, by virtue of their gender, age, or access to resources, made decisions about who would be sold or bought, to whom or by whom. Families had enormous customary leeway to sell their members and to acquire servants for their households, without suffering social opprobrium. By reframing trafficking as an ordinary practice, Ransmeier shows us that in many situations it expressed, rather than flouted, family values.

Then how did the common-sense understanding of trafficking as evil arise? Ransmeier makes a convincing argument that trafficking came to be understood as uncivilized and in need of immediate reform only in the late nineteenth century, in a context when Chinese sovereignty was threatened by imperialist powers. An extended series of civil wars and famines enlarged the scope of trafficking and catapulted it into public view. Late Qing reformers, aware of Euro-American discourses on slavery and its abolition, and eager to enhance China’s status in the international realm, drafted regulations that prohibited trafficking. Although the fall of the dynasty in 1911 foreshortened their efforts, subsequent Republican-era courts attempted to enforce anti-trafficking measures. But at the same time, inconsistencies within the regulations, and the manner of their enforcement, allowed most of the customary and still widely accepted transactions surrounding marriage, domestic servants, and prostitutes to proceed. Chapters 2 and 3 of the book provide a rich account of how trafficking became a social problem while still remaining a practice crucial to many households, and how the law’s silences and contradictions attempted to address both of these aspects.

Across the Republican period, it remained unremarkable for poor families to sell their children into adoption or domestic service (the latter sector is analyzed in Chapter 7), or their daughters into concubinage or marriage or even prostitution. Under many circumstances, selling people was regarded as a form of mutual assistance within networks of kin or communities, with buyers and sellers connected by multiple ties. But Ransmeier does not portray trafficking as a timeless practice rooted in the needs of Chinese families. History mattered. Stories of kidnapping and rape were located in an increasingly distressed countryside and in burgeoning cities portrayed as dangerously anonymous. By the 1920s, as Chapter 5 shows, women were trafficked across long distances now brought within range by newly constructed roads and railroads. The military networks of the warlord period, highlighted in Chapter 6, could facilitate trafficking. Some cases were sensationally publicized through new forms of newspapers and magazines.

In general, only when trafficking involved serious coercion, violence, and lack of consent from the family did a case attract police and subsequent judicial interference.

Sometimes the police and the courts also found themselves drawn into domestic disputes or quarrels between neighbors, requiring the kind of mediation and adjudication of competing claims that one might expect of a social worker rather than a cop on the beat. Ransmeier offers perceptive readings of such cases. Among them are the long account in Chapter 1 of a young woman who may (or may not) have been sold four times, and the story at the end of chapter 3, in which a young wife's grandmother and mother-in-law became involved in a vicious dispute over the treatment and status of the young woman.

Perhaps the main change produced by the prohibition on trafficking, with all of its subsidiary qualifiers, was that those who bought and sold people began to take extra care to document their transactions through contracts, to prove that the seller had consented to the sale. (Consent by the people being trafficked was a socially illegible category, although court cases offer much evidence that sold people often did consent.) By giving a precise account of what was unacceptable and what was taken for granted, Ransmeier successfully recreates the daily world of transactions in people as they were seen by those who were sold and those who decided to sell them. She requires the reader to enter that world without the distancing mechanism of easy moralistic dismissal.

Ransmeier's approach has many virtues; here I will mention just four. First, although her understanding of trafficking is shaped by the review of hundreds of cases, she shows extreme discipline and judgment in selecting only a few for discussion, and mining them for the larger tendencies they illuminate. The case she presents in Chapter 1 is bursting with inconsistencies and loose ends, which she resists the temptation to resolve. Instead, the reader is forced to look at the case the way the magistrate did, and to weigh the various competing claims on a young woman by her father, her husband, her father's best friend, and a miscellaneous family that may or may not have tried to purchase her as a concubine.

Second, Ransmeier makes it appear easy to make historical linkages: between individual cases and overarching regulations; between the self-justifications of traffickers and the complaints of aggrieved family members; between iconic events such as the Mixed Court Riot or the Tianjin Massacre or the Incredible Famine and the underlying tensions over trafficking; between the accusatory language of new regulations (adopted by plaintiffs) and the language of economic distress and virtuous transactions (adopted by those accused of trafficking). The reader gets a crash course on the best scholarly consensus about late Qing and early Republican political events and institutions—but also, and to my mind more important, a sense of how those forces played out in different ways in the lives of ordinary people—rich, poor, respectable, and criminal.

Third, this is a subtly gendered analysis. While making clear that both males and females could be trafficked, and in Chapter 4 paying particular attention to the purchase of children by beggars, Ransmeier sees the need for reproductive rather than productive labor as the main driver of the trade in people. She places this labor shortage in the context of a gender imbalance caused by son preference, a shortage of marriageable women, and persistent difficulties in getting and keeping domestic labor.

Fourth—and this is not trivial—Ransmeier knows how to tell a story. We don't often hear the voices of those who were trafficked, but when they are audible in legal records, as in the case described in Chapter 2 of the twelve-year-old kidnapped by an unemployed

Manchu bannerman, Ransmeier deploys them to great effect. Similarly, her reconstruction in chapter 8 of the interviews that the young woman researcher Zhou Shuzhao conducted with jailed traffickers in the late 1920s and 1930s is difficult to put down.

Across two regimes and widely varying personal situations, *Sold People* offers range, depth, and insight into the many types of people whose lives were altered by trafficking. *Sold People: Traffickers and Family Life in North China* is an extraordinary piece of work, exhibiting mastery both of historical material and of narrative.

*The Age of Irreverence: A New History of Laughter in China.* By CHRISTOPHER REA. Oakland: University of California Press, 2015. xvi + 335 pp. \$70.00 (hardcover)

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Christopher Rea borrows the title of his study of humor in late Qing and Republican-era Chinese literary and popular culture in part from historian Neil Harris's description of the skeptical attitude towards authority prevalent in pre-Civil War American popular culture, a posture he sees reflected in turn of the twentieth-century China. The other half of the title, "a new history of laughter," is borrowed from a series of jokes serialized by prolific author Wu Jianren in early twentieth-century China, a counterpart to his novel *A History of Pain*. The title also signals a juxtaposition with the prominent English-language body of research that gazes into the abyss of trauma and pain categorizing a wide swath of modern Chinese literature, among them Michael Berry's *A History of Pain* and David Wang's *The Monster That is History*. This is a *new* history, because laughter has been in many respects expurgated from standard Chinese literary histories. The author uses "history," meanwhile, in a more classical sense of the Greek *history* or the Chinese *shi* as used in the publishing industry of early twentieth-century Shanghai, denoting "an 'inquiry into' or an 'investigation of'" (8) rather than a blow-by-blow chronicle. This dynamic and pluralistic examination of laughter explores multiple "cultures of humor" (14) that occupied an ever-evolving field of cultural production.

Through re-examination of a familiar set of authors and texts—Liang Qichao 梁啟超, Wu Jianren 吳趸人 and Lu Xun 魯迅, to name a few luminaries—Rea highlights the critical role laughter played in the first decades of the twentieth century, bringing to light one more aspect of the polygeneric pastiche of late Qing and Republican cultural field. In holding these well-known works up at a different angle, Rea succeeds in elucidating the humorous aspect of what other scholars have called utopian, dystopian, science-fiction, science-fantasy, social commentary, and others. For example, Rea convincingly argues that the science-fictional "futuristic conceits" (49) of Liang Qichao's *Future of New China* (Xin Zhongguo weilai ji 新中國未來記) and Wu Jianren's *New Story of the Stone* (Wu Jianren's *New Story of the Stone* Xin shitou ji 新石頭記) could be subsumed in the category of play just as reasonably as they can be read as science fiction.

In the five principle chapters of the book, Rea explores five aspects of laughter. The title of each chapter is derived from an English translation of a Chinese term germane to the subject: jokes (*xiaohua* 笑話), play (*youxi* 遊戲), mockery (*maren* 罵人), farce