

EUTHANASIA IN CHINA:  
SOME ISSUES IN HARMONIZATION

*Alessia Magliacane\**

*Mencius explique très bien, après avoir tenu ces propos que vous auriez tort de croire optimistes sur la bonté de l'homme, comment il se fait que ce sur quoi on est le plus ignorant, c'est sur les lois en tant qu'elles viennent du ciel, les mêmes lois qu'Antigone. Il en donne une démonstration absolument rigoureuse. Il est trop tard pour que je vous la dise ici. Les lois du ciel en question, ce sont bien les lois du désir.*

Lacan, *L'éthique de la Psychanalyse* (1960)

*So, in a way, there is a kind of poetic justice in the fact that the final result of Mao's Cultural Revolution is today's unprecedented explosion of capitalist dynamism in China.*

Zizek, *Mao on practice and contradiction* (2007)

*Perhaps in a more Western kind of psychoanalytic language... we might think of the new onset of the Utopian process as a kind of desiring to desire, a learning to desire, the invention of the desire called Utopia in the first place, along with new rules for the fantasizing or daydreaming of such a thing - a set of narrative protocols with no precedent in our previous literary institution.*

Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (1994)

Discussing end-of-life choices in modern Chinese society for a Western scholar is to have the chance of looking at this consolidated area of knowledge and expertise covered by bioethics with renewed experience, although in continuous evolution. Chinese medical ethics, which directly stems from the principles and the values of a world's vision whose medical practice is firstly the application of virtue, is still present both in medical profession and in popular common sense, from small villages to large cities of the country. At the same time, Marxist alternative is clearly a data for the emancipation of Chinese society, despite of a definition of the Chinese system that continues to evade foreign observer.

Through ancient Chinese medical ethics, Chinese humanitarianism has nurtured thousands of noble-minded medical workers and has

---

\* Researcher in Comparative Law; email: [alessiamagliacane1@gmail.com](mailto:alessiamagliacane1@gmail.com).

contributed to health and human well-being. Contemporary Chinese medical ethics provides an example of a Marxist socialist alternative of society, different from that of Hippocratic and liberal Western medical ethics.<sup>1</sup> However, in the contemporary era, when science and society are developing at a rapid pace, traditional philosophy seems to be no longer able to provide current and scientific guidelines for a physician's actions.<sup>2</sup>

For Chinese practitioners, the long history and the moral depth of their traditional medical ethics carry an influence that, obviously, might conflict with modern government-endorsed ethical programs. Euthanasia and modern bioethics have been extensively debated. The issues are significant representations of man and society registered in national traditions, while offering a remarkable illustration of scientific, technological, economic, even legal interdependencies that characterize the current Chinese society.

We intend to show that the tension between traditional Chinese medical ethics and political and economic Marxist principles is beneficial in a full economic developed society, while addressing these issues in the extent required.

Euthanasia, like other bioethical problems, is quite a new ethical dilemma in China. This makes clear for the reader our choice to select also surveys from the papers and the media world, in a country where free circulation through the web and the governmental control through the same web coexist.

These paradoxes or dilemmas show the possibilities in Chinese society to achieve a diverse sense of bioethics, and suggest strong understandings which permit to reconstruct the values starting from a different perception of the *praxis*. Otherwise, the contemporary approach to the elements of this conflict, rather attentive to the advances in biotechnology and to the problems of medical ethics, classifies the forms of discourse in a way that removes any object of debate or conflict, forbidding a real discussion of these issues.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Ralph Crawshaw, "Medical deontology in the Soviet Union", in Robert M. Veatch (ed.), *Cross Cultural Perspectives in Medical Ethics: Readings* (Boston, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Hubei Z. Wu, "Conflict between Chinese traditional ethics and bioethics", *3 Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* (1994), pp. 367–371, p. 369.

<sup>3</sup> It is essential to remember that their philosophical and scientific discussion has often been anticipated, and exceeded, by judicial practice (as in the famous case of *Baby M.* in the United States, subject to grant of maternity), concerning the birth of a *bio-law*.