Tina Phillips Johnson
Childbirth in Republican China: Delivering Modernity, Lanham, MD: Lexington

Tina Johnson’s 2011 book examines the transformation of childbirth practices in China, with a chronological focus on the Republican era. The book demonstrates that during the first half of the twentieth century, a sea change in China’s political, cultural, and institutional landscape facilitated the rejection of traditional birth beliefs and expertise, as embodied primarily by ‘old-style midwives’ (jieshengpo 接生婆). It is the legacy of Republican era reforms, Johnson argues, that set China onto a trajectory of change that eventually led to the dominant, highly medicalised hospital birth model in metropolitan China today.

The choice of focus on the Republican era is intended to fill in a historiographical gap between the late imperial period, as illustrated by Charlotte Furth and Yi-Li Wu’s fine-grained studies, and the strong state interventions into reproductive matters under Communist China. Johnson’s study fills the lacunae in our understanding of the critical half-century in-between and argues that it is a crucial period to detect the peculiar characteristics of reproductive modernity in China. The primary difficulty of studying reproductive health reforms during the Republican era, however, lies in the remarkable heterogeneity of actors and the absence of a ‘unified or regulated movement’ on the part of the Guomindang state (let alone the problem of consistency between central and local authorities), leaving the historian the thorny task of what to foreground in his or her narrative. The same situation applies also to other aspects of social change under a relatively weak central state, and Johnson’s book has made a laudable contribution by uncovering a variety of perspectives from which the issue of childbirth could be addressed.

The book’s four chapters are thus organised as accounts of distinct but overlapping actor groups—medical missions in China; scientific and popular media that promoted modern ideas of motherhood and childbirth; advocates and members of a new professional group known as the ‘modern midwives’ (zhuchanshi 助產士); and the Guomindang state and its legislative and educational efforts to regulate childbirth practices. The epilogue provides an overview of continuities and changes after 1949. In each chapter, Johnson shows how motivations of actors often crossed paths at unexpected junctures, and includes interesting materials that deserve more in-depth studies in their own right. For instance, Johnson tells us in Chapter one that the first missionary clinic with women trainees in Tianjin was made possible by patronage from Viceroy Li Hongzhang after the successful cure by electrotherapy of Li’s...
wife from her paralysis. Similar episodes of Chinese élite patronage towards Western hospitals, often coming from family matriarchs, provided the initial funds for reproductive clinics in numerous early twentieth-century cities. There is a larger story to be told, therefore, which would see late nineteenth-century philanthropy and organised medicine as a joint enterprise between Chinese élite and Western missionaries.

For readers of *Asian Medicine*, two arguments stand out as particularly interesting. First, this book is the first to give sufficient attention to the creation of the ‘modern midwives’ under the leadership of Dr Yang Chongrui 楊崇瑞 (Marion Yang). Johnson emphasises that the professional authority of zhuchanshi, mostly young female practitioners with less or no reproductive experience themselves, resided primarily in their formal education. Their stories stand in contrast to both the history of nursing and the rise of male obstetricians in the West during the same time period, since the predominant mores of the Chinese public remained wary of letting male obstetricians dominate the birth room. In Chapter three, Johnson tells stories of those practitioners from the annual reports and other published documents of the First National Midwifery School of Beiping. We might want to ask for more: What is the implication for those women to remain celibate by choosing a career in obstetrics? How did the trained modern midwives fare in the People’s Republic? The careers of zhuchanshi open up many fascinating questions about the historical origins of medical professions in China, as well as the changing occupational prospects and family lives for Chinese women.

A second point of interest lies in Johnson’s ambiguity over painting the picture as a straightforward progression from a local ‘tradition’ to a global ‘modern’ model of childbirth. For instance, in Chapter one Johnson reminds us how negative portrayals of traditional Chinese midwifery by Western missionaries were biased toward the most difficult cases, ignoring the majority of ‘regular births’ that went on without notice. In Chapter four again, Johnson frankly acknowledges that considerable gaps existed between the Republican reformers’ rhetoric and reality. Overall, however, one might wish that the author take a stronger and clearer stance over what kind of modernity was being ‘delivered’ in her accounts, and where we are looking at the historical actors’ obsession with ‘modern’ ways of life, as opposed to modernity as an analytical device borrowed from contemporary social and cultural theories. In other words, how did the ‘fetish for modernity’ discourse in Republican China (Chapter two) matter in the concrete hopes, fears, and options available for pregnant women and their families?

In sum, *Childbirth in Republican China* adds the important issue of childbirth to the recent scholarly scrutiny of the traditional/modern divide in Asian