

appears several pages later. We also observe inconsistencies in the renderings of specific terms that would require at least some clarification regarding the choices made in different passages. To name just two examples, *miwu* 麋蕪/麋蕪 is rendered as “rotting of the elaphures” (p. 90) and “deer-parsley” (p. 103); *henglan* 衡蘭 is “asarum and orchid” (p. 90) and “horizontal orchid” (p. 104). Also, there are quite a few errors regarding romanization and Chinese characters, typos and other editorial slips. Some of these slips could easily have been avoided if only the editor were given the support from the publishers that this series definitely deserves.

Notwithstanding the minor problems mentioned above, this volume is a highly valuable addition to this well-established series. When read against the original text of the *Shiji*, these translations, the notes, and all the other material provided by the translators and the editor will serve as inspiring points of departure for further explorations in the wider field of Chinese history and literature.

Yangruxin Liu

SOAS University of London

MATTHEW H. SOMMER:

Polyandry and Wife-selling in Qing Dynasty China: Survival Strategies and Judicial Interventions.

xiii, 478 pp. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015. ISBN 978 0 520 28703 7.

doi:10.1017/S0041977X17000830

It is widely recognized that the prevailing marriage system in imperial China was polygamous for the elite and monogamous for the majority. By analysing more than 1,200 legal cases from the Qing period, documented in various archives, Matthew H. Sommer surveys the Chinese marriage system from the bottom of the socioeconomic scale and casts fresh light on the living conditions of marginalized members of Qing society. He argues that for many of the rural poor, polyandry and wife sale were by no means deviant exceptions. Although they were stigmatized and prohibited, these social practices constitute a third pattern and form an integral part of the broader system of Chinese marriage and household formation, alongside polygyny and monogamy.

By focusing on the social practices of the poor, this book aims to provide an in-depth understanding of their living conditions. As a counter-narrative to the normative discourse among the elite, it unearths the centrality of the traffic in women, recasts perceptions on the marriage system of late imperial China, and breaks new ground in Chinese legal history. The author shows how the practice of polyandry and wife sale was widespread among the rural poor, in contrast to ideological standards in Qing law, and illustrates how local magistrates negotiated these contradictions with considerable flexibility and creativity.

The book is organized in three parts: Part 1 (chapters 1–3) and Part 2 (chapters 4–8) deal mainly with polyandry and wife sale among the poor. Part 3 (chapters 9–11) examines issues of conflict and reconciliation between ideology and practice within the judicial system, with a specific focus on the treatment of wife sale.

For those familiar with Philip Huang’s work on the agricultural involution, Sommer’s argument may come as no surprise. However, by expanding the scope of family labour to the sexual and reproductive labour of women, the author

draws our attention to hitherto widely neglected, yet ubiquitous practices on the margins. Polyandry, polyamory, marital prostitution, wife sale, etc. are neither symbols of poor people's sexual licentiousness nor signs of moral failure (both of which were subject to fierce criticism and draconian prohibitions by the elites and the courts). Sommer argues convincingly that these should be perceived as survival strategies applied by the powerless poor to get through serious social-economic problems such as overpopulation, agricultural involution, semi-proletarianization, and the skewed sex ratio that bedeviled the empire for centuries. His focus on underprivileged social groups changes the perspective on Chinese marriage and household systems during the late imperial period in a productive and inspiring manner.

Sommer builds his arguments on previous research on gender, kinship and community in social anthropology of (premodern) China. Following the work of scholars such as Dorothy Ko and Susan Mann, who produced a powerful interpretation model "against the May Fourth victimization paradigm" and reclaimed the agency of women in late imperial China, Sommer broadens the horizon from the tiny segment of elite women to the rural poor (including both men and women), and thereby draws a wider, more complex and textured picture of living conditions, life and the spiritual world under the Manchu.

For example, the author argues that wife-selling was mainly driven by poverty, and that this strategy did not necessarily indicate patriarchal exploitation of women. Since moving from one household to another could improve a woman's living standard, it often provided her with an opportunity to pursue her own interests. This is why in many cases it was the wife who would agree to or even provoke the transaction. By comparison, even if this transaction resolved family problems, the husband would still be widely regarded as a loser who had lost his wife, and sometimes even his children – which would not only stigmatize him but also degrade him to a surplus male outside of the family system. No doubt this would have been a fatal blow to his dignity and masculinity.

As well as the compelling arguments presented by Sommer, a few additional points deserve further consideration: where the purpose of conditional wife sale is to provide surrogate motherhood, what is documented about the tensions between the buyer's patriarchal family and the sold wife's uterine family after she provides an offspring (for the buyer) and returns to the first husband's house? How would she deal with her own parenthood when the buyer (and his infertile wife, if he had one) had custody over her children? Would the long-term experience in the buyer's house have an impact on her emotions towards his family and/or provoke conflicts between the buyer and the first husband when she was eventually redeemed? What was her female agency in such circumstances? As these seem relevant to casting a comprehensive view on gender roles, empowerment, kinship, marital systems and social ideology, it is unfortunate that Sommer does not touch upon these questions.

Notwithstanding those minor queries, this book presents important and convincing arguments based on meticulous analysis of legal cases. It is a most stimulating contribution to our understanding of living conditions, emotional experiences, kinship practices, marriage systems and legal history in late imperial China.

Mi Li

Central South University, Changsha