

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

JING-BAO NIE *Behind the Silence: Chinese Voices on Abortion*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005, 288 p.

Without a doubt, Jing-bao Nie's *Behind the Silence: Chinese Voices on Abortion* is a remarkable achievement. It is advertised as "the first in-depth work in any language to explore the diverse perspectives of mainland Chinese regarding induced abortion and fetal life in the context of the world's most ambitious and intrusive family planning program." Nie's overarching project, the eclipsing of stereotypes held in the West about a monolithic and mono-cultural Chinese experience, can be said to be an unqualified triumph. Not only does the work represent a hitherto unexamined area of Chinese society, it contributes to a theory of ethics that must coexist with this contentious subject matter. Refreshingly enough, his moral message is not based on the chauvinistic call to human rights that is often distinctive of the American abortion debate. Nie's book is about the morality and ethics of abortion as much as it is about the multifaceted grounds for a medical procedure, and its frequently devastating effects on the lives of Chinese women.

During the four years I taught in China, I heard abortion mentioned twice. In the first year, a student who was an only child told me he might have had a little brother or sister because his mother had inadvertently become pregnant and had an abortion. He seemed to readily accept it. In the second instance, the situation was murkier and abortion was only implied. A surgeon with whom I was acquainted knew a professor who got involved from time to time with his female students, and sometimes required his "assistance." But abortion was only insinuated, and since the issue was an uncomfortable one, I did not ask for details. According to Nie, the former example, acceptance, is a prevalent Chinese attitude to abortion related to the one-child policy, and the latter is representative of the "silence" alluded to in the title of the book, an omnipresent hush surrounding politically sensitive subjects and sexuality that persists in China.

For this work, Jing-bao Nie employed what could be described as a culturally-situated methodology, in that he deliberately eschewed the postmodern obsession with difference. Instead he used what he called an "interpretive approach," one that looked at cultural similarities as well as differences, and that was primarily concerned with the "internal complexity" of Chinese culture. Data gathering for this project was accomplished using multiple methods research, starting with a pilot study conducted in Galveston, Texas, with twenty Chinese students and scholars.

Fieldwork was done in five Chinese cities and three villages, so that the perspectives of both rural and urban Chinese were incorporated. In the field, a total of 601 participants filled in questionnaires, where Nie examined attitudes to abortion from an impressive array of social and religious groups: traditional Chinese medical students, doctors, Catholics, Protestants, Buddhists, university students, and medical humanities scholars. In addition, 60 semi-structured interviews were carried out – 30 with Chinese women who had experienced abortions, and 30 with medical practitioners who performed them.

Missing from Nie's (2005) analysis are the voices of members of the massive Chinese bureaucracy required to implement the one-child policy, government birth officials who must sometimes enforce compliance with the birth quotas of a work unit or village by means of coercive abortion. To be fair, obtaining the consent of these cadres would have been a formidable, if not impossible task. Most assuredly they would have been Communist Party members who would be reluctant to express dissent from the official party line; nevertheless, future research in this area might take the distinguishing aspects of their standpoint into account.

The most valuable contributions of Nie's research lies in his courageous subjectivity, his attention to spiritual matters (does the fetus have a soul?), a historical outline of abortion in China, the telling narratives of Chinese women and doctors who experience abortion in different ways, and his interpretive approach to an ethics of abortion. His analysis clearly demonstrates an extraordinary sensitivity to women's experience, and a profound struggle with the issue. Although important and necessary, his quantitative analysis was sometimes dry, repetitive and difficult to read. This text is crucial for scholars and graduate students in science, medicine, ethics, sociology, women's studies and Asian studies who investigate abortion. In particular, the narrative sections are useful for undergraduate courses in philosophy, sociology, Asian studies and women's studies that focus on women's health.

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