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By Johanna S. Ransmeier. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard
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Book Review: *Sold People: Traffickers and Family Life in North China*,
written by Johanna S. Ransmeier (2017)

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Sold People is a rarity. Based on her Ph.D. thesis,ⁱ Johanna Ransmeier's first monograph is the kind of book that sets a milestone and opens a new research field. In the space of 395 pages, *Sold People* takes the reader on a fascinating journey into the often-overlooked world of slaving and human trafficking in northern China (1870s-1930s). Although the topic has long been a recurring issue in the field of social history of the late Qing and Republican periods, few scholars had attempted to address it comprehensively and on its own right.ⁱⁱ For this reason alone, Johanna Ransmeier's remarkable work will remain a landmark study and, it is to be hoped, inspire a new generation of social historians of China.

Making extensive use of judicial archives, police records, newspapers, and even sociological surveys undertaken in the late 1920s, Ransmeier aptly capitalizes on the driving forces that have contributed to rejuvenate the field of Chinese social history in the past decades. Although not a legal history book *per se*, *Sold People* is yet another example of the potential of Chinese judicial archives in renewing approaches to social history. (Judicial) case studies hold a central place in the book. Not only as its main source materials, but also as an integral part of the narrative, and as a powerful stylistic inspiration. Each development draws on the meticulous reconstitution of one (or more) judicial affair narrated in the same manner as a detective novel. This sometimes gives the book an impressionistic touch, which nonetheless comes with major benefits: on the one hand, this facilitates the reading of a study that attempts to decipher a complex social phenomenon; on the other hand, this also helps support the methodological choices of the author. Strongly influenced by contributions of gender, subaltern, labor, and slavery studies to the broader field of social history, *Sold People* approaches human trafficking as a dynamic "process" and from below ("by staying

close to the ground,” in the author’s own terms). To unpack its social (and even psychological) mechanisms in all their complexity, Ransmeier focuses on micro studies. She gives voice to the actors, brings to life the agency of the trafficked ones, and sheds light on all the modalities of negotiation, resistance and survival. The result is occasionally frustrating, reaching the limits inherent to the sources, from which Ransmeier nonetheless reaps even the smallest seeds.

Many aspects of human trafficking are explored only in passing. *Sold People* is not a comprehensive survey of trafficking networks in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century China. It is not a quantitative evaluation of the significance and role of trafficked manpower in the regional economy of northern China or a study of “slavery” (enslavement being only one of the many outcomes of trafficking). Rather, *Sold People* is a book about human beings, and about the way they coped with a rapidly changing environment. All the actors (the victims, occasional and professional traffickers, brokers and matchmakers, police officers and their informants, officials, beggars, prostitutes, etc.) and their networks of sociability populate the book, just as they populated the multiple interconnected spaces of trafficking (the famine-stricken rural areas and the residential urban neighborhoods, the criminal underground world and the marketplace, rickshaw garages and brothels, trains and steamships). If people are Ransmeier’s main object of investigation, her principal units of observation are the household and, as she aptly coins it, the “transactional family.” A close focus on these privileged spaces of human trafficking indeed opens the door to a nuanced appreciation of its primary functions. Among these, Ransmeier brings to the fore the regulative role of a practice essential to family strategies; not only as an important purveyor of reproductive, domestic and sexual labor, but also as a major adjustment lever in times of crisis. This also allows her to isolate and question the foundations of the pervasive “survival” rhetoric (the “no other choice” *topos*), ceaselessly repeated by those who needed a socially acceptable justification for the selling of their own flesh, by the traffickers themselves who felt the need to legitimate their actions, and by the state and the local authorities who subscribed (even after the practice was criminalized) to the idea that “buying and selling” people was a natural social regulator. Staying true to these lines of investigation from beginning to end, Ransmeier provides a sharp and solid analysis of the social mechanisms of the practice of “buying and selling” human beings, its ambiguous role in the lives of those involved, and of its resilience in the changing and uncertain environment of the early Republican era (1912-1948).

The book is arranged (mostly) chronologically and is centered on one pivotal moment (chap. 3): the promulgation in 1910 of the edict prohibiting the practice of “buying and selling human beings” (*jinge maimai renkou* 禁革買賣人口). The first two chapters draw a vivid picture of trafficking during the last decades of the imperial regime, but the core of the book (chap. 4-8) is dedicated to the Republican era. Here, Johanna Ransmeier carefully untangles the rationales of the market in human beings. She also seeks to understand the ways in which the many transformations of the first two decades of the Chinese Republic affected the pattern of trafficking. Central to her argument is the idea that, contrary to what one might expect, contending forces—including modernizing ones—contributed not only to the perpetuation of the practice long after the Chinese revolution, but also to its further expansion. Although there is no way to quantify the phenomenon, and while increased concerns expressed by the government and the modern press cannot be taken as evidence of an increase of the phenomenon itself, Ransmeier forcefully demonstrates how the combination of many factors (the criminalization of transactions in human beings, the resilient practices and strategies of the “transactional family,” the slow disintegration of the household-centered mechanisms of social solidarity, new modes of transportation, the new value of contracts in negotiating labor relations, an increasingly public urban life, commercialization, etc.) provided traffickers with new opportunities and modes of action, and made people—especially women—more vulnerable to trafficking (but also more likely to get leverage).

The rich introduction (pp. 1-23) presents the main topic, the scope of the study, its analytical framework, and its methodological choices. One critical point is made about the working definition of “trafficking” used by Ransmeier. This (not so “old-fashioned”) definition is deliberately inclusive enough to encompass most instances of “buying and selling, as well as brokering and transportation with intent to sell” (p. 3). In other contexts, the choice of such a catchall definition would have been questionable, as it potentially brings together illegal practices of trafficking (already criminalized under the Qing) and the legal transactions constitutive of the Chinese transactional family. Considering the time frame of the study and the pivotal place of the new legal norms criminalizing transactions in human beings in the Chinese empire, Ransmeier’s choice is nonetheless relevant. It is also supported by the legitimate ambition to “consider an overall trafficking context in which transactions in people were widely accepted,” and therefore to shed light on the mechanisms by which licit and

socially crucial transactions (adoption, marriage, etc.) contributed to shape and foster a broader spectrum of illicit (yet, in part, necessary and tolerable) sales. The introduction also raises the issue of the relationship between the “sale of people” and the broader analytical frameworks of “slavery” (pp. 7-13). This discussion is of importance to the book, not merely because the commodification of human beings is a corollary of “slavery”; but also because the prohibition of the “buying and selling of human beings” of 1910—which took place in a context of rapid dissemination of Western discourse on slavery and freedom—was first and foremost conceived as a demonstration of China’s commitment to abolish “slavery.” Yet, as stated by the author, “trafficking itself was not slavery” (p. 12). The rapid overview of the concepts that today underpin the various definitions of “slavery” (property, power, claims, etc.) nonetheless provide Ransmeier with a forceful justification of the choice she makes to free herself from the all too rigid conceptual frameworks derived from different historical contexts and from a status-based approach to bondage. Ransmeier, therefore, seeks to contextualize and historicize bondage relations by looking at the specific combination of social, economic, and normative forces that legitimated claims over bodies and labor (in particular “reproductive” labor). In her own words, looking at the *process* of trafficking allows us to explore how “narratives of traditional hierarchical obligation and kinship combined with the readily available mechanism of monetary transaction to activate and enforce relationships established through trafficking” (p. 13).

Chapters 1 and 2 draw a vivid “landscape of trafficking” in late Qing China. Chapter 1 opens with the case of a young woman who, between 1870 and 1872, was sold by her parents as a wife, leased by her husband’s family as a concubine, allegedly abducted, and then sold back again to her parents through a marriage severance agreement. Ransmeier methodically unfolds this complex case piece by piece. She takes the perspective of each actor one after the other and fleshes out the turpitudes of a woman’s life cycle. In doing so, she progressively brings to light the intricate web of factors that, despite the many safeguards and restrictive measures included in the *Great Qing Code*, contributed to the resilience of more or less illegal practices alongside the legal market. In the process, she weaves together the specific context of late Qing North China (wars, famines, deterioration of state-monitored relief mechanisms, etc.) with structural factors, so as to underline that trafficking was not only a byproduct of crisis, but a constitutive element of family construction and adaptation. Here, Ransmeier

reveals a world of everyday para-legal practices, where power, influence, and literacy were mobilized to compete over claims and access to the bodies and labor of women. She also elaborates on the reasons why illicit sales were tolerated (and even necessary). Underlining the paradoxical situation in which women were held to high standards of morality and were the first liability among family members, she unfolds one of her central arguments: in an environment with a structural shortage of women and reproductive labor, women were not only a burden, but also a disputed resource that could be monetized. In other words, both “kin and property,” as individuals with a value but who could not “capitalize on their own value” (p. 61), women were the first adjustment variable in the constant reconfigurations of Chinese families. These raw and insightful observations lead Ransmeier to question and reveal the realities concealed behind the constant and pervasive poverty rhetoric used as the main justification for tolerating these practices.

Chapter 2 dives deeper into the context of trafficking in northern China. Drawing a lively portrait of Zhou Fu (the man who initiated the 1910 “abolition”), exhuming the well-known sequence of the “Tianjin Massacre,” and exploring in detail a case of outright kidnapping and trafficking in the 1870s, Ransmeier searches for elements likely to explain the emergence of an “abolitionist” conscience and to inform the mentality of traffickers and of the handful of officials who supported the anti-trafficking legislation in the last years of the Qing dynasty. Zhou Fu, a protégé of Li Hongzhang’s, was a pragmatic modernizer. On the frontline of China’s human, military, and diplomatic crisis since the 1870s, he acquired experience in famine relief, disaster management, and in fighting against trafficking. The situation of North China since the 1870s (and the great famine of the end of the decade) accelerated the pace of human trafficking and increased official concerns about the phenomenon, including Zhou Fu’s. The elements presented in this chapter shed fresh light on the context and factors that prompted the 1910 reform. Yet, although Ransmeier brings to light context-specific factors (diplomatic tensions, protests against the coolie trade, anti-Christian resentment, increased visibility of trafficking cases, etc.), deciding whether the late Qing context contributed to shaping a genuine “abolitionist” mentality remains unclear.ⁱⁱⁱ The combination of famine relief and anti-trafficking measures, for instance, was not a late Qing innovation,^{iv} and the development of summary executions in that period (which applied, among other criminals, to traffickers) is not in itself evidence of an increased anti-trafficking mentality.^v

In chapter 3, *Sold People* focuses on the process, content, effects, and enforcement of the 1910 edict prohibiting “the buying and selling” of human beings (again enlightened by judicial cases). One of the many achievements of the *Xinzheng* Reform era (1901-1911), the prohibition was to remain in force until the late 1920s. The criminalization of all transactions involving human beings is therefore essential to the following chapters in which Ransmeier explores the resilience and transformations of trafficking during the early Republican period. Continuing her analysis of the factors that prompted the adoption of the prohibition, she brings to light the emergence of a growing concern about trafficking, illustrated by modern newspapers articles, placards, police records, and the development of anti-trafficking societies. Yet, she also makes it clear that despite the new visibility of trafficking and the pervasiveness of the metaphor of “slavery” throughout Chinese society, the goal of the reform was highly opportunistic and aimed at bringing China “in line with evolving international norms while simultaneously tending to domestic interest” (pp. 110-111). Ransmeier then explores the events that triggered the reform (the Shanghai Mixed Court of December 1905), the content of its ten articles, and their limits (suppressing the status of *nubi* 奴婢 and all the monetary aspects of transaction involving human beings, the reform did not question traditional hierarchies), before turning to the Republican period. From that point on, Ransmeier opens an almost totally unknown page of history. Using Supreme Court decisions, police records, and local courts archives, she dives into the “judicial conundrum” created by the reform, looking at the ways judicial courts and jurists struggled, in this time of legal experimentation, with new legal norms, loopholes inherited from the Qing, ongoing traditional practices, the changing meaning of terms related to trafficking, and the appropriation of the new norms in the strategies of traffickers and families.

Chapters 4 and 5 follow this line of investigation. As an echo to the first two chapters, Ransmeier navigates from one tableau to another. She untangles the social web and the mechanisms of human trafficking in the new and uncertain world of the nascent Chinese Republic. What interests Ransmeier here is the rationale of the market in people in all its complexity. In these chapters, she explores in detail the intricate relationship between the resilient private sphere of the “traditional” household, and the “new,” changing, promising, and dangerous public spaces of the Republican era. Deconstructing the all-too-common and all-too-simple narrative of “inevitability” associated with the selling of children and women,

she demonstrates that marketing people was not always a last resort, but an option as valuable as others in the strategies of even better off families (as she notes, p. 139, “the market in people was a place of decision making rather than inevitability”). Family strategies are at the core of these chapters, as is the agency of all the actors. She skillfully tries to reconstitute those elements by reconstituting the ways in which the families, the trafficked, the traffickers, and the authorities perceived the variety of transactions in human beings (as actual sales, as trafficking, or as normal family arrangements), and the way they adapted and appropriated the new legal norms in a context of increased criminalization. In so doing, she underlines the pervasiveness of such transactions in everyday life (as a means to “replicate traditional extended families structures even as modern life strained those structures”), and sheds light on the fragility of some family bonds, on the strength of family networks, and on the ambivalent role of the authorities in this “morally ambiguous arena” (p. 168).

Chapter 5 introduces the issue of mobility as a crucial factor for the alienation of sold people. Transportation, isolation, and violence were essential tools in the making of trafficking. This observation is not new. It has been central in the analysis of enslavement in other contexts (like in Orlando Patterson’s or Claude Meillassoux’s studies of slavery^{vi}), and it was already present in China long before the Republican period. Ransmeier nonetheless ably depicts the mechanisms of isolation in the context she studies. She first shows how alienation was imbedded and reinforced by the “dominant ideals of marriage” (p. 174) and how the “bride-price-dominated marriage system fed the overall social ecology of trafficking” (p. 172). She then turns to the role of new modes of transportation in the process of isolating and alienating the victims of trafficking, with a particular focus on the emerging railway and steamships networks, which created new opportunities for personal mobility as well as new vulnerabilities, added secrecy, swiftness, and distance in the more connected and multilayered networks of trafficking criminals.

Chapter 6 examines in further detail the changing ideas and policies about trafficking in post May-Fourth China, scrutinizing the implementation of the 1921 crackdown on traffickers in the strategic treaty port of Tianjin by the affluent Chief of Police Yang Yide and his men (who took pains to document their efforts to apprehend traffickers). Focusing on the police methods of this unconventional police officer (including the use of ex-criminals and underground police operatives), Ransmeier untangles the web of a widespread trafficking

business connected to militarists and criminal organizations. Depicting the famine context and military defeats that led the widow of a former commander of the Zhenwu army to operate human trafficking locally (through her family's rickshaw business) and nationally (by means of steamer transportation to Hong Kong), she draws a vivid picture of the innovative ways of operating trafficking in Republican China, using social networks and the sense of loyalty formed in the army. As she underlines (p. 238), the urbanized, mobile, militarized and fragmented Republican era, and the criminalization of transactions in people by the state "ensured that traditional needs would be filled by new, more predatory and clandestine, trafficking enterprises."

Through a series of vivid vignettes (a 16-year-old runaway maid accusing her owners; a "child-bride in waiting" beaten by her "mother-in-law"; and a wet nurse fired for not producing enough milk), chapter 7 then explores the transformations of the market in domestic labor in the 1910s and 1920s. Ransmeier sheds light on the major shifts that affected family conceptions (from the resilient traditional economic unit of co-residence to a more intimate and conjugal nuclear unit) and labor patterns (from incorporation through purchase to contractual employment; from paternalistic to professional relations). The slow erosion of the bonds of mutual obligations, the increased social and legal value of contracts, and the inconsistent appropriation of new norms created growing tensions and anxieties, but also opened the road to autonomy, to appealing for legal protection and to gaining leverage and power. It therefore offers a vibrant illustration of the evolution of subaltern agency, power relations, and labor structures in the Republican era.

Chapter 8, "Talking with Traffickers," approaches the psychology of the traffickers. Bringing back to life the survey conducted between 1929 and 1932 by Zhou Shuzhao (Zhou Fu's great-granddaughter, then a graduate student in the Sociology department at Yanjing University), Ransmeier incidentally takes her readers on a journey through prison life. She depicts human trafficking (an exhausting, competitive, and lucrative business) in a new and cruder light; one that differs "strikingly" from police and courtroom records, narrated by the traffickers themselves, and "on their own terms." Through Zhou's work and notes, she dissects the traffickers' own ambivalences: their ambiguous sense of pride for the skills they acquired, for their reputation, and for their "exploits"; their vivid consciousness of the nefarious nature of their activity and its inexorable appeal once involved with it. She also reconstructs the crude

and colorful slang of the traffickers to underline the violence of the trade in human commodities that many attempted to mitigate. The portraits she draws in this final chapter unveil the deep mechanisms of trafficking, the blurred lines between legal and criminal trading, the manipulation techniques of the traffickers, and the vulnerability to trafficking of those who ventured, in those changing times, into the new public spaces and on the labor market. As she underlines (p. 305), those stories of failure (as Zhou's informants had been sentenced to prison) "capture the social penetration of a market that cannot be tabulated merely by counting police files, court cases, or newspaper reports."

Sold People is not exempt from minor defects. Occasionally, some arguments leave the reader yearning for much more. In particular, some readers will regret the limited ambition of the book to connect Chinese trafficking in human beings with broader regional and global dynamics. However, this is a topic on its own that has not, so far, been researched extensively. On the editorial and formal side, most defects are negligible.^{vii} More inexplicable, however, is the absence of a comprehensive bibliography, despite the book having an appendix, glossary, endnotes, and an elaborate index. Having to remind academic publishers that bibliographies are not a waste of precious printing resources and why they matter is, at the very least, problematic.

Despite such minor issues, *Sold People* is a genuine *tour de force*. It is a must-have that will find its due place alongside recent studies in East Asian bondage history, like Amy Stanley's *Selling Women*^{viii}, and Matthew H. Sommer's *Polyandry and Wife-Selling in Qing Dynasty China*.^{ix} Furthermore, it is also a vibrant tribute to early Chinese sociology, the fruits of which have not been sufficiently reaped so far.

ⁱ Johanna Sirera Ransmeier, "No Other Choice. The Sale of People in Late Qing and Republican Beijing, 1870-1935," (Ph.D. diss., Yale Univ., 2008), supervised by Jonathan D. Spence.

ⁱⁱ See, for instance, Ma Yushan 馬玉山, *Zhongguo gudai renkou maimai* 中國古代人口買賣 (Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1999), and Zhang Xiuli 張秀麗, *Minguo Beijing binü wenti yanjiu* 民國北京婢女問題研究 (Beijing: Beijing Shifan daxue chubanshe, 2016).

ⁱⁱⁱ Using a different approach, I have tried to address this (still unclear) issue. See Claude Chevalyere, "Under Pressure and out of Respect for Human Dignity: The 1910 Chinese Abolition," in *Distant Ripples of the British Abolitionist Wave: Africa, Asia and the Americas*, ed. Myriam Cottias and Marie-Jeanne Rossignol (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2017), 147-198.

^{iv} See Claude Chevalyere, "Asservir pour punir: la nature pénale du statut d'esclave dans la Chine des Ming (1368-1644)," *Extrême-Orient, Extrême-Occident* 41 (2017): 100-105.

^v As demonstrated by Eric Schluessel, the increased use of immediate executions was rather part of a new government technique supported and enacted by provincial officials of the "Statecraft" movement. See Eric Schluessel, "The Law and the 'Law': Two Kinds of Legal Space in Late-Qing China," *Extrême-Orient, Extrême-Occident* 40 (2016): 39-58.

^{vi} See Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982) and Claude Meillassoux, *Anthropologie de l'esclavage. Le ventre de fer et d'argent* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1986).

^{vii} Endnotes still contain pagination errors (e.g. Chap. 1, n. 18 should refer to page 275 of Hsieh Baohua's book, not to page 274), omissions (e.g. Chap. 1, n. 15 does not provide the pages where to search for more in the book it refers to), and discrepancies (e.g. Chap. 2, Li Hongzhang's memorial, dated Aug. 21, 1870 in the text, is dated Aug. 21, 1872 in n. 49).

^{viii} Amy Stanley, *Selling Women: Prostitution, Markets, and the Household in Early Modern Japan* (Oakland: Univ. of California Press, 2012).

^{ix} Matthew H. Sommer, *Polyandry and Wife-Selling in Qing Dynasty China* (Oakland: Univ. of California Press, 2015).