Spring 2007

Behind the Silence: Chinese Voices on Abortion by Nie Jing-Bao

Marc L. Moskowitz
University of South Carolina - Columbia, moskowit@mailbox.sc.edu

Publication Info

Published in *China Review International*, Volume 14, Issue 1, Spring 2007, pages 186-189.

each other, good luck and bad luck produce each other, slowness and swiftness convert into each other; by dispersion and concentration [things or events] take shape. All this can be accounted for by names and actualities, all this can be reflected on by subtle [thoughts]" (p. 123). I don't see how this quote unambiguously supports his claim. This passage, moreover, is probably later than the oldest *Zhuangzi* passages. See Hans-Georg Moeller, "Chinese Language Philosophy and Correlativism," *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 72 (2000): 91–109, p. 105.

14. Again I have the impression that Moeller somewhat overstates the practical political relevance of the *Laozi* by interpreting it in terms of later uses of that text.

15. In *Lü shi chunqiu*, 18.4.5 "Departing from the Import," a text of the third century B.C., the same allegory is clearly meant to give priority to meanings over words. See John Knoblock and Jeffrey Riegel, trans., *The Annals of Lü Buwei* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 453.

Nie Jing-Bao. *Behind the Silence: Chinese Voices on Abortion.* New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005. x, 294 pp. Hardcover $75.00, ISBN 0–7425–2370–5. Paperback $27.95, ISBN 0–7425–2371–3.

Nie Jing-Bao's book *Behind the Silence* is an exceptionally thorough and well-documented examination of abortion in the PRC. This is a truly pioneering work in that the PRC government's antagonism to research that has anything to do with the one-child policy has, until now, made such a project impossible. Nie successfully overcame this barrier, however, producing this very important contribution to the academic study of China.

The book draws on fieldwork in five Chinese cities (Beijing, Changsha, Dalian, Guangzhou, and Qingdao) and three villages in Hunan. It includes thirty interviews with women who had abortions and thirty interviews with doctors administering abortions. Nie also provides data from his survey in China, which had a total of 601 respondents, as well as a smaller survey he conducted of Chinese residing in the United States.

The book begins with a brief foreword by Arthur Kleinman, who vividly demonstrates the often great gap between Chinese and Americans on the issue of abortion. The introduction outlines the array of Western responses to China's one-child policy, ranging from outraged condemnation to sympathetic support. Chapter 2 provides a well-written and detailed outline of the PRC's history of population growth, laws concerning abortion, and the one-child policy. Chapter 3 addresses views on abortion in imperial China.

Chapters 4–6 deal with responses to his surveys, interviews with women who have had abortions, and interviews with people administering abortions, respectively. All three chapters contain a wealth of information and succeed in giving a sense of the range of emotional and intellectual responses to this matter.

In Chapter 7 Nie explores the slippery issue of "coercion" as a response to Western attacks on China on the one-child policy. Chapter 8 is the conclusion.

Nie creates a well-balanced account of both abortion and the one-child policy. He neither condones the human tragedies caused by coerced abortion nor approves of the demonization of the government, which, he points out, takes no joy in the traumas the one-child policy has inflicted but, rather, enforces the policy out of a sincere concern for the public good (p. 189).

Nie points out that the policy has reached its goals in that China's growth rate has leveled off at 2 percent in the last two decades (p. 200). In contrast with many Americans' outspoken condemnation of the one-child policy, many of the respondents to his survey stated that they wanted abortions for their own reasons (p. 149). Also, though most of his respondents reported that they would prefer two children, the majority of them also supported the one-child policy (pp. 113, 116, 132, 154) and even endorsed the idea of coerced abortion for women violating the one-child policy (p. 117). Nie likens this issue to paying one's taxes in the United States in that one might desire to maximize one's personal gain by paying as little tax as possible while still recognizing that taxes are necessary for society as a whole (pp. 207–211). Thus, the tension of what is good for the individual and what is good for the nation becomes an important theme of this book.

As with any work, there are points that could have been stronger. Nie highlights the arguments that people have extremely diverse views of abortion in China and that this demonstrates that China is not as homogeneous as presented in the West. These are very important points, and it is good that they were raised, but they tend to dominate the theoretical focus of the book to a degree that might not be warranted. Given that the book is written for an academic audience, which has already come to accept the idea of China being more heterogeneous than once believed, Nie's ideas on this matter were sufficiently demonstrated in the introduction, and indeed with the materials he presents, that he did not have to belabor the point throughout the rest of the book.

Nie is also a bit dismissive of the role of religion in perceptions of abortion. While he notes that different religious affiliations influence one's beliefs in whether or not one should have an abortion, he seems to discount the importance of these same beliefs in one's emotional response to one's own abortion, though he admits that he did not ask about them (p. 152). There are several points in his book when it becomes clear that religious belief permeates this issue. In the history chapter he speaks of a fear of karmic retribution for aborting fetuses (p. 73). For contemporary China he cites abortion "caused by demons" as one reason to have an abortion (p. 99)—although it is unclear if this is literal or slang for

a certain type of man who impregnates women. Forty-eight percent of his survey respondents stated that they believed human life began at conception (pp. 106–107, 131), 72 percent said that human life begins before birth (p. 131), 74 percent believed in a human soul (p. 122), and 36 percent believed in a fetal soul (p. 123). There is also mention of a popular Buddhist temple that people frequented in order to cure infertility (pp. 164–165). Also, just as many Americans who do not feel they are religious have been profoundly influenced by Judeo-Christian morality, it seems likely that in spite of China's relatively secular orientation many people in China still shape many of their values on Buddhist morals, a Confucian sense of family, and/or popular religious views of the spirit world.

As a smaller point, Nie makes a startling assertion that some women who have had abortions go through *zuo yuezi* (misspelled as *"zhu yuezi"*), a religious-based set of rituals that a woman goes through for a month after childbirth (p. 3). As evidence of this he notes that a woman who had just had an abortion wrapped her head in a blue handkerchief, which is from the *zuo yuezi* tradition (p. 3). It is unclear, however, if women commonly do not work for a month after abortions, which would also be an important part of this tradition (and which seems highly unlikely), or the extent to which they follow other aspects of the *zuo yuezi* customs.

Nie is at his best when relating the results of his findings, which he does painstakingly and in a clear, well-organized manner. He seems less comfortable in delving into the cultural meanings of his findings, however. For example, he spends five pages outlining the ways in which China's intellegentsia responded to his survey differently from other groups (pp. 127–131) but gives no insight as to why this might be.

Nie documents women's voices with accuracy and sensitivity but does not really tease out the issues of what this says about women's position in society. An examination of the effects of the one-child policy on a woman's relationships within her affinal and natal kin groups, her husband, or her lover would have contextualized both abortion experiences and the meaning of abortion a bit better. Similarly, the ways in which women's bodies and personhoods are engaged in state discourse and cultural interaction would give more of a feeling for what it means to have an abortion without limiting it to (admittedly very important) individual experiences or views on abortion's legal and moral status.

Other cultural issues resulting from the one-child policy might also have been worth exploration: its effect on age hierarchies in the family and in society as a whole, or the "little emperor" syndrome in which a nation of only children is resulting in somewhat overindulged youngsters, would, again, give insight into what abortion has meant for China's culture.

Nie has some true gems in his study that, if true, would also have been worth expanding on. He found that men and women were surprisingly similar in their views of abortion—on average, the respondents to his survey had almost the exact same responses on all thirty questions, with the largest variance being 6 percent

(p. 124). Rural respondents to the survey did not say they wanted additional children more than those in cities (pp. 114–115), and the majority of both rural and urban respondents who did express the desire for more offspring said they wanted only two children (p. 114).

Nie also asserts that the abortion rate is not "excessively high" compared with Japan, Korea, and Russia, and that the rates in United States and Europe are "not significantly lower than those in China" (p. 96). Unfortunately Nie does not provide exact numbers for any country but China, but if he is correct this is a very important discovery that should enter into international discussion about the one-child policy.

No book can do all things, and my suggestions above should be read as topics of further study in relation to the rich data that Nie has provided rather than as criticisms of the book. Overall, the strengths of Nie's work far outweigh any shortcomings it might have. He provides a striking range of voices concerning abortion in China, ranging from full support of the policy to a woman spitting in an abortion doctor's face (p. 165). The very fact that Nie was able to conduct this study, given the PRC's ambivalence about research on the one-child policy, is nothing less than astounding, and for that alone Nie's work is of great importance. He is also extremely thorough in his documentation and provides the most comprehensive overview of English-language scholarship on abortion in China to date. Nie's book is therefore well worth reading and I predict that it will be the foundation for many future studies of its kind.

Marc L. Moskowitz

Marc L. Moskowitz is an assistant professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of South Carolina. He is currently a Fulbright Scholar and affiliated with the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, Taiwan. He is the author of The Haunting Fetus: Abortion, Sexuality and the Spirit World in Taiwan *(2001) and coeditor of* The Minor Arts of Daily Life: Popular Culture in Taiwan *(2004).*