



# Childbirth in Republican China: Delivering Modernity

By Tina Johnson

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*Childbirth in Republican China: Delivering Modernity* (1911-1949) is the study of a pivotal period in which traditional midwifery, marked by private, unregulated old-style midwives, was transformed into modern midwifery through the adoption of a highly medicalized and state-sponsored birth model that is standard in urban China today. In the twentieth century, biomedical technologies altered the process of childbirth on virtually every level. What had been a matter of private interest, focusing on the family and lineage, became a national priority, a symbol of the new citizen who would participate in the creation of a revitalized nation. This transformation of reproduction coalesces with the broader story of China's twentieth-century revolutions, marked by an emphasis on science and modernity. The roles of the state and of western medical personnel were paramount in affecting these changes, but equally important are the intense social and cultural shifts that occurred simultaneously. The dominant themes of reproduction in twentieth-century China are characterized by expanding state involvement, shifting gender roles, escalating consumption patterns accompanying the commercialization of private lives, and the increasing medicalization of the birth process.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

Joining a wave of interesting new studies of the entwined histories of medicine, gender, and the state in modern China, this book focuses attention on the science of reproduction and on midwives and changes in their profession in the 1920s and 1930s. Johnson (Saint Vincent College) argues that a long process of 'medicalization' of childbirth was initiated by Euro-American Christian missionaries in the late 19th century and carried out more systematically by the nationalist and communist governments beginning in the 1920s. Thus, the state claimed an increasingly significant role in the lives of women and their babies. Midwifery was transformed from a local practice to a standardized and regulated profession until being abolished in 1993. Johnson brings to light important archival material, as well as professional and popular literature on reproduction and childbirth in early-20th-century China. Detailed accounts of the individuals and institutions responsible for this great transformation in Chinese lifeways and medical practice, as well as carefully chosen illustrations, enliven the book. **Summing Up:** Recommended. All levels/libraries.

(*CHOICE*)

This well-researched book is an important addition to the literature on state-building and modernization in modern China. Focusing on the introduction and development of the biomedical birth model in the Republican period, it provides a stimulating case study of the transformation of reproduction during a period of far-reaching social, intellectual, and cultural changes. The author's careful and insightful analysis of the issues of modernization, state-building, gender roles, consumer culture, and the medicalization of birth in modern China is scholarly and commendable. The book will be of considerable value to historians of China and medicine, sociologists, and anthropologists, as well as gender studies scholars. (Ka-che Yip, University of Maryland, Baltimore County)

This richly-detailed analysis is an important contribution to our understanding of the ways in which gender, medicine, and state-building have historically intersected in modern China. Through a multi-faceted account of the individuals and institutions who sought to reform traditional midwifery practices, *Childbirth in Republican China* reveals how measures intended to improve women's status could also subject female reproductive bodies to intensified government control. It is sure to become a standard reference in the field. (Yi Li Wu, author of *Reproducing Women: Medicine, Metaphor, and Childbirth in Late Imperial China*)

#### About the Author

**Tina Johnson** is assistant professor of modern East Asian history at Saint Vincent College, Pennsylvania.

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