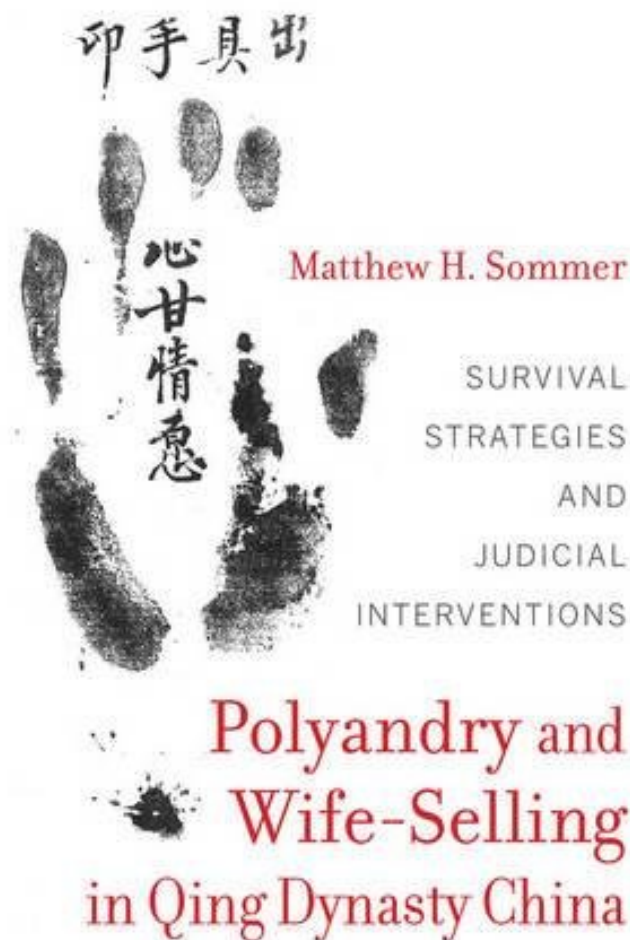


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Polyandry and Wife-Selling in Qing Dynasty China: Survival Strategies and Judicial Interventions

Matthew H. Sommer

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Matthew H. Sommer : Polyandry and Wife-Selling in Qing Dynasty China: Survival Strategies and Judicial Interventions before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Polyandry and Wife-Selling in Qing Dynasty China: Survival Strategies and Judicial Interventions:

7 of 7 people found the following review helpful. Great social historyBy E. N. AndersonThis major work opens up a

whole world of illegal and semi-legal practices in Qing China: wife-selling, polyandry, prostitution, and various intermediate situations. Dr. Sommer shows that a combination of desperate poverty and a very skewed sex ratio (due to selective infanticide or neglect) led to many arrangements to share women or to move women from men unable to support them to men who could. Life was horribly difficult for anyone less than affluent, and sickness or accident could submerge a person rapidly. Many men became "bare sticks," unable to find or keep any woman at all. Many who did have wives were reduced to selling them because of misfortune. However, there were interesting con games attending this--men who tricked husbands into selling their wives, and then prostituted them; men who sold their wives and then brought them right back, to cheat the buyer out of the sale price--a practice known as "flying a falcon" (because the falcon returns to the falconer). Women had a surprising amount of agency in all this. They could refuse to be sold, cause endless trouble, go home to their parents, or go to law (at least if their natal families were supportive). Sometimes, a woman flown as a falcon decided she liked the intended victim better than her husband, and refused to return. All these not-very-legal procedures often led to fights that ended in murders--producing the most dramatic of the case files that Dr. Sommer draws on. He has gone through hundreds of complicated and difficult files to write this book. Dr. Sommer stresses the poverty and desperation of the people in question, but some of the characters involved were less charitable. A magistrate referred to wife-sellers and other marginal characters as "useless wastrels"--"useless" is a seriously insulting word in Chinese. Wives tended to refer to husbands that sold them as "liking to eat, but too lazy to work," also a forceful phrase in Chinese. The world of the poor merged with the underworld, as so often happens globally. Dr. Sommer concludes that the situation was not so much one of exploiting and oppressing women as of a system that was ferociously hard on anyone unfortunate. This will be debated.... What I can say is that this book is an instant classic, and a huge contribution to social history. It is also a delight to an anthropologist (like me), because of the enormous ethnographic detail in the stories and because of the light it throws on kinship and marriage, always the favorite anthropological field of enquiry. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Brilliant scholarship By pokey This is a stunning exploration of the ways marriage arrangements varied in traditional China--including the selling of one's husband for sexual or labor services -- Sommer is a brilliant scholar and his use of marriage contracts, local histories and anecdote create a very surprising picture of the varieties of marriage in China, especially the ways the individual and marriage practices were manipulated to assist in the preservation of the family and the lineage.

This book is a study of polyandry, wife-selling, and a variety of related practices in China during the Qing dynasty (1644-1912). By analyzing over 1200 legal cases from local and central court archives, Matthew Sommer explores the functions played by marriage, sex, and reproduction in the survival strategies of the rural poor under conditions of overpopulation, worsening sex ratios, and shrinking farm sizes. Polyandry and wife-selling represented opposite ends of a spectrum of strategies. At one end, polyandry was a means to keep the family together by expanding it. A woman would bring in a second husband in exchange for his help supporting her family. In contrast, wife sale was a means to survive by breaking up a family: a husband would secure an emergency infusion of cash while his wife would escape poverty and secure a fresh start with another man. Even though Qing law prohibited both practices under the rubric illicit sexual relations, Sommer shows how magistrates charged with propagating and enforcing a fundamentalist Confucian vision of female chastity tried to cope with their social reality in the face of daunting poverty. This contradiction illuminates both the pragmatism of routine adjudication and the increasingly dysfunctional nature of the dynastic state in the face of mounting social crisis. By casting a spotlight on the rural poor and the experiences of both men and women, Sommer provides an alternative to the standard paradigms of women's history that have long dominated scholarship on gender and sexuality in late imperial China.

"Sommer's exhaustive analysis of legal cases involving illegal marriage practices is the first systematic attempt to document their prevalence and grapple with their implications for our understanding of gender order and state-society relations in the Qing."