

The Haunting Fetus: Abortion, Sexuality, and the Spirit World in Taiwan

Review >
East Asia

It is common belief in contemporary Taiwan that an aborted fetus may come back to haunt its family, and the ritual practices to appease it. According to this belief, the aborted fetus appears in the world of the living as a fetus-ghost (*yingling*) or as a fetus-demon (*xiaogui*). Fetus-ghosts provoke disorder affecting the family concerned, such as disease, injury, or death, while fetus-demons seek vengeance through evil acts: to appease the fetus-ghost, the family performs a ritual. While fetus-ghosts are associated with guilt and redemption, fetus-demons are concerned with evil: fetus-demons' sorcery means sorcery performed by a sorcerer master with the help of a fetus-demon. Haunting fetus-ghosts generate disorders in the same way as most Chinese and Taiwanese spirits.

By Evelyne Micollier

In *The Haunting Fetus*, Moskowitz endeavours to explore the ghosts' (*yingling*) distinctiveness, particularly their nature as children. A cultural continuum links the abortion cult, child spirits, and Daoism, providing a framework of local ideas and practices in which this newly imported cult can thrive. In traditional Chinese culture, age is calculated from the date of conception, while representations of early or 'unborn' childhood involve ambiguity, incompleteness, and a liminal state that gives access to secrets of the cosmic world. All of this is significant in Daoism. Moreover, the ultimate goal of the Daoist practice 'Guarding the One' was to return to such a liminal state through concentrative meditation, in which the technique of 'embryo breathing' was used to regress to the '*enfance*' state (Schipper 1982:206).

The treatment of the subject is fascinating, as the moral, psychological, and symbolic aspects of abortion are addressed in the context of a modernizing Taiwan. Against this background Moskowitz discusses gender-related power struggles and the emotional manipulation of women. Moreover, the topic is original in the way it addresses religion in the context of Chinese and Taiwanese culture: the author conceptualizes the subject as being at the crossroads of religion and gender studies in a context of societies in social, political, and economic transition.

His analysis is based on ethnographic material such as case studies, urban mythology, people's own accounts given through interviews, newspaper articles, morality tracts, and visual media and literature about the ghosts. Moskowitz collected written documents and conducted interviews in Mandarin Chinese, primarily amongst urban Taipei residents, during the mid-1990s.

Fetus-ghost appeasement practice seems to be rooted in Japanese culture from where it spread out across Taiwan during the 1970s. The influence of Japanese belief and practice is noticeable in Taiwan in the development of new religions in general and in fetus belief and practice as a new religious component in particular (chapter 3). The legalization of abortion in 1985 may partly explain the development of such a controversial ritual practice in Taiwanese society. For the first time, abortion was discussed in the public sphere along with a range of highly emotionally charged related issues such as teenage pregnancy, sexuality, and family planning. These issues provoke tensions between the person as a whole and her inner self, the individual and society, and within society as a whole. Fetus-ghost appeasement helps to reduce those tensions, while fetus-demon sorcery reinforces them.

Though the study focuses on specific religious belief and practice, the scope of the research is so broad that it also contributes to understanding new concerns in the context of an

Asian society in the process of modernization, including moral values, control of sexuality, and the family as a traditional social structure in transition. In his analysis, Moskowitz takes into account the historical and political background. His research is innovative as no systematic ethnographic study of fetus-ghosts (*yingling*) and little ghosts (*xiaogui*) (called 'fetus-demons' in the book) had previously been conducted. Indeed, a better knowledge of Chinese and Taiwanese perceptions and conceptions of the spirit world contributes to our anthropological knowledge of daily acts and ideas, actions pragmatically connected to people's world views and systems of representations.

Moskowitz concludes: '...fetus-ghost appeasement is part of a larger body of religious practice and belief that might be called a commodification of sin, in which one can atone for one's wrongs through financial sacrifice in one form or another' (p. 168). But he also notes that 'religious masters could not market this belief if there were not a demand' (p. 169).

The book offers an insight into the process of reshaping the religious sphere through a pragmatic adaptation to the social issues raised in a society in transition, such as abortion and its meaning, women's changing roles, and other gender issues: all these issues are analysed in connection with economic transition. It opens up a number of avenues for further research related to gender, religion, and globalization related issues. Although the author does not sufficiently clarify his theoretical stands or his epistemological choices, the book is definitely a valuable work for any specialist and inquisitive reader as well as those interested in a contemporary anthropology. Moskowitz empathically covers a whole range of issues from the most intimate aspects of the human condition to the most external aspects of life in society. He also shows that a 'globalized' process of commodification is subtly pervading each of these aspects, even through the manipulation of emotions generated by distressing events. The book is a welcome addition to a body of anthropological works about women and contemporary religious culture in Taiwan. ◀

- Moskowitz, Marc. L., *The Haunting Fetus. Abortion, Sexuality, and the Spirit World in Taiwan*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, (2001), pp.206, ISBN 0-8248-2428-8

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