

1996

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Recommended Citation

Leonard, John (1996) "China's "Dying Rooms"," *Florida State University Journal of Transnational Law & Policy*. Vol. 5: Iss. 2, Article 10.

Available at: <https://ir.law.fsu.edu/jtlp/vol5/iss2/10>

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Cover Page Footnote

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CHINA'S "DYING ROOMS"

JOHN LEONARD**

For three months, a year ago, three British journalists with hidden cameras bluffed their way into orphanages all over China to find out what becomes of the million baby girls who are abandoned each year on riverbanks, by roadsides and in railway stations of the Middle Kingdom. The result was a stomach-turning TV documentary, "The Dying Rooms," that shows up for 40 minutes Wednesday night on Cinemax Premium Cable, between a western and a murder movie.

You might have seen some of "The Dying Rooms" on "Eye To Eye" on CBS last August. Snippets also made the network news in January, when a human rights watch report on the abuse of children in China's state-run orphanages hit the front page of The New York Times and other papers. But nothing quite prepares us for what we see Wednesday night on Cinemax: a *cinema verite* of babies dumped on the street, like kittens in a sack; to whom names are attached like luggage labels; swaddled five to a cot; bound hand and foot; tied to each other on communal benches; denied soap and medicine and toys; and left to die in dark rooms.

Almost all of them are girls, because overpopulated China insists on a one-child-per-couple policy, and rural Chinese, especially, prefer boys to take care of them in their dotage, and so babies of the wrong sex are discarded like botched experiments. "The Dying Rooms" also talks about mandatory abortions and forced sterilizations.

I was going to show you a bit of the Chinese government's videotaped reply to "The Dying Rooms," but it's a laughably inept exercise in agitprop, and there's something more urgent to emphasize. When Westerners criticize human-rights abuses in non-Western countries, we are told to mind our manners by two different groups, unlikely allies in business as usual. On the one hand, cultural

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relativists say that moralizing about the rest of the world is imperial arrogance. On the other, pragmatic politicians and the multinational corporations to which they pander are loathe to punish repressive regimes with anything like a trade sanction. It hurts us in the profit, and confuses geopolitics. A free market will eventually democratize everybody.

They said this about South Africa; they repeat themselves on Singapore. What's missing from this disingenuousness, besides scruple and decency, is any sense that Western critics are themselves allies of braver men and women fighting on their native ground, like a Sakharov, a Havel, or a Zhang Shuyun, the Chinese physician who blew the whistle on a Shanghai orphanage. Or Aung San Suukyi, under Burmese house arrest by the bully boys of Myanmar until her Nobel Prize embarrassed them. Or Ken Saro-Wiwa, who has a new book out next week—too late to save him from being hanged in Nigeria.

Four years ago, when Alice Walker published a novel attacking the genital mutilation of too many women in too many African countries, she, too, was reviled for Western uppityness, as if hurting women were a quaint local craft or dialect. But when eight Nobel Prize-winning writers, born in eight different countries, gathered last April with Jimmy Carter and Ted Koppel in Atlanta for a symposium just published in the *Georgia Review*, they didn't sound like relativists or multinationals. Their witness was universal and enduring.

I suggest we find our moral bearings in the testament of great writers. There is a cosmopolitan multiculture that's more than business as usual; more than bank loans, ARMs credits, microchips, Shell Oil in Nigeria, the CIA everywhere; and the spiderspeak in green decimals of international currency speculation. It's Kobo Abe reading Garcia Marquez in Japanese, and Toni Morrison and Wally Shienka reading him in English. It's Garcia Marquez reading Kafka, Faulkner and Flaubert in Spanish; and Philip Roth in Czechoslovakia discovering Jiri Weill. It's Maxine Hong Kingston rewriting classical Chinese novels to include Abbie Hoffman as the monkey king; and Naguib Mahfouz, who got himself stabbed for organizing forty Arab intellectuals to defend the right of Salman Rushdie to his novels and his life. Every one of them would break down the door of a dark room, anywhere, to save a dying child.

So must we.