



# UCD Centre for the History of Medicine in Ireland

**Seminar Series 2018 – 2019**

**5 pm Thursday 21 February 2019  
Room K114, School of History, UCD**



'Child being sold' (1909)

**Dr Isabella Jackson (TCD)**

**'Child slavery and changing conceptions of  
girlhood in modern Chinese history'**

## **Abstract**

Children, particularly girls, were routinely sold as slaves in China for centuries until the practice declined suddenly in the Republican era (1912-1949). Children could be bought and sold because they were small and unable to defend themselves, because they were considered the property of their parents, and because personhood and the rights associated with it were not deemed to apply to children. Girls were far more likely to be sold due to preference for boys to continue the family line. Many of them were sold by poor families to wealthier families who would use them for unpaid domestic labour: with no freedom to leave, they were slave-girls.

Opposition to the practice of selling girls into slavery grew in the 1920s and 1930s, and the nature of the discourse changed. Initially reformers, Chinese and foreign, made the case that girls needed protection in the same way that women should be protected. Yet in the 1930s the case was increasingly made that girls were entitled to an innocent childhood, free of labour and exploitation. This paper, drawn from a project funded by the Irish Research Council, will examine the hypothesis that the shift in discussions about child slavery in this period marked a change in the conception of childhood in China from a category applied to boys and elites to a universal stage of development encompassing girls and the poor.

## **Biography**

Isabella Jackson is Assistant Professor in Chinese History at Trinity College Dublin, where she is based in the Department of History and the Trinity Centre for Asian Studies. Before taking up her current position, she was a lecturer at the Universities of Oxford and Aberdeen. Her research focuses on the history of colonialism in China, and the global and regional networks that shaped its treaty ports. Her monograph, *Shaping Modern Shanghai: Colonialism in China's Global City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), examines how the Shanghai Municipal Council governed the International Settlement of China's most important and diverse port city. Her main current project examines twentieth-century campaigns against child slavery in China and what they reveal about changing conceptions of childhood.