The ambivalent relationship between science and ethics is a hot topic of ongoing academic and public debate in many countries, especially in the field of bioethics. Bioethics, understood as the moral-philosophical reasoning on life science and the treatment of living beings, does not only include biomedical issues such as organ transplantation, genetics, stem cell research or life prolonging techniques, but also biotechnology in agriculture, animal experimentation, and environmental policies.

Despite the differentiation and institutionalization of bioethics, the most prominent field still seems to be biomedical ethics. Faced with the globalization of biomedical science, as seen for example with the Human Genome Project one of the most successful scientific global interactions, and the global threats of infectious diseases like AIDS, the question remains how moral values and scientific responsibility and regulation can be managed in an international setting. However, the first step is to learn more about local solutions and problems. Only then would global solutions become plausible and realistic.

The need for a system of global ethics and international bioethics is one reason why more and more bioethicists, philosophers and politicians are interested in cultural studies of medicine and national specificities in ethical issues. Another reason is that there are specific research topics in the relationship between culture, scientific development and moral disputes that can only be examined properly within one (dynamic) picture.

These reasons provide the background for this book edited by Ole Döring. As an expert on China’s history and philosophy, he organized the symposium Aspects of Ethics in Medical Science in China: Initiating an Ethical Debate in Hamburg in 1998. The book in hand is the result of this conference, bringing together a selection of revised versions of papers presented at it. The book is composed of sixteen rather short and survey-like papers with an appendix pro-
viding further information on the symposium and the contributors. The composition of the group of contributors is not only international (China, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Germany, and the USA), but also interdisciplinary (clinical geneticists, physicians, virologists, social scientists, philosophers, and historians). The majority of the contributions deal with the problem of human genetics, its opportunities and especially the social responsibilities attached, mostly in China, but also in Germany. In addition, many other issues, such as HIV-treatment, public health care and cloning, are raised. As the range of topics is very broad and sometimes unconnected, only a selection of papers, those which focus on the recent situation in China, will be discussed. I will conclude with some general impressions, however.

Qiu Renzong, philosopher and bioethicist, gives a broad overview of biomedical ethical issues discussed in China. The bioethical debate in China has developed since the early 1980s. Nowadays, it is a structured and institutionalized academic research field with its own journals. Medical ethical courses are offered to all medical students in China (as the contribution by Chen Renbiao and Qiu Xiangxing explores in detail). Four main issues are identified by Qiu: euthanasia, assisted reproduction, HIV-prevention, and the health care system. Yang Huanming, a Chinese geneticist, formulates his concerns about the abuse and misuse of genetic information. These concerns are based on three conditions. Firstly, there is a demand-driven effect in genetic services, which results in badly trained geneticists and inappropriate genetic testing. This is due to the fact that China, with its large population, has a large number of clients. Therefore, secondly, mistakes and bad counselling can result in a chain reaction. Thirdly, there are the lessons from history, both from within Chinese culture but also from outside (this is where other authors refer to eugenics in Germany, Scandinavia or the USA). Here, Yang Huanming refers to the abuse of scientific knowledge for political and ideological reasons. In this sense, he is a scientist who regards science as a politically and culturally neutral complex and argues for a social and ethical embedding of science and technology. According to him, a basic standard must be freedom of speech, or, more concretely, the principles of informed consent and privacy. Like other contributors, he pleads for more education to achieve this goal. While education seems to have an intrinsic value for most people, the question remains whether education is the sole key to responsibility and safety. Slightly different is the contribution by Shao Yiming, who addresses the ethical issues in AIDS-research and therapy. As someone who has detailed knowledge of HIV/AIDS research in China, he speaks in support of a respectful way to treat all HIV-patients, regardless of the way they were infected. The social discrimination of patients still occurs in hospitals. In his opinion, the main problem is—as in most developing countries—the limited access to the expensive HIV-therapies. Therefore, he criticises the role of international pharmaceutical companies that do not provide affordable drugs and invest in vaccine research. Stephen T. S. Lam, a clinical geneticist, describes and discusses the policy of abortion, sterilization and genetic control in Hong Kong and China.
The practice of using abortion or sterilization as a means of genetic control, for eugenic reasons, is indubitable. Legislation in China and Taiwan stipulates pre-marital check-ups, which include checks for genetic diseases. In Hong Kong, on the other hand, no such legislation exists (at the time of publication). Therefore, a mixture between cautiousness and pragmatism prevails. Abortion for eugenic reasons (if the child will suffer from physical or mental abnormalities so as to be seriously handicapped) is allowed until the twenty-fourth week of pregnancy but not later. Sterilization of mentally handicapped people is allowed, but has to pass a hurdle of medical proofs and legal counselling.

From a bioethical point of view, it is interesting that many authors refer to the so-called ‘four principle approach’ that is very prominent in the United States and Western Europe. It comprises respect for patients’ autonomy, doing good (beneficence), doing no harm (non-maleficence) and being fair (justice). Obviously, these four principles can conflict. Without a rule for a hierarchy or a balance between these four principles, they should be understood as heuristic tool for detecting ethical problems. One interesting insight is the way the relationship between the physician, the patient, the family and society as a whole is described and reflected in China. While Western biomedical ethics stress the autonomy of the patient as a critical reaction to medical paternalism and abuse in medical research, many Chinese bioethicists emphasize a balance between individual and social interests. In contrast, the Neo-Confucian perspective on human genetics, provided by Lee Shui-chuen, differs. According to him, biotechnology (including such very controversial techniques as human cloning and surrogate motherhood) is good because it relieves pain and suffering. Unfortunately, a critical discussion of the scientific, anthropological and psychological underlying meaning of ‘pain’ or ‘human defect’ is missing.

The whole discussion seems to be framed by the perspective of scientists and researchers who have to consider and reflect upon their responsibilities. In this sense, we find a more expert-driven debate in which the relationship of the expert to the patient (or lay person) is discussed, but not necessarily vice versa.

In summary, the book conveys different impressions that provide single puzzle pieces of the debate in China. It serves as a helpful initial entrance into the bioethical debate concerning China and Eastern Asia. However, the heterogeneous selection does not really provide a systematic and well inter-connected whole. The general topic of responsibility in terms of ethics and scientific practice often remains too vague.