The volume *Bioethik: Chinesische Texte zu Stammzellenforschung, Sterbehilfe und AIDS*, edited by Prof. Dr. Paul U. Unschuld, gathers translations of recent Chinese articles all thematically focussed on bioethics. In doing so the editor tries to provide a first insight into current Chinese bioethical discourse.

One of the most salient features of the collection is the wide range of topics and problems addressed by the essays. The first two contributions, which discuss bioethics from a more comprehensive perspective and thus are of an introductory nature, are followed by articles highlighting topics such as assisted reproduction, stem cell research, HIV/AIDS, informed consent, drug testing and euthanasia. A second notable feature of the volume is the particular background of the authors. Mainly active in hospitals or as scientists in medical and public health research institutions, their training and specific concerns have a considerable bearing on the methodology and content of the articles. The authors approach bioethical issues primarily from sociological and medico-technical perspectives, thereby confining themselves to raising public awareness of particular problems and outlining corresponding solutions.

These two features mean, first of all, that the majority of the articles do not pursue a philosophically orientated systematic approach, but remain the expression of a distinct form of social engagement. Secondly, and related to this point, the particular background of the authors means that the normative frameworks which they occasionally invoke as well as their foundations are not explicitly spelled out. They are merely hinted at in an allusive way.

Concerning the first consequence, one has to stress that the social engagement is mostly addressed in quite general terms. Zhang Beichuan’s contribution, for example, constitutes an overview of the relationship between homosexuality and HIV/AIDS, in which the proposals for solutions do not go very far beyond the highly unspecific advice to enhance the development of science and foster compassion. One has reason to
doubt that such measures alone will finally remove the taboos and exclusions affecting the lives of Chinese homosexuals. Along the same lines, Liang Hongfeng depicts in an almost journalistic style the situation of the drug-tester in the PRC. Though providing the reader with detailed and useful information, the author misses the opportunity to present, besides the recommendation to complete and further elaborate drug-testing laws, a clearly-defined way out of the existing challenges. Others, fortunately, engage in a more concrete solution-oriented debate. Li Shibao, for instance, comes up with suggestions regarding the general situation of HIV-infected persons, and deploys a catalogue of possible measures to avoid the exclusion of the patients, ranging from a “strategy of tolerance” to prevention activities in the prostitution environment.

With regard to the second consequence, Weng Jianping, for instance, refers to principles that might serve as an orientation for future euthanasia laws. He mentions in this context the principle of free choice, the idea of a transparent procedure everybody has to comply with, as well as the allocation of a certain period of consideration for those concerned. How the author came up with these principles, however, and how they are related to each other remains unclear. Since the foundations of this account are not clearly presented, one is tempted to question whether the list of principles is complete or in need of improvement.

Particularly interesting in this context are those essays which consult original Chinese sources in dealing with the normative aspects of bioethical issues. Wang Yanguang, a philosopher, presents a “strategy of tolerance” (p. 99) which should frame the way HIV/AIDS patients are to be treated. She distinguishes this ‘strategy’ from the western conception of tolerance, which, according her, merely implies a distant bearing of differences. In the Chinese understanding, on the contrary, tolerance implies an active devotion to the other person. Wang tries to generate from this basis different measures to support HIV/AIDS patients in general and drug-addicted and homosexual AIDS patients in particular. These measures are, however, so self-evident that one doubts whether a Chinese version of tolerance is able to give rise to any theoretical innovation. The systematic role of the Chinese conception of tolerance is thus left in a highly under-determined shape.

In approaching public health problems Chen Xiaoyang and Yang Tongwei for their part resort to Confucian ethics, and above all to the idea of humane government. Although the overall quality of the Chinese public health system is improving, the authors diagnose striking short-comings in the just distribution of medicare. The conception of humane government implies that politically responsible persons intervene in a regulatory manner in the existing injustices in order to establish an harmonious society. To be effective every humane government has to rely on agents
distinguishing themselves by their loyalty, honesty and sense of justice. The theoretical explanations of the authors do not, however, go into further details. It thus, for instance, remains an open question which conception of justice is actually the relevant one for the authors: should the worst-off be privileged (maximum) or should the greatest number of patients enjoy the maximum benefit (utility)?

The diversity of topics and their specific perspective on bioethical issues of the articles certainly does not allow one to draw a consistent picture of current Chinese bioethical discourse. This, however, is not a shortcoming of the editor. It rather adds to the charm of this compilation, and mirrors the fact that bioethics has to be understood in the Chinese context in a fairly broad sense, encompassing very different and not only philosophical approaches. In this respect the volume constitutes a very helpful introduction to current Chinese bioethical discourse.

As mentioned above, some contributions lack a genuinely systematic approach, leaving the reader sometimes disappointed. The introduction to the volume, which taken as a whole provides a very good first orientation, could have pointed out this problem and recommended further primary sources that follow a more systematic approach. One such example is Cao Gang’s Moral Dilemma and Procedural Justice (Daode wenti yu chengxu zhengyi 道德问题与程序正义), which deals in a highly systematic manner with moral dilemmas, and discusses amongst other things bioethical issues. The Chinese academic world is much more diversified than is sometimes assumed, and the levels of quality are far from uniform. This needs to be emphasised in order to avoid misunderstandings.

The translations, on their part, are sound and read well, though one might have hoped that the translators would at times have included Chinese characters, especially on occasions where it could have been of use for the reader familiar with Chinese.

The volume is all in all a valuable addition to the China-related academic scene. A continuing updating of articles related to bioethics would be a praiseworthy enterprise for the future. The production as well as the quality of Chinese academic work is increasing at breath-taking speed. One should keep an eye on these developments.