

Reviews

***China's Peasant Agriculture and Rural Society: Changing Paradigms of Farming*, edited by Jan Douwe van der Ploeg and Jingzhong Ye. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2016. vi+289 pp. £85.00 (cloth).**

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Debates over modernization theory—the optimistic notion that society is continuously moving in a single desirable direction—have faded into the background, and today most scholars, policy makers, and the general public take the assumptions of modernization theory pretty much for granted. Perhaps it is because modernization theory was juxtaposed with dependency theory—and given the fatal deficiencies of dependency theory, the flaws of modernization theory pale in comparison. It is so accepted today that modernization theorists do not recognize themselves as such—they are simply studying development. The forces that are supposed to drive modernization are taken to be positive for nearly everyone, at least in the long run. The main puzzles focus on how such forces operate, what impedes them, and how to encourage them. And while critics of modernization theory persevere, the lack of a proactive alternative to the modernization thesis has meant that such criticism has not shifted into a competing vision. If modernization is to be toppled, we need to ask what other futures are possible.

Whatever debates remain among modernization theorists, one of many points of implicit consensus is that peasants—small holding subsistence farmers—should not exist in the modern world. They utilize land inefficiently. They are poor and illiterate. They hold to and protect traditional regressive ideas and ways of life. They are patriarchal. Through their very presence, they block the modernization of agriculture (think of Iowa and its mighty combines) as well as manufacturing. What is more, they *want* to leave agriculture for the benefits of a wealthier modern urban life. Thus, we are justified in helping them along, in solving the “peasant problem.”

Against this hegemonic vision, a pair of scholars provide an alternative understanding of the peasantry in the People's Republic of China. Development scholars know Jan Douwe van der Ploeg of Wageningen University for his pathbreaking, influential research on agriculture and rural change in a variety of contexts. China scholars interested in rural China recognize Jingzhong Ye as one of

the leading lights on the myriad changes in the countryside. While modernization has affected most sectors in China since the 1980s, it is only recently that agriculture in many regions has fundamentally changed. And the winners and losers of such changes are not the same across China's vast, disparate regions. Douwe Van Der Ploeg and Ye have assembled an impressive array of primarily Chinese scholars who bring firsthand experience and incisive scholarship to a range of questions. Most of the chapters are written collaboratively—typically one or two scholars cooperating with one or both of the editors. This is an approach rarely adopted in edited volumes, and it brings welcome cohesion to the volume.

Studying a vast country like China at the grassroots sometimes can seem like the blind men feeling an elephant, but this edited book describes and analyzes such a range of parts that a clearer picture of the elephant emerges. It does so in the best way possible—close-up—by analyzing results from intensive fieldwork across a number of years in seven villages in four provinces scattered across China. In describing the dynamic peasant experience and the interaction of China's farmers vis-à-vis land, cities, formal and informal "work," gender, age, and markets, the authors undermine many of modernization's most hallowed assumptions. Are farms in China too small to be competitive? Not so, argue the authors, who document the high productivity of these farmers. Doesn't China's land-to-population ratio and low productivity of labor mean that China must inevitably import land-intensive commodities? If that is so, the authors note, how has China remained largely self-sufficient? Are the countryside and city a dichotomous pairing locked in a zero-sum game? The authors argue persuasively that the countryside has been vital for urban development and has promoted China's comparative advantage. Have farmers permanently left the countryside for urban jobs? No, argue the authors—most migrants move back and forth between urban jobs and the countryside. In this way, having land to return to creates a form of insurance, income diversification, and a home base for farmers, which in turn has allowed manufacturers to thrive even as the countryside has endured. The book directly unpacks and counters numerous assumptions and shows how the evidence actually undermines them.

No volume is without flaws, and this one is no exception. First, given its nuanced approach, it is jarring to see sweeping generalizations that appear throughout the book. Sub-Saharan Africa—presented as a counterpoint to China's success—is taken as a homogenous whole. Despite the book entreating us to see China's countryside as a diverse place, we are still told that peasants have a unified identity—a way that they "define themselves." Really? These are hundreds of millions of people. The book repeats China's misleading official account that China's current system of agricultural

landholding—the Household Responsibility System—emerged through bottom-up forces. Most scholars see this institution as arising through an interaction between farmers and the state. The volume's bibliography is impressive, but many seminal works on changes in China's rural life are puzzlingly omitted. I found no references to the scholarship of Anita Chan, Jonathan Unger, Dorothy Solinger, or David Zweig, just to name a few. The book's more sweeping generalizations and conclusions may trouble those who are familiar with the debates in this field.

Too, the central government and political actors of any kind are largely absent. I searched for the names of Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping to no avail (the index is not among the book's strong suits). Yet the administrations of the three post-Deng leaders have had a major impact on China's agriculture and rural life. While the Xi administration was relatively new when these papers were likely written, speculation on how this administration's radical policies of urbanization would affect the cultures and institutions described in the book would have been most welcome. The authors present scattered evidence in this regard but provide no direct analysis connecting Beijing with far-flung rural places.

Nevertheless, these drawbacks do not mar the book's relevance and importance. Modernization theorists (aka mainstream development scholars) will find a foil to their ideas and food for thought in this book. Critics of modernization theory will find a rich case study that can contribute to establishing theories that challenge modernization theory's dominance. China scholars are presented with an alternative view of the countryside that might be unfamiliar to those who do little fieldwork there. Even seasoned observers of rural China will find much to ponder in these pages. Individual chapters or even the entire volume can be used in an advanced undergraduate class, and the book should be required reading in relevant graduate courses on China. This ambitious book does not represent the final word. But it stands as a powerful expression of one side of several debates in China studies and development studies, and it takes criticism of modernization theory in new and more productive directions.