

**The Individualization of Chinese Society.** By Yunxiang Yan. Pp. 384. (Berg, Oxford, 2009.) £17.99, ISBN 978-1-84788-378-0, paperback. doi:10.1017/S0021932010000362.

Clifford Geertz (1988) once likened *The Nure* by Evans-Pritchard to a high-resolution slide show: stunningly clear, immediately accessible, but somehow static. Reading Yan's book is like watching a classical documentary film; the images are dynamic, vivid, flowing smoothly from one scene to another; the interpretations are measured and always directly speak to what is in front of the audience's eyes. It is of a 'classical' style also in the sense that the rich footages about everyday life, accompanied by systematic narrations about the background, are always meant to lead to a clear point and to build a coherent, well-structured, overall configuration. The book powerfully demonstrates unique strengths of ethnography in tackling complex social changes in countries like China.

The book can be divided into three parts. The largest section consists of eight articles, each on a particular aspect of the life in a village in north-east China where Yan lived and conducted fieldwork for a long time. The second part includes two chapters on urban consumerism. And finally there are two articles (Introduction and Conclusion) that seek to draw out more general, theoretical insights on the theme of individualization. Most of the articles were previously published. The village chapters are definitely my favourite. Yan's intimate understandings of the local life make his arguments deeply convincing. He saw changing relations between cadres and peasants while watching quarrels on the street, and delineated historical changes in household arrangement while listening to old people's complaints about their adult children. In a time when multi-sited ethnography becomes fashionable, such long-term, well focused fieldwork remains indispensable.

Yan's theoretical proposition that Chinese society is undergoing a distinct process of individualization raises a series of fascinating questions. Yan approaches the notion of the individual in three ways though he does not explicate so. First, he treats the individual as an analytical category and stresses the importance of individual agency. Such a theoretical position bears no direct relation to the specific empirical conditions under examination; individual agency is indeed critical for understanding totalitarian systems that grant little space for individual freedom. Yan adopted this position very productively. For instance he convincingly demonstrates how actual kinship relations, as practised by individuals, differ from the normative presentation yet are conditioned by it. By contrast, the second approach sees the individual as an empirical category. It is along this line that Yan suggests that individuals in China become more independent, autonomous, demanding and in general more important in social changes. He goes further to argue that the emerging individualism in China stresses individuals' assertion instead of self-reliance, and is basically ultra-utilitarian egoism which creates 'uncivil individuals', thus very different from the 'Western European' model (Chapter 7). His observations are revealing and convincing, but the question is whether the observed changes can be most productively captured by the idiom of individualization. For instance, Yan attributes young villagers' increasing demand for bridewealth and dowry to increasing individualism; but we know that, for adult

children, it is much more acceptable to squeeze every penny out of the parents to get married than to choose to work hard to care for the parents but remain single. Instead of pioneering individualism, both parents and children are hostages of collective forces resulted from a combination of the commodification of social life and the conservative familial ideology.

What prompted Yan to stress individualism is that the village youth themselves deployed individualistic discourses to justify their position. This leads to the third approach to the question of the individual, namely the individual as an ideological construct by the people themselves. The popularization of individualistic discourses, however, does not necessarily mean that individuals become more important than before, nor does this mean that people believe so. Yan's ethnographies contain much valuable information about how people perceive the individual in specific incidents, but he falls short of working out how people imagine, articulate and critique the larger society through the idiom of individual as *their* analytical tool. For instance the chapters hardly investigate people's perceptions of dignity, will, fulfilment, empowerment, hope etc., issues that are all intrinsically related to, but also go beyond, the notion of the individual. The rich history of the intellectual and social debates about individualism since the May Fourth Movement is neglected, and Yan's comments on the ideological critiques of individualism by the communist state may not be completely accurate. Furthermore, it is important to note that individualistic discourses have become less predominant in China since the late 1990s. Ordinary people are acutely aware that individual choices, life trajectory and the possibility of self-determination are conditioned by unequal structures. In other words, ordinary people may be more politically informed and intellectually sophisticated than Yan's theorization suggests. It would be more productive to engage with people's ideological debates at a deeper level. The lack of such engagement renders the two urban chapters less satisfactory. Given the brilliance of Yan's ethnographies, some readers may find it disappointing that Yan ends with comparing and contrasting the two (the 'Chinese' and the 'Western European') idealized versions of individualism and asking whether the latter can be 'applied' to apprehending the former (p. 276). Nevertheless, the book is undoubtedly a highly valuable addition to China studies in the West, and I anticipate that Yan's theoretical exploration will trigger important debates.

### Reference

- Geertz, C. (1988). *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. Stanford University Press.  
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