

BOOK REVIEWS

Chūgoku Kahoku nōmin no seikatsushi 中国華北農民の生活誌
(Daily Life in Rural North China)

By Li Enmin 李恩民. Tokyo: Ochanomizu Shobō, 2019. Pp. viii + 162.
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In the afterword to this volume, Li Enmin, who is a professor at J. F. Oberlin University in Tokyo, describes how he came to write this book. Born and raised in a rural Shanxi village after his father was exiled from his urban job as a result of “political problems,” Li entered Shanxi Normal University as one of the first round of successful exam candidates following the Cultural Revolution. At that time, he thought he knew everything he needed to know about life in rural North China and had no intention of taking up the study of rural history and society. He later entered graduate school at Nankai University, and then moved to Japan to study at Hitotsubashi University where he studied Sino–Japanese diplomatic history. He went on to publish several major works on post-World War II Sino–Japanese relations, including a volume that won the Ohira Masayoshi Memorial Prize.

Li Enmin’s advisor at Hitotsubashi, Mitani Takashi, was head of a Japanese research group studying North China villages, and Mitani invited Li Enmin to join an on-going international project between his research group and scholars in contemporary history at Nankai University in Tianjin to re-study villages that had been the subject of a major wartime Japanese investigation. This wartime project to study what was called customary law has been described in a state of the field essay on follow-up studies published in *IJAS* in 2014.¹ Beginning in 1994 and continuing through 2007, Li joined other members of the international team in research in the North China villages, coordinating research activities while also conducting interviews. Interview records from this international project have been published in both Japanese and Chinese, and members of the research team have published many articles and books. Most of those works have used the research materials to trace the histories of the villages during the Maoist period, to describe and analyse the impact of various mass movements at the local level, and to think about changing family, religious, political, economic, and social patterns.

The volume under review is distinguished by its concern for contemporary daily life, with interpretations of interviews enriched by the author’s introduction of his own experiences growing up in a poor Shanxi village. The book comprises five chapters which take up marriage and family, descendants in light of the one child policy, medical care and health, environmental problems (water shortage) and migration, and the views of rural people towards Japan. Each chapter begins with a list of short comments, taken from the author’s fieldwork notebooks, summarizing his observations and questions related to the subject of that chapter.

Chapter 1, on rural marriage and the “spatial marriage network” begins with a set of observations. First because of the system of household registration and the difficulty for rural people to change their household registration from rural to urban, hypergamy (i.e. marriages that had been more common in the pre-1949 period in which an urban resident married a partner from the countryside, most

¹Linda Grove 2014.

commonly an urban man marrying a rural woman) have almost disappeared. The background to this is directly related to the stipulation that children follow the household registration of their mother, not their father. Second, long-held prohibitions on marriage between people of the same surname are still largely followed, even when there is no close blood relation. Third, despite the strong move in contemporary China to stress “love” in marriage relations, most village couples meet their partners through “introduction.” And finally, men who live in villages that are recognized as being particularly poor, have experienced great difficulty in finding brides. In this chapter, Li takes up the question of the spatial distribution of marriage networks, one of the classic questions in studies of marriage in rural China. William Skinner touched off those discussions when he argued that there was a high level of correspondence between the spatial dimensions of marriage networks and standard marketing areas. It is often assumed that improvement in transportation and the greater mobility of individuals as a result of migration for schooling and work has led to a spatial expansion of marriage networks. While there are certainly examples of marriages across greater distances, using data from the village of Sibeichai in Luancheng county near the Hebei provincial capital of Shijiazhuang, one of the poorest of the *kankō chōsa* villages, Li shows that while most marriages in the prewar period occurred within a circle with a radius of about 5 km, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the marriage area had only expanded to 10 km. Within that circle, there were numerous marriages between some villages, none with others: the deciding factor was the network of kinship relations which provided introductions to young people of marriageable age.

Chapter 2 on attitudes towards children and grandchildren and the one child policy begins with several observations. The first, related to the birth planning process, reports a case in which a young married couple realized that the wife was pregnant before the couple had applied for a permit to have a child. At that time, a couple not only needed to be eligible to have a child but also needed to apply in advance for a birth permit. In the end, the couple was able to obtain a permit from a fellow worker who had a permit but had not succeeded in becoming pregnant. Another of the author’s observations from an example in his own natal village reported the difficulties of village cadre who were responsible for enforcing the one child policy: in one case, unidentified villagers had dumped manure around the house of the female cadre responsible for enforcing birth control policies. At the root of the opposition, as the author shows, was the strong reliance of rural families on a son for support in old age. Rural villagers were gradually persuaded to accept the government’s regulations on family size – a process that was supported in the 1990s by the establishment of old peoples’ homes for elderly who lacked a son (or daughter) to care for them.

Chapter 3 on health and medical care is one of the most interesting chapters in the book. Most of the data describe the situation in the late 1990s and early twenty-first century, before the government sponsored system of rural health insurance was fully operational. Observations at the beginning of the chapter use common sayings in rural China about the disastrous impact of illness on a family’s economic fate. For example, “if you have money you treat illness, if you lack money, you lose your life”; and “if you have escaped from poverty for 3 or 5 years, one illness will bring you back to your originally impoverished state.” In this chapter, the author uses interviews with rural doctors to describe the situation for medical care in rural villages. After the dissolution of the communes, the integrated system of medical care in the countryside that depended on “barefoot doctors” in rural villages collapsed, and many of those who had been barefoot doctors set up private village clinics. Most of the “doctors” who provided care were graduates of short-term courses, not graduates of medical schools, and the village doctor functioned simultaneously as doctor, nurse, and pharmacist. The reform era has also seen a revival of various forms of what we might call “faith healing” practiced by shamans (*wu*). This chapter about health and hygiene, focusing on the experience of villagers and their interactions with the medical system, is an important complement to other studies that focus on the medical system from a macro perspective.

Chapter 4, “on rural migration and the sacrifice of the interests of rural people to save the cities,” takes up the issue of water shortage in North China and the impact of central government projects to bring water from the south, where there is more than enough, to the north, where water is in serious shortage. Li begins with a description of the various engineering projects which involve the

construction of canals, dams, and reservoirs to store and redirect water flows from the Yangzi river region to North China, primarily for use in large cities such as Beijing and Tianjin. The author argues that various dam projects (some of which, like the Three Gorges dam were for the generation of electric power) have led to the forced relocation of some 15,000,000 people, almost all rural dwellers. The water supply problem was both a rural and urban issue. Earlier studies of rural life based on the wartime *kankō chōsa* studies have described the rituals of praying for rain which were a regular feature of villages on the semi-arid North China plains. From the 1970s on, engineering replaced the ritual prayers, as efforts across North China to dig deeper wells to supply water for both irrigation and household use greatly improved the situation. The combination of more irrigation and chemical fertilizers dramatically increased agricultural output, but also led to a lowering of the water table. The basin of the Yellow River, which had once been plagued by floods, began to experience years in which the water flow no longer reached the ocean. The water supply crisis stimulated efforts continue to find ways to use water more efficiently. Despite all the years of engineering work, the problem has not been resolved.

The final chapter in the book examines villagers' views of Japan in the mid-1990s. The author, as noted earlier, has spent most of his academic career studying the history of post-World War II Sino-Japanese relations, and this chapter is an effort to find out how the government's expressed views are understood by North China villagers. In thinking about these issues, the author begins with a recollection of his own experience as a student in a rural Shanxi elementary school in the early 1970s, after the Sino-Soviet split and about the time of the visits of Nixon and Tanaka Kakuei to China. The students in his school were mobilized to participate in a national campaign to prepare for a possible Soviet invasion, digging underground shelters and tunnels that would lead from the village out into the fields. Li describes the dedication he and his classmates put into participating in this national project. In exploring the ideas of villagers about foreign affairs, Li pays special attention to exploring how the villagers make sense of the sudden reversals of state policy. In this case, how did his informants make sense out of the sudden shift in state attitudes towards the USA and Japan, which previously had been viewed as hostile enemies, but were suddenly transformed into friends as a result of the signing of friendship treaties. For example, one villager in Sibeichai in Luancheng county discussed the question of the revival of "militarism" in Japan, which had been one of the core arguments of the Chinese state's understanding of Japan before the signing of the friendship treaty. The villager commented, "I thought that there must not have been a revival of militarism, because if there was, would we have signed a friendship treaty with them?" The chapter includes an appendix with the results of a survey questionnaire, which included questions about name recognition of Japanese politicians. The highest name recognition was for LDP politicians who had played significant roles in the restoration of relations between China and Japan: Tanaka Kakuei and Ohira Masayoshi. This survey was completed before the widespread availability of SNS in China, and so it would be interesting to see whether in the present period SNS provides more alternative voices in rural China, or whether the government strategies to lead public opinion have been magnified by the new technologies.

As these brief descriptions of the five chapters in the book show, Li Enmin has put together an interesting book that focuses on ordinary daily experience and the lives of rural dwellers on the North China plains. His reflections, based on his own experience growing up in rural North China, show a sensitivity to the voices of the people he was talking to, and at the same time his long experience living in Japan have given him a sense of the issues that need to be explained to those less familiar with rural China in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Reference

Linda Grove (2014) "Revisiting the Kankō Chōsa Villages: A Review of Chinese and Japanese Studies of North China Rural Society." *International Journal of Asian Studies* 11:1, pp. 77–98.