



China's peasant agriculture and rural society: changing paradigms of farming, by Jan Douwe van der Ploeg and Jingzhong Ye

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BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS DE LIVRES

China's peasant agriculture and rural society: changing paradigms of farming, by Jan Douwe van der Ploeg and Jingzhong Ye, London and New York, Routledge, 2016, 289 pp., ISBN-13 9781138187177 (hardback)

China's Peasant Agriculture and Rural Society is the outcome of a large and longstanding research programme of the College of Humanities and Development Studies at China Agriculture University in Beijing. It offers valuable insights into how millions of Chinese peasants make their living, including the mechanisms used by rural households to defend and sustain their livelihoods, increase their agricultural production and improve the quality of their lives. The book explores the practices and methods that underpin the organisation and development of China's peasant agriculture, which depends on labour to convert ecological capital into food and other products and services. The authors also examine newly emerging trajectories of entrepreneurial and capitalist farming and assess whether these meet the enormous challenges that China faces. The authors argue that China's changing farming trajectories may provide a foundation for building an alternative paradigm of farming in China, which does not depend on Western agricultural practices (p. 249).

The research programme was driven by curiosity about how to explain the nature and dynamics of Chinese peasant agriculture. The researchers were puzzled by a comparative analysis question: how does China's peasant agriculture perform so well when it violates the usual rules of "successful agriculture"? This led the authors to embark on a search to understand Chinese peasant farming. The authors trace how four "decays" emerged with the rapid development of Chinese agriculture. These include: ecological decay, or how ecosystems have been negatively affected in extensive and irreversible ways; social-cultural decay, in which achieving impressive growth rates has been accompanied by tremendous hardship for "left behind" women, elderly and children, as well as the hardship of migrating men; demographic decay, or how an aging population caused by family planning has produced the risk of too few people engaging in farming; and a form of decay that extends to and materialises within large urban centres and is associated with the persistent degradation of food that translates into repeated food scares and fatalities. As "a form of farming that is essentially grounded on ecological capital, which, through skilful and industrious labour, is converted into food, and other products and services", China's agriculture results in these different forms of decay (p. 247).

On the whole, the book makes a substantial contribution. The book shows how peasant agriculture in China has achieved both agriculture growth and poverty alleviation (Chapter 11). It demonstrates that it is possible to involve the whole of the rural population in land reform processes, rather than including only a minority. Rural women are shown to be a major social force in agriculture and development. Temporary labour migrants are also found to contribute to agricultural renewal and a "reinvention" of farming through flows of new experiences, ideas, contacts and resources. The book offers a fresh take on newly emerging trajectories of entrepreneurial (Chapter 5) and capitalist (Chapter 6) farming in China, and assesses whether such alternatives, while currently only marginally feasible and successful, can meet the enormous social, economic and environmental challenges that China faces. Finally, the editors explore contemporary Chinese alternatives to the country's agricultural paradigm in Chapter 12, discussing the importance of balancing food sovereignty, peasant

wellbeing and an attractive countryside. In this sense, the book reveals the specific ways that agriculture contributes to the welfare and wellbeing of rural people in China.


This book is written for a multidisciplinary readership and offers both quantitative and qualitative research. The empirical contributions focus on villages mostly in northern China, such as Hebei Province, Heilongjiang Province and Jiangsu Province. Many of these are close to Beijing. For example, data from Sanggang village in Hebei Province is analysed in five of the volume's chapters. This is important as it means that the data are not nationally representative in terms of research site, land size, access to markets and rural development. For example, in southern China, where farmers tend to have small plots of land, there are fewer entrepreneurs and rich households. Similarly, Chapter 7 captures the reinvention of peasant farming through food delivery, agrotourism, the cultivation of regional specialties and well-cared-for landscapes. It is suggested that these trends lay a strong foundation on which China's future agriculture might be grounded. However, in the assessment of this reviewer, many households lack the capabilities to undertake such ventures. At the same time, the intensive labour required to sustain the Chinese agricultural paradigm, the limited income earned from small-scale farming, the country's aging population, the hardships experienced by peasants and limited rural social protection all present further challenges to Chinese agriculture that are not explored in detail. Finally, data were primarily collected between 2008 and 2012, and it is possible that this data may now be somewhat dated.

More detailed explorations of the four types of decay would offer a more complete and balanced understanding of China's rural society. For example, Xiandan Meng, Sabine de Rooij and Jan Douwe Van Der Ploeg discuss the social-cultural decay in Chinese agriculture related to gender relations when they detail the negative impacts of the out-migration of men on women left behind (Chapter 8). However, the impacts of men's outmigration on the left behind elderly, children and other men are not discussed. Attention to these impacts would have been an interesting addition to the analysis presented in this chapter, providing a more nuanced understanding of the grassroots realities and dynamics of farming for rural societies.

Despite these considerations, Ploeg and Ye's work is a timely and novel contribution to the literature. It offers an important "bottom-up view" of China's agriculture, showing how millions of Chinese peasants make a living. It also shows the necessity of balancing food sovereignty, the wellbeing of peasant households and an attractive countryside. It should be – and will be – widely consulted by scholars and practitioners engaged with these issues.

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Energy democracy: Germany's *Energiewende* to renewables, by Craig Morris and Arne Jungjohann, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, xxiii + 437 pp., ISBN 978-3-319-31890-5 (hardcover)

In a world of unchecked climate change the rapid growth in renewable energy has emerged as something of a good news story. New technologies will raise a host of issues for development specialists as wind, solar and biogas energy expand globally, initiating new patterns of