

Julia Chuang: Beneath the China Boom: Labor, Citizenship, and the Making of a Rural Land Market

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Review by Isabel Heger

In this multisited ethnography, based on fieldwork conducted in various stages between 2007 and 2011, Julia Chuang follows the fate of China's rural population as the country is shifting from economic growth through cheap migrant labor to growth through rural urbanization.

To explain this turn to urbanization as well as its implications for China's rural workforce, Chuang argues for a "Polanyian view of China's development": According to Karl Polanyi (1944), both labor and land are fictitious commodities — sources of human subsistence that can be commoditized for sale on a market. In China, the commodification of rural labor — as well as the exploitation of the rural workforce for low-cost export production — has been ongoing since the beginning of postsocialist reforms. Many rural migrants have been able to withstand their precarious employment conditions in the cities without social welfare only because of their collective land-use rights, with families strategically dividing their labor force between subsistence farming and migration so that migrants can retreat to their home villages in times of need. Over time, this model of development has caused a fiscal crisis in rural areas which, while hollowed out economically, had to support the renewal of a labor force employed elsewhere. To resolve this fiscal crisis, local governments have, since the early 2000s, turned towards "accumulation through dispossession" — the expropriation and commodification of rural land, leading to an uncoordinated urbanization boom. This development, however, undermines the conditions which have so far protected China's rural workers from the risks associated with migrant work.

Chuang develops and empirically grounds these arguments, which are presented in chapter 1, throughout the overall seven chapters of this book. Chapter 2 outlines the different development trajectories of her two fieldwork sites: Faming village in Sichuan province, where people still hold land-use rights, and Landing village within the jurisdiction of Chongqing municipality, where the local government has implemented a New Socialist Countryside campaign in the course of which villagers were expropriated. Chapters 3 and 4, on the case of Faming, show how an economy of migration has emerged and is shaping village society, as well as how institutionalized rural–urban inequalities maintain the equilibrium necessary to reproduce a migrant labor force. Chapters 5 and 6, on the case of Landing, show how land expropriation is eroding livelihood security and deepening lines of social stratification as the conversion to urban citizenship often does not come with the promised "land-for-welfare" trade. Apart from those completely unaffected by land loss, the others — farmers, regular migrant workers as well as migrant labor

brokers alike — have to develop new strategies of survival. Particularly problematic is the fact that many of the newly landless laborers now have to compete for jobs with landed laborers who are still able to accept below-market wages. These conditions have prevented the formation of a free, united, and politically mobilized proletariat. In the final chapter, Chuang summarizes her arguments and intertwines them with the further life course trajectories of some of her informants, two of whom committed suicide following land expropriation.

In Chuang's own words, her book "makes a vast analytical leap, from an on-the-ground process of participant observation, to the interactive dynamics within mechanisms of capital accumulation, and then to a broader explanation of Chinese economic growth at large." (p. 191) In the opinion of this reviewer, Chuang takes this leap very successfully, weaving macro level analysis and ethnographic accounts into an encompassing and convincing narrative. Ongoing reflection about the generalizability of the two fieldwork sites (where people heavily rely on the construction industry and land has a vital function for subsistence) add to the cogency of her arguments. The biggest merit of the book is that it coherently and insightfully explores phenomena which are often treated separately in existing research: On the one hand, Chuang presents a comprehensive theory of China's post-1978 development trajectory which extends previous theories on the underlying causes for the country's economic boom and "runaway" urbanization. On the other hand, she shows a profound understanding of the human dimension of China's rural-urban transformation, demonstrating how the marginalized group of rural migrant workers is often transformed into the even more marginalized group of "landless peasants".

Inevitably, this vast analytical leap comes at the expense of some ethnographic detail. The focus of Chuang's narrative clearly lies on people's socioeconomic circumstances, while the emotions connected to village life, land, and land loss are given no room. Also, while Chuang vividly illustrates how her protagonists' lives are intertwined both personally and professionally, I wish we could have learned more about people's self-perceptions as well as their feelings and opinions regarding China's rural transformation and state policy. Similarly, it is a pity that the author's process of research and conceptual understanding, with the exception of a methodology section in the first chapter, only finds a place in the appendix, so that the presence and role of the author herself are hardly reflected in the finished study. Another small shortcoming is that the book lacks a solid theoretical foundation regarding insights on class and social stratification in the two fieldwork sites. Which concept(s) of class Chuang draws on is not made clear, and especially readers less well-versed in sociological theory might appreciate additional explanations.

However, these small drawbacks do not change the fact that this book is an outstanding new contribution to the literature on China's urbanization as well as on socioeconomic development more broadly. Moreover, it is a very engaging read. I

would highly recommend it to experts, scholars, as well as students from related disciplinary backgrounds.

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