BOOK REVIEWS

*Gender and Employment in Rural China* by Jing Song, Abingdon, Routledge, 2017, xi + 149 pp.

*Gender and Employment in Rural China* is a well-organized sociological study of contemporary Chinese peasant families. Based on firsthand oral history of numerous grassroots villagers, the book successfully discloses Chinese peasants’ hidden behavioral logic and explores family economic strategies.

It is widely recognized that China’s rapid economic advancement over the past 20 years has only been possible with an ample and cheap labor force supplied by rural peasant families. However, few scholars have attempted to answer why this has been possible and, more specifically, why it was logical for peasants to participate. Recently, China’s rural households have witnessed increasingly diversified economic opportunities. Especially after the abolition of agricultural taxes in 2006, there has been a drastic change in relationships between the state and peasants. Nevertheless, since the publication of classic works by Judd (1994) and Jacka (1997), there have been few comprehensive studies treating gender issues in contemporary peasant families. Thus, Song’s book is a must-read for understanding Chinese peasants today. Here, I will give a brief overview of each chapter.

Chapter 1 begins with an introduction of the rural transformation of employment patterns from socialist collective agriculture to a more privatized, decentralized, and diverse rural economy. It also explains why and how the four villages under investigation represent different developmental contexts regarding industrialization and urbanization. Chapter 2, “The Peasant Question and the Gender Question,” provides a theoretical discussion based on existing studies on “rational peasants” or “passive peasants,” gender roles, and the family division of labor. The chapter stresses that, as the job hierarchy has been changing, women’s (and men’s) agency should be studied by considering their flexibility in moving between a great variety of formal and informal economic activities within and beyond the household.

From Chapters 3 to 6, the book provides vibrant case studies from four villages. Chapter 3, “Rural Industries and Private Business,” depicts Bei Village in Zhejiang Province, which is characterized by a high level of industrialization. Bestowed both with a tradition of sideline activities and collective industries in the Mao era, the village has more recently witnessed thriving private businesses. As “being one’s own boss” became most prestigious in the new job hierarchy, family cooperation in venture businesses became important in accommodating men’s and women’s aspirations. Chapter 4, “Collective Legacy and the ‘New Socialist Countryside,’” studies Su Village in Jiangsu Province, where the industrialization process has been largely influenced by collective legacy. Although large collective enterprises have been privatized, they continue to accommodate the majority of local employees. The availability of local white-collar jobs has
empowered young and educated locals in the labor market. However, the gender division of labor has been reproduced in more institutionalized career ladders in the workplace and household chores and care work at home.

Chapter 5, “Urban Dream, Tied Migration, and Male Bonding,” illuminates Han Village in Hebei Province, an inland area. In this area, which has only limited local job opportunities, there is labor migration, including “going to Beijing” or “going to the mountain” (for mine workers) for nonagricultural employment. If one wished to embark on local businesses either in quarries or transportation, “male bonding” would be indispensable in mobilizing limited resources. For villagers, cities remain distant. The chapter explains that the “urban dream was both close and far away: the allure of urban life was nearby but settling down in the cities was difficult” (p. 102). Chapter 6, “Integrated or Marginalized in Urbanization,” highlights another inland case, Ning Village in Ningxia Province. The case largely represents those villages that became targets for land development projects and were swollen by city centers. After land development, transplanted external employers did not necessarily favor locals as potential employees. Although women and men adapted to low-end individual jobs in the city, they also began to participate in rental businesses as a major source of income.

Chapter 7 summarizes the findings from the four case studies using different combinations of farms and nonfarms, locals and migrants, extra households and family-based components. The author concludes that employment is a continuing process rather than a fixed choice, and families are adapting their strategies with changing political and economic environments.

The most prominent contribution of Song’s book is the conceptualization of the “family economic strategy.” This concept helps us to understand how China’s high economic growth was possible with the inherent logic of peasant families. According to the author, the family economic strategy mainly consists of three elements: (1) a diversification strategy in which different family members are involved in different types of employment, (2) a multitasking strategy in which the same family member is engaged in several types of employment simultaneously, and (3) a family cooperation strategy in which family members cooperate in the same venture (p. 7). In these strategies, the three patterns are flexibly combined. In other words, peasant families constantly adjust their farm management, domestic affairs, child and elderly care, sidelines, venture businesses, and migrant work. For example, if one can find abundant opportunities for nonagricultural employment, investment in farming can be reduced accordingly. Conversely, “the labor investment in agriculture was related with the amount and quality of land” (p. 85). Another factor affecting family strategy in recent years is the fact that agriculture itself is becoming “lightened” due to mechanization. Likewise, the burden of child-rearing has been greatly reduced due to the decreasing number of children per parent.

Indeed, I have also been engaged in field research in rural China and am aware of the “flexibility” with which a peasant family rationally and aptly allocates its domestic labor from time to time. Nevertheless, I was enlightened by Song’s insight into the roles played by young women in shaping this flexibility. On the one hand, when an opportunity arose for nonagricultural employment, men in a family were the first to grab it. On the other hand, those over 50–60 years old were the furthest from off-farm jobs, generally
staying home to farm and care for their grandchildren. Under such circumstances, active-
age women can be treated as free “pieces,” a source of flexibility for the family’s economic strategy. “As men’s engagement in migrant work was contingent on the family’s economic needs, women’s migrant work was more dependent on family structures…. the presence of grandparents could also facilitate young people, particularly women, to work outside home” (pp. 91–93). Thus, these women are expected to play a “supporting role” or to become “a good homemaker” (p. 118).

Another major contribution of this book is its well-designed “contextualization” of the family economic strategies which follows typical regional economies. Two coastal villages are discussed, Bei Village and Su Village, which largely correspond with the renowned “Wenzhou model” and “Suzhou model,” respectively. Since these economic structures have provided plenty of off-farm local jobs, family strategies in these regions are more inclined toward “multitasking” and “family cooperation.” Conversely, in more mediocre villages, represented by the inland Han Village, people are more likely to employ the “diversification” strategy, in which men are most likely to leave home as migrant workers, whereas women stay home to take up supporting roles in side-work activities and domestic care work. Furthermore, the most conspicuous strategy in urbanized suburban areas like Ning Village would be “family cooperation” in rental businesses.

The abovementioned valuable findings from the present study are welcome, and I pose two questions for further discussion. First, what is the “goal” of the family economic strategies? Admitting that they are not simple tactics or pure reactions to economic environments, there should be a philosophically deep-rooted goal behind peasant strategies. The author seems to have largely evaded this question, probably because the goal of “becoming rich” (fajiazhifu) in the Chinese social context is too ubiquitous to be highlighted. However, it should be noted that this simple goal is neither predominant nor universal in other peasant societies, as I observed in Russian and Indian research. Rather, it is a product of China’s specific social contexts and historical experiences.

A second point is concerned with the relationship between the family economic strategy and public life or, more fundamentally, public order in rural society. Accordingly, the author notes, “For both men and women, the Maoist work ethic of devotion to the public sphere had given way to a tendency to avoid ‘wasting time’ in public affairs for practical reasons, and had been overridden by individual and family calculations of material rewards” (p. 62).

Interestingly, preceding studies have also found that women are keener and more sensitive than men to the interests of their small households rather than to those of extended families or of the general public (Kipnis 2016; Li 2009). If this is truly the case, public life in rural China would inevitably shrink to a minimum. Nevertheless, in reality, one can still notice active public life and village-level governance in the Chinese countryside, especially in economically advanced coastal areas. Presumably, the family economic strategy, though a highly important component in the rural reality, may not account for all aspects of present village life in China. As the well-trodden “moral economy” debates connote, we may come to know alternative (public?) strategies functioning outside the present material calculations. Of course, this issue should be left for future discussion.
REFERENCES


Fumiki Tahara

*The University of Tokyo*

Tokyo, Japan

---


*Renegotiating the World Order: Institutional Change in International Relations* provides us with useful insights into the changing international order. The central proposition of the book is that the speed of institutional change depends on the characteristics of the environment in which it is placed. Specifically, Phillip Lipsy argues that international institutions in a competitive environment must adjust frequently and flexibly to the new realities in order to secure continued support from their members. The primary independent variable that shapes these institutional dynamics is the existence of “outside options,” by which Lipsy means other alternative international institutions or even domestic institutions that pursue similar ends. The proposed theory can be summarized as: an international institution in a competitive environment (presence of many competitors) must adjust flexibly; otherwise it loses support and, in the worst case, ceases to exist. The book attempts to test the validity of the proposed theory with empirical evidence.

The book is full of food for thought for both scholars and policymakers. It gives us useful insights into theoretical questions regarding international institutions, such as why international institutions are established, why they are renegotiated, and why they sometimes are dissolved. It also gives us useful ways to address critical policy questions, including how to design international institutions, how to revitalize existing international institutions, and how to reform existing institutions so that they accommodate themselves to such changing external environmental elements as the rise of China.

A. Summary of the Book

After the Introduction (Chapter 1), Lipsy presents his theory of institutional change, borrowing ideas from industrial organization in the economics literature. The theory provides us with the basis for a discussion of the entire book. It explains that international institutions that work on the policy area where there is a large number of outside options change promptly, but, in the worst case scenario, they may be dissolved if they fail to accommodate the new reality. This in turn means that only international institutions that...