

BOOK REVIEWS

RETHINKING LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN MODERN CHINA IN LIGHT OF MIGRATORY PATTERNS

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A Review of Varieties of Governance in China: Migration and Institutional Change in Chinese Villages

By Jie Lu

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 298 pages.

Jie Lu's new book is a landmark work of political science that lucidly draws on the diverse fields of history, anthropology, and migration studies in elucidating divergent modalities of local village governance in China. Drawing on an impressive number of statistical analyses, rich case studies, and his own fieldwork in rural China, Lu strongly makes the case that the effectiveness of local governing institutions in rural China is dependent on the social environment, community networks, and rates of out-migration. Through exploring local governance in Chinese villages, Lu sheds important insight into grassroots democracy, lineage solidary groups, rural banking, disaster relief, and conflict resolution, which enables this book to appeal to broad scholarly audiences.

At the heart of Lu's argument are three villages that stand as case studies and frame much of his qualitative evidence: Qianzhouzhai Village of Shandong Province, Songzhuang Village of Henan Province, and Su Village, also of Henan Province. For Lu, Qianzhouzhai is representative of one type of rural Chinese village, which has preserved a high level of tight-knit communal structures and has seen relatively low rates of out-migration. Strong social pressures dictate much of everyday life and mundane behavior here, such as a custom of only using umbrellas on rainy days.¹ Elections are held in Qianzhouzhai Village, though candidates are typically nominated directly by the township government, and village cadres sport meager salaries. Nonetheless, roads get paved and loans are provided, though largely through kinship structures and charity from within the local village.

Songzhuang Village, the second case study, has a higher rate of out-migration, with 10 to 15 percent of its total population working outside of Henan Province.² Though the houses of Songzhuang are clustered together like those in Qianzhouzhai, the streets are less lively and mainly populated with elders, whose children have left for work elsewhere. Competitive, democratic elections matter here: Voter turnout nears 100 percent of the local population, and elected cadres help villagers solve all different types of problems and maintain public infrastructure.


Su Village, Lu's third case study, is located in the northeastern part of Henan province, where it has seen approximately 60 percent of its 1,500 people leave for work in other provinces or emigrate with their families.³ There is little social cohesion in Su Village, with most families building large, detached houses while public roads remain unpaved. There is weak enthusiasm and low turnout in elections, and the township government heavily influences, if not dictates, the results. Lu's point is that effective local governance, either through kinship ties or grassroots democracy, is possible in the first two types of villages but difficult to achieve in the third, which has crossed a migratory threshold. There, local bonds have been broken, traditional village cohesion is lacking, and democratic elections are irrelevant.

Lu's arguments are cogent and supported by empirical data that highlight collective village income, semi-regular land allocations, distances to central townships and cities, and election statistics, all of which he generously provides throughout his narrative. One pleasure of this book is Lu's constant conversations with historians of China, with close readings of Prasenjit Duara's formulations of informal state brokerage and the "cultural nexus of power," as well as Philip Huang's notion of "involution in agricultural production."⁴ Lu points to other groundbreaking scholars, such as Vivienne Shue, who has noted the irony that, even as the early decades of the People's Republic of China (PRC) saw attacks on kinship and lineage structures, the commune organization and *hukou* system effectively tied people to the land, which in many cases allowed some traditional kinship and lineage structures to remain active into the 1980s.⁵ This clear delineation of historical and anthropological observations allows a convincing conduit into his argument that sustained and voluntary migration, of the type seen from early 1980s to the present in China, differs from earlier, often forced, movements of people due to famine, warfare, or political campaigns. Those who support an increase in grassroots democracy in rural China will be dismayed to learn that, in many cases, village cadre elections do not function particularly well, either because of the local strength of kinship ties or the complete local cohesion. Lu's analysis does point to the idea that in many areas, effective village-level government is happening. Yet, the future implications of the study are unequivocal: As long as migration con-

tinues to increase from rural to urban areas, rural China's challenges will grow as social fabrics fray. New governing paradigms will have to be created.

Lu's generosity with statistics and data allows readers to infer some conclusions that reach beyond the author's stated goals. For example, Qianzhouzhai Village is located ten miles from a large county-level city, Qingzhou. Here, young people can take part- or full-time jobs in Qingzhou during the day, lessening the need for more permanent long-distance migration.⁶ Thus, William Skinner's descriptions of local networks remain relevant today: The position of a village within a hierarchy of market centers seems to have some influence on governing and social processes, particularly with regard to the degree that rural kinship ties can be maintained in the twenty-first century.⁷

Additionally, one might ask whether the migration destination could also affect governing outcomes in the place of origin. The image of the low-income, rural Henan worker moving to a wealthy coastal city is certainly part of the picture here, but Lu's own statistics imply a more complex canvas.⁸ While provinces like Guangdong continue to attract a major number of rural migrants—over 20 million cited here—the country's poorer provinces are beginning to attract them, too. Provinces with low rankings on the Human Development Index, such as Xinjiang, Tibet, Qinghai, Heilongjiang, Guizhou, and Yunnan, collectively recorded nearly 7 million migrant workers in 2006, a figure that is likely higher today.⁹ Migrants' initial distance from a city, their decisionmaking process in weighing and choosing a destination, and the influence of chain migration patterns based on kinship or cultural affinities may all influence patterns of rural development in China. Some of these themes have been explored in the context of global migration by Peggy Levitt and Deepak Lamba-Nieves in their discussions of social and economic remittances, which could inform future efforts in China studies to understand these complicated trends.¹⁰

In short, this is an impressive study that leaves no doubt in the reader's mind that migration will transform both urban and rural China during this century. *Varieties of Governance in China* is a multidisciplinary triumph for asking challenging questions on the future of Chinese rural governance and demonstrating that the resultant conversation has the potential to bring scholars from anthropology, sociology, religion, history, political science, and economics together. The conference table truly needs them all. 

NOTES

¹ Jie Lu, *Varieties of Governance in China: Migration and Institutional Change in Chinese Villages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 121–22.

² *Ibid.*, 123.

³ *Ibid.*, 126.

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⁴ Ibid., 59. Prasenjit Duara, *Culture, Power, and the State: Rural North China, 1900-1942* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988); Philip C. C. Huang, *The Peasant Economy and Social Change in North China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1985).

⁵ Vivienne Shue, *The Reach of the State: Sketches of the Chinese Body Politic* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), 64.

⁶ Lu, 121.

⁷ G. William Skinner, ed., *The City in Late Imperial China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1977).

⁸ Lu, 78–79.

⁹ Ibid., 78.

¹⁰ Peggy Levitt and Deepak Lamba-Nieves, “Social Remittances Reconsidered,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 37, no. 1 (January 2011), 1–22.