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Book Review

China's Peasant Agriculture and Rural Society: Changing Paradigms of Farming

Jan Douwe van der Ploeg and Jingzhong Ye

New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. 2016. ISBN: 978-138-18717-7, 128 pages

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This book integrates current research in peasant agriculture with appropriate and relevant cases, and practical relevant examples. The beauty of the book lies in the individual chapters that delve into the density issues of Chinese peasant agriculture in readable and entertaining style. I see this book as a perfect outlet for readers who are curious about Chinese peasant agriculture and for students to explore this material through both assigned and optional reading.

As society moves into the 21st century, it confronts one of the biggest challenges—to protect and preserve the earth's resources while farming continues actively. Farming is politically, economically, and socially necessary but not necessarily environment-friendly. If farming is achieved at the expense of the environment and natural resources then it is being compromised. Without better stewardship of the land and environment, farming will be undermined and food security and safety will intensify. It is apparent that land stewardship plays an important farming dimension in the food safety and security equation because transboundary and global environmental

resources are not governed by any effective multilateral environmental policies.

Van der Ploeg and Ye edited a book on Chinese peasant agriculture and rural society comparing between Western and Chinese paradigm in agriculture. The book is an account of the success of Chinese peasant agriculture based on circularity, pluriactivity, and multifunctionality outlooks going beyond the orthodox conventional approaches to farming analyses. These features systematically interlink and mutually reinforce each other on the success of smallholding farms in China.

The book provides a well-balanced theoretical foundation with practical examples before dwelling into specific farming and agriculture subjects. The various chapters written by distinguished scholars present practical and relevant examples, innovative interpretation and potential area for continued research in peasant farming. With limited knowledge of farming in China, I am astonished at the success of peasant farming (in the Western eyes such farming practices are considered inefficient and profligate) and able to digest most parts of the narrative with considerably less surprises than I would have

otherwise. Prior to reading this book, I believe that the peasant farmers still live in oblivion to the very obvious truths faced by the poor farmers in the developing countries and this book is an excellent attempt to bridge the lack of knowledge.

The book uses peasant farming as a unifying paradigm to relate the many grassroots and dynamic issues in agriculture. It is written in a lively manner with real peasant farming events from seven peasant villages to discuss the concepts, topics, and policy issues in peasant farming. For example, in Chapter 11, van der Ploeg discusses the relevance of the Chinese experience to explain how peasant farming exhibits the balance between man and the land—stewardship of the land generates high levels of productivity in tiny plots.

The book is divided into 12 chapters. It opens with a discussion of the main issues and ideas of Chinese agriculture and peasant farming and the implications between them. It includes exploring dynamics and drivers of Chinese agriculture on how, why, and when China feeds its people. What makes Chinese agriculture section astonishingly impressive is a pocket of micro farms less than 5 mu (about one third hectare), the size that from the Western perspectives is inefficient and not economical. However, the Chinese micro farms show continuous growth and development. It reminds us that “big” is not a prerequisite to succeed in farming. This is followed by essays ranging from labor migration, man and land, peasant-managed agricultural growth, entrepreneurial trajectories, contemporary peasant farming, women’s role in agriculture, relevance of rural among the young, markets and value chains, and the Chinese experience to a concluding chapter that puts the jigsaw puzzle together.

Each chapter is filled with vibrant quotes and examples from the peasant farmers. These personal accounts provide deeper insight into a better understanding of the nature and dynamics of the often poorly understood Chinese peasant

agriculture. They are more than just a listing of factual information. Without a doubt, the graphic verbal accounts of the peasant farmers are vivid and exuberant. The book is well-referenced, making skillful use of first-person sources. While it is impossible to thoroughly explore all topics, the detailed bibliography provides sources for obtaining more information. This format spotlights the key phases of Chinese peasant agriculture.

Among the notable contribution is the one by the editors who explore labor migration in Chapter 2 as a promising new road that allowed for higher incomes especially for young people to escape the monotony of village life. This sets the tone for the rest of the book. Labor migration renders an income but at the same time represents hardship in many ways. It is not the desirable way forward for many migrants who discovered that the city is a space of disappointment and returning back to one’s county or village is a better option. The editors tastefully described the phenomenon of multiple job holding in Chinese peasant farm that exhibits a strong linkage with the ‘Hukou’ registration card. The Hukou system poses significant barriers for the migrants to settle permanently in urban areas while at the same time encourages the migrants to maintain close ties with their home villages and communities (Démurger and Xu 2011). Thus, internal migration can be considered as a temporary circular process where migrants move from the rural to the ‘global factory’ and then back again to the rural area. The returning migrants may settle back in the counties of origin by working on the farmland they are entitled, taking up employment or starting self-employment.

To further substantiate the editors’ discussion on labor migration, van der Ploeg, Ye, and Pan’s discussion of the link between Man and the Land governed by three successive periods—fed by the land, feeding the land, and developing the land. Each period has different emotional bonds with different

mutual obligations with grandparents, parents, and children. The first period exhibits the close bonding between the young and elderly, followed by relative hardship in the second, sacrificing for a better future. The son leaves his home, family, and village for an extended period to engage in relatively harsh work in the urban city. The third period is a reflection of happiness with the return of his son to take over the farm. van der Ploeg, Ye, and Pan termed this bonding process as a dual unity in which they evaluated father and son bonding in totality. In the Man-Land relation, migrant work is short term and insecure, but farming is long-term and secure. Migrants leave their home and farm with the intention to return. Land promises security from one generation to the next and ties the extended family together, which provides a better balance in rural and urban development.

Another notable contribution is the one by de Rooij, Wu, and van der Ploeg who argue that rural farming is important to a growing metropolitan population who demand better quality of product, security of supply, and confidence in the safety of the food they consume. The authors conducted an interview with students from rural and urban villages on their view on the rural. Their results are interesting—students perceive the rural and urban villages as antipodes, neither is good or bad, and each has its space of disappointment. Many factors shape the students' view of the rural, and students from the rural area are more pro rural. But most students do acknowledge the rural will remain relevant and needs further development.

Other notable contributions include the dualistic structure of dairy farming with small peasant dairy farmers and large capitalist farms that specialize in milk production; hit-and-run agriculture in onion and ginger enterprise based on modern technologies and often large-scale production; feminization of agriculture, where women empowerment are strongly intertwined in farming; and Xin Fa Di market, where many

buyers and sellers meet and engage in transacting all differentiated agricultural products based on different quality and price levels. Xin Fa Din covers an area of 230 hectares with 14 million tons of agricultural products traded annually. In feminization of agriculture, Meng, de Rooij, and van der Ploeg shows that women work in a changing environment and that women have their limits in farming both economically and socially. However, they show how a “patriarchal equilibrium” does not necessarily improve women's empowerment. Their analysis of women's increased involvement in the farm labor process does not equate to a change in working women's status. Women's decision about big farm and household expenses are still dominated by the men.

The book closes with an eye-catching conclusion. The editors tastefully put the “puzzle” together developed in previous chapters. It begins with a concise summary of the main thesis of the book followed by lessons to be learned from Chinese agriculture. Following this, the editors reiterate the Chinese agricultural paradigm contrasting with the Western paradigm. This is succinctly documented in Table 12.1 (p. 256) in terms of key features that characterize both agricultural paradigms. The “puzzle” brought the preceding background discussion and subsequent chapters together nicely in a condensed style. For example, the editors acknowledged that agriculture and rural development are essentially exogenous in Western paradigm; endogenous in Chinese paradigm (p. 250).

The construction of the book meshes well its organization and the individual chapters delve into the density issues of Chinese peasant agriculture in readable and entertaining style. The book is beneficial reading for those who are curious about Chinese peasant agriculture and the success of smallholding farms. The book also conforms to an academic curriculum, which is beneficial as supplemental reading for economists and graduate students in economic

development and agriculture economics on what to produce, by whom, how, and for what reasons. The book can be used as a reference guide for students; for example, an understanding of markets in peasant agriculture in Chapter 10, or large-scale capitalist farm enterprises in Chapter 6. Another nice feature of the book is an update at the end of some chapters that provides new data or changes that occurred before the completion of the book.

The book has a nice presentation and is relatively short. It provides a balance presentation on changing paradigms of Chinese and Western agriculture—Western large farms are governed by market dynamics, while Chinese peasant farms are centered on self-controlled and autonomous resource base, and the market is only an outlet. The peasants focus on value-added products without increasing farm size. The tone of the book reflects a learned appreciation for the marvel of peasant farming based on extensive interview, case studies, biographies, surveys, and participatory observations.

A chapter on “way forward” displaying the current trends of the landscape of Chinese agriculture and peasant agriculture would enhance the value of the book. Despite the remarkable achievements of peasant farming, China faces several challenges on ensuring sustainable growth of agriculture and raising farmers’ income. The chapter could look at the current global challenges and opportunities emerging from China’s fast changing agricultural markets with regards to improvement in sectoral structure, green development, and innovation in science and technology, as well as international cooperation.

Overall, this book is filled with detailed realities that can shed light on many key agricultural issues today. One of the things I enjoy most about reading this book is that it characteristically discusses specific events factually, without resorting to overly vague generalizations. Recent several high-profile

tainted food scandals have shaken confidence in food production and distribution in China. These incidents have included infant formula contaminated with the industrial chemical melamine to cooking oil recycled from street gutters (Huang 2012). In Chapter 9, de Rooij, Wu, and van der Ploeg provide a counteractive and balance debate on food safety and security with supporting examples and events.

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