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BOOK REVIEW

Becoming a Young Farmer

Young People's Pathways into Farming: Canada, China, India and Indonesia

From the *Rethinking Rural* series, eds. Philomena de Lima and Belinda Leach

■ Sharada Srinivasan, Editor

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Based on a multicountry research done in 2016–21, this book provides new insights on the socioeconomic mechanisms underlying the phenomenon of aging agriculture both in developed and developing economies. This work contributes significantly as a good reading material for tertiary education, for advanced research in rural-social studies, and in formulating public policies in agricultural economic development.

The concluding chapter of this book starts with questions that precisely reflect the importance of this study: “in a world in which farming populations are aging, who is going to provide the planet’s peoples with the ‘sufficient, safe and nutritious food’ that is needed to meet the ‘dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life?’ In other words, where are the people who are needed to generationally renew farming?” (415). The book reports the results from a comprehensive microanalysis addressing those questions in four countries—Canada, China, India, and Indonesia.

In many regions of the world, populations have grown older and fertility rates have exceedingly declined, leading to simultaneously shrinking and aging populations. This phenomenon has far-reaching implications for sustainability in the current context of extensive and rapid urbanization (Jarzebski et al. 2021). Clearly, the implications in the agriculture sector also have started to make people uncomfortable as they threaten the capability of the sector

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to produce enough food, supply inputs to the manufacturing sector, and provide environmental services that ensure global sustainability.

Several recent studies analyzed the process of aging in the agricultural workforce and its impacts on global food security and agricultural sustainability (Ren et al. 2023; Yu et al. 2023; Szabo et al. 2021). However, studies on the mechanism of how young people become farmers and how they perform in the agriculture sector are rare (Mulema et al. 2021).

This book is part of a contemporary sociology series that emphasizes scholarly analysis of rural communities across national spaces. The selected four countries sufficiently represent global variations of rural situations all over the world although only two continents are covered. Seventeen authors from the four countries and from The Netherlands wrote the book. Their academic backgrounds cover anthropology, geography, and other socioeconomic development policy studies.

The book consists of 15 chapters divided into four parts, each devoted to one of the four selected countries. The first chapter of each part (chapters 2, 5, 8, and 11) introduces the socioeconomic context of each country, followed by two chapters (three for Indonesia) comprehensively describing the results of the survey in the sampled villages. Chapter 1 (Introduction) effectively highlights the framework of the research, whereas Chapter 15 (Conclusion) succinctly lists the main messages of the book.

The book discusses three big questions:

1. Will there be a new generation of farmers to take the place of today's aging farmers?
2. What are the experiences of young people who are establishing themselves as farmers, and how are these pathways gendered?
3. How can young farmers be supported to feed the world's growing population?

More technically, the questions focused on four points:

- *Agrarian contexts* (e.g., what are the general patterns and trends of farmland ownership and access, farm sizes, and labor use?)

- *Becoming a young farmer* (e.g., how do young people become farmers?)
- *Young farmers and innovation* (e.g., what are young farmers' attitudes to conventional farming practices?)
- *Young farmers in policy and agenda setting* (e.g., how do agrarian and rural policies affect young people engaged in farming?)

To answer the questions, field surveys involving intensive in-depth interviews were conducted in rural areas of the four selected countries. To provide representative samples, at least two types of villages were surveyed from each country. A total of 378 young farmer-respondents from each sampled village were interviewed. While interviews were guided by a common set of questions, research teams in the individual countries had the opportunity to address country-specific issues and questions essential to complete each country's case studies.

The book presents significant findings from the study—for one, becoming a (young) farmer is a process rather than an “event”. While most respondents began farm work when they were as young as 13 years, a vast majority of farmers in all four countries did not start farming independently until much later. The average age when respondents began farming independently was 23 years; but for many still, this milestone came much later. After leaving school or college, young people typically go through a period of nonfarm employment, frequently migrating to urban centers for work. This applies as much to the “continuers” (those from farming families) as to the “newcomer” farmers, and as much to female as to male young farmers. It also applies to young graduates of vocational agricultural schools. This has many policy implications for the kinds, and the timing, of the needed support for young farmers, including education, land allocations, and subsidies (15).

The book reminds that young rural people are generally landless even if their parents own land. The only young people who may obtain access to parental land, while still young, are the children of land-rich farmers or those whose landowning

parents die early. Most young farmers, therefore, do not have access to parental land when they start. Even if they have access to land, however, gaining more control over farming, farm-related decisions, and earnings pose a challenge. Many young farmers start their farming life on rented land; sometimes, as can be seen in Canada and Indonesia, on land rented from or sharecropped with their parents (16). This has clear policy implications. In countries or regions where vast tracks of farmlands are not privately owned but are with the state or community (e.g., China, parts of Indonesia, Canada's crown lands), there are many possibilities for the allocation of use-rights on this land, at low rental rates, to young farmers. There are a number of examples around the world of good government practices in facilitating young farmers' access to land at reasonable rates.

Studies on discrimination against women in the agriculture sector and in rural areas have a long history across continents (Nichols and Carter 2023; Phiri et al. 2022; Quisumbing et al. 2021). In 2013, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights warned that "discrimination faced by rural women negatively impacts food security." Regarding this important topic, the book also provides insightful findings, i.e., that young women farmers face problems of resource access and recognition as farmers in most of the research sites. National and local efforts to counter these biases are important but unlikely to emerge unless (young) women farmers emerge as a political force (16). This study found little evidence of young farmers emerging as a significant political force, whether locally, regionally, or nationally. This is unfortunate because today's young people (men and women) are on the front line of many public discourses; and it is important that their voices are heard.

A special terminology "pluriactivity" often appears in rural studies literature, which pertains to a combination of agricultural and nonagricultural activities run by the farmer's household (Fuller 1990; Bateman and Ray 1994; Moumenihelali et al. 2023). In other words, "pluriactivity" shows that one person (a farmer) or a group of people (farmers) are involved in different activities

(i.e., agricultural and nonagricultural). In the book (16–17), it is reported that young farmers' pluriactivity is the norm in most cases, often at the individual and, certainly, at the household levels. In all four countries, farm incomes alone are inadequate with which to support a household; rural livelihoods are built by diversifying income sources out of farming into rural nonfarm and off-farm employment, which can include a significant element of rural-urban migration. This provides another insight for policies to support young people in farming. Policymakers need to recognize the reality that for today's young farmers, engagement with farming is seen—as it was for the previous generations—as both a part-life course and a part-livelihood activity.

The case studies in the book demonstrate that the widely articulated view that young women and men are averse to farming as an occupation is misleading. Rather, young women and men, whether it be in Canada, China, India, or Indonesia face economic and structural issues in their lives that significantly limit the viability of farming as a livelihood for a family. Together with the perceived attractions of urban life—shaped now by widely available social media—these can lead to a decision to migrate (430).

The in-depth interview method used in collecting data for this study may have limited the number of respondents. Given the constraint of available research resources, it is understandable that to implement the method, the number of respondents must be manageable. On one hand, the method may be considered as the best approach to answer the research questions. On the other hand, it should be realized that the population size and the area of the selected countries are diverse such that the characteristics of young farmers and their behaviors vary tremendously across regions within a country. For example, according to the recent agriculture census of Indonesia (BPS-Statistics Indonesia 2023), the number of agricultural households is over 27 million (consisting of more than 40 million farmers), residing in more than 83,000 villages (in more than 400 districts). In addition, the agroecosystem as well as socioeconomic background in Java (western

Indonesia) is substantially different in many aspects from that of other islands in the country (eastern portion). Consequently, in the case of Indonesia, a sample of less than 150 respondents from less than 10 villages in two islands is not nationally representative. Certainly, similar problems exist in the case of the other three selected countries known for large and heterogenous economies. These points suggest the need for more confirmatory research activities utilizing more extensive hard data that are capable of scientifically testing hypotheses to validate (or invalidate) the findings reported in the book.

Without any doubt, it can be said that the pluses of the book are threefold, at least. The book is readable to senior students of undergraduate programs (or first year students of graduate programs) in fields related to social studies, including rural sociology and agricultural economic development studies. It also provides new insightful knowledge that is useful for formulating the directions of future research programs. Last but not least, the book systematically describes foundations for planning public policies in rural and agricultural development in the short- and medium terms as well as in food security in the longer run.

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