

China

Yi Wu, *Negotiating Rural Land Ownership in Southwest China: State, Village, Family*

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Yi Wu's book draws on a well-established tradition of theorizing property institutions as sites of social contestation to analyze how negotiations among local governments, village communities, and androcentric families have transformed rural collective land ownership in China. The author proffers the concept of "bounded collectivism" to illuminate the following four characteristics of the consequent ownership compromise: collective ownership by "natural" villages (the hamlets or "small groups" that together comprise each of China's administrative villages); intra-village egalitarianism; enduring physical and social boundaries within which male villagers maintain tenacious, "relatively exclusive control over land" (64); and, paradoxically, state control over rights associated with rural land use and exchange. Empirically, the book is informed by local archives and secondary sources covering the period between the early twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and ethnographic field research in Fuyuan, a poor, mountainous county on the boundary between Yunnan and Guizhou provinces.

The book comprises four parts. Part 1 explains the evolution of and relationship between "natural" and administrative villages. Here, Wu argues that the state's 1962 vesting of land ownership in "natural" villages made these villages "fundamental, stable components of the rural political structure," thereby profoundly affecting not only the sharing of land rights between the two levels of village administration but also the roles played by village leaders and the tenor of state-society relations in China's countryside. Part 2 details how land is divided among and used by village families. Part 3 focuses on local governments and rural land as a subject of local authorities' regulation and development initiatives. Part 4 of the book examines twenty-first century state interventions in agricultural production, land expropriations (misleadingly referred to as "requisitions"), and the leasing of land for commercial agriculture.

Each of these topics has received a great deal of scholarly attention in the past decade. This wealth of research is not adequately acknowledged by the author, who somewhat overstates the originality of her findings regarding the significance of contestation between state agencies, differently configured village communities, and families in the formulation of rural land ownership institutions. There also is a jarring mismatch between the careful chronological and ethnographic description underpinning the first two parts of the book and the much heavier reliance upon media and secondary sources (often non-contemporaneous examples) evident in the latter two parts. This mismatch means that Wu's initial causal argument, about the consequential nature of "bounded collectivism" in shaping land ownership, loses temporal coherence, generalizability, and credibility. As her later chapters demonstrate, there have been extremely rapid, wide-scale changes in rural land institutions and markets and a differentiation in agrarian practices across China. Whereas her emphasis is on labor surplus in the subsistence style and state-mandated tobacco farming of Fuyuan, in the coastal provinces of China mass rural-urban migration—and land leasing for highly specialized, profit-driven farming—has produced severe seasonal labor shortages in agriculture. The concept of "bounded collectivism" fails to capture these momentous changes.

To some extent, the failure of Wu's argument arises from static, essentialist conceptions of the "natural" village and rural family. For example, her insistence on the gender-equal "egalitarian" distribution of land rights among people within long-standing, traditionally bounded "natural" villages ignores research demonstrating that gender equity was *not* always observed in the distribution of land contracts, land lease income, and land compensation funds. Also overlooked is how state restructuring, relocation,

and mergers of administrative village and sub-village populations to accommodate urban expansion—infrastructure such as the Three Gorges Dam and poverty-alleviation projects—have dramatically altered village boundaries, intra-village organizational units, and land shares. Indeed, in some provinces such as Zhejiang, provincial regulations have effaced “natural” village land ownership and identify the administrative village as the legal owner of collective land. In Guangdong, much of the rural land is owned not by village organizations at either level but by share cooperatives. But the inadequacy of this study also is a salutary reminder of researchers’ limited opportunity to theorize and generalize on the basis of an atypical single-site ethnography, especially in a dynamic and socially, economically, and ethnically diverse continent-sized modernizing country such as China. A deliberate comparative ethnographic study of poor, mountainous, marginal Fuyuan and a county hosting commercialized farming in the central or coastal regions of China would have enabled the identification of much more plausible “family resemblances” and conceptual labeling that translates to other sites.

Negotiating Rural Land Ownership in Southwest China deserves to be read by all those interested in land and development in southwest China. It is written in an accessible style and provides a useful historical survey of land transformations in China.

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