

Gonçalo Santos

Chinese Village Life Today: Building Families in an Age of Transition

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The title of this book is misleadingly bland and uninformative. Even the subtitle reveals little of the riches within. *Chinese Village Life Today: Building Families in an Age of Transition* takes transformations in the life of a single rural Chinese community as a case study to explore issues relating to technocratic modernization and the increasing dominance under global capitalism of technoscience and technocratic expertise in the conduct and governance of family life. It is a complex, multifaceted ethnography, which sets the bar high for new studies of everyday life in twenty-first-century China.

The book has four main strengths. The first is the duration and richness of research on which it is based. Most recent book-length studies of Chinese village life draw on ethnographic research conducted over just a few years. In contrast, this book, which is Gonçalo Santos's first single-authored monograph, is based on an intensive fourteen months of research in villages in the northern Guangdong township of Yellow Flower in 1999–2001, followed by repeated research visits to the same villages in nine of the twelve years between 2005 and 2017. Furthermore, in addition to returning to Yellow Flower, Santos kept in touch with villagers who had left their village homes and visited them in their migrant homes in Guangzhou and other cities in the Pearl River Delta. Consequently, this book draws on longitudinal multi-sited rural-urban research conducted over a two-decade period. The resultant combination of a translocal focus with a wealth of detail about transformations over time is the book's main distinguishing feature.

The second strength relates to language. Santos's prior training and fluency in Cantonese, a sub-variety of which is the main language spoken in Yellow Flower, undoubtedly contributed to the wealth of his fieldwork findings. The inclusion in the

book of a discussion of language and orthography, as well as a glossary of Cantonese and Mandarin words, also adds to the book's riches.

The third strength is how the book weaves together detailed micro-histories of transformations in Chinese village life in the post-Mao reform period with broader macro-level histories. This strength is particularly evident in chapters 3 and 5, which focus on transformations in attitudes and practices surrounding childbirth and toilets, respectively. In these chapters, Santos analyzes how recent transformations in the most basic aspects of everyday village life are entangled in complex ways with much longer histories involving national and global shifts in and contestations over morality and understandings of civilization, technology, and modernity. For example, in chapter 5, he locates villagers' conflicting responses to the introduction of private flush toilets in relation to twentieth-century elite ambivalence and only very gradual reform of an imperial-era system of public hygiene involving public latrines and the collection of human excreta for use as fertilizer. This system was not discarded until the post-Mao period. But then, middle-class urbanites quickly embraced Western-style private flush toilets as emblematic of "civilization" and "modernity." In Yellow Flower, this new standard of "modernity" took hold in the late 1990s, but only with resistance, local adaptations, and variations among villagers. In the 2010s, some villagers continued to use communal latrines, saying that their own private flush toilets wasted water and were expensive to maintain.

A final strength of the book is the author's engagement with critical social theory and the work of other China scholars. Santos pulls in a whole plethora of concepts and conceptualizations, but two overlapping clusters of ideas form his starting point. The first relates to modernity and individualization. Much recent scholarship on China has been influenced by anthropologist Yan Yunxiang's claim that, as in other modern states, social relations in China have been transformed by individualization. Building on his previous critiques, Santos suggests in this book that the individualization paradigm is useful for its attention to everyday practices and individual agency, but it fails to capture the moral conflicts experienced by individuals and communities. In response, Santos turns to theoretical approaches that conceive modernity as a reconfiguration of social norms, involving contention, conflict, and negotiations between actors at both macro and micro levels. He focuses on how macro-level forces of change are mediated by micro-level "intimate choices" made through negotiations between individual members of Yellow Flower's families and kinship networks.

The second cluster of ideas framing this book relates to "technocratic governmentality." Here, Santos builds on Susan Greenhalgh's writing about China's family planning policies. In the 2000s, Greenhalgh broke away from the previously dominant narrative portraying the one-child policy as a key example of an authoritarian state's coercive control over citizens' private lives. From the 1990s, she argued, China's population governance increasingly involved market forces and a variety of nonstate actors. Contributing to this shift toward more indirect governance was the rise of normative discourses emphasizing the need for the cultivation and self-cultivation of population "quality" (*suzhi*). Greenhalgh and her co-author Edwin Winckler characterized these trends in terms of Foucauldian notions of "governmentalization" and "neoliberalization" (see Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005).

Santos is not comfortable with labeling China's state "neoliberal" or "neoliberalizing." Instead, he suggests we think of China as remaining a "civilization-state," bent on

promoting and defending a single Chinese way of life. This model, he suggests, helps to explain the efforts of each of China's leaders in the post-Mao period to make a new contribution to the construction of a "socialist civilization" that highlights science and technology, while retaining core Chinese characteristics.

At the same time, though, Santos retains Greenhalgh's pluralistic model of technocratic governmentality in post-Mao China. Thus, he argues that the civilizing mission to construct a socialist civilization with Chinese characteristics is not enacted by the Communist Party state alone. Instead, it involves a range of state and nonstate actors, including professional experts and institutions, such as hospitals, and communities and individual citizens themselves. Greenhalgh's discussions have mostly focused on how state and elite nonstate actors have discursively framed family planning in terms of science and the cultivation of a quality population. Santos, in contrast, takes a bottom-up approach, which highlights the moral agency of villagers and furthers an understanding of macro-level, civilizing, technocratic frameworks of power as being entangled with conflicts and negotiations at the micro level.

These two clusters of ideas are developed in conjunction with other ideas in each of the book's main chapters to different degrees, in different ways, and in relation to a variety of topics. The whole that emerges from the combination of these many moving parts is rich and thought-provoking. However, the book is less of a tightly knit cloth and more of a loose weave.

Chapters 2–4 are the core of the book. Each of these three chapters relates in some way to the building of families through marriage, childbirth, and parenting. The links among these chapters are clear, as is the link to the book's subtitle, with its focus on "building families," and the introduction, where family planning is first discussed. In each chapter, the focus is on intimate choices and the complex relationships between micro-level contestations and broader forces under modernity. Technology and technocratic governance also emerge as obvious themes, especially in chapter 2, in relation to technocratic family planning and the technologies of birth control, and in chapter 3, in relation to the high-tech medicalization of childbirth. The theme of technology is also carried into chapter 4, where Santos focuses on "technologies of multiple mothering" to refer to the "sociotechnical ensemble" involved in childcare arrangements.

After chapter 4 there is a major break, and chapters 5–6 depart from topics of marriage, childbirth, and parenting to discuss toilets and popular religion, respectively. These chapters are characterized by the same combination of ethnographic detail about micro-level intimate choices with broader macro-level theoretical and historical discussion as the previous ones. But the differences in topic, both between these chapters and previous ones and between chapters 5 and 6, are disconcerting. I suspect that many readers will feel that, despite obviously relating to important aspects of Chinese village life today, these last two chapters do not really fit in this book.

My own feeling is that the disjunctures could have been avoided and the book's discussion of "building families" enriched by referring to feminist theorizing around social reproduction, householding, and community economies. These overlapping bodies of theory reconceptualize or overcome the dichotomy between public production and private social and cultural reproduction. Many scholars have applied them in discussions of shifts in global capitalism around the world. In relation to contemporary China, they have fed into analyses of shifts in care work of the kind discussed in this book's chapter 4 (see Jacka 2018). They also have inspired discussion of the way in which a burgeoning

consumer capitalism in rural China has been accompanied by a resurgence in popular religion and ritual practices, the topic of chapter 6 (see Yang 2020). Given Santos's engagement with feminist debates about technology, it is curious that he does not also discuss this other strand of feminist theorizing, especially given how pertinent it is to the "building of families."

Aside from the awkward disjuncture between some chapters, there is also some unevenness in the quality of individual chapters in this book. To my mind, the weakest is chapter 6 on popular religion. Apart from being only tenuously linked with other parts of the book, this chapter is burdened with a mountain of technical detail, which neither contributes to the analysis nor thickens the description and feel of life in the villages of Yellow Flower.

At the other end of the spectrum, my favorite chapters are 3 and 5. These chapters offer insights into the high-tech medicalization of childbirth and the history of norms and practices around toilets and hygiene. These are fundamental aspects of everyday Chinese village life, but they have received relatively little attention in previous ethnographies. The skillful weaving together of micro- and macro-level historical transformations in these chapters makes for fascinating reading. And the balance between empirical detail and theoretically informed analysis is just right.

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