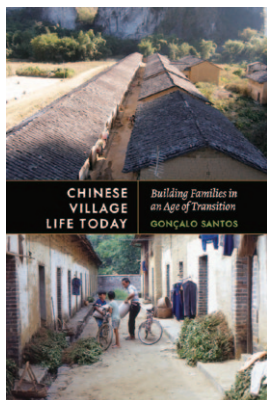


chapter evenly detailing what was happening in the three major communities, might lead readers to interpret it as such. Nonetheless, the three communities are not easily comparable. They have different population structures, and, more importantly, the locations of incinerators slated for construction are different. The relocation of the one that was targeted by Meadow and its two neighbour communities, Willow and Pine, matters more for the entirety of Beijing (p. 171). Therefore, we cannot quickly conclude that the cancellation of the incinerator near the Meadow community was solely due to mobilising potential and protest activities. Finally, I agree that the Tocquevillian perspective effectively explains how associational life could lead to the birth of “civil society” within a gated community. Many readers, I presume, would appreciate the author’s deeper engagement with other streams of literature, such as contentious politics, and the development of additional theoretical reflections.

Despite these critiques, I believe *A Spark in the Smokestacks* is an important book that will be necessary reading for political sociology in general and contentious politics in particular. It can also serve as a useful reference for students studying environmental politics in China.



SANTOS, Gonçalo. 2021.
Chinese Village Life Today:
Building Families in an Age
of Transition.

Seattle: University of
 Washington Press.

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In six chapters, each focusing on one key aspect of contemporary Chinese rural family life, anthropologist Gonçalo Santos paints a vivid portrait of a village in northern Guangdong. Building on around 20 years of longitudinal ethnographic research (from 1999 to 2020), he attempts to analyse how the social transitions that this rural community has gone through have impacted family dynamics. Santos’s work is intended to add to the literature on Chinese village studies, which goes back to anthropologist Fei Xiaotong’s works. Santos clearly states that his bottom-up approach, giving priority to

the situated perspectives of ordinary citizens, has allowed him to better consider the effects of macro-level interventions on their lives. He aims to give more visibility to the “epistemologies of the South” (p. 19), that is to say marginal communities, and in this case rural villages.

Santos aims to analyse the moral tensions in China’s contradictory value system, which are a result of micro-level choices interacting with macro-level forces. Building on classical theories of modernity, as well as on the recent works of contemporary China scholars such as Richard Madsen and Yan Yunxiang, the researcher posits that these moral tensions and negotiations have inspired the development of a “translocal model of rural livelihood” (p. 25) in which villagers continuously move between countryside and city, which requires being studied with a fresh approach. He is particularly keen on answering the following question: “How are increasing rural-urban migration and mobility in the age of digital connectivity leading to the emergence of new frameworks of rural sociality?” (p. 26).

After a first chapter that presents the village, referred to by the English fictional name of Harmony Cave, and its single-lineage community during the transition to the twenty-first century, Santos delves more deeply into specific dimensions of this transition. Each chapter successively analyses the following aspects: marriage and child-rearing, medicalisation of childbirth, labour migration, household hygiene, and local religious practices.

Chapter Two focuses on the changing frameworks of marriage and child-rearing. Discussing family planning policies, Santos suggests that the state regulates the population through indirect techniques of governance, which involve nonstate actors and institutions such as families and local communities. Despite a more flexible approach in rural areas, villagers have nonetheless resisted to some extent and have found personal strategies for noncompliance with the rules. Santos insists on the idea that macro-level forces are “translations” of micro-level negotiations (p. 97), an idea that he feels warrants further explorations on the subject.

Chapter Three revolves around the medicalisation of childbirth. Here, Santos discusses technocratic medicalisation in relation to a dramatic rise in caesarean childbirth from the 1990s onwards. These changes in childbirth practices and preferences in rural China since the reform era may show that new generations have developed new sets of values: their high-tech vision of childbirth emphasises the life-saving importance of medical intervention. Contrasting sets of values reflect a cultural and social contrast between older and younger generations of rural women, who adhere to different models of medical modernisation.

Chapter Four focuses on labour migration and its consequences on childcare. Santos analyses the intimate choices made by the village’s families regarding labour migration. The practice of children staying with their grandparents in the village while their parents go to work in the city creates surrogate parenting arrangements where the authority of the grandparents often comes into conflict with that of the parents. These struggles, too, reveal changing generational power dynamics in the rural family.

Possibly the most unusual and fascinating of all is Chapter Five, which focuses on changing hygiene practices in the village.

Modernity in Harmony Cave seems represented to some extent by household appliances and bodily hygiene practices: the adoption of modern habits, such as a private bathroom with a flush toilet, contributes to promoting the construction of a new socialist civilisation. Villagers who live in new houses see themselves as representatives of a superior “modern material civilization” (p. 159), in contrast to those who still dwell in clay-brick houses lacking a separate bathroom unit. Santos points out that changes in hygienic practices have resulted more from cultural/social values associated with new technologies than from the real benefits of such practices, human uses of technology being rarely culture free. The author argues that the flush toilet can be interpreted as a technopolitical project as well as a civilisational process: this “flush toilet revolution” (p. 156) thus contributes to the making of modern identities in China.

Finally, Chapter Six deals with local religion. Santos considers religious festivals as “technologies of ethical imagination” subject to civilising forces that promote the construction of a new “socialist spiritual civilization” (p. 174). Compared to national official efforts, local religious festivals give rural communities more opportunities to elevate moral civilisation; they are, however, not exempt from moral frictions among villagers regarding ritual monetary contributions. The author argues that we should develop an “action-oriented pluralistic conception of ethical life” (p. 203) in order to understand both small-scale projects of self-cultivation and the macro-level politics that shape the Chinese Communist Party projects of national ethical standardisation, such as the improvement of human quality (*suzhi* 素質).

The strengths of this book lie in the profound involvement of the researcher in his fieldwork. Twenty years of paying visits to the villagers and sharing life with them have the merit of building a consistent dataset that allows for a detailed report of rural life, which is much needed in the literature on social change in China. Readers who are familiar with ethnographic research will find this work well-structured. However, readers would have benefitted from a concluding chapter recapitulating the main points of Santos’ arguments, since his analysis of the rural transition to modernity spreads in several directions. Social scientists less familiar with ethnographic writing may have appreciated a more robust theoretical framework, but there is no deficiency of theory: the book is an informative, well-grounded, and enjoyable read.



HONG FINCHER, Leta. 2023.
Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China (fully updated 10th anniversary edition).
 London: Bloomsbury.

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Leta Hong Fincher’s pathbreaking analysis (2014) of an effectively institutionalised culture of discrimination against women in their late twenties/early thirties who, for one reason or another, found themselves without a husband, became an instant hit with students, journalists, and feminist activists in and outside China when it appeared. In a gender environment that discouraged critical enquiry, its revelations about the extent of legally binding discriminatory practices emboldened countless women in China to begin to speak up about their own experiences.

This 10th anniversary revised edition is no less startling in its revelations. Indeed, it is difficult to read the revised edition without a sense of increasing indignation if not outrage. Readers will recall that the macro-political context for the revelations in this revised edition is the total absence of women from the highest echelons of Party-state government. The 20th Party Congress held in October 2022 was confirmed as the first time in decades that there was not one single woman in the Chinese Communist Party’s ruling Politburo. Only 11 out of 205 members on the Central Committee are women. China’s ranking in the World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report (2012-2022) fell from 69 to 102 out of 146 countries.

This second edition indexes an explicit reassertion of masculinist and patriarchal practices in every dominant aspect of society: gender discrimination in university admissions, gender disparities in the financial and legal aspects of property ownership, falling numbers of women in the social labour force, increasing unemployment among 16- to 24-year-old women, and against rising rates of divorce, increased state media efforts to shame single women and pressurise them into marriage. If the term “leftover woman” (*shengnü* 剩女) has in recent years been replaced by “good wife and virtuous mother” (*xianqi liangmu* 賢妻良母) with two or three children, then this foregrounds even more visibly the main