

LIN, Jean Yen-Chun. 2023.
A Spark in the Smokestacks: Environmental Organizing in Beijing Middle-class Communities.
 New York: Columbia University Press.

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I thoroughly enjoyed *A Spark in the Smokestacks: Environmental Organizing in Beijing Middle-class Communities* by Jean Yen-Chun Lin. Drawing on data collected through online and offline research, the book offers a fluent and vivid account of associational life among the emerging middle class in Beijing. Despite numerous studies on environmental protests in China, Lin contributes significantly to the current literature by systematically tracing the processes and consequences of protests staged in three gated communities (Meadow, Rose, and Marigold). The book adopts a Tocquevillian perspective and argues that gated communities could serve as “schools of democracy” (p. 1). Informal associational interactions, according to Lin, may cultivate civic skills among homeowners and build civic capacities in communities. Lin pays particular attention to place-based identities, emphasising the importance of “becoming homeowners and neighbors” (p. 11) for community collective actions. She goes as far as claiming that a sense of collective identity was a precondition for environmental protests in China.

Apart from the introduction and conclusion, this book consists of six chapters. Chapter One lays out the background of the research, helping readers make sense of the formation of middle-class homeownership due to the housing reforms of the 1990s and the environmental challenges community homeowners have faced during the process of urbanisation. Chapter Two is pivotal to the book. In this chapter, the author illustrates a process of becoming neighbours: from early community activity participation to place-based collective identity formation, to the attempted establishment of homeowners’ associations. The author argues that activities such as organising group purchases, documenting homeowners’ meeting minutes, and drafting letters of complaint to property management contribute to civic capacity building. Chapter Three details how residents of Meadow, Rose, and Marigold made sense of environmental threats outside their communities. While all communities had their representatives, the results of sensemaking varied. Only Meadow’s figureheads succeeded in transforming the

landfill problem into a collective responsibility by moderating the sharing and interpretation of common grievances related to external threats.

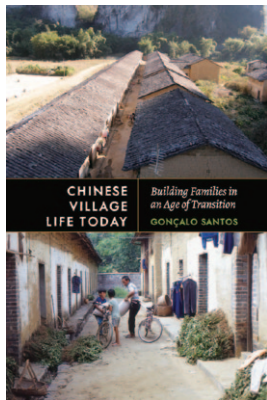
In Chapter Four, Lin examines the mobilising and organising of community actions. Once again, she emphasises the significance of community leaders. More capable leaders could effectively organise collective action, employing concrete plans and coherent rhetoric while drawing on community volunteers and expertise. Lin points out that different tactics would encounter varying degrees of repression and intervention, with institutional communications being more acknowledged by the authorities. Chapter Five is particularly interesting. The author is right to point out that using citizen science, which includes data collection and research on environmental and health impacts, is an important alternative to disruptive protest for the moderate middle class in China – a characteristic that differs from the rural environmental resistance I have studied. In China, the legitimacy of action is the central concern for both leaders and followers of protests. Drawing on citizen science means relying on facts and reason, which could enhance the legitimacy of collective action. Equally important, using the approach of citizen science is a process of capacity building and civic learning.

Chapter Six explores the consequences of community organising in the three communities. The author is an optimist and sees many positive impacts of grassroots collective organising, such as increased environmental consciousness, a deeper understanding of environmental rights and laws, enhanced civic skills in interacting with the government system, and an extended sense of civic duty that goes beyond community boundaries. While I acknowledge that a difference has been made, I tend to doubt the durability of these positive changes and perceive the limits of grassroots organising. This scepticism is rooted in my own research on environmental protests in a town in eastern China, where peasants produced serious pollution themselves after vehemently and successfully opposing chemical pollution from an industrial park. In other words, their environmental consciousness was conditional and therefore limited. The likelihood of villagers lodging complaints and engaging in collective action depended on the entity responsible for the pollution. I also observed the transient nature of their enthusiasm for environmental participation. My intention here is not to negate the positive transformations that can follow a series of grassroots collective actions, but rather to underscore the formidable challenge of sustaining long-term civic engagement for systemic change among participants in both rural and urban areas.

Amidst the enjoyment of the captivating narratives woven by the author, I would like to offer three general critiques. First, Lin heavily relies on data collected from the Internet, which is acceptable but inevitably limits the scope of her observations. Regarding data collection, I also expected to see more interviews with local officials who dealt with protests and resistance in both institutional and noninstitutional fashions, as well as with ordinary residents other than the key leaders of the communities examined. However, I fully understand that conducting fieldwork on sensitive topics, especially for scholars with overseas backgrounds, is challenging. Second, although the author does not explicitly claim the book is a comparative case study, her storytelling style, with each empirical

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.