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BOOK REVIEW

Ginkgo Village: Trauma and Transformation in Rural China

Tamara Jacka. Canberra: ANU Press, 2024. 314 pp. AU$60.00 (also available Open Access). ISBN 9781760466411

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Ginkgo Village by Tamara Jacka offers a series of stories of individuals and their families with particular focus on women's experiences in a hamlet in central-eastern China's Henan Province. The introduction situates these stories within a teleological temporality largely informed by official discourse. Indeed, it is almost as if there were a conceptual divide between the first historiographical chapter and the subsequent narrative. While some of the stories contain compelling descriptions of character and event, their focus on individuals and their families is not contextualized by analysis of the mundane everyday interactions of village life in its spatial, temporal, cultural and social complexity. Nor does the book provide a rich enough understanding of the village's history during the Mao era to be able to substantiate its prioritization of "trauma and transformation."

Chapter one offers a brief chronological excursion through the PRC to frame the themes of trauma and transformation. This begins by setting the geographical, demographic and cultural scene of Gingko Village in a poor mountainous border region well known for its location as the Eyuwan Soviet – a key revolutionary base of the depleted Chinese Communist Party in the 1930s. A sketchy historical account of Eyuwan's place in China's civil war prefigures the conceptual, even ideological, framing of the book by noting that "even after the Liberation of 1949, … locals continued to suffer brutality and deprivation" (p. 18). The implication that brutality and deprivation should have come to an immediate end in 1949 is strange. 1949 marks a significant historical moment for China, but after decades of war it could not wipe out conflicts overnight, any more than any post-war resolution can. Indeed, in addition to the challenges of poverty and a broken infrastructure, resolution of military, social and class conflict received systematic attention from the newly founded state.

The following section on the constant struggle for survival and reproduction between the 1920s and the 1950s overlooks any serious consideration of the aims of land reform, mutual aid groups and co-operatives in the early 1950s and the effects of these on changing the social relations of production in Gingko. The acceleration of collectivization between 1956 and 1957 and the disaster of the Great Leap Forward (1958–1961) are thus left a matter of simple description with no more than brief analytical comments about why Gingko seems to have escaped the worst ravages of the famine, by contrast with the adjacent county of Guangshan, where reportedly one third of the local population died (p. 22). A few pages on the Cultural Revolution gives even less grounded information about what happened in Gingko, instead focusing on how the landlords were given the most menial tasks, in the creation of a new "class hierarchy." Oddly, this takes narrative priority before acknowledging that "aside from violence and destruction," some improvements in basic health care and education were introduced at this time, alongside an initiative between 1967 and 1969 to plant tea bushes that became a mainstay of the local economy under the restoration of family-based farming in the 1980s. The final section on the 1980s–2010s buttresses the ideological framing of this potted history, with the argument that from a starting point of massive poverty in the early

1980s, the village's breakthrough came with the increase in rural outmigration, alongside state investment in poverty alleviation programmes. Jacka acknowledges the effects of such developments on exacerbating gender and intergenerational inequalities within the village but not their effects on exacerbating the rural–urban divide. Even less acknowledged are the ecological effects of the officially encouraged felling of large numbers of giant Chinese tallow trees, followed shortly after in the 2000s by the felling of gingko trees.

As a feminist social anthropologist with a long record of research on rural women, Jacka is explicitly interested in women's lives, and it is these that constitute the main strength of the book: stories of young girls who died before they came of age and thus as "hungry ghosts" periodically roamed the realms of the living; an elderly woman's story of survival from childhood abuse, abandonment and poverty to become widely known for her weaving skills; a woman who became the proud leader of a women's rice-transplanting team during the collective era; the shame of a young woman's suicide alongside the ritual funeral honours accorded fully fledged villagers; the social aspirations of a village woman who became a skilled entrepreneur. However, many questions remain to be asked about key events in these women's lives – experiences of childbirth, child upbringing, care of the elderly and sick, wifehood and motherhood. Greater consideration of some of these issues would have shed necessary light on the historical and conceptual framing of "trauma and transformation."

A major conceptual difficulty of the book concerns its focus on empathy, and Jacka's explicit aim to enable readers to acquire an empathetic understanding of Gingko villagers. Readers' access to being able to "immerse themselves" in Gingko villagers' lifeworlds (p. 271) is impeded by the absence of ethnographic description of the everyday comings and goings of village life. The author's narrative reflections on her own life did not, for me, facilitate the possibility of empathy with the lives of the villagers in question. Rather, I was left wondering how come such reflections did not compel her to ask more inquiring questions about the memories and experiences of her interlocutors.

The absence of conceptual pointers as to what to make of the individual stories raises questions about what, in fact, the non-specialist reader that Jacka wants to engage can make of these stories beyond the sketches of their *dramatis personae*. Hence, we learn little about how women's barely disguised frustration with their menfolk spilled over into gossip filling the social spaces of the village, nor about the burdens of childcare shouldered by the elderly, particularly the grandmothers, nor about general village attitudes towards the two powerful businessmen from outside the village who managed to buy up most of the village's small holdings, establishing themselves as the most powerful landowners around.

The book seems to come to a rather sudden end with a chapter on motherhood. But not quite. Following the epilogue comes a curious appendix containing material about the author's research process that both reiterates and goes beyond the book's introductory comments. The "truth of anthropological research," so readers are reminded, is that when we "go to the field" we don't leave ourselves behind, but we take with us the cultural and emotional baggage of our own lives. It may well be the case, as Jacka argues, that not enough ethnographies are explicit in acknowledging this, but anthropological debate has long included critical self-reflection on the crucial relationship between ethnographer and her interlocutors. It would therefore be helpful to read Jacka's thoughts on where her work stands in this debate and include this in the introductory chapter rather than at the end of the book.