

village that practiced “living heritage,” they decided to create one. They found a scenic spot above the Yellow River, found some abandoned cave homes that they turned into a folk museum, and started training villagers nearby in paper cutting and ritual. Their efforts led to Ford Foundation funding and government efforts to improve infrastructure – roads, electricity and water. At first the villagers, especially women, started to profit from the tourists who followed the road – renting rooms and selling paper cuts directly to them – until the county government opened its own tourist hotel with a souvenir shop. Wu frames this chapter in terms of a “narrative battle” over the meaning of “heritage,” but the real strength of the chapter is in illustrating a battle over resources, especially women’s labor and tourist dollars.

Chapters three and four examine the practice of storytelling (*shuoshu*), which, like paper cutting, was once used for ritual, then harnessed for propaganda, and now is used for propaganda, company promotion and ritual. As in chapter two, Wu writes with a light ironic touch and narrates how three blind storytellers, after a clerk has refused to allow them to see a local manager of China Telecom, wage a kind of sit-in, demanding that they be given some work performing propaganda or promotion. One of the storytellers says to the clerk: “[w]e are still living in a socialist society. I would not come if we are [sic] living in a capitalist society. We all know that a capitalist society is a brutal one and no one cares about the other. But we are not living in a capitalist society yet, are we?” (pp. 112–13).

Chapter five investigates the rise of village spirit cults. Wu argues that given a “marginalization of rurality” the spirit cults have “created a new kind of social space where people mingle and share their experiences of inauspiciousness and health problems” (p. 133). While this rings true, it would have been interesting to learn more about storytellers and spirit cults from before 1949 to the end of the Mao era. Perhaps Wu will conduct oral histories for her next book.

Wu’s conclusion is somewhat cursory. Those of us who conduct research amongst the “folk” (*minzu*) of Yunnan would have liked to see more comparisons drawn. For example, in my own research in Dali (see *Displacing Desire: Travel and Popular Culture in China*, [University of Hawai’i Press, 2006]) there are striking parallels in the construction of “hyperreal” tourist places, the disappearance of farm land to infrastructure, the increase in traffic accidents, villagers finding solace in ritual, and a marginalization of village entrepreneurs.

But this is a minor criticism. Ka-ming Wu has written a lively, engaging ethnography that will be accessible to students in courses on contemporary China.

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Irony, Cynicism and the Chinese State

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This collection of essays, which grew out of two workshops attended by the contributors, represents an in-depth and ethnographically grounded look at irony and cynicism and their role in today’s China. As Michael Herzfeld points out in his afterword, “[t]he essays are all – for such is the power of ethnography – about real

people facing real dilemmas” (p. 176). The various studies collected here are rich in detail and can stand very well on their own, but are only loosely connected and less-than-convincingly framed by Hans Steinmüller’s introduction and Stephen Feuchtwang’s theoretical chapter.

The eight ethnographic chapters cover a wide variety of snapshots of daily life in today’s China, from rural settings (chapters two, five, and seven), to grey areas of urban life (chapters three, four, six), to the culture of an ethnic minority (chapter eight) and the Chinese internet (chapter nine). Their strength lies in their independence from each other and in the multiple ways in which they deconstruct what irony or cynicism are in today’s China as well as how they are used in different contexts.

In his introduction, Hans Steinmüller elaborates his definitions of irony and cynicism as being based on the distinction between insiders and outsiders, with the two mainly differing by degree rather than being fundamentally different: “[i]f cynicism aims to stop the work of interpretation [...] irony emphasises openness and contingency” (p. 5).

Stephen Feuchtwang pushes the discourse further in his theoretical chapter, linking irony and cynicism to ideology, other belief systems and the choices faced by individuals having to live with them. His chapter also provides some historical background to the other chapters in the volume.

Somewhat problematic in both the introduction and the theory chapter is the link that is stressed between irony/cynicism and ethics or morality. In both contributions, they are seen as expressions of moral persons living in and coping with an immoral society. This line of argument is unnecessarily judgmental in the context of the volume and not supported by the ethnographic evidence in the individual chapters.

John Flower and Pamela Leonard present an interesting older study about the ironies in a village in Sichuan using data from 1992 (with some updates at the end) to show how irony and cynicism grew out of the frequent changes in the direction of national policy. Instead of focussing on large-scale changes, their close look at the lives of three people brings many issues to life.

The strength of John Osburg’s chapter lies in the way in which he deconstructs the notion of morality to show that many of the ironies and cynicisms of everyday life in China derive from the shifting positions taken up by individuals towards the people and institutions they come in contact with. In a China in which collaborations between organized crime and government officials help to keep cities and their economies running, Osburg argues that the Communist Party is seen more as a protector against a slide into immoral chaos rather than as a paragon of morality.

The chapter by Jaesok Kim is filled with examples of migrant labourers who employ socialist slogans as ironic criticism of the collusion between government officials and business managers. In his conclusion he points towards the greatest irony in his study by outlining how migrant labourers trust exploitative foreign managers bent on profit more than Communist officials supposedly fighting for their Chinese compatriots against evil Imperialists.

Tan Tongxue’s chapter’s greatest strength is that it engages with Chinese social scientists to a greater extent than any of the other chapters, while his data provides examples of informal, corrupt power relations between rural officials that are necessary to keep things going. Without the corruption, government operations would grind to a halt, while the continuing corruption, supported by ironic exchanges between those in the know, keeps government running smoothly.

Judith Audin takes a different tack in her study of neighbourhood associations in Beijing, presenting their interactions as games of truth(s) that people engage in out of

necessity, using irony as a tool to move the game along or to score points with other players. Quasi-political exchanges are public performances in which insiders will exchange views using ironic statements that are opaque to outsiders.

The final three chapters diverge from the pattern set by the others in that they are either not ethnographic in the same sense as the others and/or do not deal with micro-studies of life in contemporary Han China. The chapter by Brandtstätter offers a re-evaluation of some of her past encounters with grassroots activists using irony as an interpretive frame. Katherine Swancutt's chapter discusses prophetic dreams among the Nuosu in south-west China and how they are used to guide individuals in their decision-making. Kevin Latham's chapter argues for a reframing of studies of the internet in China by pointing out that it never was a free space but instead a deeply ironic and cynical project under the control of the CCP, which should serve as the basis for studies of the use of irony and cynicism by internet users.

In summary, the ethnographic details in the individual chapters make this collection a valuable addition to any course covering aspects of modern China. While the moral emphasis in the framing of the volume is annoying and unwarranted, it does not distract too much from the rest of the book, which has to be highly recommended.

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