

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

LAUREL BOSSEN, *Chinese Women and Rural Development: Sixty Years of Change in Lu Village, Yunnan*. Lanham, Boulder, New York and Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2002, xxv +362 p. Index.

Laurel Bossen presents a richly descriptive - sometimes poetic, but rigorously researched - ethnography in *Chinese Women and Rural Development*. This project ambitiously compares the ethnographic work of the famous Chinese anthropologist, Fei Xiaotong (and his collaborative work with Zhang Zhiyi) on the Lu Village in the late 1930s with Bossen's own decade-long study of the same area in the 1990s. While Fei's work does not pay adequate attention to gender and the position of women in the Yunnan Province, Bossen's project considers the political economy of gender in this rural context and looks at how the revolutionary changes in China throughout the last century have affected gender relations. Bossen is specifically interested in how women's social and economic lives are shaped by the dynamic intersection of historical, global, and local factors. For instance, she considers the impact of revolutionary policies, such as the Cultural Revolution, the Great Leap Forward, family planning, and the omnipresence of the Community Party, on women's family and economic lives. She considers these changes in relation to the experiences of wealth and poverty, work, disability, displacement, mothering and political participation (chapters 6, 8, 9).

A central theme of the book is the dynamic of change and continuity in gender relations over time. Specifically, while family organisation and farming practices have remained largely the same since Fei's earlier study, there have been significant changes to gender relations. Gender relations have been shaped by the introduction of modern technologies, methods of transport, and education. Another key theme of Bossen's work is the centrality of women in several areas of village life: historically in textile manufacturing (chapter 3), in farm work (chapter 4), and in cultural and social institutions (chapter 5). Finally, she also considers the complexity of gender relations. The intricacy of gender relations is particularly poignant in her examination of both the personal experience and the political economy of family and marriage practices (chapter 7). Overall, she demonstrates that, in the context of rural development intersected by political, historical, and economic pressures, and with the increasing introduction of "modern" elements into Lu Village, local gender relations have been marked by both change and continuity.

Bossen's work takes up many components of women's experiences in rural China in several different sites of analysis. However, two of her most compelling chapters deal with the life of a woman shaman and footbinding respectively. Chapter 5, "The Wealth of a Gifted Woman: The Shaman of Lu Village," pieces together the story of a woman shaman through the eyes and the fragmented tales of other villagers, including their myths, legends and assumptions, rendering a complicated and often contradictory picture of a woman central to village life. Chapter 3, "Trade and Beauty: The Demise of Footbinding in Lu Village," offers a compelling alternative account of footbinding - and its decline - in this particular region of China. Bossen's work goes far in upsetting dominant Western imaginings of what footbinding in China meant, drawing out the relationship between footbinding, women's labour, and larger economic processes of trade and development. She demonstrates that, contrary to received popular assumptions, women with bound feet contributed in important ways to the local economy, engaging in textile work until their production was supplanted by imported textiles, and participating as well in often arduous farm work. One peculiarity, however, about Bossen's chapter on footbinding is that she makes no reference to patriarchy, arguing neither that patriarchy was a factor or that it was not a factor in footbinding practices.

Bossen's study contains diverse methodologies, which would make it an interesting pedagogical tool for students of ethnography. But there are two aspects of Bossen's methods that are most potent. First, she makes compelling use of Fei's work as a comparative point of historical reference, which provides a sense of context, historical continuity and historical dynamism to her study. Second, Bossen makes space available for storytelling *by* and *about* the women whom she studies, on their own terms. However, the many strengths of Bossen's study make the few weaknesses more apparent. While Bossen makes strong use of description, her work is at times somewhat a-theoretical, as she engages in very little interpretive work. For example, while showcasing the women of Lu Village as strong, inventive, resourceful and as survivors of struggle and hardship, and while making compelling use of women's storytelling about their own lives, she does not consider whether there is a "feminist" consciousness (I use the phrase cautiously) among the women, which may have emerged organically in a culturally, spatially, and temporally contingent fashion. Also, although Bossen's work is generally both rich and thorough, at times she tempts her reader with tantalising morsels of information but offers no further elaboration. For example, Bossen makes intermittent reference to the influence of television images, and urban and popular cultures in a time of accelerated change; however, she neither elaborates upon these examples, nor does she contemplate how the Lu Villagers *themselves* understand the impacts of these "modern" cultural artefacts.

With powerful chapters on footbinding, marriage and households, and sex preference in family planning, this work will be of interest to those studying gender or women's experiences in rural China as a point of comparison for regional variation. Scholars interested in the routine

experience of post-revolutionary China and the everyday lives of rural peoples may also find this text useful. Finally, this book will also be of interest to scholars studying the relationship between gender and economic systems in China more generally.

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