

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

Eriberto P. Lozada, *God Aboveground: Catholic Church, Postsocialist State, and Transnational Processes in a Chinese Village*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001. xii + 250pp., \$45.00 .

God Aboveground is not an ethnography of a Catholic, Hakka village in Guangdong, China. It is about the participation of a local, deterritorialised community in transnational processes of identity, communication and exchange. Happily, Lozada draws the reader away from the facile approach to Catholicism in China as a contrast between real Catholics (loyal to the papacy) and collaborators (loyal to the Chinese state). Rather, we are invited to consider the transnational character of Roman Catholicism. The process of ‘localisation’ is the primary concern here, by which term Lozada indicates the meaning of Catholicism to the villagers integrated with global and national forces. Lozada’s sensitivity to his subject is enhanced by his status as a householder in the community (his family lived with him during fieldwork), a Catholic and an American of Asian ancestry. Indeed, he displays an awareness of both major events in the life of the villagers (weddings, funerals, road-building, church dedication) and the larger context of the Chinese state (with its attendant history) and the contemporary reality of globalisation.

Lozada draws extensively upon previous work on trans-national and globalisation processes, particularly that of his former doctoral supervisor James Watson. This is all to the good, as this book rests upon solid theoretical ground. It is concerned with Catholic practice in the local context, not the Church as a unifying institution. Lozada is concentrating on process, not ideas, with the understanding that “unbounded communities” (as he terms them) are a special object of study. As such, the community of interest is a part of universal Catholicism and a reflection of local interests and history.

Lozada’s approach is to understand the process of localisation within the context of transnational processes through the examination of events in the Catholic Hakka community of Little Rome. He asserts that he makes no claims to represent Chinese, Hakka or Chinese Catholic Hakka cultural practices. This is a popular approach in contemporary cultural anthropology and a legitimate methodological concern. Yet we are left with the question of what precisely is being described. In this instance, Lozada states that “[i]n essence, my unit of analysis for understanding the localization process was the events themselves” (pg 21), chosen according to the events he knows best. There is no serious question about the validity

of this “diagnostic event” analysis. If any concerns are raised, it is in relation to the larger question of what we are trying to accomplish through the anthropological project. Lozada’s radically anti-essentialising approach implies that we can make generalisations about processes (in this case localising and trans-national processes) but we cannot make general statements about cultures. In sum, the rationale is that there is no such thing as a culture, but only communities or neighbourhoods (pg 14). Culture only functions in this analysis as an element of context without any implication of unity, while locals are engaged in the interpretation and transformation of trans-national processes. Lozada is primarily writing about the response of a human community to its environment, or human ecology in the broadest sense of the term.

Lozada does succeed in his human ecology of Little Rome. However, we do not learn as much as we would like about “Little Rome” as a holistic community. And in placing the village in trans-national context, we do not really get a description of what distinguishes Little Rome, nor what Catholicism means to the different members of the community. These are minor quibbles. This is a well-described account of an ‘unbounded community’, even if the bounded community disappears from view. This text should be of interest to students and scholars of religion, sociology and anthropology. It is suitable for use in an undergraduate course, but because of its interesting theoretical perspective, has value for use at the graduate level and beyond.

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