



Mun Young Cho, *The Specter of “the People”: Urban Poverty in Northeast China*

Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013. 232 pages. 12 illustrations, 9 halftones, 2 tables, 1 map. Hardcover, \$69.95; paperback, \$24.95. ISBN-10: 0-8014-5165-5; ISBN-13: 978-0-8014-5165-2 (hardcover); ISBN-10: 0-8014-7864-2; ISBN-13: 978-0-8014-7864-2 (paperback).

THIS BOOK explores the socioeconomic marginalization of factory workers on the periphery of the northeastern city of Harbin in post-Mao China. It situates the workers’ loss of privilege and growing frustrations in the context of the large-scale closing down of state enterprises, the influx of the rural population into urban neighborhoods due to the lifting of restrictions on rural-urban mobility, as well as the insufficiency of state policies to address urban poverty issues.

The introduction summarizes the central questions and key concepts and engages these by framing concerns with relevant theories. Chapter 1 sets the scene for the ethnography from a historical perspective, as ex-workers recall their heyday under state socialism when they toiled in the factory and enjoyed *danwei* (“work unit”) benefits and protection; “the people,” also including peri-urban farmers and rural migrants, are featured as heterogeneous and tension-ridden, and this is not only between workers, but also between the different groups in the neighborhood. Chapter 2 illuminates the desire of workers to purchase new homes as housing privatization and consumerism dominate post-Mao economic life. Chapter 3 problematizes the ways in which *dibao* (“the minimum livelihood guarantee”) policy is practiced among ex-workers. Chapter 4 draws attention to the campaign of community building as a new mode of urban governance, which, however, leaves the workers-turned-community-cadres in a predicament. In light of the story of a migrant woman, chapter 5 focuses on the struggle for survival of rural migrants, who are largely shut out from both urban and rural systems. Chapter 6 shows how

structural interventions compartmentalize the poor, who once came under the rubric of “the people.”

This well-researched and very readable book has a number of strong points. First, the moods and shifting identities of workers are successfully captured through the “thick description” of their lived experience. Thus their difficulty in coming to terms with becoming poor is firmly anchored in a rapidly changing political economy. Second, the use of multi-sited fieldwork adds to the depth and complexity of the ethnography. For instance, the inclusion of visits to the village offers insights into the situation in which peasants are sometimes forced to move into the city because of the lack of consistency in the implementation of state policies at different levels of government. Third, the community cadres give compelling accounts of their difficult positions, sandwiched between bureaucracy and local residents in their roles as members of the local administration and a voluntary organization. Last but not least, the interaction between the aforementioned three major social groups—ex-workers, rural migrants, and the community cadres found in the same old industrial neighborhood are presented in an articulate and tactful manner, offering a glimpse into the world of the urban poor in post-Mao China.

However, there could be more depth regarding the portrayals of rural migrants, especially with the ongoing and hotly-debated phenomena of *nongmingong* (“peasants-turned migrant workers”) in the process of China’s massive urbanization. One of the key informants, Sun Yufen, appears as a member of *nongmingong*, those who have a rural *hukou* (“household register”) while engaging in nonagricultural work in the cities within the special Chinese urban-rural dual system. Emerging in the 1980s, this social group numbered 269 million in 2013 in response to a burgeoning neo-socialist market economy involving neoliberal practices. Many of them have replaced urbanites to work in the now mainly export-oriented factories across China, particularly those located in the special economic zones, coping with long hours, low wages, and minimal social benefits. Over time, migrant workers have not only turned China into the world’s factory, but have also changed their public identity from the pejorative *mangliu* (“blindly floating population”) to the more neutral *nongmingong* (albeit still a bit derogatory). They are now on the way to becoming officially recognized urban residents according to new policies (see below). As rural migrants have received increasing attention in recent decades, “the workers” find their status rapidly declining. Often viewed as different social groups, today’s rural migrants and workers hardly remind one of the once uniting term “the people” without referring to a particular historical background, as discussed in the book. It is worth noting that the recently announced National New-type Urbanization Plan (*xinxing chengzhenhua jianshe*, 2014) emphasizes human-centered (*yirenweiben*) urbanization. It highlights the improvement of the rights of migrant workers, including reforming the *hukou* system and helping them adapt to city life and to access services and social welfare. However, it will be very challenging to meet the ambitious targets of the plan. For instance, it will be difficult to fully integrate one hundred million migrant workers into the urban system by 2020 according to the plan, given the current level of resources (for example, housing, schools, and hospitals) available in the cities.

The book would be better if the transition between ethnographic descriptions and theories (or the other way round) were made smoother. However, for any ethnographer, it can be difficult to achieve a seamless transition. This is a great contribution to the understanding of contemporary China from aspects of everyday urban poverty and governance that will suit both academics and students specializing in anthropology and/or China studies. It will also be useful to those who are interested in life at the grassroots level in urban China.

Jialing Luo
Southwest University, China