

**Lena Kaufmann**, *Rural-Urban Migration and Agro-Technological Change in Post-Reform China*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021. 306 pp. ISBN 9789463729734

The focus of Kaufmann's excellent anthropological study brings a socio-technical perspective to understanding migration processes in China. Kaufmann's focus is on what she calls the predicament of rural migrants who work in the cities to earn money while retaining a modicum of economic and social security by keeping their rice fields back home. She concentrates analytically on 'doing paddy rice' as an everyday life strategy that develops and applies skills of various kinds, often techniques of the body, amongst rural migrants and those left behind in the villages.

The book is based on fieldwork in Anhui, Hunan and Shanghai during the years 2007-2008 and 2010-2011. She followed up on the fieldwork through correspondence and video conversations with a number of her informants between 2012 and 2017. Why paddy rice? Because, suggests Kaufmann, focusing on the intimate, often tacit interaction of rice farmers with their material world allows the researcher and ultimately her readers to sense the specific agency of rice farming households between the countryside and the city. Overall, this is an under-researched topic in migration literature.

The book starts with analysing the important policy and knowledge transformations that have taken place in China since the 1950s which have given rise to the particular situation that Chinese farmers now face. Kaufmann then moves on to farmers' contemporary responses to these transformations. Chapters 2 to 5 constitute the main qualitative-ethnographic sections of the book. Chapter 2 considers the complex re-configuration of the repertoire of an extended rice knowledge among farmers over recent decades. Farmers have been provided with this knowledge so that they can better handle their paddy field predicaments, while the deskilling among the young migrant population is also observed.

Chapter 3 describes farming proverbs - a specific location-embedded verbal medium of paddy field knowledge - and the role that these

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proverbs play in the context of the paddy field-migration predicament. Because of Kaufmann's mastery of Chinese, she can craftily bring this material into her analysis, and it is a pleasure for the reader who has once done similar studies to become re-acquainted with this kind of rich folk wisdom combined with instructive proverbs coined by the authorities in the same vernacular. Kaufmann demonstrates that such agricultural maxims provide an additional layer in understanding the knowledge transformations that surround paddy cultivation.

Chapters 4 and 5 focus on the socio-technical strategies that rice farmers use to manage their farmland, specifically farmers' strategic decisions in relation to farming technology. Kaufmann demonstrates how it makes sense for farmers to simultaneously draw on a repertoire of old and new technologies, rather than simply opting for mechanisation in order to compensate for the migration of labor. The analysis also provides a rare and comprehensive overview of twelve land-use and land-arrangement strategies that incorporate both social and technical dimensions. It appears that farmers draw on a wide repertoire of available resources to handle their complex situations, and Kaufmann sheds new light on the logics behind such land-use decisions.

Rice paddy has a long history in China and it persists as a main staple. Cultivation techniques combine traditional knowledge with requirements for understanding how to use green and post-green revolution technologies. Kaufmann uses a socio-material lens to scrutinize the choices and actions of rice farmers when they respond strategically to their life challenges. 'I was amazed', notes Kaufmann, 'to come across a whole potpourri of diverse technologies, ranging from stone mortars to motorized ploughs' (p. 168). Rather than simply focusing on the people she knew, with whom she has lived and whom she has interviewed and observed, she uses a 'repertoire' approach (p.189) and historical contextualisation analysis to delve into and reflect on the different strategies used by migrants and their families to cope with structural changes and the challenges of making the ends of day-to-day life meet. The rich fieldwork notes underpin this approach admirably.

Kaufmann's basic argument is that the strategies implemented by migrants and farmers are informed by the rich repertoire of knowledge and skills that focus on the preservation of the paddy fields. First, the farmers do not want to lose their land permanently, since it has potential future value. Secondly, for those who still till the land, the focus is on maintaining its productivity through the application of

techniques and technologies that will produce the maximum output with the resources available (such as investments and labor power). While this is a classical approach in rural sociology and agricultural economics, the focus on how migrants continue to uphold these systems of production while facing structural constraints on the one hand and the need for life choices and strategies on the other is new.

Kaufmann employs a pedagogical technique that consistently presents these strategies as distinct and modular while simultaneously recognising that farmers usually employ several different strategies at the same time. They act according to the changing circumstances in the environment as well as in their personal circumstances. In this way, she manages to link the macro perspectives of farming systems with the discrete choices made by individuals. She is also aware that the differentiation between migrant and left-behind actors is often blurred, as most strategies involve both parties and the categories themselves are fluid. In fact, in an increasing number of cases, migrants have no family members in the village to take care of their land and therefore rent it out. In this context, it would have been useful with statistics on land use and the composition of active farmers (whether locals or migrants) in the villages that Kaufmann visited.

Another important aspect of the book is the relationship between the migrant farmer families and the state. As a farmer in China, you are always aware and in most cases in contact with the state through its variety of agricultural extension agents as well as through its local government agents. In fact, in pursuing their own projects, farmers often act in line with state objectives, either deliberately or unaware, because the state is present everywhere. At the same time, the state mostly tries to help farmers by creating a framework that enables them to do their farm work in the most productive way without violating national policies or regulations. For example, Kaufmann notes that land abandonment is not permitted by the state, but it seems that the government has focused on providing farming incentives rather than imposing penalties for abandoning land.

Kaufmann has produced an excellent anthropology-driven analysis that privileges the agency, skills and decision-making behaviour of paddy rice farmers with a focus on the complex processes of rural-urban migration in China. Masterfully, she manages to 'grasp and describe a Chinese modernity that is grounded in practices of "non-synchronicities", where stone mills, oxen-pulled ploughs, combine harvesters and hybrid rice coexist' (p. 234). Her

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insight and analysis of the transformations of knowledge systems is first-class.

I would also commend Kaufmann for having acquired a deep knowledge of agricultural technologies and practices. Her reviews of these as well as the overview of agricultural modernisation history are at times a bit long, but they could certainly be a boon for the person who is not familiar with this already.

Finally, Kaufmann's strong focus on knowledge and skill perspectives in relation to migration studies overcomes the dichotomies that often dominate migration studies, e.g. differentiations between skilled and unskilled migrants, internal and international migration, migrants and non-migrants and people and things. Kaufmann's analysis shows that these divisions are not clear-cut. Farmers not only move between the rural and the urban situations, but their actions always take both sides into consideration in a productive way. The book would be highly suitable for teaching the anthropology of China, for rural/agricultural studies, for studying agricultural modernisation and changing farming practices, and within migration studies.

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