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- 1 **Xiang Biao, *Transcending Boundaries. Zhejiangcun: The Story of a Migrant Village in Beijing*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2005.**
- 2 This translated work is the condensed version of a volume published in Chinese in 2000 by the sociologist Xiang Biao.¹ It provides us with a remarkable study of the relations in Beijing's Zhejiang Village between migrants, the different levels of government (the administration and the Party), and permanent residents. The writer emphasises from the start the central argument of the work, which is that migrant workers and traders have "transcended the geographical, social, administrative and ideological boundaries" that have played a key role in maintaining social order in contemporary China (p. 3).

In his introduction (pp. 1-27), Xiang Biao gives us the situation of Zhejiang Village within the city of Beijing, and outlines his own theoretical and methodological tools (particularly the concepts of *guanxi* and *xi*). He draws attention to the fact that the village is located in a transitional area between city and countryside and that it straddles several street committee areas and the rural township of Nanyuan. These precise details are important in that migrants from Wenzhou have taken full advantage of the administrative confusion that characterises the area in developing their trading networks.

Chapter 1 (pp. 29-43) deals with the founding of the village. Xiang Biao shows that the first phase of its development corresponded to the continuing waves of spontaneous migration that began during the Cultural Revolution, and in some cases even before 1949. When the State began to allow the introduction of market mechanisms in the

countryside and small towns, some migrants from Wenzhou took advantage of those measures to settle in Beijing or Baotou, while others had already reached these cities to try to set up businesses there (pp. 21, 43). This chapter is also particularly interesting for its documentation of the unorganised forms of mobility and labour, which in the latter case was either illegal or dependent on twisting the rules of the institutions of the time. It also reports the testimony of the Zhejiang Village pioneers who managed to get through the mesh of the "closed towns" system during the Maoist period. At the same time, the chapter bears witness to a strong culture of migration, a powerful work ethic, and a desire for success through individual initiative among the migrants who came from Zhejiang.

In the next chapter, the author deals with the second phase of the village's development (1986-1988), during which the migrants showed themselves particularly adept at taking advantage of the measures adopted by the Beijing city authorities to make state enterprises more competitive, especially by giving greater room for manoeuvre to the managers of state shops. That enabled migrants from Wenzhou to rent outlets in order to sell their clothing under the terms promoted by the municipal government.

Chapter 3 (pp. 61-78) covers the period between 1988 and 1992 in three parts. In the first part, the author focuses on the spectacular development of the trade in leather jackets in Zhejiang Village. That trade developed to such an extent that from the early 1990s it attracted travelling salesmen from Russia, eastern countries, and South Africa. Here too, the author's rich ethnographic investigation enables him to document the way the migrants from Zhejiang developed their trade in leather jackets on the Sino-Russian border. The second part of this chapter sets out the mechanisms for conflict resolution within the Zhejiang migrant community. In the situation of administrative ambiguity and its legal vacuum, two types of actors emerged as part of the process: the "big players" (*da renwu*) and the gangs (*bangpai*). Finally, Xiang Biao deals with the change in relations between local authorities and migrants from Zhejiang once migrants outnumbered officially registered local residents. This third phase in the development of the village coincided with the "cleansing" (*qingli*) campaigns launched annually by city authorities. In the face of what the migrants themselves called "political typhoons" at the time, their tactic was retreat, or rather temporary withdrawal. Xiang Biao shows that, given the "resilience" of the trading networks they had set up, the production and distribution of goods by migrants from Zhejiang was hardly affected by these campaigns (pp. 76-77).

The following chapter (pp. 78-103) describes a dual development: on the one hand there was widespread migration from big cities to smaller towns, and on the other hand, at the national level, there was the development of nationwide networks of production

facilities, labour, capital, and means of transport centred on Zhejiang Village.

The next three chapters (pp. 104-122, 123-143, and 144-171) consist of a thorough investigation of the dynamic relationship between the Zhejiang Village migrants, the local authorities, and the officially registered residents. The author first sets out in detail the migrants' ingenuity from 1992 to 1994 in acquiring increasingly important sales outlets by getting round the current regulations. These two years also saw a change in the attitude of city authorities (essentially by the head of the Trade and Industry Office) towards greater recognition and even collaboration in the case of a vast market project. But Xiang Biao points out that due to the fragmented nature of the institutions connected with the city administration, this change towards accommodation coincided with the emergence of a confrontational dynamic. He shows how the Trade and Industry Office's collaboration with the migrants was not part of an overall management policy but had to do with financial interests within that administration. Because of this, the policy vacuum in public security led to self-management initiatives on the part of the migrants, particularly through the establishment of a non-governmental organisation within the village, aided by a student society from Peking University. This initiative was welcomed by the lower levels of government while arousing disquiet among the upper levels.² The writer also gives a detailed account of the massive campaign to demolish Zhejiang Village launched by State Council towards the end of 1995 (pp. 154-166). Despite its widespread implementation, however, this campaign did not prevent resumption of the village's activities several months later, at the same level as previously.

Finally, the author spells out a series of conclusions at the end of the book (pp. 171-181).

This work, which keeps to a rigorous analytical framework, has several fine qualities, but for lack of space in this commentary, I will restrict myself to two. The first of these is the richness of the ethnographic material of which it is composed. This is the fruit of six years of work on the ground (1992-1998), and of the writer's involvement, not only as investigator but in certain respects also as a social actor, in the processes he observes and analyses.³ The second strong point of this work is linked to the first: Xiang Biao makes use of his deep ethnographic insight to show the extent to which the migratory flows (the presence of the migrants in the cities and the development of their businesses) sharpen and bring to the surface the tensions within the state itself. This is a dynamic that can be found in studies of migration and post-migratory dynamics throughout the world, but Xiang Biao brilliantly illustrates this fragmentation of the state and shatters the myth of its monolithic structure. He shows that the Zhejiang Village migrants not only uncovered and intensified tensions within the governmental bodies and between institutions and administrations of varied nature or status, especially within the city authorities, but also

between these authorities and the Zhejiang provincial authorities. Unfortunately, the author gives relatively little critical attention to the existing literature on China's internal migration and on the relations between the state and society at large.⁴ Leaving this reservation aside, this volume provides material of great interest to both students and experts on contemporary China, and also to the general reader interested in the socio-political dynamics at work in that country.

11 Translated by Jonathan Hall

NOTES

1. Xiang Biao, *Kuayue bianjie de Shequ. Beijing "Zhejiangcun de shenghuo shi,"* Beijing, Sanlian shudian, 2000.
2. Xiang Biao clearly underlines the limits that were soon reached when this organisation began to try negotiating with the local Public Security Bureau. From that moment, the solidarity between the association members was shattered, since everyone was afraid of taking responsibility for his actions (p. 151). This is quite typical of the unstable nature of activities led by NGOs in China in Post-Mao China: when certain vested interests are threatened or certain sensitive areas are encroached upon, the very existence of such associations can be quickly imperilled.
3. Xiang Biao considers his involvement on the ground in his introduction, and he distinguishes four different roles he assumed during his six years working on the spot (pp. 27-28).
4. The writer reviews his own work in an extremely interesting way in the preface to this work. There he underlines the relevance of his conclusions to the present situation.