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Twenty Years After: Hong Kong's Changes and Challenges under China's Rule

Roberta Zavoretti, *Rural Origins, City Lives: Class and Place in Contemporary China*,

Seattle and London, University of Washington Press, 2017, xi + 202 pp.

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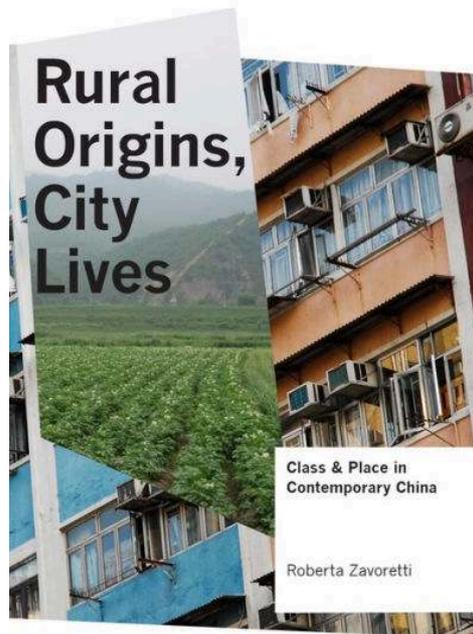
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- 1 Based on the author's 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork in the city of Nanjing in 2007 and 2008, the main aim of *Rural Origins, City Lives: Class and Place in Contemporary China* is to present a nuanced account of labour migration in today's China by documenting the everyday lives of a diversity of rural workers labouring and living in this city of more than 10 million inhabitants. What defines rural migrant workers? How are they labelled and subjectivised, and how do they negotiate their identities and shape their aspirations in relation to their position in the social hierarchy, to elite and state-sponsored norms of upper-class social mobility, and to their everyday social interactions? These are the major questions that run throughout this volume.



- 2 A distinctive feature of this ethnographic study resides in the fact that Zavoretti documents how some of her rural-born informants share a variety of predicaments related to work and social mobility in an urban setting with urbanites for whom post-Mao economic reforms have not meant gains but rather increasing adversity and insecurity. In this respect the volume touches upon a fascinating question, i.e., that of the ever growing specter of people facing patterns of precariousness at work in contemporary China. For instance, Zavoretti shows that many of her informants, while not self-identifying as “working sisters” (*dagongmei* 打工妹), would definitely define themselves as “those who *dagong*,” i.e., those who perform short-term and rather informal jobs, and that in urban China such patterns of informalisation and unpredictability concern not only rural workers but also more and more university students or young graduates, former employees of state-owned enterprises, etc.¹
- 3 Most of the author’s informants have been living in Nanjing for extended periods of time and comprise street vendors, workers at a tailor shop, and employees of a café and its related bakery. The authors’ daily interactions with this diversity of workers as well as her observation of various sites of social interactions contribute to her description of the great heterogeneity of the category of rural migrant workers, a category that, the author insists, is too often lumped together by the state, elite, everyday public discourse, and to some extent scholarly narratives, while class stratification and differentiation are at work both in the countryside and in cities. On the whole, the author’s study does indeed shatter commonly accepted dichotomies of “urban/rural,” “public/private,” and “traditional/modern,” and sheds light on the emergence of a class society at large (pp. 9-10).
- 4 After setting the aim and scope of her study in the introduction to the volume (pp. 3-27), in Chapter One (pp. 28-51) the author delineates how the category of “peasant workers” (*nongmin gong* 农民工) is politically and morally heavily invested and produced via state, media, and market-related models of social mobility, via social norms of consumption, as well as through the devaluation of rural bodies along hegemonic norms of human quality taking the middle-class citizen as the model-to-be for rural workers. The next chapter (pp. 52-79) then looks at how the author’s rural-born informants re-appropriate the hegemonic discourse and normative expectations they are the object of, and how they negotiate their perception of themselves in their everyday social interactions. Through a wealth of accounts of her informants’ everyday experiences, Zavoretti documents how their identities, far from being reified, are actually unstable, negotiable, and relational (p. 66). She also shows that rural workers regard Nanjingers as incapable of nurturing the values of hard work for the sake of one’s family livelihood, hence constructing Nanjingers as a homogenous negative category.

- 5 Chapter Three (pp. 80-109) delves into rural workers' various forms of occupying urban space and questions the widely accepted assumption that their presence in the city is bound to be temporary. Zavoretti documents the fact that most of her rural-born informants were neither spatially segregated nor considered themselves transient. She also sheds light on the manifold contingent modalities of differentiated social exclusion based on class, gender, educational, and regional differences that rural workers experienced, and how such exclusion permeated everyday social interactions in public space. In Chapter Four (pp. 110-135), the author explores rural workers' ethical and political investments in consumption practices. She shows that these practices are marked more by saving in hopes of acquiring housing in Nanjing than by spending, demystify the elite stereotype of rural people being low-end, unfit, and naïve consumers. To be able to buy housing and thereby obtain a local household registration turned out to be a fairly remote project and a major source of concern for rural workers and for other better-educated and sometimes more well-off non-residents alike, particularly for those who were endeavouring to provide decent education for their children (pp. 126-127, 134-135).
- 6 The complex articulations between informants' experiences and hegemonic understandings of individual success is the main question addressed in the fifth and last chapter of the book (pp. 136-161). For many of the author's informants, the way they perceive success is positioned at the interface of economic success—in particular the capacity to buy housing—and the capacity to build stable family and interpersonal relationships. But Zavoretti highlights that people's understandings of success were never fixed and had to be constantly re-negotiated in everyday interactions. As she nicely puts it, "The issue of agency does not necessarily need to be linked to a voluntarist idea of the self, but rather emerges through praxis: an interplay of embodied ideologies and conditions of existence, which are never static" (p. 141).
- 7 Throughout this fine-grained ethnographic study, the author's arguments are developed very clearly and with much fluidity, and Zavoretti's mastering of social science theories and her constant engagement with contemporary Chinese studies makes this volume a truly enticing read. One may regret, however, that the rather short conclusion does not live up to the ethnographic wealth and analytic quality of this study, which will no doubt interest students and researchers of contemporary China and of rural-to-urban migration in general.

NOTES

1. See for instance Lee Ching-Kwan and Eli Friedman, "Remaking the World of Chinese Labour: A 30-Year Retrospective," *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 48, No. 3, pp. 507-533; Chris Smith and Pun Ngai, "Class and Precarity: An Unhappy Coupling in China's Working Class Formation," *Work, Employment and Society*, Vol. 32, No. 3, pp. 599-615; Lee Ching-Kwan, "Precarization or Empowerment, Reflections on Recent Labor Unrest in China," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 75, No. 2, pp. 317-333.

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