

IN ONE'S OWN SHADOW: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT
OF THE CONDITION OF POST-REFORM RURAL CHINA
XIN LIU, 2000

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In One's Own Shadow, written by Xin Liu, is an ethnography about the daily lives of the people of Zhaojiahe, a rural village in central China. In his account, Liu uses a variety of structuralist and postmodernistic theories along with folk models to explain "everyday practice" of the Zhaojiahe villagers. He highlights how social, political and economic changes in China in the last hundred years transformed the nature of everyday practice.

In the introductory section of *In One's Own Shadow*, Liu gives necessary background information about China and the villagers he studied. Because the book relates daily activities to changes through time, Liu explains how he has divided the twentieth century into traditional, the Maoist era, social reform or revolution (late 1970s through the 1980s), and the present (1990s). He makes an interesting point in that the peasants of China, such as the villagers of Zhaojiahe, are a necessary element of the modern social reform campaign. Without a "backward" group of people, the modernized population has no one to measure themselves against. This renders rural peasants simultaneously necessary and unwanted.

Even though they feel backwards, the villagers Liu studied, desire modernization. They want expensive items and hold those from cities in high esteem, but at the same time they are suspicious of modernization. Modernization is characterized by three main changes, in Liu's opinion. It has meant a loss of collectivism, greater individualism and all the fear and empowerment associated with personal choices. Secondly, it has increased social stratification and a desire for money. Thirdly, through modernization people have lost control in the government. Because of these modern developments, many view Maoist era in retrospect as a dreamworld, "not for what it had actually offered but for what it had

promised” (14). According to Liu, villagers view their lives as increasingly disenchanting and he paints a good picture of this general despondency through vignettes of their daily lives.

The notion of practice is a central theme to the book. Liu strives to look for the relationship between experience and performance in the everyday, ordinary actions and habits of the villagers. According to Liu, much of practice is subconscious and practitioners do not even realize how or why what they do has evolved. To break it down by section, in the first part, Liu theoretically analyzes how everyday practice concerning kinship, marriage and food has been transformed from the traditional era, to the Maoist era, through reform and modernization. He claims the second part of the book focuses on “practice from the perspective of the actors” (109). This section contains more vignettes of daily life, but is not without analysis from Liu’s and others’ viewpoints.

Certainly, Liu’s continual quest to pin down the subconscious reasons or motives behind practice can get convoluted at times. He teeters between various theoretical paradigms and is occasionally unclear whether or not he supports or disapproves of specific theoretical methods. This occurs in Chapter 4 when Liu gets caught up in abstract binary reductionism using structuralist theory to explain how food and everyday practice associated with food (i.e. preparation, attending feasts, gift giving, planting, etc.) has been transformed through the Maoist era, revolution and into modern times. Ironically, in Chapter 5, Liu discredits the very kind of structural analysis just performed by saying it “is limited by its too-exclusive focus on systems of classification,” which fosters a high degree of conceptual abstraction in analyzing types of society” (128). Not all of Liu’s analyses were so contradictory or inappropriate. Some were helpful in understanding the material, like when he applied a structural analysis to kinship and family organization.

A downfall of *In One’s Own Shadow* is Liu’s apparent confusion about emic analysis in his study. The second main section of the book “The Logic of Practice” is not always logical. In this section, he claims he wants to portray everyday practice from the villagers’ viewpoints. This is in contrast with one of his main goals for the book – to look at how actions get performed and experienced subconsciously. In China, Liu claims, there is no connection between societal forces and emotions so actions are usually not directly related to individual emotions, but rather to what society prescribes. If he believes the motivations behind practice are subconscious to the actors then how can they explain them? Liu’s harsh and disabling statement “they cannot satisfactorily explain their own behaviors” (113-114) is fatal to his emic analysis.

Sometimes ethnographies focus on extraordinary events. In *One's Own Shadow* is an interesting account of ordinary, everyday lives. Despite Liu's periodic analytical confusion, he presents great stories and shows how practice has been transformed historically by social, political and economic changes. Perhaps, the average person would appreciate the everyday stories and learning about some idiosyncrasies of peasant villagers in rural China during the 1990s. Professional anthropologists and graduate students who know about different theoretical paradigms would probably get the most out of Liu's ethnography.