

Book Review

“Hygiene, Sociality, and Culture in Contemporary Rural China: The Uncanny Village”

Chutinon Putthiwanit ^{1*}

(Received: January 25, 2023; Revised: August 8, 2023; Accepted: September 18, 2023)

Despite the Covid-19 and the current global political turmoil, China still stands strong in all desirable dimensions of its portrayal of what she wants to be. What has been the main motivator for China to become one of the world’s strongest economy? Is there a secret sauce no one has yet discovered? This is the reason why I would like to review this book by Associate Professor Lili Lai, at the Institute for Medical Humanities of Peking University, digs deep down to research the root cause of these phenomena by understanding what lays beneath the ‘real’ contemporary Chinese society and what is so uncanny about it? That is, the author tries to communicate us the mysteriously unsettling way of Chinese society in the rural village.

The book has five chapters as follows: 1) The local intimacies of China’s rural-urban divide; 2) Dirt, hygiene, habitus; 3) Immanent sociality: Open-ended belonging; 4) Culture Plaza: Why culture? Whose plaza? and 5) The Uncanny new village. In Chapter 1 Professor Lili begins her journey in October of 2005 that lasted until 2006 in Shang Village, the Province of Henan. She provides as clear overview of the village (although throughout the book, this village remains still uncanny for her somewhat and somehow). Staying at Ayi (Aunt)’s traditional Chinese house made her feel well-adapted with the local cultural, and she even becomes friends with Ayi’s daughter – Lihua. This chapter dwells on her understanding of everyday life aspects – from birth to death, the Chinese government’s desire to create a ‘Socialist Village’, and more. The concept of dirty (*meji*) for ‘is it really dirty?’ or, is this how the urban people perceive dirty?’ is also discussed. The author also emphasizes the difficulties that local people face compared to urban people. This rural-urban divide makes Chinese people in these different areas become less and less intimidated. Rural people became scapegoats of the society and blamed for under circumstances. For example, the author discusses the Three Nong Problems of rural people: 1) *Nongcun* (rural area problem); 2) *Nongye* (agricultural production problem); and 3) *Nongmin* (rural people problem). This focus makes the reader aware that the rural villages are creating headaches for Chinese government. Or consider whether it is just false blame for an unknowledgeable village?

¹Corresponding author: chutinon.p@ku.th

^{*}Lecturer, Department of Business Management, Kasetsart University, Chalerm Phrakiat Sakon Nakhon Province Campus

The daily lives of the rural people living in Shang Village is explored for hygiene in Chapter 2. The author, by her own judgment, still feels unfamiliar with her living conditions, which make things seem even more unexplainable for her. Was the place she lives really ‘dirty’ or was it just dilapidated? Professor Lili employs Freudian concept to try and explain the phenomenon of her status quo. Bound to Chapter 1, living at *Ayi*’s traditional house (with an old hall, a kitchen with a washstand outside, a pit latrine, and even the unavoidable plastic trash) might not as bad as her first impressions suggested. Were the arrivals of modern construction materials, plastic bags, and papers (as trash) the new effects of modernization to this traditionally uncanny village? Or, were they new uncanny modernization?

Chapter 3 continues by exploring the new challenges of the Shang people as migrant workers working in the urban city. Living as peasants with less income than they earned as migrant workers in urban cities made the Shang village people feel the loss of informality of village ties. The author proposes Deleuzian concept of ‘the Plane of Imminence’ to explain this situation. The Shang village people, especially the elderly, are more familiar with the traditional Chinese medicinal clinic and its family-like service. This long-time art of social relations, as mentioned by the author, make the Shang people the collectivistic culture people. She describes the Shang Village as *nihao wohao dajiahao* (if you’re well, then I’m well and everyone’s well). The closeness of the Shang people, for author, makes this village even more uncanny in such cultural description.

Chapter 4 begins with the Lunar New Year in 2006 at the Temple of the Yellow Dragon or *Huanglong Miao* and a new building project called the Culture Plaza (*Wenhua Guangchang*). The goal of this Culture (*Wenhua*) Plaza building is to make all the societies in Shang Village inclusive, which is uncanny due to the democratically neoliberal capitalist management by and socialist nature (even the Shang people do not consider themselves as having ‘culture’). However, the author notes her opinion that even the Shang people, who were looked down as uncivilized, tended to be the more collectivistic cultural oriented people (for example, their Temple Fair). Can the Shang people live a quality (*Suzhi*) life? This goal depends on the cultivation effectiveness of *Wenhua* in this village. Indeed, the Shang people argue that the real ‘*Wenhua*’ is more concerned about ‘Money’ than ‘Culture’ by definition. Therefore, they do expect that this Culture Plaza Building will generate higher income for the Shang peasants. In the end, despite the harshness and hardship of their lives, the Shang people do enjoy their *Wenhua* in the end, and that outcomes produce a strong magnitude of solidarity in the village.

In Chapter 5, the author offers concluding remarks about the Shang village and calls it an uncanny new village due to its uncanny modernization and the transition of Shang village from a low *Suzhi* life to a better *Suzhi* life. Their rural problems seem to be gradually being solved. The village is reformed in a more socialist manner with much better operation than a bureaucratic one. Shang village was even declared as the ideal village in Zhaozhou county. Finally, throughout the book, the author applies the concept of Freudian uncanny to explain a transition of traditional Shang village to a modernized Shang village. The book thus sheds light on the new perspective of socialist management, while still maintaining democratically



inclusive societal form of management. After all, this book enlightens readers to shed light on Chinese people's mindset. This essential understanding is highly beneficial for managers when conducting business in China. Knowing the basic Chinese customs will thus facilitate readers/managers to comprehend more about uncanny China.

Reference

Lai L. Hygiene, Sociality, and Culture in Contemporary Rural China: The Uncanny Village. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press; 2016.