Book Review. The Specter of the People.

Marc L. Moskowitz, University of South Carolina

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*The specter of ‘the people’* is a welcome addition to the investigation of the ever-shifting status of the poor in China’s quickly changing political economy. The preface and the introduction outline the central arguments of the book. The second chapter presents the travails of the poor who are trying to purchase living quarters when property values are increasing exponentially. In the third chapter, Cho begins to expand on the theoretically complex discussions that were promised in the earlier pages. The most central of these points revolve around the fact that being a member of the lowest classes in China is all the more galling because the poor were so celebrated in the first two and a half decades after the establishment of the PRC. This historical context makes the experiences and expectations of the poor quite different than in other areas of the world.

In the following chapter, Cho provides an exceptionally compelling account of the lives of the local cadres. Primarily focusing on the accounts of low-ranking female cadres, the author introduces us to the ways that they are trapped between a distant and uncaring system and the people they are responsible for.
Chapter 5 introduces the case of a poor rural woman’s attempts to get restitution from the government from property that was taken from her because land rights continue to be bound to the patriline. In this chapter Cho explores some of the ways that the poor are exploited, and points out that they have little recourse to the law. She also suggests that few rural poor have a strong affinity with their rural background, hoping to move to cities with the hope of offering their children greater educational and employment opportunities. In the following chapter she contrasts this with the fact that in spite of desires of urban mobility among the rural poor, they feel little solidarity with their urban counterparts. The stereotypes that her interviews reveal, including statements from government officials, the urban poor, and the rural poor, create a surprisingly coherent narrative of the biases that are levelled against each segment of the population.

Though the book’s history, statistics, and theoretical analysis are primarily devoted to examining the lives of the poor in China, the most compelling and personal statements are often from low-level cadres, many of whom emerged from the poor themselves. In large part this resulted from the structural limitations that the author was faced with. The majority of interviews she conducted with the poor were arranged for her by government officials – a fact that is revealed in passing, in two sentences on page 127. In doing fieldwork on such a sensitive topic, the relative lack of access to the poor is of course understandable. Yet because so much of the best fieldwork is given voice through these cadres’ statements, the book would have benefited from structuring its theoretical analysis around this fact. Considering the richness of the ethnography with the cadres, an equally apropos title might have been ‘governing the poor’.

The cadres’ narratives provide some of the most important contributions of the book in understanding the plight of China’s poor in relation to state policies. How can a low-ranking cadre fulfil her role as a government official if the regulations are at best out of touch with realities, and at worst aid in petty vendettas among neighbours? How can one get the community to work for the common good when so much of the system garners mistrust and pits the poor against each other, and the cadres? How does one manoeuvre politically to overcome neighbourhood residents’ veto power over who obtains welfare assistance in a society that equates hard work with morality?

This is not to say that the poor are neglected in this study. Cho draws on an impressive array of statistics, scholarship, and historical background material about the poor. She also offers a range of important insights about their daily lives and struggles. Yet the relative eloquence and empathy of the cadres’ statements is the most compelling dimension of this book. It is also the most unfamiliar territory for those already acquainted with China. For these reasons, among many other strengths that I did not have time to explore in this brief review, The specter of ‘the people’ is an important contribution that adds new insights to an ongoing discussion about China’s poor, and the state policies that at varying times help, hinder, or simply ignore them.

Marc L. Moskowitz University of South Carolina