Book Review. Anxious Wealth

Marc L. Moskowitz, University of South Carolina
Anxious Wealth: Money and Morality among China’s New Rich. By John Osburg. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2013. 234 pp. $75.00 (cloth); $22.95 (paper); $22.95 (e-book).

Marc L. Moskowitz

The Journal of Asian Studies / Volume 73 / Issue 02 / May 2014, pp 534 - 535
DOI: 10.1017/S0021911814000126, Published online: 04 June 2014

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0021911814000126

How to cite this article:

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region in the 1750s as a minimalist maintenance of the status quo, whereby local officials complied with court policy to avoid frontier entanglements and policy activism. This may be somewhat overdrawn. Although frontier officials frequently acknowledged court concerns about border tranquility and couched their reports on local incidents in the language of restoring frontier peace, they also sometimes pursued capacity expansion through border engagement when doing so provided them with advantages in their competition for power and resources against rival institutions within the imperial bureaucracy.

XIUYU WANG
Washington State University Vancouver
xiuyuwang@vancouver.wsu.edu

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Anxious Wealth is an exceptionally articulate and insightful examination of elite businessmen in Chengdu, China. The book opens with an examination of China’s shifting political economy under Deng Xiaoping’s new economic policies. These reforms created room for a new class of entrepreneurs to emerge—an elite group of men who are the subject of Osburg’s study. Osburg then explores the ways that womanizing becomes both a status symbol and good business sense for men who seek favors from other men. Osburg also uses his case study to explore generalized reciprocity (guanxi) networks. The Confucian-inspired idea that friends help friends leads to corruption and nepotism, which, for these particular men, decidedly trumps abstract notions of a rule of law.

Osburg then examines conspicuous consumption and status. This includes social pressures that result in remarkably standardized consumption practices from which the men cannot deviate. The men frequently voice a feeling of being locked into a system of questionable behavior in order to maintain the money that they need to pay for these status symbols.

Anxious Wealth also includes a chapter on women entrepreneurs. In it, Osburg notes the relative exclusion of women from the higher echelons of business dealings in China. In large part, this is because businesswomen are expected to leave when men go to hostess bars, where most of the important bonding moments and business decisions are made. This chapter also delves into a range of stereotypes that female entrepreneurs must overcome, in that they are widely thought to have used their sexuality to get ahead.

Osburg deftly explores the ways that conceptions of proper male behavior inform the actions of the men in his study. This includes business transactions, leisure activities, and, to a lesser degree, family life. Osburg nicely contrasts the men’s narratives with their actions—a rhetorical commitment to human sentiment (renqing) and brotherhood is frequently used as an excuse for corruption, for example. Many of the men complain that they have no free time since so many of their “leisure” hours are used courting business partners. The men clearly benefit from this system, but often at the cost of their health because of excessive drinking. It also takes a clear toll on their family lives, because they spend so much time at hostess bars that they become increasingly estranged from their wives and children. They complain of living with the constant anxiety that they might fail in business, or that they might be made examples of by a government that enforces laws harshly but unpredictably.
Given their enormous wealth, and the negative impact that many of these men’s actions have had on Chinese society, it is hard to feel too much sympathy for their travails. Yet their statements certainly give a feel for the conceptual frameworks of those involved. Osburg does not flinch from the fact that many of the men he studies are engaged in illegal activities, but nor does he vilify them. The result is a sensitive, insightful, and articulate look into these men’s lives. Osburg ties this in with the relevant English-language scholarship fluidly and concisely, providing a range of insights along the way.

Unlike his interviews with the men in this study, for the most part Osburg’s analysis of hostesses, mistresses, and businesswomen relies on popular press accounts. This does not discount what he has to say about women. Here too he is informative and insightful. Yet at times it is hard not to wonder about the level of distortion that the journalists or newspaper editors have added to this discussion.

Ousb erg’s study is an unusually sensitive anthropological investigation of a group of people who have earned very little sympathy in Chinese or English-language popular press or academic analysis. There is a cost in portraying these men too sympathetically, however. The men’s disenchantment with their own lives, the framing of their behavior as renqing or guanxi, and the claimed necessity of breaking the law or taking advantage of others are all noted faithfully and contextualized within larger social trends. Yet they are seldom explicitly challenged. Some of the men’s claims that they do not enjoy the drinking and womanizing are taken at face value, for example.

As he is an anthropologist, Osburg’s decisions on this matter are perfectly understandable—perhaps even laudatory—but this approach does create its own distortions. As Osburg points out, many of the men’s interviews are consciously constructed narratives that inevitably focus on their sacrifices and on the noble goals that are meant to justify their less than honorable deeds. The book counters this with a brief concluding chapter that explores the consequences of widespread corruption in relation to the economy and civil society. Yet, in reading the men’s statements about their lives in the earlier chapters, their worldview is given human form. In contrast, those harmed by these men are presented through a more distanced and abstract set of statistics or historical overviews.

These limitations should not be assessed as criticism. Rather, I merely seek to point out where the boundary lines of this particular study are. Osburg’s work on this subculture is superb. It would serve equally well in an introductory undergraduate course or in a graduate seminar. In it, Osburg gives voice to a subsection of Chinese culture that one rarely hears from firsthand, and his account provides remarkable insight into their world views. This includes the pleasures, challenges, and anxieties of their everyday lives. In short, this is one of the best anthropological accounts of China that I have read in several years. It should be obligatory reading for anyone hoping to better understand Chinese masculinities in relation to China’s ever-shifting political economy.

MARC L. MOSKOWITZ
University of South Carolina
moskowit@mailbox.sc.edu

doi:10.1017/S0021911814000138

The shape-shifting nature of photography and its history in China make both subjects constantly moving targets. Since its arrival in the mid-nineteenth century, the uses of