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The Demoralization of Teachers: Crisis in a Rural School in China - book review

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particular attention on the concept of “leadership of place,” wherein Riley describes a project called Leadership on the Front-line, which involves school leaders in the United Kingdom. She reiterates that, by working in partnership, it is possible for school personnel, pupils, and communities to create school spaces that are both safe havens and places of opportunity.

As cities and communities around the world become more diverse culturally, ethnically, religiously, and so on, and the gaps between economic classes continue to widen, there is an ever-increasing demand for schools to act as harbingers of agency. As Riley aptly states, “Leadership of place is about agency. Leaders of place start by identifying the spaces in the school and in the locality which are significant for young people: for their learning, well-being, their sense of self” (159). Riley advocates Freire’s stance that schools are places where agency includes helping young people “read both the word and the world” (35).

Leadership of Place: Stories from Schools in the US, UK, and South Africa is a provocative read that offers some solutions while raising critical questions. At times the solutions to the problems Riley highlights seem so simple—for example, if only we cared more, the situation might change. Nonetheless, her work is a call to action for anyone concerned about, committed to, and engaged in education and work with youth in blighted communities around the globe. Riley offers compelling evidence for why educators need to create living and learning spaces for young people that will help them navigate the waters of wider society that may often seem and feel all too foreign and offer little by way of access.

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All over the world, an urban-rural education gap can be found, and modern China is no exception. Author Dan Wang cracks open the black box of the rural Chinese school in this eminently readable book, The Demoralization of Teachers. Wang describes how the daily experiences of students, teachers, administrators, and parents are shaped and impacted by national education reforms. In this case study, based on her dissertation, Wang articulates why everyone—except the core stakeholders—is scrambling to escape what feels like a trap set up to stifle aspirations and rob their lives of meaning.

Wang uses low work morale reported by these educators as an entry point to better understand the economic, organizational, and policy instructions in the school. Wang pays close attention to the social cultural milieu in which the rural teachers work and students study. Wang deftly employs narrative and storytelling techniques interwoven with in-depth analysis, as well as the international literature on schooling inequality, to present the challenges and constraints in the daily life of a school in southwest China. Through the micro perspective of the rural teacher’s work morale, the macro dynamics of testing-driven educational decision making,
for example, assume shape: “Teacher Wan, the physics teacher for both slow classes, complained about the [teacher] evaluation by [student] exam scores: ‘If you are strict on students, they will drop out. For each dropout, every teacher . . . will [get] a 0.3 point reduction . . . worse than punishing one teacher! If you are lenient with students, they will fail the tests. Either way, it is your [the teacher’s] fault’” (87). It is in these observations on the ground that conceptual issues emerge. Teachers worldwide, caught in what in the West is called the “neo-liberal project” and which in China has ancient roots, will be able to relate to this teacher’s lament and draw similar conclusions about the overregulation of schooling.

Wang makes transparent her relationship to the project under study. Wang conducted her 7-month fieldwork in a rural elementary school, lived in the teacher dormitory, and taught eighth-grade politics. She identifies herself as both an insider (as a Chinese school teacher) and an outsider (a researcher affiliated with a US-based institution). Wang becomes involved as more than a witness. She struggles with her frustrations at the prevalence of corruption in the state and school bureaucracy as she questions her right as a field researcher to intervene.

Instead of criticizing rural teachers’ “backward” teaching methods, Wang offers narratives and in-depth understanding of the teachers’ drive and compromises with overwhelming constraints. Wang points out that even when teachers approved recent curriculum and pedagogical reform (Quality Education), the content and timing of learning objectives, which were developed based on urban conditions and schooling, forced them into no-win situations due to their incompatibility to rural life. The cultural misfit of school policies with the worldview, mind-set, and experiences of rural families who knew only backbreaking manual labor defeated even the most dedicated teacher. Wang’s fine ethnography showcases the rural teachers’ attempts to work within the policy and bureaucratic mismanagement and still provide a decent education more appropriate to their local students’ needs. Though they struggled for agency, little changed. “No democracy at all! . . . I won’t go [talk to the administrators]. [They] won’t listen anyway. [Others] hold the knife and chopping board, I am the fish and meat” (86). On the other hand, the teachers featured in Wang’s case studies often replicated the top-down system with their students: “Two girls from Tong’s class came to look for him . . . with a Chinese textbook in hand . . . to recite a newly learned passage . . . [He] listened to the students’ stammering for several minutes . . . and instructed, ‘Go on memorizing for another fifteen minutes and then come back to recite again’” (86–87). It is this careful attention to the nuances of the world of the rural school that is the strength of the book.

Much of the evidence will strike many rural educators as familiar, such as Wang’s description of the tragic cycle where college-educated teachers enforce their newly garnered urban sensibilities and learning on rural families whose culture clashes most forcefully with the academic regiment.

The Demoralization of Teachers is published in a series edited by Gerard A. Postiglione to showcase in-depth studies on China’s educational development by young Chinese scholars. This title is comprised of seven chapters and nine figures and tables. The introduction in chapter 1 offers an overall view of rural education in China and the structure of the book. Wang provides an extensive review of the literature on rural schooling, citing some of the outstanding work done by Li and
Yu, Xiao, Paine, and DeLany. Wang, who is critical of framing the rural-urban educational divide merely in economic or cultural terms, uses a multidimensional analysis to focus on the teachers’ daily experience and their low work morale.

In chapter 2, Wang provides an introduction of the local economy (the coal mines and labor migration) and the sociocultural setting (gambling, restaurants, drinking culture, and lottery) of the school. She then situates herself vis-à-vis her fieldwork: “the boundaries between methods and data inevitably become blurred” (25).

Chapter 3, “Struggles Over the Work Routine,” outlines the micro management mandated by central government policy, subject content, textbooks, workload, and teacher time, and identifies the assignment of teaching staff and school’s time structure as a political site. Examples from the fieldwork are plentiful and often repeated more frequently than necessary to make the point.

In chapter 4, Wang showcases voices of the teachers, who express their lack of fulfillment with rural classrooms as well as their frustrations with the new curriculum reform (Quality Education). Wang describes the clash between teachers’ biases and rural parents’ and students’ seeming lack of concern for education as “a profound cultural clash between the school life of mental work and the rural life of manual labor” (76).

In chapter 5, Wang explores the relationship between authoritarian school administrators and teachers’ low work morale. Wang makes the case that the teachers’ professional expertise in controlling their own work and workplace and their access to government-provided resources was ignored by administrators, which she argues was a contributing factor to the general malaise, excessive drinking, and low morale.

In chapter 6, Wang demonstrates how the formalistic and corrupt state bureaucratic system exacerbates teachers’ poor work morale. On the other hand, Wang also shows how teachers’ private interests sometimes trumped their consideration of the students’ needs. This is recounted in one particularly ugly confrontation between teachers competing to garner the dining-room concessions for 600 boarding students. The administrators “resolved” the conflict by passing the burden onto students, forcing them to bring lunches from home while the school pocketed the government lunch subsidy.

“In practice, the local school was never merely a place at the bottom of the bureaucratic totem pole taking and implementing orders from above. Neither was it possible for the higher government agencies to acquire accurate knowledge and make correct judgments regarding the trivial but nonetheless necessary local matters” (121).

In the last chapter, Wang discusses the context of the social and economic transformations of the school. She argues that economic instrumentalist policies do not address the complex causes of teachers’ demoralization in rural schools. Wang’s research shows that teachers demanded a more democratic workplace and meaningful and productive teaching work, but the internal organization “through which the teachers could voice competing values and demands” was absent (134).

In sum, The Demoralization of Teachers makes an important contribution to the literature on rural education in China and elsewhere. Wang vividly presents the dilemmas of teachers, parents, and students in rural China where age-old cultural
patterns of family cohesion and personal interest function within external structural forces (such as the state bureaucracy) that often remain blind to local conditions. Wang shows how these teachers survive in the cultural clash between schooling as mental work and the rural life of manual labor. The stories in this book reverberate across the decades of Chinese education. Chinese educational institutions, in particular, from village schools to prestigious institutions of higher education, are usefully understood as political sites of struggle between administrative and educational goals. The cultural clash she describes between academic and local ways of life is endemic to the educational enterprise in China. In sum, this work contributes to the understanding of these universal and particular insights through a colorful case study and deep descriptions of one school in the mountains of modernizing China.

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We are living in an age of educational accountability and rely heavily on data to evaluate all aspects of our educational systems: students, teachers, schools, and administrators, to name a few. Given the role and use of data in other aspects of our society, it is not surprising that data-based decisions would impact education as well. While this might feel like a recent development, the use of data in education is as old as formal education itself. Because of the current widespread interest in using educational data so voraciously to make many high-stakes decisions, the timing for a book that investigates the history of such data use could not be more ideal.

The Rise of Data in Education Systems: Collection, Visualization, and Use, edited by Martin Lawn, offers a series of eight essays that examine various eras of education. The Rise of Data has its origins in the sociology of statistics (CITES), an exciting new field that traces the history and development of statistics across the globe and in various contexts. At the heart of CITES is the belief that when we look back to see what has been done before, we will use data from the past to make better decisions in the present and future. By examining the role of data in education, one hopes to understand why we are so obsessed with it, what data can and cannot achieve, and how it has been used in history and the present. This edited volume consists of eight essays that span several eras and nation-states. The collection provides informative reading for anyone interested in using data in education today. The themes and issues identified in The Rise of Data mirror today’s concerns, while