

In this volume, Zheng Yougui presents a closeup view of the Sunan model, focusing specifically on the ability of the Bixi Township of Changshu City to produce successful firms and famous brands. Zheng discusses in detail how new enterprises in Bixi faced the challenge of dividing shares of the collective economy, and emphasizes how the professionalization of village and township government eased the transition into a market economy. However, while other firms in the Sunan model relied heavily on promotion by local officials, Bixi was somewhat unique in that it enjoyed attention from the highest levels. Already in the early 1980s, Li Peng and other central leaders were promoting the “Bixi Road,” initially as a pilot project, and later as a replicable model of successful development. What is not stated, of course, is the effect that such high level promotion had on the region, particularly on its ability to attract loans and investment. Without downplaying the success of the region, it is also worth noting the similar role that the state had played in promoting earlier generations of model production areas.

Unique Perspectives and Contributions

Although many of the chapters in this volume run parallel to, or in some way engage the major themes in English language scholarship on post-1949 rural China, there are tangible differences in their approach and perspective. One obvious difference derives from the nature of sources. Most of the scholars featured in this volume enjoyed access to local archival materials, and many augmented this detailed view with more or less extensive oral histories. This combination of sources allows them to present a finely grained view of local institutions, such as rural canteens and daycare. On the other hand, they tend to be rather less critical of the perspectives contained in the sources themselves, presenting without additional commentary the somewhat stylized view of construction and technology during the Maoist period, or the unqualified success of the Bixi Road. This observation itself is not necessarily a criticism. It is perhaps a bit too simple to dismiss as ideological extremism historical concerns over the reemergence of rich peasants, or movements such as the deep plowing campaign. Scholarship that speaks, as many of these chapters do, in the voice of the original sources, is particularly able to recapture the considerations that went into the formation of these iconic policies.

In some cases, the perspectives in this volume present entirely new directions of inquiry. Issues such as informal rural debt have been studied extensively in

the periods before 1949 and since the 1980s, but not in between.³⁴ Revealing the importance of how and why rural cadres encouraged debt adds an important facet to our understanding of their plans for rural reconstruction. The most striking departure is found in Chapters 11 and 12 on the flow of grain between provinces.³⁵ Together, these two chapters outline dramatic changes: the ability after 1986 of provincial governments to negotiate grain prices, and especially the historic shift in the mid-1990s when the movement of grain from north to south first exceeded in caloric terms the traditional flow in the opposite direction. Like the others, these two chapters are valuable for their attention to detail, in this case on the realities of the trade, for example the fact that corn produced in the vast new farmlands of northern Heilongjiang works better as animal feed than the produce of the traditionally fertile south.

Needless to say, the fourteen articles included in this volume, limited in number and scope of investigation, do not do justice to the rich and multifaceted scholarship that the Chinese researchers have developed in the past decades in understanding agriculture and social change in Maoist and post-Mao China. Nevertheless, we hope that readers will find the new evidence and perspectives presented in these studies a useful resource for understanding some of the most drastic experiments, pitfalls, and breakthroughs that the hundreds of millions in rural China have experienced since 1949.

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34 Walter H. Mallory, "Rural Coöperative Credit in China" *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 45, 3 (1931): pp. 484–498; Li Zhou and Hiroki Takeuchi, "Informal Lenders and Rural Finance in China: A Report from the Field," *Modern China*, 36, 3 (2010): pp. 302–328.

35 On provincial trade, see also Thomas Lyons, "Grain in Fujian: Intraprovincial Patterns of Production and Trade," *China Quarterly*, 129 (1992): pp. 184–215.

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