

## Book Review

Yi Hyeonjeong [Lee Hyeon Jung] 이현정. 2020.  
『평릉현 사람들: 개혁기 중국 농촌 여성의 삶, 가족 그리고  
문화』 [People in Fenglong county: The life,  
families, and culture of rural women in reformed  
China]. Seoul: Chaekkwahamkke 책과함께.  
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Moon Kyungyun\*

*People in Fenglong county: The life, families, and culture of rural women in reformed China* by anthropologist Yi Hyeonjeong focuses on the daily lives of individuals instead of taking a state-centered perspective, which is commonly used in studies of modern China. Yi explores the lives of rural women and presents the reality of life in the Chinese countryside after the reform and economic opening-up programs of the late 1970s. The lives of rural Chinese women are unknown to those outside of the country because they rarely become the object of mass media coverage. However, women's lives in Fenglong County presented in this book are not far removed from those seen in rural areas of South Korea.

This book tells stories of women and families in Fenglong County villages. The author accumulated her stories over a 20-year period, beginning with field research conducted for her doctoral thesis. Yi investigates why suicide rates are so high among rural Chinese women and examines how discourses of social disadvantage have been imposed on rural women from the beginning of China's national construction and how those dis-

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\* Research Fellow, Research Institute for Social Sciences, Changwon National University.

courses have been reflected or recreated in the realities of Fenglong County. In particular, during the reform and opening up of China's economy, rural women came to experience a wide range of structural discrimination, such as domestic abuse, violence from their in-laws, spousal infidelity and abandonment, and the burdens of agricultural and family labor with no support from absentee husbands.

In her foreword, the author states that the main subjects of her book are women, families, and culture in China. As she explains, women's lives in rural China are not separated from those of men, and rural life cannot be understood separately from urban life. The primary focus of the book is rural women, and Yi portrays the ways in which their emotions—joy, satisfaction, frustration, and sadness—drive and are revealed in their conflicts and differences with men, the elderly, and children. This integrated life is depicted through the category of the family. In rural areas, the family is the basic unit for many rituals and customs, and it is the most basic element of Chinese society. The lives of Chinese women and their families are portrayed within broad cultural contexts. The book deals with the varied lifestyles and ways of thinking that appear in the living environment of rural China, the means available for earning a living, the functioning of basic organizations, performance of religious ceremonies, and child rearing. The book comprises eight chapters organized into three parts. Part 1 covers life in China's rural areas and women's issues. Part 2 is about market reforms from the late 1970s and new cultural practices. Part 3 discusses the family and culture imprint on women's bodies.

Yi's most outstanding observations regard the custom of bride-price and the high suicide rate among rural women in China (Chapter 4). Bride-price and dowry are central to the economic function of marriage, the status of women, and even social structure, as they are approached in anthropology. The bride-price refers to goods, which traditionally include necklaces, rings, and other finery, sent by the groom's parents to the bride's parents before their wedding. Some scholars have characterized the increase in bride-price in rural China after the reform and opening up as resulting from a decline in patriarchal power and the improvement of women's status (e.g. Yan 2003, 2005). However, Yi observed that patriarchal power remained strong in rural areas. She also shows that the bride-price received by the bride's parents goes back to the bride and is used by the newlyweds themselves.

Is this an illustration of Jack Goody's (1973) theory that bride-price is a

form of “indirect dowry”? Yi denies this, as dowry customs continue to exist in Fenglong County alongside bride-price. The bride-price that pertains to the bride is still called the bride-price and is distinguished from the dowry. The bride-price has simply changed recipients, from the bride’s parents to the bride herself, and the groom’s parents do not have the right to interfere with its dispensation. It is impossible to say that the bride-price is not a bride-price after all, because the bride-price is made up of goods that the groom has given to the bride’s family, and the future trajectory of the bride-price is decided by the bride’s family, who received it originally.

Yi, who is a medical anthropologist, also brings real insight to bear on the cultural aspects of suicide among rural women in China. Anthropologists have long been interested in the cultural significance of suicide and the way it affects individuals, but the focus has largely been on suicide among men, not women. In Fenglong County, the author found that suicide (illegal in China) is considered to be a way for rural women to escape their desperate state. The choice of suicide among those women is never impulsive; instead, the women are taking up and reproducing cultural attitudes toward suicide through their direct and indirect repeated experiences and their processes of unconscious embodiment. In the case of informants Sujing and Li Hua, for example, after a close female family member committed suicide, they suffered from psychological pain, guilt, anger, and sadness; depressed for a long time, they felt an urge to attempt suicide themselves. In those rural communities, one individual’s suicide was very likely to be followed by more suicides in the village.

Yi’s discussion forms a starting point for an analysis of the relationship between the body and culture. However, as the author notes, this orientation may overlook those women who, in spite of inhabiting the same cultural environment, do not commit suicide, and it may produce a stereotype that most women in Fenglong County learn to resort to suicide in difficult circumstances and reproduce its cultural normativity. Conducting a historical study of suicide trends may help develop means to reduce the suffering of women in Fenglong County and may help resolve these concerns.

I recommend this book to anyone who is curious about the contemporary lives of Chinese people, the daily lives of Chinese women, and ongoing changes in Chinese families that often escape media coverage. These are problems that are common in many places and will likely continue to be so, so observing these discussions will enable us to reflect on our own lives.

## References

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