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Review Of "The Transformation Of Rural China" By J. Unger

Tyrene White

Swarthmore College, twhite1@swarthmore.edu

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Volume 49, 161-163. DOI: 10.2307/3182206

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The Transformation of Rural China, by Jonathan Unger. New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2002. ix + 256 pp. US\$60.95 (hardcover), US\$23.95 (paperback).

For many years Jonathan Unger has been reporting on the state of affairs in rural China, documenting the changes that have swept across the countryside, accumulating a wealth of empirical data and providing first-rate analysis of political, economic and social trends. *The Transformation of Rural China* continues this fine tradition, weaving together updated versions of previously published essays with new material to provide a comprehensive look at the Maoist and post-Mao countryside. Like his earlier work, this book will become required reading for those seeking to understand the complex realities of rural China.

The book is organized into two parts, the first covering the collective era (Chapters 1–4) and the second covering the post-Mao era (Chapters 5–11). Within each part the approach is thematic, not chronological, with two principal themes running through the entire work. The first theme is the pattern of institutional development, with a special focus on the role of the state in making and remaking the institutional context that shapes rural life. The second, echoing a longstanding concern in Unger's work, is the problem of equality and inequality. How the ideas, institutions and developmental priorities of the Maoist and post-Mao eras have promoted or undermined equality (defined in terms of both social class and income) and at what price they have done so are also important issues dealt with in the work.

Two aspects of this book—historical sensibility and analytical sophistication and nuance—make it a particularly valuable contribution to the literature on rural China. First, Unger takes the time to carefully review the evolution of political and economic institutions and government policy under Mao (1949–1976). In doing so, he reminds us that judgements about the consequences of post-Mao reform are inseparable from our prior assumptions about the collective era: if those assumptions are flawed, our views of reform-era change are similarly flawed. Second, Unger makes clear that the complexities of rural China defy easy attempts to generalize about rural conditions or the impact of reform. He examines a wide range of villages that vary by location, natural endowment, economic history and degree and type of industrialization, showing how these

different circumstances shaped local developmental choices and outcomes. Unger is also very sensitive to the passage of time—that is, to the ways in which early gains from reform in the late 1970s and early 1980s could be rapidly undermined by the evolving policies and economic environment of the late 1980s and 1990s.

Unger successfully challenges a number of arguments that have been put forward in the literature on rural China and have too quickly become a part of the received wisdom. In a chapter on the Cultural Revolution, for example, Unger puts to rest any notion that the countryside was largely untouched by the political upheaval and violence that marked the campaign in urban areas. Unger documents how frequently Cultural Revolution rhetoric became a cover for lineage group or leadership struggles within the village. Two-thirds of his interviewees reported the eruption of such conflicts, while many others witnessed conflict that was orchestrated from above (p. 171). Unger concludes that rural violence and conflict was much more widespread than previously assumed. Another issue that Unger takes up is the question of how decollectivization came about (Chapter 5). Was it a spontaneous movement from below or was it orchestrated from above? Unger provides convincing evidence that decollectivization was imposed from above and did not arise as a widespread spontaneous reaction to the failures of the collective system. Certainly, Unger argues, many villagers were eager for change, but the official regime story about decollectivization, echoed in the conclusions of several influential scholarly works, greatly exaggerates the degree to which the momentum came from below. Unger concludes that only in a few “desperately poor districts” did villagers “take the initiative” (p. 99). Elsewhere, villagers were “channeled from above into a single type of organizational structure” and “very few villages were offered any choice in the matter” (p. 97).

A third issue that Unger takes on is the question of property rights. Would the privatization of land help to alleviate rural poverty and inequality and hasten development in laggard areas of the countryside? Unger argues that land privatization would run the risk of turning many of the poorest households off their land, creating a class of dispossessed that would aggravate the growing gap between rich and poor in the countryside. Since many of the poorest households are also minority nationality households, such a move also risks exacerbating income differences between Han and non-Han households and villages. Equally important, land privatization is not what farmers want, as is shown by Unger’s interviews and several recent surveys. On the contrary, many fear the implications of land privatization, seeing it as far too blunt an instrument for the often subtle, complex and changing circumstances of village life. For example, many villagers opposed Beijing’s 1993 decision to put a thirty-year moratorium on land redistribution. Cognizant of how changes in the family life-cycle (through marriage, birth and death) can turn landholding into a burden rather than an asset, villagers prefer the system of periodic reallocation that has been in place since the mid-1980s (pp. 115–18).

Unger’s analysis of different patterns of rural industrialization, and the political and economic consequences of these patterns, is perhaps the strongest element of this work (Chapters 7–8). He gives detailed case studies of the growth

of private and collective industry in the countryside and of the emergent patterns of government–business relations. Predictably, Unger finds that where private entrepreneurship has flourished village and township governments have lost much of the influence and power they enjoyed in the collective era. However, in contrast to other studies, which have found rural officials to favour collective industry (which they can control) over private enterprise, he finds that village and township officials in some areas have made substantial efforts to promote the development of private industry. Far from being hostile to private entrepreneurship, they function as the local equivalent of the developmental state.

Given Unger's emphasis on the variety of conditions that prevail in rural China—rich villages whose wealth is based on private or collectively owned enterprises, agricultural villages in the heartland that have lost ground since the mid-1980s, and poor interior and minority villages that have gained little ground despite the state's anti-poverty effort—it is not surprising that his analysis of state–peasant relations is similarly nuanced. His examination of rural collective protest (also studied in detail by Kevin O'Brien in a review essay in the July 2002 issue of *The China Journal*) reveals not only the array of tactics that farmers deploy as they seek to challenge abuses of power but, equally importantly, the variety of constraints and opportunities that operate on different administrative levels and the extent of conflict between village, township, and county officials. This will frustrate readers looking for clear-cut answers to questions about the future of the Party as a centre of rural power or the prospects for widespread rural instability, but Unger's analysis should convince them that there are no sure answers to be had.

Tyrene White
Swarthmore College