Little Town on the Prairie

Leslie T. Chang

China in One Village: The Story of One Town and the Changing World
by Liang Hong, translated from the Chinese by Emily Goedde.
Verso, 307 pp., $26.95

Liang Village sits on the edge of the North China Plain, about 650 miles south of Beijing. The area was settled by migrants who came in waves throughout Chinese history, attracted by the fertile soil in what was traditionally one of the country's breadbaskets. But its economic promise faded a long time ago. The brickworks shut in 2004; the elementary school, which also closed, is rented out to pig farmers, and the doctored sign over the door—"The Liang Village Pigpen Imparts Knowledge and Educates the People"—reads like a mocking commentary on the village's decline. Much of the local economic activity is concentrated in the dredging vessels on the Tuan River that mine sand for construction. In every way, this place is nothing special, "unknown within China, just one among countless villages like it."

So writes Liang Hong, who was born and raised in Liang Village but left to attend college and eventually became a professor of Chinese literature at a prestigious university in Beijing. When she was in her mid-thirties, she returned to live in her family home for five months and write a book about the villagers who stayed—the retirees, farmers, and failed entrepreneurs whom professors of literature don't usually bother with. *China in One Village: The Story of One Town and the Changing World* describes a community in crisis. Its 1,300 residents, many in their sixties and seventies, are struggling to maintain family farms and raise their grandchildren while the village's able-bodied adults work migrant jobs far from home. Extended families no longer gather on holidays, ancestral homes are collapsing, and Confucian values like respect for education and filial duty are disappearing. Behind the recent rape and murder of an eighty-two-year-old woman by a local high school student, Liang sees the breakdown of a social order that had existed for centuries. "Villages no longer have cultural cohesion," she writes. "They are like a patch of loose sand, arbitrarily piled together, but quickly scattered again."

When *China in One Village* was published in China in 2010, it was a surprise hit that sold more than a quarter of a million copies. The book won awards and praise for its lyrical writing about ordinary people and their problems; Liang, in her attention to an obscure place, was compared to Hardy and Faulkner. *China in One Village* opened up a commercial market in China for *feixugou*, or nonfiction writing, and paved the way for books about Tibetan migrant workers, Alzheimer's patients, road construction crews, and rural pyramid schemes, among other subjects. Four decades into a social and economic transformation unprecedented in scale, Chinese writers are waking up to the fact that great material may be right under their noses.

Xihewan Village, Xinyang, Henan Province, China, 2016

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This outpouring has parallels to the New Journalism of 1960s America, which sought new ways of depicting intense social transformations that seemed too bizarre for fiction. "It was as if everything changed ten times as fast in America, and this made for extraordinary difficulty in creating a literature," wrote Norman Mailer, who published three nonfiction books during the decade. Mailer, along with writers such as Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote, Hunter S. Thompson, and Joan Didion, chronicled contemporary events with techniques borrowed from the novel, including psychologically complex characters, vivid scenes, and long stretches of dialogue. They experimented with point of view and language, delved into unusual subcultures (astronauts, topless dancers), and spent time with people on the margins of society (drug-addicted hippies, motorcycle gangs, murderers). Their method of "saturation reporting" required following a subject around for days, months, or even years.

The New Journalism exerts a strong influence on Chinese writers. Classics like *In Cold Blood* and *Is Paris Burning?* continue to sell well in Chinese bookstores. The US market is seen as a possible model for publishers in China, which also has a large pool of educated readers who could support in-depth reporting projects. Could the next Capote or Mailer turn out to be Chinese?

It's often said that China is undergoing industrial, economic, and social revolutions all at the same time. "The short thirty years of Reform and Opening has been like covering the past hundred years' history in other countries," one magazine editor has said. "These are all a rich goldmine of themes for nonfiction works." Yet much of the recently published nonfiction shows Chinese writers struggling to make sense of the moment. They may conduct exhaustive research but fail to articulate a broader point, or present interesting details without any background. They seem ill-equipped to analyze their own society and arrive at a convincing conclusion.

These flaws are evident throughout *China in One Village*. Liang's central theme is rural decline, which she sees reflected everywhere in the landscape:

> The trees were being cut down until the green river plain had become an empty wasteland. The small deer in the woods, the swampy pond, the wild ducks, the warblers, at some point they all disappeared.
>
> All across the village weeds and debris rule the land around the houses. They reveal the village's inner desolation, its decay, its exhaustion.
>
> Those eternal villages . . . are riddled with ills like this multilane expressway, crossing through the plains, as if proclaiming to all the world: modernization has arrived at the countryside's doorstep. But, as far as the villages are concerned, modernity is as distant as before, and perhaps even more so.

Modernity is as distant as before: over three hundred pages, Liang tries to back up this claim even as she accumulates evidence mostly proving the opposite. The quality of life in Liang Village has improved dramatically in the years she's been away. The government made a concerted effort to eradicate rural poverty. It paved roads, introduced sanitation measures, and rebuilt earth-and-wood structures in brick and cement. A central business district lined with new buildings has replaced the old market quarter, and the village has expanded and merged with a neighboring town. With their earnings from migrant work, the residents have built multistory houses with modern appliances.

These kinds of changes have been taking place across the entire country in recent decades. But Liang fails to do the basic research that might explain what she sees, and instead regards developments as a literature professor might. The new structures are "all built in the same slanted roof, European style, which appears both very modern and very out of place," she writes. The recently built expressway resembles "an immense scar on the plains beneath the sun." The construction of an interprovince highway network has done more than anything to connect remote places to the modern world, but Liang mourns the damage to "village ecology" and the disappearance of a slower pace of life. She recalls fondly when all the members of an extended clan lived as neighbors, followed the same rituals, and knew everything about one another. It's a surprising position for an elite scholar from Beijing who turned her back on that world long ago.

Liang's writing is strongest when she evokes her childhood, the only time she knew the village well. She describes an older relative who would invariably appear at the door right before lunch: "In one meal he could eat three days' worth of our flour." She remembers her first visit to the county seat, which appeared immense to her eyes:

> Once, on this bridge, I saw the most beautiful moon in the whole world. It was nearly dark, and the moon had already risen in the sky. Its color was a strange, light yellow, like fine Xuan rice paper, and its round elegance was set off by a wisp of cloud across it. . . . I was thirteen that year, and it was both my first time at the county seat and my first time seeing a train, yet my first impression of the city, the one that has remained with me, is that moon.

This narrative assurance disappears when Liang tries to make sense of present-day developments. "On behalf of us all, I raise the question: What on earth is going on in the Chinese countryside?" she writes in her preface. The deeper she digs, the more muddled and confused she becomes. If Liang Village is really a place of desolation and decay, how does that square with the highways, the business district, and the new houses with their European-style slanted roofs? The villagers say they're happier than they've ever been, but Liang dismisses this: "Chinese rural people are easily satisfied: do a little something good for them, and they'll remember it forever."

Liang Village may be nothing special, "just one among countless villages like it," but making sense of the place isn't easy. The Chinese countryside is complicated, just as the country is complicated—it contains multitudes. For all her claims to know "every tree, every house, every person I encounter" in the village, Liang remains the aloof intellectual who doesn't understand a place that she nevertheless feels compelled to try to fix. The ground is constantly shifting beneath her feet, like the sandy banks down by the Tuan River where dredging has created pockets and holes under the earth. You could drown if you're not careful.

It's telling that almost no one in China before Liang had bothered to write about ordinary people. There has always been a divide in Chinese society between the educated elites and everyone else. In imperial times,

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scholars who were trained in the Confucian classics ran the civil service and were expected to set a moral example for the people they governed. Modern intellectuals still see themselves as the nation's conscience, expressing concern for the popular welfare while maintaining a distance from actual people. The poor may be objects of pity or concern, or targets of social reform or political indoctrination, but rarely are they seen as individuals who are interesting in themselves.

In China's literary tradition, national concerns have always come before individual ones. For more than two millennia, scholars have written history with an eye to legitimizing rulers, promoting Confucian ideals, and providing moral instruction for later generations; there's not much room for the varieties of individual experience. In the modern era, Chinese writers have maintained their historical responsibility of *youguoyoumin*, "to worry about the nation and the people." Scholars and ambassadors in the late nineteenth century wrote about their travels in the US or Europe, but their memoirs focused less on actual people than on finding policy prescriptions for China's domestic problems. The travel writer Zou Taofen, on a visit to the Soviet Union in the 1930s, fixated on road conditions as an expression of class conflict. Under the tsars, he wrote,

> the streets were twisted and complex and difficult to improve because of the corruption and obstruction of powerful landowners. After the revolution, all this corruption and obstruction was swept away.... By the end of the second five-year plan the streets of Moscow will all be as smooth as glass.

The closest precursor to today's nonfiction is *baogao wenxue*, or literary reportage, which emerged in China in the 1930s. Inspired by their leftist counterparts in Germany, Japan, and the Soviet Union, Chinese writers visited factories, mines, and other industrial sites in order to expose oppression and promote Marxist revolution. But even in writings that are supposed to be about the working class, the voices of individual workers are rarely heard or taken seriously. The poor function as a collective symbol of misery, as in the writer Ji Hong's 1937 account of a visit to a Shanghai soup kitchen:

> These people ought to actively go out and find the path to a permanently better life. But what could I say to them? These thousands of people I see living in hellish darkness, leading an inhuman existence have no one to educate them, no one to lead them to break out of this hell and seek out the path to the light.

"One does not expect the direct psychological exploration commonly associated with the modern fictional character," the scholar Charles A. Laughlin writes in *Chinese Reportage: The Aesthetics of Historical Experience* (2002). "In reportage, meaning is generated from…the ability of the character's externally observable qualities to suggest something more general, such as a social group or a historical trend."

The best recently published Chinese nonfiction shows capable and sometimes exhaustive reporting. (Few of these books are available in English, but a number of articles have been translated and published on websites like *Reading the China Dream*, *Chinarrative*, and *Paper Republic*.) *Renwu* (Portrait) magazine published "Delivery Drivers, Stuck in the System," a six-month investigation by Lai Youxuan into the working conditions of food deliverymen; the journalist Du Qiang wrote a 30,000-word essay, "The Vagabond Club," about migrants and prostitutes living in a factory district in Shenzhen. But the tendency is still to view the masses as masses, not individuals, and their characters tend to be weakly drawn, stereotypical, even interchangeable.

"On the Road with a Chinese Trucker," for example, begins promisingly when the author, Huang Jian, hitches a ride with a veteran semi driver who works the Shenzhen-to-Chongqing route. But a third of the way through the story, he abruptly switches his focus to another driver in a different city, then back to the original one, then to the second and later a third driver, toggling among them as if all members of this group shared the same experiences and feelings. (A more accurate title would have been "On the Road with Three Chinese Truckers, All Confusingly Surnamed Zhang.") In an article by Ba Rui, "Escaping the Beauty Salon," about a group of women who were forced to work as prostitutes in what they initially thought was a hairdressing establishment, the experiences of six of the victims blend together until it's impossible to remember who's who. Without strong characters, you can't tell a good story, and much recent Chinese nonfiction is missing both.

Liang's little town on the prairie feels devoid of individuals, too. She organizes her book around themes, like a government report on rural problems, and the villagers mostly serve to illustrate this or that social crisis: "Save the Children" is the title of one chapter, "Rural Politics Under Attack" another. The suicide of a young wife was caused by the sexual repression endured by millions of migrant couples who are forced to live apart. A man who occupies a house in the cemetery is a victim of society's indifference, "a moral stain on the village, the mocked and rejected 'other.'" The high school student who murdered and raped the old woman, Liang speculates, acted out of loneliness because his parents work in faraway Xinjiang, never mind that most children raised by their grandparents or other relatives don't commit violent crimes. When she finally has a chance to interview the young man in prison, she has no idea what to ask him. "What attitude should I adopt before him?" she writes. "What frame of mind? I didn't know. I was at sea."

Such failures in reporting occur at several crucial moments. When Liang comes across the man living in the cemetery, she doesn't seem to realize that she should ask him questions and find out what he's doing there. After the other villagers fill her in on his name and background, she seems stunned: "To be honest, it hadn't occurred to me that he had a name." Throughout the book, one gets the sense that the villagers are being brought in, usually by Liang's father or brother, for interviews with the respected professor from Beijing, but she isn't interested in spending much time with them. "The smell in the room is unbearable, so we don't stay long," Liang says of a visit with a troubled relative who has suffered a mental breakdown. "Every time I live in the village for a while, I want to hurry away," she writes at another point. "You can't help your sense of superiority or the disdain that arises from differences in rural and urban lifestyles."

This inability to connect with ordinary people blinds Liang to changes that are taking place before her eyes. When she meets a cousin's wife who ran a successful vegetable business in Beijing with her husband and lives in a house they built with their savings, she is surprised at the woman's "strong opinions" and finds her "conceited." On a visit with another villager, Liang writes, "I was shocked to see how modern and urban their home was." Money from migrant labor is the main source of income growth in rural China, and it's changing the face of the country as migrants build homes, start businesses, or remake themselves as urban citizens. But Liang is locked into her view of this class as helpless and suffering:

> Untold numbers of workers move cautiously through city streets, wearing shabby clothing and strange expressions. They move clumsily, as if half dead, like fish out of water. Imagine: in the villages, in their own homes, they might be revived, restored to their natural selves, like fish returned to the stream.*

When you're confused about how the world is changing, one response is to valorize the way things used to be. "Principal family members don't live at home and are losing their connection to the land," Liang writes, as if it would be better if everyone just stayed on the farm. Clans lack the influence they once had, she complains; children growing up in the city are cut off from their rural roots; no one shares braised dishes on the holidays anymore. She proposes a "cultural revival" in the villages but doesn't suggest which aspects of rural culture should be preserved. At one point, she makes the bizarre claim that migration is "a fundamental obstacle to the progress of democratic politics," without seeming to register that an authoritarian government is a bigger impediment. Swimming against four decades of history, Liang seems to wish that migrant workers, "like fish returned to the stream," would quit the city and make another go at village life. As someone who left home herself, she should understand why others make the same choice. Somehow, she can't.

There's a richer and deeper story to be told about Liang Village, and Liang's reporting does uncover important issues that face small

*Liang writes about the experiences of the village's migrants in a follow-up book, *Chu Liangzhuang Ji* (Leaving Liang Village, 2013), but she persists in seeing this group as victims, whom she describes variously as "dull," "isolated," "depressed," "deprived," and "apathetic."

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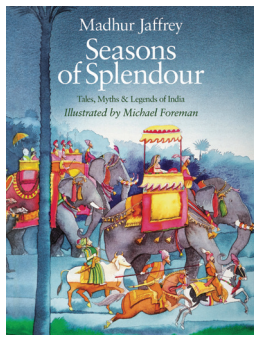

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towns. These include the seismic impact of migration, the environmental damage wrought by unrestrained growth, the emergence of corporations cultivating farmland on a large scale, the changing dynamics between local officials and increasingly savvy citizens, the clash in generational values, and the rise of Christianity. But finding the meaning behind these developments would require a closer look at individual experience and a more honest reckoning with the past and present than Liang is capable of.

Instead, she falls into what may be the literature professor's occupational hazard: reducing everything she sees to symbols. The cut-down forests and polluted ponds suggest the village's impending demise; the shuttered school signals a dwindling respect for education. "How many people are forgotten in a village, in the life of a community?" Liang writes. "My childhood companions, Qingli, Dongxiang, Duozi, where have they gone?" But many of her interpretations are just wrong. The ravaged landscape is most likely a sign of economic development. (Even the denuded hillsides run counter to trends in rural China, where the government has been implementing the largest reforestation program in the world for the past two decades.) The village school probably closed due to out-migration of much of the population and the aging of residents who remain, reflecting a national trend. And her childhood friends? It's a good bet that they've grown up and moved to the city, where their kids are getting a better education than they could have had back home.

If Liang had tracked down these women, she might have found that they've become symbols of social mobility and self-invention. But apparently she didn't try very hard to find them.

In 2013 I traveled to Beijing and Shanghai to promote the publication of my book *Factory Girls* in Chinese. It traces the lives of two young women who left their farming villages to work on the assembly lines of Dongguan, a factory town across the border from Hong Kong. Over five days, I had two press conferences, four talks, five TV appearances, and probably twenty-five interviews with print media outlets. ("In China, a book tour is like war," my editor told me.) Many of these encounters circled around the same question: How come you wrote this book and not us? "You're very perceptive," a writer for *Southern Weekend*, which is known for its investigative reporting, told me. "Only a foreigner could write this book. Chinese could never write this book." "Why not?" I asked. "That world is too strange for us," he replied.

Over the past decade, much of the successful nonfiction about China has been written by foreigners. Journalists, mostly American ones, have published books exploring the socioeconomic changes experienced by migrant workers in factory towns, the residents of a Shanghai street, and neighbors in a traditional Beijing neighborhood facing demolition. There's an idea among Chinese critics and readers that foreigners bring a unique perspective to the country. A more important factor may be that they come from an educational tradition that emphasizes the importance of processing information as a social scientist would, respecting individuals' stories, and challenging conventional wisdom when necessary.

In a well-known short story by Lu Xun called "My Old Home" (1921), a civil servant returns to his village to pack up his family home, which has been sold. Told that a friend from childhood named Runtu plans to visit, he has a sudden, vivid flashback. Runtu, the son of a hired laborer, had dazzled the ten-year-old narrator with his "treasure-house of strange lore": how to set traps and catch birds, and the names and colors of exotic seashells. When the grown-up Runtu appears, the narrator is stunned at the change that has come over him:

> He had grown to twice his former size. His round face, once crimson, had become sallow, and acquired deep lines and wrinkles; his eyes too had become like his father's, the rims swollen and red, a feature common to most peasants who work by the sea….
>
> He stood there, mixed joy and sadness showing on his face…. Finally, assuming a respectful attitude, he said clearly:
>
> "Master!…"
>
> I felt a shiver run through me; for I knew then what a lamentably thick wall had grown up between us.

The narrator stays to pack up or give away the rest of his things, to entertain visitors and say his good-byes. As he departs his hometown by riverboat, he thinks about Runtu: "The vision of that small hero with the silver necklet among the watermelons had formerly been as clear as day, but now it suddenly blurred." We must remake our world, he thinks, so that the poor aren't so beaten down by hardship and cut off from the rest of society, as Runtu has been cut off from him. Lu Xun's story has one of the most famous endings in modern Chinese literature:

> I thought: hope cannot be said to exist, nor can it be said not to exist. It is just like roads across the earth. For actually the earth had no roads to begin with, but when many men pass one way, a road is made.

The spirit of this story suffuses Liang's book. (One of its chapters is titled "Runtu Grows Up.") Her homecoming is also marked by alienation and regret; she feels the same sorrow at the village's backwardness, the same guilt for having left. The divide between the native son (or daughter) who has done well and the villagers who stayed behind feels as wide as it's ever been, even though China is a richer and more equitable country now. One hundred years after Lu Xun's story was published, Chinese writers are still searching for a language in which to write about common people.

Liang has said she plans to write a book about Liang Village every ten years until she dies. "I consider it my duty to keep doing so all my life," she writes at the end of *China in One Village*. Perhaps she, or some of the other writers working today, will develop the skills to humanize the individuals they are writing about, thus creating new roads across the earth. ●

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