DOI 10.3868/s110-003-014-0038-x

The demoralization of teachers: Crisis in a rural school in China. Wang, Dan. Plymouth, UK: Lexington Press, 2013. 151 pp., (hardcopy), 65\$, ISBN: 978-0-7391-6942-1.

After seven months of fieldwork at Chaoyang Elementary School, one of a myriad of rural schools in China, Dr. Wang Dan wrote an ethnography depicting teachers' demoralization in terms of a prevailing sense of despair, cynicism, moral anxiety, concern over salary and general loss of professional dignity among rural teachers. She explored "the structural mechanisms that have dampened these teachers' passions, eroded their professional ethics, and finally demoralized and alienated them from their work" (p.11). The majority of literature on rural teachers focuses on teachers' professionalization, resource shortages in terms of finance and availability of qualified teachers, and curriculum reform. Most research takes a single perspective rather than a multi-dimensional approach. Dr. Wang, however, was ambitious enough to select an understudied but important topic and try to unearth the mechanisms causing teachers' demoralization by looking at cultural, economic, and bureaucratic factors in the organizational and social context of their work. With a sound training in anthropology, Wang did her fieldwork carefully and tactically, displaying a passionate empathy with the teachers. The excellent quality of the narrative brought "the story" alive to this reader. For Western readers who may not be familiar with rural China, this book serves as an engaging introduction. The reader will clearly sense Wang's passion for China's rural education and her devotion to academic research.

The emphasis on multiple perspectives is the double-edged sword of this book. Since bureaucracy, the distinction between manual and intellectual labor, and economic reform are all causal factors leading to the demoralization of teachers, how do these factors combine and function? The author did not organize all the reasons for demoralization into a single framework. The book can be read as evidence that "rural schools are a symbol of the state and exercise the state agenda in the rural areas" (p. 127, the key point of Li Shulei's *Country in the*

villages: Rural schools amidst cultural change which is also an interesting and profound book), on one hand and also within Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction on the other. More emphasis is placed on perspectives than detailed findings and one is left wondering which perspective is most critical to those concerned? From this reader's perspective, the school principal appears to be the key barrier to improvement in morale. Most of the issues brought about by working routines, clashes with parents of the children, new curriculum reform, corruption and bureaucracy in the school, could be solved by a principal with a strong sense of social responsibility, a genuine philosophical commitment to education, and management experience. The principal is not "just the executor of those external forces inside the school" (p. 134) given the principal-directed system in China but this angle is not well analyzed in the book. Under China's principal-directed system, which is the core of the educational bureaucracy, the author's suggestion to construct democracy and autonomy sounds somewhat utopian unless there is careful consideration of how principals need to change.

The dialogue between the teachers and the author is central to this book but there is a need for a comprehensive understanding of the teachers, administrators, villagers, and education bureau staff. The principal's image is mainly constructed in the discourse of the teachers but not in relation others. Teachers' images are created by the teachers themselves and the author's empathy. Can all these images be actual and real? From this point of view, during the whole fieldwork period, for the teachers, the author is half an insider; for others, the author is an outsider, which undermines the extent to which the book can convince, as its multiple angles tend to reduce its depth.

XU Yang

Higher Education Press

E-mail: xuyang@hep.com.cn