effectively improved.

LI Miao
Shandong University
E-mail: limiao@sdu.edu.cn

DOI 10.3868/s110-005-016-0047-7

Family strategies, guanxi, and school success in rural China. Ailei Xie. New York, NY: Routledge, 2016. 128 pp. (hardcover), £95.00, ISBN: 978-1-138-84106-2.

There are many ways in which parents can help their children succeed in school. Parents are aware that the more they are involved in their children's schooling, the better their children may do in school. However, parents' keenness to get involved is not officially channeled. Xie opens up the issue of how rural parents from different social backgrounds employ their interpersonal social network (*guanxi*) to produce and reproduce advantages for their children in the quest for school success. He describes in meticulous field notes how these rural parents are strategically involved in schooling as a social capital transference process in a rural region wedged in by national economic reforms. By the end of the book, the reader understands how the state legitimizes parents' role in schooling, and the relationship between parents and teachers in China. Social networks, that constitute effective family strategies for rural parents helping their children succeed in educational competition, are caught up in what in the West calls the "neoliberal project" in which some children are left behind.

Xie takes the impact of economic transformation on Zong county as the entry point to understand social stratification in rural society. Xie deftly employs narrative techniques interwoven with national and regional data. This is coupled with apt interpretations, mostly referring to international literature on family-based resource effects on children's educational outcomes in terms of social capital. With regard to research shedding light on children's success in rural schools in China, the readers might want to know more about how the impact of

family-based resources on children's success in school has been conceptualized in the context of China after 1990s. That would allow readers outside China to gain a better understanding of how social capital in terms of *guanxi* works as a mechanism of social exclusion in the competition for school success in China.

Xie makes transparent his relationship to the study. He did his 12-month fieldwork in the rural region in which he grew up until the age of 15 and in which his family members still live. He identifies himself as an insider in terms of the social network of family and community. In detail, he narrates how he developed a rapport with his research participants. His potential research participants did not think of him as an insider, at least not a full insider. Xie evolves towards having a self-reflective view on limits that this brings to his fieldwork. It is critical to conceptualizing how researchers as insiders are positioned by their study participants as having outsider status. The researcher might have no way to give comments on how parents employ their social networks to produce and reproduce advantage necessary for their children's success in school from a full insider's perspective. However, Xie offers narrative and in-depth understanding of their drive and compromise with overwhelming competition among children for school success in rural schools. He argues that rural schools as formal educational institutions do not provide rural parents the official channels to be involved in schools and help their children succeed. Xie critically analyzes and discusses how parents are marginalized at the policy level, which limits the interconnectedness between family and school. Xie provides a critical lens for looking at mechanisms of social inclusion and exclusion in education: Who are the stakeholders in schooling in China.

The few formal and official channels for rural parents to get involved in schools functionally exclude some children from success in school. These rural parents are keen to employ *guanxi* as their primary strategy for constructing and reconstructing the linkage between parents and schools with regard to their children's success in schools. Compared to children from privileged families whose parents are cadres, professionals and business owners, the children of peasant parents are disadvantaged and marginalized in terms of social capital in the form of *guanxi*. Xie convincingly demonstrates how crucial education is for shaping the strategies and desires of such rural families.

The book is published as part of a series edited by Gerard A. Postiglione to showcase the excellent in-depth ethnography of rural parents in Zong county

schools. Xie's important contribution to the literature is to treat rural parents' strategies for producing advantages for their children's success in school as a "social phenomenon," a ubiquitous sentiment related to the powerful desire for education in China. The intended consequences, Xie argues, offer insight into the intensity and effect of parents' desire to send their children to higher education. In addition, the privileged family's employment of social capital by involvement in schooling has unintentionally produced and reproduced inequality in education. The underprivileged peasant parents decode this inequality as "education is a game that only those with power and money can play" (p. 108). This work reverberates through decades of rural schooling in China and contributes a further dimension to understanding how parents' involvement in schools is caught up in the "neoliberal project."

Tianhong ZHANG
Kent State University
E-mail: tzhang13@kent.edu