

Book Review: Ordinary Ethics in China

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*Drawing on a wide range of anthropological case studies, this book examines the kinds of moral and ethical issues that emerge (sometimes almost unnoticed) in the flow of everyday life in Chinese communities. The breadth of the work means that it provides a useful resource for many researchers and students in anthropology and Chinese studies, as well as an important contribution to the growing field of ordinary ethics, and it is to be hoped that the book may lay the ground for future study of the ethics of everyday life, writes **Charlotte Goodburn**.*

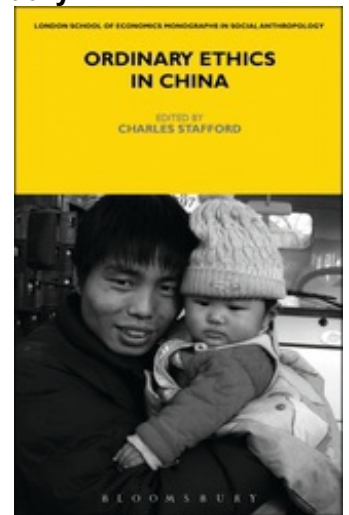


Ordinary Ethics in China. Charles Stafford (ed.). Bloomsbury Academic. February 2013.

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How is a Chinese child judged to be good or bad by his teachers and classmates? How can the moral obligation to stay at home and care for one's elderly parents be reconciled with the competing obligation to leave in search of wealth which can be sent back? What makes villagers judge some of their neighbours more harshly than others for not living up to accepted standards of behaviour? And should the wrongs of China's past be forgotten in the interests of social harmony, or be addressed in the present?

These are the kinds of everyday moral and ethical issues that this fascinating collection of anthropological essays sets out to address. Based on Michael Lambek's concept of "ordinary ethics", the papers in this volume, based on a 2009 workshop at LSE, discuss common ethical practices and understandings in contemporary China. The ethnographic case studies deal with a range of ethical issues linked to childhood and education; rural communities and families; and everyday technologies or techniques which raise ethical issues. In doing so, they highlight not only that there is much to be learnt about Chinese society from focusing on the implicit ethics of these unexceptional circumstances, but also that explicit and sometimes quite complex ethical deliberation occurs on an everyday basis too.



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The book benefits from an excellent introduction by [Charles Stafford](#), which ties together the quite disparate topics of the essays into a coherent whole by identifying interesting key themes and providing examples. Stafford's own chapter, on the moral judgments made by villagers in rural Liaoning, is also a highlight. He picks apart several everyday situations, including the arrival of an unexpected and slightly drunken lunch guest, discussions over the giving of gifts and assistance to relatives, and the criticisms an elderly grandmother makes of her son and daughter-in-law's parenting – analysing the ways in which moral assessments are (and are not) translated into actions in each case. What sets this chapter apart from most others in the volume is the attempt to relate discussion of the ethnographic material to complex debates in philosophy and psychology over ethical judgment, free will and the "fundamental attribution error" (the tendency to overestimate dispositional factors, such as personality, and underestimate situational factors in explaining others' behaviour). The paper comes to the interesting conclusion, in line with Peter Strawson's philosophical work on moral responsibility, that despite deterministic beliefs and a "collectivistic" culture, Chinese villagers do make damning moral judgments about their fellows' actions, and that even when they refrain from articulating such judgments it may be more for reasons of social utility than deep empathic understanding.

Hui Zhang's chapter, on the ethics of avoiding envy in China's countryside, also deals with moral judgments about fellow villagers, considering the question of how one should respond to one's neighbours becoming suddenly rich. Drawing on ethnographic study of one community in rural Hebei, where key families had made their fortunes through windfall payments from the local mining industry, Zhang demonstrates that the ethics of envy are extremely complex: those being envied are traditionally blamed at least as much as those doing the envying, since it is thought that if they had cultivated better social relations they would have avoided provoking "red eye". Zhang's analysis of the use of population "quality" (*suzhi*) discourse to denounce those who envy local officials as low "quality", as a convenient way of avoiding blaming the officials themselves for not having cultivated good social relations, is especially interesting, albeit brief, and makes a nice counterpart to the villagers' descriptions of officials themselves as being of low *suzhi* in Hans Steinmüller's chapter on the ethics of irony. The concept of *suzhi* comes up again in several other essays: high *suzhi* is an ideal that teachers should aim for, in the chapter on elite primary education; smoking on the bus is a sign of low *suzhi*, according to a self-deprecating remark in the chapter on irony; and young migrant women workers panic about finding high *suzhi* husbands, in the chapter on Shenzhen factories. This theme is pulled together well in Yunxiang Yan's interesting afterword on the "striving individual", highlighting the fear of failure to attain high *suzhi* status, the push that this creates to succeed materially and socially, and the conflation in contemporary China of the process of becoming a moral person with the process of becoming "successful".

Rather different is Stephan Feuchtwang's chapter on retrospective evaluations of the Great Leap Forward. Dealing with contemporary ethical assessments of the horrors of the Great Leap famine, this is perhaps not "ordinary ethics" in the sense of the other papers, but provides a nice illustration of what Stafford discusses in the introduction in the context of several of the other papers – the idea that historical events cast a long shadow over China today. Feuchtwang's focus is on the human psychology, in particular the use of shame and shaming techniques, leading to the disastrous outcome of mass starvation in the 1950s, and the ethical decisions made by Chinese people today in tactfully recounting these circumstances. This of course links back to the same kinds of questions of understanding, blame and forgiveness discussed in Stafford's own chapter, although on a much grander scale.

Overall this is a rich and fascinating book, providing a detailed account of the everyday ethical deliberations and moral judgements made by many Chinese people. The chapters are rather diverse in range, and some are notably slighter and less polished than others, but are held together effectively by the well-written introduction and afterword, allowing them to be taken as a coherent set of examinations of China's "ordinary ethics". The breadth of the work means that it provides a useful resource for many researchers and students in anthropology and Chinese studies, as well as an important contribution to the growing field of ordinary ethics, and it is to be hoped that the book may lay the ground for future study of the ethics of everyday life.

Charlotte Goodburn is a Lecturer in Chinese Politics and Development at the Lau China Institute, King's College London. She was previously a post-doctoral researcher in the Centre of Development Studies at the University of Cambridge, where she completed her PhD on the impact of rural-urban migration on children in China and India. Her research interests include migration and urbanisation; comparative development in Asia; educational provision; and gender and household dynamics. [Read more reviews by Charlotte.](#)