

Book Review: Communities of Complicity: Everyday Ethics in Rural China by Hans Steinmüller

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*Everyday life in contemporary rural China is characterized by an increased sense of moral challenge and uncertainty, in which ordinary people often find themselves caught between the moral frameworks of capitalism, Maoism, and the Chinese tradition. **Hans Steinmüller's** ethnographic study of the village of Zhongba, in Hubei Province, central China, is an attempt to grasp the ethical reflexivity of everyday life in rural China. This should be of interest to scholars and students of Chinese rural change, local politics and culture, as well as to anthropologists of "ordinary ethics" beyond China Studies, writes **Charlotte Goodburn**.*



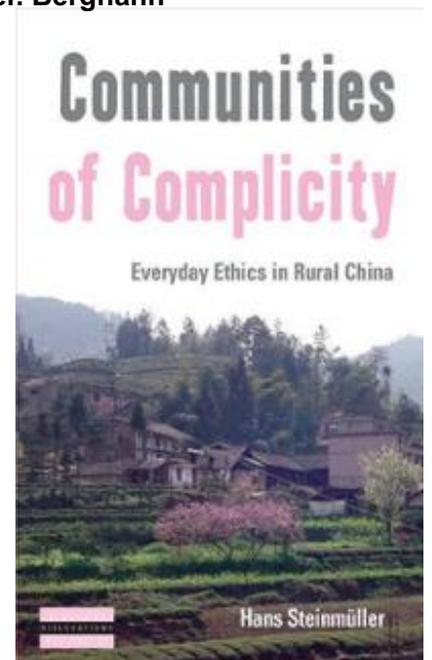
Communities of Complicity: Everyday Ethics in Rural China. Hans Steinmüller. Berghahn Books. April 2013.

Find this book: 

[Hans Steinmüller's](#) *Communities of Complicity* is a fascinating and vivid ethnography which examines the ethical reflexivity of the everyday lives of ordinary people in rural China. It is based on eighteen months of fieldwork in a village in Hubei Province, and provides a rich and nuanced account of the rapid social change faced by villagers there. Yet the book is much more than a straightforward examination of how rural people react to changes imposed from above and outside. It is also an account of how villagers actively negotiate the tensions between state discourses and vernacular practices, deal with the moral ambiguities of everyday life and make ironic use of official representations of Chinese society to resolve their own unease – processes which bind villagers (and sometimes their officials) together in new "communities of complicity".

Steinmüller's work is theoretically extremely rich. The conceptual foundations are drawn from recent anthropological literature on morality and ethics, in particular [Michael Lambek's work on "ordinary ethics"](#), which emphasises the role of everyday ethical deliberations in ordinary social life. Steinmüller – an anthropologist at the London School of Economics – also bases his analysis on Richard Rorty's [Contingency, Irony and Solidarity](#), but extends Rorty's focus from the ironic perspectives of intellectuals to the uses that ordinary people make of irony as they regard tensions between "the categorical" and "the contingent". This is especially fruitfully explored in Chapter 7, on "Face Projects in Rural Construction", in which Steinmüller examines housing development schemes as a performance project designed to build "face" for the local state. Houses built closest to public roads and tea plantations are given preferential investment from local officials compared with houses less visible during official inspections. Although local people criticise these projects, they also see their necessity, and both they and their officials attempt to derive benefit from them while reflecting ironically on the situation, rather than openly attacking them.

Steinmüller returns to this theme in his conclusion, where he recounts the villagers' responses to a TV broadcast in which Steinmüller took part. One man criticises the researcher: "You said that the rural reconstruction programme is done so well? I tell you, look at the houses here, off the street...this fucking reconstruction programme sucks". Another villager, though, praises his participation, and tells him approvingly: "finally you have understood how propaganda works here...I'm sure you'll do well". Steinmüller's examination of the villagers' uses of irony to express the differences between the "categorical" demands of what it is to be a Chinese peasant building a new house or a local official in charge of a housing project on the one hand, and the "contingent" realities of their actual lived



experiences on the other, is fascinating.



Rural village. A contrast to the big cities elsewhere in the Province. Credit: [Tim Zachemuk](#) CC BY-NC 2.0

Similarly, in Chapters 5 and 6 on family celebrations and gambling respectively, *Communities of Complicity* vividly demonstrates the gap between the categorical and the contingent. Villagers take part in an array of practices that are officially condemned in China, including marriage and funeral rituals and socialising through drinking and gambling. Family celebrations have enormous social importance, and drinking and gambling play a large role in the expression of conviviality and the development of personal relations, and as such they not only constitute an important part of the community's social life, but are also strategically important for ordinary villagers and local officials alike. Although upheld as essential to "getting things done" in the village, these practices are condemned as "backward" by the Chinese state, and locals therefore regard them with a mixture of embarrassment and irony. Again, Steinmüller's rich ethnography reveals the way irony is used to acknowledge "outside" official perspectives while protecting the "inside" practices.

In each of these examples, Steinmüller is careful to show that it is not only villagers but local officials who experience embarrassment and irony as they take part in condemned social rituals or manage housing projects inequitably to build face. Local officials are not mere representatives of the state, but are an essential part of the "communities of complicity", sharing familiarity with and participation in local practices, and entering into reflection on moral frameworks. Steinmüller relates this not only to Rorty's work on ironic redescription, but also to Michael Herzfeld's concept of "cultural intimacy". At times, the theoretical discussion and the sheer volume of scholarly literature examined weighs heavily on the book, with some resulting loss of readability. However, the insights Steinmüller offers into the reflexive processes of local people and their creation of cultural intimacy, are both extremely thought-provoking and eloquently expressed.

Overall, this is a book that is both empirically rich and theoretically interesting. Despite current headline-grabbing statistics on urbanisation, *Communities of Complicity* is an important testament to the continued necessity of understanding rural China if one is really to get to grips with how Chinese development works. It should be of interest to scholars and students of Chinese rural change, local politics and culture, as well as to anthropologists of "ordinary ethics" beyond China Studies.

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

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