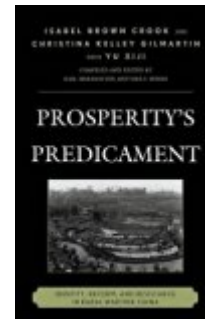


Isabel Crook, Christina K. Gilmartin, Xiji Yu, Gail Hershatter, Emily Honig.
Prosperity's Predicament: Identity, Reform, and Resistance in Rural Wartime China.
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Reviewed by Bin Yang

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Commissioned by Aaron D. Whelchel (Washington State University-Vancouver)

Editor's Note: Although the reviewer worked under one of the authors in this volume and visited the research site with her, the Advisory Board at H-World decided there was no conflict of interest in this case as the reviewer's advisor is deceased and the reviewer has no professional or personal obligations to the other authors.

It took seventy years to research, write, and complete this book, and the authors, editors, and various other contributors have illustrated their everlasting devotion to modern China by focusing on a small rural town called Prosperity (*Daxing*) near Chongqing, southwest China.

The authors and editors of the book deserve our attention. Isabel Crook was born in Chengdu, Sichuan, into a Canadian missionary family. Yu Xiji, a woman from a prestigious gentry-scholar family with a MA degree from University of Toronto, was a medical worker in Prosperity and later an important advocate for preschool education in China. Christina Gilmartin traveled to China in 1974 and stayed there for many years, be-

coming an eminent historian on women in modern and contemporary China. The editors, Gail Hershatter and Emily Honig, are well-established scholars on gender and modern China and bring this background to the text. In 1940 Isabel and Yu Xiji went to Daxing and in the spring of the following year they conducted a house-to-house survey. While their detailed fieldwork of 1,500 households built a firm base for this book, the “path to publication has been more labyrinthine than the street that winds through the market village in Sichuan” (p. xv). The data remained untouched in a drawer until Isabel retired in the early 1980s. She and Yu Xiji ultimately decided to resume the project, and, in the mid-1990s at the suggestion of Mark Selden, they invited Christina Gilmartin to join the team. With the unfortunate death of Yu Xiji in 2006, and that of Christina Gilmartin in 2012, Gail Hershatter and Emily Honig kindly agreed to complete the last stage of publication. The history of this book and the scholars that have contributed to it span over half a century and criss-cross the Asia-Pacific region; their obser-

vations and insights deliver important messages that we cannot afford to ignore. The book itself is supported by a Chinese translation of the field notes, titled *Xinglong Chang: Field Notes of a Village Called Prosperity, 1940–1942* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2013), and “a complete write-up” of the notes will soon be available at <http://www.isabelcrook.com> (p. 10).

The front matter of the book includes a preface and acknowledgements by Isabel Crook and an introduction by Gail Hershatter and Emily Honig. The remainder of the book is divided into two parts: “Insiders” and “Outsiders,” each with five chapters. Chapter 1, “The Market Way of Life,” sets the stage by introducing the market of the town of Prosperity that served as the social-economic center of the whole community. Chapter 2, “Living Off the Land,” focuses on ordinary farming families and their agricultural practices. Population pressure eventually led villagers, struggling to feed their families, to exploit every patch of land. Still, land shortages and population pressure made non-farming occupations, all connected to the market, crucial for family survival, explaining why Prosperity, unlike its counterparts in northern China, was so commercialized. Consequently chapter 3, “Not Far Afield: Family Survival Strategies,” examines how farmers leveraged the market when farming was unable to meet their needs. Even so, the majority of the population struggled to make ends meet and proved highly susceptible to natural or man-made disasters.

Chapter 4, “Lineage, Landlords, and the Local Body Politic,” reviews the composition of the local elite community. Lineages were small and their traditional authority was in decline as military-based elites, a product of warlordism beginning in 1911, had come to dominate local society. Landlords remained highly respected, reflecting the scarcity of land and the high price of rice during wartime. Even the *bao-jia* system, recently introduced by the Guomindang government (GMD)

and described by the authors as an “unprecedented invasion of local autonomy,” largely remained on paper and failed to significantly restructure local hierarchies (p. 111). Chapter 5, “The Paoge and Informal Power,” elaborates on this topic by examining the most powerful stakeholder in Prosperity: Paoge, the local “secret society” that had the final word on matters of local importance and accumulated wealth through a variety of legal and illegal business activities, including opium distribution and gambling. Ultimately, part 1 provides a well-developed profile of wartime life in Prosperity and provides the background for a discussion of the many reforms brought into this small rural town.

These reforms that were introduced in wartime Prosperity are considered in the five chapters of part 2, “Outsiders.” Chongqing, as a wartime capital, enhanced bureaucratic growth, standardization, and penetration into rural towns and villages. This was accompanied by non-governmental rural construction movements advocated by James Yen and Liang Shuming and Christian missionary efforts such as medical and educational programs. Chapter 6, “Wartime Reformers,” and chapter 7, “Taking Health Care Public,” focus on the collaborative education and health care reforms organized by the GMD and the National Christian Council (NCC), with the former adopting a top-down approach while the latter worked from the bottom up and enjoyed relatively better success. Chapter 8, “Marriage: Reformed and Unreformed,” discusses a variety of issues related to gender and marriage such as foot binding, early and arranged marriages, weddings, and common forms of divorce, showing how new ideas and marriage practices took root in a rural community. Chapter 9, “Of Money and Men,” highlights two key issues that caused local resentment against the state, taxation and conscription, while chapter 10, “Trial of Strength,” reviews GMD suppression of opium and gambling during 1940-41 and the rise and fall of salt cooperatives organized by the NCC. In general, this section provides

substantial evidence that state reforms faced strong local resistance and failed to realize their goals while nongovernmental efforts achieved some success, especially in medical and educational projects.

The value of this book is self-evident and is summed up by Gail Hershatter and Emily Honig in their introduction. First of all, it provides an extremely detailed and relatively comprehensive survey of a rural town in southwest China, paralleling, supplementing, and revising other classic surveys and studies produced by a group of Chinese and Western scholars, such as D. H. Kulp, H. S. Buklin, H. B. Brown, J. L. Buck, Sidney D. Gamble, Ling Jinghan, Chen Hansheng, and G. William Skinner, during the 1920s through the 1940s. Some of the data found in the book represents the sole source on this small republican township, such as the map of Prosperity made by Isabel Crook (Figure 1.1, p. 28) and lists of residents' names, family members, occupations, rents, relationships, and so on. Thus, the book facilitates both our understanding of this specific locality and of rural China as whole. Second, while the survey by Isabel Crook and Yu Xiji coincided with a contemporary trend of interest in rural village life and economies, it distinguishes itself by discussing many other interesting aspects such as state intervention in rural society with outside centralization competing with local power structures. These detailed case studies of local resistance illustrate the complicated transition of China from empire to modern nation-state. The issue of gender also immediately draws attention. Unlike other outside scholars, Isabel Crook's and Yu Xiji's gender facilitated relationships with local women, and their observations challenge conventional stereotypes, shedding new light on gender relations and women's roles in rural Chinese society. The book demonstrates that women in Prosperity played a crucial part in farming, trading, and handicraft production. They were active in both the public and private aspects of local life, taking dynamic roles in almost all important fam-

ily decisions. Indeed, one-fifth of the property owners on Prosperity's main street were widows, and the "stall keepers were mostly women" (p. 26). That many other women also helped to support their families through trade only underscores their importance to the local economy.

The book is extremely readable, filled with many arresting stories. Nevertheless, as in all other field studies, the dual role of Isabel Crook and Yu Xiji as both participants in reform and as observers deserves some attention. For example, it seems that in many cases they relied on information from a limited number of subjects, such as Sun Zhonglu. Sun, in his late twenties, was a member of the local gentry and, partially because he was the founder of the GMD branch at Prosperity, was appointed as the town head by Bishan County. He was well educated and was once chosen as a trainee of the NCC Salt Cooperative. Sun, "young, patriotic, and openly devoted to modernizing reforms," is described by the authors as a progressive force in his hometown (p. 267). In contrast, Feng Qingyun, a man in his thirties, symbolized those local gentry who opposed any progressive changes. He stole a wife, farmed out taxation of the marketplace, pig butchering, and salt, and was deeply involved in opium and gambling businesses. Furthermore, Feng conflicted with the NCC Salt Cooperative, succeeded in taking it over, and eventually dissolved it (pp. 264-267). Despite their contrasting educational background, the two shared many similarities indeed. They were both powerful elites and key individuals in the local Paoge branches and, a few years later, both became targets of the communist regime. Furthermore, while Isabel Crook and Yu Xiji were popular among local women, they were unable to get direct access to many male elites in Prosperity such as Commander Cai, the head of Paoge and probably the most powerful man in the community. This was possibly the result of their relatively short time in the village; they were there for less than two years. In addition, the glossary omits the names of local people and many Chinese names

found in *Xinglong Chang: Field Notes of a Village Called Prosperity, 1940 – 1942* do not correspond to the Pinyin versions in the book itself. Finally, readers must bear in mind that this book serves as only part of the much larger project initially planned by Isabel Crook, Yu Xiji, and Christina Gilmartin that would cover the post-1949 period. And understandably, due to space limitations, many important and interesting notes even on pre-1949 Prosperity were unable to be covered.

Since April 1997 when I first met the three authors, I have had the pleasure of occasionally being involved in this project. While only my own personal recollections, the following episodes may help the reader further understand the authors' complex relationship with Prosperity.

In the summer of 2006, Christina Gilmartin (my PhD advisor at Northeastern University from 1998 to 2004) and I went to Bishan for local archive and fieldwork at Prosperity. We spent about two days reading and copying documents in Bishan and another two days at Prosperity. We visited the market, chatted with residents and farmers, paid visits to a few old friends, and took a tour to Danfeng and a primary school. Everyone, regardless of their role in Prosperity or the surrounding region, welcomed us with open arms. Frequently, "strangers" (from my point of view) stopped us and invited us to chat or visit at his or her home. To them, Isabel and Christina were part of the Prosperity community.

As with any field researchers, Isabel Crook and Christina Gilmartin have, to some extent, been given stories that place the tellers, whether individuals or institutions, in the best light. And various local myths have developed around them, the most interesting of which claims that Christina is Isabel's daughter. During my two visits to Prosperity in 1997 and 2006, a few people wishing to demonstrate their close connections with Isabel and Christina emphasized to myself and others that they "knew" that she (Christina) was her (Isabel's) daughter.

Prosperity's Predicament will be of interest to many world historians. One of its key themes, the tension and interaction between state and farmer, is a fundamental process found in many societies transitioning from pre-industrial "traditional" ways of life to modern industrial states. Additionally, the book contributes to the debates surrounding Orientalism. Isabel was probably the last Westerner who conducted such field work in China before the Cold War, eventually joined the Chinese revolution, and has remained in China to this day. Her experience complicates our understanding of Orientalism, possibly indicating the approach is over-homogenizing and totalizing. Her life-long pursuit of universal scholarship and justice challenges the simplistic categories of the "West" or "Westerners" and illustrates the ability of humans to transcend the divides of race, ethnicity, and nationality.

The opportunity to review this book brought back so many memorable moments with Isabel Crook, Yu Xiji, and Christina Gilmartin. In the summer of 2000, I read and replied to letters sent to Isabel by boys and girls from local primary schools at Prosperity and, in the autumn of 2002, when Isabel was so worried about a local "troublesome" boy she asked me to call Prosperity to check in. I also remember when Yu Xiji recalled that she had to climb out of an attic window to open the door during a snowstorm at Toronto and that she loved cheese, or western *chou doufu* (smelly bean curd). And I will always remember the moments with Christina in her office checking notes and drafts and her last email to me, entitled "Bon Voyage." This book completes but does not end the journey of these dedicated scholars.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-world>

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