

Ellen Oxfeld *Drink Water, But Remember the Source, Moral Discourse in a Chinese Village*, University of California Press, 2010, p. XIX+292

Moonshadow Pond surely is not a place that readers, either Chinese or foreigner, would easily locate in China. A map in the book will tell you that it is not so far from Hong Kong, in the Meizhou area of Guangdong province, populated by Hakka, ethnic Chinese but with their identity and language. It is there that E. Oxfeld has conducted field work, mainly in 1995-1997, after a first visit in 1993, and other visits in 2006 and 2007. Remarkable long stays which enable her to write a lively account of life there, with particular interest on moral discourse. Persons she met become some kind of actors in the book. It is very well written, entertaining like a novel, but with an evident scholarly background. Thanks to these qualities, the book is to be recommended to a large public interested in other cultures than their own.

The subtitle of the book precise the aim of the research: moral discourse. With reference to other researches, Oxfeld explains that “[m]oral discourse ...is frequently about expectations...[m]y interest was in understanding these expectations in context.” (p.27) Interestingly, she notes also that criticism by pointing how duties have not been fulfilled express even more clearly the norms of what is expected. Now, the title of the books seems to encapsulate the paramount norm: remember what good has been done to you by whom, and express your gratitude with a reciprocating attitude toward benefactor. All the examples in the everyday life described along the chapters illustrate such a simple paradigm. But time was necessary to reach the conclusion and to see all its implications in at first not too clear or even paradoxical situations.

Ch.2 “*Liangxin*”, translated as “conscience”, is particularly useful: “*Lianxin* is therefore a quality of those individuals who *remember* their moral obligations and try to act on them”.(p.52) So there is such a thing as moral debt; but this seems to beg the question: What constitute a moral debt, and to whom? Ancestors enter the scene, and rite of funeral and yearly mourning festivals are the obvious manifestations of paying debt to those who have founded a lineage, and given life. Actually any act of goodness toward others link people as partners in the everyday life. Of course, counterexamples come easily to show people forgetting debts, or preferring *mianzi*, face, with a false note of show-off instead of moral feelings.

Return visits of parents having left the village with the Nationalist army, and living in Taiwan or elsewhere are loaded with moral dilemmas because different expectations render their visit, at least, ambivalent (see Ch.5). So, expectation appears more complex than the exchange of good-for-good. The same is confirmed in the following chapter on “Property Rights and Wrongs”. As for marriage (Ch.3) the

picture is colored by a “classic” role of women. Changes did occur since 1949, and contradictions sharpen facing the future. All the same, village mentality evolves slowly, especially among elder women.

The fieldwork was in a village, not very far from rapidly developing cities largely opened to the reforms. Although Oxfeld knows that and notes here and there the influence of economic transformations, she remains more interested in the conversations with people with no intention or possibility to work in factory. After all, she is interested in moral discourse in the village of Moonshadow Pond. She does not pretend to do more than that (p.11), even when she indicates parallels in other researches.

Social scientists doing fieldwork refrain from generalizing, but their method is liable to many misunderstanding when they publish the results of their inquiries. With reason the issue is not touched by Oxfeld, but caveat should perhaps have been repeated in the conclusion, where the case of Moonshadow Pond is offer only as an illustration. The “case” shows well that reciprocity remains high in the moral discourse despite major changes along recent decades. Reference to other studies would confirm that this is true elsewhere in China. Perhaps only the accumulation of observations allows tentative generalization.

A last remark. Moonshadow Pond is a Hakka village. The author has been introduced to the Hakka culture by specialists. She mentions quite briefly characteristics of these people, for example their hospitality. So question arises: If the Hakka have discernable characteristics, how are they manifested in their moral discourse? This would be an obstacle to generalization of the author findings. On the contrary, if no, or minor, specifics traits, can be found, moral discourse would not distinguish the Hakka from other Hans.

In this writing, E. Oxfeld seems to suggest that, concerning moral discourse, no big difference would be found; if this is here position, she could have say that more explicitly. But most readers do not need clear answer to these questions to learn much from the stories told with elegance, sympathy and intelligence in the chapters of the book, which contains also a good index, a long bibliography, a Chinese characters glossary, and in the pages simple, well chosen pictures. .