The Moral Worlds of Wealth and Poverty: Review Essay

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Anxious Wealth: Money and Morality Among China's New Rich, by John Osburg. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013. xii + 234 pp. US\$75.00 (hardcover), US\$22.95 (paperback and eBook).

The Specter of the People: Urban Poverty in Northeast China, by Cho Mun Young. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2013. xxiv + 208 pp. US\$69.95 (hardcover), US\$24.95 (paperback and eBook).

The ideas of wealth and poverty evoke radically different economic and existential conditions. But what do wealth and poverty have in common? They describe individuals as both economic and political beings, and are often used to explain individuals' grievances or, at least in China, to inscribe their existence in the developmental trajectory of the country or in the building of the nation. The terms depict seemingly objective states of being, but comprehension of these expressions is largely dependent upon relative subjective perceptions. The conditions of being poor and of being rich are also both deviations from an assumed normality or ideal—the perfect situation of collective relative wealth and freedom from want which is the shared goal of every modern nation and every legitimate government. Everyone has felt rich or poor at different stages; social groups experience mobility within or outside either category; and even international relations are driven by real or perceived differences in wealth between countries. Wealth and poverty, as much as class, have both objective and subjective dimensions. Their nature is defined not only by material resources but also by ideational and discursive strategies, and these are functions of the history that created them.

The deviant, abnormal character which all societies attach to wealth and poverty is better accommodated in modern political and cultural systems that internalize the idea that market and competition are the impartial judges of the distribution of prosperity. Nonetheless, even in such systems, the existence of abject poverty juxtaposed with extreme wealth is the most significant challenge to the (presumed) self-evident corollary that markets provide a “natural regulation”.

The rich and the poor sit even more uncomfortably in systems where this liberal view is inflected by the ethical concerns and normative discourses of

“socialism”. Of such systems, China is today a most prominent example. Here, the ideas of poverty and wealth, as well as the bodies of the rich and poor, provide ways to contest the guiding principles of redistribution. The argument that poverty or wealth are generated by the transition to a market economy, but also by corruption in the leadership and the uneven allocation of opportunities, presents a fundamental challenge to the credibility of the socialist ethics invoked by both old and new leaders. The existence of the rich, as much as that of the poor, challenges the intrinsic logic of socialism more fundamentally than it does with liberal ideologies.

These two books demonstrate how the ethics of wealth and poverty are constituent of both individual and collective “anxiety” over China’s contemporary condition and of the need, possibly more than in other parts of the world, to “historicize” conditions that otherwise risk being seen either as “natural” or as the mechanistic result of the introduction of market reforms.

The authors of these two books may think that their work has little in common, but reading them in tandem generated fertile thinking. The books’ protagonists differ greatly. One book narrates the stories of wealthy entrepreneurs and underworld brotherhoods in Chengdu; the other, the struggles of unemployed workers and rural migrants in Harbin. Yet they are remarkably comparable. Both books provide vivid and enjoyable reading and serious anthropological reflections on China’s contemporary society. They also feature the struggle of the rich and the poor to elaborate (and mobilize) an explanation of their condition, to “exist” in the discursive world of yet another “new China”. By doing so, both books examine the intersection of their subject’s moral and ethical concerns with the discussions of nation-building and the fragmented nature of multiple Chinese subjectivities.

Not all wealth is the same, and neither is all poverty. These books ask how ethics of wealth and poverty are disputed or hegemonic, local, national or global. Do they produce contested and divided ideas of the self, of social relations and of the nation? Does the anxiety generated by these conditions produce agency or acquiescence, and does the path, the history that brought people into wealth and poverty matter? Does it matter that the poor are the direct result of political decisions to deindustrialize and privatize the economy of China’s Northeast, or that wealth is the result of the construction boom and land grabs that followed deindustrialization?

John Osburg’s book, *Anxious Wealth*, approaches wealth through businessmen’s social activities in entertaining associates, which are undertaken to build reputations and which, in the process, redefine sexual, marital and extra-marital relations. Osburg’s embedded narratives about the lives of his informants yield a vivid storytelling that takes us deep into business circles, relationships and entertainment venues, and down into Chengdu’s underbelly.

Osburg’s main interest is in the intersection between wealth narratives, the social experiences that they describe and the rituals and practices of masculinity

and of sexual and marital relations. While we are faced with some disturbing evidence of the commercialization of relationships and of a constant attribution and recalculation of “value”, we can also not escape the feeling that being a wealthy entrepreneur, lover, husband or wife is “hard work”. The public face of wealth, the exhausting entertaining, the striving to enroll ever “better” lovers (with actresses attracting the highest “price tag” because of the benefit that they provide for a businessman’s image) to showcase instead of wives (whose role is reserved for family and non-business-related occasions) at public events appears as a comedy of performed business masculinity. The performative nature of this behavior seems clear to all of Osburg’s informants, both those who subscribe to it and those who criticize such practices as uncivilized.

The book analyzes what appear to be pre-packaged entertaining and consumption practices, a series of different rituals adapted to the differing needs of business deals, networking and acquiring social capital, all of which are central to the success or failure of a business enterprise. His informants engage in various forms of entertaining, the rituals of which need to be familiar to business people who see being skilled at this type of networking as a central concern of their work (“Entertaining Is My Job” is the title of the opening chapter). Entertaining takes different codified forms: the expression *goudui*,¹ for example, indicates ways to recruit a new acquaintance to one’s own network, typically with a utilitarian goal; “being social” (*yingchou* 应酬) indicates ways in which entrepreneurs showcase the reach of their power, the extent of their connections and wealth, for example by hosting events for national festivals or New Year celebrations; while “enjoyment” (*wan* 玩) suggests private amusement or entertainment with friends where business interests are not directly involved.

Even in what appears as an exposé of the worst practices of China’s new rich, however, Osburg finds a world of ethical concerns, uncovers the anxiety behind the practices, the tiredness, the apprehension that the precariousness of their situation requires an over-performance of both wealth and business ethics. Business wealth generates concerns both about its sustainability (how many of these characters will be fearful in the face of the current crackdown on wasteful business practices and corruption?), and about one’s identity, in a social environment where cultural references for affluence appear to be rapidly redefined, and where masculinity and femininity are increasingly demarcated as functions of wealth and power.

Reading Osburg’s book suggests that attempts to regulate the behavior of Party officials—for example, a recent central edict to forbid smoking in public by cadres—are more than manifestations of concerns for public health and the

1. The book does not reveal the Chinese characters for this expression, which I assume refers to the characters for “hook a partner” (勾对) rather than the homophone “mix wine and juices” (勾兑). Osburg says that the phrase is Sichuanese, but I have heard it elsewhere.

public image of the Party. They are deeply connected to the idea of civilizing both business practices and the bodies that perform them, especially when the interactions between the state and businesses become more frequent.

Osburg argues that the anxiety produced by the businessmen's "quest" for social recognition has "the potential to generate a new status-driven ethics" of business and social practices. The anxiety that features in the book's title originates, not only from the risks associated with doing business in a volatile environment, but also from the demand for continuous performance of the symbols of wealth that have become central features of successful business activities. The "haunting category" of the "upstart" (*baofahu* 暴发户), used to describe the uneducated new rich or those who have money but not "quality" (*suzhi* 素质), hangs over the heads of these wealthy individuals. Riches and success are not values *per se*; they are not enough to produce status. Their social worth is a function of the history of that wealth, and it will take an enriched peasant greater effort than the son of a local or national leader to conduct himself in the business world. For a businessman, his value and success is only as great as its ability to perform its status and to overcome the disadvantage deriving from the history of his enrichment. To free their status of this historical legacy, businessmen need to be *à la page* in the appropriate choice of venues, friendships and consumption and to participate in the "beauty economy" where "young women play a mediating role in projecting an idealized masculinity onto the men involved" (p. 10). In all this theatrical entertainment, masculinity is one of Osburg's main concerns, with wealth and success becoming the most significant benchmark of an all-round gendered identity that is profoundly associated with a social status.

The theme of historicization of poverty, and of the consequent need to investigate its specific practices rather than the general discourses, is central and explicit in Cho Mun Young's excellent *The Specter of the People: Urban Poverty in Northeast China*. This ethnography explores the condition and strategies of the "new poor" expelled from state-owned enterprises in the years of industrial restructuring in a district of the city of Harbin (Hadong). Cho focuses on the category of "the people" and on the powerful contestations produced by the variety of meanings attributed to this term in both official and private discourses. She shows that the workers' constant reference to the signifier of "the people" prevents them from "being entirely converted into 'numbers', that is into a regularized population without history" (p. 170). The historically constructed frames adopted by workers and by cadres infuse the everyday experiences of these communities, in ways that expose the contradictions between the ideology and the practices of poverty management, between the obsessive, rigid definition of the boundaries of poverty relief (and other governance goals) and the perceived need for a fluid and negotiated approach to governing. An inflexible definition of poverty pigeonholes the poor by hardening the boundaries of the category. Cadres, afraid of the consequences of violating their brief, police such boundaries strictly.

Rigidity, Cho shows, consolidates and perpetuates poverty, rather than creating a level playing field: for example, although owning a computer is considered a reason to be denied public subsidies, learning how to use it is crucial in finding a job and becoming independent.

For Cho, “the people” is a “floating signifier” that changes, depending not only on who appropriates it but also on social context. Urban workers expelled from the ailing state-owned factories of Hadong are therefore given “voice and leverage” by the regime’s long-standing commitment to “serve the people”, while their inexorable demise renders the meaning and scope of the signifier “people” increasingly contentious. In the process, not only poverty and the pursuit of wealth but also the very meanings of some fundamental questions are contextualized: whom is socialism supposed to serve, who can claim to belong to the category of those served, and what entitlements are to come with this belonging? The mobilization of a historically contingent category allows workers to frame their claims with reference to their contribution to socialism and the growth of the nation, and to the egalitarian tradition of Maoism, despite the current bankruptcy of the Maoist ideology. This interpretation, widespread among Cho’s informants, clashes with public attempts (by officials and public media) to attribute poverty to “dependency” and to Dongbei people’s ultimate lack of entrepreneurial spirit, as victims of the tragic mistakes of paternalist industrialism during the high tide of socialism.

“The people”, in Cho’s work, is a more fruitful category than “the poor” for deciphering the tales of Hadong workers, as it “reclaims the historicity of poverty” (p. 169). Here are parallels with Osburg’s work. Both books suggest that wealth has a politics, an ethics and a history, and that contestation and elaboration are not simply about possession or lack of wealth, but rather about entitlement to it, an entitlement which stems from long-experienced and deeply seated perceptions of ethics and morality. Such ethics and morality develop along multiple pathways. In Cho’s accounts, they allow for workers’ agency and calls for government action. We see cadres as trapped, both being “the people” and serving them—saved by their new role as public servants and government mouthpieces while they deal with being also workers expelled from the utopia of Communism. In Osburg’s work we see wealth, even extreme wealth, not being enough for the new rich. They must still invest time, energy and money in building a reputation, to defeat the “contingency” and the history of what appears to most as immoral gains.

Wealth and poverty present the same haunting dilemma to contemporary China. Can the history of the country’s distribution of wealth—entrenched in the perception and discourses of such categories as “poor” and “rich”—be reconciled both with the liberal techniques of governing that are widely at work in the country and with the ethical concerns that still modify such capitalist ideology? As Cho reveals, the myth of Maoist egalitarianism still provides powerful support

to the argument that China's government should serve "the people". This, albeit floating, idea of the people is the one that also holds the nation (and the regime) together. At the same time, while the history of impoverishment makes a moral case for saving China's working class, it also encourages liberal critiques of dependency and hails entrepreneurship and autonomy over dependency, and social skills and initiative over the pursuit of entitlement. At the other end of the spectrum, as shown in Osburg's book, the wealth resulting from extreme forms of such individualism and entrepreneurship has little historicized morality of its own and requires exaggerated performances to overcome the condescension of the more established power circles.

Both wealth and poverty are not simply a status but a condition. Their definition is a tool of government, a way by which both the rich and the poor, the "advanced classes" and "the people" are called upon to perform a role and take responsibility in the building of the nation, the former by seeking to conform to a civilizing role that justifies their possession of wealth, the latter by adapting to the ethics of the market and shedding the remnants of a life of egalitarian entitlements. Such demand to conform is one of the sources of the anxiety noted here, as much as it is one of the barriers to social mobility. Disgruntled workers, especially the middle-aged, women and unskilled workers, have fundamental difficulties adapting to the new demands (learning to type on a keyboard being one of Cho's example of the quotidian barriers to their conversion from workers to cadres). They thus rely on the collective power of the Maoist interpretation of "the people" to legitimize their claims. Entrepreneurs seek status by performing wealth, pushing the boundary of morality or trying to contest the moral hierarchy, in the search for status recognition.

As on so many other occasions before, it is from an ethnographic perspective that analytical categories are more likely to come unstuck. These books challenge the reach of the categories of "poverty" and "wealth". By focusing the gaze away from the issue of quantifying inequality that has dominated the discussion of wealth distribution in recent years, they show how the negotiation of morality is a central component of the daily struggle to accommodate both one's own condition and the expectations of the nation. The strict moral imperatives established in public discourses thus become an arena of contention, elaborated in daily tactics to achieve status or simply to maintain legitimacy in the face of adversity. Here other descriptors become more important than simply belonging to the economic strata of the poor or the rich (the people, the *baofahu*, the socialist worker, the skilled entertainer, the network-builder). Such categories are immersed in a much stricter, and more contested, set of ethical principles. For obviously different reasons and goals, both the rich and the poor need to engage with the morality of the historical roots of their condition. By doing so, they become active contributors to the re-writing of the meaning of wealth and poverty.

In this reinterpretation, both authors also call for an understanding of *suzhi* that goes beyond the most common interpretation of it as simply an expression of the dominant new neo-liberal paradigm. *Suzhi* is the arena of a struggle. The neoliberal ideas of entrepreneurship that should place wealthy Chengdu entrepreneurs at the peak of Chinese society do not in fact benefit them. Rather, these entrepreneurs battle to overcome the stigma that sees them as “by far the group most likely to be accused of possessing poor *suzhi*” (p. 189).

Similarly, and despite making up the formal socialist elite for generations, former workers who are recruited by the government to become community cadres are required to shed their “low *suzhi*” accumulated in years of dependency on the state, in order to be able to perform the role of mediator between the state and the discontented communities of Harbin. In other words, rather than being simply an expression of the new valuation of human subjects created by the capitalist reform, *suzhi* appears in both these books as a disciplinary category that contributes to restrain and direct new social groups into the new ethics of state capitalism and to integrate them fruitfully into a new order. Such governing practices lead to a moral order that is neither purely neoliberal nor staunchly socialist, but rather serves the goal of preserving social and political stability.

Finally, both books have a morality issue of their own, which is as much a part of the research methodology as it is an element of their argumentation. These close-to-the-ground observations necessarily produce an empathy that is both an inevitable and a significant part of the anthropological approach. Both authors become characters in their narratives. Osburg’s continuous interrogation of his own ethical dilemmas when doing research on shady-but-powerful characters and on their morally questionable practices call our attention to the fact that exploring unfamiliar moral and ethical worlds without pre-judging them is like walking on eggshells, trying to lighten the weight of the narrator’s own morality without losing his soul. Similarly, Cho’s investigation of the worker’s experience requires the capacity progressively to include in her narrative the operationalization of the state, especially when the “state” is embodied in the workers themselves, through long-lived experiences and floating descriptors like “the people”. While these are at times very intimate accounts, they project questions about poverty and wealth that are of universal significance.