

Culture

Norman A. CHANCE, *China's Urban Villagers: Life in a Beijing Commune*, Toronto, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984. 159 pages, \$12.80 (paper)

Ellen R. Judd



Volume 5, numéro 1, 1985

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078347ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078347ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie

ISSN

0229-009X (imprimé)

2563-710X (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Judd, E. (1985). Compte rendu de [Norman A. CHANCE, *China's Urban Villagers: Life in a Beijing Commune*, Toronto, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984. 159 pages, \$12.80 (paper)]. *Culture*, 5(1), 89–90. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078347ar>

Tous droits réservés © Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1985

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

Schwimmer, Strathern, Wagner, and Young, to name a few), but none of these figure in Watson's account. What we have is a pre-alliance theory view of what groupness and intergroup relations are all about.

It is no surprise that one ends up with contingency as a theme: relations founded on reciprocity are by definition conditional, promise must always be backed by performance. A comparative look at Melanesian societies suggests that, following Schwimmer, we might do better to account for the flux of social life in these terms. The shiftiness of loyalties and the readiness to realign and so on are less the products of breakdown forced by circumstance than consequences of a reliance on reciprocity as the governing mode of relationship.

In explanatory terms, the error lies in the attempt to account for a general phenomenon (the flexibility of reciprocal relationships) with recourse to something far more particular, the so-called "Ipomean revolution" in the New Guinea highlands. Watson seems to have been led to this by a no-nonsense empiricism only capable of apprehending social life as pragmatic behaviour, a stance aggressively paraded throughout the book. In the end, *Tairora Culture* must live with empiricism's strengths and weaknesses: a wealth of fine-grained details atomistically arrayed. Flying close to the ground, Watson cannot be accused of presenting an over-ordered account of Tairora society, and their status as *ad hoc* pragmatists is secure. But from this elevation all one can see is trees—the shape of the forest remains uncharted.

Norman A. CHANCE, *China's Urban Villagers: Life in a Beijing Commune*, Toronto, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984. 159 pages, \$12.80 (paper).

By Ellen R. Judd
St. Thomas University

The publication of an ethnography on China based on recent fieldwork is a very welcome addition to the available anthropological literature on China and on peasant societies in general. Access to the field in China is restricted to the extent that the two and a half months Norman Chance and his co-researchers were able to spend investigating a village (production brigade) in Red Flag Commune in 1979 was an unusually ample period of research.

The resulting ethnography, *China's Urban Villagers*, will be a valuable text in first courses on China or in introductions to peasant societies, although it offers almost nothing new to research on China or to the comparative study of either peasant or socialist societies. The strengths of the book are in its effort to give a vivid, human portrayal of contemporary life in a Chinese village and in its effort to indicate the lines through which the village is vertically integrated into the larger society of which it is part.

The date of the study—1979—is significant, as the current policies of dismantling the main structures of the rural collective economy were only beginning to be implemented and had not yet had a great impact on Red Flag Commune. The study is of a rural socioeconomic structure which could be seen as becoming a thing of the past even as the ethnography was being written. The original intent of the researcher to investigate China's non-capitalist road to development was consequently frustrated to a considerable degree. It is, however, fortunate that his research team was able to investigate a production brigade before the recent changes. Opportunities to research the new rural "responsibility system" are likely to become more common in the future. The slightly out-of-date quality of this ethnography may be viewed as one of its particular strengths. The author was well aware of the impending changes, and has usefully oriented some of his discussion to the issue of rural socioeconomic factors favouring either the changes or the retention of the collective structures.

What had been intended as a study of a qualitatively different mode of economic development, and in part remains such a study, shifted its emphasis to a study of more conventional modernization in a village near a major metropolis. If the particular issues of suburban rural life were not at the source of this study, Norman Chance has nevertheless done well to emphasize them by his choice of title. Despite the essentially rural milieu, the villagers whom he and his associates studied had very substantially greater involvement in a non-rural economy than do most Chinese villagers. The careful attention Norman Chance gives to the specificities of this situation are essential in distinguishing this quite atypical village.

The limitations of this study, valuable as it is, deserve mention in that they indicate some major problems confronted by anthropologists who undertake the study of complex societies in the modern world. Invariably such study requires that the anthropologist, oriented toward holism in the study of non-complex societies, find some means of

retaining a holistic view in a society too large and complex to accommodate itself to the traditional anthropological methods centred around the study of a small human community. *China's Urban Villagers* does commendably try to show links between village life and larger issues and policies in Chinese society, but never moves significantly beyond the limits of the village. Norman Chance has perhaps gone as far as he could in showing the vertical integration of a village into a larger society while remaining firmly rooted within a village study. It is necessary to reconsider that unit of research.

Problems also arise with source material. Norman Chance has relied upon his first-hand research, carried out with the aid of a tape recorder and interpreters, published sinological research in English, and the advice of sinological associates. I would question the value of a tape recorder as, in the Chinese context, it tends to ensure that one hears only "official" views, but this is not the major point to be made here. Research in a literate, complex society provides access to the "native model" of society through means not available in non-complex societies. The various forms of written material—indigenous research and social commentary, literary and artistic work, official policy documents, and so on—should all be used as well as whatever foreign scholarly material may be available. Even without a high level of competence in the Chinese language, much more use of material readily available in translation could have been made, and should be made in research in such societies.

Further, the comparative orientation of anthropology in investigating societies such as contemporary China can continue only through innovative means which may lead beyond the conventional bounds of anthropology. Norman Chance's concerns with researching a socialist road for development, at the time it was on the point of being dismantled, would have benefited from a familiarity with the literature on "actually existing socialism" which has arisen outside anthropology in addressing the problems of similar societies in Eastern Europe.

Christian POUYEZ et Yolande LAVOIE, *Les Saguenayens*, Québec, Presses de l'Université du Québec, 1983. 386 pages.

Par Brigitte Garneau
Université Laval

Rendre hommage à un peuple peut prendre bien des formes. Le collectif de Pouyez et Lavoie, avec la collaboration de Bouchard, Roy, Simard, St-Hilaire et la participation d'associées de recherche, d'étudiants, de techniciens, de professionnels de l'informatique et de secrétaires, en est un exemple remarquable qui fait ressurgir pour la région du Saguenay (Québec, Canada) une partie de son histoire collective, qu'elle soit amérindienne, blanche, ou autre. Cet ouvrage de démographie historique déborde largement le cadre de son mandat. Mise à part l'analyse de données permettant de reconstituer l'évolution du peuplement du Saguenay sur plusieurs siècles, de l'origine jusqu'à nos jours, il contient une comparaison des comportements démographiques de sa population avec ceux de quatre autres régions rurales (Bas St-Laurent, Lotbinière, Charlevoix, Joliette-Montcalm) et de deux villes de la Province de Québec (Montréal, Québec). De plus, il offre la possibilité de consulter des données de base chiffrées (état civil, effectifs des populations, taux bruts), annexées sous forme de microfiches insérées en pochette.

Le volume se répartit en huit (8) chapitres qui situent le cadre spatial (physique, géographique, administratif) de la région et les sources utilisées, et permettent de suivre diachroniquement (de 1526 à 1981) les fluctuations des populations saguenayennes laissant entrevoir certains changements futurs. Le texte est accompagné de très nombreux tableaux et figures, bien introduits, clairement lisibles et joliment présentés, comme l'ensemble de l'œuvre. D'ailleurs, la manière suivant laquelle sont cités auteurs et sources confère à cet ouvrage une sobriété que les études démographiques en général gagneraient à imiter.

La valeur du document tient davantage cependant à l'honnêteté rigoureuse dont les auteurs font preuve pour étayer leurs résultats et à leur cheminement systématique pour élaborer leurs hypothèses démographiques. Cette attitude se fait sentir dès le premier chapitre où ils exposent l'origine de leurs sources, les critères de sélection de leur échantillon comparatif, et les limites de la validité de leurs comparaisons. Du même coup, à les lire, on apprend qu'on ne s'improvise pas démographe,