

Land and Lineage in China Book Critique

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Dr. Hilary J. Beattie's 1979 historical study titled *Land Lineage in China: A Study of T'ung-Ch'eng County, Anhwei, in the Ming and Ch'ing Dynasties* presents strong argumentation, backed by rigorous research, that seeks to reconcile differences between marxist and traditionalist interpretations of upward mobility in late imperial China using sociological and historical approaches. Dr. Beattie uses a case study that follows a limited number of affluent families in the already wealthy county of T'ung-Ch'eng to convince the reader that upward and downward mobility existed for the top ten to twenty percent of the population in China. However, she asserts that overtime the wealthy families were able to establish their dominance to ensure that no gentry member fell to peasant status and that no peasant rose to gentry status. Despite the use of compelling sources, the historiography is weakened by its limited scope; namely its focus on a few affluent families in a single county.

Land and Lineage in China begins with a discussion of the arguments put forward by Chang Ying, a chin-shih degree holder and prominent official in the early Ch'ing era who argued for "the desirability of long-term investment in landed property."¹ The text then presents an overview of T'ung-Ch'eng county for background context. Dr. Beattie then chooses to dedicate a chapter to a discussion of taxation, labor service requirements, and how members of the Chinese gentry sought to push back against such policies. According to her, during the Ming era, wealthy Chinese gentry members were initially given exemptions from certain taxation because having one family member with a civil service degree granted every family member immunity.² In addition, local officials found tax collection from wealthy families to be difficult. However, when tax exemption law was modified so it would only apply to civil service degree holders and

¹ Hilary J. Beattie, *Land and Lineage in China A Study of T'ung-Ch'eng county, Anhwei, in the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties*, (Cambridge UK, Cambridge University Press, 1979), 2.

² *Ibid.*, 87.

not family members, the gentry ended up paying more in land tax.³ Around the same time, the government relaxed its enforcement of the mandatory labor service draft and thus, the families of gentry members could easily evade such drafts. Dr. Beattie claims that this trend favored gentry members overall as they preferred to be close to their land.⁴

Following this discussion, Dr. Beattie then delves into a summary of the Chang and Yao lineages; the lineage from which Chang Ying originates. The author states that the Changs migrated to T'ung-Ch'eng from Wa-hsieh-pa in Po-yang county, Kiangsi at the start of the Ming dynasty.⁵ Chang Ping was the ancestral patriarch who founded the fortunes of the Chang family. Generations later, the Chang family was producing a substantial amount of chin-shih degree holders, prominent officials (including governors), central Peking bureaucrats, grand-secretaries, and many more county and provincial-level degree holders. The Changs ended up intermarrying with the Yaos, another prominent family, several times.⁶ Dr. Beattie then broadens the discussion to lineage societies generally, as she describes how lineage organizations were structured, how heads were appointed, how they kept the Yamen at bay, and how they profited from their land holdings. Most importantly, Dr. Beattie describes how these lineage societies operated to keep notable families secured in the gentry class for many centuries.⁷

The greatest strengths of Dr. Beattie's historiography are the arguments presented and the quantity of evidence used to solidify her arguments. I particularly enjoy how she attempts to mediate the argument between traditional and marxist historiographical approaches on the subject of social mobility in late imperial China. In addition, I enjoy that Dr. Beattie makes a

³ Beattie, *Land and Lineage in China*, 86-87.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 88-89.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 90-96.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 111-120.

different argument in each chapter. For example, in the chapter on taxation, she argues that Ch'ing policies were somewhat effective at forcing the gentry to pay more in land taxes,⁸ while in the section on lineages, Dr. Beattie concludes that in the early Ming period there was a window for social mobility over several generations, which declined as the gentry became more entrenched.⁹

Furthermore, *Land and Lineage in China* is filled with strong sources, which help enhance Dr. Beattie's claims. The author uses lineage organization charts and records from the Board of Civil Service to back her assertions about the effectiveness of local lineage organizations. She also uses survey data, taxation information, land ownership documents, and reports written by T'ung-Ch'eng county magistrates every several decades to formulate her evidence-based hypothesis that shows how land ownership and lineage societies changed over time in China. For example, in Appendix II the author uses taxation and land ownership records to conclude that the land of T'ung-Ch'eng was productive.¹⁰ Additionally, Dr. Beattie compares data findings to backup Chang Ying's claim about land being the safest investment.¹¹ However, I am most impressed by her use of family genealogies as primary sources to drive her conversation on T'ung-Ch'eng county lineage organizations. Overall, the sheer amount of evidence that Dr. Beattie presents does convince me of her arguments as applied to T'ung-Ch'eng county.

Although I believe that *Land and Lineage in China* is a strong historiography, I do not think that the T'ung-Ch'eng lineage societies case study is representative of all Chinese gentry in early modern China. Thus, the limitation to just one county with a focus on a few strong families in that county does weaken Dr. Beattie's argument. The author does inform the reader that a

⁸ Beattie, *Land and Lineage in China*, 86.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 126.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 138-139.

country-wide study is impossible due to a lack of evidence.¹² However, I think that finding common trends in land ownership and lineage organizations across a few different counties would have improved the quality of the study. Another problem with choosing T'ung-Ch'eng county is that it was relatively wealthy.¹³ From what Professor Rowe discussed in class, I am aware that the circumstances for landowning gentry were either different or non-existent in poorer counties of the Ming and Ch'ing empire.

To me, the most fascinating subject brought up in *Land and Lineage in China* is the question of upward mobility in society. China from the Song until the collapse of the Ch'ing was, in theory, a meritocracy as there was no formal nobility and coveted governmental official positions were given to those who passed excruciating civil service exams. Classic Chinese texts such as *The Great Learning* were major subjects on these exams. However, Dr. Beattie argues that powerful lineage societies ensured that those only in the gentry had some social mobility but didn't fall into the peasant classes.¹⁴ My personal perspective on the issue of upward mobility in China mirrors some of the views presented by Dr. Beattie. I agree with her assessment that it was virtually impossible for a peasant family to allocate scarce resources to preparing their smartest son for the civil service exam and, as such, social mobility for individuals was rare. However, based on the evidence in the book, and what Professor Rowe discussed in class, I think that upward social mobility existed in the Ming and Ch'ing empires for families, and that social uplift from peasant status to prominent gentry did take several generations. However, in a society that valued the family over the individual, this type of social mobility must have appealed to hard-working peasants. This is especially true in the high Ch'ing era between Kang Xi's and

¹² Beattie, *Land and Lineage in China*, 20-25.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 138.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 128-132.

Qianlong's rule, where commerce was booming, government policies were helping tenants, and for some parts of China, there might have been opportunities for peasant families to acquire prestige over generations.¹⁵

Finally, I would like to discuss *Heng-ch'an so-yen (Remarks on Real Estate)* by Chang Ying, as Dr. Beattie often alludes to his work and leaves a translation of it in appendix III of *Land and Lineage in China* for the reader. Chang claims that for purposes of stability and prosperity, one must invest in the land above all else as "even though the emperor might change, the landowners [remain] as before."¹⁶ In addition, he argues that land cannot be stolen and is the only permanent item a family possesses.¹⁷ He refers to land as "a commodity which even after a hundred or thousand years is always as good as new;" all other objects "invariably become old."¹⁸ Throughout *Land and Lineage in China*, Dr. Beattie proves that Chang is correct. I agree with Chang about the stability of land ownership; however, I will note that Chang being a descendant of an influential family and being raised in an environment that values filial piety does present a potential source of bias. Chang's bias manifests when he states "if you sow thinly you will reap a meagre harvest but if you nourish the land generously then you will get a generous return," implying that external factors such as weather aren't concerns for farmers.¹⁹ This bias, in my opinion, could lead Chang to understate some problems with land ownership such as uncultivable land, or government seizure of property. Furthermore, even during the Ch'ing dynasty, engaging in commerce did help the wealthy and thus, could be understated by Chang.

¹⁵ He Yang, "Land and Peasants in Late Imperial China: An Economic Analysis," Mason Archival Repository Service, 2013, ,15-18.

¹⁶ Beattie, *Land and Lineage in China*, 140.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 141-142.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁹ Beattie, *Land and Lineage in China*, 144.

Overall, Dr. Beattie makes compelling arguments about the importance of land ownership and about how gentry maintained their influence for centuries. These arguments are backed by strong primary sources and quantitative analysis of the financial trends in T'ung-Ch'eng county. Furthermore, while I believe that T'ung-Ch'eng county is not a representative case study of all Chinese gentry in the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties, Dr. Beattie did provide meaningful and valuable insights about the social conditions within the county that she surveyed.

Bibliography

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