

11-1-2013

## Caizhen Lu. Poverty and Development in China: Alternative Approaches to Poverty Assessment. Routledge Contemporary China Series, 74. New York: Routledge. 2012.

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### Recommended Citation

Blumenfield, Tami Ph.D. (2013) "Caizhen Lu. Poverty and Development in China: Alternative Approaches to Poverty Assessment. Routledge Contemporary China Series, 74. New York: Routledge. 2012.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 4: No. 2, Article 17.

DOI: 10.62608/2158-0669.1159

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol4/iss2/17>

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**Caizhen Lu. *Poverty and Development in China: Alternative Approaches to Poverty Assessment*. Routledge Contemporary China Series, 74. New York: Routledge. 2012.**

Through a meticulous examination of four distinct approaches to identifying people living in poverty, Caizhen Lu offers a trenchant critique of existing strategies without solving the conundrum of how poverty should be assessed. While a generally accepted standard for poverty by Chinese people involves having “no food to eat and no clothes to wear” (p. 25), developing more precise definitions of poverty has proven elusive. After introducing some basic approaches used worldwide, Lu discusses how a combination of opaque decision-making processes and quotas passed down from higher levels of government to village, township, and county officials results in capricious, ever-changing lists of exactly how many villagers and which households are officially poor. By the time her study concluded in 2006, the exercise had yet to result in any specific poverty alleviation efforts or fund distribution, but a vague idea that it might in the future made people eager to receive this designation. On the governmental level, as Guo Xiaolin demonstrated in her 2008 book, *State and Ethnicity in Southwest China*, poverty designation has itself become a development strategy sought by counties in Yunnan (and presumably beyond).

Lu, who is currently a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Sciences’ Kunming Institute of Botany, does not engage in a theoretical discussion of how the concept of poverty has been constructed or how certain societal structures have contributed to the widening inequality in Yunnan, though she does thoroughly define the terms with which she engages. She is focused squarely on what strategies for assessing poverty prove effective in what settings, as well as what respective strategies leave out. As she writes, “The application of a classification system is always arbitrary” (p. 18). After reading about her guilt over conducting a focus group with villagers who expect some concrete action in return for their time, an expectation Lu is forced to dash as she explains that hers is a pure research project not directly tied to policies or projects (p. 145), one can understand her relentless focus on how to improve poverty assessment strategies and thus better target interventions to those who need them most. Nevertheless, a broader theorization of poverty and development, one that critiqued the assumptions surrounding these concepts, (as do the works of Arturo Escobar (1994) and many others) would strengthen the book. As it currently reads, the idea that some people should be defined as poverty-stricken over-emphasizes deficits rather than strengths—though Lu does discuss the dynamism of poverty and argues that governments can eliminate it if they so choose (though they rarely do) (p. 20). The book draws heavily on poverty studies and development literatures, including a wide range of Chinese language sources; incorporating key arguments from less applied fields would further improve it.

This limitation notwithstanding, Lu does an admirable job of designing and carrying out her research. Yunnan is a good place to study poverty (10% of China’s poor are in Yunnan), and by focusing on a single administrative village as her study site in Wuding County (part of Chuxiong Yi Nationality Autonomous Prefecture and a nationally-designated poor county), Lu is able to test four distinct methods for identifying impoverished households. The study site, with a mix of Yi, Han, and Miao people living in five natural villages, is not the most marginalized area in Yunnan. In fact, the rationale for studying poverty here is less than convincing, and one suspects that in addition to its relatively difficult living conditions, other factors motivated its choice as research site. Nonetheless, Lu argues that looking into perceptions of poverty where it is not extreme is as appropriate as examining poverty in its most extreme locations (p. 58).

First, Lu analyzes the official poverty identification method. Haphazard at best and meaningless at worst, this method results in wildly variable numbers of poor households. Lu convincingly demonstrates that the process is thoroughly politicized: “The poverty standard is arbitrary and political” (p. 18); “when the quotas increase, more people are poor” (p. 73); and the entire project results in “largely fictitious poor lists” (p. 83). In the next chapter, she explores the monetary poverty approach that uses a poverty line to judge household poverty rates. A strength of her analysis is that while analyzing the monetary approach, she compares a variety of poverty lines: the numerical Chinese state poverty line; a version of the state poverty line derived from local prices for staple goods; the World Bank standard line (now \$1.25 US per day); and interestingly, a basket of goods perceived by locals to be necessary for basic sustenance, which she calls “the local people’s poverty line” (p. 95). After defining these various poverty lines, Lu employs a team of villagers and teachers to survey all 473 households in the study area and determine who falls within what line. (As Lu herself admits, the survey administration is not without its own problems, something that she discusses as a limitation of this very labor-intensive method for large-scale efforts to identify those affected by poverty [p. 113].) Not surprisingly, different poverty lines yield different results of poor and “low-income” households.

Next, Lu examines results from a series of participatory poverty assessments she conducted. Once again, the methodology is impressive: she meets separately with villagers divided by age and gender; thus, she meets with female schoolchildren and elderly men, for example. (Her meetings in the villages where Yi and Miao live seem to have been less specifically defined, one of several examples that made this reviewer wonder about the effectiveness of her approach to ethnicity in the study. For example, she explains that diverse natural conditions combined with ethnic minority identity are a reason for widespread poverty in Yunnan [p. 42], and she uncritically uses the word “backward” when discussing minority practices [p. 47]). Her reports about the villagers’ own ideas about poverty form one of the richest parts of the book, although even more qualitative information would have further enriched this section. After taking into account overlaps in households identified as poor or low-income by the various groups, Lu demonstrates that the participatory poverty assessment identifies a wholly different set of households than either of the two preceding methods. Finally, Lu discusses how multidimensional poverty indicators, coupled with participatory wealth rankings, offer an efficient yet people-centered alternative to the preceding methodologies. Here, a wide variety of factors are used to determine which households qualify as poor, and once again, a separate set of households is identified.

Lu is clearly an advocate of increased participation and the expanded use of participatory methods, but to her credit, she does not suggest that participatory methods should be universally adapted. They are difficult to compare; crafting nationwide policies drawing on them would be challenging at best, inappropriate at worst. She argues instead that poverty alleviation efforts by state agencies and NGOs should undertake their own assessments of poverty, choosing the most appropriate assessment tool based on the desired targets to avoid “leakage” (p. 201). For example, efforts focused on expanding education—though relatively few of these, or other long-term, non-income-generating ways of addressing poverty, for that matter, exist in this area, something that comes in for critique by Lu—should be preceded by participatory and/or multidimensional indicator poverty assessments that identify those most in need of educational interventions. Lu also points out the danger of relying on specific approaches to measuring poverty, namely that doing so can actually influence behaviors: households may combine or split up to receive greater shares of compensation when the household is the unit of distribution. In India, the Below

Poverty Line measurement has contributed to households postponing purchases or investments that may have benefited them in order to be best positioned to receive state assistance (p. 179). Similarly, Lu warns of the *deng, kao, yao* (waiting for, depending on, and asking for assistance) mentality of dependency that poverty alleviation programs can engender (p. 74).

While its detailed statistical analyses—including 15 figures, 47 tables, and a 36-page appendix with survey questions and additional tables—demonstrate the thoroughness of Lu’s work, some problems with its structure and content detract from its overall quality. First, as the chapters move forward, one becomes increasingly aware of repetitive sections and redundant paragraphs. Each of the four chapters describing the various poverty assessments (Chapters 4-7) concludes with “reflection(s) on the exercise.” These reiterate points made during preceding sections of earlier chapters, and as the book nears its conclusion—which again restates points made in these chapters—this repetition, combined with a blur of statistics that otherwise enrich the study, begins to dull the prescience of the author’s assessments. Second, significant changes to the provision of welfare benefits and rural income assurances have taken place since the author’s fieldwork concluded in 2006. To take two examples, the Chinese government has now implemented the “Two Exemptions, One Subsidy” policy to reduce barriers to school attendance at the primary and junior secondary levels. This policy, which significantly alters families’ educational burdens, was not mentioned at all in the text. (Its implementation date varied, but in most areas of western China it was widespread well before 2010.) Second, discussion of the “Basic Guarantees” policy, which directs cash transfers to elderly, disabled, and other particularly needy villagers, was referenced in passing only once. These were curious omissions in an otherwise comprehensive study of poverty policies published in 2012.

Overall, however, the fascinating results that Lu presents as she systematically compares the four methods of poverty assessment make this book a valuable contribution to studies of poverty in China and studies of poverty assessment practices worldwide. As Robert Chambers writes in the foreword, “After this book, unless its readership is restricted by price, there is no excuse for any lack of reflexivity about approaches, even less for methodological monoculture” (xviii-xix). *Poverty and Development in China* is thus highly recommended reading for those looking for a baseline understanding of poverty in China and for development practitioners ready to be challenged about the superiority of any one tool for assessing poverty, for only four of the 473 households studied by Lu attain impoverished status using all four tools (p. 191). The very idea of poverty as something to attain, as opposed to something to alleviate, is an intriguing phenomenon that deserves further investigation, a task that should be facilitated by Lu’s excellent study.

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