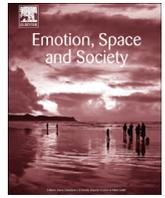




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Book review

Stresserleben, Emotionen und Coping in Guangzhou, China: Mensch-Umwelt-Transaktionen aus Geographischer und Psychologischer Perspektive (Stress Experiences, Emotions and Coping in Guangzhou, China: Person-Environment-Transactions from a Geographical and Psychological Perspective), Anna Lena Bercht. Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart (2013). 1 and 445 pp. EUR 64.00 paperback, ISBN: 978-3-515-10403-6

This ambitious work by Bercht, written in German, focuses on experiences of stress, emotions and coping in Guangzhou, China. It is the 8th Volume in the book series entitled *Megacities and Global Change*. Guangzhou, the third largest city in China, with a population of 10 million, situated in the Pearl River Delta near Hong-Kong, is undergoing an unprecedented and rapid transformation via economic growth and urban expansion. The focus of the book is Shibi Village, situated in the peri-urban area of Guangzhou, the site of the Guangzhou South Railway Station. The Guangzhou government is developing this area to become one of the most important transportation hubs in China by building the largest railway passenger station in Asia. This setting of dramatic change makes it a convincing case study with which to deepen understandings of stress, how local residents and migrants cope, and person-environment-transactions from a geographical and psychological perspective.

The first half of the book offers an excellent literature review of person-environment relations, stress and coping (an index section would make it more helpful), while the second half gives great insights into the lives of village residents amid globalization. A qualitative interpretive research design is used to investigate the different person-environment transactions. The study involved 71 interviews with 62 participants of both genders and different ages, focusing on people with low education level and income. The interviews ranged from short interviews to narrative interviews with auto-photography; photographs taken by participants to illustrate their perceptions of their village. Such photographs were supplemented with photographs taken by the author enabling the reader to picture the conditions described in the text.

The first part of the book presents the methodological and theoretical framework of the research. In so doing, Bercht analyzes the conceptual limitations of an interactional approach that treats person and environment separately, and the empirical limitations of a transactional approach that poses challenges in identifying variables. Bercht uses the interactional approach in data collection, but the transactional approach in her analysis, which conceptualizes person and environment as inseparable. In this section of the book, Bercht also focuses on stress, coping and resilience, she also draws on the work of Lazarus (1999), where stress is considered a transaction. Using this approach, stress is viewed as a relationship between a person and the environment (as opposed to merely a response ('an organism' (Selye, 1956))) or as a stimulus ('an

event/environment' (Holmes and Rahe, 1967)).

Chapter four introduces the village of Shibi in Guangzhou Southern China. Located about 10 miles south of the city center of Guangzhou, Shibi, is rapidly changing, due to the construction of the South Railway Station, from a rural setting of agricultural landscapes and traditional buildings to an increased urbanization of modern multistory buildings, roads and railways. Consequentially village residents are faced with the dispossession of their land (which is technically state owned), loss of their traditional livelihood as farmers, and a large influx of migrant workers. Additional concerns of local residents (Chapter 6.1.1) include corruption by the village committee suspected of diverting funds meant for investment in the village and compensation to the residents; and the loss of their *Heimat* or homeland due to the rapid changes in physical and social changes. Concerns shared by local residents and migrants (Chapter 6.1.2) include: resettlement marked by the uncertainty of if and when it will happen; the education of their children deemed necessary as key to participating in modern China, but competitive and costly; water quality particularly that of well water suspected of being compromised through increased industrialization; and increased crime rates. The main concerns of migrants themselves (Chapter 6.1.3) include: the children they left behind; homesickness; and obtaining a residency permit. Their status as non-locals requires continued residency permission whilst being ineligible for benefits from the local government such as health insurance and free education for their children.

The author not only identifies the common potential stressors to residents and migrants, but also identifies that how they are experienced depends on the person, and their resources. For example, land dispossession (Chapter 6.1.1) for an aged farmer for whom farming is his livelihood – but also a central part of his identity – is impacted more strongly than some younger farmers. Young farmers may be able to switch their occupation to meet the demands of the changing environment, whether seeking employment in construction, investing in kiosks or in rental apartment buildings serving the migrant population. Such investments hinge on the availability of resources, such as access to capital via personal savings, help from family members, or bank loans, and personal connections (*guanxi*).

While this research concerns specific people in a specific place in a specific time, the themes relate to general phenomena happening globally in emerging economies. While various coping mechanisms were presented that allowed residents to deal with their situations (p. 387), the overall findings paint a depressing picture, as there seems little that the villagers can do in the sense of resistance and influencing the outcome of their village.

Bercht acknowledges the difficulty in judging effective and ineffective coping, particularly under much uncertainty and institutional amphibiousness. The ambivalent character of institutions with arbitrary enforcement and non-enforcement of laws make it

difficult to tell the outcome of investments in illegally constructed apartment rental buildings, for example. At the same time Bercht attempts to differentiate protective and risk factors (p. 404). There she favors realistic optimism and positive emotions over pessimism and negative emotions. I would argue that defensive pessimism and negative emotion could work as protective factors and as an impetus for action and change. Defensive pessimism and negative emotion on a collective level can be particularly powerful when organized (e.g. mass action-to protect the land or demand fair compensation).

As Bercht situates her research within the emotional turn in Geography, she also draws on a rich literature from different disciplines on emotions that relates to the interest of this present journal. In my opinion, rather than extensively drawing on Luhmann's (1984) often abstract and vague system theory, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems approach would have provided a more tangible and useful framework, as it identifies and integrates various systems of the environment. However, overall the book provides an interesting and detailed case study of the

processes of rapid urbanization process in a peri urban environment and the psychological impacts this has on its residents.

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23 June 2017