

Wu Xiujie, *Ein Jahrhundert Licht: Eine technikethnologische Studie zur Beleuchtung im chinesischen ländlichen Alltag*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag (Alltagskulturen Chinas und seiner Nachbarn / Everyday Cultures in China and its Neighboring Countries, 2), 2009, 249 pp.

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This book is the author's doctoral dissertation at the Freie Universität Berlin. It was written in the framework of a research program on "History and ethnology of Chinese everyday culture" under the direction of Mareile Flitsch. Like many works in this series, which includes theses by project members upon such subjects as the oven-bed *kang*, fishing boats and worker's songs in Tibet, clothing during the Cultural Revolution, and eating habits of migrants in Shanghai, this is a truly pioneering work.

Studies and policy papers that discuss the electrification of Chinese rural areas invariably enumerate data relating to access to power supply in the period since 1949, largely building on official figures and policy statements. Even if some also question the "truth behind the numbers," and also mention everyday-life practices of the use of electricity, the focus is rather on norms and top-down policies.¹

Yet this book prominently portrays practices concerning lighting in daily life. This not only concerns electric light, but all other known types of illumination as well. The author, an ethnographer trained in China and

¹ Peng Wuyuan and Pan Jiahua, "Rural Electrification in China: History and Institutions," *China and World Economy*, vol. 14, 2006, pp. 71-84; Pan Jiahua; Peng Wuyuan, Li Meng et al., "Rural Electrification in China 1950-2004: Historical processes and key driving forces," Working Paper 60, December 2006, at the website of the Stanford University Program on Energy and Sustainable Development, Center for Environmental Science and Policy, http://iis-db.stanford.edu/pubs/21292/WP_60_rural_elec_china.pdf [last access 2015.09.01]; Poon, Chun Yu Jonathan, "Behind the Numbers: The Chinese Vision of Electrification," Columbia University China Sustainability Project, Policy Brief Series, 2015, http://cgsd.columbia.edu/files/2015/02/China-Sustainability-Project_Policy-Brief-Series_2-1-15.pdf [last access 2015.09.01].

Germany, divides her book into five large parts. These treat the perception of light in literary, historical and contemporary sources, incorporating oral evidence gathered in interviews made during her fieldwork trips in North China. She discusses the material culture of pre-modern and modern lighting devices, socioeconomic perspectives of lighting in the twentieth century, present-day common use of lighting, and the perception of light and lighting devices as metaphors in popular and elite beliefs and in literature. As can be seen from this structure, this is a multi-perspective approach, firmly grounded in ethnography, but with extensions into several large fields of learning.

In her critical observations on sources and methods, the author has taken care to give an overview of worldwide research on the material culture of lighting, referring to studies by Wolfgang Schivelbusch on artificial lighting since the nineteenth century, Viktoria Arnold's work on the history of electrification in Austria, and Brigitte Steger's book on Japanese sleeping habits. However, it is Jan Garnert's studies on the use of light in Sweden have inspired her most of all.

The book starts out with historical information on the material aspects of lighting. Here, the author argues that the first lamps found as funerary items, mainly from the Han, were cherished as ritual objects rather than for their functional value. The famous Dou Wan lamp, excavated in 1968 from the tomb of the Western Han prince Liu Sheng, is a case in point. Obviously this lamp was used for preparing alchemical elixirs rather than for illumination (p. 79). The function of lighting came to be appreciated in later epochs. The author refers to "light," "enlightenment" and "illumination" as metaphors in Buddhism, and that the act of lighting a lamp can be considered to be a good deed according to the text *Randeng wen* 燃燈文 "Lighting the lamp," an example of the Tang period texts found in Dunhuang 敦煌. Moreover, Buddhist monks integrated the original ceremonial use of lamps into temple ceremonies. The author further finds that in lyrical texts from the Tang and Song references to lamps increase enormously, and convey notions of individual emotions, both of homeliness and loneliness. She assumes that lamps became more everyday items when people found out how to press oil from seeds and use the oil for lighting, in about the third century AD. The production of candles using beeswax and insect wax existed, but they were expensive and mainly used in well-to-do households. Issues of technical history are covered in great detail, with comments on all types of fuels (animal and plant fats) for lamps and candles, and typologies of lamp models.

The author's intention with this study was to give an account of the living circumstances of her parent's generation, who lived in rural North China, and to include country life and survival into the field of academic research. She does not use her actual home locality, but Dingzhou or Ding-

xian, a place that became famous through Sidney Gamble's, Li Jinghan's and James C. Yen's pioneering social surveys on rural North China.² She thus aptly links up to local social history, and her fieldwork reports on visits and participatory observation in two villages in Dingzhou are among the highlights of this book. I was fascinated by descriptions of sesame oil making (p. 98-102). As she engages in a dialogue with the oil making master, who ponders whether or not to reveal his professional secrets, the author also carefully reflects on the work of the ethnographer, and the value of information gained with methods of interviews and participatory observation.

Lamps burning seed oil were in continuous use in North China for many centuries, and households always had the dilemma of whether to use the scarce oil they had for eating or for lighting. Change came with introduction of petroleum in the twentieth century. Petroleum offered a respite from this problem on the one hand, but Wu Xiujie rejects the idea that marketing strategies for petroleum were more efficient, or that this fossil fuel had any other advantage—she refers to “better quality of lighting,” “better price performance” and “better marketing strategies” as the “three myths about petroleum.” Petroleum lamps, promoted by the mostly foreign oil companies, became scarce in the North China market during the war years, and after 1950 made a comeback. However, since petrochemical products were strictly rationed, it was replaced and abolished for good after electricity was introduced. This was a gradual, politically charged process, since electricity was meant to symbolize technical progress. Moreover, as many other studies on electrification also show, even if electric power supply was available for a village, this did not mean that every household had access to the new technology. Although between 1960 and 1973 there was a continuous *per capita* rise in the electricity supply, actual consumption was quite uneven, and pricing policies were chaotic. Wu Xiujie also reminds the reader that in these years, lighting was the only household use of electricity. The data she offers, even if they only show statistical averages, powerfully convey the very limited supply of electricity in the early period of the People's Republic of China. To quote just a few samples of data, a prognostication in the year 1974 was that in the year 1980, every household would use 35 kWh of electricity. If two 15 Watt bulbs were lit simultaneously, this would result in 3.27 hours of lighting

² *Ting Hsien: A North China Rural Community*, ed. by Sidney Gamble, foreword by Y.C. James Yen, field work directed by Franklin Ching-han Lee, New York: International Secretariat, Institute of Pacific Relations, 1954; Li Jinghan 李景漢, *Dingxian shehui gaikuang diaocha* 定縣社會概況調查 (Social Survey of Dingxian), Beijing: Zhonghua pingmin jiaoyu cujinhui, [1933].

per day—and even this conservative forecast proved to be illusionary. The data she could investigate during her fieldwork (in 2003 and 2004) in a village of 1,077 households were that middling families consumed about 30 kWh during the month of December, using two bulbs, one TV set and one water pump. At the lower end, eight percent of households used less than 1 kWh per month, which means that they had one bulb of 15 Watt and no other electric devices. Five percent of households used 1 to 5 kWh. And yet, even back in the 1970s, on special days, electric light was applied in what seemed wasteful abundance, such as on New Year's Eve or the Lantern Festival. The author describes in detail her childhood memories of New Year's Eve, when the family's two "big bulbs" of 200 Watt each were taken out and lit for one whole night, to be stored in the closet for the next big event.

Lighting also had gender perspectives, since in the traditional mode, the seeds for producing traditional edible oil were often grown by women at the margins of the fields, and women also decided when to light which lamp. By contrast, petroleum had to be bought and electricity acquired in more complex procedures from which women were usually excluded. Moreover, women were rarely trained to be electricians, if at all. On the other hand, the traditional literature discusses the quality of needlework and characters written at night without light.

The fourth and fifth part of the book, dealing with consciousness and perception of light, are of particular interest for their perspective on the *topoi* of light and lamps in popular literature.

As a word of critique, one may wonder why the title promises "a century of light," when actually it goes back much further in time. Here and there it also wanders off into (equally interesting) topics that are less pertinent to lighting. That said, the book has achieved marvelously its goal to bring rural North China back into the limelight of academic research—where Dingzhou in particular has stood for a long time. It is therefore a particularly useful sequel to the English language and Chinese social surveys of the 1930s. Moreover, this case study qualifies as an excellent source of information and analysis for social, economic, and technical history. An English translation would be very desirable. Given its appeal and clarity, it will be useful to academic research as well as for the general audience.

Perusing this study will raise the reader's awareness about the use of light and electricity elsewhere in the world. It does not do so in an obtrusive or pedagogical manner, yet the issue of access to light and electricity in rural China gives rise to immediate questions of comparison and global inequality. It is unlikely that the reader will switch off the reading lamp in the same manner after studying this book as when first opening its pages.