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**Review: Jacob Eyferth, Eating Rice from Bamboo Roots: The Social History
of a Community of Handicraft Papermakers in Rural Sichuan, 1920–2000**

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Jacob Eyferth, *Eating Rice from Bamboo Roots: The Social History of a Community of Handicraft Papermakers in Rural Sichuan, 1920-2000*, Cambridge (Mass.) and London: Harvard University Press (Harvard East Asian Monographs 314), 2009, 334 pp.

Mareile Flitsch

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Would not anyone opening a book on crafts expect it to also tell one about the skills of craftsmen? As the current anthropological debate on apprenticeship shows, it is not that easy to talk and write about skill. Academics tend rather to be interested in knowledge, technical ways of doing things, tools or matter, and strategies of solving social or economic problems. It is much less common for social scientists to talk about skill, “as a system of embodied orientations” (p. 17), about what makes a craft special, what needs socio-technical knowledge, and what needs to be transmitted.

For some years now, though, we have witnessed a publication-productive practical turn in Western studies on China, as a result of which modernisation processes gradually emerge in their many facets of transformations of the material texture of the everyday, of gradual and often non-synchronous changes in quotidian knowledge and work. With his study on the life-world of Sichuan papermakers, Jacob Eyferth adds a particular perspective to this field. In focussing on the skills and practical knowledge of these local craftspeople, he is able to concretise in which way the larger historical processes of the transformation of Chinese everyday life, as well as that of peasants into citizens of the nation-state in twentieth-century China, implies – as Eyferth puts it – “skill-extraction” that led to “a massive transfer of technical control from the villages to the cities, from primary producers to managed elites, from women to men” (p. 2).

The book under review puts skills at the centre of its focus, talks about the negotiation of the value of skills, and about the transformation of a particular skill-scape in the modernisation process in twentieth-century China. A community of craftsmen and papermakers is presented as a com-

munity of “skilled practitioners”, those who know how to make paper from bamboo, who think and act in their world in terms of papermaking, who know that this is hard work, that this needs enduring patience, and know how it is linked to grain. They know the consistency and smell of pulp, and know about vats or about what the wall feels like on which the paper is spread to finally dry. All throughout the book the reader has a skill perspective in mind. He or she waits for the word skill to appear, learns to contemplate the fate of papermakers in terms of what becomes or has become of their skills, and grasps an idea of how it must feel when skills become obsolete, fragmented, when they get lost, or when decision-making institutions simply lack appropriate insight and implement political strategies that run counter to the skilled papermakers.

Practical knowledge of craftsmen has found an interest among literati throughout Chinese history, especially so from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards. Economists, chroniclers, historians and technical painters, as well as early Western-trained engineers, took an interest in tools, machines, production processes, production statistics, workshop organisation and the like. In passing they also noted religious issues, and perhaps even the family and kinship structure on which workshop organisation was based. This practical turn, thanks to which practical knowledge in China was written down, preserved – the word “extracted” seems odd to us here –, depicted and photographed, was one expression of Chinese reactions to Western scientific discourse, as well as to modern technologies of reproduction of knowledge. This practical turn relates to what Eyferth calls the process of “skill extraction”. He seems to include an emic perspective of the papermakers, who have always been aware of the risks if outsiders knew too much about the skills crucial to their craft. For a couple of reasons – explained in this book – such “skill extraction”, an intense interest in studying and recording manual papermaking technology for purposes of reform initiatives and industrialisation – culminated in Republican times and in the 1950s.

In his book, Eyferth starts from the texts – and thus extracted knowledge – of literati and scholars to look at the transformation of the life-world of Chinese craftsmen from the late nineteenth through the twentieth century, marked by the end of Imperial China (chap. 2), the Republic of China between 1911 and 1949 (chap. 3), the founding of the PRC in 1949 with the Great Leap Forward, the famine, and the Cultural Revolution in the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s (chap. 4-6) and the economic reforms since the 1980s (chap. 7-9). This latest era, by the way, was the stage of the story at which Eyferth pursued his interviews in Sichuan. He was confronted with some of the logical consequences of this – potentially being identified with “spies” regarding a now precious manual technology, witnessing a

revival of religious practice, witnessing discourse on the new situation and reflections on change and times gone by, and facing a lack of archival materials due to the destruction of archives in times of civil war and the Cultural Revolution. (pp. 18-19)

In focussing on “the material and the everyday” (p. 1) in village China at work, Eyferth takes the example of papermakers in rural Sichuan as the background for telling the story of a crucial yet under-researched transformation of the workplace in China. It resulted, as he puts it, in a “redistribution of skill, knowledge and technical control” (p. 2).

Jacob Jan Karl Eyferth, currently professor of Chinese history at the University of Chicago, trained as an historian and sinologist in Berlin, Leiden, Hangzhou and Oxford, has worked at the Fairbank Center for East Asian Studies, at Rutgers University and at Simon Fraser University – and, by the way, also trained as a carpenter before turning to academia. Well-equipped by these backgrounds, he has gathered data from intensive archival research, and field interviews and on-the-spot information among Sichuan papermakers between 1995 and 2004. He gives an account of the social history of papermakers in twentieth-century China, developing his interpretation of their history in nine chapters and an elaborate conclusion, in a well-produced book furnished with a Chinese character list for selected names and terms, a comprehensive bibliography and an index.

Eyferth situates his study methodologically between history, social history, economic history, phenomenology, cognitive sciences and anthropology of technology. This enables him to develop his own approach to the papermakers’ community of practice and skill, as such communities of shared knowledge were, in particular ways, hit by and shipped through the turbulent decennia of political and economic change.

The book offers multi-dimensional perspectives on the transformation of their life and work and is, first and foremost, interesting to read. Through minute descriptions, quoting from interviews with papermakers that include their terminology, and texts from their work songs – one regrets that the publishers did not include original Chinese language song texts – Eyferth allows insights into the pleasures, hardship, toil and joy of the papermakers. He depicts an everyday working life where taxation and grain procurement, a customary reward system, hard work and rights to take breaks and proper meals, struggles over rights regarding skills and competences, access to paper drying walls in the compound of another family or issues of long distance transport and possibilities of innovating technical processes were imprinted into the course of peoples’ daily lives and routines. His historical analysis provides Eyferth with a grid within which to situate the contents of his interviews.

Against a common model of a “rural-urban divide” (p. 2) that, according to James Scott, modernising states tend to construct as “state simplifications” (p. 3; Scott 1998) and through which the skills of rural people are contested and denied, Eyferth re-establishes the “skillful peasant” (p. 5) “centrally concerned with the production and reproduction of economically useful skill” (p. 6). In “looking through the lens of skill” (p. 7), he approaches economic life asking what drives and forms social and particularly kinship organisation and the reproduction of knowledge in society. In the case of China, with its long history of local rural craft specialisation, which was appreciated and in many ways fostered by the elite and literati, the negotiation of the political and economic importance admitted to specialised labour and labourers and their products comes into focus.

Like other craftspeople in China, the Jiajiang 夹江 papermakers produced and still produce a local product of national importance. Throughout the turbulent political processes that shook the PRC in its first 50 years, the community of papermakers has been driven along, caught in the attempts to construct a new socialist society, with its re-categorisation of its citizens, attempts to integrate them into economic planning, to centrally organise the industrialisation of their products, and finally appearing to make their skills obsolete. Factors that characterised this history seemed at times trivial. The classification as belonging to the category of peasant could force the papermakers to have to exploit their poor land for agriculture and sacrifice their bamboo woods (hence the title “Eating Rice from Bamboo Roots”). This also led to the fact that the papermakers were very heavily hit by the great famine at the beginning of the 1960s (chap. 6). The distance to the county seat – the comparison of Hexi 河西 and Hedong 河东 as places of different distances and the consequences they endured due to this difference which runs through the book – could be a decisive factor. The degree of insight or even ignorance of local cadres and decision-makers into the skills and thinking of papermakers could be another. The fate of the papermakers depended heavily on the translation of their needs on a local level, if not to the national government. It thus depended, Eyferth argues, on translators and activists like the courageous party secretary Shi Dingliang (Pseudonym) and his impressive engagement with bureaucracy on behalf of the papermakers after the great famine (chap. 6).

The history of the papermakers in twentieth century China has, as Eyferth shows, also been a social history of the transformation of a local craft. In the beginning we see an agnatic, kinship based community of skilled labourers producing for retailers who sold handmade paper to urban elite consumers. In the end he describes an extended household family workshop industry in the 1980s’ economic reform period, retailing

directly to connoisseur consumers and shops for luxury paper, and about to renew kinship ties ritually (chap. 9, about the Jiadangqiao 加档桥 stele). The fact that in the end, with the economic reforms, hand-produced paper kept its importance for connoisseurs for whom it became a luxury art-paper product, while cheap paper was re-used in rituals which had been banned until then, seems ironic. But the evolving market economy since the 1980s also created a new market for the papermakers. This led to the re-evaluation of still existing skills, techniques, and local products. Today we observe in China the reformation of the craft due to the luxury market as well as due to counterfeiting.

Eyferth makes such processes concrete. He looks at this history from two perspectives: that of the skilled craftsmen, and that of a socialist state implementing its policies towards the craftspeople. He introduces the notion of skill as a resource of a community of practitioners, a resource that has always been and still is “contested and subject to distribution struggles” (p. 11). His book is about the history of struggles for skill protection vs. skill extraction. Skills, Jacob argues, are constantly negotiated, even within the papermaker community, where knowledge and the acquisition of skills are kept in the family through exclusion, exclusion also, for example, of out-marrying members from certain craft knowledge. Eyferth introduces the notion of de-skilling—again following James Scott, who read the way the modern state pursued his interest in the “dispossession of subaltern groups” (p. 12; Scott 1998)—in appropriating their resource skill for a better planning of the economy and for developing the country and industry. Here, Eyferth speaks of “socialist deskilling”: “My focus is on a process of stateled skill expropriation that began tentatively in the 1920s and culminated in the campaign and struggles of the 1950s and 1960s.” (p. 13) In the end it has been the socialist state, he seems to argue, which sacrificed local skill-scapes and manual labour for technological and social progress, for industrial state construction, and in the interest of state control over its citizens. The papermakers, on the other hand, “did engage with the revolution at a conceptual level” (p. 17), but they did it “acting from a background of previously acquired skills” (p. 18). Finally, the papermakers’ communities of skill could take advantage of economic and technical change. This had already started in the 1970s, when a black market for handmade paper evolved, and continued under the family contract system of the 1980s (chap. 7-8). The papermakers finally managed to revive their craft under conditions of part-mechanisation, which made their hard work easier, enabling them to “reconnect the social tissue that had become thin and fractured during the Mao years and to repair the structures that underpinned the reproduction of skill” (p. 21; chap. 9).

In 2011 this book was awarded the “Joseph Levenson Book Prize: Post-1900 Category” by the AAS China and Inner Asia Council. It is a crucial *oeuvre* not only in the social history of modern Chinese crafts and technology, but also for Chinese anthropology. The image of “an almost total discontinuity in the Chinese workplace” in modern China, while “continuity in the workplaces tends to be conceptualised as an anachronistic survival of pre-industrial habits” (Eyferth [Ed.] 2006: 3) has dominated the discourses on work in the early PRC long enough. In “looking through the lens of skill” Eyferth is able to distance himself from this discontinuity paradigm, and to give way to the appreciation of the value of other factors – the re-negotiation of the value of skills, ownership in and appropriation of knowledge, social change and its gender implications for the transmission of and access to skill, and, of course, skill extraction and processes of de-skilling. Thus he allows an entirely different image to emerge, one that helps to link the picture of the rural community of papermakers of the 1920s to that of the papermakers in the year 2000 – both performing similar work in now entirely different societies. No, the skills of the papermakers were not extinguished in the socialist period, simply because the skills were not just a matter of technical facts and prescription, but “distributed across a field of relations” (p. 16) with a “wide dispersal of information across heterogeneous media” (p. 16). Eyferth concludes that this was due to “the inability of state agents ... to come to terms with the nature of physically embodied, socially embedded skills” (p. 227).

The picture of a re-established order after socialism, though, is – and Eyferth’s descriptions allow us to imagine in which way – misleading. Between the two ends of the story lies a history of promises, hope and deception, of the inevitable logics of the everyday consequences and often not anticipated aftermaths of political decisions, of strategies of resistance, of courage and pride – if not of living up to promises once made by the socialist state that were not fulfilled. Today, a new page in the history of papermakers has opened with the declaration of Jiajiang papermaking as National Immaterial Cultural Heritage in 2006. The story of the papermakers in China is thus not finished. This book leaves readers full of curiosity.

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