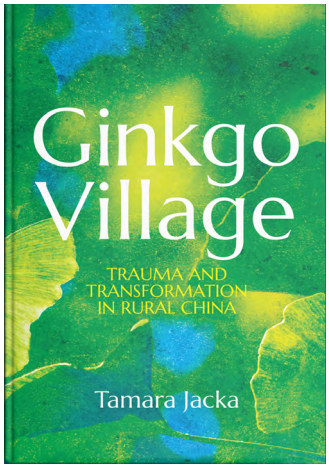

Ginkgo Village: Trauma and Transformation (ANU Press, 2024).

Ginkgo Village

A Conversation with Tamara Jacka

Nicholas LOUBERE, Tamara JACKA

In *Ginkgo Village: Trauma and Transformation* (ANU Press, 2024), Tamara Jacka takes readers deep into a village in central-eastern China. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Ginkgo villagers experienced terrible trauma and far-reaching socioeconomic and political change. At the heart of this book are eight tales that draw on ethnographic and life-history research to re-create Ginkgo Village life and the interactions between the villagers and the researchers who visit them. These tales use storytelling to engender an empathetic understanding of Chinese villagers' often traumatic life experiences, to present concrete details of transformations in everyday village life in an engaging manner, and to explore the challenges and rewards of fieldwork research that attempts empathetic understanding across cultures.

Nicholas Loubere: The writing style and format of this book represent a departure from the traditional academic research monograph. You provide a detailed historical and contextualised background to Ginkgo Village, but the bulk of the book is a collection of fictionalised stories. Can you discuss the choices you made when deciding to adopt this unusual approach? What different kinds of political or ethical considerations did you wrestle with compared with the more traditional academic writing you have done in the past? And how do you envision this book contributing to knowledge production differently than other academic monographs, including your own previous works?

Tamara Jacka: Thanks for this question. I appreciate it because I believe there are political and ethical issues at play in every choice of writing style and format, and every writing style and format has political and ethical effects. Over the decades, several feminists, interpretivists, and other social theorists have drawn attention to this, but it's not a big consideration in the social sciences today. There are very powerful conventions for social science writing that most people adhere to without much thought: we use technical jargon and formal language; avoid emotive language and keep ourselves out of our writing; pretend to be objective and impartial; and analyse, explain, and develop arguments using 'facts' and 'evidence'. We don't tell stories. We don't make things up.

That's a caricature, but readers will recognise a general trend and will be familiar with the institutional pressures to conform with this trend. Put simply, it's hard to receive jobs and grants, get published, and be accepted as a serious social scientist if you flout or challenge the conventions I've outlined here. But in *Ginkgo Village*, that's precisely what I've tried to do.

Here I want to pause to highlight what it is about the writing in *Ginkgo Village* that's so different from other, more conventional academic research monographs, including my own previous works. In your question, you highlight fictionalisation, but I'm going to put this last and discuss it separately, because it has been less central to the achievement of my main aims than some other features of the writing in this book.

To my mind, the most distinctive and important features of the writing in *Ginkgo Village* are a language that is personal, direct, and informal; a storytelling mode; the inclusion of the researcher/author as a character in the story; and the use of memoir and personal reflection. My aim in adopting these distinctive features has been to achieve an effect very different from that of more conventional writing in the social sciences.

To explain, I'd like to draw on a spatial metaphor: all the conventions I outlined have the effect of maintaining a gap between the researcher/writer and the 'objects' of research and writing, and between the writer and the reader. In contrast, the most distinctive features of my writing in *Ginkgo Village* are aimed at reducing those gaps. I have deliberately chosen them to make what I consider to be political interventions in the production of knowledge.

First, I've tried to close the gap between the researcher/writer and the reader by making my writing more engaging and accessible. Most social science writing is inaccessible to people outside a narrow field of academia, the effect of which is to reinforce the elitism of knowledge production. I want to work against this, to strive for what I believe should be the goal of any scholar: broad public education and empowerment through the cultivation of skills in creative and critical thinking and knowledge production. I see engaging, accessible language and stories as a contribution to achieving that goal.

I've also tried to close the gap between the researcher/writer and the reader—many of whom will also be researchers or aspiring researchers—by revealing details about the experience of conducting fieldwork in rural China. Most fieldwork-based research writing tells the reader little about the researcher and their background or about the researcher's personal experiences and relationships with people in the field. Whether intended or not, the effect is, first, to ill prepare junior researchers for the reality of fieldwork research.

This type of writing also reinforces the notion that a researcher can and should maintain distance between themselves and whom or what they are researching. They should be impartial and objective and not become emotionally entangled with the 'objects' of their research, and their personal background, experiences, and relationships in and outside the field are irrelevant to the research findings and how they are interpreted.

Many social theorists—especially feminists, critical anthropologists, and those taking an interpretivist approach—have written at length about what nonsense this is, yet this way of writing, this highly problematic form of knowledge production, persists. As a new approach to the problem, I have used memoir and stories in which I, the researcher/writer, and my research assistant are protagonists.

The reason I have taken this new approach can be summed up in the injunction to creative writers to 'show not tell'. You can waste a lot of ink trying to write an academic article or book that tells readers what is wrong with the impartial, objective researcher model and the supposed dichotomy between researcher and researched without really getting them to appreciate how far removed it is from reality. But with a well-written story that shows rather than tells, you can draw readers into your work far more effectively and enable them to really feel and appreciate for themselves what you are trying to say. That is what I have aimed for in this book.

The third motivation underpinning the most distinctive features of this book, especially its storytelling mode, is the wish to overcome the gap between readers and the villagers I have researched and written about. My aim has been to complicate or get past the headlines and stereotypes of China as an evil authoritarian state, to overcome the perception of a divide between 'us' and 'them', and to build empathy.

Empathy is a key theme in the book. I define it as 'a first-person–like visceral, emotional and cognitive understanding of others' subjective experiences, underpinned by respect and care for their wellbeing' (p. 8). As I discuss in the Introduction to *Ginkgo Village*, achieving empathy is a demanding process, which takes a great deal of hard work and learning and involves overcoming numerous challenges. Many of the stories in this book explore those challenges and illustrate how difficult they are to overcome. At the same time, though, I argue that attempts to build empathy across political, social, and cultural divides are vital. As has been demonstrated in particularly stark fashion in recent years, political leaders use divisive rhetoric, full of misinformation and prejudice, to try to promote violent regional and global conflicts. Building empathy between peoples can help counter these efforts. That is my aim with this book.

Storytelling is crucial to achieving this aim. Well-written stories are empathy-building machines. They are effective as stories precisely because they collapse the distance between the reader and the text, enabling readers to imaginatively inhabit characters' life-worlds and imagine and feel what it would be like to be in those characters' shoes.

Again, the 'show not tell' injunction is crucial here. To enable readers to inhabit characters' life-worlds, I must provide a wealth of detail about things that in most social science writing would be considered trivial and irrelevant. This includes details about the weather and landscape, individuals' mannerisms and body language, their clothing, and the type of housing in which they live.

This brings me to the issue of fictionalisation and the use of composite characters. These are features of the book that I chose primarily for ethical reasons, to protect residents of Ginkgo Village from identification and the harms that could potentially flow from it. I didn't want villagers or village leaders to get into trouble because of revelations of official corruption, for example. Nor did I want to exacerbate tensions within families by revealing family members' identities and writing about the conflicts between them. Most ethnographers get around this problem

by using pseudonyms. But because I had adopted a storytelling mode, which, as I have suggested, requires a lot of detailed information about individuals as well as their life-worlds, pseudonyms were not sufficient. I had to fabricate far more to make the stories engaging, while also protecting Ginkgo Villagers from harm.

I suspect that my use of fictionalisation will cause conniptions among some social scientists who look for facts and figures as evidence that the writer/researcher is 'telling the truth' and describing and explaining a reality separate from and unaffected by the writer/researcher's own identity and interpretations.

In response, I stress that facts and figures cannot remove the inevitable influence of the writer/researcher and their interpretations on the research findings. But I'd also like to point to several features of the book that should allay concerns about the validity of the knowledge it imparts. These include a detailed description (in the Appendix) of the research on which my stories are based and of the relationship in the book between fact and fiction; and an explicit discussion (in the Introduction) of issues relating to interpretation.

NL: Something that came across quite forcefully when reading the book was the starkness of power inequalities in rural Chinese interpersonal relations throughout history: the subjugation of those within the same community, and even the same household, in often violent ways. Obviously, this is not unique to rural China, and we see these dynamics at play throughout the world and across human history, but it is something that has affected many of us who have spent time trying to understand the historical transformation of rural Chinese society. Do you think these dynamics are a function of the past or do they still exist in the ways in which rural China is organised today?

TJ: Power inequalities in rural China are definitely not just a thing of the past. But, over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, there have been numerous shifts in the patterns of power inequalities that villagers experience. For example, decollectivisation and the return to family farming reduced village cadres' power over production decision-making. But at the same time, the imposition of the One-Child Policy involved an increase in village cadres' exercise of coercive control over villagers' reproductive lives.

When it comes to intrafamily power inequalities, the picture is also complex. During the Maoist era, collectivisation moved power over production decision-making from senior men within the family to senior men outside the family. With decollectivisation in the post-Mao period, much of that power was restored to senior men within families. Then, with new opportunities for labour outmigration, came opportunities for younger women to improve their personal incomes, and this enabled them to improve their bargaining power within their families. But the improvements have been limited, partly because men's waged labour is generally remunerated at a higher rate than women's, and partly because the norm has been for either mothers or grandmothers, but not fathers, to withdraw from paid employment to raise children.

Meanwhile, my sense is that overall the power and status of *older* village women, relative to other family members, declined through both the Maoist and the post-Mao eras. The outmigration of younger members of the family exacerbated that trend, with most older villagers having little say in their offspring's decisions to migrate and leave grandchildren in their care, even though these decisions frequently result in huge financial burdens and workloads for older left-behind family members, especially women.

There is one aspect or consequence of intrafamily rural power inequalities, domestic violence, about which relatively little research has been conducted. So, it's hard to say whether its incidence has increased, decreased, or stayed the same over the decades. However, the numerous stories I've heard about domestic violence have led me to believe that it's very prevalent in rural China today. It's probably no more prevalent than in the past, though, and probably no more prevalent than in urban China or anywhere else in the world.

NL: A constant undercurrent running through this book, and one that has been a primary focus of your research for much of your career, is the fundamental importance of labour migration as a driver of transformation in rural China. As you point out, the migration patterns in Xin County are unique due to larger quotas for overseas labour migration. Nevertheless, it also feels like much of the rural experience that you describe in the book is relatable across much of rural China. Can you reflect on some of the key migration-induced transformations that you have explored in this book? How has migration shifted the fabric of social life in places like Ginkgo Village?

TJ: Yes, labour migration has been a key driver of social transformation, especially in poorer rural areas in inland China, where local industrialisation has been minimal. In these areas, which have been the focus of my research, most young and middle-aged people have left the village in search of waged employment. As I outline in Chapter One of *Ginkgo Village*, this has had a profound impact on the social fabric of the village.

First, migrant earnings have greatly boosted some villagers' disposable incomes, and this has contributed to new desires and social expectations for consumption. At the same time, variations in villagers' abilities to lift their incomes through outmigration have led to much greater inequalities. Within the village, the extent of these inequalities is less obvious, simply because the wealthiest have permanently moved away. But even among those remaining in the village, inequalities have increased between better-off households with access to migrant earnings and income from agriculture and poorer households with less access to both migrant earnings and agricultural income. The former build large new houses, with amenities like running water and flush toilets, and buy appliances like smartphones, smart TVs, and cars. At the other end of the scale, the most disadvantaged group includes households of the sick and the elderly who receive little or no financial assistance from migrant family members and live in appalling conditions. In between, many middle-aged and older women and couples left behind in the village subsidise their adult migrant children by caring for and

covering the costs of sick family members, their ageing parents, and their grandchildren. This burden affects their workloads and health as well as their incomes, consumption, and living standards.

Second and relatedly, the removal of young people from the village labour force has resulted in shifts in the work patterns of the left-behind. Most importantly, large numbers of middle-aged and older villagers, burdened with child care on top of agricultural production, have stopped growing rice because it is too labour intensive. This withdrawal from rice-growing has spurred two further shifts: a decline in animal husbandry and the merging of numerous smallholdings into large tracts of land controlled by businesspeople, often from outside the village, who employ local middle-aged villagers as agricultural wage labourers.

Third, rural outmigration and the associated increased incomes and mobility of young people have had important effects on family living arrangements and intrafamily relationships. Two important trends have emerged: on the one hand, many young married couples are leaving the older generation earlier than they would have previously and are living further apart from them. This includes couples who met while working as migrant labourers who decide to remain living in the city where they met. On the other hand, young women's need for childcare assistance has led to a range of previously unusual household arrangements. For example, many older village women move back and forth between the village where one or more married sons or daughters and their families live and a nearby town and/or distant city where other adult children's families live.

To some extent, increasing physical distance between family members and kin has also weakened kinship ties and has had a negative effect on the intergenerational transmission of village culture and norms. It isn't just labour migration that has had this effect. Kinship ties and cultural transmission have also been affected by increasing levels of schooling, which have pulled youngsters away from the village into urban boarding schools, technical colleges, and universities.

This greater physical distance between the generations means that older folk have less chance to pass on knowledge relating, for example, to foraging and the customary rules associated with weddings, funerals, New Year, and other rituals. To some extent, this has been offset by the return of most labour migrants to the village every New Year and by the advent of new forms of communication, especially smartphones. In the future, though, I suspect that foraging will die out as will local knowledge about key rituals. Key wedding and funeral rituals will continue, but they will be conducted more frequently by employed professionals.

The impact of physical distance on kinship ties is likely to continue to be less marked, at least in the near future: migrants' reliance on family members for child care and the ongoing socioeconomic significance of *guanxi* ('connections'), combined with migrants' annual return to the village at New Year and their use of social media and smartphones, mean that intrafamily and kinship ties are likely to remain key to villagers' and migrants' lives.

NL: The history of Xin County that you outline in the book is one marked by poverty and extreme hardship. Even as incomes have increased in the post-reform era, you illuminate some stark inequalities. At the same time, the modern Chinese Communist Party (CCP) claims much of its political legitimacy from rural poverty-alleviation efforts, even going so far as to declare the end of extreme poverty in the country. If we think about contemporary Gingko Village and Xin County in the context of their histories and the ways in which rural places and people have been subordinated to urbanisation and industrialisation, do you think their place in the political economy of China has really changed? What role will places like Ginkgo Village play in the broader project of modern China going forward?

TJ: That's a good question. At the most fundamental level, I don't believe that the place of the countryside and the rural population in China's political economy has changed significantly since the CCP came to power in 1949. Despite all the Maoist rhetoric about overcoming rural–urban and class inequalities, and all the post-Mao rhetoric about alleviating poverty, rural places and people remain disadvantaged and marginalised, essentially because they have been key to capital accumulation via the exploitation of cheap labour and the extraction of agricultural goods. From the 1950s until the early 2020s, that basic role in the political economy has not changed, at least with respect to the poorer inland areas and populations. However, the mechanisms through which exploitation and extraction occur have shifted. In recent years, there have also been shifts in the relative importance for capital accumulation of exploitation and extraction from different parts of rural China.

In brief: during the Maoist era, collectivisation and the enforced state appropriation of a very large proportion of agricultural produce were the mechanisms through which capital accumulation was achieved.

During the post-Mao period, especially since the 1990s, capital accumulation has occurred through rural labour outmigration. Exploitation of both the rural migrants themselves and their family members left in the countryside has been crucial. Low migrant wages and minimal provision of welfare to migrant workers boost the profits of capitalist enterprises. And these low wages are made possible because migrants and the businesses who employ them are subsidised by family members back in the villages and towns who take charge of social reproduction. Family members bear most of the costs of caring for the sick, the elderly, and the very young, and they also maintain a foothold in agricultural production, so they're able to keep themselves fed, while also contributing to food security for the rest of the population.

In the twenty-first century, though, growing rural incomes, industrialisation, and urbanisation have reduced the pool of rural migrants and family members willing to be exploited in this fashion, especially in the more economically developed regions close to cities and on the eastern seaboard. The state and businesses have adopted a few strategies to try to offset this trend. Multinational businesses in search of cheaper labour have shifted into inland China and overseas to places like Vietnam and Sri Lanka. Meanwhile, the state has sought to shift from a model of economic growth fuelled by the exploitation of cheap rural labour in production combined with export and overseas consumption,

to one that relies more heavily on rural as well as urban consumption. This has involved attempts to alleviate rural poverty and improve rural welfare and consumption power through the abolition of agricultural taxes and education fees, the provision of medical insurance and old-age pensions, and other poverty-alleviation measures. At the same time, the state has also tried to improve food security and lessen its reliance on food imports by subsidising the development of large-scale, mechanised agricultural production.

We have yet to see how, in China's recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, strategies for capital accumulation will evolve. But my sense is that the pre-Covid trends will continue. In some parts of the countryside, capital accumulation will occur through large-scale mechanised agricultural production and through rural as well as urban consumption. The importance of rural labour migration as a strategy for capital accumulation will decline overall, but not disappear entirely. Many poorer rural families will contribute to capital accumulation through the dual exploitation of migrant labour in production and their family members' labour in social reproduction. These families will remain disadvantaged and marginalised. ■

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