for ethnic, religious, and cultural minorities, or rural populations in general. It can also be helpful for experts in other fields who want a deeper understanding of China's social and political processes. As Wu's research covers broad issues of interdependence of rural and urban development, ethnic and cultural politics, internal migration, and the impact of globalization on marginalized communities, scholars and practitioners in social justice and global development research will find it a vital read.

Yulia NESTEROVA
The University of Hong Kong
E-mail: yulia.nesterova@hku.hk

DOI 10.1007/s11516-017-0032-3
教育的社会文化土壤：基于美国费城安卓学校的教育人类学观察 [*The cultural characters of education: A fieldwork in Agela School in the city center of Philadelphia*]. 刘谦 [Liu, Qian]. 北京, 中国: 光明日报出版社 [Beijing, China: Guangming Daily Press], 2016. 212 pp., (paperback), 45RMB, ISBN: 978-7-5194-0722-3.

© Higher Education Press and Springer-Verlag GmbH Germany 2017

This book is a serious attempt to uncover the underlying sociocultural forces within which American public schools are embedded. It was written by a Chinese anthropologist, Liu Qian, based on her year-long fieldwork in an urban public school called Agela School (a pseudonym) in Philadelphia. While doing the fieldwork, Liu's role as a visiting scholar from China allowed her to participate in Agela School as a volunteer, but she was brave enough and curious enough to reach out to all sorts of people involved in the school, and participate in various activities, including a teachers' strike that would normally be inaccessible to non-member participation. I appreciate the courage and candidness with which Liu describes the research and, at the end of the book, presents sensitive issues of

access and ethics. Because of Liu's deep involvement, the book is full of detailed descriptions of the school's overall profile, teaching, and learning activities in a third-grade classroom, as well as special events that took place in the school. Rather than dealing with any specific educational problem, the book aims to provide a panorama of American public school life.

The book is divided into seven chapters, with the first two chapters laying out theoretical foundations and methodological settings for the study. Each of Chapters 3 to 6 focuses on one key facet of American public schools. Chapter 3 addresses the issue of time management, class rules and order maintenance in teacher Kevin's classroom at Agela School. Chapter 4 describes the procedures, processes, and rules involved in the state assessment test and people's attitudes towards it. Chapter 5 examines special education programs for disadvantaged children, i.e., how the children are identified and placed in these programs and what they learn through these programs. Chapter 6 deals with how citizenship education penetrates into the curriculum, classroom activities, everyday rituals as well as responses to emergency events. While there have been an abundant number of books addressing American education in recent years, Liu's book is special in several ways. First, most of the other books are based on elite suburban schools with students mostly from white middle-class families. In contrast, Liu's book depicts an average urban public school, facing financial constraints and serving students from diverse backgrounds, a large number of whom are special education and low-income children with unsatisfactory academic performance. To a certain extent, Agela School is more representative of American public schools as a whole. Second, a lot of the Chinese mass media reports about American education are sporadic, partial glimpses based on stereotypes and inaccurate generalizations, whereas Liu, as a trained anthropologist, portrays a contextualized, in-depth picture of real life within an American public school.

The thread that weaves across all the major chapters in the book is the attention to individual needs as a distinct feature of American school life. In talking about the time management rules, Liu finds that the head teacher Kevin allocates ample time and room for children to express themselves in class. For example, facing the gap between children's limited experiences and the abstract knowledge in the textbooks, he slows down his pace and engages students' senses of feel, touch, smell, etc. in order to make them understand. As a result, he is not able to finish all of the teaching tasks. Also, he does not mind that class

time is frequently interrupted by children's personal affairs, such as students' feeling sick, unhappy or not getting along with others, as these individual needs are recognized and accepted as natural and to be dealt with in class. According to the author, such tacit rules reflect the cultural definitions of what is a class and what is the appropriate use of class time. While the American classroom, guided by Deweyan child-centered pedagogy, gives supremacy to students' true needs, the textbook-centered Chinese classroom is solely devoted to knowledge instruction, with students' physical and emotional needs put aside.

Similarly, in describing the procedures and requirements of the state assessment test, Liu is keen to identify the key features that differentiate it from Chinese testing. For example, she finds that although the teachers have to obtain certain qualifications and follow formal legal rules in order to supervise the testing, there are no time limits for the students and the use of a calculator is allowed in the test. These rules aim to provide special considerations for students' diverse needs and form a sharp contrast to Chinese testing, in which the same amount of testing time is deemed as a matter of equity and no calculators or other study aids are allowed.

It is interesting that the author acknowledges the adequate school resources underlying the attention to each individual student's needs in American schools. However, I could not agree more with the author when she points out that it is more important to look beyond the material provisions at school and examine the sociocultural factors at a deeper level. While economic determinism has appeals to many Chinese, things have changed with China's rapid economic development in recent years. Some Chinese urban schools are even better resourced than American public schools, especially than Agela School in a low-income urban neighborhood. However, they are still obsessive about pursuing high college admission rates instead of paying due attention to the disadvantaged student subgroups and their special needs. Probably the major contribution of Liu's book lies in the fact that it provides the Chinese policymakers and educators with more details about how American public schools serve their disadvantaged students rather than the elite students, whereas the latter group has tended to be given more attention in the Chinese literature.

Although individual needs are emphasized in every aspect of American school life, the author, at the end of each chapter from Chapter 3 to Chapter 6, questions the effectiveness of the various mechanisms aimed at adjusting for diversity and

counteracting students' disadvantaged family background. However, the author seems to have had neither time nor interest to conduct systematic and in-depth research to explore this issue. For example, when the author questions the impact of special education programs on the disadvantaged students, she does not cite any convincing evidence or any American scholars in the field, but makes a hasty conclusion instead: "Although special education programs try to provide every citizen with individualized education, they may not be able to improve these students' life chances" (p. 217).

Clearly, the book is written for a Chinese audience and from a Chinese person's perspective. Chinese readers will be interested to learn of many distinct features in American school life through the author's thick descriptions and come to a better, demythologized understanding of the public schools in the US. The events depicted in the book, as well as the interpretation of the meanings and rationales behind these events, all help to "make the strange familiar" to Chinese domestic readers. To American readers, however, the book might feel like a record of their regular school life with nothing new. Nonetheless, they would probably be startled by the author's comparative lens in the way that it "makes the familiar strange," and therefore equally benefit from reading it. In this sense, the book enhances cross-cultural understanding for both parties through a process of "knowing oneself by the otherness."

ZHANG Donghui
Renmin University of China
E-mail: donghuiz@ruc.edu.cn