



## REVIEWS

Li, Tania Murray. 2014. *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*. Durham, North Carolina and London: Duke University Press. 225 + xiv pp.

Tania Murray Li, professor of Anthropology at the University of Toronto, has made important contributions to Southeast Asian agrarian studies with her books *Transforming the Indonesian Uplands* (Li 1999), *The Will to Improve* (Li 2007), *Powers of Exclusion: Land Dilemmas in Southeast Asia* (Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011) and many articles (e.g., Li 2010). In her new book *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*, she traces the process and mechanisms of land privatization and emerging capitalist relations in Lauje communities of upland Central Sulawesi, Indonesia. (The reasons why I like this book are explained in greater detail in White [2015], on which this review has drawn.)

Li first arrived in the region in 1990 just as some farmers were starting to experiment with a few cacao seedlings, still intercropped in their swiddens, and with no plans or imaginings that they would replace food crops. She made repeated visits to the same region over a period of some twenty years, making her base at different times in eleven different locations, in both the narrow lowland coastal region, the “middle hills,” and the remote “inner hills” that could only be reached by a tough hike of eight to ten hours. By the time of her last visit, a few successful farmers had accumulated land and wealth, while the majority had lost their land completely or were reduced to growing high-value crops on their ever-shrinking farms, no longer able to grow their own food.

Li uses an “analytic of conjuncture” to “tease apart the set of elements that gave Lauje highlanders in 1990-2009 their particular form, and to explore how each element set the conditions of possibility for others, in changing configurations” (16). “Conjunctures” are “the set of elements, processes, and relations that shaped people’s lives at this time and place, and the political challenges that arise from that location” (4). All kinds of material and social factors, both global and local, combine or collide into (time- and place-specific) conjunctural configurations, which in turn produce different impacts and outcomes in specific local contexts. Li underlines that such complex and dynamic conjunctures are not randomly generated. They are dynamic, but not random; they are caused, and therefore they can in principle be explained. Good ethnography pays attention to the complexity of local variation in context and human action and the variety of relationships that produce concrete historical patterns, as well the power of the circumstances under which people seek to make their histories but which they do not choose themselves.

Chapter 1 (“Positions”) uses historical sources and oral history to describe processes of identity formation and the evolving relationships between the Lauje of the interior and coastal merchants and rulers over a period of some 200 years up to 1990. However remote the Lauje may have been, they have long cultivated cash crops besides their own food crops: tobacco from 1820-1970, which from the 1950s onwards was gradually replaced by shallots and garlic. Their food staples upland rice and maize were also grown both for own consumption and market exchange.

Chapter 2 (“Work and Care”) describes the “economy of care” in Lauje’s middle highlands around the time of her first visit in 1990. The system of labor relations and social reproduction had many interesting aspects, particularly the individual’s personal autonomy of labor which treated each individual (male and female, adult and child) as the owner of his/her own labor and likewise of the product of that labor. This could be seen in the way in which each family member planted his/her own crops and controlled the product, and in the practice of wage transactions within the family (between parents and children, husbands and wives). Although no farmers were short of land at that time—there was always the option of clearing new land for cultivation—they were anything but “food secure.” They were constantly at risk of harvest failures of both staple and cash crops due to El Niño or other drought episodes, and harvests lost to birds, monkeys, wild pigs, and

disease. These risks, and extractive relations with coastal traders, pushed many of them into chronic debt with people of the coastal lowlands. Most Lauje were “marginalized by a discursive regime that situated them as backward, and in significant ways they came to see themselves in this light” (56). Not surprisingly, then, they eagerly seized the opportunity to plant cocoa trees, which would provide relatively stable cash income every year; they wanted to free themselves of social stigma, food insecurity, and precarity of income, and they wanted roads, schools, and decent clothes like the people of the lowlands.

Chapter 3 (“Enclosure”) takes us through the process of land privatization that began around 1990. The planting of cacao trees among the maize on communal lands broke the swidden cycle in which land periodically reverted to the kin group who inherited the land from the person who first cleared it. The association of labor with ownership allowed the enclosure of land as private property of those who planted cacao on it without significant opposition or resistance and without government intervention. “When they started to enclose their land, they managed the process among themselves, without reference to state land law, without the use of documents, and without the benediction of government officials” (86). Thus the new idea emerged of land as a spatial unit that could be owned by individuals and be bought and sold.

Chapter 4 (“Capitalist Relations”) shows how capitalist relations emerged during the cocoa boom, with land, labor, and capital now moving in commodity circuits governed by competition and profit. While some farmers managed to accumulate wealth, land, and capital, the majority lost their land during a period of only about fifteen years, through failing to repay loans for farm inputs or food. Those who hung on to some land were now compelled to grow high-value crops on their ever-shrinking farms and were no longer able to grow their own food. Here we see, in local detail, how the transition from cash crops as choice to cash crops as dull compulsion catches smallholders in a “simple reproduction squeeze.”

Chapter 5 (“Politics, Revisited”) shows us how Lauje villagers responded to the increasingly entrenched inequalities in their communities. The rapidly emerging agrarian class differentiation did not provoke clashes between the new landless and near-landless and wealthy farmers, landlords, or moneylenders, although in the relatively more democratic environment following the fall of Suharto in 1998

there was some mobilization against rapacious “crocodiles,” corrupt officials who stole funds earmarked for infrastructure projects.

Li’s concluding reflections bring readers back to the various broader issues that this micro-study has raised. Land privatization does not expand farmers’ freedom and options (as liberal theory would have us believe) but traps them in capitalist relations where competition and profit rule the day. The Lauje “great transformation” of the past twenty years was not dramatic or conflict-ridden but a quiet and almost unseen process in which capitalist relations emerged and subjected Lauje farmers to their dull compulsion. This, rather than spectacular “land grabs,” may indeed represent the way in which agrarian capitalism has most commonly developed in history. Li’s analytic of conjuncture, and her repeated field visits, have allowed her to show us in detail how global abstractions like Polanyian (1944) “great transformations” and Marxian “class formation in the countryside” actually happen on the ground. It is a pleasure to read and a model of good ethnographic writing for new generations of students and agrarian researchers to follow.—**BEN WHITE**, EMERITUS PROFESSOR OF RURAL SOCIOLOGY, INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL STUDIES, THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS

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