This is a fascinating, detailed and painstakingly researched monograph that reveals the highly nuanced realities of lives and communities affected by toxic pollution in rapidly industrialising rural areas of China. Anna Lora-Wainwright’s book is the culmination of her extensive anthropological fieldwork in China over many years, in collaboration with leading Chinese scholars, providing a rich account that succeeds in appealing to a wide range of scholars and being accessible to non-China specialists. Situating her discussions within wider debates around China’s so-called “cancer villages”, as well as in relation to broader literature on environmental health activism and social movements, Lora-Wainwright depicts the ways in which villagers negotiate and/or contest severe industrial pollution. Her focus is Baocun, where residents live with the effects of phosphorous mining and fertilizer production; Qiancun, a lead and zinc mining site; and Guiyu, where pollution is caused by the processing of electronic waste (e-waste). In each case study, the author’s ethnographic account and insightful analysis captures the fluid and nuanced ways in which residents’ experience severe toxic pollution and how they make sense of this in the context of their everyday lives.

At various points within the case study discussions, Lora-Wainwright provides some engaging insights into the challenges of researching such a sensitive topic in this very particular social and political context. In the introduction she notes her conscious decision not to foreground her own experiences within the book (in order not to detract from the villagers’ experiences), which does seem an appropriate stance. The appendix, though, does provide more context regarding the process of data collection and the challenges this presented, particularly given the sensitivities of conducting research in China. Despite these discussions, I would have liked more methodological reflection on the author’s experience of conducting fieldwork in these (socially, politically, physically and emotionally) challenging conditions, particularly as a female researcher. However, I fully appreciate that the backdrop to the
fieldwork, and also concerns about safeguarding both Chinese colleagues’ and her own future access, may also have placed limits on the author’s ability to reflect openly on these issues.

Over the course of the book, Lora-Wainwright convincingly builds the case for conceptualising the responses of villagers as “resigned activism”, drawing on notions of the everyday and of less visible activism to situate residents’ actions on a broad spectrum of resistance, located within the very specific context of rural China. She coherently argues that “the co-presence of resignation and activism demands that we situate the whole spectrum of attitudes and reactions to pollution vis-à-vis complex, shifting and uneven social, cultural, political and economic contexts” (p.xxvi). Each of the empirical chapters presents a grim picture of the realities of life in these highly polluted villages, and the severe structural inequalities and precarity faced by both local residents and migrants. Lora-Wainwright uses short vignettes of differently situated individuals to bring to life the complexities of villagers’ daily lives and how they have negotiated these challenges in severely straitened circumstances over many years. This approach vividly demonstrates the ways in which activism intertwines with both resilience and resignation, and illustrates that “there is no inevitable linear development leading from the discovery of pollution’s detrimental effects on the environment and health to the formation of collective identity, the politicization of the local community, and the emergence of citizen-expert alliances” (p.xxvii). Importantly, Lora-Wainwright’s analysis captures the ways in which community and individual responses to pollution change over time, and how stances, allegiances and capacities to resist are fluid and shifting. She cogently explores the contradictions and ambivalence that characterise villagers’ perspectives on the pollution they experience, and emphasises the ways in which villagers’ livelihoods are often themselves bound up with the polluting industries that impact their lives and communities. The author argues for the need to “make visible the subtler and resigned forms of activism and challenge the existing parameters of what counts as activism” (p172), contributing to an emerging body of scholarly work focused on developing more nuanced theorisations of activism and resistance over time. In contrast with the “cancer villages” that provide the main frame of reference for Lora-Wainwright’s analysis, she highlights the
absence of environmental NGOs and civil society actors in relation to all three of the case studies discussed, and the significance of this for the ways in which resistance emerges (or not) and demands are able to be amplified and scaled up seems particularly salient both in relation to the Chinese context and in terms of making connections with broader literatures on environmental activism across the global South.

Overall, *Resigned Activism* provides an empirically rich and insightful account of the harsh realities of life for villagers living with extreme pollution in rural China, the ways in which this pollution is normalised, challenged, negotiated and/or ignored by local people, and the structural inequalities that this reveals. It is an important book for scholars from across the social sciences who are interested in better understanding the diverse ways in which practices of activism and resistance ebb and flow over time in contexts of marginalisation and precarity.

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