

Preface and acknowledgements

The idea of assembling a collection of papers dealing with both theoretical advances and empirical findings on rural development and policy intervention, and spotlighting China, evolved out of the many conversations and seminar discussions that arose among a group of Chinese and visiting scholars at the College of Humanities and Development Studies (COHD), China Agricultural University (CAU), Beijing, from 2005 onwards. The group was already well established and widely acknowledged for its research and practical work in the field of rural development and agricultural policy.

Yet, despite this impressive record, which entailed a ‘reinvention’ of rural sociology and anthropology following the ‘opening up’ of China in the 1980s onwards, plus the implanting of many new contributions from western-based ‘development’ researchers and practitioners, the Beijing group remained convinced of the need for much more engagement with foreign scholars and institutions dedicated to the study of contemporary processes of rural transformation. Eventually this crystallized into the organizing of an international conference on ‘Policy Intervention and Rural Transformations: Comparative Issues’ held in Beijing in September 2007. The organizers were delighted by the response to their invitation to participate in this event from a distinguished set of foreign researchers – all high profile in regards to research on development and social change; and matched them with a roughly equal number of well-known Chinese scholars experienced in rural research.

The conference itself sparked off many lively debates on questions of theory and practice, and provided an opportunity – especially for foreign participants – to learn more about the intricacies of continuity and change in China itself. In addition, it stimulated the establishment of several new research and training initiatives involving both individual Chinese and foreign scholars and their respective university institutions.

This book then brings together a selection of contributions originally presented at the Beijing meeting but reworked for a wider audience. Its central aims are, in the first place, to offer an overview of current theoretical and methodological perspectives on contemporary processes of rural transformation and policy intervention, and, second, to explore empirically some of the specificities of the Chinese case.

Central issues discussed concern the impact of state policy and practice on rural populations; the emergence of patterns of diversification of labour and livelihoods; migration and the relationship between rural and urban scenarios; the role of cooperative or collective modes of organization; the significance of issues of 'value' and 'capital' for households and gender relations; the dynamics of state-peasant encounters; the issue of land ownership and sustainable resource management; struggles between administrative cadres and local actors; and the dilemmas of 'participatory' development projects.

As we indicated earlier, this book is deeply embedded in the history and commitment of a group of researchers and students at China Agricultural University, who over the past decade have built a strong research group – now widely recognized – dedicated to the study and analysis of rural change and development intervention. A key figure in initiating this programme was Professor Li Xiaoyun who is now Dean of the College of Humanities and Development Studies. The editors therefore wish to express their special appreciation of the many inputs he has made into consolidating these research goals.

The 2007 Beijing conference of course became an important step in linking the CAU group to a wider network of international scholars working on related themes. Our thanks go to all those involved in organizing this gathering of researchers, which turned out to be an exceptionally successful and enjoyable international event. In particular, we wish to acknowledge the fine-tuned planning and implementation of the conference organized by Dr Wang Chunyu, Dr Wu Huifang and Dr Dong Qiang (Senior Lecturers at the COHD), and Professor Zhao Xudong (Head of the Sociology Department) for his support in inviting various Chinese and international scholars. Of course neither the conference nor the publication arising out of it would have been possible without the generous continuing support provided by the China Agricultural University '985' Programme, for which we are most grateful.

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