Introduction

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CHINA IN CONTEXT

The aim of this collection is twofold: first, it offers a critical overview of current theoretical and methodological perspectives and debates on contemporary processes of rural transformation and policy intervention, and, second, it explores empirically some of the specificities of China’s pathways to rural change and development.

Over the past two or more decades much intellectual effort has been devoted to surmounting the orthodoxies of earlier modernization, dependency and poststructuralist paradigms, such that now we have reached a point where many researchers are inclined to adopt a more ‘actor-oriented’ and ‘post-development’ perspective. This approach accords a central role to showing how, despite the vicissitudes and constraints of globalization, market liberalization and state hegemonic control, the multiplicity of actors involved are still able to negotiate some critical space for themselves and in so doing shape the nature and outcomes of external interventions. Although the treatment of these issues may vary from chapter to chapter, several contributions highlight the variability of outcomes and the blending of contingent and often ambiguous factors. This is a central theme running throughout the volume.

The second component of the book constitutes a series of well-documented case studies dealing with the dynamics of specific rural scenarios. While most of these pertain to recent Chinese ethnographic research, some raise interesting comparative dimensions, for example, in respect of patterns of rural–urban migration and its impact on family and gender relations, or concerning the survival or ‘remaking’ of peasant livelihoods. It is at these junctures, of course, that one encounters a central tantalizing – yet only partly answered – question, namely, how far do rural scenarios in China resemble or differ from those in other countries undergoing what appear to be similar rural trajectories? Stemming from this empirical concern is the more penetrating question as to whether development theories and practice developed in
particular socio-historical contexts are transferable to other locations, in this instance to China.

In summary, then, the volume is framed by a number of theoretical and substantive issues that allow for the exploration of topics relevant to the Chinese case. Central issues discussed are the impact of state policy and practice on rural production and socio-economic activities; the emergence of patterns of diversification of labour and livelihoods; the separation and overlap of rural and urban scenarios and class affiliations; the role of cooperative or collective modes of organization; the significance of issues of ‘value’ and ‘capital’ and their gender implications; the dynamics of state–peasant encounters; the issue of land ownership and sustainable resource management; struggles between administrative cadres and local actors; and finally, the dilemmas of ‘participatory’ development projects.

As Ickenberry (2008) has observed, over the past decade China has emerged as a formidable global player, both economically and politically. Its economy has grown fourfold since the beginning of the market reforms of the late 1970s and is predicted to double in the next ten or so years. It is now a major global manufacturing centre and consumes one-third of the world’s supply of iron, steel and coal; and has accumulated massive foreign reserves, amounting (in 2006) to more than $1 trillion. Paralleling these economic achievements is the expansion of its military services, which not only protect its frontiers but also play a major role in responding to natural disasters and emergencies of various kinds, as witnessed so graphically in May 2008 when the earthquake struck Chengdu, the capital of south-west China’s Sichuan Province.

A recent report by the Carnegie Trust (Keidel 2008) identifies certain critical trends in the Chinese economy following the introduction of the Household Contract Responsibility System in 1978, which marked the shift from collectivized agricultural production and labour to a leasehold arrangement whereby the collectives (formerly known as ‘brigades’) distributed plots of land to individual households for self-management. This led quickly to a number of other agricultural reforms concerning marketing and farm services. From then onwards, the economy experienced periods of fluctuating economic growth. Agricultural food production boomed in the mid-1980s in response to the opening up of markets and the emphasis placed on growing a range of crops – not only grains, but also a variety of vegetables and cash crops. Thereafter, there followed a series of ‘fast’ and ‘short’ cycles of growth driven by imbalances in supply and demand, and characterized by a series of government interventions aimed at cooling off or slowing down the economy when it became ‘overheated’. This was achieved by enacting lower food prices and pressuring farmers to devote more land to low-profitability staple crops. This strategy, however,
had the negative consequence of widening the income gap between urban and rural households. The eventual outcomes of this policy – even though some modest improvements were made in the 1990s – was that by 2006 the gap in per capita consumption between rural and urban areas had returned to what it had been in 1978 when the rural reform was first introduced.

Keidel’s analysis also reveals that the key stimulant to China’s overall economic growth, which now spans some 30 years, was not (as some commentators have suggested) the intervention of foreign trade and investment in technology and management skills per se but rather the growth in domestic demand and production. Furthermore, in the past, the ups and downs of the Chinese economy did not coincide, for example, with the USA’s growth downturns of 1991 and 2001–02 which impacted on a wide range of other countries. Following this logic, one might also argue that it seems unlikely, following the global financial collapse of mid-2008, that China will go down the same route to recession as have the USA, European and other Asian countries.

Indeed, as many commentators have emphasized, the more critical events affecting China’s overall pattern of growth were essentially ‘socio-political’ by nature. For example, gross domestic product (GDP) expenditure data for China show that the most severe slowdown followed the Tiananmen political disruptions of 1989. Furthermore, while the position of China in the global economy is central to understanding certain patterns of change and development, this needs to be matched by an appreciation of the differences that exist across socio-economic sectors, regions and, especially, between rural and urban scenarios. It also requires acknowledging the danger of adopting too much of a ‘western’ slant on China.

A major handicap or shortcoming of ‘western’ scholars studying and pondering the social conditions and cultural make-up of China and the kinds of direction in which it might be said to be moving, is that all this is inevitably perceived and interpreted through the lens of western ‘developmentalist’ thinking and practice. This is even the case for those who espouse more radical ‘postmodernist’ or ‘post-development’ positions vis-à-vis contemporary scenarios of change, whose critique rests on the need to go beyond the simple notion of ‘modernization’ to embrace the idea of ‘multiple modernities’.

While such a conceptual clarification has undoubtedly contributed to a better theoretical and practical understanding of change in what is now a global world, we are left with the more challenging task of coming to grips with the specificities of social change in various parts of the world that have remained much less affected by mainstream discourses of ‘developmentalism’ and ‘globalization’. In other words, as Martin Jacques
(2009: 140–45) has recently argued, it is necessary that we grasp the full significance of this notion of multiple modernities by explicitly acknowledging how other advanced nations or ‘civilizations’ both embrace and yet contest ‘modernity’ western style. Of course, China is a striking example that requires detailed understanding of the nature of both its political economy and sociocultural bedrock. It is simply not enough to describe it as a ‘transitional’ or ‘emerging’ economy that is expected to catch up with and overtake the most powerful of ‘advanced capitalist’ regimes. This line of argument dovetails with Nonini’s (2008: 145) view that China practices ‘a hybrid form of governance that combines earlier Maoist, socialist nationalist and developmentalist practices and discourses of the Communist Party with the more recent market logic of ‘market socialism’ – or as they say in China, development with Chinese characteristics (zhong guo te sede fazhan).

AGRARIAN ISSUES

These brief comments on the trajectories of economic change and development in China highlight the significance of rural populations, livelihoods and state–farmer relations – a set of issues explored in relation to different types of risk by Christiansen in Chapter 5 of this book. China is a large country where agriculture remains an important source of income and subsistence for the majority of the rural population, although since the early 1980s rural livelihoods have progressively become more diversified. This change is explained by three elements. The first is the increase in surplus labour due to improved technology and productivity in farm production backed by local and/or central government funding. The second concerns the emergence of a great number of off-farm businesses run on a collective basis (often by township or village officials) and private enterprises (frequently owned by returnee migrants). The income earned by the owners and workers employed by these various enterprises now constitutes an important component of household income. The third element relates to the out-migration of villagers to the larger urban centres and the remittances they send back. Bryan Roberts (Chapter 7) provides an overview of different modes of rural urbanization, while Zhou Daming and Huang Xueliang (Chapter 8) describe the gradual shift from predominantly agricultural to rural/urban and migrant livelihoods in Phoenix Village, Guangdong Province.

Following the formation of the Peoples’ Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese government adopted (in the mid-1950s) a development strategy that promoted industry in urban areas based on capital-intensive
technologies. As explained by Christiansen, this was supported by mechanisms to ensure low-priced foods and other necessities as well as guaranteed employment with benefits for most urban residents. On the other hand, rural inhabitants were confined to production units where they produced agricultural commodities under strict state planning. Surpluses emanating from the agricultural sector contributed to capital accumulation in industrial enterprise and supported a system of urban-based subsidies, thus reinforcing the separation of China’s rural and urban sectors. This separation was reinforced by the hukou system of residential registration whereby persons of rural origin are classified as separate from those of urban origin, each having different ‘citizen’ rights. Later government-initiated agricultural reforms began the process of attempting to correct the bias towards urban manufacturing and service industries. Agricultural prices were increased, the system of product procurement was abolished and restrictions on the movement of labour were lifted, at least from time to time when labour shortages occurred. An important development here (from the 1980s onwards) was the promotion of clusters of rural manufacturing and service industries known as Township and Village Enterprises (TVEs), whose aim it was to strengthen the link between rural and urban sectors.1 Urban-based industries outsourced part of their production to TVEs in order to benefit from the cheaper labour force and technology, and to take advantage of the more relaxed enforcement of environmental, health and safety regulations characteristic of rural areas. A direct result of this was a notable increase in the productivity and income of rural households as some of their members secured jobs in these small industrial enterprises.

CHINA’S NEW RURALITIES2

Since the late 1990s, rural sociologists and anthropologists have addressed much of their research and publications to defining and researching a new agenda of work designed to document the kinds of changes consequent upon increased local/global scenarios (see, for example, Arce 1997; Buttel and McMichael 2005; Long 2001: 224–39; van der Ploeg 1997; Hebinck 2007: 1–13). The present volume aims to contribute to this reconfiguring of theory and practice by stimulating the convergence of new ways of thinking about and researching processes of rural transformation with a special emphasis on exploring the emerging new ruralities of China.3

Worldwide statistical trends and comparative case study data over the last two decades underline the increased involvement of small-scale agricultural producers in global commodity markets, either directly or through contracts with corporate organizations. Indeed a recent comparative study
van der Ploeg (2008) has documented the case for the resurgence of peasant forms of livelihood in both industrialized and developing countries in this era of global food empires. The predominance and reconfiguration of small peasant holdings throughout much of China of course provides an illustrative example. However, this has not been associated with increased homogenization of the rural economy, but rather with processes of diversification wherein the borders between agricultural, industrial and service activities or between rural and urban locations have become increasingly blurred. Bernstein, here in Chapter 3, theorizes such changes in terms of what he calls the ‘straddling’ of on- and off-farm activity, stressing that we should avoid talking about proletarianization and peasantization in a general sense since the vast majority of small-scale farmers fall into what he terms the ‘classes of labour’.

THE BLURRING OF RURAL AND URBAN: SPACE AND AUTHORITY

Alongside this differentiation of types of labour and livelihoods that cross-cut the rural and urban sectors of the economy is the division between, what one might call, the ‘interior’ and ‘exterior’ of rural life, which is now much more ambiguous spatially and in terms of regimes of authority. Thus, while for many local inhabitants, the present-day township or town (xiang/zhen) may be conceptualized as being separate physically and administratively from the domain of the village (xingzhengcun/zirancun), its officials nevertheless retain a strategic degree of authority over such rural locations and their inhabitants. This is akin to what Jean Oi (1998) calls ‘local state corporatism’, which implies a strong pseudo-corporate integration at village and township level, and sometimes in opposition to central government.

Several chapters in this book provide highly revealing ethnographic accounts of the dynamics of village governance and the strategic interplay of relationships between villagers, village cadres and township officials. But they do not all entirely endorse Oi’s concept of local state corporatism. For example, a case in point is Chatelard’s case study (Chapter 14) of the implementation of a village-level project promoted under the ‘Construction of the New Countryside’ programme, initiated in 2006. Her main focus is to explore the multiple meanings of ‘accountability’ and the ways in which these are negotiated and renegotiated within a network of relationships involving villagers and officials. She concludes, however, that there exists no fixed coherent political order or set of alliances between the actors involved. Instead their actions and discourses are
shaped by ‘the necessarily incessant reinvention of the boundaries of the “legitimate”’ (p. 383), thus underlining the shifting nature of political and semantic components, rather than the more fixed notion of ‘corporativism’. In addition, Liu Jinlong’s research on the vicissitudes and obstacles entailed in the implementation of a village forest management project in NW China comes to a somewhat similar conclusion, though in the end he is inclined to the view that it is the alliance between long-standing village leaders and key township officials that permits a degree of gerrymandering that eventually undermines the project and the efforts of the implementers (see Chapter 13).

We also encounter cases where village collective enterprises have successfully retained their independence and consolidated their control over critical local resources. For example, Chan et al. (2009) provide a vivid account of how boundaries between villagers and outsiders or newcomers have been more sharply reinforced in a south China village as a result of the impact of over 20 years of industrialization, urbanization and globalization. Their study highlights how the original villagers, the ‘insiders’, who now control the bulk of the collective assets of the community, lead middle-class lifestyles supported by the proceeds from rental properties and underpinned by a mini-welfare system provided by the village government, while the much larger number of ‘outsiders’ or ‘newcomers’ work in the manufacturing plants that have taken root there.

**LAND AND OTHER RESOURCES**

Throughout the world social change in agrarian situations has been accompanied by conflict over land and resources in both rural and urban locations and China is no exception. These have sometimes resulted in modifications in or manipulation of existing legal frameworks affecting land ownership, use and management. Rural China itself is currently in the throes of dealing with complex land-related issues, which in many cases can be traced back to the introduction (in the early 1980s) of the household contract responsibility system based on the leasing out of collective property to individual households and subsequent sub-letting. Zhao Xudong, in Chapter 6, contextualizes these conflicts and traces their historical roots, which he believes is essential for comprehending the complexities and ambiguities of land ownership and use rights in the contemporary situation. He then applies his analysis to an understanding of land property rights and the leasing out and sharecropping of land in a south China village. As one highly influential recent study (Ho 2005: 7–11) demonstrates, the changes that followed Deng Xiaoping’s land reform resulted...
in a mismatch between the ‘privatization’ of capital and, to a degree, agricultural labour, vis-à-vis the continued ownership of land exercised by the state and the collectives.

Whether in China or elsewhere – and whatever the policy measures adopted by the state or regional government – major agrarian and social reform tends to acquire its own momentum. That is, it becomes relatively self-generating in the sense that change can never simply be imposed or dictated by outside authorities or power holders. The different actors involved – peasant smallholders, village collectives, commercial farmers, agricultural workers, private companies, government bureaucrats, party officials, property developers and, in some cases, city folk moving into the countryside to enjoy a more rural lifestyle – all struggle to advance their own particular interests and to have a say in what happens to rural resources over the short and longer term. In recognition of this, rural research in China (and elsewhere) has moved towards addressing these complex, actor-driven and negotiated processes. One interesting Chinese case study is Murphy (2002). She underlines the dynamic role played by migrant returnees (including women) in investing in the local economy in Jiangxi Province, lobbying for changes to local tax policies, generating opportunities for more diversified livelihoods and thus contributing to the overall development of rural towns and villages in the region.

In similar vein, Augustin-Jean’s (2009) study of the Chinese sugar industry demonstrates that, despite the strong official discourse on introducing market mechanisms into the production, processing and commercialization of sugar, it is inter-organizational social practices and key actor networks that articulate with state bureaucrats that explain how the industry actually works. Here the essence of China’s so-called economic ‘liberalization’ measures are revealed as consisting of a series of interlocking actor projects that are negotiated across different domains, thus showing how the central state, local governments, private and state-owned enterprises interconnect and come to terms with each other so that the costs and gains are distributed among the key players. Frequently, these outcomes run counter to what appear to be the best market options. The outcomes also impact (sometimes positively but also negatively) on the agency of farmers and local groups. This example also warns against reducing issues of producing, processing, marketing, retailing and responding to consumer demands to a process of adding economic value to commodities. Rather it constitutes a series of arenas of struggle in which the various parties involved contest notions of ‘quality’, ‘convenience’ and ‘price’.5 Villarreal in Chapter 4 expands this perspective to cover the larger questions of how, in fact, to reconceptualize theoretically ‘value’, ‘capital’ and ‘financial practices’ – all central to developing a better grasp of peoples’
everyday livelihoods, needs and well-being. The latter are, of course, likely to be shaped by gender difference and by the sociocultural components of economic transactions in general. Her approach therefore has much to do with how peasants, families and individuals cope with their necessarily limited life circumstances, and thus suggests connections with many of the other chapters of this book.

Another critical point is the fact that farmers and agricultural workers sometimes fear that heavy commitment to outside markets and institutions will threaten or marginalize their interests. In such circumstances they may show strong allegiance to existing lifestyles, and jump to the defence of local knowledge and livelihood practices. On the other hand, if intervening parties, such as transnational companies, the state or retail organizations, fail to take seriously the ways in which people mobilize and use resources through existing social networks and cultural commitments, then they run the risk of being rejected by, or distanced from the life experiences and priorities of local producers and consumers and their families. It is important, therefore, to be alert to the dangers of assuming the potency and driving force of external institutions, interests and narratives – whether global or national – since they represent only one set among a large array of actors who shape outcomes.

LOCAL AUTONOMY VERSUS HEGEMONIC CONTROL

The results of these processes are complex and varied and highlight the many ways of organizing and creating space for negotiation or increasing autonomy. While many previous studies on rural China have stressed the centralist character of the state and its capacity to impose policy ‘solutions’ on various sectors of the rural population, in recent years this has given way to a burgeoning of field studies that have challenged this simplistic interpretation.

Among such studies are a series of detailed ethnographies of village politics and the subtle manoeuvres devised by both township- and village-level leaders and their supporters to successfully subvert or re-channel funds towards their own pet projects. For example, Wang Yihuan (2003) explores the non-linear nature of ‘participatory’ development intervention, in a case funded by a German non-governmental organization (NGO) offering to finance local household-based credit schemes in Hebei Province, north-west of Beijing. This is rejected by all local leaders in favour of using the funds to upgrade their existing water supply system. So, in the end, the donor has to back off and give way to local wishes. The
project is particularly interesting because — in true ‘participatory’ spirit — the researcher herself was a main figure in the participatory intervention team. This, as it were, allowed her to act as the candid camera of the project and thus the means by which to question a number of accepted wisdoms, both theoretical and practical, characteristic of participatory projects in general. In fact, the agreements reached and the organizational forms that result from such situations are built upon a set of interlocking actor ‘projects’ generated by the encounters, negotiations and accommodations that take place, even though some actors may never in fact meet face to face (Long 2001: 49–72; Long and van der Ploeg 1994). The influence of actors who are remote from the action situation is especially pertinent in an age where information technology increasingly penetrates into everyday life. In some instances, farmers now communicate through mobile phones with colleagues and maybe farm workers in the fields, and some possess computers that can directly access national and global commodity markets for up-to-date information on prices and product turnover.

MIGRATION AND HOUSEHOLD-BASED PEASANT ENTERPRISES

Wage-earning migrants living outside their communities of origin constitute an important source of information and capital. Their remittances not only subsidize the incomes and livelihood activities of family and other kin at home, but they may also be crucial for establishing new income-generating activities and enterprises and sustaining new lifestyles in their places of origin. The designation of these rural industries as ‘Township and Village Enterprises’, mentioned earlier, suggests an association with the earlier ‘commune’ and ‘brigade’ enterprises of the collectivization period, thus emphasizing their ‘collective’ nature, and many scholars have indeed simply assumed this to be the case. However, recently this has been clarified by in-depth archival and survey data compiled by Yasheng Huang (2008: 73) who argues that the TVE category was primarily used as a locational concept to indicate that they were enterprises found at both township and village levels, but were not necessarily organized by the village or township collective. In fact he shows that the vast majority of these enterprises (even at the early stage of the reforms) were privately owned businesses or workshops (Huang 2008: 77–8). In 1985, they were reclassified by the ministry of agriculture into three ownership categories: collective, privately run and self-employed household businesses. At that time, there were 1.57 million collective enterprises as against 0.53 million private ones, and 10.1 million classified as household businesses. Broadly speaking, this
distribution remained the same up to 1996 when the number of private TVEs overtook the collectively owned or managed ones. It is also worth underlining that throughout these years household businesses accounted for between one-third and one-half of all those employed by TVEs, thus attesting to the central role played by smallholder peasant families in the economic diversification and urbanization of the countryside.

Murphy’s (2002) detailed study of enterprises established by returnee village migrants in Jiangxi Province, east China, adds more detail to this picture by exploring differences in the operational styles and backgrounds of the founders of 81 manufacturing and service sector businesses. She distinguishes between the large-scale, more formalized urban factories and the smaller-scale enterprises operating on a ‘familial petty commodity mode of production’. Most of them had set up independent privately owned and managed businesses, while a few had purchased or were contracted to run existing collective or state enterprises. Only a few operated agricultural businesses, focusing, for example, on the cultivation or rearing of specialized food products (such as bullfrogs, eels, pigeons, fruits and tea). One of her more interesting findings was that only 13 women (that is, 15 per cent) in the sample were running TVEs. This smaller number of women entrepreneurs roughly paralleled the male/female ratio of out-migrants from the research area. According to a 1993 survey conducted in the same area, some 22 per cent of out-migrants were women. Murphy also notes that enterprises are often joint ventures between husband and wife.

Ye’s 2002 study also gives examples of initiatives jointly undertaken by spouses. One couple started a clothes making enterprise producing the latest fashions for the city markets (2002: 210–18). Women are often involved in weighing up the value of different kinds of activities and entrepreneurial ventures, but it is usually the men who return to start up the small enterprises, whereas women mostly return to marry or to care for family members, though some use their experiences working in manufacturing to start entrepreneurial activities.

THE BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF INDUSTRIAL LABOUR

This capacity to maximize the benefits of living in city environments and working in assembly-line factories or service delivery firms is graphically illustrated in a study of factory girls in Dongguan, an industrial city in the Pearl River Delta (Chang 2008). The account is woven around the lives of two unmarried youngsters who seek work and social advancement outside the confines of village life. The work and conditions were
arduous – 13 working hours a day with two short breaks for meals and the nights spent in over crowded bunk rooms – receiving only 400 yuan (or $50) a month, though the pay was often late, and deductions would be made for ‘bad behaviour’, such as talking on the job. Yet most girls stuck it out, their progress depending largely on their ability to stand up to supervisors and demonstrate their work skills. Those with a modicum of education and good level of literacy would then gradually be promoted to more responsible positions and thus increase their earnings. But accumulating savings necessitated avoiding the temptation to overspend on luxury items such as stylish clothes, make-up and a busy social life, and instead required devoting some of one’s earnings and spare time to attending classes on useful skills such as computerization, bookkeeping and other administrative techniques. In addition, most workers attempted to learn some English, which they found especially useful if employed by a transnational firm.

The study also reveals how during the 1980s and early 1990s village migrants set off for the city with relatively little knowledge of what they might meet. They were ‘often driven by a family’s need for cash and the desire to build a house back home’ (Chang 2008: 105). The early migrants were mainly seasonal workers who returned home to provide much needed labour for harvesting the crops and, eventually, once they had accumulated what they judged as a reasonable amount, they would marry and settle back in the village. Then in later years, we witness not only the out-migration of younger and better educated migrants but also a constant stream of both older single and married persons and sometimes the entire nuclear family, but mostly as couples or the husband or wife alone. This absence of family members – sometimes lasting for several years – puts considerable pressure on both sides, leading also to what has been described as the problem of the ‘left behind children’ (see Ye Jingzhong et al. 2005; Chapter 10, this volume).

THE CENTRALITY OF HUKOU STATUS

At this point it is important to re-emphasize that relations between rural and urban spaces in China are influenced by the hukou system of residential registration whereby persons of rural origin are classified as separate from those of urban origin, though, on the other hand, seen in welfare terms rural registration is a safety net when unemployment strikes (see Christiansen, Chapter 5 and Zhou Daming and Huang Xueliang, Chapter 8, both in this book). The main implication of this is that migrants from rural areas working in urban zones are not entitled officially to remain
there indefinitely, nor do they receive the same level of rights to education, health and housing as do urban-registered people. On the other hand, rural hukou status gives the right to farm village land, acquire a plot on which to build a family house, and gives access to educational and minimum health services. Nowadays, and mainly due to the increase in the number of workers and residents of rural origin in the urban areas, the hukou system is under pressure. Moreover, since the economic downturn in the autumn of 2008, followed by the laying off of thousands of industrial workers and the like, there have been much larger numbers of people seeking to secure the benefits of a basic survival strategy back in the home village.

For a long time the hukou rural/urban system of registration was the single most important obstacle to the advancement of rural livelihoods and aspirations. Although countless rural migrant workers have made a great contribution to the development of cities, they do not enjoy the same level of rights and treatment as urban citizens and this makes it virtually impossible for family members to accompany migrant workers, especially dependent children. Furthermore, children who have studied in rural schools are unlikely to compete effectively with urban-educated children for places in city high schools and in any case, the costs entailed for rural migrants would be prohibitive, since such workers find it difficult enough to meet their own daily expenses. So, in the end, the majority of workers from rural backgrounds spend considerable periods in urban areas, while their dependents remain in their rural home community. This strategy enables them to respond to the heavy economic pressure placed on their families in respect of education, health and rural taxation (Wang Yanbo and Wu Xinlin 2003), though the latter has now been mitigated to a considerable extent by the state’s decision to phase out rural taxes and levies over the period 2002–04.

Clearly then, it can no longer be taken for granted that rural space equals agricultural space or that the central problems for analysis can be reduced to what was called the ‘agrarian question’, namely, the debate concerning the significance of proletarianization versus peasantization of the countryside that was a major preoccupation of agrarian social scientists during the 1970s and 1980s’ or even the recent debate about the usefulness of the concept of ‘repeasantization’ in an era of globalization (see van der Ploeg 2008; and Bernstein, Chapter 3 in this book). That is, we should not privilege agricultural production over other income-earning livelihood activities; and we should go beyond agricultural production and resource issues to look more generally at the utilization of countryside resources. This means a concern for landscape and environmental dimensions, recreation and leisure time pursuits, and the management of forest and water resources.
ECOLOGICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

In the Chinese case it is acknowledged that in the past rural space was identified with collective/village land, designated primarily for the production of staple grains, and worked by peasants under exploitative conditions and associated with a policy of rural industrialization, and in the past with poor concern for conservation and sustainability. In contrast, in recent years, discourse has revolved around issues of ‘ecological stewardship’ of land and natural resources, and the encouragement (wherever possible) of the production of ‘high-quality’, ‘high-yield’ and ‘high-priced’ products, such as those cultivated organically or collected in the countryside (medicinal herbs and ‘exotic’ mushrooms), combined with the promotion of leisure zones and farm tourism. With the growing prosperity among certain sectors of the urban population, there is a growing demand for recreational activities in the countryside, and farmers and communities in areas of natural beauty in particular are responding to this.

These ecological and environmental issues raise central questions about how to attribute value to ‘nature’ and ‘landscapes’ (Liu Jinlong 2006) and how best to manage land and natural resources on a sustainable basis, both of which will depend on achieving some kind of farmer consensus and cooperation. So what would be the ‘natural’ groups or the best ways of doing this in China?

It is at this point that Jan Douwe van der Ploeg’s (Chapter 2) case of farmer organized and initiated territorial cooperatives for managing farming, controlling carbon emissions and preserving valued landscape in a particular area of Holland becomes relevant. Of course, local actors (for example, farmers and traders) and outside professionals (for example, agricultural extensionists, pollution officers, conservationists and research scientists) may differ in their assessments and priorities. They may also differ in the way they represent ‘nature–man’ relations and the ‘environment’ more generally. There is also the more pragmatic question of what measures to use in promoting more sustainable management of natural resources – as for example Liu Jinlong’s attempts to introduce more sustainable forest management in Chapter 13.

A central issue here becomes how the state attempts to control people and territory as against how people in situ go about utilizing and conserving resources and biodiversity. For example, indigenous peoples often have quite different conceptions of their rights and relationships to territory than do national governments. And, in the current context, governments are thus faced with the choice of implementing ‘centralized’ as against ‘decentralized’ modes of control – the latter implying some community involvement in natural resource management. Nowadays
environmental policies are hedged around by a host of regulatory pre-
scriptions and subject to pressures from powerful conservationist lobbies
at national and international level. Moreover, coupled with these environ-
mental and conservation issues is a booming ecotourist industry, which is
often, as suggested above, critically important for the livelihoods of many
rural inhabitants. All these elements and dilemmas are readily seen in dif-
ferent ecological zones of China.

A further way in which rural space is being reconfigured concerns the
movement of rural producers and families from comparatively disadvan-
tagged localities or regions to more resource-rich rural locations. While this
may be driven by economic incentives or ecological pressures of one kind
or another, the construction of large-scale development projects is associ-
ated with processes of social dislocation, the rebuilding of livelihoods and
the social reconstruction of communities and groups. This is the case with
the construction of the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River in central
China, and resettlement in more favourably endowed habitats (whether
voluntary or forced, planned or not) This challenges policy practitioners
to find ways of resolving the problems in accordance with the expressed
wishes and adaptive capacities of the groups affected. 

ORGANIZATION OF THE VOLUME

From the discussion so far, we see how closely the chapters in the book
reflect the theoretical and practical issues of new ruralities. The volume is
organized around four themes:

1. Theoretical perspectives on agrarian development and change.
2. Peasant livelihood issues.
3. The urbanization of the countryside and migration dilemmas.

Part I identifies critical questions – both theoretical and empirical – that
occupy four well-known social researchers studying issues of rural devel-
opment. These range from broad concerns about the ways in which agrar-
ian life is reshaped by global and state-inspired interventions, to detailed
accounts of how various agrarian actors respond to and reshape the sets
of relations and scenarios they find themselves in. The contributors differ
in their theoretical points of view, but grouped together they offer useful
insights into contemporary issues of rural transformation.

Arturo Escobar (Chapter 1) opens by tracking historically and criti-
cally how ‘development’ as both discourse and practice emerged following
World War II, which together with the phenomenon of ‘euro-modernity’, came to form the basis of modernization theory and its many variants. By the late 1980s, this theoretical paradigm was seriously criticized for its unilinear, externalist and top-down presumptions. As Escobar spells out, the attack on such dominant modernity models was first mounted by Latin American scholars, and later by other ‘third world’ and ‘western’ researchers, eventually crystallizing into what became known as the ‘post-colonial’ debate. The latter introduced the notion of ‘alternative modernities’ or, more penetratingly, ‘alternatives to modernity’, upon which Escobar outlines what he calls ‘a framework for thinking about and beyond development in terms of ecological, cultural and economic difference’. His discussion concludes with an attempt to explore briefly the applicability of these issues to Chinese rural development contexts and processes.

Jan Douwe van der Ploeg’s contribution (Chapter 2) concentrates on the emergence of ‘territorial cooperatives’ developed by farmers, which are area based and bring together various types of farming units (arable, horticulture and dairy farming). Such cooperatives serve the interests of their members (mostly family farmers) by developing programmes that aim to enrich and strengthen the ecological and social resources of a given area, and in so doing to improve livelihoods and employment opportunities. Van der Ploeg explores these issues through an analysis of the formation and workings of the Northern Frisian Woodlands cooperative in the Netherlands. But his account goes beyond the particularities of this case to argue that these ‘new’ territorial cooperatives represent a ‘peasant-like’ response to the many difficulties that small-scale farmers now face throughout the world, including China.

Henry Bernstein (Chapter 3) stresses the need to engage with issues of class differentiation when analysing the pattern of rural poverty, its causes and the role played by specific policy alleviation interventions. In order to pursue this, he provides a synthetic overview of the politico-economic ‘coordinates’ of agrarian transformation under different historical circumstances. His analytical approach focuses on issues of commodification and the interplay of commodity and non-commodity value. He stresses that in the present context it is centrally important to understand the ‘straddling’ of on- and off-farm activity as well as working for self and others. He also suggests that we should avoid talking about proletarianization or peasanthization in a general sense since the vast majority of small-scale farmers in developing countries fall into what he calls ‘classes of labour’. That is, they are not in possession of the necessary means to reproduce fully their own mode of living, nor are they fully dependent on wage employment. This he maintains is just as important to China as it is to other parts of the
developing world, since many of the labouring poor survive across different sites (rural and urban) of the social division of labour.

The final contribution to this part, by Magdalena Villarreal (Chapter 4), critiques the meanings attached to the concepts of ‘value’ and ‘capital’ in the literature on development intervention, drawing upon detailed ethnographic data from Mexico that highlight the significance of gender difference. Her analysis explores the array of meanings and calculations applied by women vis-à-vis certain kinds of ‘capital’ assets, transactions, and livelihood activities in such a way that it raises fundamental doubts about the treatment of the concepts of ‘value’ and ‘capital’ in existing studies.

In Part II the book focuses upon livelihoods, well-being and land issues. Flemming Christiansen (Chapter 5) explores the intersection of peasant livelihoods and state intervention in China following the implementation of the household contract responsibility system of land holding that grew out of a series of experimental measures carried out by peasant farmers in Anhui Province. He points out that the idea of the household responsibility system appealed especially to liberal economists of the period for its emphasis on ‘individualistic incentives for peasants and the efficiency of the peasant household as a production unit’, with increased productivity and agricultural growth rates, even though land ownership remained in the hands of the village collectives. In contrast to the communes, it was now the individual household that was expected to bear the full weight of risks such as crop failure, ill health and other calamities. It was reasoned that building a strong family-based mode of farming would also mitigate some of the problems caused by the mass movement out of agriculture as peasants sought work in the expanding cities. On the basis of these kinds of structural changes, Christiansen enters into a discussion of peasant livelihood strategies, highlighting some of the intricacies and dilemmas that are generated for families and their kin, illustrating this by analysing the changes associated with preferred patterns of exogamous marriage, bridewealth and dowry practices and pointing to evidence of migrant daughters improving their status and bargaining power vis-à-vis family and other assets.

Zhao Xudong (Chapter 6) extends Christiansen’s contribution by exploring the issues surrounding land ownership, land use and symbolic value. He begins with the ongoing debates in China regarding land reform and privatization, arguing that there is a strong need to examine in detail what is happening in specific agrarian situations. This he illustrates through a village study in south China, documenting how farmers deal with land issues and how they trade, rent, sharecrop, sublet and in other creative ways use their land. He also shows the connection between these processes and off-farm activities and investments.

In Part III we move to issues of the urbanization of the countryside,
introduced by Bryan Roberts’s review of contemporary patterns of urbanization in the developing world and their implications for rural development (Chapter 7). Two aspects are salient, namely, migration and the administrative and economic de-centralization that accompanies urbanization in much of the contemporary world. He discusses patterns of rural urbanization whereby rural settlements are gradually integrated into a larger regional system of urban and industrial centres of production, bolstered by government and private (often foreign) investment. His mainly Latin American examples serve well for depicting similar processes in China.

Zhou Daming and Huang Xueliang in their chapter on Phoenix village provide an example of this process by which the village becomes part of a larger township and regional setting (Chapter 8). The study is particularly interesting since the village was the site of detailed anthropological work on the Chinese peasantry in the 1920s. Their re-study thus makes it possible to depict the extent to which the social and economic life of the village has been transformed. Their discussion concentrates on how urbanization of the village has led to changes in village lifestyles, cultural orientations and organizational forms consequent upon its incorporation into the surrounding network of towns and cities in the Guangdong area of China, where industrialized forms of production have taken root since the 1970s. The study provides interesting everyday life material on food habits, transport connections, entertainments and communication media, providing a snapshot picture of generational differences. It concludes by discussing the meanings and implication of talking about ‘villages in townships’ or cities in the Chinese context.

The next two contributions, by Gail Mummert (Chapter 9) and Ye Jingzhong et al. (Chapter 10), are also closely related. They deal with the series of problems and dilemmas affecting Mexican and Chinese families that suffer separation due to members migrating for work or other reasons. Mummert focuses on children and the elderly, whereas Ye et al. concentrate on the difficulties for children and guardians (mothers, grandparents and others) of children left behind in the village. Hierarchical generational and gendered relations coupled with family ideologies figure largely in the work of Mummert, and frame what women and men, mothers and fathers, or sons and daughters expect of each other and how this changes over time and in relation to context. She also discusses whether the state ought not play a bigger welfare role. Ye et al. focus more on the vulnerabilities, and emotional, physical and educational needs of left-behind children and how the absence of a parent or parents can affect the well-being of both children and carers or guardians. Their study attempts to give children and their guardians a voice and thus increase awareness of the plight of left-behind children by state officials and public institutions.
Part IV consists of four chapters that deal with issues of policy intervention and local participation. Alberto Arce (Chapter 11) opens with the more general question of how to frame and conceptualize the notion of development invention. In doing so he takes a strong actor and interface perspective. He provides a historical overview of policy thinking and critically reviews different analytical approaches to understanding the policy process. Throughout, he attempts to demonstrate the case for including and giving more attention to the ways in which local actors and organized groups define the problems they face, draw upon various narratives of democracy and devise strategic modes of response. A central thread throughout is the need for policy to give space for civic participation.

Li Xiaoyun and Liu Xiaqian (Chapter 12) focus on questions of participatory development, reviewing the history and dynamics of the Chinese experience. Participatory development was introduced in China by international organizations in the 1990s. It aimed to facilitate change in China’s system of top-down planning and bring about a more ‘people-centred’ discourse. However, empowerment remains limited. The chapter looks at participation in relation to village poverty alleviation schemes. The authors explore the methodology used to ensure that funds allocated reach the poor, highlighting its shortcomings. Subsequently, targeting was moved from county to village level. The chapter highlights the problems and contradictions involved in implementing such a participatory method in a situation where there is still a degree of hegemonic control by the party and local government officials.

Relating to this same participatory theme is the chapter by Liu Jinlong (Chapter 13). The case study presented is located in a forest region of Gansu Province, northwest China, where the natural forest protection programme had been implemented. His aim as a forestry researcher himself was to establish a pilot European Community (EC)-funded project to establish village committees for forest management planning. The case study again highlights the continuities and transformations in the structure of power and authority in present-day rural China.

All the struggles and conflicts that followed the attempt to form a planning committee in the ten project villages were conducted in the name of forest management, but in reality they had little to do with forests at all, but with alliances between village and township leaders and their attempts to control the committees and fund allocation.

The final contribution, by Solange Guo Chatelard (Chapter 14), explores the theoretical implications of the currently vogue notion of ‘accountability’, together with a specific local case study of a Chinese government project that falls under the national programme for the ‘construction of the new countryside’. This ongoing programme focuses on the improvement
of living conditions and livelihoods and the creation of conditions for a more ‘harmonious’ and social society. She shows that the project comes to fruition (that is, in the form of new amenities and administrative building and car park), thanks to a ‘multifaceted concert of individual and collective negotiations, and through the long-standing but permanently evolving social practice of Guanxi’. In the process she discovers there is an implied semantic field of possible complementary concepts that can be associated with ‘accountability’ which do not exist per se in Chinese. This chapter then ties together a number of strands – semantic, social, political and symbolic meanings around the idea of ‘development’.

NOTES

1. For a detailed analysis this type of enterprise and its performance levels, see Huang (2008: 68–85).
3. For a comprehensive overview of China’s recent agricultural performance and rural development initiatives, see Sonntag et al. (2005). The report also gives useful information on markets and fiscal policy, farmer associations, public services, off-farm activities, labour migration, agricultural research, extension services, water management, land security, rental markets for cultivated and environmental problems. China had achieved a high level of food security and food production capacity.
4. To understand fully the dynamics and outcomes of such social struggles necessitates coming to grips with the problematic of resistance to hegemonic authority and the centrality of a theory of agency (see Long 2007: 69–89).
5. See Long and Villarreal (1998) for an analysis of maize husk commodity networks that span the Mexican–US border. Maize husks are used for making tomates, a characteristic Mexican food speciality. There is a scarcity of maize husks in the USA because a proportion of the maize crop is directly processed into animal feed.
6. I cannot here elaborate but this issue raises the important question of the kinds of change that marriage customs have undergone since the 1980s. There have been substantial shifts in the scale, attributed meanings and practices associated with marriage payments which often allow the bride herself to achieve greater control over asset bargaining and use. There is also the intriguing dilemma that the migrant married woman may face, namely, whether she should favour her husband’s household or that of her natal home in respect of remittances and any other gifts she may wish to give them. A second highly pertinent dimension is the extent to which their access to outside earnings (and perhaps substantial savings) carries with it the possibility of negotiating a better deal in respect of their status in both their husband’s family as well as vis-à-vis their own parents and siblings. Chang (2008: esp. pages 369–76) provides a perceptive account of how an unmarried migrant woman, who returns to her home village to attend a cousin’s wedding and to visit her family, leads to a consolidation of her status position in the family and village such that she is able to dictate family affairs and wield a high degree of power. Her ability to do this rested firmly on what she had learnt and what she had accumulated in cash and experience during her working years in Dongguan.
8. Adopting this broader view of rural space and activities requires finding ways of bridging evident disjunctures between distinct bodies of research, for example, those of rural sociology and economics, and those of ecological and environmental studies. Whereas
the former have generally focused on issues of production, consumption and commodity values in the context of state intervention and globalization, the latter have principally concerned themselves with the conceptual issue of how to relate natural resource and environmental issues to social phenomena. Here there is a need to synthesize these contrasting perspectives so as to achieve greater insight into questions of diversity and change in the countryside.

9. Government-initiated resettlement schemes abound throughout rural China and much debate about how one should classify them (that is, as ‘spontaneous’, ‘voluntary’, ‘compulsory’ or a mixture). Lin Zhibin (2003) provides an interesting comparative analysis of two contrasting cases of resettlement in Ningxia Autonomous Region and Yunnan Province.

REFERENCES


