Social transformation in rural China

Book section

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In the three decades since the end of Maoism, the Chinese countryside has undergone extraordinary social transformations. Travelling through the provinces of central China, one cannot fail to note the ubiquitous construction of new houses, generally of bricks and concrete. In all but the most remote villages, modern consumer goods have arrived, such as electrical appliances, washing machines, radio-cassette players, TV sets, motor bikes, mobile phones etc.[1] Among the younger generation, literacy is close to universal, and mass media (TV in particular) reaches most farm households. Both work and consumption are increasingly integrated into market economies, not least because of large-scale labour migration (Murphy 2002, Steinmüller 2013:ch.3). The family and the household continue to be the basic units of production and consumption, and of ritual exchange; but all these social spheres are now also deeply intertwined with the logic of markets for commodities. Rural industrialisation, administrative restructuring and the prioritisation of economic development have fundamentally changed rural politics. People confront all this in everyday life, which is characterised now by contingency and heightened moral ambiguities.[2]

This chapter provides a brief overview of the social transformations that have taken place in rural China. I first deal with economic change: local commercialization, labour migration, and the changes in land ownership. This leads over to the political changes in local communities, specifically in terms of political administration, participation, and the relationship between various levels of government and local communities. The final section presents some broad generalizations about the modernization processes that have taken place in the countryside, and what they mean in terms of the social integration of communities, nation-state building, individualization and moral change.

Economic change

In terms of agricultural production, the decisive change of the era of reform and opening was the introduction of the 'household responsibility system' (*jiating lianchan chengbao zerenzhi*), through which use rights to agricultural land were given back to individual households. Famously, the new system was first tried out in some villages in Anhui province[3], and in 1981-82 most provinces of central China followed.

[1] The arrival of such consumer goods and the changes in house construction are similarly reported in most ethnographic accounts of rural China in the last two decades (e.g. Yan 1996; Ruf 1998; Han 2001; Ku 2004).

[2] Over the last decades, there has been a proliferation of academic texts which discuss moral and ethical struggles in rural China (e.g. Madsen 1984; Croll 1994; Ku 2004; Liu 2000; Yan Y. 2003; Yan 2010), see also Oxfeld in this volume.

[3] The village in which local farmers themselves first implemented the new system, was Xiaogang in Anhui (see Chen and Wu 2009).

During the Maoist era (1949-1976) agricultural land had been administered and worked by the collectives of production brigades and work teams. Yet in principle, the absolute ownership of land has been with the Chinese state ever since the land reform in 1951. Deriving from this basic principle, land rights are characterized by a particular combination of collective ownership and individual use rights. Since the introduction of the "household responsibility system" in 1982, farm households contract the use and income rights to agricultural land from the most basic collective, the village. Generally, land contracts are established between the village administration and a household represented by a household head (*huzhu*), based on the number of persons in the household; sometimes also based on household labour force, or a combination of the two (cf. Liu et al 1998). The distribution of land use rights amongst rural households is done according to egalitarian principles by the village authorities, usually the leaders of the village committee and party branch. In actual fact, land is distributed via social agreement and mutual control between neighbours and village leaders. Since land distribution is done on the basis of demographic features, it needs to be re-adjusted intermittently.

Whilst property in land had been based both on social agreement in local communities and state registers (generally related to the extraction of taxes), there has never been a very accurate cadastre of agricultural land plots until the present day. Even though the borders of agricultural plots are generally not marked by boundary stones, the boundaries are locally known to those who work the land, and there are ditches between fields and scalings of terraces. The recognition of "property" or "ownership" to particular plots in practice is left to local communities. In 1982, farmers estimated and distributed the land plots together. In the case of land conflicts, sometimes the land registration titles issued by the village government are produced. But the most crucial issue has remained recognition of ownership by one's relatives and neighbours. Government officials interfere only in exceptional situations, and local agreement often operates without explicit confirmation or oversight by legal statute or local officials. In some ways this is fairly similar to the way property rights were treated during the late Qing dynasty (1644-1911 CE): whilst the state was concerned with tax extraction and social stability, property dealings and contracts were largely left to local society (Gilmartin and Ocko 2009:74ff). Deployed with the new political orientations of the reform era, such mutual control and social agreement within local communities has resulted in relatively egalitarian land distribution, as empirical studies in the 1980s and 90s showed consistently (cf. Kung 1995, 2000, Liu et al 1998). Farmers throughout China have also regularly re-allocated landholding rights in local communities, usually to ensure a relatively egalitarian distribution of land between neighbours (Kong and Unger 2013).

Yet there are also several major discontinuities when compared with late imperial China: use rights to land are now conceived as a contract between the village collective and individual households, and the party-state continually creates new laws which have a direct impact on property.

Land rights are of utmost ideological significance for the Chinese party-state. The current system of use rights is justified in terms of land as a means of production, as food security for the Chinese nation, and as a form of livelihood security for the rural population. But the increasing marketization of the Chinese economy and high-speed urbanisation have led to a widening gap between the ideological presentation of land

rights, and the pragmatic realities of a market economy. Even though there is a trend towards land rights that are more like individual property rights, a deliberate institutional ambiguity in land rights allows the state to experiment with new forms of property in land, and helps to avoid open conflict (Ho 2001).

At the same time, there has been a broad expansion of commercial and large-scale agriculture (Donaldson and Zhang 2008). This expansion has taken place to some extent against the state's continued allegiance to collective land rights; and in the interaction of agribusiness with small-scale peasant producers, collective land rights still provide some bargaining power for small producers (Donaldson and Zhang 2013). The limits that China's agribusinesses encounter inside the People's Republic also partly explains the expansion of China's agribusiness into Southeast Asia and elsewhere abroad (Luo et al 2011).

Matching the particular system of property rights and land distribution, increasing commercialisation and specialisation of agricultural production, together with the declining importance of agricultural production for the livelihoods of most households, is the fact that agricultural land is accorded relatively little value as a source of identification for particular families. Farmers recognize clearly that they have only use rights to the land, and generally prefer the current combination of collective ownership and individual use rights (Kung 1995, Kung and Liu 1997). Whilst the identification of one particular family with its land has been thoroughly broken, agricultural plots are now symbolic of the egalitarian ideals of the nation-state.

Another crucial change that has occurred in the last two decades – described by some as the core of the 'hidden revolution in Chinese agriculture' (Huang 2010) - is the replacement of staple crops with higher-value foods. This revolution is 'hidden', because it is less 'visible' than the agricultural revolutions that took place in other countries. Instead of the introduction of new agricultural technologies, or changes in rural society itself, this revolution is mainly driven by external structural factors. Aside from the general changes in Chinese society and economy, Philip Huang and Peng Yusheng (2007) identify three macro trends that furthered the replacement of staple crops with higher-value crops: the decreasing natural growth rate of the rural population, the transfer of rural labour to non-agricultural jobs, and changing food consumption patterns in the People's Republic of China. As a consequence, this agricultural revolution does not so much focus on broad increases in crop yields, but rather in a shift from staple crops to cash crops and higher-value foodstuff such as vegetables, fruits, diary and meat.[4]

In this process, it remains an open question as to how family farming will do when compared with corporate producers. It has been suggested that family farming is still strong, and that local political economies, in particular the mediation of local producers' access to markets, has a decisive influence on this process (Zhang 2013).

Aside from the changes in agricultural production, local industries have also played a decisive role in the changing economic landscape of the Chinese countryside. The earliest stages of this process can again be found in the republican era, when Fei

[4] For an example for the introduction of the cash crop tea, replacing staple crops (predominantly paddy rice and potatoes) in Southwestern Hubei, see Steinmüller 2013: chapter 3.

Xiaotong declared rural industry to be the main challenge for the modernization of the countryside; he became a very influential proponent of rural industrialization in the 1980s and 90s (Fei 1986a; 1989). He promoted in particular the 'Wenzhou Model' of small, rural-based industry (Fei 1986b; 1995; 1999; Ye and Wei 2005).

During the Maoist era, local collective industries were built up in many townships, but rural sideline industries were discouraged, and depending on the tides of mobilizations and campaigns were often completely forbidden. In the Reform and Opening Era, rural industries played an ever-increasing role. Some have argued that it was in fact rural industries, first in the form of so-called Township and Village Enterprises (TVEs), that were responsible for much of China's economic growth, especially in the 1980s (Huang 2012). These local industries were often former collective enterprises that were sold off to private individuals – often the same officials who had previously managed those industries for collectives. In this situation, rural officials frequently turned into entrepreneurs, and local relationships of kin and community played decisive rules in early rural industrialization (see for instance Ruf 1998, Ko 2004). The entanglement of local politics and kin networks in this transformation also continued to play decisive roles in access, ownership and property rights in new rural enterprises (Oi and Waler 1999, Brandtstädter 2003b).

Aside from a change in national policy, such local flexible arrangements contributed much to the early success of rural industrialization. Additionally, the skills – from literacy to craftsmanship and professionalization – built up during the Maoist Era arguably also facilitated rural industrialization in the era of Reform and Opening (Bramall 2007).

The development of local industries is paralleled by the changes in local markets. Before 1949, periodical peasant markets were common all over rural China (Skinner 1964; 1965a; 1965b). During the Maoist era, these periodical peasant markets were tightly controlled and sometimes completely forbidden. Since the 1980s, these markets have seen a huge revival in most of urban China (Sinner 1985); and have proven remarkably resilient. Even though it was expected that the development of road networks, modern transport, and in particular permanent shops and retail marketing in more central market places would finally replace periodical peasant markets, the relatively lax regulations for itinerant trading and the difficulties in establishing permanent larger shops ensured the continuing importance of periodical marketing in much of rural China up until the early 2000s (Rozelle, Huang and Benziger 2003). With further modernization of transport networks, and the installation of supermarkets and retailers in many townships, many such periodical markets might now, however, be finally in decline.

Parallel to rural industrialization and the marketization of the rural economy another crucial social and demographic change took place: the rise of rural-to-urban labour migration (see chapters by Florence, Zoccatelli, Fong et al, Yiu in this volume). Since the 1980s, the household registration system of the *hukou* was gradually loosened and allowed the rural population to enter the cities as temporary labour migrants. The number of internal labour migrants increased gradually during the 1980s and 90s. Various observers speak of a 'new generation of rural labour migrants' in the 2000s that is characterized by higher levels of education, new consumer orientations and lifecycle goals, and a higher consciousness of their rights, when compared with the

first generation (e.g. Wu 2009). In recent years, the number of migrant workers has also slowly declined.[5]

Rural migrants are the main provider of labour in the special economic zones of coastal China and construction labour in all major Chinese cities. Rural-to-urban labour migration has happened against the background of massively growing inequalities between the countryside and the city.[6]

Internal Migration in China is one of the main factors contributing to urbanization. Out-migration has lead to a 'hollowing' and 'greying' of rural society – often it is only the old who remain in the countryside. At the same time, many labour migrants return periodically to the countryside. As long as they do not manage to acquire an urban hukou, they still face discriminatory treatment in the cities, especially with regards to health and education (Chan 2012).

At the same time, the phenomenon of rural migration has substantially changed the social landscape of rural China. Much of the income that rural labourers gain in the cities is spent on life-cycle goals such as house construction, weddings and funerals and many labour migrants eventually return to the countryside (Murphy 2002).

Politics

The official organization of China's rural governments and administrative units has its roots in the Maoist era.[7] Before 1949, local governance on the village level was still based on a combination of lineage organizations, family elders, and in many regions temple organizations, brotherhoods, and sometimes guilds.[8] The Nationalist government and various local warlords attempted to reintroduce the baojia system, a system of local governance and civil control, which had existed already in previous dynasties. But on the whole this system remained incomplete and ineffective in Republican China, not least because of intermittent wars and disorder.[9] In the 1950s and 60s, the Maoist regime extended government administration to the township and village levels. Parallel to the danwei system of work units in the cities, in the countryside production brigades and work teams were organized to govern agricultural production, and other aspects of everyday life, including mobility and marriage. At all levels, the government structure was accompanied by a party structure that followed a hierarchical top-down chain of command that extended from the central party committees down to the party branches of village governments. This dual system of control became a central feature of Chinese politics. On the national level, the opposition between party committees and government bureaucracies often

[5] The National Bureau of Statistics announced that the number of rural migrant workers in February 2015 was 163.31 million, down by 6.02 million or 3.6% when compared with the previous year (National Bureau of Statistics 2015).

[6] According to the National Bureau of Statistics, the average per capita annual income in the countryside was 7 917 RMB in 2013, while in urban areas it was 24 563 RMB (China Statistical Yearbook 2013). For general trends in income inequality in China, see Whyte 2014.

[7] For an overview of continuity and change in the official organization of rural China, see Unger 2012.

[8] For an example from South China, see Siu 1989: ch.3 and ch.4.

[9] For a brief overview of the *baojia* system during the Qing dynasty, see Ch'ü 1962: 180ff; for a general description of rural governance in North China in the late Qing and early Republic, see Li 2005.

fell together with the opposition between 'reds' and 'experts', that is, those who favoured political mobilization versus those who advocated for technocratic governance.[10] The tension between these two different sets of objectives has had its repercussions until the present day; even though on a superficial level it might seem that the experts have long won the battle (I will return to this theme further below).

The administrative divisions of rural China have undergone a series of reforms since the 1980s, when the former "production brigades (*shengchan dadui*) were renamed "villages" and the former "production teams" (*shengchan xiaodui*) disappeared or became "village small groups" (*cunxiaozu*).

Village elections were introduced in the early 1980s (He 2006). Single-candidate, Party selected names of leaders of production teams were submitted for approval by elections in the Mao era. In 1981, local governments experimented with multi-candidate direct elections every three years to the headship of the village committee, as well as elections of the chairs of villager representative assemblies. The first test cases were later followed up at the national level and promoted via the Ministry of Civil Affairs.

There are a number of sources of political power in administrative villages (*xingzheng cun*). Each section, or small group (*xiaozu*), or neighbourhood elects a representative onto the *villager representative assembly.* The villager representative assembly also includes the following officers, selected by the township government: the village treasurer, village secretary, village women's officer, militia head, and others. They form the 'village committee', which leads the assembly. The assembly meets three or four times a year (Oi and Rozelle 2000:519). The representative assembly is a mix of elected and appointed members. The party secretary is appointed by the next level up (mostly township, *xiang*) of the party, and is approved by village party members. The Party Secretary is both the lowest policy-making and –influencing cadre, and the main executive officer of the village administration. In more industrialised villages there is sometimes a special village economic committee or board of directors consisting of the managers of the village enterprises, sometimes including the village head.

Kevin O'Brien and Li Lianjiang (2000) describe the political controversy surrounding village elections of the head of the committee. Support for village elections came from senior members of the Party, who argued that they were the only way to maintain supervision over local cadres, the Party disciplinary organs being unable to do so at the base level because there are just too many base level officials and cadres. Peng Zhen, the chairman of the National People's Congress at the time, and one of the main supporters, recalled his long advocacy of the mass line, from Yan'an onwards. The proponents of village elections encountered strong opposition from ministries and different levels of government, particularly the township level above the village, fearing that village electoral self-government would bring about chaos, disobedience to state policies and refusals to pay tax. Another source of opposition came from within the Party, fearing a pole of opposition to the authority of the Party Secretary. Those in favour said that, on the contrary, elected leaders could test the legitimacy of Party Secretaries and effectively discipline them, so improving the quality of Party members. They added that reminders to pay taxes would be obeyed more readily if

[10] The classic account of the debates between 'reds' and 'experts' in the 1950s is Schurmann 1966.

they came from elected heads of villages. The proponents won, but implementation of the law, finally promulgated in 1989, that there should be elections in every village, has been frequently avoided.

Findings from a survey in 1999, by a US China studies team (Oi and Rozelle 2000), show where elections were implemented most thoroughly, village administration (by Party secretary and others) has become more transparent (as measured by open publication of village accounts) and taxes have been more willingly paid in those villages as opposed to villages where elections had been avoided. There is also evidence that the elections had already by 1999 induced villagers to become more aware of laws in general and the law on village elections in particular as grounds for protesting against overweening officials and corrupt cadres (O'Brien and Li 2000: 481-483). Nonetheless, it is the case that village elections do set up two poles of official authority in a village, the Party branch whose secretary is nominated by the upper level of the Party and approved by village branch members, and the village committee whose head is elected by all the villagers.

While it seems that village elections in many places are well run according to standards such as strict registration of those eligible to vote, having more than one candidate, an open system of nomination, secret ballots and forbidding proxy voting, nonetheless, in many places these standards are not always applied. There are strong indicators that in villages where substantial economic gains are at stake, village elections become less important.[11]

The dynamics of village-level politics have also fundamentally changed with the new economic challenges described above. Even though parts of rural China have been rapidly industrializing, quotas abolished and cash crops were introduced, in terms of the national economy, the importance of agricultural production for national income has continuously decreased. In the last decade, the rising inequalities between countryside and city have resulted in fundamental changes in rural governance, signalled in the abolition of the general agricultural tax in 2006. Until then, state efforts to modernize the countryside always went hand in hand with the extraction of resources from the countryside. This abolition marked a turning point in the relationship between rural communities and the national government, but also in the importance of agriculture and the countryside for national economic policies.

It was preceded by an academic and public debate about the so-called 'three problems of the countryside, the farmers, and agriculture' (*sannongwenti*) (see for instance Wen 2000; 2001). One focus of this debate was the so-called 'peasant burden' (*nongmin fudan*), a summary term for the fee extraction of local government from the peasant population (Bernstein and Lü 2003, Göbel 2010). Under the label of the 'Construction of a Socialist New Countryside' (*Shehuizhuyi Xin Nongcun Jianshe*) the national government began a broad policy change towards subsidisation of agricultural production and rural livelihoods (Ahlers 2014). These policies gradually led to a relaxation of the financial difficulties of local governments.

[11] Oi and Rozelle 2000 point out that this happens where village enterprises became share-holding companies.

An important part of rural development policies is the construction of new 'model villages' that are often built according to standardized urban designs (Bray 2013). In many places this has also lead to a new discourse of 'face projects' (*mianzi gongcheng*) – projects that only produce a façade of development, but do not in fact do much to improve livelihoods or increase productivity (Steinmüller 2013: chapter 7).

In Qingyuan city of Guangzhou province, local government has experimented with new forms of administrative division that would return substantial powers to the natural villages and village group levels. At the level of the former "village small groups" new "government service centres" (*xingzheng fuwu zhongxin*) were established in 2012/13. The declared aim is to give more responsibility back to lower levels and to officials, who are often in direct contact with villagers. This implicitly also returns local level politics to the level of personal connections that often follow the close-knit kinship networks of local patrilineages. These local networks and the close connections between village-level officials and villagers are seen here as effective tools for local governance and specifically for the supervision of local officials. This represents a turn-around when compared to the reforms of the 1980s, which guarded against local power networks. So far most official discussions of the experiments report positive results, even though there are doubts as to whether the experiences can be replicated in richer areas (where local interests might be too divided). The Qingyuan experiments were explicitly mentioned in the number 1 document on agricultural in February 2014 and other local governments have been encouraged to emulate them.

The campaigns and mass mobilization of the Maoist era have given way to a new kind of rural politics. But rather than a general 'de-politicization', this was a new kind of politics, both in terms of the organisational structures of government, and popular self-organisation. While there is much less ideological control now, local conflicts arise because of matters of economic development and inequality, such as land acquisitions, development projects, and official corruption. Instead of the politics of mass mobilization, new rural politics are contentious politics that allow for the expression of rights and interests of social groups (see Wu in this volume). O'Brien and Li (2006) have described these new politics as politics of 'rightful resistance', expressive of a moral economy, rather than an awareness of legal rights. Other observers link this to discussions of civil rights, citizenship and even civil society (Zweig 2003; Goldman 2005; Chan in this volume), but it remains questionable whether these categories are really at stake in group protests and local conflicts in the Chinese countryside. Chinese scholars, at the same time, attempt to describe the dynamic and logic of such contestations in different terms: Ying Xing, for instance, suggests a Chinese political logic that has to do with the expression and balance of 'qi' (vigor, strength, force) (Ying 2011; 2014). Rather than direct confrontation, he describes local struggles as a waking and waning of 'qi', which can end in compensations, suppression or open conflict – but never takes obvious and singular recourse to 'rights' and 'the law' itself.

The transformations in the political economy of rural China correspond to new arrangements in families and communities, which are the topic of the next section.

Family and Community

The core transformation in the realm of the rural family is the transition from extended families towards stem families and nuclear families. Even though the reality in rural China often did not correspond to the ideal of 'four generations under one roof (*si dai tong tang*), until the 1970s married children were often living in the households of their parents. In the reform era the young increasingly established their own households separate from their parents. This corresponded to lower numbers of children, and the increasing importance of wage labour, especially when compared to the declining importance of agricultural incomes for rural livelihoods. In the political economy described above, the young in particular started earning independent wages, both locally in the new rural industries, and elsewhere as labour migrants.

One main factor contributing to decreasing fertility rates was the introduction of the one-child policy in the early 1980s. While it is an open question as to whether, when and how fertility rates would have eventually decreased in the process of industrialization, there is no doubt that the one-child policy played a decisive role in bringing fertility rates down (Greenhalgh 2008).

The growth of the stem family and of the nuclear family was accompanied by the increased bargaining power of the young, and specifically of girls – a phenomenon that Yan Yunxiang has termed 'girl power' (Yan 2003:220ff.). On a larger scale, this might fit into a broader phenomenon of individualization, in which the family, however, still has a crucial role to play (Yan 1998, 2010).

Within smaller families, parents in the countryside are also investing heavily in the education of their children. Traditionally boys were favoured here and girls received less support from parents in their studies. But with fewer children, this is also rapidly changing, and the percentage of girls in higher education has increased exponentially. While to some extent continuing a long-standing Confucian emphasis on education, the mass extension of higher education since the 1980s, with parents investing much more in the education of children, who spend much longer times in education, creates a series of challenges, both for local governments, and for families (Kipnis 2011). In families, 'educational desire' might be seen as a core field in which new aspirations for individuality and success are negotiated (Kajanus 2015).

New attitudes to individuality were linked to changes outside individual families too. During the Maoist era, as community life was strictly regulated in production brigades and mobility restricted, local communities were tightly integrated. Now many people are increasingly mobile, and a large part of the rural population are labour migrants. In many communities, the young and able are almost constantly absent, while women, children, and the elderly are left behind (see also Yan H. 2003). For many young, in particular, the countryside might appear as a spectral landscape, a 'void' from which they want to escape (Driessen 2017).

But in other regions of China, and in particular in the early reform period, there had been a broad revival of new forms of associations and communal groups, in particular traditional associations, such as lineages and temple associations. Rural communities until the communist revolution had been characterized by a diversity of social organizations, including lineages, brotherhoods, and temple associations. After 1949 this diversity was replaced by the relative uniformity of party and government

institutions, including production brigades, work teams, and party branches (see for instance Siu 1989). Since the 1980s, rural China has seen a rise in new forms of associations and communal groups, and in particular a revival of traditional associations, such as lineages and temple associations.

During the era of high Maoism, local religion was almost completely suppressed in most parts of rural China. However, since the 1980s, there has been a revival of many local religious cults and in some areas (especially in the Southeast) lineage associations (see for instance Brandtstädter 2003a). Nonetheless, the relative political relaxation since the 1980s did not mean that ideological control completely disappeared. There are still intermittent crackdowns on popular religion, and especially on Christian churches.

Both individualization within families, and the transformations of local communities, during the Reform Era rely on the further spread of education and urban infrastructure. As Andrew Kipnis (2012) demonstrates, the spread of standard Chinese (putonghua), higher levels of schooling, modern means of mass communication[12], better means of transport and increased mobility, have led to a standardization of communication and the construction of commonalities across large parts of the population. Rather than as results of 'globalization', the levelling effects of these processes of modernization and nation-building remain largely within the boundaries of the People's Republic of China, Kipnis argues.

A consequence of these processes of modernization and nation-building is also that the local social structure of rural China – famously described as constructed of hexagons by William Skinner (1965) – might be finally dissolving. Perhaps, finally, there will be a break up of localism and traditionalism in rural China. In her 1990 book on *The Reach of the State*, Vivienne Shue had argued that the Maoist state, against its own intentions, increased peasant localism and traditional local networks. Based on G.W. Skinner's earlier analysis of peasant periodical markets, organized in hexagons, Shue pointed out that the Maoist state increased the self-sufficiency of such local units, in politics and economics, as well as in culture.

Other analysts have often emphasized the role of local self-sufficiency and the principle of subsidiarity for local political economies in China. Susan Shirk and others have argued that it was in fact these principles that made the rapid economic development in the era of reform and opening possible (Shirk 1993). Others have pointed out in a similar vein that even urbanizing villages, or 'villages in the city', still exhibit many forms of traditional rural sociality, in particular the links of lineage and extended kinship (Li 2012[2002]).

The question of whether to emphasize the resilience or the transformations of the bonds of family and community, has larger repercussions on the interpretations of rural society. Seen in this light, the sociology and anthropology of rural China need to take the different kinds of 'rurality' and 'ruralism' into account, that go beyond the opposition between rural tradition and urban modernity. One way to do so is by

[12] In this regard, the social impact of mobile phones should not be underestimated (Law and Peng 2006).

looking at the reflexivity of social actors in the countryside, who are using the images of 'ruralism' sometimes in strategic ways (Steinmüller 2011).

Conclusion

Even though the *hukou* system still persists and effectively separates the Chinese population into rural and urban, the boundaries between countryside and city have been blurred very much by process of urbanization set in motion in the 1980s (Solinger 1999). Aside from China's large urban centres, urbanization has been taking place also in townships far away from the mega cities of China (Hillman and Unger 2013). While many features of China's urbanization are similar and comparable to processes of urbanization elsewhere, there is also a large set of particular challenges that have to do with the particular social, economic and political environment in which they are taking place in contemporary China. 'Traditional' social ties, marked by kinship and local place, have proved remarkably resilient in China (see for instance Wang C. 1995 and Wang H. et al 1997). Economic transformations cannot be separated from the particular role of the communist party.

This essay can only provide a very brief summary of the broad transformations that rural China has undergone since the early 1980s, in terms of economics, politics, and society. There is large number of studies of the important changes taking place in different areas, including demography, family structure, rural economics, and rural politics.

There is also a possible engagement with rural studies elsewhere. While there is much specialization, the over-arching framework of many Chinese academics writing about the problems of the countryside is still identifiably modernist. As an indication of this, one might look at the popularity of the Chinese translation of Henri Mendras *La Fin des Paysans* by Li Peilin (1991[1967]). In good modernist fashion, both academics, planners, and officials, seem to assume that there is a unilinear path from the countryside to the city. This is bound up, in a contradictory way, with the idea that village represents the nation. The tension between both ideas was important both in social science and nationalism in China (Liu 2002; Steinmüller 2011), as it was in India (Atal 2003, Breman 1997) and in Japan (Morse 1990).

This is of course not just a Chinese problem, and in many other modernist imaginaries we can see a certain 'intellectual imperialism of the urban' (Krause 2013). But in China, like elsewhere, the examples of the mutual connection and overlapping of the city and the countryside abound: There are 'villages in the city', local planners modelling villages in urban styles, and farmland bordering skyscrapers and new university campuses. And hence the question of 'new ruralities', that has been discussed in a number of other country contexts (for instance, Halfacree 2004; 2008; 2012) might also become more important in China in the future.

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