

## **Rural Politics in Contemporary China**

Much news about today's China focuses on the urban. A milestone was reached in 2011, when the proportion of the PRC's 1.34 billion citizens living in cities reached 50%, the result of a remarkably rapid "great urban transformation" (Hsing 2010) that began in the 1980s. By 2025, China is projected to have 221 cities with over one million inhabitants. Still, with hundreds of millions moving to urban areas, hundreds of millions more will continue to live in the countryside and work in agriculture. The fact that more people in China make their home in cities than villages marks a historic shift. At the same time, it is the product of long-standing dynamics through which the urban and rural are mutually constituted by processes, politics, and ideologies that link, transgress, and span both (Murdoch and Lowe 2003; Davis 2004; McCarthy 2005). Even as China becomes more urban, the politics of its countryside will continue to be central to the PRC and around the world.

This special issue addresses China's rural politics, broadly construed as the power-inflected processes and struggles that shape access to and control over resources in the countryside, as well as the values, ideologies, and discourses that shape those processes and struggles. Though scholarship on agrarian politics in China has taken off over the past three decades, the literature has tended to appear in area studies journals, or disciplinary outlets in which questions central to a single field are placed front and center. Our intention here is different. In commissioning a set of review essays on themes in critical agrarian-environmental studies, we sought to bring what China experts have uncovered into conversation with the traditions and concerns of peasant studies' scholarship. Toward this end, we assembled an international group of established researchers who span the social sciences, including political science, sociology, anthropology, geography, history, and environmental studies, to address

enduring questions in peasant studies, including the relationship between states and peasants, taxation, social movements, rural-urban linkages, land rights and struggles, gender relations, and environmental politics.

### *Rural China in brief*

As the world's largest developing country, China's success in reducing child mortality, promoting primary education, eliminating infectious diseases, and lessening hunger has contributed significantly to global progress in meeting Millennium Development Goals. In a remarkable accomplishment, the number of rural people living in poverty was brought from 85 million in 1990 down to 36 million in 2009. China itself has set a goal of not just eliminating extreme poverty, but of achieving an "all-around *xiao kang*" or "moderately well-off" society by 2020. This objective is to be met by a combination of targeted government investment and the country's rise as an economic power. Still, while China's turn toward capitalism has brought prosperity to many, leading some analysts to wonder whether 'peasants' continue to exist as a social category,<sup>1</sup> it has also exacerbated income disparities, transforming the PRC into one of the most unequal societies on earth. Peaking at 0.49 in 2008, China's current Gini coefficient of 0.47 ("Gini out of the bottle," 2013) approaches those of Nigeria and Brazil, and is higher than that of the United States. The wealth gap is regional as well as spatial, with average per capita income in rural areas less than one third that in cities.

China's rise has been fueled by more than 250 million migrant workers, members of the "floating population" (*liudong renkou*), whose labor in export processing zones, cities, and better-off villages has turned China into "the world's factory." The "household registration"

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<sup>1</sup> This was the theme of a Presidential panel on "The Persistence of the Peasant" at the 2012 Association of Asian Studies Conference.

(*hukou*) system, which has tied citizens to their place of birth since the 1950s, was relaxed in 1984 to allow peasants to move to urban areas. As the township and village enterprises that spurred economic growth and absorbed rural labor after “opening up and reform” (*gaige kaifang*) went bankrupt or were privatized in the late 1980s, the flow of migrant laborers increased. To this day, however, the *hukou* system denies “peasant workers” (*nongmin gong*) state services, such as access to education, health care and housing, which are reserved for urban citizens.<sup>2</sup> In addition, migrants continue to be looked down upon by urban residents, blamed for crimes, paid salaries late or not at all, and discriminated against (Solinger 1999; Yan 2003; Zhang 2002; Ngai 2005).

As migration exploded in the 1990s, and the countryside was emptied of working age men and women, so too did a national ideology that valorized the urban and denigrated the rural, positing cities as the primary site of political, cultural, and economic worth (Bulag 2002, Cartier 2002, 2003, Ma 2005, Yeh 2013a). Cities became metonyms for development, and urbanization became a top goal of China’s modernization strategy. Along with this, city dwellers were deemed to be of higher quality, or *suzhi*, than rural residents (O’Brien and Li 1993-94; Bakken 2000; Anagnost 2004; Murphy 2004; Kipnis 2006). This privileging of the urban and disparaging of the rural led to what has been called the “spectralization” (Yan 2003) of agriculture and the countryside, as villages became ghostly reminders of the past, a wasteland inhabited only by the “left-behind,” particularly children and the elderly (Jacka 2013, this collection; Ye 2013, this collection).

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<sup>2</sup> Note, however, that this varies by city, with some municipal governments (for example, Shanghai and Chengdu) providing more services than others (for example, Beijing). Thanks to Alexsia Chan, and her forthcoming Ph.D. dissertation at the University of California, Berkeley, for this point.

The 1990s also witnessed an overhaul of the fiscal system that shifted many expenditures to local governments. In poorer, agricultural villages this often led to spiraling taxes and fees, including illegal ones. These “peasant burdens” (*nongmin fudan*) were a major cause of resentment and contention, ranging from everyday resistance (Scott 1985) to “rightful resistance” (O’Brien and Li 2006), to thousands of sometimes violent “mass incidents” (*qunti shijian*). As the new century unfolded, the frequency and intensity of protest grew. Whereas 8,700 mass incidents were reported in 1993, the figure for 2011 reached 180,000 (Zheng 2012: 30), or nearly 500 every day.

A mounting sense of crisis, referred to as the “three rural problems” (*san nong wenti*, or rural people, society and production), drew the attention of intellectuals concerned with the peasantry and state leaders worried about social stability and regime legitimacy. Debates emerged between liberals, some of whom argued that land rights should be privatized, and the new left, which critiqued neoliberalism and called for protections from the market and retaining equal distribution of farmland. One current among left-leaning intellectuals centered on calls for a New Rural Reconstruction Movement, modeled after a Chinese populist program of the early twentieth century. These scholar-activists urged fellow intellectuals to lead a rural cultural revival that would remake the countryside, in part through the formation of cooperatives.

The state also took steps to combat the “three rural problems.” In 2002, a tax reform abolished most local fees, foreshadowing the complete elimination of agricultural taxes in 2006. That same year Beijing launched the New Socialist Countryside program, an initiative designed to spark rural development, reduce income inequality, and check unrest by redistributing resources and income to rural areas. Its components included expanding the cooperative medical system, eliminating school fees, enhancing water conservancy, and completing the electric power

network. Despite a shared aim of addressing rural problems, the thrust of the state's program is quite different from that advanced by leftist intellectuals, insofar as it calls for further urbanization, consumption, and market-driven growth. The New Socialist Countryside program, as Elizabeth Perry (2011) has noted, also harkens back to an earlier Maoist campaign in its goals and because it has been implemented through propaganda and work teams. Political campaigns have also become a prime means by which environmental targets, whether for reducing pollution or afforestation, have been addressed (Economy 2002; van Rooij 2006). The reliance on mobilization and "education and ideology work" (*jiaoyu sixiang gongzuo*), in areas as different as environmental protection, village election implementation (Schubert and Ahlers 2012), protest policing (Deng and O'Brien 2013), and population control and crisis management (Perry 2011) speaks to the Party's enhanced presence at the grassroots since the late 1980s.

The end of the agricultural tax has also produced a number of other far-reaching consequences. One has been a hollowing out of the township, the lowest level of formal government. This has led some Chinese observers to call for the township to be eliminated, while others have proposed that it become little more than a service provider (Kennedy 2013, this collection; Day 2013, this collection). Perhaps an even more important result of revamped fiscal relations has been the turn to land appropriation by local authorities to generate revenue to compensate for lost taxes and fees. In China's complex property rights system, local officials can expropriate farmland, transfer it to state ownership, and then sell it to real estate developers. But rural collectives cannot sell their land or move it to non-agricultural uses. Peasants are compensated based on the average value of the land's agricultural output, typically only a small fraction of the market price. As a result of land takings, roughly 88 million peasants became landless between 1990 and 2008, with another 50 million expected to join them by 2030

(Sargeson 2013, this collection). Not surprisingly, whereas high taxation inspired much discontent in the 1990s and early 2000s, land expropriation has come to the fore now, accounting for some 65 percent of rural “mass incidents.”

Environmental protests are also becoming more common. With five of the ten most polluted cities in the world, and pollution reducing GDP by 8-15% not including health care costs (Hilton 2013: 8-9), grievances run deep. Though much attention has been paid to urban pollution, as in coverage of Beijing’s 2013 “airpocalypse,” unhealthy air and water are also common in rural areas, including the notorious “cancer villages” where death rates far exceed the national average (Lora-Wainwright 2010). Despite growing concern with environmental degradation and stringent regulations, enforcement remains lax, largely because local governments are financially dependent on polluting factories. Coal mining accidents, particularly at small, unregulated and often illegal mines, illustrate these dynamics well. Fearful of protest, the state hesitates to condone anything that interferes with economic growth. This necessitates continuing use of coal to avoid brownouts and keep industry humming, and reduces incentives to enforce worker safety and environmental measures (Weston 2007).

The environmental politics of China’s capitalist transformation are not limited to air and water pollution. The building of large hydropower dams has led to the involuntary resettlement of millions of peasants. Plans for new dams, particularly along the Nu River, have also been targets of local protest and mobilization by environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOs) (Büsgen 2006, Litzinger 2007, Yang and Calhoun 2007) as well as the source of much bureaucratic infighting (Mertha 2008). Other development efforts, including those designed to improve the environment, have also led to large-scale resettlement of farmers and pastoralists (Yeh 2009). The rapid expansion in the number of nature reserves, for example, has reduced

access to crucial livelihood resources, leading to various forms of peasant resentment and resistance (Yeh 2013b, this collection).

### **The essays**

All these issues and more are discussed by the twelve contributors to this collection. Though written from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, the articles are all grounded in Chinese culture and society, and an approach to politics that rejects essentialist understandings of a reified “Chinese culture.” Many of the reviews include both English-language and Chinese sources; this is true of the articles that discuss Chinese debates on rural society, and those on taxation and land expropriation. Furthermore, though access makes long-term fieldwork in the countryside difficult, most of the contributions are grounded in just such experiences. This engagement with daily life and the quotidian is reflected in the “view from below” found in many of the essays.

Although a single volume cannot take on all of agrarian politics in China, this collection covers substantial territory. Drawing on a wide range of topics, five themes emerge: intellectual debates about the peasantry; everyday practices of local governance; contentious politics; rural-urban linkages; and environmental politics.

#### *Intellectual debates and the New Rural Reconstruction Movement*

Our first set of essays, by Alexander Day, Yan Hairong and Tamara Jacka, explores Chinese debates about past, present, and future state-peasant relationships. Both Day and Yan argue that there are resonances between contemporary discussions, particularly within the New Rural Reconstruction Movement, and those of the early twentieth century. Jacka, on the other

hand, offers a feminist critique of the New Rural Reconstruction Movement. All three find that, even while criticizing neoliberal proposals to further integrate agriculture and rural labor power into national and global markets, the movement's intellectual leaders tend to view peasants as a homogenous whole, ignoring class, gender, and other forms of differentiation crucial to understanding rural society. This complicates their efforts to protect the peasantry from economic exploitation and to ameliorate a growing income gap, the aging and feminization of agriculture, the fragmentation of family life, and livelihood challenges.

Alexander Day's essay provides a historical backdrop for issues discussed by other contributors, including the debate over the future of the township (Kennedy 2013, this collection) and rural property rights (Ho 2013, this collection). He argues that in both the decades following the end of the Qing dynasty and in the 1990s, rural China was characterized by "state involution": intensifying economic crisis, predation by entrepreneurial brokers, and weakened central capacity. Drawing on ways earlier intellectuals reimagined rural society and politics, particularly the notion of "self-governance," contemporary analysts associated with the New Rural Reconstruction Movement have championed alternative models of organization, such as cooperatives (Yan 2013, this collection), peasant associations, and democratic self-governing villages. Their vision for how society should be organized following the abolition of the agricultural tax differs markedly from those of liberal intellectuals who favor privatizing land. However, even without privatization and full proletarianization of labor, capital has penetrated the countryside and new class relations have developed (Zhang and Donaldson 2008, 2010; Huang 2011).

Yan Hairong's essay examines recent efforts to promote rural cooperatives. Like Day, Yan hears echoes of debates from the 1930s Rural Reconstruction Movement. The crux of the

1930s controversy concerned the nature of agrarian China. Liang Shuming, a prominent advocate of cooperatives as a “third way” alternative to Western capitalism and communism, stressed the uniqueness of Chinese culture and society, which he argued lacked class divisions. This led him to support reform rather than revolution. Mao Zedong, of course, thought otherwise. Mao believed that Chinese society was riven by class opposition, contradiction and struggle, and that revolution was the only way out. Today’s supporters of a New Rural Reconstruction Movement also promote cooperatives as a possible “third way.” Like Liang Shuming, who lamented villagers’ inertia, contemporary intellectuals lament “fake” cooperatives, which exist in name only, or are dominated by a few rich farmers or “dragon-head” (*longtou*) enterprises. Yan shows that many supporters of today’s movement downplay class differentiation because, as Day (2013, this collection) also argues, they conceptualize rural society as an undifferentiated whole. Despite this blindspot, supporters of rural reconstruction appropriately, in Yan’s view, challenge modernization theory as well as the dominant and unsustainable neoliberal vision of capitalist agriculture.

Whereas Day and Yan highlight the absence of class in New Rural Reconstruction Movement discourse, Jacka’s feminist critique focuses on its elision of gender inequalities. Discussing the movement as a form of alternative development, she finds that it gives insufficient attention to the gendered nature of institutions, and so reproduces injustice. Thus, as an alternative globalization movement, New Rural Reconstruction is less able to ally with women’s movements, in the way the Zapatistas in Mexico or the MST in Brazil have. Jacka examines the work of influential scholars Wen Teijun and He Xuefeng, and their writings about the left-behind population. Both, she argues, implicitly equate “the peasant” with a man, neglecting the presence and agency of women, the significance of a gendered division of labor,

and gender-specific challenges common in contemporary rural Chinese society. Moreover their appeal to Chinese culture assumes an essentialized view of the patriarchal family as unquestioned norm. Drawing on Nancy Fraser's work, Jacka concludes that rural reconstruction could have transformative potential, but is currently better characterized as taking an affirmative approach to economic and cultural injustice that fails to tackle global capitalism head on. This means it risks compounding the inequities experienced by poor rural women.

### *Everyday practices of governance*

The next contributions by Kennedy and Smith address the nitty gritty politics of county and township governments. Kennedy traces some of the same transformations in governance as Day does, though from a political scientist's vantage point. He argues that the trajectory of tax reform has arced toward centralization. In 1994, county and township officials' main responsibilities shifted from service provision to collection of taxes and fees, and then after further reform in 2002 and 2006, back to service provision. However, these changes looked quite different to villagers and to analysts who viewed them from a broader institutional viewpoint. Villagers in poorer regions tended to blame township officials for rising fees and taxes, whereas from an institutional perspective it was a structural bias against villagers, rather than township officials per se – who often had to go without salaries to meet county quotas – that encouraged excessive extraction and sparked protest across rural China. The cadre management system, analyzed in depth by Smith, was also a crucial factor that shaped county-township relations and created the rural tax burden.

Noting that too little of the literature on rural governance addresses “how the local state actually get things done,” Smith examines informal and sub rosa practices, including the role of

the “shadow state.” His contribution suggests several logics of Chinese rural governance, such as “the party trumps the government, and everyone wants to live in town,” while also cautioning against assuming uniformity or overly general rules of thumb. Other principles he identifies include localism, the weak role of townships, and the importance of informal networks and patronage. His article, like many others (for example, O’Brien and Li 1999; Whiting 2000; Edin 2003),<sup>3</sup> underscores performance targets embedded in the cadre evaluation system. These, as seen in Tilt’s (2013, this collection) essay, are also central to understanding why China’s environmental regulations have not translated into reduced pollution, and also to changes that may be underway with the introduction of high-priority, quantitative targets that may finally motivate cadres to pay more attention to the environment (Wang 2013).

### *Contentious politics*

One way that research on rural China has opened a dialogue with peasant studies has been through O’Brien and Li’s (2006) notion of “rightful resistance.” Like James Scott’s concept of “everyday resistance,” rightful resistance identified a form of contention between quiescence and rebellion that enables peasants to “act up” more than otherwise seems prudent. Rightful resistance, in particular, involves using the language of power to challenge local cadres who fail to implement the policies, laws, and commitments of the Center. Its defining characteristics include operating near the boundary of authorized channels, employing the rhetoric of the

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<sup>3</sup> For critiques of what might be called the “fetishism of targets,” see Ahlers and Schubert (2013) and Mei and Pearson (2013). Ahlers and Schubert, in particular, suggest that recent research on the local state sometimes turns cadres into narrow homo economicus interested only in promotion (and in disguised defiance of their superiors). Cadre evaluation matters, they acknowledge, as do unfunded mandates, bureaucratic collusion and factionalism, but they also find a striking amount of cooperation between cadres and their superiors to achieve “good enough” implementation of initiatives such as the New Socialist Countryside program.

powerful, exploiting divisions within the state, and mobilizing community support. Kevin O'Brien's contribution to this collection constitutes a "self-criticism" (*ziwo piping*) that engages various critiques of the concept and its application to rural China. Though O'Brien and Li's book, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*, had an apparent "ground-level orientation," O'Brien agrees that there is room for more ethnographic, less state-centric studies of protest that focus on peasant subjectivities, rural communities, cultural norms, and local histories. Moreover, though the book offered a view of the state from below and unpacked the hierarchy level by level, he suggests it is time to go beyond disaggregating the state vertically to a horizontal disaggregation that examines conflicts within each level. O'Brien also notes that, as a conceptual effort, the book spent little time exploring variation by region or issue, and that doing so is the next task for survey researchers and others to dive into. Finally, he concludes that a number of vexing questions about rightful resistance suffer from overly stark either/or conceptualizations that confuse more than they inform. In particular, he argues that it probably does not make sense to insist that rightful resistance is either sincere or strategic, reactive or proactive, or reflects rights versus rules consciousness. A more open reading of contention in rural China allows for ironies and paradoxes, revels in the intentionally oxymoronic term "rightful resistance," and encourages us to hesitate before leaping to conclusions about the relationship between local protest and systemic change.

As noted above, the most prevalent bone of contention in the countryside today is land appropriation, which now accounts for around half of local government revenue. Sargeson's contribution examines land expropriation violence.<sup>4</sup> Like O'Brien and Li's rightful resistance,

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<sup>4</sup> Some suburban farmers, however, treat land-taking as an opportunity to shake down the state. Andrew Kipnis, personal communication, 17 March 2012. See also Paik and Lee (2012) on rural people who want to be expropriated.

Sargeson's application of Arturo Escobar's concept of "violence as development" has relevance to peasant studies beyond the PRC. Coming from a radically different analytical approach, Sargeson's essay addresses some of the same critiques of rightful resistance that O'Brien examines. In particular, it leans hard against overly rationalist assumptions about individuals weighing costs and benefits that O'Brien (2013, this collection) writes have been justifiably criticized in *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*, and instead attaches more weight to memories and a community's historical relationship to a place, as well as to how subjectivities are transformed. Sargeson locates problems in each of three discussions of violence that accompanies land expropriation: game-theoretic, rational choice approaches in which violence is instrumental; a spatial ecology approach in which there is an implicit spectrum between a rational, propertied urban citizenry and inchoate resistance by peasants in the hinterlands; and a "political maturation" approach in which violence is seen as a catalyst that transforms villagers into politically astute citizens. All three of Sargeson's critiques echo O'Brien's concern that some research on rural protest is too rooted in neoclassical assumptions about individual behavior and reflects "developmental thinking," or at least can fall prey to teleological readings. Instead, Sargeson argues that understanding violence as constitutive of development better accounts for non-instrumental, spatially dispersed, and socially complex violence, including episodes where villagers become disillusioned with the possibilities of collective rightful resistance.

### *Rural-Urban linkages*

All of the contributors recognize the interconnectedness of the rural and urban, but two essays highlight this linkage explicitly. Peter Ho's article on the institutional structure of rural-

urban property rights argues that “the functioning of rural land tenure cannot be understood separately from the urban land market,” while Ye et al.’s essay focuses on the people left-behind as a result of China’s massive rural-urban migration.

Ho mounts a critique of neoliberal arguments that insist that China’s insecure and opaque property rights mean that the institutional structure must change or collapse. Reviewing rural and urban property from the formation of the PRC to the present, with particular attention to land markets, Ho suggests that the persistence of the institutional set-up, in which rural land is untitled, informal, and frequently reallocated, confirms that it is functional and credible and in no danger of falling apart. Instead, it will most likely change from within. Rather than viewing flexibility and ambiguity as weaknesses, Ho sees them as drivers of China’s capitalist development. He stresses that “frictions and distributional conflicts” are inevitable. Though he mentions land expropriation, his focus unlike Sargeson’s (2013, this collection), is not on “structural violence” or its traumatic effects. That peasants support frequent reallocation of land (Kong and Unger 2013) is evidence of the flaws in neoliberal thinking on property.

Like Ho, Ye et al. challenge tenets of mainstream economics, in this case the belief that China’s rural-urban migration is nothing more than an efficient reallocation of labor that serves national economic development. Their article presents a comprehensive review of the literature on internal migration, placing the Chinese case alongside studies around the globe. The authors suggest that research on migration typically proceeds from three starting points: neoclassical economics, a social and cultural perspective, or neo-Marxism. They favor the neo-Marxist approach. Worldwide, most studies find significant variation in the effects of migration on education, physical and psychological health, and marriage and gender roles of people left behind, at both the individual and community level. For China, most research on left-behind

children, women, and the elderly ignores political, economic and structural forces, frames their problems as moral failings, and seeks solutions in the form of charity, care, and “love.” Instead, Ye et al., propose a framework that builds on Foucault’s and Agamben’s work on biopolitics to explain why both migrants and those left-behind exist in a precarious “state of exception.” Like Sargeson, Ye et al. are critical of the structural violence of development. Like Ho, they stress urban-rural linkages, though they are much less optimistic than Ho about the current state of affairs in rural China. Rather than seeing institutions governing internal migration as endogenous, autonomous and credible, they treat them as forms of biopolitics, which discipline, exclude and sometimes kill migrants. Still, all is not hopeless. Ye et al. suggest that a biopolitical perspective on migration could one day help an organized working class emerge “out of the present cocoon” of semi-proletarian migrant laborers.

### *Environmental politics*

The last group of articles focuses on issues in rural environmental politics: industrial pollution, conservation, and water. Tilt, Yeh and Magee all adopt a political ecology approach and advocate expanding the study of rural politics to include human-environment relations, as well as bringing politics to the forefront of literatures often dominated by managerial approaches.

Tilt proposes a framework that makes sense of the current state of industrial pollution in rural China—perhaps the largest cause of protests after land appropriation—by conceptualizing it as a domain consisting of rural citizens’ knowledge of environmental harm, the actions that they take and their results, and regulations that shape pollution. Though industrial pollution is often assumed to be an urban concern, air, water and soil contamination are severe in the countryside, largely due to the spread of rural factories and industrial parks. Information and data

about pollution, however, remain scarce, and causal links to health effects are difficult to prove. Because science cannot provide indisputable answers, it is important to understand perceptions, which arise from specific socio-political contexts. In terms of action, rightful resistance is a particularly apt concept for environmental protest, given the state's own discourse about environmental protection. At the same time, most grievances end up being addressed through compensation, which routinizes pollution rather than reduces it. The fiscal constraints discussed by Kennedy and Smith further limit enforcement.

Yeh's article shows that much of the literature on forest protection and rehabilitation, nature reserves, and grasslands is technocratic and managerial and fails to consider the politics of access. A number of researchers have examined the effects of reforestation—under the massive Sloping Land Conversion Program—on off-farm labor participation, rural income, and forest ecology. Their studies have generated mixed results, though many suggest that the program is unlikely to benefit marginalized communities. The political ecology literature on Chinese nature reserves shows that conservation enclosures have often sparked peasant resistance and that biodiversity goals are compromised by the revenue imperative and performance criteria by which cadres are judged (see Smith, 2013, this collection). With reference to grasslands, Yeh reviews studies that show how cadre evaluation and pastoralists' efforts to maintain their livelihood have foiled various programs to rehabilitate rangelands. At the same time, she argues that pastoralism deserves more attention from the peasant studies community. She points out that environmental politics in ethnic minority areas is a form of rural politics, and that ethnicity is one of many types of differentiation that should not be neglected. Omitting struggles over resources in minority areas from the literature on peasant politics mirrors and reinforces their exclusion from repertoires of resistance available to other rural people.

Finally, Darrin Magee's examination of the limited western scholarship on the politics of rural water overlaps with Tilt's discussion of water pollution. Both focus on the obstacles peasants face accessing China's legal system and how activists and NGOs provide legal aid to victims of water contamination. Beyond this, Magee also explores discourses, power relations, and institutions that govern irrigation, household water use, power generation, and in-stream flows. These discussions pose the deeply political question of whether water should be treated as a basic right or saleable commodity, and reflect a growing interest in neoliberal solutions such as Payment for Ecosystem Services. In his treatment of irrigation, Magee cites research that shows how uncertainty about land tenure may have contributed to a decline in effective water use, a downside to the property rights regime that Ho finds "credible." Magee's analysis of dam-building touches on several themes that reappear throughout the collection, including protests, inequality, and the relationship between cities and the countryside. Dams produce (mostly urban) winners and (mostly rural, often ethnic minority) losers, as well as contention both before and after they are constructed.

### **Common messages**

Several common themes stand out in these contributions. First, many critique neoliberalism, though they take different tacks doing so. Ho attacks the idea that institutions are the products of intention, which he considers a fundamental tenet of neoliberalism. Sargeson focuses on the human cost of capitalist development, and how its structural violence disrupts the way of life, social standing, self-respect, and sense of self and place of many rural people. Ye et al., Yan, Day, and Jacka all criticize theories of rural society that do not take structural forces

and class differentiation into account. Finally, Yeh and Magee discuss problems that arise when Payments for Ecosystem Services programs are used to manage China's forests and water.

Second, these studies suggest the need to think about rural politics relationally, highlighting rural-urban linkages and expansive conceptions of both "rural" and "urban." This is made explicit in Ye et al.'s study of migration and Ho's argument that the division of rural and urban land markets is complicated and more fluid than it appears. It is also evident in Sargeson's and Ho's discussions of land-taking as a driver of urbanization and a strategy for rural governments to generate income. Moreover, as Magee emphasizes, hydropower development is often tied to discourses about rural poverty, but peasants generally lose out from projects that expropriate land to provide urban residents with electricity. Protest also draws the urban and the rural together. In the articles by Day, Yan, O'Brien and Jacka, we see urban activists, intellectuals and even officials working together with rural people to improve life in the countryside.

Third, a number of articles demonstrate the relevance of mixed methods and cross-disciplinary approaches (Borras 2009), while clarifying the relative strengths of qualitative and quantitative research. Kennedy, for example, finds that quantitative studies of the 1994 tax reforms revealed regional differences across China, in particular showing that the effects were not as uniformly negative as is often believed. Ho supports the use of regression and factor analysis to help make sense of the relationship between economic growth and land institutions. These authors remind us that qualitative research by itself, divorced from a sense of frequencies and diversity, can be misleading, particularly if a single village is taken to stand in for the whole of China. As William Hurst (2009) has argued concerning Chinese workers, we are long past

the time when studies of Chinese peasants in one locale at one time can stand in for their circumstances, hopes, and struggles everywhere.

Qualitative analysis, on the other hand, shines in offering insight into informal and illegal revenue collection, as well as villagers' resistance to it. In-depth field research also offers a fuller understanding of how rural people experience and cope with pollution day-to-day. Tilt, in his essay, argues for combining the regional and national-level data that dominates work on pollution with qualitative work, which shows us how and why peasants respond to environmental degradation. Sargeson and Smith, too, make strong arguments for long-term "soaking and poking" (Fenno 1978) in the countryside. Smith notes that such fieldwork is often dismissed by quantitative social scientists as unrepresentative and lacking in rigor. He maintains, however, that it is only through extended stays and the development of trust that phenomena such as the selling of government posts and the "shadow state" can be understood. Sargeson also makes a forceful appeal for longitudinal and qualitative research, which alone can reveal "how people bring unique histories to bear when participating in political-economic processes that span long periods of time and space."

Sargeson's and Ye at al.'s essays highlight another theme threaded through the contributions: the need to engage social theory, including Marxian and poststructural approaches to development (see also Borrás 2009). Other authors, particularly Day and Yan, also underscore the relevance of classic theories of political economy, particularly ones that emphasize class politics,<sup>5</sup> by pointing out the neglect of class differentiation in analyses of rural society by left-leaning Chinese intellectuals.

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<sup>5</sup> On class in contemporary China see Hanser (2008) and Yan (2008) .

Another issue that appears throughout this collection is how to make sense of geographic differences in China. A number of contributors point to sources of disagreement in the literature that are in fact the product of regional and local variation. Smith, for example, suggests that the degree to which the local rural state has been characterized as predatory, developmental, corporatist, or mafia-like hinges on the presence and ability of firms to apply pressure, which in turn depends on location. Similarly, Kennedy demonstrates that the effects of local tax and fiscal policies were different for poorer, inland regions, which had to impose more informal fees and levies, and wealthier coastal townships, which experienced little change. Thus, geography, understood as the “path-dependent,” relational production of places, matters a great deal for understanding rural governance in China.

O’Brien also notes that many readers of *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* wanted to know more about variation across space and time. Though the intent of the book was to show that seemingly disparate phenomena could be thought of within a single framework, O’Brien points out that the next task is understanding why rightful resistance appears to be more common in some provinces than others, and in some parts of the countryside (for instance, is it more common in suburban or more remote villages?). We also need to know more about whether the form resistance takes varies by issue, and how different elite allies (for example, officials, journalists, lawyers, entrepreneurs, roving scholars) affect the course and outcomes of protest. By contrast, Ye et al., while examining a bewildering amount of variation in how migration affects sending areas, emphasize the need to go beyond the conclusion that “it depends” to uncover underlying patterns and processes.

Peasant studies clearly needs both “lumping” (to discover unexpected similarities) and “splitting” (to uncover patterns and forks in the road). It’s neither “turtles all the way down” and

baffling complexity, or one master story that applies in all the places and times. This holds true for peasant studies and also for China studies and comparative research that includes China as a case. China is sometimes held up by area specialists as unique and exceptional. At the same time, its recent capitalist turn has been treated by some grand theorists as a story whose outline is already known, with only minor, empirical details to be filled in. This collection suggests that it is neither. Instead, we must continue to navigate the path between exoticizing China and treating its rural transformation as a tale many times told.

## References

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