Peasants, time and the land: The social organization of farming in China

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A B S T R A C T

This article discusses the multiple meanings of land in the peasant economy of modern China. It argues that the three-generation structure of the peasant family and the circularity of labour migration ensure that land remains a central and non-substitutable resource. This implies that the, oft-articulated, thesis that migrant work represents a definitive adieu to farming is a fallacy. Peasant workers remain attached, and consequently return, to their land, precisely due to labour migration. In the absence of their husbands, women care for the land, together with their fathers in law and in so doing they sustain both the productivity and continuity of agriculture. It is also argued that a further softening of the Chinese Hukou regulation will not trigger a massive rural exodus. The strong relations between peasant households and the land suggest that this will not happen. The article draws on anthropological and agronomic research by the authors in villages in the province of Hebei that has been ongoing for several years and reviews of historical literature.

1. Introduction

The paradigm that governs most of agrarian sciences and policy-making strongly conceptualizes modern agriculture as men's work. Men do the heavy work; they deal with complex technologies and are the main decision makers. Women, at best, do “work of the second kind” (de Rooij, 1992, 1994). They assist the men, they give a helping hand. And when responsible for specific tasks (e.g., feeding the calves, accountancy), they follow the guidelines formulated by the men.

This paradigmatic view on rural women's role is, of course, very much a virtual image—it is only partially true. In many parts of Europe, women run the farm, because the men are working elsewhere (Van der Plas and Fonte, 1994). And if men are at home doing most or all of the farming work, it might very well be the earnings obtained elsewhere by the wife that make this ‘centrality’ of the man possible. Farmers' wives also have a strong, albeit a somewhat hidden, say in decision making (Van der Ploeg, 2003). Women also often play a prominent role in the new fields of activity that are being created as part of new, multifunctional, farms (Rooij et al., 1995).

When viewed from this paradigm, Chinese agriculture seems doomed to being second-rate: men in the prime of their lives are absent from the farm. Farming appears to be mainly the activity of women and old, retired, men. The young and middle-aged men are away working in the cities. When combined with the very small acreage of the farms (on average one third of a hectare), this seems a highly fragile constellation. As Huang (2011: 459) argues: “most social science theory and the currently powerful Chinese ideology of modernization assume that with modern development, family-based peasant farm production will disappear”. If not for legal restrictions (the Hukou which obliges return to the village for social
services), there probably would be far less people in the countryside and agricultural production would decrease proportionally. In this view, a softening of the 
Hukou rules would trigger a massive rural exodus. If this were to happen China’s best option would be to spur an accelerated process of scale-enlargement. This, it would seem, would be the only way that China could feed itself with a greatly reduced agricultural labour force.

In this article we argue that this particular view (as exemplified in Quisumbing, 1994; Saito et al., 1994) that, ironically, is shared by several Chinese agrarian scientists (Cheng, 1998; Zhang et al., 2006; Fan and Zhu, 2007; Li, 2009), is at odds with the way in which farming is perceived, practised and organized by the Chinese farming population (in this respect we follow Zhang and Donaldson, 2013; see also Meng, 2014). The same view also ignores the very strong relations that tie peasants and the land together.

The article is based on 24 family biographies that we could elaborate, together with household members of different generations, between 2009 and 2012. The biographies regard villagers from three villages located in a hilly area in Hebei province. They entail extensive comments of the villagers on their trajectories through life. Special attention was given to questions as: who works where and for what reasons? The history of the family farm and the relations between family, farm and fields were also carefully documented. The interview fragments in this article are derived from these biographies.

2. The social calendar of peasant life

During life the relations between people and the land change several times — and each time they change significantly. This can be schematized in three stage periodization. First, when a boy, the family’s land will be worked by the boy’s mother and grandparents (who might be assisted by the boy’s father when there are heavy tasks to be done, such as land preparation). The land will feed the family and generate a small surplus which can be used to pay for daily expenses. Most probably, the boy’s father will be working faraway. He does so in order to ‘feed’ the land (for instance paying for the considerable expense of fertilizers) and to save money for big expenditure, such as paying for the construction of a house (for when the young man has grown to say, 25) and the wedding. At the end of this period, the boy (now grown) will already be doing migrant work — unless he is studying.

This first period is followed by a second one in which the young man himself, now married and having one or more children, is almost permanently absent from the village and engaged in migrant work. His wife enters the social category of ‘left behind women’ (Ye and Wu, 2008). During this second period which, roughly speaking, extends from the age of 25–50, the family farm’s income (generated by his wife and parents) is complemented with monetary income from elsewhere. ‘Feeding’ the farm and saving for big expenditure are now the responsibilities of the man (in the first period the boy). Previously it was his father who did so, now it is the grown man himself. He does so because, as is said in the countryside, “the family is always the first priority”. In this second period this implies being engaging more or less permanently in migrant work, even though it is hard for the man to be separated from his wife and children. Equally his work can sometimes be dangerous, monotonous and risky (sometimes the boss fails to pay).

As one villager explained:

For a household with a migrant worker, it is easier to have a good balance of money and food ... Nong min [peasants] can eat well but they have less money income, they have to exchange things to obtain money ... But usually that is not enough for the education fees, the weddings and other social fees and the farm inputs [...] We pay for the farm inputs and the other big expenses with the money earned in migrant work.

When the strength of the man declines, the third period (from, say, 50–75) starts. He comes back to the village and starts to work the land (probably assisted by his wife and daughter in law). Yuan (2010) applied a cohort analysis to different groups of migrant workers who originated from rural Guizhou. She concludes: “none of the couples in the survey said they would not come back […]. Most migrants never think of migrating to the city permanently” (2010: 140). The same is observed by Lou et al. (2004), who studied the migration experiences of young women from Sichuan and Anhui. In this third period the returned men try, if possible, to develop the land further so that, as the countryside saying goes, a ‘foundation’ is created for his son (now involved, in his turn, in migrant work) when the latter returns in the future. For the elder man this is the period of his pension. But he does not pass it idly. He works and develops the land — that is how the first priority, responsibility for the family, materializes. When the third period finishes (schematically at the age of 75) his own son (now already at an age of 50) will come back. He and his wife will care for his parents who will be increasingly unable to continue with the hard physical work — and he will care for the land that his father developed for him. In this period the possession of the land passes to the son: “sons are both entitled to inheritance and required by both customary expectation and by law to provide maintenance for their aged parents” (Huang, 2011: 469). Formally, girls and women can have possession rights as well. However when a young woman marries, the rule of patriilocality implies that she moves to the village of her husband and thus her (formal) rights pass to her family, i.e. to her father and, then, her brother(s). In practice, the (allocated) land belongs to the family household and within the family it passes from one generation to the other. This practice is also increasingly codified in China’s steadily evolving legal system (Huang, 2011: 475).

The reciprocal relations that govern the third period are explained by one of the villagers as follows:

A good son must treat his parents well and take care of the land even if farming gives less money. This maybe a sacrifice for the son, but he does so out of respect for his parents. [If the son returns] the father will be very happy. If the son wants his father’s share [i.e. the part of the land allocated to the father], the father will also be happy. Normally the son provides compensation: often 1 sack of rice and 2 sacks of wheat flour every year. This happens when there are several sons. If there is only one son the rule is that the son gives his parents whatever they need for food.

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4 Yuan (2010) developed a four stage periodization. The first and second stages she distinguishes are grouped here together in one single stage. Carter and McColdrick (2005: 383) arrive at a family life cycle consisting of six phases each of which involve negotiations on “the expansion, contraction, and realignment of the relationship system of family members in a functional way”.

5 Formally, women have the same rights on land as men. Due to the rule of patriilocality, however, the land (i.e. the usufruct right) belongs, in practice, to the family of the man.

6 Before having a first child, man and wife sometimes leave together the village. This may occur as well after the birth of a first child. In that case the grandparents take care of the child. There is a strong regional influence here.

7 When the parents eventually die they may be buried in their own land.

8 This comment was given by an elder villager; younger people might very well be inclined to think differently.
But the third period is not only about food production per se. If there are possibilities, the returning man will develop the land (i.e. extend and improve the resource base)\(^9\):

*All the men who come back develop the land; those who come back want to take good care of the land and develop it [...]. At the moment there are some 20 men who came back, who are now developing the land, making new ditches in the hills, planting walnut trees, developing fruit yards, breeding new herds [...]. I want to leave a legacy for the next generation; newly developed land is the economic foundation for our children.*

Another villager told:

*For sure, when they are older my sons will come back. They will have less strength and the companies will not employ them anymore. They have to come back then [...]. I have to rely on crop planting, but crops only render a little money, so I am now developing this contracted\(^{10}\) land, which I have planted with walnut trees [...]. I want to get money [zheng qian: money earn]. In this way I can sustain myself, I am not a burden for the children, and when they return they can sustain themselves with the walnut trees as well.*

Evidently, there will be many variations on this sequence. The indicated ages (the boundary indicators of the different periods) might differ considerably in real life, whilst the notion of migrant work changes over time. Often, youngsters go to faraway industries or construction sites, later on they will work in nearby county towns (if possible) and finally they may commute on daily basis to a nearby mine or factory. Another shortcoming of this brief synthesis is the focus on men (and the absence of daughters). Equally, the story does not apply to youngsters who go to university and get a good job somewhere in the urban areas. There might also be adverse circumstances that block the unfolding of this idealized typical pattern. Nonetheless, describing the life cycle as having three successive periods (and the associated changes in the relations between men and the land that occur) captures well the realities of many rural people. It also provides a basis for some major issues that we will discuss later.

Each generation passes through the three successive periods. Each generation is firstly ‘fed by the land’, then provides assistance to the family in order to work the land (‘feeding the land’ by providing the money needed) and, finally, it works and further develops the land. Thus each generation makes its own dance through time. However, no generation does this in an isolated way. As Fig. 1 illustrates, there are interactions between the single trajectories. For example, while my generation is being nurtured by the land, my father’s generation is nurturing the land (directly and indirectly), and my grandfather’s generation is working the land (and further developing it). Thus, the three generations are tied together by a complex set of complementary rights, duties, tasks, and expectations that together compose a moral code within which the land is central (see the ovals in Fig. 1 in which each oval represents the unity of grandparents, parents and children).\(^{11}\)

Fig. 1 also illustrates that the land is continually at the centre of this moral code. There is not one simple usufruct relation (between the land and those working it). There is, instead, a complex set of relations that embraces three generations (generally with several people per generation). Each individual will be cared for and receive good food in the first period. At this time these youngsters are supposed to dedicate themselves seriously to their schooling, give a helping hand in the fields if needed and to obey and respect their parents (and grandparents). As an adult (i.e. in the second period) there is a duty to earn enough through economic activities other than farming the family plot. This is done in order to maintain the family, to make farming possible and to save the money needed for the education, house and wedding of the next generation (i.e. the children). These duties go together with the right to return when labour migration comes to an end (for whatever reason) and to use the family farm as a pension. This marks the beginning of the third period. At this time new duties and rights emerge. These include the duty to further develop the land (if possible) and the right to be supported by the son(s) and daughter(s) in law if the workload becomes too heavy.

Thus, the multiple set of duties and rights implies many relations between people and the land. These mutual relations change over time (according to a well-established pattern). The relations with the land also specify reciprocal relations between the people involved: relations that specify processes of giving and taking over extended periods of time. At the same time these relations (and the associated rules) govern the destiny of the land; its use, development, and fate. What is done with the land and the way land is understood and valued, is governed by the logic that reigns within the family — and definitely not governed by the logic of the market. The same set of duties and rights closely interlinks the life courses of father and son. In this respect Elder (1974) referred to “interlocking trajectories”. For rural families, land is the connecting point that weaves together the different trajectories.

The three-generation family (me and my wife, my parents, and our children) is not necessarily a unit where living, working and eating together is central (as was the case in the past). It is more a complex set of rules and conventions that function as a familial (as opposed to individualistic) land-labour institution, which systematically embraces three generations (and often relates symbolically to the ancestors as well). Current worldviews would see such a three-generation family as doomed to be replaced by a nuclear family (consisting of just me, my wife and our children) and expect the familial values to be replaced by more individualistic ones.\(^{11}\)

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\(^9\) Developing the land might mean two different things in China. It could refer to industrialization and urbanization. It may refer also to investing in the land in order to increase its potential for agriculture. Here we refer to the second meaning.

\(^{10}\) Alongside the allocated land, peasant families may contract additional land from the village committee. This depends on the amount of land held in reserve.

\(^{11}\) It could be tempting to reduce the choreography illustrated in Fig. 1 to mere ‘tradition’. This would be partly true (Fei, 1939); but this pattern re-emerged from 1980 onwards, after the introduction of the Household Responsibility System (which reintroduced individual possession of land) and, especially, after the massive expansion of migrant work in the 1990s. Consequently, this pattern is as much a product of modern times as it is tradition. It represents an adapted version of historical institutions.
The successive periods have different emotional loadings, just as they imply different mutual obligations. The first period is one in which the young boy (and later on the adolescent and the young man) is protected and cared for — especially by his mother and/or grandmother. He is nourished in the literal sense of the word, but also, later on, receives assistance with building a house and the search for a suitable wife. It is, on the whole, a period of relative hardship. The man has to abandon his village, home and family for long periods and to engage in relatively harsh work. As an elder man, now old and a grandfather, is proud if he does not have to ask for such assistance. Through farming he secures his economic independence (thus allowing the children to dedicate themselves to their own duties) and is even capable of constructing a ‘foundation’ for his son when he returns.

Of course, this endurance is compensated for by the feeling that he is helping his family in what seems to be the best possible way. It is also compensated for by the prospect that he finally will return definitely to his village, his family and his land. We are not implying here a ‘romantic’ love for the land; this does not exist in China. As we will discuss later, the centrality of land is due to other reasons.

The third period is, again, one of relative happiness. The elder man has done his duty and now merits his pension. If additional money is needed, his son will help (that is his duty). But usually the man, now old and a grandfather, is proud if he does not have to ask for such assistance. Through farming he secures his economic independence (thus allowing the children to dedicate themselves to their own duties) and is even capable of constructing a ‘foundation’ for his son when he returns.

**Fig. 2.** Balancing father–son relations through the land.

It is true, people are less happy in the middle of their lives, they have to face many burdens. You have to endure the middle of your life in order to have a happy ending later on.

The deeply institutionalized pattern synthesized in Figs. 1 and 2, explains why land is so crucially important for rural people in China. If the land were eliminated from the logic of everyday life, the very axis of mutual obligations and expectations would disappear if the land were eliminated from the ordering of peasant life; just as strong emotions are present in the decision to create an escape from the land. These emotional loadings may very well change over a life-time. It is possible that negative feelings developed during youth encourage labour migration, but that these change, as a consequence of hardship experienced during migrant work, into positive feelings later on.

Although this opinion is diametrically opposed to much of the story told so far, it shares the emotional loading of the man–land relations. Man–land relations are not neutral, based on a utilitarian economic value only. The associated emotions are central in the ordering of peasant life. They also say “when you lose strength and have to stop with migrant work you can always continue farming […] doing it well so that there is a foundation for the son when he comes back”.

**Fig. 2** combines the temporal patterns in which both father and son are engaged and also illustrates the associated emotional loadings. The vertical arrows in this figure indicate how support flows from one actor to the other, thus contributing to emotional well-being.
strongest possible way, in the multiple use of the word nong min (peasants). Those who are in the village and working the land are nong min — but those far away, involved in migrant work, also identify themselves as nong min and are perceived as such by others. Migrant workers are referred to as peasant workers (nong min gong); they are peasants who work in the city — but regardless of the location of the work, they are and remain peasants. Thus, farming and migrant work are expressions of one and the same livelihood — of being nong min. But the two expressions are, of course, clearly distinguishable. A relatively young man, previously engaged in migration work, but now investing in farming (and thus 'developing the land'), explains:

A peasant is ongoing, there is continuity, it is long term, you have to endure ... You have to invest, you need dedication, you need effort. By contrast, a migrant worker is about immediate profit ... they get their money and that's it. You cannot harvest without effort and investment ... farming is about long term securities. Farming is also, if not especially, about value adding [zeng zhi].

He added:

That is why I want to have my farm instead of being a migrant worker. It allows you to progress and to reap the fruits of this progress yourself ....

The pattern that ties the different generations and the land together also explains why villagers hardly ever abandon farming (in the worst case they ask others to temporarily care for the land). It is repeatedly argued (also by villagers themselves) that farming alone does not provide a decent living or cover ‘big expenditures’, especially in the second life period (see Figs. 1 and 2). Migration is needed in order to enlarge the total cash flow. However, the potential extension of this argument (to abandoning farming permanently and dedicate oneself completely to industrial and/or urban jobs) hardly ever occurs and certainly not to the extent it does in many other parts of the world. Clearly, the Hukou regulation plays a role here but we do not think that Hukou in itself provides sufficient explanation for the non-abandonment of land. We will come back to this crucial issue later.

3. Land and food consumption

The dual urban-rural system is partly maintained by the Hukou system, which undoubtedly is a significant institutional factor that hinders the definitive migration of the rural population. However, returning to farming is also a voluntary choice made by nong min themselves. It is not just related to the notion of further developing the land (as discussed above). It also clearly relates to the self-provisioning of family food. Peasants usually talk about this by comparing themselves with city dwellers:

In the village we can survive and live well without spending even one cent. Grains for staple food are produced by the family and exchanged for flour with the trader. Vegetables, eggs and pork are all produced by ourselves and we don’t need cash to buy them. In the city everything is different: cash is required everywhere and you have to buy everything with money. In the supermarket you can easily spend 100 Yuan on only a few items even before you realize it. In the village we plant what we would like to eat and we also feel safe eating the food we have produced ourselves.

These sentences reflect two of the key advantages of farming—high autonomy and food quality. Peasants feel proud that they can satisfy the basic family demands for food consumption without being dependent on the market. Although urban people earn more money than peasants, they heavily rely on the food market and need a cash income to meet their ends. This means that they have to work hard (with such incentives their attachment to their work will be quite different from someone farming his own land). Due to their low dependency on the markets, peasants can maintain a decent living with a relatively low cash income and do not have the same worries about food quality as most city dwellers. In modern society people are bound to and dependent on a host of external factors. For a peasant (especially one who knows how to work the land well), the land is an essential instrument for pursuing autonomy and well-being. Under current conditions this translates as the possibility to produce one’s own food that is safe and of high quality.

The capacity for self-provisioning and autonomy in food consumption is a fundamental prerequisite and also an important feature of being a peasant. This autonomy can even be expanded to the city through the non-commercialized food circulation between rural and urban areas. In the villages where we currently are doing research this pattern is noticeable, particularly for glass-noodles and free range eggs, as well as fresh fruits and vegetables. The existence and maintenance of a rural connection is fairly common among urban people who are rooted in the countryside, especially between rural parents and urban-based children. For rural parents, a considerable part of harvested food products are for their adult children who are officially registered as part of the urban population. This also allows their offspring to reduce their dependency on the food market. Food coming directly from rural areas is always appreciated and cherished by this group because of its high quality and the awareness of the dedication that has gone into producing it. It is also highly valued as it allows them to take a temporary break from the market. Thus even those urban dwellers who have passed the Hukou threshold, still strongly prefer autonomous food consumption which they intentionally embrace whenever they have the chance. In synthesis, the preference and pursuit for autonomy illuminates peasants’ deep bound with their farmland.

The search for autonomy also explains why peasants refuse, or are reluctant, to completely commoditize their food production. First and foremost the production of food is meant to satisfy the basic consumption demands of each family, the primary obligation and duty of a peasant. For peasants, food is polyvalent: it has physical properties and is a corporal necessity, it has cultural property when bestowed as a gift, strengthening intergenerational bond, a political property when given as a tribute to powerful individuals and many other properties. When put onto the market and converted into commodities, food is reduced to a monetary value (the main property of a commodity).

14 There is a clear tendency now that some young men, after having accumulated sufficient savings, return earlier to their village than others. They do so in order to start new businesses in their village. These often include ‘new’ agricultural activities: raising large numbers of pigs or poultry; developing fruit orchards; engaging in agro-tourism or in on-farm processing and direct selling; etc.
15 Increasingly the costs associated with the education of the children and later providing them with a dwelling.
16 For example in the apartment block where one of the authors lives, people who live on the ground floor usually transform their little garden into a vegetable garden for domestic consumption and even some public flower beds have been reshaped for maize planting.
17 From the point of view of food security and nutrition, this is a strategic feature. In the case of China it is partly rooted in (or re-affirmed by) the large famines that struck the country in the 1950s and 1960s. It also relates to China’s huge and decentralized food reserves. Every family has its own reserves.
Over the last decade the value of self-produced food, consumed directly in the peasant household and/or distributed as a gift in wider circles, has increased further. This is due to the combination of high levels of contamination of food produced for the market (which have given rise to numerous food scares) and the fact that peasants hardly use agrochemicals (of whatever type) for self-produced food. Both these factors considerably increase the extra value of self-produced food.

4. Land and the struggle for autonomy

As for peasants all over the world, land is a precious resource for Chinese peasants. It is a sine qua non, an indispensable requirement. This applies to those who actually work the land, but it also applies to the migrant worker. Maybe, it applies especially to him. The land provides his parents, his wife and his children with food (just as he himself will take a considerable amount of food back with him to the city every time he leaves the village). But the land is also his fallback position if, and when, major misfortunes (accidents, sickness, mass closures of factories due to recession, or whatever) occur and it is his pension when he gets older. Beyond all this, the land often represents a concrete opportunity: it can be developed further, thus allowing for the possibility of making a better living and better supporting the family. In short, the land (together with other indispensable resources, as the labour force, water, knowledge, seeds, networks, instruments, small tractors, etc.) is a major necessity. It is the central axis of an autonomous resource base that helps the peasant family face up, and respond, to a difficult, if not harsh, environment (see Fig. 3). It is worth repeating that this does not apply only to those currently working the land, but also, and maybe especially, for the nong min gong, the migrant workers.

The available resource-base is used for different purposes. The labour force, for instance, is not only used in agricultural production, household activities and local non-agricultural activities, it is also used to engage in labour migration. All these activities are important and complementary. Together they secure food, income, long term security and savings (to be used for weddings, houses, education, funerals) for the peasant family.

Land occupies the central place within this multi-faceted resource base. Its centrality and the way land is used is greatly influenced by the moral economy. Land is to be cared for. To have land, without working it, is seen as immoral. There are strong pressures, if not an outright moral obligation to achieve a good harvest. When it is too dry or too wet you adjust your farming behaviour, trying to make the best out of it. Even the women, even when they are very tired, do what they can to get the best possible harvest […] But when you are talking about a good peasant you always have to take into account the weather and the family cycle. When the peasant has to dedicate a lot of effort to the problems of his children then he can dedicate less time to the land...

Fig. 3. Having an autonomous resource as the basis to face a difficult environment. (Figs. 1–3 are adapted versions of the ‘choreography’ described by Van der Ploeg, 2008.)

Here there is a reciprocal relation as well. If a peasant works well, the yields will be high. That is, the land will be generous to him or her. It is about giving and receiving. Thus, a blossoming field or a good harvest says a lot about a hard-working peasant. This was nicely phrased by one of the villagers:

“Shi Zai Ren Wei, Di Zai Ren Zhong”.

This literally translates as ‘things depend [on what] people do, land depends [on how and what] people plant’. More generally: success depends on the efforts people make, agricultural production depends on the care people give to the land”. One of his neighbours added:

Everything that I put in my farm will render me fruits; [this represents a strong contrast to migrant work because] a salary is just dead money.

This seemingly enigmatic quote points to another decisive difference. Migrant work only renders money that can be used for consumption (of whatever kind). And when this money is spent, one has to start anew. The agricultural labour process, however, always has a double objective: it aims at reproduction as well as production. Production is realized (for self-provisioning and/or exchange in order to obtain money for further consumption), but at the same time the resource-base is reproduced. It is renewed: at the end of the production cycle it is not ‘dead’, but ready for the next cycle. The reproduction might take a simple form but it might also be ‘enlarged’, i.e. to lay the foundation for increased production in the near future.

Hence, the returning elder men do not solely limit themselves to agricultural production. Instead, if the opportunities arise, they...
also try to improve and/or to enlarge the resource base. This is schematically shown in Fig. 3 where agricultural production feeds back into improvements and/or enlargements. In the villages where we have been studying this occurs through several mechanisms, as e.g. terrace construction in the hills for walnut tree planting, the creation of herds, the development of orchards along the river and improvements in soil fertility. The technicalities of such improvements and enlargements are discussed elsewhere (Van der Ploeg et al., 2014) – here we will limit ourselves to the underlying rationale.

“Developing the land” (an expression that is frequently used by the villagers and understood as an accolade for both making improvements and enlarging the resource base) is strongly related to the inter-generational pattern we discussed here before (see especially Fig. 1):

“ Newly developed land is the economic foundation for our children [...]. I want to leave a legacy for the next generation” [bold added].

Monetary considerations and calculations are not absent in the strategic reasoning underlying the development of land. When comparing the alternatives these are important. However, the justification for land development does not reside in the market as such. It centres, instead, upon continuity between the generations and the desire to hand over a ‘stronger’ foundation, i.e. an improved and enlarged resource-base, to the children.

Working the land well and developing it further are, as discussed above, seen as moral obligations. These moral obligations have (and sustain) a counterpart: that is the moral right to the land. If a peasant family cares for the land, and develops it further, then it is morally entitled to the land. The land is theirs – not in a formal legal sense, but according to the basic rules of reciprocity. The strong socio-cultural bonds between man and the land that are actively wrought in this way also explain the tens of thousands of conflicts, that occur every year in the Chinese countryside (Walker, 2006; So, 2007). These conflicts occur as a result of repeated violations of what Chinese peasants consider as their moral right to the land. If the land is needed for other purposes than farming, righteous compensation is claimed. It is telling that expropriation by the state is accepted more readily by the peasant population than land being allocated to private enterprises. Within the moral economy of the peasants, the state (still) has more moral authority than private enterprise.

At micro-level the attachment to the land re-appears in daily life in many different forms. One telling expression is that the land is nearly never left idle and that people do not sell the right to use it. If, for specific reasons, the family plots cannot be worked, other family members, or friends, or neighbours are asked to take up this responsibility. Normally there is no money involved in the transaction. It is just a temporary deal to take care for the land until the original users can do so again.

5. Land and the sense of belonging

Within the worldview of the Chinese peasants, the relation between people and the land (i.e. the possession of an autonomous resource base that is being worked and developed further with household labour – be it directly or indirectly) defines the contours of a social class. It is the axis that specifies a sense of belonging:

All villagers are peasants, because they all have allocated land. You may have contracted land as well, but if you only have contracted land you are not a peasant. A big boss contracting 1000 mu of land is not a peasant [this clearly reflects that the relation with the land is perceived as a longstanding if not permanent one]. Such a boss, like other urban people, does not suffer what peasants suffer, nor enjoy what peasants enjoy. He does not belong ...

Somebody else observed:

Urban people are not peasants ... because they are not treated as peasants, they don’t have heavy duties, but neither do they get the subsidies...

It is important, though, to note that this sense of belonging (or more generally: the class position) is not linked to specific fields (or to a specific property). The status of being a peasant is characterized by the possession of an autonomous resource base that one works and develops oneself. When discussing this issue with a village elder, he had this to say.

I still can remember two pieces that formerly belonged to our family. Our family had quite some land in the past. The village was rich and my ancestors were among the better-off people. At that time people had a strong tie to their fields. There is also a family graveyard. It was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution but later on it was restored. It used to be on our family’s land but this is no longer the case. It is not the case that we ‘love our land’ as you say European peasants sometimes do. Everything has changed here, there have been so many reallocations of land. That has been the great social transition of our country. Of course, we invest a lot in the land. But if we have to exchange it for another piece then that is alright as well, provided that the quality is equal or better. Then we won’t feel disappointed. We need land, not a particular field [...]. When the commune was created we felt very depressed for losing our land, but now it is different [bold added].

Land is the cornerstone of the peasant’s resource base. It is also a highly visible expression of autonomy. But we are talking about land in general as indispensable part of the resource base and as a carrier of a degree of autonomy – and definitely not about a specific piece of land. Peasants wanting to improve their resource base might readily exchange one plot for another. Today’s peasants do not define themselves by a specific plot, but by having direct access to land, an essential means of production for them. That is what defines the peasant class and what gives them a sense of belonging.

6. Land, the peasant family and continuity

The peasant family that works its own land is a land-labour institution (Pearse, 1975; Duncan et al., 1977) that is remarkably stable over time (Mazoyer and Roudart, 2006). In China, just as in other societies, this institution has been “impressively resistant to sudden change, though this does not mean that such structures were static” (Hobsbawm, 1994: 320). In China it was even able to resist the two decades between 1958 and 1978, when production teams and communes dominated the countryside (Myrdal, 1965). This period only ended after the peasant revolution in Anhui in 1978. This revolution (and the subsequent formulation of the Household Responsibility System) restored the peasant family as the nodal point within the texture of village social life and the rural

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[22] This is equivalent to 67 ha.
[23] The subsidies related to e.g. grain production, or getting an insurance paid by the state, are equally perceived as rights.
economy. The continuity between the pre-1958 peasant families and the ones that re-emerged from 1978 onwards is strong. Hobsbawn’s (1994: 335) observation seems to apply here more than anywhere else: “Over most of the world the old textures and conventions, though undermined by a quarter of a century of unparalleled social and economic transformation, were strained, but not yet in disintegration” (italics added).

Yang (1945: 45), a Chinese anthropologist who did extensive fieldwork in the 1930s described the peasant family before the 1950s as follows: “A Chinese family, especially in rural China, is far more than a group of related individuals […] it is a complex organization of family members, family property [including, evidently, the land], domestic animals, family reputations, family traditions, and family gods. It can be said that the family extends to the as-yet unborn generations and to the long-deceased ones”. And with regards to the land he noted that “land is the most important form of property, for it belongs to all generations. It means much more than a piece of earth on which crops are cultivated; it is the very foundation of the family. Without land a family can never be settled and the family members will never have a sense of security. People and land are the two pillars of the Chinese farm family […] When we say a family is broken, we mean that the family’s land is gone. Thus, land becomes a part of the life of the farmer and his family, and they have a very deep sense of attachment to it; their land is no less dear to them than are their children […] Land ownership also gives the farm family independent personality, spiritual inspiration. And a feeling of freedom” (Yang, 1945: 46, italics added).

Although this was written nearly 70 years ago — years that saw ‘unparalleled changes’ — these descriptions also fit the Chinese peasant family of today. As we argue in this article, people and land are again24 tied together through a dense and internally coherent set of rules that specify the relations between family members, between the family and the outside world and, especially, between the family members and the land. Land again is a ‘foundation’. Much has changed in the countryside but Yang’s observations remain valid: “All three generations have a common interest in the family’s economic security” (Yang, 1945: 74) (note how Fig. 1 shows how the three generations are tied together through the land). And “the continuity of a family line depends not only on having generation follow generation, but also upon the uninterrupted transmission of the family’s common property” (Yang, 1945: 81). This transmission assumes that “if the property of the living generation is inherited from the previous one, then the present members are merely the stewards who keep it intact and hand it down to a new generation. Family ethics give a son the right to the property but also assign him an obligation” (Yang, 1945: 81).

Labour migration and especially its circularity (leaving from, and in the end returning to, the village) can also be understood as re-emerging (or re-invented) phenomena — rather than traditions that are disappearing. Yang (1959: 71—72) observed that in the pre-1950 years “farming alone could not provide a livelihood for half of the villagers […] life for the poorer half of the community was bleak and often impossible […] For these peasants, the solution lay in going beyond the economically restrictive confines of the village borders […] The emigrants were of two types: seasonal and long-term. Seasonal emigrants went to the city for a few months or shorter periods in a year, generally during slack periods at the farm. […] Seasonal emigrants generally went to Canton [where] their predominant occupation was ‘selling hard labour’ (mai ku li, hence the pigeon English word ‘coolie’). They worked as porters on docks, in warehouses […] at pulling rickshaws and carts, at carrying and digging dirt […] Peddling vegetables into the city also engaged many villagers”. His namesake, Yang M. C., drew attention to the circularity of these flows: “In most countries, when men leave a rural community and find work in the city they settle there permanently with their wives and children and sever connections, for the most part, with their relatives back home. In China, however, most of the villagers who seek work in the city maintain close ties with their relatives and send their surplus earnings back to their homes to be used to buy land and build houses for the family. If they are married, the wives and children remain in the family home. […] This custom makes it possible to have a society existing in a state of balance between city and country life. Such a population movement has advantages both for the village and the city. Returning villagers bring new methods, new ideas and new wealth to the village, and, since most of those who go forth to seek their fortunes eventually return, the countryside is not depleted by the lure of the city” (Yang, 1945: 229).

Since 1978, the peasant family farm and the circular labour movements in which it is embedded, have once again become central features of the Chinese countryside. These features are not just contingent or provisional responses to temporary problems. They should be understood as the re-emergence of traits that are, as we have seen, deeply rooted in Chinese history (Fei, 1939; Huang, 2011). This re-emergence, and the underlying continuity, show the strength of the peasant family farm as a land-labour institution that is able to face different problems, survive very contrasting periods and continually re-invent itself in order to cope with new circumstances. To expect such institution to easily disappear would be ludicrous — to say the least.

7. Land, rules and flexibility

Although the historically persistent patterns (or ‘social textures’) that govern village life basically contain very clear sequences and well-outlined responsibilities, their application in real life is very flexible. Concerning the ‘second period’ (between say 25 and 50 years) it is observed that:

“A good father has to construct a house for his son, be it in the village or in the county town. [But whether this is really done] depends very much on the family situation. If the father has limited capacities, then he cannot finance the construction of the house. Then the son might not complain. Beijing is another case. If they want a house in Beijing, that might be impossible. Prices are far too high there. Much also depends, on the wishes of the daughter in law.

The third period (from 50 to 75 years) is also characterized by the need to cope with specific circumstances:

I have strong faith in my land, in my farm. If the economic conditions are good I can develop it further and will invest more. However, when the economic conditions are not good, providing no major disaster occurs, I develop the farm more slowly […] And the happy ending depends on many other things. If your children are married and have a house you do not have to face large expenditures anymore. But if the son is not yet married, then it is difficult to think about a happy ending.

We think that it is precisely this flexibility in adapting basic patterns to highly variable conditions and situations that contributes to their strength and endurance. The moral guidelines of the Chinese peasantry allow considerable room for manoeuvre
and help them avoid stark black-and-white choices of either sticking to rigid rules or rejecting them as impossible or unbearable. Each group of interlinked actors assesses (often through lengthy processes of deliberation and negotiation) the best possible way forward. Thus, the many, heterogeneous micro-episodes within which the man—land relations are dealt, lead to the reproduction of ‘structural patterns’ (Long and van der Ploeg, 1994). And the capacity of the peasantry to flexibly adapt these patterns is a key mechanism in these overall patterns being reproduced.

8. Conclusions

Given the pivotal role of land in the tight web of relations, expectations and duties that ties rural families in China together, it is not very likely that Chinese peasants will abandon their land. Neither is it very probable that migrant workers will cease their return flow back to the countryside. Land simply is too important for them, and its importance is of a multi-faceted nature. It provides food, it promises security when there are problems elsewhere, it offers a pension, it allows for investing in the future of the next generation, it ties the extended family (three or more generations) together and, finally, it delivers the highly-appreciated gifts (good, and often finely processed, food) that play a binding role in social relations. This tentative conclusion is supported by statistical data at national level. According to the Agricultural Census China counted in 2006 some 200 million agricultural households. As compared to the previous Agricultural Census (from 1996) this represented an increase of 3.7%. From the indicated 200 million households having land, 58.4% had agriculture as their main source of income. As compared to 1996 this represented a decrease of 7.2%. In short: whilst other sources of income are increasingly growing in importance, this does not translate in a diminishing number of households having land. Land remains to be important for households in China’s countryside.

At the same time land is not a ‘fixed’ entity with narrow limits and its use-value does not automatically shrink to one of irrelevance during ’boom’ periods. At such times land is more likely to be developed, as we discuss above. The resource base of which it is a central part is continuously improved and enlarged whenever possible. This has even triggered the phenomenon of a small, but increasing, number of adults returning from migrant work long before they reach the age of, say, 50. They start to develop the land far sooner and create a living that provides them with as much income as they would otherwise obtain from full-time migrant work, whilst simultaneously building a legacy for their children. The emergence of new opportunities linked with activities such as agro-tourism, organic production and other types of multi-functional farming might strengthen this new tendency.

Within this context, Hukou (the obligation of rural residence and the associated benefits) evidently plays a role. However, we believe that, in the current debates about a softening of the Hukou system, its role is largely over-estimated. Hukou is, to an important degree, a formalization of underlying patterns that are deeply rooted in the Chinese economy and culture – as we have argued throughout this paper. Thus, even if Hukou is softened or even abolished, the underlying patterns will remain. It is even possible that an elimination of Hukou will be strongly opposed by parts of the rural population itself. For Hukou is a complex set of place-bound rights and obligations, part of which is that every villager has the right to a fair share of the land. The abolition of the Hukou regulation could endanger this strategic right. Some students with rural background are already discussing this possible consequence of any change in Hukou. It is also telling that dwellers in towns and small cities are increasingly expressing a demand for land: even relatively small plots could be very useful in complementing their relatively low salaries and help them avoid paying the increasing prices paid for vegetables.

Since ancient times Chinese peasants have combined farming with other economic activities. They continued to do so during the period of collectivization. Afterwards this practice was continued through Town-Village Enterprises (see Kung and Lin, 2007) and, later on, through the massive migration to the large industries and the big cities with their informal economies and many construction sites. In the future for sure, this pattern will take new forms; probably through farms evolving into more multifunctional enterprises, more focused on the emerging needs of the urban population.

Be that as it may, the relations between peasants and the land are a cornerstone in the relatively harmonious town—countryside relations that characterize the country (Long et al., 2011). They help to create a balance that cannot be eradicated, without considerable social upheaval. The firm rooting of these patterns in the life cycle of rural people and their flexibility, suggest that such a balance will probably be maintained for many decades to come.

We want to finish with a methodological observation: to understand the dynamics and role of the Chinese peasant farm, and the three-generation family, research needs to depart radically from strictly Western world views, and acknowledge that China is constructing a modernity that differs in several significant respects from the one that exists in the West (Long et al., 2012; Long, 2014). It is not necessarily better or worse. The point is that it is and will remain different. This implies that a different (or adapted) paradigm is required to understand and represent the past, present and future of China: one that clarifies and highlights what remains invisible and/or irrational (and hence ‘outdated’) in Western views. This is especially true when it comes to farming and agriculture. Instead of continuing with ancient polemics about the demise or continuity of the peasantry, we would do far better to depart from Shanin’s dictum that, above all else, the peasantry exists “as a process” (Shanin, 1971). There are simultaneous processes of de- and re-peasantization, which articulate with each other in complex and often novel ways, giving rise to a plurality of forms and a wide spectrum of developmental tracks (Li, 2010). In this way the peasantry continuously reconstitutes itself. In this article (and the research underlying it) we have simply tried to come at grips with the complex grammar that orders this process of reconstitution in contemporary China.

25 See the ovals in Fig. 1.
27 We have to keep in mind also that arrangements such as the current Chinese Hukou have existed in many places. In the Netherlands, until the 1930s, it was forbidden to stay in the major cities without having a job and a proper place to live. Vagrants would be arrested and sent to workhouses in the countryside.