Bringing Agriculture Back In: The Central Place of Agrarian Change in Rural China Studies

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Since the mid-2000s, rural development and politics in China has entered a new phase that revolves around what the central government calls ‘agricultural modernization’. Transforming the once-dominant smallholding, family-based agriculture has become a focal point of the government’s programme of rural rejuvenation, where a range of economic changes unleashed by urbanization and industrialization also converge. We argue that in this new context, agrarian change has become the key vantage point from which to study rural China. We review key contributions of the papers in this special issue and highlight their insights on rural differentiation, land politics and rural livelihoods. We discuss how studying the ‘Chinese path’ of agrarian transition can contribute to ongoing debates on key themes in agrarian studies, including both the agrarian questions of capital and of labour, and how agrarian political economy offers unique perspectives on the overall processes of capitalist development in China.

Keywords: agricultural modernization, agrarian change, China, rural development, reform

INTRODUCTION

This special issue focuses on the long-term dynamics of agrarian change in China, with a special focus on the past two decades. This introductory essay first provides a brief overview of the contemporary historical background to the processes of agrarian change and transitions illustrated in the contributions to this special issue. This background includes reference to the most dominant strands of literature in rural China studies in the past 20 years, before exploring the new policy discourses about agricultural modernization and rural rejuvenation, which form the backdrop to accelerated commodification, social differentiation in the countryside and the entry of capital into agriculture. These are key themes in the papers of this special issue, which are summarized.

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RURAL CHINA SINCE THE REFORM

China’s economic reform started in rural areas. Farmers’ spontaneous, unauthorized experiments with household-based farming in Anhui and other provinces was the spark that started the prairie fire (Zhou 1993). Formal institutional reforms then followed and began with decollectivizing agriculture, raising farm-gate prices and liberalizing household production. The increased surplus and freed-up labour supply from agriculture then provided the necessary conditions for the rapid growth of rural industries in coastal provinces, led by collectively owned township-and-village enterprises (TVEs), and joined by a much larger number of small household businesses, particularly in south-east China. For the whole of the 1980s, while urban reforms faltered, rural China enjoyed a decade of unprecedented high growth, widely shared prosperity, massive reduction of poverty and political stability. The 1980s has since then been remembered as ‘the decade of entrepreneurialism’ (Huang 2008).

China’s reform experiences, particularly those in rural areas, started to attract the attention of researchers outside China and entered into mainstream scholarly debates in the mid-1980s. Debates raged on topics that ranged from the political foundation and implications of the incremental reform (Goldstein 1995), to the causes of agricultural growth (Lin 1992; Putterman 1993; Bramall 1995, 2004), and to the impact of entrepreneurial activities on social stratification (Nee 1989; Walder 2002). But the issue that has received the most attention and led to the most influential works is no doubt the surprising success of the TVE-led rural industrialization. This experience is puzzling not only because it has been so rarely accomplished in other developing countries, but also because it represented such a decisive break from rural China’s own path of underdevelopment in the pre-revolutionary era. Some scholars sought to fit this experience with conventional theories based on privatization (Naughton 1994), entrepreneurialism (Huang 2008), institutional design (Che and Qian 1998) and foreign investment (Whiting 2001); others emphasized how policies during the Maoist era laid the foundation for rapid industrialization (Putterman 1993; Bramall 2009). The most innovative and influential explanation of China’s rural industrialization is probably the ‘local state corporatism’ model developed by Jean Oi and others (Oi 1992; Lin 1995; Walder 1995; Peng 2001), which stresses the role of local developmental states in leading rural industrialization.

While academic debates were still raging, the period of ‘triumphant industrialization’ in rural China was coming to an end in the mid-1990s and facing mounting economic and political challenges. The once-vibrant TVE sector in coastal areas lost its lustre under both increasing competition from urban firms and the burden of its own institutional constraints. The bankruptcy of TVEs and then a massive privatization soon followed, which not only weakened a key revenue source of local governments in these areas, but also reduced the demand for surplus rural labour. In the early 1990s, the decline of the central government’s share in fiscal revenue had also led to further weakening of central power and deterioration of governance. In response, the central government implemented the fiscal re-centralization reform in 1994, which concentrated more revenue sources in the central coffers while shifting more expenditure to local governments. This added another impetus that drove local rural governments, especially in inland provinces, into predation.

The ‘peasant burden’ – excessive and arbitrary fees and taxes imposed by local governments – began to mount. This became a lightning rod that triggered widespread resentment among the rural population and rising incidences of political contention (Bernstein and Lu 2003). The focus of academic research on rural China also shifted from rural industrialization and entrepreneurialism to contentious politics. The idea of ‘rightful resistance’ proposed by Kevin
O’Brien (O’Brien 1996; O’Brien and Li 2006) became a central theme that informed many studies of rural China during this period of local despotism and popular resistance.

State predation and economic decline in rural areas had another important impact: it drove more and more rural residents into searching for migratory wage jobs in cities. In cities, Deng Xiaoping’s Southern Tour Talks in 1992 accelerated market reform and urbanization. The exclusionary mechanisms that had curbed migration in the past, such as the rationing of consumer goods, especially foods, only to urban residents, were relaxed, creating a more hospitable environment for rural migrants. By the turn of the century, the magnitude of this exodus of rural labour force had reached the order of hundreds of millions. Known as ‘migrant workers’ (nongmin gong) by urban dwellers and framed as the ‘floating population’ (liudong renkou) in the official discourse, these migrants encountered a different set of challenges in their transient lives on the margin of urban societies. These included institutional barriers that limited their access to urban citizenship rights (Solinger 1999), legal and social obstacles that restricted their ability of collective action (Friedman and Lee 2010; Pun and Lu 2010) and discrimination by urban dwellers that reinforced social exclusion (Zhang 2001; Zhan 2011).

The exodus of the most able-bodied and educated portion of the labour force drained rural areas and agriculture of its vitality. Abandoning farmland became widespread and agriculture output stagnated. But more importantly, this demographic change created a new set of social problems for rural China: the emergence of the ‘left-behind’ populations, which disproportionately consisted of children, women and the elderly. They not only had to face predatory local states, but also endured hardship in family relations and physical and mental well-being (Xiang 2007; Ye and Pan 2011; Jacka 2012; Ye et al. 2013).

If the first 15 years of rural reform can be characterized by the triumphant success of rural industrialization, the following decade from the mid-1990s onwards formed a sharp contrast. The three strands of literature discussed above – rightful resistance to predatory governments, contested citizenship among rural migrants and hardship faced by the left-behind populations – documented how a countryside that had once brimmed with entrepreneurial activities and industrial growth descended into economic stagnation, political contention and social decay.

Within China, these problems have been known and discussed as the ‘three rural problems’ (sannong wenti, or agriculture, countryside and peasantry). While all these challenges were certainly real, this discussion of the countryside as immersed in mounting crises also aided the emergence of a national discourse that framed all things rural as backward, unreformed and problematic. The entire rural society appeared in the popular imagination and the national ideology of developmentalism and urbanism as something ‘left behind’: the feminized and ageing population of rural residents was left behind by the more productive and self-actualizing migrant workers, agriculture was left behind by more rewarding urban wage employment and entrepreneurial activities, and the countryside was left behind by modernized cities and the valorized urban lifestyle and culture. In this ‘spectralization’ (Yan 2003) of the countryside, agriculture and rural people, rural society is constructed as a ‘wasteland’ inhabited by unproductive people, teeming with conflicts, and trapped in involution and stagnation.

STUDYING RURAL REJUVENATION AND CENTRE-STAGING AGRICULTURE

The aggravation of rural problems led the central government to introduce a slate of policy reforms in the early 2000s, which ushered in a new phase aiming to rejuvenate the
These new reforms started with the rural tax-for-fee reform in 2000 and unfolded through the nationwide abolition of agricultural tax from 2004 to 2006, accompanied by the streamlining and limiting of township-level government, the launch of the Constructing a New Socialist Countryside programme around 2005 at the Fifth Plenum of the 16th Party Congress, the building of a rural social welfare system that comprises the New Cooperative Medical Scheme, the New Rural Social Pension Insurance and the Minimum Living Allowance, and the provision of an increasingly wide range of agriculture-related subsidies.

These policy reforms were introduced in a new political–economic context. China has become a fully fledged industrialized and urbanized country, as signalled by two recent landmark events: the rate of urban population passed 50 per cent for the first time in 2012; and the country surpassed Japan, to become the world’s second-largest economy, in 2010. The central government has also set the goal of achieving an ‘all-around well-off’ (quanmian xiaokang) society by 2020. These developments and political goals made it necessary for the central government to implement policies that make ‘cities nurture countryside’ and ‘industries nurture agriculture’.

Recent studies of rural China have begun to examine the uneven implementation and varied impacts of these reforms. The fiscal and administrative reform, designed to rein in local state’s predatory behaviours, has been found, on one hand, to have hollowed out township governments and weakened their capacity to meet local developmental needs (Kennedy 2007; Smith 2010) and, on the other hand, turned them towards land expropriation to compensate for lost revenues (Hsing 2006). Studies of the New Socialist Countryside programme found that while its implementation still relied on Maoist-style campaigns of using propaganda and work teams for bureaucratic and mass mobilization (Perry 2011), its comprehensive policy package has a rich potential for rejuvenating the countryside (Ahlers and Schubert 2009). The welfare and subsidy programmes have been found to significantly contribute to rural incomes, but can have a regressive impact on inequality as they are more accessible to richer households (Lin and Wong 2012).

These interconnected policies were designed to tackle the ‘sannong’ problems: to raise rural residents’ income and social security, to stimulate agricultural growth, and to improve rural governance and social stability. While these reform policies target a wide range of issues, the central government’s programme of ‘rural rejuvenation’ is built around a central agenda – agricultural modernization. The central government’s hope is that, through promoting modernized agriculture that is larger scale, uses more technology and greater capital investment, and prompts deeper market integration, agricultural producers that are either ‘left-behind’ in rural areas or driven back from their precarious urban sojourn can achieve higher incomes and productivity. This higher productivity would then rejuvenate agricultural growth, release more surplus labour from rural areas to spur further urbanization, and alleviate the pressure on the country’s dwindling supply of arable land and environmental resources.

Each year, China’s central government (the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and the State Council) releases a No. 1 Central Policy Document (zhongyang yihao wenjian) to set priorities and guidelines for its work in that year. When reform started in the early 1980s, for five consecutive years (1982–6), the No. 1 Central Documents had set rural reform and agricultural development as the priority. In the following two decades, rural issues

1 The most notable intellectual response within China to the rural crises was the New Rural Reconstruction Movement, which sought the rejuvenation of the countryside through cooperative agriculture, rural cultural revival and democratic grassroots self-governance. For details, see Day (2013) and Yan and Chen (2013).
were excluded from policy priorities set in the No. 1 Documents. Rural reform made its return to the No. 1 Document in 2003 and since then has stayed as the priority issue in the following 13 consecutive No. 1 Documents, including the one released on 1 February 2015. Table 1 summarizes the central themes and selected policy measures identified in the No. 1 Documents of the past 13 years.

The central government’s policy goal of rural rejuvenation and its reliance on modernized agriculture as the approach to achieve this goal are unmistakable from this summary. From the central government’s point of view, agricultural modernization serves multiple policy goals. Modernized agriculture and rising productivity, it is hoped, will provide the means for the country’s agricultural producers – a population left behind in previous phases of reform and by the more capable members of rural society – to finally get their tickets to prosperity. Increasing food production would also help the government meet its goal of self-sufficiency in basic foods. Subsidies to agriculture provide the central government with a convenient channel for disbursing the fiscal transfers it has earmarked for rural areas. Furthermore, increasing demands in modernized agriculture for chemical inputs and farm machines, spurred by state subsidies, give the politically powerful urban industries new market opportunities. This analysis suggests that in studying the current new phase of ‘rural rejuvenation’ in China, agriculture must now be centre-staged as the main terrain on which the reforms unfold.

In addition to these policy reforms, a series of changes in the socio-economic context are also turning agriculture into the pivotal issue in rural China. Huang and Peng (2007) identified a confluence of three historical trends that provide favourable conditions for the rejuvenation of smallholding family farming in China. These include the decline of the natural birth rate in the rural population, sustained transfer of rural labour into urban jobs and changes in urban diets that replace consumption of cereals with that of higher-value foods. Together, these changes would allow smallholding family farms to simultaneously shift from cereals to products with higher market values, raise their scales of production and increase labour productivity. The cumulative effects of these developments could then significantly raise the incomes of family farmers and provide the economic pillar of a rejuvenated countryside.

One does not need to share Huang and Peng’s optimism about family farming to see that there are strong forces that are bringing unprecedented developments to Chinese agriculture. Rapidly rising urban consumer demand for fruits, vegetables, dairy products, meat and poultry, and processed foods presents new opportunities of accumulation for the surplus capital that has started to plague China’s urban sector in recent years. Furthermore, the recurrent scandals of food contamination and alteration in recent years, often blown out of proportion by the urban-centred media, have also created a nationwide concern over food safety among consumers. While a diverse range of responses to this perceived food safety crisis have emerged, urban capital has seized this opportunity to portray corporate agriculture as the solution to higher-quality, more reliable and traceable food products.

Urban capital’s entry into agriculture has been swift and forceful. Legend Holdings, the corporate group that owns the world’s largest PC maker, Lenovo, for example, has established a new agribusiness, Joyvio, which has quickly become the country’s biggest grower–processor of blueberries and kiwi fruits. For the central government, this is a welcome change. In its policy design, the so-called ‘dragon-head agribusinesses’ have all along been identified as the key actor to push forward the agricultural modernization agenda (Zhang and Donaldson 2008). From the central government’s point of view, dragon-head agribusiness firms bring much-needed capital and technology into agriculture; modernized agriculture then raises
Table 1. The central government’s No. 1 Central Policy Documents, 2003–15

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<th>Year</th>
<th>Central theme</th>
<th>Key policy measures</th>
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| 2003 | To fully implement the experiment of rural tax-for-fee reform | • Regulate local taxes  
• Reduce agricultural tax |
| 2004 | To promote the income growth of rural residents | • Support main grain-producing regions  
• Promote scaled-up agriculture led by dragon-head agribusinesses  
• Develop markets for agricultural products |
| 2005 | To raise the overall capacity of agricultural production | • Implement the strictest protection of farmland  
• Strengthen the construction of agricultural infrastructure  
• Speed up innovations in agricultural technology |
| 2006 | To push forward the New Socialist Countryside programme | • Promote modernized agriculture as the pillar of the New Socialist Countryside |
| 2007 | To actively develop modernized agriculture and build the New Socialist Countryside | • Increase investment in agriculture and rural infrastructure  
• Promote technology innovation in agriculture  
• Develop the multiple functions of agriculture (tourism, environmental protection, cultural transmission, etc.)  
• Build a modern agricultural logistic system |
| 2008 | To facilitate agricultural development and rural residents’ income growth | • Ensure adequate supply of basic foods  
• Strengthen the building of agricultural infrastructure  
• Strengthen agricultural technology and extension services  
• Improve public services in rural areas |
| 2009 | To promote the stable development of agriculture and growth of rural incomes | • Develop the market for the transfer of land use rights  
• Accelerate agricultural mechanization  
• Promote rural–urban integration |
| 2010 | To promote integrated rural–urban development | • Increase state investment and subsidies for agriculture  
• Encourage non-state resources to invest in rural areas  
• Raise the scale of agricultural production |
| 2011 | To speed up the reform and development of the irrigation system | • Encourage non-state capital to invest in irrigation  
• Reform the water pricing system |
| 2012 | To promote technological innovations in agriculture and strengthen the supply of agricultural products | • Improve agricultural extension services  
• Improve rural education and train more agricultural technical staff |
| 2013 | To accelerate the development of modern agriculture | • Raise the scale of agricultural production  
• Nurture and strengthen dragon-head agribusiness firms and specialized big family farms  
• Increase private providers of agricultural services  
• Reform the rural collective ownership system |
| 2014 | To deepen rural reforms and accelerate the promotion of agricultural modernization | • Perfect the national system of food security  
• Deepen the reform of the rural land system  
• Support the growth of new agricultural producers (including cooperatives)  
• Speed up institutional innovation in rural finance |
| 2015 | To accelerate the building of agricultural modernization | • Use agricultural modernization to transform the pattern of agricultural development |
labour productivity, provides market opportunities for agricultural producers and transforms them from ‘backward’, ‘unproductive’ peasants into market-integrated, technology-savvy and productive modern farmers.

Studies of the two previous phases of rural reforms in China generally paid only scant attention to agricultural production. Agriculture as a subject of study was left almost entirely to agricultural economists, who approached it from an ahistorical and analytically reductionist framework that mostly focused on productivity and its determinants. In the three strands of literature on ‘sannong’ problems discussed earlier, for example, agriculture is usually treated either as the ‘poverty trap’ that rural migrants were trying to escape from and left-behind populations were trapped in, or the unrewarding activities that were unable to meet local states’ demand for fiscal resources.

Before the mid-2000s, agriculture was probably overshadowed in rural China research by issues such as the mounting peasant burdens, rising rural contention and the plight of migrant workers. But as fiscal reforms all but eliminated the peasant burden, and the once-heightened social tension over taxation has been deflated, reforms of the household registration system and the building of rural social welfare systems are also gradually reducing the institutional discrimination that rural migrants face in cities and improving the conditions of the left-behind populations. At the same time, the convergence of the central government’s policy goals and urban capital’s interest in accumulation has elevated agricultural modernization as the central agenda for fiscal resources.

These developments have started to attract more scholarly attention in recent years (Zhang and Donaldson 2008, 2010; Huang 2011; Huang et al. 2012; Zhang 2012, 2013; Huang and Gao 2013). These studies show that the entry of capital into agriculture – from diverse origins, via different paths and through uneven processes – has not just introduced fundamental changes to agricultural production; it also transforms rural politics and society in important ways. The essays in this collection further advance this research agenda.

INSIGHTS FROM STUDYING AGRARIAN CHANGE: THE PAPERS OF THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

The papers in this collection examine the contested processes of agrarian transition in rural China and provide some early assessment of its impact on rural society and economy. In at least three areas, which we briefly review below, findings from these studies bring new insights to enrich our understanding of rural China and demonstrate the utility of centre-staging agrarian change.

Rural Differentiation and Family Farming

Rural China’s departure from the ‘destratified society’ (Parish 1984) that it had once been – created by socialist land reform and collectivization – started early in the reform period. Business incomes from household entrepreneurial activities and wage incomes – first from local TVE jobs and then from migratory jobs in cities – were the main drivers behind rising income inequalities among rural households. The existing studies on rural inequalities, however, have two major deficiencies. First, the impact of rising inequalities on rural stratification is seen as creating a gradational distribution of rural households along some scale of privilege or deprivation, be it income, education, power or wealth. These studies have not examined how rural households’ differential participation in various economic activities can create different positions in the relations of production and, as a result, socially differentiate
the rural population into classes. Second, agriculture is still seen as a relatively level playing field – thanks to the egalitarian allocation of collectively owned farmland – and agricultural producers continue to be seen as an undifferentiated mass.

These problems become especially jarring in light of the classical thesis in agrarian studies – that growth of capitalist relations in agricultural production creates class differentiation among agricultural producers. Applying this thesis to the case of rural China, the contributions from Zhang, Huang and Yan and Chen expose how class differentiation has become a key feature of the rural society as a result of the political and economic project of pursuing ‘agricultural modernization’.

Citing national statistical data, Yan and Chen first show an alarming picture of rural inequality: not only is income disparity even larger than urban income inequality, but the income gap between rural households that mainly engage in farming activities has also been steadily growing since the 1990s. The foundation that used to keep the growth of inequality in farming in check – egalitarian allocation of farmland – is being chipped away by a confluence of political and economic forces. By 2013, 26 per cent of the country’s total farmed land had changed hands and become increasingly concentrated among large-scale producers – dragon-head agribusiness firms and specialized big household producers. More importantly, their analysis shows that this redistribution is closely connected with changes in relations of production and, thus, that the unequal allocations of land are giving rise to dynamics of class differentiation. Not only are dynamics of accumulation ‘from above’ and ‘from below’ creating new capitalist producers, but even farming households that manage to hold on to their small landholdings are being subsumed by capital in a variety of ways. As smallholding family farmers lose their autonomy, the myth of ‘a homogeneous peasant family economy’ is laid bare.

Zhang’s paper similarly focuses on the dynamics of class differentiation and tries to develop a systematic scheme to map out agrarian class positions. Using the combination of rural households’ positions in four markets, he identifies five class positions: capitalist employers, petty-bourgeois commercial farmers, dual-employment households, wage workers and subsistence peasants. His analysis also shows how the expansion of markets and the penetration of commodity relations into all aspects of agricultural production are exerting relentless pressure on the once-homogeneous population of family farmers and pushing them into different directions and positions. While he does not go as far as Yan and Chen in describing family farmers as ‘subsumed by capital’, Zhang sees them as subjected to tendencies of differentiation and their current resilience as contingent on the presence of specific political–economic conditions, which can be undermined by capital and the state.

Huang’s paper adds more ammunition to the attack on the idea of family farming as an essentialized Chinese tradition and resistant to the spread of capitalism. Her case study documents how commercial family farmers’ pursuit of technical upgrading in shrimp aquaculture brought about exacerbated biological risks inherent to these technologies; this eventually led to the total collapse of household-base petty production, as the required technical conditions of production surpassed the capability of household producers; agribusiness then stepped in and hired former commercial farmers as wage workers. This provides a vivid account of the increasing differentiation and rising challenges of social reproduction that even once-successful commercial family farmers face in a competitive market environment now dominated by capital.

The image of rural China that emerges from these studies is a society where class differences are becoming the main fault lines of social division. While they remain the dominant form of socially organizing labour and land in agricultural production, the
once-homogeneous core of rural Chinese society, smallholding family farmers, have become market-dependent for their production and social reproduction. Now subjected to the same market imperatives as corporate farms, they either raise capitalization to increase labour and land productivity and stay competitive in markets, or are gradually pushed into wage work. The implications from these findings are far-reaching. This uneven terrain of class differentiation is the new structural context in which all other social changes are unfolding – including, for example, processes of collective mobilization, dynamics of social contention, implementation of state policies, and provision of public goods.

Local States and Politics of Land

Land has no doubt replaced taxation as the focal point of social contention in rural China today. The once-rapacious local governments that preyed on the rural population through excessive taxes and fees have been defanged by the fiscal and administrative reforms of the mid-2000s. But their hunger for revenue sources has not abated, which drove them to exert leverage on their political control over land and profit from requisitioning collectively owned rural land and then auctioning it off for urban uses. Zhan’s contribution in this issue illustrates this dynamic, which has now so frequently become the source of rural social contention. Unlike other studies of land conflicts in rural China that focus on the politics of contention, Zhan’s paper sets the recent phase of land expropriation in a longer process of dispossession that started with the privatization of collective TVEs. It shows how the separation of rural residents from collective resources – first, jobs, dividends and property rights in TVEs and now access to land – gradually undermined the institutional foundation of rural industrialization in southern Jiangsu, which used to be the most successful in the country.

In Zhan’s account, land expropriation in this highly industrialized and prosperous part of rural China is notable for the conspicuous absence of confrontation and agitation. While resentment had initially been detectable among small entrepreneurs whose businesses had to be relocated, that later turned into a willingness or even urgency to have their land expropriated, as the government’s new pro-large industrial policies have all but sealed their eventual demise in competition with big firms.

This points to a new development in rural China’s politics of land, where the relationship between local governments and rural residents is being reshaped by the advance of capital into the countryside. The ability of capital and state to reap profits from rural land while rural residents are denied these opportunities by the state’s restrictions on their land rights is often the cause of contention between rural people and the state. Most studies on land politics in rural China focus on this. Yet, capital now has other ways of acquiring land – whether for urban development or capitalized agriculture – that may in fact be more preferable both economically and politically. It can use its market power to eliminate all other alternatives in which rural residents can use their land productively and, thus, leave them with no choice but to part with their land in a fire-sale manner. This of course still requires the assistance of the state; for example, in individualizing and registering land rights, building the institutions of a land transfer market, and tilting the competition in capital’s favour with industrial and agricultural policies.

And these are exactly what the central state has been doing, as Ye’s contribution meticulously documents. Ye’s analysis shows that to facilitate rural land transfers through open-market transactions and to concentrate land in the hands of scaled-up, modernized producers has become a clear policy priority for the central government in recent years, with an already
significant impact – by 2013, 340 million mu of farmland has been transferred. This is larger in scale, by an order of magnitude, than rural land expropriated for urban development. Yet, this process that is more widespread and, in all likelihood, more consequential in shaping the lives of a far greater number of rural residents, has received much less attention in the study of land politics.

When market transfer – again, often politically assisted by the state – becomes the dominant way of separating rural residents from their land rights, the contention that used to rise between state and rural people over land expropriation process is replaced by seemingly voluntaristic market exchanges. How markets are rigged by pro-capital policies is much less visible and less prone to contestation. Rather than being coerced by political power or even violence, rural residents are now more likely to be driven off their land by ‘the dull compulsion of economic forces’. A key insight from Ye’s contribution, therefore, is that rapidly growing land transfer driven by the state’s agricultural modernization project should become a central issue in the study of land politics. The impact of market transfers on muting land-related collective resistance – or, maybe, igniting new class-based contention – requires serious investigation.

Livelihoods and Well-Being

While the central state’s policy goal is about ‘rural rejuvenation’ through agricultural modernization, the real impact on rural livelihoods of these policies and, more broadly, the economic changes with which they are intertwined, are far less clear cut. The contribution by Xu and Zhang presents a deeply puzzling finding: despite rising rural incomes, the nutritional intake of China’s rural population has suffered a steady decline since 2000; and this decline is observed across all income groups and in all regions. Using national- and provincial-level statistical data, their analysis shows that this decline is attributable to both voluntary causes (decline of nutritional needs resulting from people’s exit from farm work) and involuntary causes – more specifically, a budget squeeze that they attribute to the commodification of rural residents’ subsistence and the Westernization of their diets, which replaces cheaper sources of nutrition (cereals) with more expensive ones (animal products).

This is an alarming finding about the potential impact of the programme of rejuvenating the countryside through agricultural modernization. While agriculture is being turned into a new venue for capital accumulation and has thus received unprecedented infusions of capital and technology from the private sector, this appears to be rejuvenating capital accumulation much more than rural livelihoods. For most rural residents, agricultural modernization brings the further penetration of commodity relations into all aspects of rural lives, especially in turning their contracted farmland and household labour into commodities available for capitalized, ‘modern’ producers. In the short run, this commodification of their subsistence can present opportunities for higher incomes, as Zhang’s paper, for example, demonstrates. The left-behind populations, rather than being trapped in a ‘wasteland’ deprived of rewarding economic opportunities, are in fact finding new wage job opportunities in local capitalized agriculture or through short-duration migratory work in large-scale farms. But in the long run, their livelihoods will be made more precarious and exposed to the vicissitude of markets, as the scaled-up, capitalized agriculture to which their wage work contributes undermines the

2 There is no accurate estimation of the amount of expropriated rural land, but sources cited in Sargeson (2013, 1068) estimate it to be 4.2 million hectares (63 million mu) for the entire period of 1990–2008.
viability of their own small-scale, under-capitalized family farming. In fact, Xu and Zhang’s paper finds that an increased reliance on more expensive purchased food for their consumption – an important step in family farmers’ commodification process – contributes to the budget squeeze that leads to declining nutritional intake. Thus, commodification of subsistence and its contradictions should become a central perspective in studying changes in rural livelihoods. Not only should agricultural modernization be evaluated for its impact on rural livelihoods by advancing the commodification of subsistence, but recently implemented rural welfare programmes also need to be assessed in terms of whether they impede the further commodification of subsistence.

CHINA’S CASE IN AGRARIAN POLITICAL ECONOMY: CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Bernstein in this issue argues that China’s case is ‘a particularly intriguing, complex and challenging case of agrarian change today’. This assertion underscores the centrality of historical and context specificity in the history of agrarian transitions, which results, as Byres (1996, 2003) argued years ago, in a variety of distinct ‘paths’ to capitalist development and agrarian transitions. To be sure, some common and long-standing features described in this introductory paper and in all the contributions to this special issue (commodification of subsistence, rural labour market formation, primitive accumulation and social differentiation, to name the most important) are also found in the ‘Chinese path’. The particularities of the processes of agrarian change in China have to do with its intensity, timing, sequencing, drivers and specific class structures and social, economic and political outcomes. These specificities also stem from being ‘one of a distinctive cluster of historic agrarian formations in East and South-East Asia’ (Bernstein, this issue).

This special issue was initially and primarily conceived to fill a gap in China’s rural/ agrarian studies. In this vein, it was designed to engage with and attempt to respond to a number of key themes and questions in agrarian political economy, all cogently summarized by Bernstein’s essay. A key aim, therefore, was understanding and engaging with ‘agrarian questions’ in China.

In classic agrarian political economy, the ‘agrarian question of capital’ has been central, but in contemporary studies the ‘agrarian question of labour’ emerges with force. Byres (2013) describes the former in its broadest terms as ‘the continuing existence in the countryside of a poor country of substantive obstacles to an unleashing of the forces capable of generating economic development, both inside and outside agriculture’. Central to the agrarian question of capital is the ‘internalist’ and ‘production problematic’ in Bernstein’s terms, which essentially refers to the drivers of and impediments to the development of capitalist agriculture in agrarian transitions to capitalism. These questions are revisited in Bernstein’s essay in this special issue, in the form of ten different questions, organized around four ‘themes’, namely agrarian class formation, rural–urban interconnections, the agrarian basis of industrialization and capitalist development, and international/global dimensions, each relevant to different levels of analysis. Central to the debate on ‘agrarian questions’ is labour market formation, or the gradual generalization of wage labour as a way of survival and the gradual separation of workers from their means of production – that is, land – itself also related to instances of ‘primitive accumulation’.

As many papers in this special issue illustrate, in the context of China it is hard to understand agrarian change, transitions and ‘crises’ without reference to internal migration and the links between town and countryside – what Bernstein calls ‘rural–urban interconnections’.
Therefore, both the agrarian questions of capital and labour imply ‘challenges’ and contradictions inherent to the process of capitalist development (i.e. widespread rises in living standards coupled with increasing inequalities, environmental challenges and conflict), the burden of which is unevenly distributed among different classes of labour and capital.

Overall, this special issue, with contributions coming primarily from Chinese authors, aims to expose readers, including those not so familiar with China’s development trajectory, to these debates and their relevance to the context of China and, more importantly, to the basic contours and many ‘determinations’ of agrarian change and transition in China in the past 40 years, in the context of the longue durée of social, economic and political transformations in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Three key processes constitute the central features of agrarian change in China. As noted above, these are also processes historically associated with the development of capitalism in other contexts, albeit with their own particularities. First, there is the dynamics of accumulation, its diverse drivers and its variation across contexts. This special issue, as summarized above, provides new evidence on salient characteristics of the entry of capital into agriculture in a country that has already substantially industrialized. The late development of capitalism in Chinese agriculture is particularly interesting, as it does not appear to be a necessary condition for industrialization and overall capitalist development, but follows the rapid social and economic transformations already achieved during the process of economic reforms. However, this late development of capitalism follows a period of collectivization and state-led accumulation and industrialization. In that sense, agricultural accumulation still contributed to (or was even the necessary condition) for industrialization; it just took place under state socialism, rather than capitalism. Second, the commodification of subsistence and the expansion of rural wage labour, a long-standing feature in most trajectories of agrarian change in the context of capitalist development, is mediated and shaped by internal rural–urban migration on a mass scale. Third is the process of agrarian differentiation and rural class formation that results from the first two processes, and the various mediating factors that attenuate or exacerbate these tendencies, namely land transfers, urbanization of rural space, labour migration, fiscal policies and changes in consumption patterns, among others. Instances of ‘primitive accumulation’, also central to studies in agrarian political economy, are also illustrated and critically discussed in this special issue.

Byres (1996) has insisted on the centrality of the role of the state in understanding the specificities of trajectories of agrarian transition in particular historical social formations. Most papers in this special issue document how various forms of state intervention and shifts in policy discourse and action, at different levels (central, provincial and local), have shaped the speed and characteristics of the three processes mentioned above.

The outcomes of these processes and changes can be analysed through a dialectical lens that emphasizes the existence and persistence of contradictions intrinsic to the dynamics of capitalist accumulation and agrarian change. Most contributions to this special issue critically explore the most important contradictions, some easier to anticipate (rising inequalities, social tensions and environmental challenges) than others (declining nutrition intake). The key challenge is to be able to hold two ideas at the same time, by considering the ‘progressive’ aspects of processes of accumulation and capitalist penetration (‘agricultural modernization’ in the policy jargon) as well as their contradictions and most pernicious outcomes. At the heart of some of these contradictions lies the growing importance of rural–urban interconnections, and how the boundaries between ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ become increasingly blurred and analytically problematic. Bringing agriculture to the centre of the agenda certainly does not mean analysing it in isolation from economy-wide processes, structures and relations. As many
papers in this special issue show, the ‘devil is in the detail’ of these interconnections, which seem particularly important in China given its rapid industrialization, compared to most developing countries.

This leads us back to one of the questions that concerned us at the start of the journey to produce this special issue: why is China important for the literature on agrarian change and agrarian transitions? First, it is because of its scale and speed in the space of 30 years, and thus China being one of the most significant examples of process of agrarian transition in contemporary developing countries. Second, it is because the case of China is an excellent platform to re-engage with and revive ongoing debates about the ‘agrarian question’ and notably the relevance and nature of the agrarian questions of capital and labour in agrarian political economy. Third, it is because of the implications of ongoing processes of agrarian change for the overall process of capitalist development in China, which is one of the most quantitatively and qualitatively important in current times, and with global implications. Fourth, it is because of the particular history of China and the possibility of devising new analytical categories of agrarian transition, with socialist transitions preceding and shaping more conventional capitalist transitions. In comparative terms, the study of agrarian questions in China opens up a wealth of possibilities in the study of agrarian transitions worldwide, and therefore should be of interest to those working on other regions and countries of the developing world.

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