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Some Reflections on Agrarian Change in China

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This is a paper of two parts. The first suggests a number of questions concerning agrarian change in capitalism, grouped by their concern with social forces and dynamics internal to the countryside, rural–urban interconnections internal to the 'national', the contributions of agriculture to industrialization likewise within the 'national' and those 'external' determinants grounded in capitalist world economy. The second part draws on the papers in this special issue by Chinese scholars, to argue the continuing relevance of questions about commodification, differentiation and accumulation from below and from above, in agrarian change in China today.

Keywords: agrarian political economy, China, commodification, class dynamics of agrarian change

INTRODUCTION

China presents a particularly intriguing, complex and challenging case of agrarian change today. What are some of the markers of its special interest?

In Francesca Bray's seminal *The Rice Economies* (1986), China is one of a distinctive cluster of historic agrarian formations in East and South-East Asia. Their demographic features, farming organization, technologies and political configurations bearing on irrigated rice cultivation in the region suggested to her a model of agricultural and social development very different to that extrapolated from Western historical experience, and from which future trajectories alternative to Western paths of development can be derived. Whether 'feudal' or exemplifying a tributary mode of production (Banaji 2010), China was arguably the greatest of the agrarian civilizations that vanished in the modern period of world capitalism and imperialism. It had a dynamic and extensive commerce, a sophisticated science, technology and artistic culture, and the largest population (about half the world's people in 1750).

In the thesis of Kenneth Pomeranz (2000), China's economic and social development was comparable to that of Europe at the end of the eighteenth century, the moment of the 'great divergence' thereafter.[1] According to official Chinese historiography, 'feudalism' in China began to collapse from its internal contradictions during the eighteenth century, with any positive trajectory beyond that undermined by the devastations of Western (and Japanese) imperialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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I am grateful to the editors of this special issue and to two anonymous referees for comments on these 'reflections', which are best read after the substantive contributions by the Chinese scholars on which they draw.

[1] Brenner and Isett (2002) and Huang (2002) provide critiques, with a response by Pomeranz (2002). Elvin (1973) argues the stasis of China's historic civilization over the *longue durée*. Arrighi (2007) provided a very different, explicitly Smithian and much more positive, interpretation of China's modern economic history.

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From the ruins of its imperial social formation and during the brief Republican period, China experienced the greatest of the 'peasant wars of the twentieth century' (Wolf 1969) in the 1920s to the 1940s, which led to national liberation in 1949. In outline, the main markers of China's land and agrarian history since then (see Ye in this special issue[2]) are: revolutionary land reform that destroyed the social basis of landlordism; the reforms that led to the establishment of the communes; the dismantling of the communes from the 1970s and the establishment of the Household Responsibility System (HRS) from the late 1970s;[3] and incremental then accelerating liberalization of markets, as well as other important policy measures to modernize agriculture, together with massive industrialization, urbanization and rural labour migration, as the capitalist road increased its momentum. It is salutary to remember that the Maoist period in liberated China was shorter than that of the capitalist road since then. Nonetheless, the extraordinary pace and intensity of economic and social change in China in the past 30 years provide almost 'laboratory' conditions for the exploration of its agrarian transition, if that is what it is. To open up that issue, I turn next to some central questions and themes in the political economy of agrarian change.

KEY QUESTIONS ABOUT AGRARIAN TRANSITION

Political economy investigates agrarian change through processes of class struggle and class formation. Concerning transitions to capitalism, the agenda of agrarian political economy centres on a range of questions, which I group here. A first set of questions can be framed as (I) *internal to the countryside*, addressing the following:

1. The 'commodification of subsistence' (Brenner 2001), and of the means of subsistence, of ('peasant') farmers: are they able to reproduce themselves outside (competitive) market exchange of what they produce (sale of 'output') and how they produce it (purchase of 'inputs')? This connects with a second theme:
2. The commodification of land: does agrarian transition necessarily involve dispossession of 'peasant', small or 'family' farmers, whether by direct means (expropriation through enclosure) or indirect means (crises of reproduction exerted by market pressures)?
3. How are new classes of capitalist landed property, agrarian capital and wage labour formed? By what means and with what effects?
4. How, in what forms, and how far, does accumulation of capital in the means of agricultural production (land and instruments of labour) proceed?
5. Is there accumulation 'from above' and/or 'from below', the latter through the class differentiation of farmers?
6. What are the effects for production growth in farming, realized through the development of the productive forces and especially growth in labour productivity?

Two further themes push against limiting such processes of change to social forces within the countryside, thereby bringing in (II) *rural–urban interconnections*:

[2] Hereafter I refer to contributions to this special issue by authors' surnames only.

[3] Any assessment of the experience of the communes is (far) beyond the scope of this paper. Ye acknowledges some beneficial legacy of the communes to agricultural production in the subsequent reform period. Others such as Le Mons Walker (2006) and Wen (2008) maintain that there has been serious deterioration in maintenance of the rural infrastructure (irrigation, flood control) since the dismantling of the communes. Bramall (2004) argues that a differentiated peasantry continued to exist in the period of the communes, and that (relatively) 'rich' peasants contributed a disproportionate share of total grain production. He also dissents from standard views of decollectivization and the benign effects attributed to it.

7. On the side of capital, what is the significance, and its effects, of '(agrarian) capital beyond the countryside' that invests in farm production directly or indirectly – the latter, for example, through contract farming?
8. On the side of labour, what is the significance of 'rural labour beyond the farm' involving rural industrialization (from older to more contemporary forms of non-agricultural wage employment) or regular rural labour migration, as vital elements of the incomes and reproduction of classes of labour in the countryside (who may also engage in some 'own account' farming)?

Themes 7 and 8 (together with 6) point towards (III) the place of agriculture within larger *'national' economies*, which becomes more explicit with a further theme:

9. What are the contributions of agriculture to industrialization? Do (particular) states facilitate, hinder or 'block': (i) the transfer of agricultural surpluses to industrial accumulation by direct taxation of agrarian classes, or indirectly through the terms of exchange between agriculture and industry; or (ii) the development of a home market integrating exchange between agriculture and industry? How? And how much?

A final theme concerns the character and effects of (IV) the capitalist *world economy*:

10. What are the effects for agrarian change in particular places at particular times of the formation and interactions of: (i) international divisions of labour in agricultural production, international trade in agricultural commodities, how trade is organized and financed, and international investment in agriculture; and (ii) the international state system?

Some Historical Coordinates

Listing such questions, and the themes they highlight, is unavoidably general. Those questions and themes contain (or, as stated, conceal) much theoretical dispute, and in any case can only sketch an initial agenda. Beyond that, the specificities, modalities, complexities, durations and contradictions of agrarian transitions, in the different places and times of capitalism – the 'substantive diversity' of paths of agrarian transition (Byres 1996) – require detailed investigation.

Questions 1–6 about commodification, class formation, accumulation and agricultural productivity growth traverse the histories of capitalism from the original English agrarian transition of the fifteenth or sixteenth century to consideration of change in China's countrysides today, as a number of the contributions to this special issue show. Without further determinations, in Marx's term, they resonate an 'internalist' problematic (Bernstein 1996), reflecting debate of the original English transition, if also aiming to carry forward its 'lessons'. This is common to such pre-eminent scholars of the English transition (despite other difference between them) as Robert Brenner (1976) and Terence J. Byres (2009) for whom, first, the emergence of agrarian capitalism is explicable principally, or exclusively, by the formation of classes of capitalist landed property, agrarian capital and wage labour through social struggle internal to the countryside (Questions 2–5). Second, agriculture has to provide a surplus available to fund industrialization within particular countries (Questions 6 and 9, emphasized by Byres). Third, the development of a home market integrates exchange between agriculture and industry as the basis of 'national' development (Question 9).

The 'internalist' problematic features in historical comparisons between the English transition and other European cases – France, Prussia/Germany, the Netherlands, the 'second serfdom' of Eastern Europe – from the late medieval or early modern period onwards (*inter*

alios Byres 1996, 2009; Wood 1999; Brenner 2001; Heller 2011). It informed the most important study in classic Marxism of the development of capitalism in a zone outside Western Europe, Lenin's *Development of Capitalism in Russia*, the subtitle of which is *The Process of the Formation of a Home Market for Large-Scale Industry* (Lenin 1964/1899).[4] Byres' work has centred on Question 9, to provide a seminal comparative account of the agrarian basis of capitalist industrialization in Europe, the United States (US) (Byres 1996) and Asia from late nineteenth-century Japan to South Korea and Taiwan in the second half of the twentieth century (Byres 1991).[5] The most striking finding of his studies is that the contributions of agriculture to industrialization – agrarian transition in his sense of the term – did *not* always require the (prior) development of capitalist farming in the sense of the formation of capitalist landed property, agrarian capital and wage labour, combined in large-scale production (Questions 1–6). In the East Asian cases, the accumulation fund for industrialization was secured from taxing peasant farming (and peasant farming with growing productivity), and in the US through the terms of trade between industry and agriculture, with the latter characterized by 'petty commodity production from below'[6] (Byres 2003). Byres revisited the ('internalist') problematic of agrarian transition and national development (industrialization) with reference to the current period of globalization, concluding that it remained relevant to the 'giant economies' of India and China, with vast potential domestic markets reflecting their demographic profiles (ibid., 209; see also Byres 2013).

Several further questions then arise. First, is a transition to capitalist agriculture, in the sense of large-scale farming employing wage labour, a *necessary* condition of industrialization? Byres' comparative studies conclude that the answer is 'no'. Might this answer also apply to contemporary China (as to Byres' historically earlier East Asian cases)?

Second, is the formation of capitalist landed property, agrarian capital and agricultural wage labour combined in large farms – derived from the original English transition – the *only* form that the development of capitalist agriculture can take (which is Byres' position)?

And third, how well does an 'internalist' approach travel across the different places and times of capitalism from the original English transition to explorations of agrarian change in the world today, including contemporary China? Is the first set of questions and themes, while still relevant, *sufficient* to explore agrarian transitions across the past five centuries or so of capitalism on a world scale? What other determinations might the histories of capitalism require? This connects with Questions 7, 8 and 10.

Rural–urban interconnections – signalled by Questions 7–8 above concerning '(agrarian) capital beyond the countryside' and 'rural labour beyond the farm' – start to stretch any framework that limits class dynamics of transition to the countryside (see Zhang), as well as indicating a need for much more extensive attention to (changing) relations between agriculture and industry in the histories of capitalism, especially, I suggest, from the nineteenth

[4] See also the classic work of Preobrazhensky (1965), first published in 1926, which addressed how to achieve Soviet socialist construction without the sources of colonial and other world market primitive accumulation available to European capitalist industrialization. Lenin (1964) is invoked by Yan and Chen and by Zhang in this special issue, and debates about earlier European transitions are invoked by others writing on agrarian change in China, especially with reference to primitive accumulation (and Marx's account of it), on which I comment below.

[5] A central aim of Byres' comparative work was to analyse the prospects of (and obstacles to) agrarian transition in independent India.

[6] In an echo of Lenin's 'American path'. Post (2011) provides a different materialist interpretation of the American road to capitalism to Byres, with no doubt that the United States underwent a transition to agrarian capitalism.

century.[7] This can be highlighted by expanding Question 7 to include accumulation by today's agribusiness capitals upstream and downstream of farming, and the control over farming processes that they seek to impose. All this applies *a fortiori* when placed in the context of capitalist *world economy*. The abbreviation (or concentration) of Question 10 above points to the most encompassing terrain of debate about agrarian change today.

In relation to Question 10, the 'internalist' problematic is challenged most strongly by insistence on the global character of capitalism from its origins, as fundamental to its emergence as to its subsequent development. A well-known example is Immanuel Wallerstein's world-system analysis, which emphasizes the interconnections of the international state system and patterns of international trade, investment and finance in the formation and functioning of the capitalist world economy.[8] A particular version of this approach argues that successful transitions to (industrial) capitalism in the countries that experienced them, at least the European countries (and Japan), depended on primitive accumulation from colonial plunder, exploitation and trade as much as, or more than, any growth of agricultural productivity driven by their internal (class) dynamics. It can further lead to the position, associated with Rosa Luxemburg (1951), that advanced capitalism continues to require primitive accumulation beyond its conventional (internal) mechanisms of expanded reproduction, not least through its exactions from peasantries in the South (Moyo et al. 2013).

A rather different and original innovation within a 'world systems' perspective is the analysis of food regimes, introduced by Harriet Friedmann and Philip McMichael (1989). The notion of the food regime 'links international relations of food production and consumption to forms of accumulation broadly distinguishing periods of capitalist transformation' (ibid., 95); that is, *accompanying* or *following* capitalist industrialization. The food regimes that they identified are a first (1870–1914) during the (final) period of British hegemony in the world economy; and a second (1945–73) under US hegemony in the post-war world economy; with McMichael (2013) elaborating a third 'corporate food regime' since the 1980s in the period of (neoliberal) globalization. For this approach (as for Wallerstein), the formation and mutations of the international state system are central to world markets in agricultural commodities, and their consequences for the organization of farming and how it changes. Most importantly, analysis of the third food regime suggests the transnationalization or globalization of some of the dynamics noted so far, especially with regard to '(agrarian) capital beyond the countryside'. The modalities of (financialized) corporate agribusiness include both 'new' themes – global sourcing of raw materials for processing (biofuels as well as foods and feeds for the 'global meat complex'), international market liberalization, and the ever-intensifying industrialization of both crop and livestock production (and its ecological consequences) – and 'old' themes in new historical conditions – land grabbing, and the accelerated dispossession of small farmers ('peasants') – all of which resonate in debate of agrarian change in contemporary China.

Complications and Cautions

The list of questions, summarized in Table 1, should be seen as heuristic. It cannot provide substantive accounts of the diversity of paths of agrarian transition in the histories of

[7] Debates of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries in Europe address agrarian transitions *before* the emergence and rise to dominance of capitalist industry.

[8] The first volume of Wallerstein's (1974) *The Modern World-System* is titled *Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century*.

Table 1. Questions about agrarian change

Themes	*Locus*	*Questions*
I Agrarian class formation Growth of production and productivity	Countryside	1–5 6
II Rural–urban interconnections:		
• '(agrarian) capital beyond the countryside'	'National' [and international → IV]	7
• 'rural labour beyond the farm'	'National'	8
III Agrarian basis of industrialization	'National'	9
IV International divisions of agrarian labour, trade etc.	Capitalist world economy	10

capitalism, and does not pretend to. Accounts of that diversity, briefly illustrated in the previous section, start to add complications that point to some vexed issues in the debate of agrarian change:

- What is considered 'capitalist' and why (and hence by implication 'pre-' or 'non-capitalist')?
- What forms of capitalist development of agriculture might there be other than the archetypal large-scale farm employing wage labour?
- What is the relative weight of, and what are the interactions between, determinations internal to the countryside and to the 'national', and 'external' determinations that derive from the dynamics of the capitalist world economy (as in the third food regime)?

The aspiration to clarify, through simplification, some of the key analytical elements in the study of agrarian change across five centuries of capitalism (inevitably) transgresses aspects of those histories. For example, there were important instances of seasonal labour migration by peasants in various times and places of early capitalism; hence it is not exclusively a 'new' question or theme. And, as indicated, there are various arguments about the significance of colonial agrarian change in Asia and Africa, and indeed about the effects of state formation in Europe at different moments for its agrarian transitions and subsequent industrialization (Bernstein 1996). Also, it could be argued that just as Table 1 signals a (historical) movement of '(agrarian) capital beyond the countryside' from the 'national' to the international plane, the same could apply to 'rural labour beyond the farm', given the importance of international migrant labour in capitalist farming both historically and today.

However, the primary note of caution here concerns the formulation of '(agrarian) capital beyond the countryside', with its somewhat awkward placing of 'agrarian' in parentheses. What it aims to signify is capital of non-agrarian, non-rural provenance and character that enters, directly or indirectly, into agricultural commodity production and shapes it to a greater or lesser extent through specific, and varying, forms of integration with markets. In turn, this affects the relative fortunes, and hence the conditions of reproduction, of different classes of agricultural producers. In earlier histories of capitalism, types of '(agrarian) capital beyond the countryside' were often (extra-rural) moneylending capital and merchant capital.[9] In the global corporate world of today's third food regime, the principal applications of '(agrarian)

[9] The centrality of merchant capital in the development of capitalism is emphasized by Banaji (2010).

capital beyond the countryside' are to agribusiness upstream and downstream of farming.[10] Upstream, 'agri-input' corporations are typically industrial, especially chemical, conglomerates. Downstream, they comprise industrial corporations sourcing and processing feedstuffs for the 'global meat complex' and manufacturing 'durable foods', and other 'agri-food' capitals in global circuits of distribution ('the supermarket revolution'). Moreover, within current dynamics of globalization, agribusiness both upstream and downstream are new frontiers of interest to finance capital, as is speculation in futures markets for food and feed (and biofuel stocks).

There is a danger here that emphasis on the centrality today of '(agrarian) capital' – or simply capital – 'beyond the countryside' generates a binary between the 'old' determinations associated with the 'internalist' problematic and new determinations associated with an 'external' focus on connections between agriculture and industry, and on patterns of globalization. That is, invoking the powers of agribusiness capital to shape agricultural production, in order to provide particular answers to Questions 7 and 10, can marginalize Questions 1–6 (and Question 8), especially concerning class differentiation and class formation within the countryside.[11] This is most likely to be an effect of agrarian populist positions that conceive today's definitive contradiction as between the interests of 'peasants' (and sometimes *all* non-corporate farmers) and (global) agribusiness, and champion 'the peasant way' – which also resonates in today's debates about agrarian change in China, on which more below.

AGRARIAN CHANGE IN CHINA

Who are the Farmers?

China's agrarian landscapes are populated by vast numbers of mostly tiny farms and those who cultivate them (Ye). There has been a more or less encompassing process of the commodification of their subsistence since the dismantling of the communes and establishment of the Household Responsibility System (HRS) in the context of the capitalist road that has accelerated since then. The commodification of subsistence has various dimensions: the increasing need to purchase farm inputs (Xu and Zhang) and sell output (Yan and Chen, Zhang); the need to pay for education and health services previously provided by the communes, and also new consumption goods (Xu and Zhang); and, not least, the massive scale of wage employment – 'labour beyond the farm' – in both rural industry (Zhan) and through longer-distance labour migration (Ye).[12]

Broad agreement about these processes is, however, wrapped in a range of disagreements about their exact mechanisms, forms, extent and effects, that stem from different theoretical perspectives, compounded by great variation in rural areas: their ecologies, the social conditions and organization of their farming systems, and highly variable levels of regional development.[13] This is further compounded by the lack of government statistical sources that

[10] Noteworthy here is Chinese government encouragement of 'capital going to the countryside' (Yan and Chen).

[11] As well as dissolving the contemporary relevance of Question 9, or prejudging answers to it.

[12] 'In today's rural China, for a large majority of the population, wage employment has become a central pillar in their social reproduction . . . wage employment has also become a central dimension in creating socioeconomic differentiation' (Zhang 2015).

[13] 'In various parts of rural China, different local models of transition have emerged. Family farms are disintegrated, or subsumed, or reproduced, or transformed, while agro-capital, on the other hand, uses either arms-length markets, integrated firms, or neither-market-nor-firm contract arrangements to engage in agricultural production. Wage labor appears in different forms, offered by proletarianized or semi-proletarianized laborers and employed by family-based farms or agribusiness companies' (Zhang 2013, 9).

allow macro-level analysis of key elements of commodification and *a fortiori* rural class differentiation (as well as methodological issues in the compilation of official statistics and their uses for certain analytical purposes). In this respect, China is very different from India, where debate of class formation in agrarian change has long used the data sets of the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO), the Agricultural Census, the Census of India and exhaustive reports by the Planning Commission and other government bodies (for recent examples, see Ramachandran and Rawal 2010; Basole and Basu 2011; Ramachandran 2011; Lerche 2013).

Beyond official statistics and the limited purposes for which they can be used (and with appropriate caution[14]), there are large surveys usually conducted by agricultural economists (e.g. Rozelle et al. 2005) and a range of case studies of particular dynamics in particular places at particular times (and, at best, over time), which are illustrative (and, at best, richly suggestive) rather than representative, let alone conclusive. Having said that, two broad perspectives are most relevant to the political economy of commodification of the countryside. One aims to investigate its effects for class differentiation and accumulation, exemplified in this special issue by the wide-ranging arguments of Zhang and Yan and Chen. Zhang considers the formation of classes of capitalist farmers, 'petty-bourgeois' commercial farmers, 'dual-employment households' combining wage employment with some farming (the 'semi-proletarianized', Ye) and (proletarianized) wage workers, deploying a range of examples. These class categories are also discernible in Yan and Chen's exploration of accumulation from above, from below and combining elements of both. Huang's case study of changes in shrimp aquaculture in one locality traces specific conditions and constraints of commodification in what appears to be an instance of accumulation from below, with a shift from formal to real subsumption of labour.

Permeating the comprehensive papers by Zhang and Yan and Chen is a kind of dual-track process of capitalization of agriculture, namely:

(i) the differentiation of (once 'peasant') farmers – in China, 'agrarian capitalism grows mainly through . . . a transformation of family-based farming', as Zhang puts it (and of which he provides a conceptually subtle account) – and
(ii) the formation, functioning and effects of agribusiness, whether through accumulation from below or above and indeed from 'outside' – '(agrarian) capital beyond the countryside', and 'going to the countryside' in a term prominent in Chinese official discourse (Yan and Chen).

The second can intersect with the first, as Yan and Chen suggest, often through the modalities of contract farming (see also Zhang 2012) and other ways in which petty (and not so petty) commodity production is integrated with agribusiness upstream and downstream (processing and/or marketing). Moreover, both papers observe competitive pressures on commercial farmers, smaller and larger, in certain market conditions and in circumstances (including the political) of the expansion of agribusiness. They also illustrate the extensive use of wage labour in some types of farming. Zhang and Yan and Chen emphasize the development of capitalism in Chinese agriculture, without it taking the exclusive form of large-scale farms employing wage labour, conventionalized in some Marxist accounts. Departing from such accounts,

[14] For example, ongoing debate among the contributors to this special issue of the methodological basis of the paper by Xu and Zhang.

Zhang, for example, proposes that due to its commodification, 'Family farming in today's China is no less capitalistic than corporate farming organized by agribusiness using wage labour.'[15]

Critics of this kind of materialist approach include proponents of the second broad perspective on the commodification of China's countryside, which emphasizes the reproduction ('persistence') of its peasant economy. One example is Philip Huang et al.'s (2012) notion of 'capitalization without proletarianization', which signals the successful embrace of petty commodity production by small farmers without rural labour markets of any significance, and hence largely without wage employment. This is a striking claim, given the famously labour-intensive cultivation of small farms in China and the drain on rural labour available to farming due to massive migration (Ye). Huang et al. (2012, 147–8) maintain that 'there can be no question that family farming has remained predominant', especially in the 'old agriculture' (grains, oil crops, cotton) but also in the 'new agriculture' of higher-value products, which is both more capital- and labour-intensive. On the capital side, they do not indicate the sources of investment funds for intensifying household production in high-value branches (and see Yan and Chen). On the labour side, they suggest that additional labour requirements are met through local casual employment (which they do not regard as 'proletarianization') of a largely 'feminized' and 'seniorized' rural population certainly in those areas with high proportions of adult male labour migration (representing a 'semi-proletarianization' of 'left-behind' people, according to Ye).[16]

Huang et al. resonate with a version of Chayanov that is taken to task by Yan and Chen. Another, more explicitly Chayanovian, approach is that of Jan Douwe van der Ploeg and Jingzhong Ye (also a contributor to this special issue), who argue that commodification is incorporated in, and mediated to support, the distinctive logic and moral economy of peasant farming. Thus for them, labour migration is driven by the need for investment in farming and family reproduction centred on land holding. While this may involve some expansion into lines of specialized commodity production, using purchased inputs (as emphasized by Huang et al.), farming for own consumption of food, and *without* purchased inputs, remains a (the?) key priority. This, then, is a kind of 'subsistence plus' model with a very large 'plus' derived from participation in markets (especially labour markets) and without any hint of possible differentiation (van der Ploeg and Ye 2010; van der Ploeg et al. 2014).[17] There seems to be general agreement that rural migrant workers prefer to retain access to land to which they are entitled as holders of village *hukou* (resident's permits), even if cultivation of that land is marginal to their reproduction,[18] and even when, *pace* van der Ploeg and Ye, they have little interest in investing savings from wage income in farming.[19] The desire to retain a land entitlement may be because it provides an element of security; in some instances a degree of

[15] In an echo of Barbara Harriss-White (2012): petty commodity production is 'as modern a kind of capitalism as the corporation' (144–5), '(re)created as an outcome of contradictory processes of capitalism' (128–9).

[16] Zhang (forthcoming) is a very useful survey of different types of wage labour, including in capitalist agriculture, and the 'fluidity, complexity and fragmentation' of wage employment and income in social reproduction and differentiation in rural China today.

[17] The fascinating paper by van der Ploeg et al. (2014) on reproduction of rural families over a three-generation cycle is based on 24 family biographies from three villages in Hebei province.

[18] And indeed such land is 'loaned' to family members from other households, or to friends or neighbours, to farm, during the often long periods when migrant workers are away from their villages.

[19] The case of the returned labour migrants in Wanzai County, Jiangxi Province, in Rachel Murphy's illuminating monograph (2002).

household farming may raise the reserve price of labour, although this cannot be assumed for China as elsewhere.[20]

There remain two important questions within this very brief exposition. One is the effect of state policies concerning agriculture in the period of the capitalist road, and its complexities and contradictions, traced in the contribution of Ye and also referenced by Yan and Chen and by Zhang. Many of those complexities are attached to the different levels of government in China, and what kinds of decisions bearing on agricultural 'modernization' and 'depeasantization', and actions to implement them, are taken across those levels from the central state through provinces and counties to the township and the village. All this has effects for the forms and extent of accumulation from above – including that associated with office holding and its prerogatives, both formal and informal – and from below. Arenas in which government action is typically of central importance, not least through the imperatives of revenue generation at local state levels, are establishing the conditions of agricultural 'modernization' (Ye, Yan and Chen) and promoting rural industrialization and then urbanized real estate (Zhan), both of which connect with the second question of land rights and 'transfers', to which I turn next.

Who Owns the Land?

In principle, the HRS gives rural households land-use rights and residual income rights; that is, through leasing of, or other income from, collectively owned land, subject to periodic reallocation by the entities in which rural landownership is vested: usually small village groups ('natural villages'), sometimes larger village collective bodies and sometimes townships (Ye).[21] In practice, the administration, allocation and uses of land are greatly complicated by the numerous changes in landownership and tenure regulations since 1949, the uneven application of tenure regulations, amalgamations and subdivisions of villages (Brandt et al. 2002), and pervasive legal and administrative ambiguities emphasized by Peter Ho (2001). Indeed, the basic question 'Who owns China's land?' receives different answers from Ho, who argues that collective land rights are subordinated to those held (and exercised) by the central state, and from Hairong Yan (2008), who maintains that 'According to Chinese law, the state owns natural resources and urban land, but not rural farm land. Rural farm land is owned by a village or a sub-village collective.' Adding to the uncertain legal status of land held collectively are the drivers and effects of commodification of farming and social reproduction in the countryside and beyond (wage labour beyond the farm, the entry of capital from beyond the countryside).

Is it possible to have a transition to agrarian capitalism without private property rights in land? Does a lack of private property rights in land, and hence a limited land market, constrain the development of capitalist social relations of production and reproduction in agriculture? Zhang and Donaldson (2013) argue that China's distinctive 'system of collective land ownership and individualized land use rights' works well in underpinning market-based agricultural growth while giving petty commodity producers some room for manoeuvre in

[20] See, for example, Gürel (2011) on Turkey in period from the 1950s to the 1970s, also a period of rapid industrialization, urbanization and major rural labour migration.

[21] Ho (2001) suggests that of these three entities, corresponding to different levels of the former communes, the claims to collective land ownership of small village groups are gradually being squeezed out. He also notes that the term 'natural village' widely used in China, including in official discourse, for such small village groups has no legal status at all.

their involvement in markets and preventing landlessness.[22] In his paper in this special issue, Zhang places more emphasis on the rapid development of rental markets through which entitlement to farmland based on village membership is turning into 'market-mediated access' to land.

In short, while under the HRS village membership provides access to mostly small amounts of land, there is growing pressure on using that land for 'own account' farming by small holders, from a number of possible sources: the interest in securing additional land connected with differentiation and accumulation from below (Yan and Chen, Zhang); the economic pressures on 'own account' farming as a (major) component of household reproduction, and hence incentives to lease out land rights (Zhang); the interest in acquiring land by agribusiness both emergent in the countryside (Yan and Chen, Yu) and from outside (Yan and Chen, Zhang), as well as from industrial and real estate capital (Ye, Zhan); and policies and actions from central to local government to scale up farming by facilitating the acquisition of land by large-scale capitals, agrarian and non-agrarian (Ye, Yan and Chen, Zhan).

The outcomes of all these dynamics and their pressures, and hence the forms and extent of land transfers, can only be understood through processes of commodification and differentiation. At the same time, they are clearly subject to great regional and local variation, including the effectiveness of covert and overt resistance to land transfers at local levels. At one end of a possible spectrum is the difficulty of land accumulation in a poorer, less-developed rural area, in Huang's case study; and at the other end, Zhan's 'land revenue regime', which drives apparently direct 'appropriation' of village land by local governments, including by (forced) sales, and indeed the disappearance of villages – together with their inhabitants' land rights, farming and small-scale industrial enterprises – when formally absorbed in urban administrative structures. Within this diversity of interests in rural land, of the pressures it generates and of land transfer outcomes, in some areas it may be more difficult to effect, or impose, land transfers for expansions of scale of farm production than for industrial and housing investment (Huang, though Yan and Chen provide examples of land concentration through accumulation from above and below), and (modest) accumulation from below might proceed more by informal local mechanisms of (more temporary) transfers of land-use rights than by formal (longer-term) transfer contracts (Zhang).

Questions of landownership, linked to mechanisms, forms and degrees of dispossession and concentration, are central to different historical experiences of capitalist development and their debates:

- *Type 1 dispossession* of small farmers/'peasants' by powerful class forces in the countryside (landed property, emergent agrarian capital) is familiar from Marx's account of 'primitive accumulation' in England's pioneering transition from feudalism to capitalism (Marx 1976, Part 8).[23]

[22] This is characterized as a Narodnik position by Y. Huang with reference to their earlier paper, Zhang and Donaldson (2008). It does seem to have an affinity with the arguments of Huang et al. (2012).

[23] The most potent sense of 'primitive' accumulation employed by Marx is that the conditions of capitalist production in pre-capitalist agrarian conditions – in this instance, the formation of capitalist landed property and agrarian capital, as well as classes of (wage) labour – first have to be established by so-called non-capitalist or 'extra-economic' means. Note, however, Marx's observation (1976, 905) that enclosure was necessary but not sufficient for a transition to capitalist farming: 'the expropriation of the agricultural population creates, directly, none but the greatest landed proprietors'.

- *Type 2 dispossession* represents 'accumulation from below' as a result of class differentiation of farmers/'peasants', the classic materialist source of which is Lenin (1964).[24]
- *Type 3 dispossession* is by indigenous classes of capital and politically powerful groups not based in, or not deriving their power from, the countryside (and hence 'external' to it).
- *Type 4 dispossession* is by international capitals (and foreign governments), in alliance with national states and classes of capital, as in so-called global 'land grabbing' today.

Dispossessions of Types 1, 3 and 4 are, in effect, variations on the theme of enclosure, of which Type 1 is the 'classic' enclosure featured in 'internalist' models of agrarian transition, and Type 4 is today often termed 'accumulation by dispossession', following Harvey (2003), and presented as a kind of contemporary globalization of enclosure. On the other hand, Type 2 dispossession, as noted, results from class differentiation of farmers/'peasants' and 'accumulation from below'.

This is only a simple schema, the categories of which are not mutually exclusive, and the boundaries of which can be blurred or crossed. First, land dispossession (especially Types 3 and 4) is not necessarily for purposes of agricultural production, but also for mining and other resource extraction (e.g. forestry), for real estate investment/speculation, factories, infrastructure and so on;[25] and, second, the role of 'the market' in these different types of dispossession and accumulation of land is very variable. In some cases, 'the market' is largely absent (or only imagined by its champions), reminding us that land questions – who has access to which land, with what degree of security, and what they are able to do with it – are highly political throughout the histories of capitalism and no less so in the current period of neoliberal globalization.

In China today, policy and public debate of land tenure 'reform' is intense, as is related discussion of land grabbing or 'new enclosure', which has featured strongly in the print media since the government 'opened' it to public commentary from 2003 (Sargeson 2012). Moreover, 'new enclosure' is driven principally by non-agricultural interests and purposes, albeit that Yan and Chen provide potent instances of land concentration for agricultural production by different forms of capital. At the same time, the loss of land to other uses (housing, industry, mining and quarrying, infrastructure development), when there is so little land relative to population, has a major impact on those who farmed it, and is also a major item in government's concern with national food security, and indeed self-sufficiency (Ye; Ho 2001; Christiansen 2009). Also relevant here is debate of privatization – that is, individual title and rights of disposal/alienation of farmland – that has been ongoing within party and state, it seems, since the abolition of the communes and beginning of the HRS.[26]

Sally Sargeson (2012, 761–2, emphasis added) usefully summarizes 'a chronicle of land enclosure as social crisis':

> China's land ownership system . . . turned the market economy of the 1990s into a source of uncontrolled land development. Under the impetus of demand for

[24] Mamdani's seminal analysis of accumulation from below and from above in Uganda (1987) focused on Types 2 and 3. For accounts of accumulation from below in contemporary South-East Asia, see the lucid essay by Hall (2012) and the outstanding ethnography of the cocoa boom in Sulawesi by Li (2014).

[25] Termed 'post-agrarian exclusions' in the valuable survey of South-East Asia by Hall et al. (2011). There are interesting Indian parallels to China here; see, for example, Levien (2011).

[26] Advocacy of full privatization of property rights in land in China is usually associated with neoliberal positions, but note the somewhat different anti-statism of the agrarian historian Qin Hui (2003) who argues for privatization of land title to help break the political oppression of peasantry by state rather than on grounds of economic 'efficiency'.

> development sites, which inflated the value of state land to the point that it exceeded the combined worth of all other state owned assets, fiscal reforms that reduced sub-national governments' tax share, and incentives inherited from the central-planning era to hoard and new market incentives to warehouse land, local governments expropriated extensive areas of arable land. Conflicts over redistribution of the positive and negative externalities of enclosure complicated relations among different ministries and levels of the state, as well as being unequally shared among investors, governments and villagers. Corruption and black market land transactions became commonplace. With every level of government and agencies at each level competing to 'cut a slice of this non-renewable cake', by 2004 income from expropriated land had grown to comprise around one third of local governments' budgetary revenue and 60 per cent of off-budget revenue. Much of this windfall was expended beyond the reach of central and provincial strategic planners, on payroll expansion and promotion-enhancing 'showcase' developments. Investors benefited from governments' discount pricing of land . . . but the direct negative costs of using enclosure as a strategy for local government financing and urban capital accumulation were borne by land losing villagers. By the first decade of the twenty-first century, tens of millions of expropriated villagers had lost *one* of their sources of livelihood and social security . . .

This passage is not quoted as the last word on the rural land question in China, but to illustrate its complexity, a strategic element of which is 'competition' between different levels and agencies of the state and the ability (or otherwise) of higher levels to control the practices of lower levels. The peculiar institutional arrangements and modes of functioning of the state in China, the interactions between investors (private capitals) and the local state (county, township and administrative village, whose officials are themselves often 'investors' in their public or private capacities or both), and the ambiguities permeating 'Who owns the land?' (above) are all key ingredients. The modalities of dispossession indicated by Sargeson probably approximate a version of Type 3 'with Chinese characteristics'. Dispossessions of Types 1–3 for purposes of agricultural production through extensive practices of land transfer bear on whether and how much a rural land market is developing in which both emergent capitalist farmers and agribusiness (or capital more generally) are active participants (Yan and Chen, Ye, Zhang).

Primitive Accumulation in/from the Chinese Countryside?

In any discussion of 'Who owns the land?', and how that might change in transitions to capitalism, it is difficult to avoid reference to 'primitive accumulation' and 'accumulation by dispossession', as the previous section shows. At the same time, these terms are often used in such encompassing, indeed promiscuous, ways that some clarification is called for.

First, following Marx, the most central feature of primitive accumulation is the *initial* formation of the social conditions of capitalist production: 'nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production' (Marx 1976, 875), 'creating wage-labour where previously it was absent' (Fine 2006, 143). In the historic European transitions to capitalism, this process centred on the dispossession of the peasantry (by enclosure and/or its transformation into petty commodity producers). Once a transition to capitalism has occurred, accumulation proceeds through the appropriation of surplus value from a working class that has to sell its labour power under 'the silent compulsion of economic relations' (Marx 1976, 899).

Second, however, there is a long lineage of argument in materialist political economy, going back to Rosa Luxemburg (1951, first published in 1913) at least, that (advanced) capitalism cannot reproduce itself without *continuing* primitive accumulation:

> real life has never known a self-sufficient capitalist society under the exclusive domination of the capitalist mode of production . . . the realisation of the surplus value for the purposes of accumulation is an impossible task for a society which consists solely of workers and capitalists . . . Realisation of the surplus value . . . requires as its prime condition . . . that there should be strata of buyers outside capitalist society . . . such social organisations or strata whose own mode of production is not capitalistic. (Luxemburg 1951, 348)

The key dimension of both these perspectives hinges on the 'inside' and 'outside' of capitalism: in the first, how emergent capitalism undermines, incorporates and transforms pre- or non-capitalist social relations; in the second, that the 'inside' of capitalism (its mechanisms and cycles of expanded reproduction) *always* requires an 'outside'. The latter was the thrust of some theorizations of 'articulation of modes of production', and has been revived by David Harvey's thesis of 'accumulation by dispossession' in the current period of neoliberal globalization (2003). While Harvey formulated this idea to explain key strategies of capital (and neoliberalism) to overcome a crisis of over-accumulation from the 1970s, his notion of 'accumulation by dispossession' has been generalized and popularized to extend to a range of practices of enclosure and privatization both historically and today.

Discussion of possible paths and means of 'primitive accumulation' in rural China in the past 30 years or so centres on four themes:

(i) transfers from agriculture to the accumulation fund for industrialization, and urban growth more generally (Question 9 above);
(ii) massive labour migration from the countryside, and what drives it;
(iii) dispossession of farmland ('divorce' from the means of production);
(iv) privatization and other organizational changes in the operation of capitalist enterprises (an emphasis that follows one key element of Harvey 2003).

One of the problems in assessing the evidence and arguments for each of these forms of 'primitive accumulation' in China is that too often they blur the distinction noted between *initial* formation of the social conditions of capitalist production and *continuing* processes of 'accumulation by dispossession'. They also require precise specification of the times (key moments in the development of the capitalist road) and places (e.g. regional, class and gender coordinates of the sources and destinations of labour migration) of the processes they propose, which connects with the distinction between initial and continuing primitive accumulation.

First, the 'contributions of agriculture' to industrialization do not necessarily entail land dispossession, as already noted. They can deploy various mechanisms of transfer from agriculture and the countryside to industrial accumulation and urban growth. Ye suggests that this was the case in China at least from the 1950s to the 1970s, and again in the 1990s, through pricing policies and other forms of taxation – and through massive labour migration that draws on China's historic 'rural labour surplus', as he also notes.[27] In this respect, as indicated earlier, there may be certain parallels with other paths of earlier (capitalist) industrialization in East Asia. Whether or not it is helpful to designate these mechanisms as 'primitive

[27] There is a resonance here, of course, with Arthur Lewis' famous model of 'economic development with unlimited supplies of labour' (1954).

accumulation', in Marx's specific sense, is another matter, even if tempting to agrarian populism that centres on a binary opposition between countryside and town.

Second, the drivers, modalities and effects of massive labour migration from the countryside constitute perhaps the most confusing aspects of debates about primitive accumulation in rural China, in part because of the lack of wholesale dispossession of its small farmers (the third element, below). For example, Pun and Lu suggest 'a path of (semi-)proletarianization of Chinese peasant-workers' (2010, 493), an '*unfinished process of proletarianization*' (ibid., 498, emphasis in original) that is

> *largely self-driven*, arising from people's strong sense of acquiring freedom by means of *dagong* [labour migration] and within the context of a huge rural–urban chasm, which itself has emerged in the reform period's rapid industrialization and globalization (500) . . . Unlike the English working class, the Chinese working class *faced no coercion* effectively forcing on them a process of proletarianization (ibid., 505, emphases added).

For Webber (2008), the mass of labour migrants from the mid-1980s were

> fleeing overpopulation and relative poverty in rural areas (304) . . . In terms of sheer numbers, more important than dispossession in removing rural people from their means of production, has been the market mechanism – through migration. *The allegiance* of these people *to wage labour is purchased through the market rather than compelled by dispossession*. Waves of internal migration into China's cities have been triggered by the gap between rural and urban incomes and the relaxation of migration controls (307, emphasis added).

He suggests that 'paths to primitive accumulation mix dispossession and market mechanisms in complex ways' (ibid., 305), the latter referring to the commodification of subsistence and its effects as distinct from outright dispossession (see Zhang).

Third, then, as China's massive labour migration occurs without comprehensive dispossession of the peasantry, do notions that consequently it is 'self-driven' or 'voluntary' help explain labour migration or, without further specification, merely restate the problem?

Webber (2008, 305) acknowledges that '[some] land dispossession has occurred, leaving some rural residents landless or with very small holdings' and continues 'Yet these are still only a small minority of rural residents. Land holdings remain more equally distributed than income (305) . . . capital has invaded the countryside . . . [with] little indigenous capital accumulation in the countryside (306) . . . the countryside is still stubbornly dominated by independent commodity producers (310)'.[28] Walker and Buck (2007, 40) suggest that 'much of China is still pre-capitalist'[29] and Post (2008, 323–4) argues that 'rural land property has yet to be transformed into capital in contemporary China . . . capitalist social relations have not penetrated the Chinese countryside'.

Much of the evidence and argument presented in the papers by Yan and Chen and by Zhang offers an alternative to such binaries of 'before' and 'after', the pre-capitalist and capitalist. They make important contributions to understanding the *dynamics* of the

[28] Disappointingly, Webber's subsequent book on *Making Capitalism in Rural China* (2012) is a series of case studies with nothing substantial on changes in farming and its place in rural reproduction other than chapter 2 on the development of commercial dairying in Inner Mongolia: the other essays focus on rural industrialization, state-organized resettlement, other forms of migration, the ethnically segregated labour market of Urumqi and tourism.

[29] While also observing of rural labour migration that 'The Marxian concept of the industrial reserve army surely applies to present-day China' (ibid., 44).

commodification of subsistence, class differentiation and accumulation (including through land transfers) in China's countrysides, even if those processes are 'incomplete'. Moreover, as noted earlier, Zhang's analysis indicates why the development of capitalism in agriculture need not take the exclusive form of large farms employing wage labour. Limiting the definition of capitalist agriculture on that criterion ('stereotypically' to invoke Lenin) necessarily establishes different boundaries between the 'inside' of capitalism and its 'outside' – the 'pre- or non-capitalist', so prominent in arguments about 'the persistence of the peasantry' in China as elsewhere. The effect is to render invisible capitalist dynamics in the countryside, as Yan and Chen point out.

Finally, privatization in the course of primitive accumulation and/or 'accumulation by dispossession' – with China an example for Harvey (2003) of the latter – is emphasized by, among others, Buck (2007), with reference to new 'urban-to-rural subcontracting patterns and conventions', Walker and Buck (2007), also with a mostly urban focus, and Webber (2008, 2012), with a focus on the privatization of ('rural') Township and Village Enterprises (TVEs) since the 1990s (see also Zhan).

Webber (2008, 315) concludes that primitive accumulation in China 'does not have one motive, does not simply reflect class interests, is not a particular case of a global capitalist project; it is instead, complex, particular and localised – a mix of dispossession for economic reasons, dispossession for other reasons, and market-led processes'. This, at least, has the merit of opening up different elements of primitive accumulation claimed for China to further investigation, including testing the ways in which they either interconnect or not.[30]

How does China's Agriculture Fit into the World Economy?

It is worth signposting this question (10 above), even though the contributions to this special issue focus exclusively on questions 'internal' to China, especially of Types I and II; that is, internal to its countrysides and 'national' rural–urban interconnections, albeit the central theme of rural labour migration spans Types II and III, the agrarian basis of 'national' economic development/industrialization.

One type of instance of international factors influencing agrarian change in China is the recent official promotion of capitalized 'family farms' (Ye, Yan and Chen), surely an appropriation of an (idealized) American 'model'. Similarly, notions of a 'modernized' agriculture, and its upstream and downstream linkages, no doubt 'borrow' from models of agribusiness elsewhere. Indeed, agricultural 'modernization' itself represents a globally hegemonic ideology, according to critics of the corporate third food regime.[31]

Another more direct instance is the entry of global corporate agribusiness in the provision of technologies, both material and managerial, in some branches of food production and processing, of which livestock, especially pig, production seems to be the main exemplar (Schneider and Sharma 2014). This is associated with rapidly growing meat consumption, highlighted by Xu and Zhang, and imports of feed grains to support livestock production (in addition to growing production of maize and soy beans for feeds in China), considered in another paper by the same authors (Xu et al. 2014). This points towards China's international trade in agricultural commodities more generally, an important topic beyond the scope of this paper. Also relevant here is a third kind of instance, namely Chinese overseas investment

[30] Walker and Buck (2007, 39–41) make some useful observations about investigating China as a case of transition to capitalism.

[31] For example, McMichael (2013), who sketches the place of China in the third food regime (87–9).

Table 2. Land dispossession: a schematic typology

Type	*Main class agents*	*'Above'*	*'Below'*	*'Internal'*	*'External'*
1	Landed property, agrarian capital	✓		✓	
2	'Rich peasants', emergent capitalist farmers		✓	✓	
3	Indigenous urban classes of capital, political elites	✓			✓ (to countryside)
4	International (+ indigenous) capitals + states	✓			✓ (to 'nation')

('agro-security mercantilism' in the term of McMichael 2013, 127), including controversies about its 'land grabbing' in sub-Saharan Africa, South-East Asia and elsewhere, and acquisitions of US food corporations by Chinese agribusiness (Schneider 2014).[32]

Finally, it is worth noting that issues of the 'internal' and 'external' determinants of agrarian change in China today fit within larger debates about Chinese economic development more generally, given its location within, and embrace of, world market integration. Harvey (2003), for example, assimilates China's path to his version of neoliberal globalization and its 'accumulation by dispossession', a position criticized by Sutcliffe (2006), among others.[33] It is also common to various strands within the disparate Chinese post-Maoist or 'New Left', which attribute the contradictions of China's path of economic growth to its world market integration ('globalization') managed by an authoritarian (and corrupt) state. This connects with my last theme.

What are the Prospects of a 'Peasant Way'?

None of the papers in this special issue touch on resistance to land dispossession and other depredations faced by 'peasants', apart from some concluding comments by Zhang on class action in the countryside. In this final section, I touch on this, also bringing together some of the themes and positions outlined so far, with the help of another simple matrix. Like the schematic typology proposed in Table 2 above, any utility it has is heuristic, in this case to help 'map' different analytical and ideological positions and their combinations; its cells are neither definitive nor mutually exclusive.

In Table 3 analytically/empirically 'strong' indicates that commodification is sweeping China's countrysides, with 'accumulation from below' from the ranks of commercial farmers, both petty commodity producers and emergent capitalists, or driven by agribusiness 'from above'. Both paths of accumulation are favoured by the government; the former, for example, in the recent conception in policy discourse of 'family farmers'. Hence they appear in the cell that indicates an ideologically positive view of strong commodification, even if the government has yet to confront convincingly the implications of comprehensive 'depeasantization' (see Ye).

[32] Albeit that claims about Chinese 'land grabbing' in sub-Saharan Africa are too often exaggerated; see, for example, Brautigam and Zhang (2013).

[33] 'The most serious indication of the weakness of Harvey's chronic crisis theory is his brief reference to China's phenomenal economic growth of the last twenty-five years . . . Instead of being a sink for the absorption of excess capital from elsewhere, China is a new extraordinarily dynamic pole of capitalist accumulation and economic development, under the direction of a strong, rich, dynamic and self-conscious bourgeoisie which is as progressive, in the sense in which Marx often used this term, as the British or US capitalist class in their day' (Sutcliffe 2006, 69).

Table 3. Commodification in rural China: a simple matrix

	Analytically/empirically 'strong'	*Analytically/empirically 'weak'*
Ideologically positive	'Modernization' of agriculture proceeding (scaling up of production, technological advance) as promoted by government = 'depeasantization'	Reproduction of peasant economy: • capitalization without 'proletarianization' • a peasant way (peasant 'resistance' (1) • peasant 'resistance' (2), epic and mundane
Ideologically negative	Commodification of agriculture by: • accumulation 'from below' • accumulation 'from above' • other agribusiness growth	Constraints on commodification, accumulation, class formation in countryside, notably lack of private property rights in land

Yan and Chen and Zhang (and Huang) also present 'strong' arguments about commodification but without embracing them ideologically. Indeed, a negative (anti-capitalist) ideological undercurrent can be sensed in Yan and Chen, and in Huang. Anti-capitalist sentiment is more explicit in those populist positions that deplore dispossession and 'depeasantization' in China, above all as an effect of the rural intrusions of agribusiness (and other types of capital), and advocate the alternative of a 'peasant way'. This links to more general critiques of China's embrace of 'modernization'; for example, its forms of large-scale industrialization and urbanization, in both populist and 'post-Maoist' Marxist variants. The former is mostly implicit in Ye and explicit in Tiejun Wen (2001, 2007), while for the Left China's 'modernization' is largely attributed to its 'globalization': world market integration and inflows of foreign capital (e.g. Lin 2013). Politically, 'post-Maoist' Chinese intellectuals might support oppositional currents such as 'food sovereignty' and 'authentic' cooperatives self-organized by small farmers versus those driven by 'big households' and other types of capital. There are also some who imagine a revived and modified commune structure, combining farming, industry and social services with local democracy, as the way forward.

The analytically/empirically 'weak' cells signal arguments that despite (or together with) the commodification of subsistence in rural China, 'peasant economy' continues to prevail, whether seen as a good thing (ideologically positive) or a bad thing (ideologically negative). To take the latter first, if 'capitalist social relations have not penetrated the Chinese countryside' and 'much of China is still pre-capitalist' (Post, and Walker and Buck, quoted above) *and* if one believes that the development of capitalism is 'progressive' in Marx's sense (Sutcliffe, quoted above), then constraints on commodification, class differentiation and accumulation from below in the countryside present a problem.

The remaining cell – analytically/empirically 'weak' and ideologically positive – is where we expect to find populist positions, of which different variants have been noted. Huang et al.'s 'capitalization without proletarianization' (above) approves the capacity of China's small farmers to reproduce themselves through embracing petty commodity production. The position of van der Ploeg et al. (above) resonates a more directly Chayanovian version of agrarian populism (see van der Ploeg 2013), in which 'peasants' negotiate their insertion in commodity relations to maintain as much as possible their autonomy and 'subsistence ethic' (in the term of Scott 1976), and thereby 'resist' (1) full commodification of their conditions of existence. This is also reflected in the discourse and aspirations of the New Rural Reconstruction

organization, commended by McMichael (2013, 138–9) as 'a broad social and cooperative movement that has emerged in response to the deepening inequality between town and country and the erosion of rural culture . . . seeking to build self-reliance on the land via agroecology and alternative marketing'.[34]

On a different scale is peasant 'resistance' (2), as an umbrella term for rural protest in China that has attracted much attention from scholars (as well as the media, both domestic and international), and is seen by some as having influenced recent government measures to address problems of depressed incomes from farming, the tax burden on rural residents and their other grievances against the local state (and party), growing rural–urban income inequality, declining social provision in the countryside, and the impact of the last in particular on populations of women, children and the old, 'left behind' by (especially male) labour migration.[35]

Rural protest has centred on a range of issues, in addition to those of land dispossession (and proper compensation for land lost), including (typically illegitimate) levels of taxation by the local state, the rigging of village elections, corrupt and/or arbitrary practices of local cadres and pollution from industrial plants. Assessing the origins, scale, forms and importance of widespread protest in the countryside is a task well beyond this essay, and I only outline briefly two different perspectives, what might be termed the 'epic' and the 'mundane'.

The former is exemplified by Le Mons Walker (2006), who begins with a scathing overview of 'gangster capitalism' in China and its mechanisms of plunder. She then moves on to depict an increasing, indeed 'epic', scale of 'peasant' resistance, especially manifested in large-scale confrontations, such as the blockading of party and state offices and roads, and escalating in force when the police and army are called in to restore order. Le Mons Walker goes much further than most commentators to suggest, first, that rural unrest is advancing 'greater organizational and political development and of the coordination of protests in different areas . . . perhaps even extending to the trans-provincial level' (2006, 12), and, second, that it is generating a 'critique of urban-centred development' and new assertions of 'peasantness' (ibid., 20–3) with which she is deeply sympathetic.[36]

O'Brien and Li's notion of 'rightful resistance' in rural China offers a contrast to Le Mons Walker's perspective (and by implication her ideological stance):

> Rightful resistance is a form of popular contention that operates near the boundary of authorized channels, employs the rhetoric and commitments of the powerful to curb the exercise of power, hinges on locating and exploiting divisions within the state, and relies on mobilizing support from the wider public. In particular, rightful resistance entails the innovative uses of law, policies and other officially promoted values to defy disloyal political and economic elites; it is a kind of partially sanctioned protest that uses

[34] On the original Rural Reconstruction movement of the 1920s and 1930s, with its Christian missionary inflections, see the informative essays by Day and Hale (2007) and Yan and Chen (2013), which also sketch the positions of agrarian populist intellectuals in China today.

[35] The problems of 'left-behind' populations have been highlighted and reinforced in public attention and debate in China by the research of Jingzhong Ye and his team at the College of Humanities and Development, China Agricultural University. My impression is that 'problems of the countryside' are typically expressed in terms of social welfare, somewhat detached from issues of production and the direction of agrarian change, a kind of separation not confined to China, of course.

[36] Contrast Sargeson (2012, 772) that 'romanticizing villagers' organic economic and political collective organization' ignores 'social exclusion and relations of inequality and exploitation within collectives'. Some of the tropes of indigeneity and 'authenticity' deployed in the construction of the positive ideology of 'peasantness' that Walker claims for China have evident parallels with the discourses of other contemporary rural movements, a kind of culturally full-blown agrarian populism.

> influential allies and principles to apply pressure to those in power who have failed to live up to a professed ideal or who have not implemented some beneficial measure. (O'Brien and Li 2006, 2–3)

O'Brien and Li consider their approach more relevant to the most widespread and significant forms of rural protest in China than the epic visions of 'peasant struggle' advanced by Le Mons Walker. The most common causes of protest they consider are against illegitimate types and levels of taxation demanded by various tiers and agencies of the local state, other depredations by party and state cadres, and corrupt practices in village elections – and more recently against land 'transfers' (O'Brien 2013). Two of their key tools are, first, the analysis of opportunities for such rightful resistance centred on apparent values and policies proclaimed by the party and state nationally; for example, the institution of village elections (in 1987) and subsequent reforms of their procedures, which are flouted by cadres at local levels of governance. The second is perceptions of the promises and dangers of rightful resistance; that is, perceptions (of opportunities), themselves subject to issues of information and interpretation, and of identifying allies in party and state apparatuses.

While all this suggests forms of political action that are less than 'epic', it can still require courage to take on local cadres and the violence they often deploy, and certainly to run the risk of more organized repression of larger, actually or potentially higher-profile, collective actions. O'Brien and Li judge that spaces for rightful resistance have increased. The introduction of village elections, official guidelines on the limits of tax collection, periodic warnings against cadre malfeasance and statements about the importance of well-being in the countryside have all enhanced popular belief in rights of citizenship and the confidence to exercise them.[37]

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

This section serves to finish this paper rather than to arrive at any definite conclusions concerning the range of differences about agrarian change in China today – theoretical, analytical, evidential and ideological – that it has reflected on, however briefly and selectively. The Introduction suggested that China in the past 30 years provides almost 'laboratory' conditions for the exploration of its agrarian transition. That is because of the speed of change and the distinctive historical conditions in which it is occurring: the development of new forms of capitalist agriculture, including agribusiness and other rural–urban interconnections, on a world scale (embraced by Chinese capital), and determinants specific to China's countrysides, not least after the dismantling of the communes (in which many on the Left had invested their hopes of a model alternative to Soviet-style development) and the commodification of rural production and reproduction that ensued so rapidly.

The most important single contribution by the 'middle generation' and younger Chinese scholars represented in this special issue is their focus on *dynamics* of change, breaking from teleological (and 'stereotypical') notions of capitalist transition constituted through restrictive concepts of the pre-capitalist and the capitalist, the before and after (definitive 'completion' of transition). The focus on dynamics is very much in the spirit of Lenin's agrarian studies, it seems to me, which allows for 'exaggeration' (in his term) in order to identify and investigate tendencies and trends that otherwise would remain 'invisible'.

[37] See also the update in O'Brien (2013), and the leading and outspoken Chinese researcher and commentator on rural 'unrest' Jianrong Yu (2010), chairman of the Social Issues Research Center of the Rural Development Institute of the China Academy of Social Sciences.

One expression of this is suggested by generational change; for example, Zhang's observation of the shift from village cadres able to use their positions to engage in accumulation (first generation) to accumulators who buy into local political office (second generation).[38] More generally, the commodification of the countryside, and the opportunities it provided, enabled some to 'get rich *first*' as Yan and Chen put it (emphasis added). They date this from the 1980s, and while some (many?) first-generation accumulators and would-be accumulators inevitably fail, those who succeed can entrench themselves, thereby limiting possibilities for others who might aspire to follow them (especially given constraints on land availability). Certainly there are some spectacular instances of (first-generation) accumulation from below, such as the growth (and spatial expansion) of the Guoxin Cotton Research Association described by Yan and Chen. Another example from the early 1980s is that of 'Wen Beiying, an entrepreneurial farmer [who] contracted with other farmers in an effort to scale-up and standardize production for his broiler processing and sales business' and whose 'small start-up company is now one of the largest domestic agribusiness firms in China – the Guangdong Wen Foodstuffs Group', according to Mindi Schneider (2014, 28). She also suggests that Wen Beiying pioneered the 'company + farm' model of contracting that has become so extensive in certain branches of production in China, and so central to promoting particular forms of petty commodity production (Zhang), if hardly 'independent' production.

Of course, such stories are not representative of all farmers, but point to certain dynamics that it would be harder to find in studies of rural class differentiation and accumulation from below in other contexts, both historical and contemporary. While there are many instances of richer peasants combining farming with processing, crop trading and other mercantile activities (such as the *kulaks* of Lenin's Russia), the scale of these examples in China, and the forms they take – contract farming, other organization and provision of specialized agricultural services upstream and downstream of farming – point to contexts of rapid commodification (and fast-growing urban demand) for which models of agribusiness integration of farming existed and/or could be created.

How widespread differentiation and accumulation from below are in rural China, and what their tendencies are – especially in relation to the intrusions and modalities of agribusiness – remains an immensely challenging question to which there are no conclusive answers. I would suggest, however, that the great majority of the rural population – and allowing for great regional variation – probably fall into two of the four class categories proposed by Zhang, namely petty commodity producers and 'dual-employment households'. Neither are 'peasants' in any useful sense. Petty commodity producers are likely to emerge from differentiation, and have to reproduce themselves in conditions of competition, both of which Zhang observes – first, differentiation because of a tendency of rising costs of entry to petty commodity production and of its reproduction, including in contract farming. Second, there is a tendency for petty commodity producers – depending on branches of production, (changing) requirements of capitalization of farming enterprises, fluctuating market conditions and so on – to be vulnerable to displacement by capitalist farmers and agribusiness. And are (most) 'dual-employment households' better understood as part of classes of labour in that they reproduce themselves primarily through the sale of their labour power while retaining a limited degree of farming, principally for self-provisioning?

In sum, there is much that is happening in China's farming and agriculture, and also much more that we need to know, not least in relation to Questions 1–6 above. One key example is

[38] See also the important analysis of differences between first- and second-generation migrant workers by Pun and Lu (2010).

the formation of labour markets in commodified agricultural production on a range of scales, including in areas of active petty commodity production that cannot be presumed *a priori* to exemplify 'family farming' (in China as elsewhere), and that is little reported and acknowledged. Some of the key avenues of further enquiry are opened up and illustrated in the contributions by Chinese scholars to this special issue. One hopes that they and others will continue to explore, both analytically and empirically, the class dynamics of agrarian change in China's countrysides today.

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