

The Demise of China's Peasantry as a Class

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Theorists of class have long predicted the end of the peasantry: Marx, Hobsbawm and Bernstein have all argued that in the transition to capitalism, peasants would be either transformed into individual specialized commodity producers (commercial farmers), or forced into wage-labour by fragmentation of their land holdings, and dispossession, debt and impoverishment.¹ On the other hand, these theorists have been uncharacteristically ambivalent about whether or not the peasantry constitutes a class. Marx, for example, argued that although peasants' economic exploitation and political and social subordination placed them in an antagonistic relationship with other classes, they lacked any consciousness of, and capacity to articulate, their common class interests, much less organize politically.² Pointing to the uneven, contradictory impacts of globalized agriculture and consequent differentiation among agriculturalists, Bernstein, too, cautions that "the peasantry" is hardly a uniform or analytically helpful social category in contemporary capitalism... The same stricture necessarily applies to any views of peasants as a (single) "class" ("exploited" or otherwise).³



Many Chinese political leaders and scholars also have predicted the eventual end of the country's peasantry. Mao Zedong believed that differentiation among the peasantry would be eliminated through the creation of collective ownership and socialist relations of production in the countryside. Eventually, with the transition to communism, full public ownership would efface material and political differences between town and country, workers and peasants, mental and manual labour.⁴ Post-Mao liberal writers have tended to emphasize demographic transition and markets as forces stratifying the peasantry and shifting peasants into non-agricultural occupations.⁵ Despite envisaging different paths to de-peasantization, both Maoists and post-Mao liberal scholars viewed the end of the peasantry as imperative for China's modernization and rise to global power.⁶ In Qin Hui's words, 'If China is to be modernized and its peasants are to become modern citizens, the transformation of peasant into farmer cannot be avoided'.⁷

Are we witnessing the demise of China's peasantry as a class? Bernstein notes that 'a

class can only be identified through its relations with another class'.⁸ If we accept this premise what types of changes can we trace in the peasant class in China's recent past, present and imagined future?

Answers to these questions will be sensitive to the way we define the two key terms, class and peasantry. Here, I interpret class as the social formations that arise from relations of property ownership, labour and capital accumulation, and which are expressed and consolidated by economic, political, social and cultural practices. This interpretation admittedly glides over important theoretical debates. However, it has the merit of accommodating Marxist arguments that class is rooted in ownership and control of the means of production and exploitative wage labour, as well as Weberian postulates that status groups based on power, education, occupation, and cultural capital form in all complex modern societies. Identifying peasants as a class thus requires attention to the way they are set apart and – potentially – against other social formations by the following associations:

- Economic: shared experiences of ownership, control or rental of property, employment relations, and the wealth, income, working and living conditions that shape people's perceptions of their material interests;
- Political: practices that create bases for collective action and contestation in fields of power and material distribution, including through protest, representation in organizations, advocacy and what Kerkvliet calls the 'everyday politics' of making rules about the production, entitlement to and use of goods and resources.⁹
- Social: the structure and composition of households, residential communities and work places, and the regulations and norms that educate people, and govern membership of and interaction in social

places;

- Cultural and cognitive: styles of learning and living that express people's views of themselves as social groups distinct from other social formations, and which inflect how they experience and make those relationships meaningful in everyday speech, stories, consumption and interaction, and transmit these relationships intergenerationally.

Peasants then may be broadly defined by three characteristics that distinguish them from other agriculturalists. First, peasants are small-holding agriculturalists. Second, peasants primarily use unwaged family labour in farming that supports their household consumption and reproduction, and meets demands from dominant classes for taxes, rents and debt repayment.¹⁰ Third, partly as a consequence of the former characteristics, peasants are only partially integrated into, and dependent upon, markets. Friedmann is quoted in Zhang and Donaldson's 2010 paper arguing that peasants' 'access to land, labour, credit, and product markets is mediated through direct, non-monetary ties to other households or classes', rather than through monetised transactions in markets.¹¹ For example, the acquisition of inputs, organization of production and distribution of produce frequently involve norm-governed reciprocal exchange with kin and neighbours, or provision of *corvée* labour and a share of the harvest in return for gaining access to land from landlord-patrons or socialist state planning bureaucrats and cadres.

Zhang and Donaldson suggest that these relationships are useful in differentiating peasants from other agriculturalists, for agribusinesses use paid workers, while commercial family farmers source their inputs and sell most of their produce in markets.¹² In contrast, critics such as Ploeg have argued that the distinction between peasant farming and other modes of agricultural production is overdrawn, for there is considerable overlap

and interaction among peasants, commercial farmers and agribusinesses, as well as peasant involvement in labour markets.¹³ Yet definitional rigour provides greater analytical traction in identifying and tracing temporal changes in the peasantry relative to other classes. For this reason, the working definition of peasant used in this paper centres on:

- small-holding agriculture as a primary occupation;
- reliance upon unwaged family labour and ties to dominant classes or groups for production and social reproduction;
- limited market participation.

Below, I use these definitions of class and peasants to trace changes in China's peasantry as a class — or spectrum of peasant classes in Mao's terminology— in the recent past, present, and future as imagined by Chinese policy experts. I will argue that while most of China's rural residents constituted peasant class(es) in the first few decades of the People's Republic of China, by the beginning of the 21st century, most rural residents were not peasants. Instead, they had become capitalist farmers, business people, migrant workers in commerce, industry, construction and transport, rentier landlords, and unemployed recipients of state welfare. Moreover, the residual peasant population constituted a very weak, numerically small social class.

Before setting out this argument, however, it is worth noting changes in the etymological uses and policy implications of the terms peasant in English and *nongmin* in Chinese. The English term 'peasant' derives from the old French *paisent*, 'country-dweller', which entered English between the 13th and 15th centuries. 'Peasant' usually is translated into Chinese as *nongmin*. Certainly, the simplest meaning of both terms refers to the occupation of small-holding agriculturalist. But the term *nongmin* is comparatively new, having come into everyday usage in Chinese only in the early 20th century,

through works on agricultural technologies, economic disciplines and political theories that were translated from Japanese and European languages.¹⁴ These works contributed to Chinese intellectuals' diagnosis that a 'crisis' in peasant farming was one of the root causes of China's weakness vis à vis the colonial powers. Consequently, one of the meanings inherent in the twentieth century use of the term *nongmin* is backwardness: pre-modern characteristics associated with dirt, hard-scrabble labour, and a lack of formal education, high culture and social graces. In a China bent on modernization in the twentieth century, as in England during the 19th century, the term was by no means a socially neutral one. Rather, it denoted the speaker as a superior modern, and the referent as a 'pre-modern' subject.¹⁵

In describing China's poor and lower-middle peasants as a potential revolutionary force and 'good' classes from the 1920s through the mid 20th century, Mao Zedong elevated *nongmin* in revolutionary parlance. Yet by adopting Soviet economic blueprints for primitive socialist accumulation in the 1950s, Mao also was instrumental in implementing the very policies that fixed *nongmin* to a binary system of population classification that would allow *nong* (agriculture) to be milked to fund *gong* (industry). Between 1957 and 1958, every household was registered as either agricultural (*nongye hukou*) or non-agricultural (*fei nongye hukou*). The labels were and are consequential. As agricultural surplus and state investment disproportionately were directed toward industrialization and urban settlements, people with *fei nong hukou* became entitled to jobs in the state and urban collective sectors, and state-funded public goods. Not so, those with *nongmin hukou*: they had to fend for themselves. Without work and travel passes *nongmin* could only obtain food, housing and medical attention in the villages in which their *hukou* was registered¹⁶. Other than by joining the military or getting into university ('as difficult as "climbing up to heaven without a

ladder”, writes Gao,¹⁷ *nongmin* rarely were able to alter their *hukou*. In sum, beginning in the 1950s, the residential registration system created one of the foundations for rapid socialist accumulation by locking *nongmin* in place and to an agricultural livelihood, and channelling resources away from the countryside and toward industry and state-sector urban workers.

With minor modifications, the binary residential registration of China’s population and biased state investment endured into the 21st century. What changed from the 1980s forward was that the term *nongmin* began to signify someone *registered* as a rural resident, rather than someone who farmed a small-holding in the countryside. On the other hand, describing someone as ‘*nongmin*’ still implies that they are naïve, uncouth, a ‘hick’ or ‘redneck’. Hence, a discourse analysis might well conclude that the term *nongmin* continues to perform a class-sorting function.

1933-1978: Peasant classes in Maoist theory, policy and practice

In 1933, Mao Zedong outlined seemingly simple criteria to be used to identify exploitative economic relations in the countryside: landlords and rich peasants lived off income made from renting land and lending money to middle and poor peasants, and hiring the labour of the poor and landless.¹⁸ Hence, in the years 1947-53 the Communist Party despatched land reform teams to the countryside to determine how much land and money each family owned, and whether their land was farmed by hired labour. Application of these criteria was meant to ensure that land would be taken from landlords and rich peasants to be distributed among the poor and landless peasants that the Communist Party viewed as one of its key constituencies. In much of the North China plain and lower reaches of the Yangtze, however, there simply were too few landlords with sufficiently large

properties to provide surplus land for redistribution.¹⁹ The majority of the population either had just enough land to get by, or eked out a living tilling tiny plots and working for others or engaging in home-based craft production or petty trade.

To overcome this distributive problem and generate political support in the countryside, during land reform peasant households were assigned to a class based on both their income from property, hired labour and usury, and their social and political background. The resulting class designations comprised enemy ‘bad classes’ (landlords, rich peasants, counter-revolutionaries, Japanese collaborators and criminals), and those with good class origins (poor, lower-middle and middle peasants, Communist Party members and soldiers). Not only did some of these class labels have little to do with Marxist class analysis, but as Philip Huang writes, the Party’s strategic decision ‘to make land reform a moral drama of class struggle for every village and every peasant was to turn into a powerful imperative to manufacture class enemies even where none objectively existed’.²⁰ In struggle meetings everywhere, peasants were urged to identify, shame and even beat neighbours who once had exploited them, sided with the Nationalists against the Communists, or collaborated with Imperialist invaders.

Drawing class lines on this basis had immediate distributive effects and political consequences. In the years 1947-53 titles to approximately 43 per cent of China’s cultivated land were transferred from the bad classes to good classes.²¹ Most middle peasants retained their holdings, but after land reform even these better-off households still held just one quarter of a hectare per capita, on average.²² Land reform certainly destroyed the property and power of much of the old rural ruling class. However, it left most households with small, scattered plots, and little in the way of capital, tools and machinery or draught animals. In

short, it created a small-holding agricultural economy that barely met the subsistence needs of the population, much less being able to produce the surpluses that China's leaders needed to fund the country's industrialization. Communist cadres argued that the small-holding economy also was nurturing petty-bourgeois individualism and 'small peasant' mentalities that were impeding implementation of the Party's revolutionary political and social agenda.²³



To curb this drift into the historical cul-de-sac of a peasant economy and establish the foundations for state extraction of agricultural surplus, Party leaders began accelerating the speed and scale of collectivization. Peasants' voluntary formation of co-operatives was soon overtaken by national campaigns to establish advanced co-operatives. In 1956, all privately owned rural land and machinery were pooled under co-operatives' collective ownership.²⁴ These initiatives triggered widespread peasant protests.²⁵ Co-operatives were tasked with controlling production, investment, distribution and consumption in almost every sphere of rural life, and managing ideological propaganda, education, welfare and health. Though 'black' market transactions could not be eliminated,²⁶ private trade was suppressed by compulsory state procurement quotas for produce, the creation of an artificial 'price scissors' between agricultural produce and

urban manufactured goods, and repeated campaigns against residual 'sprouts of capitalism'.

Collectivization eliminated property ownership as a determinant of income. Gone, was the economic basis of material relations that defined class positions in Marxist and Maoist theory. In return for each task allocated by their team leader and completed, farmers received work points which could be redeemed at year's end for a share of the harvest surplus and money received by the commune brigade (in the Great Leap of 1958-9), or, in the 1960s and 1970s, their production team, for delivering produce to the state. Obviously, collectivization also altered the scale at which people participated in farming, giving vast numbers some experience of large scale agricultural management and production. But while the scale at which agricultural production was managed and output paid for waxed and waned with Maoist campaigns, for much of this time peasants simultaneously worked as members of a co-operative, brigade or team in larger scale farming, and as household members in small-holding (peasant) agriculture.

In the Maoist era, three principal factors affected peasants' life chances, indeed, their very subsistence. The first of these was the weather, and the location and fertility of their co-operative. Unless they could alter their *hukou* and leave the village co-operative or team, *nongmin* could not escape these conditions. Even while some intra-village material inequalities declined, therefore, very significant inequalities between rural communities remained, rooted in quality of land and land-population ratios for example, as well as between urban and rural populations. People in some parts of the countryside, writes Selden, 'suffered severely in poor diets, clothing, housing and other necessities as well as in access to education, culture, and other amenities relative to those in more amply

provided areas'.²⁷

The second factor affecting life chances was class designation. To prevent the resurgence of the bad classes, class designations were made patrilineally heritable and recorded in *hukou* booklets and personal dossiers. Inter-generational class mobility was thereby curtailed. As a famous Cultural Revolution slogan put it, 'If the father's a revolutionary, the son's a hero; if the father's a reactionary, the son's a bastard!' Consequently, in what appears to be a reversal of hypergamous marriage traditions, families sought poor and middle peasants as grooms for their daughters, and shunned suitors whose bad class designation would be passed on to offspring. However, as men of poor peasant lineage were now of superior social standing, the brides were still marrying 'up'. Children were instilled with a clear understanding of class nomenclature, and strong feelings of inferiority if their own family bore the pariah designation 'landlord' - regardless of the fact that, owing to the changes made during land reform and collectivization, they no longer owned land.²⁸ According to Gao the characters for classes were among the first children learned to read and write at school.²⁹

Third, kinship networks and patron-client ties that radiated out from positions of power in local commune, brigade and team (village) organizational hierarchies differentiated people's prospects in life. Communist Party cadres and brigade and production team leaders who decided on production, assigned and valued tasks, and managed collective investments, income and the distribution of cash payments, produce and relief funds could bestow plenty or condemn families to hunger and want. In many locations cadres shirked work, and monopolized scarce resources, opportunities and privileges. Although grievances about cadres' abuses of power were widespread, Li Huaying explains that most peasants dared not 'vent' because cadres'

patronage was essential to family well-being.³⁰

Fixed in geographic and social-structural positions in the collective order, village households competed among themselves for scarce resources and opportunities. Egalitarianism among the good classes strengthened, but they also invoked bad class designations to practice discriminatory distribution and social closure. Good classes were given priority in the distribution of goods, including special foods, membership in the Communist Party branch and Poor-and-Lower Middle Peasants' Association, more desirable jobs and whatever welfare benefits the co-operative could provide. Bad class elements came last and received least. They were barred from political organizations, and sometimes even primary schools and clinics, and routinely excluded from village meetings, feasts and festivities. According to one of Jonathan Unger's Chen Village interviewees, 'They were treated like lepers. If you greeted them your class stand was considered questionable. They had no friends. They didn't dare talk to each other, either'.³¹ Bad class designations also exposed people to recurrent violence during periodic political campaigns. Ritualized public performances were held in which members of the good classes remembered the 'bitterness' of their previous lives and denounced bad class elements. After Mao Zedong warned of the emergence of a 'new' ruling class in 1965, work teams once again were dispatched to the countryside to lead the poor and middle peasants in reviewing households' class designation, identifying 'rotten' cadres, and attacking their old and 'new' class enemies.

Equally profound, however, were the changes that agricultural *hukou* wrought in peasants' relations with other classes. In official pronouncements, members of the working class were described as the owners and masters of the means of production. Though many workers no doubt looked on Party leaders and factory managers as *their* masters, compared to

peasants workers nonetheless enjoyed enviable working and living conditions, including heavily subsidized food, housing, transport, superior education and health care, regulated eight-hour days on fixed wage grades, early retirement and state-funded pensions. In a 1956 speech on 'The Ten Major Relationships', Mao called for adjustments in the imbalanced relationships between industry and agriculture, state and agricultural co-operatives, and state and peasantry.³² Nevertheless, in the following two decades the state continued to sustain high rates of accumulation by using compulsory production and procurement quotas and low prices for agricultural produce to siphon rural surpluses into industrial investment and urban consumption. Through the *hukou* system, the peasantry was locked into low-paid, collectively managed labour on the land. Groups of peasants recruited to labour as temporary and contract workers in urban industries received the lowest wages and benefits for performing the hardest, dirtiest jobs. Although some worked for years in urban enterprises, they could not bring their families with them, and were segregated on the shop floor and excluded from the enterprise-centred Party and union organizations, social community and welfare entitlements. Intermarriage between urban and temporary peasant workers was exceptionally rare. In political and economic plans and practice, therefore, peasants formed a class that was exploited by the state to the benefit of its cadres and urban workers.

Politically, too, peasants as a class were disadvantaged in their relations with other classes. Nationally, Communist Party membership was overwhelmingly rural at the creation of the People's Republic in 1949. The proportionate membership of the working class and military increased relative to that of the peasantry from the 1950s to the late 1970s. Though most sub-provincial leaders came from the peasantry, few rose to positions in the central Party and government.³³ Nor were peasants represented in or by a 'mass

organization', in contrast to workers whose interests were supposed to be represented by the All-China Federation of Trades Union, or women who were supposedly represented by the Women's Federation.

During the Maoist era, Chinese rural society was characterized by a politically charged, inelastic system of class designations. Ascribed class designations coloured every family's view of its position relative to other families in their village. It affected everything from what food they could eat, how much they might earn and who they might marry, to whether they had any influence in collective decision-making. Jonathan Unger has argued that because certain families were distinguished from others in their community by patronage relations and the symbolic and political capital acquired from good class designations, peasants formed status groups rather than a class.³⁴ However, almost all these families nonetheless were bound to an agricultural occupation and a largely self-supporting residential community. Their access to land, and their participation in, and remuneration from collective production were dictated by the state - through cadre management of labour, compulsory state procurement and the suppression of markets - with the specific aim of transferring the agricultural surplus to fund industrialization and provide public goods such as housing, health care, welfare and physical infrastructure for a growing urban population. Although intra-village community differences in living conditions remained (primarily based on family labor power), they were less extreme than the inequalities in food availability, welfare and opportunities for social advancement that differentiated collective peasant farmers from the non-agricultural population. And peasants used the vocabulary of class to describe themselves as a class that was disadvantaged relative to cadres, intellectuals and urban workers. In this regard, they formed a class that was distinguished by its relations with other social formations if no longer rooted in

unequal land ownership relations. But what eventually galvanized the peasant class into collective action were the Party's repeated campaigns and the imperative to identify class enemies in its midst, so as to secure scarce rural resources, rather than contestation against other social formations.



The disappearing peasantry: 1979-2014

In the 1981 *Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the People's Republic of China*, China's leaders rejected Mao's thesis that class struggle persists in socialist society, and called for an end to class designations.³⁵ They did not, however, end or even ameliorate the deep inequalities caused by the *hukou* system, which to the present day continues to disadvantage people registered as *nongmin*. The leadership's subsequent propagation of a new rhetoric of economic reform, social harmony and construction of a 'well-off' society was intended to rebuild Communist Party support among a population weary of divisive campaigns and eager for improved living standards. The challenge that arose, though, was that whilst transforming the socialist planned economy into a market economy, cadres capitalized on their positions to enrich themselves and their families. By the end of the 1980s, in the popular imagination the archetypal class enemy, 'landlord', had been replaced by that of 'corrupt official'. Concerned by protests against

corruption and growing inequality, China's leaders steered social reportage away from class, and toward the less contentious discourse of occupational and social stratification. Markets, human capital and entrepreneurship, rather than unequal property ownership, political virtues, or even residential registration, became the officially recognised sources of stratification.

Rural de-collectivization was at the forefront of market reforms. Chinese scholars generally identify two main processes in de-collectivization. The first entailed the de-collectivization of property and gradual deregulation of agricultural product prices.³⁶ Between the mid 1970s and early 1980s most villages distributed contracts to use collectively-owned farmland among households. The quantity of land received by each household was supposed to reflect household size, producing a roughly equal distribution of land use-rights within each village. In practice, some villages allocated unmarried sons an additional land share in the expectation that they would 'bring in' wives, while unmarried daughters were expected to 'marry out', and received no land.

Concurrently, state prices for agricultural output were raised, the scope of state procurement diminished, and controls on the marketing of produce lifted. Farmers responded by diversifying production and specializing in higher value crops for sale. By the turn of the century, prices for most products had been de-regulated.

By 2002, rural households had gained more secure, longer term tenure, and their bundle of land use rights had expanded: land use contracts were extended to periods of 30 years for arable land and up to 70 years for forests; without the agreement of two-thirds of villagers and approval of town and county governments, villages were prohibited from unilaterally resuming and reallocating farmers' land during

the contract term; and contract holders legally were permitted to sub-lease, transfer and bequeath their use rights to farmland. Contracted land use rights differed from private property ownership in that they could not be mortgaged or alienated from the collective.

Philip Huang, Gao Yuan and Yusheng Peng argue that collective land ownership moderated the disequalizing impacts of rapid agricultural commoditization and industrialization, because it prevented the 'distress' selling of land after crop failures or to pay off debts.³⁷ Hence, whereas unequal land ownership was a key cause of class inequality in the pre-revolutionary period, it was not a significant contributor to rural inequality in the post-Mao period. On the other hand, formerly collective assets like machinery and factories were privatized in the late 1980s and 1990s. In contrast to the de-collectivization of land, this was a highly disequalizing process, and in many locations, disproportionately benefited the village cadres who handled the sales.³⁸ These privatized assets subsequently could be used as collateral to raise bank loans.

Second, with the demise of collective farming, rural households were able to allocate their labour resources to non-agricultural activities. Self-employment, home-based and small businesses and township and village enterprises (TVEs) – many of which initially were established as collective enterprises and subsequently were privatised – flourished. In the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s the relaxation of state controls over employment decisions and profits in urban enterprises increased demand for cheap migrant labour, leading to growing rural-urban migration.

Labour flowed out of China's agricultural sector at a rate and scale unprecedented in human history. The proportion of the labour force engaged in agriculture fell from over 70 per cent in 1978, to 36.7 percent in 2010, and

29.5 percent in 2014.³⁹ Among the 379 million people of working age registered as *nongmin* in 2014, most were fully or partly employed off-farm; the 'floating population' alone (people absent from their place of residential registration for more than six months, and most of whom are rural registered) numbered 253 million.⁴⁰ Villages in less developed areas came to be inhabited only by the very young and the elderly, as most able-bodied adults went out to work. Almost an entire generation of rural youth grew up never having tilled the soil: by 2012, over 87 per cent of rural 16 to 35 year olds was employed full time off-farm.⁴¹ Owing to the great difficulties migrant workers encountered in enrolling their children in urban schools, a significant portion of their remittances were reinvested in paying for children's education in the countryside, and subsequent vocational or tertiary training, movement and off-farm employment.⁴² In short, de-collectivization and labour market reforms led to a rapid reduction in the number of people with rural *hukou* that occupationally were identifiable as peasants.

Those *nongmin* still engaged in agriculture began to be differentiated into peasants and commercial farmers by their dependence on markets for the purchase of production factors like labour and land, and the sale of their output. On the one hand, the small average size of land holdings (nationwide, less than one-fifth of a hectare per capita in 2011) meant that only a small percentage of agriculturalists needed to hire labour.⁴³ As Huang, Yuan and Peng point out, in contrast to India, where around 45 per cent of agricultural output was produced using wage labour in 2009, in China hired workers produced less than 5 per cent of grain, 7 per cent of cotton, 9 per cent of vegetables and 40 per cent of apples.⁴⁴ Thus, reliance on unwaged family members and reciprocal labour exchanges in small scale farming, one of the defining features of peasants, still characterized much production. What was new about this peasant labour force, was that it

increasingly comprised the elderly, rather than young and middle-aged adults.

On the other hand, the employment of wage labour in specialized agriculture rapidly increased.⁴⁵ In an oft-cited survey conducted in 2012, China's Ministry of Agriculture found that 877,000 of China's largest farms on average employed 1.68 long term wage labourers, in addition to family members.⁴⁶ Large commercial farms producing crops as varied as pulp-wood, cotton, coffee beans, poultry and milk all employed regular workers. Small commercial farmers in high-value fruit, vegetable and aquaculture production also began including casual wages in their routine production costs, as a grape stock producer in the wealthy coastal province of Zhejiang explained to me in 2013:

Unskilled women, they cost around 80 *yuan* per day. But grafting is skilled work, so we pay the grafters quite a lot. It's 200 per day for locals. The specialist grafters from Liaoning get paid per graft, 5 *mao*⁴⁷ per graft. Plus we then have to spend money on fertilizers and materials, so altogether the cost of establishing one grafted grape vine is 9 *mao*. Then there are the costs of water, advertising, transport. But depending on the market, the vines might only sell for 4 *yuan*. (Interview, Jindong District, Zhejiang, 17 May 2012)



Migrant agricultural specialists grafting grape vines, Zhejiang 2013 (photo by Sally Sargeson)

Between 2008 and 2013, China's central government issued a series of policy documents setting out its vision of a modern, commercialised agricultural sector. This vision centred on expanding the scale of production by promoting land rental, and the capitalization and commercialization of production.⁴⁸ Rental markets in agricultural land grew, reaching 26 per cent of the total area farmed by 2013.⁴⁹ In coastal provinces such as Zhejiang, where most rural household income derived from off-farm work, around 70 per cent of village households were renting out farmland.⁵⁰ Much of this land was offered for comparatively long term leases of 5 or 10 years on government created 'land transfer' auction sites. In 2013, the advertised annual rent for rice paddy in Zhejiang was between 600 and 800 *yuan* per *mu* per annum, while shrimp and crab ponds cost over 1,100 *yuan* per *mu*⁵¹ per annum for a ten year lease.

Landlessness also re-emerged, though this was less a consequence of villagers' distress-sales of their contracted use rights to land and large commercial farmers' concentration of leased land, and more because governments were

expropriating millions of hectares of farmland to lease in urban real estate markets. According to my own estimates, by 2008 somewhere in the order of 88 million *nongmin* had lost farmland through expropriation, and government analysts indicated that between 2009 and 2030, another 50 million more might be expropriated to make way for urban and infrastructure development.⁵² Because government policies required that rural residents whose land was expropriated be offered the opportunity to re-register as urban residents, however, it was difficult to calculate at any point in time how many of the expropriated were still registered as *nongmin*, and what number had become urban residents. Nor would it be entirely accurate to define all these landless people as 'dispossessed'. Around the margins of China's expanding cities and towns, some villagers strategized to have collective land expropriated in return for high compensation packages. And some of these people subsequently used the compensation they received for loss of their shares in the land, as well as lost land use rights, crops and other assets, to purchase urban apartments, social insurance, and small businesses. Especially in areas of mass in-migration, such as the Pearl River and Yangtze deltas, many expropriated households did well from renting accommodation to rural migrant workers from other regions. But in addition, many millions of expropriated *nongmin* were indeed dispossessed without adequate (much less just) compensation, and were forced to supplement their meagre state welfare payments by repairing appliances, selling trinkets, street sweeping and scavenging.

As agriculturalists of all types were incorporated into widening circuits of capital and commodities, more inputs were sourced from global and national corporations. The costs of patented hybrid seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, irrigation and greenhouse infrastructure and technical training rose. Moreover, after China's government approved

the operations of commercial credit providers, domestic financial capital expanded into the countryside.⁵³ Former rural cadres and large commercial farmers made use of their connections in government and rural financial institutions to acquire subsidized resources and the lions' share of loans.⁵⁴

Increasingly, output also was sold on markets. Yan and Chen estimated that by 2012, almost 100 per cent of vegetables, cotton and fruit, and 85 per cent of all grains, were sold on the market.⁵⁵ Agricultural producers faced growing competition for market niches. Lucrative supply contracts were monopolized by large farmers who could market online, negotiate affordable transport costs and deliver regular bulk orders to major wholesalers. Market expansion increased small producers' vulnerability to pressure from global buyers such as Nestlé and domestic wholesalers. Urban governments bent on reconstruction closed down many wet markets that had accommodated small independent vendors and allocated the sites to supermarket chains.⁵⁶ Wholesalers' unified purchasing schemes forced producers to lower their prices or accept annual payment for meeting delivery contracts, wiping out small farmers' profit margins. As a Zhejiang farmer providing trees to urban landscapers in Shanghai, Henan and Jiangxi complained to me,

We only get paid by the wholesalers once each year, after the spring festival. We still haven't been paid for last year's deliveries. A year or so ago, one of the local wholesalers ran off owing us growers hundreds of thousands of *yuan*. We often get screwed. If trees die on the way to market, they return them to us, so we bear the risk of transport and storage too.' (Interview, Changxing County, Zhejiang, 20 March 2013)

Factor and produce markets differentiated commercial and peasant producers even in less developed provinces. In one mountainous village in Yunnan, in 2014 a poor farmer explained to me how market prices swayed his production decisions:

Q: Do you rent land from others?

A: Yes, 6 or 7 *mu*.

Q: How much is it per *mu*?

A: Around 150 (*yuan* per year).

Q: How much would you make from the crops on the land? Is that your main source of income?

A: We don't make much from our crops, most of our income is from raising pigs. We've got 60 pigs. But the price for pork is really low now. We only get 11 *yuan* per kilo, but it costs us over 10 *yuan* per kilo just to raise them.

Q: Then will you keep on pig farming?

A: We'll keep doing it, see if the price rises. It's the only way we can get ahead. (Interview, Zhanyi County, Yunnan, 7 April 2014)

In short, the expansion of markets not only greatly reduced the proportion of agriculturalists that could be identified occupationally as peasant farmers, but structured competition among agriculturalists and disadvantaged peasants in their relations with capitalist farmers, businesses and the financial sector.

The demise of China's peasantry can be traced in social, cultural and political relationships as well. Largely as a consequence of reduced

fertility, out-migration and family division, rural households declined in size, from an average of 5.5 members per household in 1980, to 3.8 members in 2012.⁵⁷ The burden of agricultural production and care-work was reallocated among fewer adults.⁵⁸ Despite their dwindling size, rural households also bore much of the cost of reproducing the vast rural migrant labour force that was building China's cities and producing many of its exports. Certainly, when employed, migrant workers remitted money to their village families to support consumption and pay for new housing, education, medical care, and ceremonies associated with marriages, births and deaths. As most migrant workers lacked portable medical and unemployment insurance until recently, however, their only option in the event of illness, injury or being laid off was to return to their villages. He and Ye suggest that the weakening of old traditions of filiality and intergenerational reciprocity, and intergenerational frictions arising from differing attitudes toward work, romance and consumption, reinforced cycles of out-migration, compromising the well-being of the elderly and children "left-behind" in the villages.⁵⁹

Inevitably, part of the costs of rural households' social reproduction began to be socialised, as state-subsidized old-age pension and medical insurance schemes were extended to the countryside.⁶⁰ Even in the brief period between 2007 and 2009, for example, research by Liu, Liu and Huang demonstrates a shift in the sources of income relied on by the rural elderly (aged over 60) away from family support, and toward own labour and social assistance.⁶¹ By 2015, some 820 million rural and urban people were enrolled in a national unified old-age pension program co-financed by the government and individual contributors.

Peasant community solidarity also weakened as a result of educational and governance reforms. Consider the following two trends. Until 2000,

the vast majority of rural children attended primary schools in their home villages. Widely criticised for their inadequate resources and low educational standards, village schools nonetheless allowed children to interact with other members of their community, learn about local politics and customs and pick up rudimentary agricultural and house-holding skills. The closure of 229,400 village primary schools and more than 16,000 middle schools between 2000 and 2010 resulted in a surge in the numbers of rural children either boarding in, or travelling more than ten kilometres daily to centralised schools in towns and cities.⁶² In the centralised schools, children were taught to internalize national aspirations for modernity, and non-local teachers' class prejudices and expectations.⁶³ This led to early class sorting. Children from entrepreneurial and commercial farming households gained in confidence, and proceeded to vocational and higher education. Children from 'backward' peasant and out-migrating households disproportionately dropped out, condemning them to a future either scratching a living from small holdings, or joining the unskilled migrant labour force.

Second, peasant farmers became a minority in village populations — a minority increasingly marginalised in community governance. Legally, registration as a village resident entitles all adults to vote in village elections and assemblies, apply for contracts to farm land and for a house site, and receive a share of any dividends paid from collective income. However, in developed areas, non-peasant village residents (including commercial farmers, business people and off-farm workers) began to outnumber, and outvote, peasants. Village voters began electing people to the two key leadership posts, Village Party Secretary and Village Director, precisely because of their expertise, connections and economic success in the all-important non-agricultural realms of business. In Zhejiang, by 2009 entrepreneurs held leadership positions in around two-thirds of villages;⁶⁴ in the sixteen Zhejiang villages I

visited in 2014 and 2015, all but four of the 32 leadership positions were held either by business people or by commercial farmers. Similar trends were evident in villages throughout China's coastal provinces. Even in less-developed provinces such as Yunnan, village leaders tended to be more highly educated and involved in business than most residents.

One of the consequences of the changing occupational profile of village residents, therefore, was that the preferences of the minority peasant population often were subordinated to the preferences of the non-peasant majority. Lower levels of government prioritised the development of industry, commerce or rural tourism over agriculture. Within the agricultural domain, they prioritised commercial agriculture over subsistence agriculture. Indeed, Trappel⁶⁵ demonstrates that the commodification of farmland and commercialization of agricultural production and distribution became key criteria against which the performance of local government authorities were evaluated by their superiors. Governments dictated that land be used for commercial crops such as tobacco, which generated substantial government revenue but depleted the soil of nutrients (if grown perennially, without rotation of legume crops), or produce such as mushrooms that appealed to urban consumers, rather than promoting crops that would sustain peasant livelihoods and support household consumption. Cheng and Ngo, in 2014, found that local government authorities pressured households that refused to produce preferred crops to rent their land to other growers.⁶⁶ Around cities across China, large areas of land were used for construction and industry without adequate safeguards against contamination of adjoining farmland and water sources. A government report in 2014 estimated that nationwide, more than 19 per cent of arable land was seriously polluted.⁶⁷

Local governments and village leaders

attempted to reduce the resulting conflicts among class-differentiated villagers, and among competing rural land users, to cultivate a sense of community by improving village services, encouraging the wealthy to donate money for festivities, and holding evening cultural activities. But to date, these initiatives have had limited success in bridging divisions between the residual peasantry, and growing populations of off-farm and migrant workers, commercial farmers, and business people.

In politics beyond the village, too, the peasantry was being substituted by, and therefore becoming a hidden, unrepresented subject among, the rural registered population. Rural residential registration rather than occupation was used to calculate the occupational makeup of the Communist Party and People's Congresses. And in both organizations peasants came to comprise only a small percentage of the rural registered membership, which in turn was only a small proportion of total membership: according to one report, in 2009 only 12.8 percent of the 24 million rural registered Party members even lived in villages.⁶⁸ In a famous letter addressed to China's leaders in 2003, Li Changping wrote, 'peasant organization is at its lowest ebb since the collectivization of the early 1950s. For not only is there a lack of agencies like cooperatives or producer associations to help link peasants to the market, but such collective organizations as do exist are in the hands of Party and government officials. ... Most fundamentally, peasants lack any organizations for the defence of their own interests.'⁶⁹ Although a law and policies encouraging the formation of rural cooperatives were issued in the years after Li Changping's letter, researchers have found that over 85 percent of cooperatives formed were 'fake' organisations set up by entrepreneurs to capture government subsidies.⁷⁰ They were never intended to improve conditions for peasant agriculture, much less politically represent peasant interests.

In China's 21st century media, the peasantry is represented as a repository of old virtues and romantic folk customs, and a backward, naïve, vulnerable social group. Rarely is it depicted as it was in the early Maoist era, as a source of social change or political agency. This is despite the fact that peasants initiated the contracting of land to households, invested in township and village enterprises, and – in the course of transforming China's countryside and indeed, its urban industries – have become non-peasants. Even in scholarly discussions on class, peasants seemed to be disappearing. For example, in the humanities and social sciences collections of the China Academic Journals database, between 1963 and 2013 only twenty nine journal articles combined the keywords class (*shehui jieji*) and *nongmin*. Conversely, as Alexander Day concludes, contemporary Chinese debates about the peasantry elide questions about their class positioning: 'Whether peasants were talked about as a vulnerable or weak social group (*ruoshi qunti*), as state dependents or as a group with a separate cultural and economic logic, what was usually at best partially articulated was how they fit within contemporary class dynamics'.⁷¹

To be sure, people registered as rural residents continued to think of themselves, and were referred to by others as, *nongmin*, regardless of where they actually lived and how they made a living. *Nongmin* still were treated unequally in China's political economy, and often described as 'second-class' citizens with regard to working conditions and welfare provision. But it was the state-imposed restrictions on their rural residential registration and associated policies, and modernist prejudices, rather than their reliance upon agriculture, family labour, and limited market exposure, that rendered most *nongmin* 'second class' in these relationships.

In sum, in the early 21st century, far-reaching structural and systemic changes in the economy – many of which were initiated and

propelled by the aspirations and activities of peasants – have commoditized agricultural labour, land, capital and produce, and turned peasants into a small, subterranean class among a highly variegated rural-registered population. Rural cadres and entrepreneurs exercised political influence and accumulated wealth, which was flaunted in opulent housing, vehicles, weddings and banquets. As the expansion of markets allowed wealth to be parlayed into political, cultural and social capital, the children of these new rural rich began crossing class and *hukou* boundaries to join the urban middle class and bourgeoisie. The owners of businesses providing agricultural producers with machinery, bulk inputs and insurance and linking them with wholesale markets similarly worked, lived, socialized and intermarried with members of the middle class and bourgeoisie. Especially in developed areas, commercial farmers routinely participated in property, labour and commodity markets and interacted socially with urban small business people, rather than the peasants they employed on a casual basis. A growing population of rural landless fragmented into rentier and self-employed members of the petit bourgeoisie, a reserve army of wage labour and welfare dependants. Some members of the remaining peasantry became semi-proletarianized,⁷² compelled to sell their labour to supplement households' income from farming small plots, and simultaneously dependent on farming to compensate for migrant members' insecure work, low wages and limited social and old age protection, and because they lacked the capital necessary to either expand agricultural production or invest in businesses. Struggling to compete in factor and commodity markets, and increasingly marginalized in village and government decision making, legislative representation, media productions and social commentary, at the beginning of the 21st century China's peasantry was a declining social formation.

The passing of the peasantry? Two

scenarios

By 2030, China's urban population is expected to reach 1 billion, around 70 percent of the national total.⁷³ Urbanization, according to Premier Li Keqiang 'presents the most powerful and lasting internal driving force for economic growth in this country'.⁷⁴ Although some have cautioned that China will continue to have a large rural population in the near future,⁷⁵ there is a widespread assumption that the great majority of peasants will disappear, either as a result of moving to and working in towns and cities, or their transformation into commercial farmers, commuters or service providers.

Indeed, this seems to be one of the explicit goals of China's leadership. In repeated documents, China's central government has encouraged industrial and commercial capital to invest in agriculture, promoted rental markets in farmlands, and advocated the scaling up of agricultural production by commercially-oriented farming households, cooperatives and agribusinesses employing wage labour. There are competing arguments among Chinese scholars about how this transformation of the peasantry is to be achieved. By way of conclusion, then, here I outline alternative visions for the passing of the peasantry as a class in the early 21st century.

It is a fundamental tenet of liberal thought that markets enhance individual freedoms. China's liberal scholars similarly view the market economy as the means by which peasants will free themselves from their historic subordination and exploitation: subordination and exploitation, first, by the landlords, and then in the Maoist period, by the state's planning bureaucracy and co-operative cadres. In this view, residual collective institutions, particularly collective land ownership, still bind peasants to the soil, discourage investment in mechanization and encourage risk-averse 'small peasant' farming.⁷⁶ The final 'liberation'

of the peasantry therefore requires the elimination of these collective institutions.

For liberals such as Qin Hui, the key question yet to be resolved is ‘which of the only two possible paths rural China should take – the opposite roads to agrarian capitalism that Lenin called Prussian and American: ‘the expropriation of the peasantry from above by big landlords or companies, as in nineteenth century Prussia, or the emergence of independent small-to-medium modern farmers from below, as in nineteenth century America’.⁷⁷ Like Qin, many Chinese experts opt for the second path and advocate privatization of the land. In articles widely circulated among China’s leadership in 2007, for example, Li Chenggui of the Academy of Social Sciences recommended that privatization be accomplished in two stages. All legislation should first be revised and the mortgaging of rural land permitted. Then within a decade, villagers should be granted full ownership rights. This would establish the institutional basis on which uncompetitive peasant households could willingly sell their land to farmers wanting to expand their holdings, allowing the former peasants to fund their transformation into entrepreneurs, workers and self-funded retirees. Land privatization thereby could facilitate the scaling up commercial agricultural production and sustained capital accumulation.⁷⁸

Another essential requirement for this transformation of the peasantry is the elimination of the residential registration system that underpinned the early Maoist push for primitive socialist accumulation and which, under post-Mao market reforms, continues to render peasants ‘second class’ citizens and easily exploitable migrant workers. Dismantling this system would give those currently registered as *nongmin* the right to choose their place of residence, compete on an equal basis for urban jobs, receive equal labour protections and union membership, and have equal access

to publicly-funded education, health care and welfare goods. Lu Xueyi, argued: ‘We need to create a unified market of over one billion people. We can no longer continue with divided markets in the city and the countryside and lock 900 million peasants out of the cities’.⁷⁹ Though cynics might hasten to point out that rural registered people are by no means ‘locked out’ of China’s cities – and, on the contrary, probably helped build and provide services to those contemporary cities – Lu’s argument nonetheless has gained widespread support. It is fiercely resisted, though, by the influential governments and resident beneficiaries of China’s richest cities, which are loathe to share their generously funded education, health care and welfare goods with non-locals.

Privatization of land and the elimination of the residential system also are viewed by liberal scholars as the means of eliminating the social and political conservatism they associate with ‘small peasant’ production, and empowering former peasants politically. As propertied citizens, they would possess the motivation and legal and material resources with which to better resist the arbitrary power, taxation and depredation of local governments.⁸⁰

That liberal vision is fiercely contested. Critics argue that liberals’ recommended reforms would condemn China’s peasants ‘to repeat the tragedy that already has been played out in many third-world countries, where numerous farmers became landless, then jobless, then homeless, and eventually hopeless’.⁸¹ He Xuefeng and Wen Tiejun, for example, insist that neither Prussian nor American paths to modernity are appropriate—or available—for China.⁸² The country’s population to land ratio is too high, there are insufficient jobs to employ people surplus to the needs of a large scale, mechanized agricultural economy, and capital is still flowing out of agriculture into more profitable ventures.⁸³ Besides, in the small-holding peasant economy, land and labour are not (yet) fully commoditized. Instead, collective

land remains a critically important subsistence resource and safety net not only for the rural elderly, but also for tens of millions of migrant peasant-workers who are vulnerable to incapacitation in industrial accidents and redundancy due to cyclical contractions in global consumer demand. In fact, peasant farming underpins China's competitiveness in markets for low-cost, labour intensive manufactures.

That critique informs a radically different vision of the future for China's peasantry. As Alexander Day has shown, in proposals that unite China's 'new left' with populists who champion the contemporary utility of indigenous peasant institutions, collective land ownership, household capital and village co-operative economic organization is presented as the most effective means of protecting China's smallholding agriculturalists from the harsh discipline of post-Fordist capitalism.⁸⁴ Co-operatives' development and leasing of collective land would finance the construction of rural infrastructure, industry and services – inter-alia increasing off-farm employment – and fund collective goods such as villagers' health care and social insurance. Through co-operatives, farming households would gain access to cheap credit, and scale advantages in purchasing and marketing. This would assist them in competing with agribusinesses and commercial farmers. Rural households therefore could engage in what Yan and Chen

refer to as 'capitalization without capitalism'.⁸⁵ As joint owners of collective land and shareholders in agricultural co-operatives, villagers also would have the motivation and organizational and material resources with which to invest in household reproduction, protect their common interests and conserve regional peasant cultures.

In the imagination of these 'new left' and populist scholars, contrary to the predictions of liberal scholars and the class theorists cited at the beginning of this paper, China's peasantry will not inevitably disappear as a consequence of voluntary migration and occupational shifts, or rural dispossession, debt and impoverishment. Instead they envisage a viable future for small-holding agriculturalists, a future in which former peasants would comprise an economically, politically and socially progressive class of collectively organized land-owning entrepreneurs, capitalized farmers, and shareholding employees.

But would such people constitute peasants? Surely not according to the definition of peasant used in this paper. By that rigorous, if simple criteria, at least, the demise of China's peasantry as a class seems inevitable.

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Notes

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