



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



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A B S T R A C T

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

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1. Introduction

The paradigm that governs most of agrarian sciences and policymaking strongly conceptualizes modern agriculture as men's work.¹ Men do the heavy work; they deal with complex technologies and are the main decision makers. Women, at best, do “work of the second kind” (de Rooij, 1992, 1994). They assist the men, they give a helping hand. And when responsible for specific tasks (e.g. feeding the calves, accountancy), they follow the guidelines formulated by the men.

This paradigmatic view on rural women's role is, of course, very much a virtual image – it is only partially true. In many parts of Europe, women run the farm, because the men are working elsewhere (Van der Plas and Fonte, 1994). And if men are at home doing most or all of the farming work, it might very well be the earnings obtained elsewhere by the wife that make this ‘centrality’ of the

man possible. Farmers' wives also have a strong, albeit a somewhat hidden, say in decision making (Van der Ploeg, 2003). Women also often play a prominent role in the new fields of activity that are being created as part of new, multifunctional, farms (Rooij et al., 1995).

When viewed from this paradigm, Chinese agriculture seems doomed to being second-rate: men in the prime of their lives are absent from the farm. Farming appears to be mainly the activity of women and old, retired, men. The young and middle-aged men are away working in the cities. When combined with the very small acreage of the farms (on average one third of a hectare),² this seems a highly fragile constellation.³ As Huang (2011: 459) argues: “most social science theory and the currently powerful Chinese ideology of modernization assume that with modern development, family-based peasant farm production will disappear”. If not for legal restrictions (the *Hukou* which obliges return to the village for social

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¹ See Burt (1987) for a classical explanation on how cohesion and structural equivalence contribute to paradigmatic framing.

² This is also perceived as an indication of inferiority. Such a small acreage does not allow for investments. As a result it is thought impossible to make such a unit highly productive (through the ‘conventional’ strategies of applying new technologies and high input levels).

³ Authors as diverse as Chen (1987), Lu and Dai (1987), Hinton (1990), and Zhu and Jiang (1993) have argued that the over-fragmented farm size will not favour further increase in productivity and efficiency.

services), there probably would be far less people in the countryside and agricultural production would decrease proportionally. In this view, a softening of the *Hukou* rules would trigger a massive rural exodus. If this were to happen China's best option would be to spur an accelerated process of scale-enlargement. This, it would seem, would be the only way that China could feed itself with a greatly reduced agricultural labour force.

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

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

2. The social calendar of peasant life

During life the relations between people and the land change several times – and each time they change significantly. This can be schematized in a three stage periodization.⁴ First, when a boy, the family's land⁵ will be worked by the boy's mother and grandparents (who might be assisted by the boy's father when there are heavy tasks to be done, such as land preparation). The land will feed the family and generate a small surplus which can be used to pay for daily expenses. Most probably, the boy's father will be working faraway. He does so in order to 'feed' the land (for instance paying for the considerable expense of fertilizers) and to save money for big expenditure, such as paying for the construction of a house (for when the young man has grown to say, 25) and the wedding. At the end of this period, the boy (now grown) will already be doing migrant work – unless he is studying.

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

migrant work, even though it is hard for the man to be separated from his wife and children. Equally his work can sometimes be dangerous, monotonous and risky (sometimes the boss fails to pay). As one villager explained:

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

When the strength of the man declines, the third period (from, say, 50–75) starts. He comes back to the village and starts to work the land (probably assisted by his wife and daughter in law). Yuan (2010) applied a cohort analysis to different groups of migrant workers who originated from rural Guizhou. She concludes: "none of the couples in the survey said they would not come back [...] Most migrants never think of migrating to the city permanently" (2010: 140).⁶ The same is observed by Lou et al. (2004), who studied the migration experiences of young women from Sichuan and Anhui. In this third period the returned men try, if possible, to develop the land further so that, as the countryside saying goes, a 'foundation' is created for his son (now involved, in his turn, in migrant work) when the latter returns in the future. For the elder man this is the period of his pension. But he does not pass it idly. He works and develops the land – that is how the first priority, responsibility for the family, materializes. When the third period finishes (schematically at the age of 75)⁷ his own son (now already at an age of 50) will come back. He and his wife will care for his parents who will be increasingly unable to continue with the hard physical work – and he will care for the land that his father developed for him. In this period the possession of the land passes to the son: "sons are both entitled to inheritance and required by both customary expectation and by law to provide maintenance for their aged parents" (Huang, 2011: 469). Formally, girls and women can have possession rights as well. However when a young woman marries, the rule of patrilocality implies that she moves to the village of her husband and thus her (formal) rights pass to her family, i.e. to her father and, then, her brother(s). In practice, the (allocated) land belongs to the family household and within the family it passes from one generation to the other. This practice is also increasingly codified in China's steadily evolving legal system (Huang, 2011: 475).

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

A good son must treat his parents well and take care of the land even if farming gives less money. This maybe a sacrifice for the son, but he does so out of respect for his parents. [If the son returns] the father will be very happy. If the son wants his father's share [i.e. the part of the land allocated to the father], the father will also be happy. Normally the son provides compensation: often 1 sack of rice and 2 sacks of wheat flour every year. This happens when there are several sons. If there is only one son the rule is that the son gives his parents whatever they need for food.⁸

⁴ Yuan (2010) developed a four stage periodization. The first and second stages she distinguishes are grouped here together in one single stage. Carter and McGoldrick (2005: 384) arrive at a family life cycle consisting of six phases each of which involve negotiations on "the expansion, contraction, and realignment of the relationship system of family members in a functional way".

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

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

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

⁸ This comment was given by an elder villager; younger people might very well be inclined to think differently.

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