

## **Intellectuals and the Land – A Workshop at Mutianyu Great Wall**

**Friday 18 June, 2010**

### **Panel Discussion**

Chair: Timothy Cheek

Panelists: Chan Koon Chung, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Rural Society, *Nongmin* and *Nongmingong*”

David Kelly, “Intellectuals and the Land”

Huang Yang, “My Flight from the Land”

Vera Fennell, “Picturing Identity, Nationalism and the Land”

Commentator: Jim Spear

## **Panelist Bios:**

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### **Chan Koon-Chung**

I am a writer of fiction and prose in Chinese and occasionally in English. My latest Chinese novel "Shengshi: China 2013" is about contemporary China. I also write about subjects ranging from cultural studies, urban design and political commentaries about Hong Kong and China.

I am presently a board member of Greenpeace International and the chair of a new Hong Kong-registered NGO: Minjian International 民間國際.

I have lived in Beijing since 2000.

### **David Kelly**

David Kelly is a Professor of China Studies at the China Research Centre, University of Technology, Sydney.

He studied social sciences and Chinese studies in the University of Sydney, taking a PhD in Asian Studies in 1982. He subsequently held teaching and research positions in the Contemporary China Centre, ANU; the School of Politics of the Australian Defence Force Academy; and the East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore.

A resident of Beijing in recent years, Kelly's work ranges widely across Chinese politics: intellectual history, especially of Chinese Marxism and liberalism; political sociology, mainly of intellectuals, urban homeowners and migrant workers; and public policy, focusing on the dilemmas of governance under turbulent current conditions.

### **Huang Yang**

I teach Western ancient history, and my area of study is ancient Greek history. I've published on various topics in Greek history, in particular on Athenian democracy.

### **Vera Fennel**

I am an associate professor in the Department of Political Science at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, PA, USA. I am also a joint-hire with Lehigh's Globalization and Social Change Initiative. Many political scientists would look at globalization as a military or economic phenomenon and would ask questions about national security and sovereignty. I am much more interested in questions and uses of identity and discourse of nationalism - who are the "we" and why are the "them" not us, even if globalizing and globalized cultural expressions make them sound like "us". I have spent a lot of time using gender as a lens for these questions and now, I am beginning to use race as a new structure of meaning to look at these issues.

## Panel Submissions:

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### What We Talk About When We Talk About Rural Society, *Nongmin* and *Nongmingong*

Notes for the Mutianyu Workshop on Intellectuals and Land (Educated Elites and Rural Society) in Contemporary China

Chan Koonchung (陳冠中)

6/2010

Intellectuals talk (well, it's true they also think and write and maybe have a life). Paraphrasing Raymond Carver's famous short story title "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love", I would like to ask, honestly, what are intellectuals in China talking about when they talk about rural society, *nongmin* and *nongmingong*?

Some may indeed talk about love, as sinologists, anthropologists and classicist literati are sometimes being criticized, mostly unjustly I think, for allegedly falling in love with the idyllic pastoral past of their imagination.

If love is too un-intellectual a word, "desire" is supposedly more effable if you are adept at some arcane post-structuralist discourses. Aren't all intellectual pursuits informed by desire and the will to discursive power one way or another and the rural society and *nongmin* are just another rarefied objects of desire to someone like .....us?

But even to intellectuals of a more empirical orientation, talking about rural society, *nongmin* and *nongmingong* in present-day China is by no means unproblematic. Not only "rural" and "society" need to be put inside quotation marks, so should *nongmin*, *nongmingong* and the famous three *nongs*, with their common rendition into English as farmers/peasants, migrant workers/farmer-turned workers, farming/agriculture, rural area/countryside and farmers/peasantry. Even some tangentially related terms such as the mass, the subaltern, the grass-root, laborers, itinerant labors, floating population, migrants, settlers, dwellers, residents, workers, proletariats, lumpen-proletariats, industrial reserve army, urbanites, locals, citizens, nationals, countrymen, civil society, the people, the public, the commons, the communal, the social etc. are all problematic in the context of present-day China.

The following notes hold the views that these terms not only desperately need re-framing, but their unexamined use may have inadvertently contributed to social prejudices and perpetuated injustice, not to mention posing an obstacle to the understanding of China's morphing reality, social formation, class configuration and political economy. In short, it is about the refashioning of how intellectuals talk about an increasingly liminal sector of the multitude (previously conveniently labeled as *nongmin*) who are not yet and probably still for some time to come will not be legally "permanent" (read: *hukou*-ed) urban settlers.

While I still used terms such as *nongmingong* for heuristic reasons, I shall explain in a moment why such terms are inadequate. For the sake of clarification, I sometimes preferred the use of the rather cumbersome term "post-rural multitude" to describe this vast liminal populace which, combined with the remaining rural settlers, still make up the majority of the Chinese population.

1

The Chinese character *gong* in *nongmingong* is often construed to be an acronym of *gongren* (workers), but in Chinese the same *gong* can mean *gongju* (instruments). The latter meaning is

uncannily truer to reality. A *nongmingong* is less a worker with entitlements; he or she is more an instrument, a man/woman-machine among the phalanxes of similar man/woman-machines, devoid of his or her human individuality, job and social security, and a claim to be a full social being in the cities. Their only value as *laogong* (manual instrument) is the quantifiable laboring output they can provide to the employers. Even by the standard of an average medium-income urban person in China, most *nongmingong*'s working condition is unacceptable – low pay, long hours and over-regimented. Their living condition is demeaning and almost sub-human. Their leisure time is barren if any. The stipends would not buy them a decent living in the cities. Of course, it depends to a certain degree on which occupation the *nongmingong* is engaging – mining, construction, manufacturing or domestic and other services?

Most of them do not live with their family (like early laborers in overseas Chinese diasporas) and have no communal life to speak of (unlike early laborers in overseas Chinese diasporas where there were communities of clans and regional associations).

Qin Hui (秦暉) has recently compared the plight of *nongmingong* to the indigenous laborers in South Africa during the apartheid time and found that at least the South African laborers could have a life with family and community in their shanty towns such as Soweto. In China, such settlements within or at the outskirts of the cities, or even clusters of shingle houses where some *nongmingong* tried to live with their families, may be tolerated today but could be demolished without compensation tomorrow in the name of urban renewal or gentrification. (Yes, the powerful state of face-loving China would not allow Brazilian favela-style settlements amid our radiant cities.)

Why the urbanites can tolerate such treatment of their fellow citizens and countrymen? Because they are *nongmingong*, not urban *gongren* – *gongren*, workers, belong to a nominally dignified class who together with the *nongmin* class are putatively the true masters of the people's republic.

*Nongmingongs* are neither *nongmin* nor workers. The word itself is oxymoronic – in the orthodox categorization of the Chinese communist discourse, you are supposed to be either *nongmin* or workers; there should be no in-between. *Nongmingong*'s liminality contributed to their predicament – *nongmingong* stay in the cities but can have no claim to the urban working class' entitlements.

Why can't they just be regarded as workers, but instead be framed as *nongmingong* and stayed as a liminal non-class?

By calling them *nongmingong*, the urbanites do not need to treat them as fellow urban residents. In the urbanites' mind, they are essentially *nongmin*. The urbanites have the knee-jerk reaction that *nongmingong* as *nongmin* can always go back to their idyllic rural village and farm for their subsistence. *Nongmin* come to the cities on their own initiatives (read: willingly). Their pay though low by urban standard is higher than what they can make by farming. So urbanites do not have to pay them like urban-dwelling working men and women, and city governments do not have to extend any urbanite-only social security, medical treatment, schooling and public welfare to them. Supposedly it is a win-win situation for both *nongmin* and urbanites.

The label *nongmingong* short-circuited urbanites compassion for fellow citizens. *Nongmingong* are instruments, for the development of the economy and the cities; they are instrumental in the success of the China model where a significant number – including many urbanites and some *nongmin* -- of the 1.3 billion Chinese have improved their living standard and a minority – mostly state employees and urban settlers – have even made a fortune. When *Nongmingong* are not

needed, they are supposed to return to their rural villages and revert back to be *nongmin*.

By continuing using the word *nongmingong* and assuming they can all be *nongmin* again, we helped concealed their plight, made their situation opaque and short-circuited our understanding.

Imagine if we now stop using the term *nongmingong* and start calling them *gongren/workers*!

They are in fact “workers” already residing in the urban areas. They are entitled to all the treatments of urban working class, including the right to be represented by trade union.

No cities can then use any excuse to ask the workers to leave their cities and return to the rural areas. They have worked in the cities, and have every right to stay in the cities.

Of course, we all know in reality they (and their second generation) are going to stay in the cities one way or another, *hukoued* or not *hukoued*.. They came, they worked, they stayed.

But we and many other people have chosen to remain in a state of denial.

The city governments and some urbanites are still putting up resistance and have not made adequate preparation to come to term with the new reality.

But like it or not, it is a fail accompli that rural people have come to the cities.

Maybe it is really time to drop using the word *nongmingong* as a label and calling them *gongren*.

But for the moment, many urbanites and most city governments still prefer to see them as a breed apart from urbanites – they are *nongmingong*.

This attitude of course is reinforced by the state’s long-standing *hukou* and city-countryside dualist policy, which we are all familiar (see Appendixes 1 and 2). As of a matter of fact, since 1949, the state has been the engineer and the perpetuator of a country with two disparate classes of citizens, nationals or countrymen – *nongmin* and urbanites, with structural exploitation against the former, making a mockery of the socialist ideal of equality but undeniably contributed to the initial industrialization in pre-reform-and-opening-up first 30 years in the name of nation-building (albeit with relatively low productivity and high human costs), and ultimately to the continuous spectacular economy growth of the reform-and-opening-up second 30 years, now commonly dubbed the “China model”. While the pre-reform model was based on the economic exploitation but not necessarily social discrimination of the rural residents, the China model is based in the classic Marxist sense on the full exploitation AND discrimination of both workers and *nongmin*, especially the *nongmingong*.

China is a country of uneven development. It contains within itself a developed world and a under-developed world, a first world and a third world,

And it still did not treat all its citizens or nationals as equals, as one people.

2

Before *nongmingong* came to the cities to work, they were *nongmin*, a social class engaged in farming and cottage industries in the rural areas (see Appendix 3).

Regardless of their material scarcity, they are a part of a human society, albeit a class society in a socialist state. They survived (or failed to survive) the bad years, bad collectivization and bad state policies such as the policy-induced famine that killed more than 30 million people in 1959 to 62. But they also have seen some good harvests, and retained some of their produce depending on the state policy on cultivation at “private” lots. They lived with their family, in a pastoral environment and a community of known people, as their ancestors from antiquity did. They did not migrate.

As a boon, the sometimes ideologically inspired state had over the years fittingly tried to eradicate illiteracy, campaign against feudal cruelties and superstition, promote greater gender equality and dispense some rudimentary preventive and social medicine to the rural areas with

some positive statistics to show in the long run – something that had led not a few Indian Maoist commentators to believe in the superiority of the Chinese system.

3

But *nongmingong* can no longer be *nongmin* as butterflies cannot be larvae again.

Objectively, agriculture – including subsistence farming, for-the-city produce farming and larger scale agribusiness for distant markets -- cannot make good use of so many rural laborers –the issue of so-called surplus labor power or rural under-employment.

Market economy entails the all-importance of household disposable cash income, which is difficult to accumulate through subsistence farming.

Subjectively, once they worked in the cities, *nongmin* were transformed and could not be the same person when they went home.

Some were landless. *Nongmin* in People's Republic never legally owned the land to begin with. Many had lost their assigned farm lots due to urbanization, public works and misappropriation by corrupt officials. Some (especially in the Western provinces) had given up farming in exchange for state subsidies following the policy of conversion of farmland to forestry.

Some were born or raised in the cities with *nongmingong* parents. They had never been *nongmin* and could not be turned into *nongmin*.

Even for those who stay in the rural area, some parents had preferred to send their children to schools (often living in school dormitories in *xiang* and county towns) instead of asking them to toil in the fields to get used to the hardship and learn the skill of being a farmer.

With the ubiquitous TV sets and mobile phones and the increasingly prevalent internet connection, not to mention interaction with home-visiting *nongmingong*, most rural settlers now know a lot about life in the cities and one can understand why a large proportion of them, especially the karaoke-singing, pop-star-chasing younger generation, aspired to be urbanites.

Fei Hsiao-tung 費孝通 had made similar observations way back in 1947, but the trend was arrested during the first few decades of the People's Republic. Now it comes back with a vengeance and the scale is much, much bigger.

*Nongmingong* and many rural settlers are now in fact para-urbanites.

This time there is no turning back. The genie is out of the box again. Urbanization is an one-way street.

But they have not arrived yet – the door is not freely open to them yet. They are stuck in liminality.

Yu Jianrong (于建嵘) has said *nongmingong* formed a “floating society” (漂移的社會), adding that their personal identities are unfixed and culturally they have no sense of belonging.

While I agree with his observation on *nongmingong*'s liminality, I challenge the use of the word “society”.

There is no society or community for the *nongmingong*.

*Nongmingong* had not formed a society, if “social” relations signified meaningful relations between humans.

As *nongmin*, they belong to a community of known people.

Once they become *nongmingong* working in the cities, their social capital has been drastically impoverished.

They are not networked either.

The words network, connections, contacts etc, even the concept of civil society, are the

constructs of urban settlers.

*Nongmingong* only have disjointed threads to a few relatives, acquaintances and clansmen, if at all. That is it, disjointed threads.

They are not living in a community, they do not form a society of migrant workers -- not even secret societies in the line of overseas Chinese diaporas.

One can imagine Margaret Thatcher's reactionary saying that society does not exist may ring true from the point of the *nongmingong*.

Karl Polanyi's insight of self-protective "society against the intrusion of the market and the state -- that society is "discovered" on the onslaught of the market -- would sound like wishful thinking to a majority of the unorganized *nongmingong*.

Unlike the industrialization process in places such as England, where peasants left their land and settled in the industrial towns, albeit in bad living condition and sometimes without decent work, here in China, the post-rural multitude were for the longest time not expected to have the right to settle in the towns and cities after they finished their itinerant work.

They are not supposed to be turned into workers or proletariats in the Marxist sense.

They do not fit the description of urbanized industrial workers who played a prominent role in the narrative of the socialist state.

They are not the urbanized lumpen-proletariat, and they could not be called the industrial reserve army, which implies teleologically a final absorption to the working class.

The social, in the Marxist sense, is always about a class with its oppositions. *Nongmingong* is a liminal non-class, a post-rural multitude, and before they become members of a class with entitlements, like the workers in the cities, they are an undifferentiated and non-stratified multitude, a faceless, atomized herd.

To be a "social" entity again, they must breakthrough the stigma of liminality and be recognized as a member of the working class.

Also in the Marxist sense, the social is understood through two angles: emancipation and production.

In a sense, the *nongmingong* non-class constituted the potential for the most important social emancipation of the century -- over 400 million or more rural people are expected to be relocated to the cities and become full urban citizens within two to three decades.

That is why though *nongmingong* have no society now, the concept of the social is still important -- it is the idea of social justice and equity that is motivating many people to help changing the plight of *nongmingong*. *Nongmingong's* struggle for full citizens' entitlements and rights entails a new social consensus, a more inclusive social contract.

As to how that will impact the production mode of China needs more informed discussions.

4

If *nongmingong* can no longer be purely *nongmin* again, and their descendants will leave for the towns and cities one way or another, what is left of *nongmin* and rural society?

There will be fewer *nongmin*, or farming population.

*Nongmin* as a class is a dwindling class, but it will not disappear.

The remaining rural settlers of course have every right to have a decent life. Their living condition and welfare should be improved and their community life must be respected.

The important point is we must not think of post-rural multitude and even all rural settlers as essentially *nongmin*. To call everyone from rural areas as *nongmin* is again a short-circuited

mind-set. It makes one failing to see the vast liminal population of post-rural multitude (who split their time between urban and rural areas and engaged in non-*nongmin* works) and non-farming rural settlers.

The saying that China is a country of peasants is an anachronism.

There is no returning to a society of largely self-sustaining farmers.

Moreover, much farming are now for urban markets.

Agri-business including mechanical farming and factory farming of livestock goes without saying produces for distant urban markets.

Large scale farms employed locals as well as imported laborers, as laborers. For instance, Gansu farm hands collectively – with transport support from the county-level governments there -- left for Xinjiang to pick cotton in the harvest time.

Cash-crop farms of various scale run by entrepreneurial *nongmin* at the outskirts of towns and cities send their daily produce to the still existing (and popular among the common city folks) fresh vegetable markets in the urban areas. Their produce are deemed better than those available in the supermarkets.

Sustainable farming advocate Wen Tiejun (溫鐵軍) has organized a co-op connecting urban consumers with some selective farms in the Beijing outskirts. These farms grow “sustainable” and perhaps healthier produce for their urban subscribing co-op members. Wen’s intention is laudable, and perhaps a win-win situation has been created, and it may have helped to maintain bio-diversity, but it also proves the point that boutique farms (organic or not) at the city outskirts, appealing to the more health-conscious urbanites who can afford them, are there for the city consumers.

Medievalist Henri Pirenne and urban economist Jane Jacobs and others have made the point long time ago: agriculture is created by the cities and for the cities.

Subsistence farming -- as opposed to agriculture -- is not the only mode of farming and probably not always the dominant mode even in the past.

So it is not helpful to imagine China’s rural society as before, a society of largely self-sustaining farming communities. A modern rural society of subsistence farmers or small-scale peasant economy (小農經濟) is untenable. It is not viable to ask the rural populace to go back to the small-scale peasant farming condition of antiquity.

Many rural families can still lay claim to a piece of land for residence, cottage industries and farming. But one should not expect them to go back to subsistence farming, nor would they be willing. The meaning of the piece of land to them has changed:

For those who still have a piece of land, their thinking is that the land is their compensation for being exploited for so many years by urbanites and the state and when one day the land has legal market value they can keep it or rent it out, or they can finally exchange it in the market and have their first capital and that is their ticket to settling in the cities.

Now the urban sprawl has spread beyond the city limits (because there is no clear city limits), the meaning of the countryside is also changing. The urban rich now boast their living in the countryside, in their gated communities. Countryside and the romantic allure of a rural setting are often packaged for the consumption of the urbanites.

While “township” enterprises owned by county and village collective cooperatives had dropped out of public attention and contributed much less to the GDP, equally polluting small workshops, factories, warehouses and garbage dumps are strewn all over the rural area., not to mention random homestead settlements.

So, rural society is not the same rural society we know from antiquity up till the last few decades of the People's Republic.

While the rural environment is rapidly deteriorating, its "society" is also mutating – it is now determined by the vicissitudes of the vast post-rural multitude (often able adults) rather than the remaining rural settlers (often children and elderly).

Though it is a welcome move that the central government decided to do some transfer payments to redress the pressing problems of rural dilapidation and provide the rural settlers a minimal safety net of long-overdue social welfare, we must bear in mind it should not be construed as a move toward reviving the old system that rural populace must stay in the rural area and that rural economy can support its vast population without subsidies. Well-intentioned romantic euphoria of rural revival apart, we should not have the illusion that the younger sets will stop aspiring at migrating to the cities.

5

As I have argued, the term *nongmingong* short-circuited the understanding of the educated urbanites toward the former's predicament. However, no better Chinese descriptive terms have emerged to replace *nongmingong* apart from the cumbersome post-rural multitude that I have suggested.

Admittedly, the phenomenon of post-rural multitude is unprecedented in Chinese history. Therefore, applying other traditional terms on the post-rural multitude is inappropriate.

Strictly speaking *nongmingong* or the post-rural multitude are not *youmin* (遊民 wanderers) or *liumin* (流民 floating people or internal refugees), two castes of people existed in pre-modern Chinese society (see Appendix 4) .

It is also misleading to call them migrant workers, when the word migrant suggested there is a clear destination for settlement. In the case of *nongmingong*, no urban destination accepted them as settlers. If they are migrants, they are migrants without destination, making the term migrant itself problematic – migrating to where? So one could say they are more like (but again not quite) refugees and itinerant workers, whose destination is by no means certain.

This post-rural multitude has no subjectivity now. All old identities are inadequate if not bankrupt and are often mobilized to further disable them by the state, the city governments and the urbanized populace. They have few representatives in the state apparatus or at any level of governments. They are not encouraged to organize, and their collective voice is still weak, though now a few poets and story tellers (appendix 5) as well as documentary makers have emerged among their fold or to speak on their behalf.

8

Some recent developments:

- Canceling the agricultural tax greatly helped to ease the perennial tension of *nongmin* and local-level bureaucratic apparatchiks.

- Transfer payments in the name of new countryside building may have incrementally improved the depleting condition of certain rural areas and even revived a sense of the commons and public life. More college-educated young people have chosen to work in the countryside and some NGOs are allowed to do volunteer works in the rural areas. Apart from token palliatives, public medical cooperatives in rural areas will benefit those with rural *hukou* -- *nongmingong* who are still working in urban area now routinely go back to their *hukou*-ed rural place to claim expenses for medical treatment

- Demand for higher pay and less over-time at Foxconn and Honda plants have started to spread to other factories. Young workers (often called “second-generation” *nongmingong*) at these plants are less willing to accept strident working conditions. They would not go back to their rural places, and they are frustrated to find that they cannot afford decent urban living with the pay they are getting. They demand pay hikes and shorter overtime work hours. To adult *nongmingong*, higher pay would mean they can hope to afford the living cost in the urban areas and eventually bring over their families to the cities for reunion. To the young workers, it means they can see their future as full urban residents.

- Central government has talked of introducing a resident identity card system to replace the *hukou* system.

The post-rural condition is an urbanization condition. Admit the inevitable and start preparing to accommodate the post-rural multitude to the cities.

Gear urban planning, schooling, public housing, social security etc to this.

Sure it takes political will power, governance skill, change of perception, bullet-biting and some luck (e.g. no drastic economic downturn anytime soon).

There are resistance to allow *nongmingong* and their families to live amid urban settlers. The justifiable fear of the urbanites and the fiscal limitations of the local governments need to be addressed.

What should intellectuals do? The least they can do is when they talk, question the key words in their code-- including such terms as rural, society, *nongmin*, *nongmingong* -- against the “realities” which it may obscure or conceal, in the hope that it will help to bring about a kind of clarity instrumental in a small way toward finding the way out of the labyrinth of social discrimination, exploitation and injustice, without derailing reasonable economic development.

#### **Appendix 1: the *hukou* system**

The *hukou* system went through several stages –

1949 to 1957, the more liberal stage, where a new 1954 Constitution guaranteed freedom of movement. But in practice through policies and regulations, restriction of movements already started.

1957-1978, stricter limitation on countryside-to-city mobility implemented. Different degrees of de-urbanization were also introduced and many educated city dwellers were sent to the countryside.

1979 to now, rural labors floated to the cities to seek work, but could not get their *hukou* transferred away from their original rural residence. Some resourceful get-rich-first former rural residents managed to change their *hukou* to small towns and provincial cities. There were talks of loosening up the *hukou* system at different level of the state in recent years. But the government department pivotal in the *hukou* reform was often the police, indicating it was still regarded mainly as a security issue.

#### **Appendix 2: More on the *hukou* system**

*How the hukou system distorts reality*

*By Wu Zhong*

*Asia Times 2007*

China began to enforce the *hukou* system in 1953, shortly after the Communist Party came to power upon winning a civil war against the Kuomintang. A major purpose was to facilitate the implementation of a Stalinist-style socialist command economy.

The rationale was that production was to meet their needs of the people rather than to seek profits. Overproduction was evil. Therefore, the government had to take care of not only production but distribution as well. But it had to have some idea about the needs of people in various sectors before it could map out production plans; hence came the idea of household registration.

The failure of Mao Zedong's "Great Leap Forward" movement in late 1950s forced China to impose food rationing. And gradually nearly everything was rationed because of shortages. The command economy became a rationing economy, for which the hukou system became indispensable. In turn, rationing made it even more rigid in that it was difficult for anyone to change his residency registration.

Because of shortages, the government could only provide food, housing, employment, medical care, education and social welfare to urban residents, leaving farmers to make it on their own. In China's agrarian tradition, peasants were believed to be able to live a self-sufficiently. Thus the hukou system was used to restrict rural residents from moving into cities, to curb the growth of the urban population and hence ease the government's burden.

It was thus ironic that while socialism was to eliminate social classes, the hukou system virtually fixed Chinese people into two big classes: urban citizens and rural residents or farmers. It was almost impossible for a rural resident to change categories. His big chance was to pass the tough university entrance exams so that he could be assigned a job in a city after graduation. Nor could an urban citizen freely change his registration from one city to another, particularly from a smaller city to a bigger one.

The registration of a newborn baby, no matter where he was born, followed that of his parents. But if one of his parents was a rural resident, more often than not, the baby would be registered as a rural resident.

During Mao's times, this rigid system was also used as an effective instrument in restricting social mobility. Not only was a citizen's freedom to migrate to another place stripped away, his freedom to travel inside the country was also restricted. One had to live in the place where he was registered, and could not travel to another place without permission.

It is ridiculous that such a system should remain largely intact despite the fundamental changes to both the economy and society that have been brought by economic reform and opening up over the past nearly three decades. Today, Chinese citizens, including rural residents, are free both to travel and to migrate across the country - but they are still not allowed to change their registration easily.

Such a situation is particularly unfair to rural migrant workers. Since the early 1980s, vast numbers of farmers have left their land to work and live in cities. According to official estimates, the number of such rural migrant workers is now more than 200 million, with at least half of them "permanently" settled in the cities. It is expected that in the next several years, an additional 100 million or even more rural migrants will move to cities.

But in reality, the obsolete system means that rural migrant workers, no matter how long they have lived in cities, or if their children have been born and raised in the cities, are not regarded as urban citizens. Their registration still classifies them as rural residents, and so they are not entitled to the same rights and benefits that urban citizens enjoy. Rural migrants are therefore only the cheap labor that contributes to the prosperity of the cities but is not allowed to benefit from it.

Municipal governments in China nowadays like to boast their achievements by using the growth of the local per capita gross domestic product. While rural migrants make contributions to the

local economy, city governments do not include all of them in their calculation of local per capita GDP, so the figure could be inflated.

For instance, more than 10 million people now are estimated to be living in Shenzhen, but only 1.5 million are registered to live there. Three million have permanent residency, while the rest, more than 5 million, remain classified as migrant workers, which means they are "aliens", despite the decades some have spent there.

The Shenzhen police force is staffed to serve a population of about 3 million, which is a big reason for the deterioration of social order there.

Wang Chunguang, a researcher with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, says that if discrimination against rural migrants is not eliminated, social problems will continue to fester.

"Many of them have lived and worked in cities for more than 20 years now and have lost their farmland and their farming skills. If the cities where they have worked ... for so many years do not accept them, where shall they go?" said Wang.

When urbanization is taking away land from more and more farmers, driving them into cities, if they are not urban citizens, what are they? By definition, urbanization means the process by which the proportion of city residents in an entire population expands. By this definition, the more than 100 million rural migrant workers definitely must be considered as urban dwellers. The hukou system simply distorts the reality.

Seeing the problem, the central government in 1992 began to consider scrapping the distinction between urban and rural residents. But no progress was made in the decade that followed. In late 2005, the Ministry of Public Security, which oversees hukou, pledged to pilot the reform in some provinces. But months later it said it was up to the local government to make the changes in their systems.

However, it is in the city governments where the resistance is strongest. It means the municipal government would have to spend extra funds to expand facilities and public services to accommodate growth. For instance, Shenzhen would have at least to triple its police force to maintain social order at the minimal level, not to mention updating other public facilities and services in the city.

Hence for a city government the hukou system remains a strong defense line for its prosperity.

From this perspective, to ask a city government to initiate reform would be somewhat like "asking a tiger to give away its fur", as a Chinese saying puts it. Therefore, it is necessary that the reform be enforced directly by the central government.

Apparently, the outdated system has become a source of social injustice in that it leads to discrimination of rural migrant workers. Social injustice threatens social harmony. To implement Hu's idea of building up a "harmonious society", social injustice must be corrected. Consequently, ahead of the 17th Party Congress, which is to endorse Hu's idea as the party's line, there is hope in China that reform will soon be on its way - and this time, it will not be just another case of crying wolf.

### **Appendix 3: *nongmin* in Chinese history**

In traditional Chinese society, especially since late Western Han dynasty (around 100 BCE), *nongmin* was boxed-in as one of the 4 classes of peoples (四民) in a highly immobile Chinese society.

A person in the rural area was "like a tree", according to Wang Xuetai (王學泰). That person was not supposed to leave the soil of his birth. This was the salient feature of Chinese clan (宗法)

system and small-scale peasant economy. Through taxes, the surplus value if any of the rural populace was extracted by the bureaucrats, and together with occasional collective enforced labor, gave rise to the bureaucratic state and urban centers, where a small class of artisans, merchants and literati people also resided. Particularly since the Song dynasty, literate rural children could hope to change his class status and become a learned official (士大夫) serving the bureaucracy through taking civil service recruitment examinations. But aside from this narrow path, a rural subsistence farmer was not supposed to go anywhere.

Before 1949, farmers called themselves self-cultivating farmers (自耕農)、share tenant (佃農) or just a farming person (農夫). *Nongmin* or peasants as a socio-political revolutionary class was the construction of the Maoist communist ideology.

Ironically, though honoring peasants as a revolutionary class, the People's Republic of China inherited and further instituted strict immobility of the rural populace through the *hukou* system.

During the first 30 years after the often-violent land reform, *nongmin* were at times allowed to own production means and tend their own lot, while at other times the means and lots were collectivized to a different degree. But all along they were not supposed to leave their land, and their surplus value were appropriated by the apparatchiks in the name of nation-building and fed to industrialization and the cities.

In the initial years of the People's Republic, a new constitution gave all nationals the right of movement. It was not enforced. After 1957, restrictions were worse and led to dual economy and great disparity between the cities and the countryside. The right of movements was taken out in the revised 1975 constitution.

In late 1970s, 18 farmers from an obscure village in the poverty-stricken Anhui province famously de-collectivized some farm land and means of production. That event was significant for the subsequent reform and opening-up but for our purpose it did not change the immobile condition of the rural populace.

Then came the reform and opening up. A rural collective in Zhejiang province started township enterprises and was soon followed by other rural collectives and entrepreneurs. Township enterprises did not live up to its initial potential of lifting enough rural settlers out of poverty. They were not competitive enough in a more open market.

Market economy picked up steam in the 1980s and again after the spring of 1992. When manufacturing, infra-structure building and real estate construction called for manual labors, able-bodied rural settlers rushed to the cities. At first they were dismissingly called *mangliu* (盲流 blind floaters). They were in fact the harbinger of something unprecedented in Chinese society – the beginning of the process of breaking down the immobility of the rural society.

They were also called *wailaigong* (外來工 laborer from other places)、*mingong* (民工) and eventually *nongmingong*.

With demand for manufacturing and service labor grew, young women from rural areas also floated to Guangdong and other coastal provinces and were mockingly called *dagongmei* (打工妹 work-for-pay maids). Together they turned China into the factory of the world and contributed to growth, China model-style.

#### **Appendix 4: *yumin* and *liumin***

According to Wang Xuetai, *yumin* traditionally were jobless or unattached urban settlers, not a rural phenomenon, and *liumin* appeared when there were war, famine or plague, when residents of one place were collectively displaced and floated to another place to seek security, food and

shelter.

Compared to the urban *yumin*, *nongmingong* are from the rural areas and though they may have worked in the cities for many years, they are not accepted as embedded urban settlers, much less as loafing wanderers within the cities.

Unlike *liumin*, *nongmingong* appeared in the time of peace and abundance. Food supply has exceeded demand in China since the early 80s, and there was no massive starvation or civil war. They floated away from their native land in search of works in higher pecuniary terms, Though there are patches of labor-intensive industries in rural areas, they are exceptions to the rule. Most works are in urban areas.

#### Appendix 5: *nongmingong* literature -- some poets and novelists

\*Zheng Xiaoqiong 郑小琼, poet and a member of Guangdong Political Consultancy Conference, “我不断地试图用文字把打工生活的感受写出来 / 它的尖锐总是那样的明亮 / 像烧灼着的铁一样 / 不断地烧烤着肉体与灵魂”《铁》, “它巨大的暴力在我内心留下深陷 / 它似巨雷碾过, 交谈中 / 我感觉有一种无形的力量 / 从四周压了过来 / 幽暗处的洪水 / 正挤压着我肉体与灵魂 / 鸟的翅膀与鱼的水域 / 花朵的香气也被局限 / 在一张扭曲, 变形的门 / 在它低垂的弯拱中 / 我们每天弯腰躬身活着”《非自由》。

\*Zhang Shaomin 张绍民, poet, “一家人之间的距离可能等于火车”《亲人之间的远》, “妈妈的手刚一分神想你, 就被机器咬出了血”《加班》

\*Liu Qinbang 刘庆邦, novelist, 《神木》(拍成电影《盲井》)。

\*Cao Zhenglu 曹征路, novelist, 《那儿》、《问苍茫》、《当代》

## Intellectuals and the Land

*Discussion paper for the Mutianyu Workshop on Intellectuals and Land  
(Educated Elites and Rural Society) in Contemporary China, June 2010*

David Kelly

China's peasant problem has many aspects, behind all of which is the problem of the peasant becoming a citizen; even if they don't become townsmen [*shimin*] they are entitled to enjoy townsmen's rights. If the peasant problems we are observing aren't understood in terms of enhancing their rights and interests, many things will become problematic.

—Qin Hui<sup>1</sup>

Vera Fennel tells us that for Chinese women “land is an ambivalent and ambiguous location.” Of course this doesn't stop with women. Land can mean a huge range of things. It is one of three factors of production in economics. In textbooks of Western law, land looms as a special form of property—the one form of wealth that can never be effectively hidden. Being visible, fungible and occupiable, commercial calculations using land have a peculiar solidity. Rules for measuring, dividing, mortgaging, inheriting, leasing, etc. “real property” are relatively easy to devise.<sup>2</sup>

Of course it carries spiritual values as well. Coming from Australia and trained originally in anthropology, I could say a lot about the indigenous people of my country, who often state that they don't own the land—the land owns them. It requires their presence for its management and conservation of its values. When *Avatar* was shown in early 2010, the Chinese internet filled with voices stating that the bad guys depicted in the movie were exactly like land developers [*kaifashang*] in the countryside. From this angle, the blue-skinned people represented the Chinese peasantry. Their sacred values, their cultural affinity with nature was under just the same kind of threat.<sup>3</sup> I don't doubt this has an element of truth. But the ambivalence and ambiguity just

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<sup>1</sup> Qin Hui, “3:23 Beida jiangyan: Zhongguo nongcun wenti,” [Lecture at Beijing University, 23 March 2003, on rural issues in China] *Zhongguo nongcun wenti yanjiu zhongxin*, 24 November 2003, available at <http://www.frchina.net/data/personArticle.php?id=143>.

<sup>2</sup> Diane Chappel introduces her *Land Law* with an useful survey of its history and this quote: “Property is not a thing, but a set of legal relations between persons governing the use of things.” London: Pitman Publishing, 1997 (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.), p.4. The classical view of Western law was that among all forms of property, only land gave a basis for rights *in rem* as opposed to rights *in personam*.

<sup>3</sup> See Peter Yuan Cai, “In the shadow of Pandora: China's expropriation law,” 6 February 2010 (<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2010/02/06/in-the-shadow-of-pandora-chinas-expropriation-law/>); “‘Afanda’ baoli chaiqian zheshe xianshi, Fenghuang qishi cheng yingxiong” [Violent demolition in *Avatar* reflects reality], Fenghuang wang, 13 January 2010 [ : “《阿凡达》暴力拆迁折射现实 凤凰骑士成英雄”, 凤凰网, 2010年1月13日 ([http://ent.ifeng.com/movie/special/avatar/news/detail\\_2010\\_01/13/292770\\_0.shtml](http://ent.ifeng.com/movie/special/avatar/news/detail_2010_01/13/292770_0.shtml))].

mentioned go somewhere beyond this. Just as it turns out that indigenous Australia practised a form of land “cultivation,” using fire, and may not have been as conservative in ecological terms as we used to imagine,<sup>4</sup> China’s peasants’ affinities with the land have at times been overstated and distorted. Romantic, utopian views of the small rural community have been as prevalent in China as in other places.

I shall focus on land as a major source of inequality in China, and show that at least part of the reason lies in just this sort of intellectual mirage. To make my case I will call mainly on the writings of Qin Hui. Like Chan Koonchung I am impressed with Professor Qin’s work.<sup>5</sup> Over the last 20 years he has made an impact on how intellectuals (and other people) are rethinking issues to do with peasants and land. One of the unique things about him is that unlike most of the intellectuals who have written about these topics in the past, he has really been immersed in the reality, having worked as a rural cadre for 11 years.

### **Land as a Source of Inequality**

It is no longer shocking—it is in fact a cliché—to say that China is among the most unequal societies in the world. It was reported in May 2010 that the Gini coefficient had reached 0.48 in China, overtaking the recognized warning level of 0.4.<sup>6</sup> It is also well-known that a very large part of this disparity in incomes is attributable to the divide between city and country, to the *eryuanhua shehui jiegou* [dualistic structure of society]. “Well then, let’s just devise some redistributive measures and funnel some of the excess urban wealth back to the countryside.” It’s not so simple however. The countryside lacks institutional mechanisms to ensure that such redistribution is fair and effective. Then why not build these institutions, top down? One of the underlying reasons lies in the land. As we know the PRC Constitution of 1982 provides that rural land is collectively owned, whereas urban land is owned by the state. Neither is privately owned in technical terms, but urban land is treated very differently. Separate from a given parcel land itself are the *usage rights* extending from it. In the urban case these are far more fungible, divisible and occupiable. Suitably regulated, private ownership in the “fee simple” sense can be fairly closely approximated. We’ll leave the massive consequences of that aside for now, to concentrate on “Who owns rural

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<sup>4</sup> Tim Flannery, *The Future Eaters*.

<sup>5</sup> See “The Mystery of the Chinese Economy: Selected Writings of Qin Hui,” *The Chinese Economy*, vol. 38, nos. 4, 5 and 6 (September, October and November 2005); three special issues including my editorial introduction and translations.

<sup>6</sup> Qu Zhehan, “Redian jujiao: shouru chaju weihe buduan kuoda” [Hot focus: Why the income gap is widening], *Renmin wang*, 24 May 2010 [曲哲涵：“热点聚焦：收入差距为何不断扩大”，*人民网*，2010年5月24日 (<http://society.people.com.cn/GB/11671044.html>)]. See also the recent research by Wang Xiaolu, who is Deputy Director, National Economic Research Institute, China Reform Foundation, reported in Chen Jia, “Country’s wealth divide past warning level,” *China Daily*, 12 May 2010 [[http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-05/12/content\\_9837073.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-05/12/content_9837073.htm)]; and Zhang Chuanwen, “Pinfu chaju: jingti quanli qeshi xingcheng ‘xin diceng shehui’” [Wealth gap: Beware new underclass formed by loss of rights], *Yunnan xinxi bao*, 22 May 2010 [张传文：“贫富差距：警惕权利缺失形成‘新底层社会’”，*云南信息报*，2010年5月22日 ([http://opinion.nfdaily.cn/content/2010-05/22/content\\_12155554.htm](http://opinion.nfdaily.cn/content/2010-05/22/content_12155554.htm))].

land?” The answer, it seems, is “no one knows.” Peter Ho has devoted a book to showing that rural land ownership is not only ambiguous but deliberately so.<sup>7</sup> The *Constitution* and the *Property Law* speak of control of land utilization by committees at the level of the “natural village,” but these generally turn out to be the “administrative village” and to be under the control of the local Party Branch, that is to say, its Secretary.

In much of the country, rural land is a “no man’s or woman’s land.” It is subject to periodic redistribution, on the basis of the relative needs of households as they fluctuate in age makeup and labour power. Women’s rights in land are exceptionally contentious, an added level of ambiguity. This may be good or bad for different members of the community, but in general, it leads to a situation in which the peasantry, in the sense of the actual cultivators of the land, are unable to capitalise their primary asset, the land itself. Collective ownership of is thus ambivalent in a classic sense—it is both life-saving and life-threatening.

A number of critical political and economic issues radiate out from this situation like the spokes of a wheel. Migrant labour, the *nongmin gong* economy that has created what Chan Kuanchong refers to in his paper, in Qin Hui’s terms, as a form of apartheid, derived its original justification from the fact that peasants had rights in collective land. This was their social security, hence disqualified them from receiving the social security available to urban residents.

Some of the other policy ramifications involve (1) shortages of migrant labour (*mingong huang*) which among other things show that preventing peasants from capitalising their assets acts as a pump, forcing them into the *mingong* economy; as soon as there is an improvement in control over their lives, the *mingong* (at least in the case of the earlier generations of them—the current generations are clearly changing in their behaviour) tend to vote with their feet and take up the land once again; (2) minor property housing (*xiao chanquan fang*), basically a channel by which rural land is converted to urban usage without going through official requisitioning, and thus leaving a greater proportion of the added value in the rural community (though rarely in the hands of the peasants themselves).

### **Hierarchical Rent Sharing and Intellectual Images of the Land**

Behind these spokes, and the wheel itself, is a larger phenomenon. Luo Xiaopeng and I have described this as a system of “hierarchical rent sharing” (HRS). There is insufficient time to set this out fully in this discussion.<sup>8</sup> HRS was set in place essentially by Mao Zedong and his followers in retreating from the collapsed People’s Commune system of the Great Leap Forward. The rural urban divide and the *hukou* system are the policy consequences of this phenomenon, which is itself somewhat higher than the policy level—it is more like a social contract or constitutional order. Because the *hukou* etc policies act to preserve the essential “deal” (pro-urban and anti-rural) of HRS, to this day they can only be mitigated but not done away with.

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Ho, *Institutions in Transition: Land Ownership, Property Rights and Social Conflict in China*, Oxford University Press, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> For a brief account with fuller references see David Kelly, “Citizen Movements and China’s Public Intellectuals in the Hu-Wen Era,” *Pacific Affairs*, 79:2 (Summer 2006), 183-204.

The evolution of the HRS system has important links to images of the countryside. It is continuous with what Qin Hui has called the “default big community.” In his early work in agrarian history Qin had decided, in the face of the Maoist-influenced mainstream, that “in ancient China, conflict between the despotic state and folk society was always more important than that between landlord and tenant, or rich and poor.”<sup>9</sup> A major thread of his theorizing through the 1990s hinged on a comparison of traditional society in China and the West in terms of the structures of the communities making them up. A key difference was that the basic building block of Chinese traditional society was the “default big community” whereas the West was characterised by a “default little community.”<sup>10</sup> The latter allowed the early modern West to undergo a stage of “civil society allied with monarchy,” that is, a collaboration of individual human rights and values deriving from the big community that enabled an initial severing of the shackles of the small community. The weakness of the small community in China (contrary to what is widely believed) has forced social development to proceed along very different channels.<sup>11</sup> Freedom is seen as a socio-economic issue having little to do with spiritual matters. Its political fortunes are linked to the “hyperfunction of the big community.”

...Traditional Chinese rural society was neither a polarized society severely split by the tenancy system, nor a harmonious and autonomous cohesive small community, but a “pseudo-individualist” society based on the big community. The little community in traditional China was weaker than in other civilizations’ traditional societies. But this was not because individuality was developed, but was due to the hyperfunction of the big community.

Qin is able to show in considerable detail that China’s “traditional folk society” had rarely been an idyll of harmonious relations as people later imagined, where to face-to-face relations among rustics was ruled by ethical consensus. The sinews of the big community, of the state, were too strong.

The “ethical basis” theory of Liang Shuming, who was a long-term advocate of “rural reconstruction” in the north, is a big influence on those talking about “village tradition” today, but it was precisely Liang Shuming who felt deeply that traditional countryside in the north lacked “small community” identity and village communal organizations. He said: “Chinese people treat immediate kin as their family; those further away are

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<sup>9</sup> Qin Hui, “The Common Baseline of Modern Thought,” in *The Chinese Economy*, vol. 38, no. 4, July–August 2005, pp. 12–22.

<sup>10</sup> The distinction of “big” and “little” communities derives from the work of Robert Redfield: *The Little Community*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956. The Chinese term *benwei* is rendered here as “default” in the information technology sense: a dominant option, one that is generally the case, unless otherwise specified or determined.

<sup>11</sup> Qin Hu, “‘Da gongtongti benwei’ yu chuantong Zhongguo shehui—jian lun Zhongguo zou xiang gongmin shehui zhi lu,” [The ‘default big community’ and traditional Chinese society—on the road to a citizen society], *Boxun gongmin luntan*, <http://www.confuchina.com/08%20xiandaihua/gongtongti.htm>  
秦晖：“‘大共同体本位’与传统中国社会——兼论中国走向公民社会之路。”

part of the outside world. Small becomes very small, the big very big. (.....) it is different with Westerners. For them, the small is not restricted to their own family, and the big does not take in the whole outside world; they strike the mean, there is an appropriate scope, just right for training for group living” (Qin, citing Liang Shuming, 1990, p. 194).<sup>12</sup>

Qin Hui goes on to say:

Indeed, Chinese tradition lacked the village communities, benefices, parishes, guilds and clans of traditional Europe, And it’s difficult to see “small communities” like those of Russia, India and indeed Vietnam in China in ancient times. Ancient China did have systems of recycling allocated land, but this was an act, not of the village community, but of the state (named fields, occupied fields, equalized fields, fields allocated by headcount, banner fields, etc.); Chinese peasants’ movement was restricted historically, but the control over “registering the common people” was not by the *mir* but by the state; Chinese people knew about the “guilt by association of groups of five [households]” promulgated by the court, but had no idea of “village community guarantees.” Chinese farmers knew that private landowners to pay rent, to pay court state payroll tax, but does not see the “small community” to pay 26 per cent of how matter. Of course, the Chinese people knew about clan law and ancestral tribunals. Lovers of “culture” suppose this “customary law and ethical order” to be a primeval “local” phenomenon, and in the inaccessible backward “mountains” in the central and western regions design images of “godfathers”, but the latter were in reality more concentrated in the southeast coastal areas where there was more Western influence. The subjects of interior inaccessible areas understood the “law of the monarch” and had no idea of community tribunals.

The outlook for freedom is in this context bound to be a mixed bag:

...There is no doubt that compared to other pre-modern civilizations, the “freedom” of Chinese people (China’s “small peasants”) with respect to the community (rather than the state) was impressive. However, the subjugation of the Chinese people (China’s “registered folk”) to the state (and not the community) was even more so.<sup>13</sup>

The Marxists and later the followers of Maoist orthodoxy preserved the idealized image of a “default small community” that had rarely existed, and overlooked the power —political, economic and cultural—of the big community. The result was a shocking paradox: the very thing Marx himself had hallucinated, namely an “Asiatic state,” an Oriental despotism which had neither private property nor freedom, reached its closest approximation to reality not in ancient but

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<sup>12</sup> Liang Shuming, “Xiangcun jianshe lilun” [Theory of Rural reconstruction], *Complete Works of Liang Shuming* Volume II, Shandong People’s Publishing House 梁漱溟, 1990, 《乡村建设理论》, 载《梁漱溟全集》第二卷, 山东人民出版社, 10.

<sup>13</sup> *Op. cit.*

in modern China in the Maoist era.<sup>14</sup> Even when the extreme tyranny of the Great leap Forward and Cultural Revolution periods broke down, the dominance of the big community was preserved—in hierarchical rent sharing.

The long-term policy implication is, to make a long story very short, that freedom must be addressed in the first place by subduing the hyperfunction of the big community. The aim is not return to the small society, however, but a citizen society that gives people a stake in the order of freedom. This requires alliances and tradeoffs.

Hierarchical rent-sharing, a halfway house for the default big community, resists the rise of a citizen society. It is far from powerless, gaining support not only from a Party using ancient images of “Grand Unity” and the unitary state, but also from the recent decades of high-speed growth that has produced a wide constituency of “winners.”

We must leave how this is to be achieved to another day...

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<sup>14</sup> Qin Hui, “‘Qian jindai’ yanjiu de dangdai yiyi” [Contemporary significance of ‘early modern’ studies], *China elections and governance*, 13 February 2010 [秦晖：“‘前近代’研究的当代意义”，2010年2月13日 (<http://www.chinaelections.org/NewsInfo.asp?NewsID=169121>)].《田园诗与狂想曲——关中模式与前近代社会的再认识》序言 [Preface to “Pastoral and Rhapsody - the Guanhong model and Understanding Modern Society,” reprint edition 2010 (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1996; Qin Hui, “Jiaozhe yu qidi: huainian xianshi Zhao Lisheng jiaoshou” [Nurturing and enlightenment: in memory of my former teacher Zhao Lisheng], *Nanfang zhoumo*, 20 December 2007 [秦晖：“教泽与启迪：怀念先师赵俪生教授”，*南方周末*，2007年12月20日 (<http://www.nanfangdaily.com.cn/zm/20071220/wh/200712200033.asp>)].

# My Flight from the Land

Huang Yang

As someone whose research is not concerned with rural China, I am not able to apply any analytical tools to the subject. Instead I choose to talk about my experience in and with the “land”. I hope that this will not be a total disadvantage and that it will allow me to offer a perspective that is also useful to our discussions. I grew up in a small village some two hundred kilometers west of Wuhan, the capital city of Hubei province, managed to get into university and eventually left the country for good. To my family and the peasants in the village this was a success story. Literally for thousands of years Chinese peasants have been the foundation of every Chinese government as they are the labour and soldier pool and as they are a hyper stable element of society. Yet they have always been an underclass, have been ruthlessly ruled and exploited. To the upper classes and the urban population they are uneducated and backward. To themselves peasant life is wretched and being a peasant is a sign of incapability and failure. Hence the supreme goal of social advancement for a peasant family is to flee from the countryside. Until very recently when capitalist adventure has also become a way of flight, the only ways to flee from the countryside are, as they have always been, firstly, through civil examination or their present-day equivalent, the national test for entering colleges and universities (*gao kao*), and secondly, through military service. The latter, however, does not guarantee social advancement as only a few who excel themselves are promoted and most of them are discharged after completing their period of service. As a consequence advancement through education becomes the only desirable and most sought after way. It is often the case that a whole family does everything it can to help a promising child to attain that goal even if it involves sacrifices by other members, such as other children having to quit school owing to short of money (in this case it is often daughters that have to quit in favour of sons).

However, once someone climbs up the social ladder, he (or she) becomes a member of the elite or ruling class and immediately alienates himself/herself from the land. Typically college or university students from the countryside tend to avoid subjects that have to do with agriculture. As a matter of fact the whole higher education setup reserves only a marginal position for agriculture. The best universities normally do not have agricultural schools, and agricultural universities are regarded as secondary ones.

And yet those of us who come from the countryside feel that we are emotionally attached to the land. We feel the pain of the peasants because among them are our parents, brothers and sisters. It shocks me every time I realize how indifferent we the so-called intellectuals are to the miseries of the peasants. We do not know or pretend that we do not know the harsh realities that peasants face. In any case not many of us care. I give some examples. Every time I go back to my home village my father always tells me about what has happened in the village or neighbouring villages, especially who have passed away. Every time I hear of people ending their lives by suicide. At one time he reckons that nearly 40 percent of those who die die of suicide. This might be an exaggeration, but the cold fact remains that suicide is a spectre that hounds the peasant life. There are various reasons for this, but poverty is in most cases behind the actual quarrels or motives. In the last time I hear of a peasant who says that he will not add to the burden of his sons and daughters if he gets ill and that he will immediately end his own life. And he did just that. I myself experienced personal pains of suicide of the villagers and in my own family. My grandmother committed suicide when I was still an undergraduate in the university. Grieved and shocked, I wrote back to my father trying to find out who is at fault. He repudiated sharply, saying that the dead is gone, and what is more important is not to make the living more miserable by accusing them guilty. Years later I realized that this was a wisdom that the peasants have acquired, perhaps through centuries of experience, a wisdom of survive in which to be alive in an unfriendly world is paramount. The novel *To Be Alive* (《活着》), turned into a film by Zhang Yimou) by the writer Yu Hua (余华) is, to me at least, a very apt reflection of peasant life although it is set in a very different context. The picture I draw here is perhaps not typical of rural China, but it is a recognized fact that suicide rate in rural China is very high, and it is striking that intellectuals have not addressed the problem adequately. I know of one book that deals specifically with suicide in rural China (I might, of course, be ignorant)<sup>15</sup>.

If peasants were an underclass in the past, the present economic boom and the capitalist drive most probably exasperated their situation by tearing the rural social fabric into pieces. Most of the labor force moves into urban areas to work in factories, leaving behind the old who are not properly looked after and the young whose education and emotional needs no one sees to. The

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<sup>15</sup> Wu Fei, *Zisha zuowei zhongguo wenti (Suicide as a Chinese Problem)*, Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2007.

state-endorsed term *nongmingong* (农民工, “peasant workers”) is used both in official language and in the media to designate and confirm the inferior status of the peasants. In factories they often have to work for 10 to 14 hours a day, with perhaps one or two days off in a month, and they get an average wage of over a thousand *yuan*. Again both the government and the intellectual establishment have largely turned a black eye on this situation. It is no surprise that when a recent scandal broke out in the Shenzheng factory of Foxconn (富士康), where 12 consecutive accidents of suicide in a matter of months was reported by the press, a psychologist from Tsinghua University justified the situation by commenting that the suicide rate was normal and even lower than the national average, and the National Union of Workers faintly called for increasing psychological guidance for young workers instead of putting pressure on employers.

My impression is that Chinese intellectuals have never been so indifferent to rural issues than today. In the twentieth century there were attempts on the part of the educated or the ruling elite to address the rural problem. In the 1920s-30s the Rural Reconstruction Movement saw the “land” as the foundation of the country and aimed at reforming the rural society in the cultural, economic, health and educational domains. It attracted tremendous attention and a large group of intellectuals from very different backgrounds took part in the movement. In another movement at the same time Chairman Mao tried to mobilize the peasants with a revolutionary aim. In the course of this the livelihood of the peasants were improved through the redistribution of land. In the Cultural Revolution Mao again tackled the rural problem by sending educated urban youth to the countryside on a national scale. There are, to be sure, continued efforts to improve the life of the peasants and to reform the rural society today, such as the so-called New Rural Reconstruction Movement represented by intellectuals like Wen Tiejun (温铁军) and He Xuefeng (贺雪峰), but such efforts are sporadic and what they have been doing has failed to attract wide attention. As a matter of fact they are often called “New Leftists”, and this is a pejorative term in the Chinese intellectual circle.

In conclusion I think that the relationship between intellectuals and the land is a strained one, if indeed there is a relationship to talk of. Essentially intellectuals identify themselves with the elites or the ruling class, and when they are concerned with the rural problem, they approach it in a way as to ensure their elite status or the rule of the ruling class. As such peasants and peasant society tend to be objectified as a subject of discourse and study. Moreover, the capitalist drive ushered by the government destroyed the old moral and ethical norms of socialism and, as the

Communist ideology has become ever more rigid, it no longer relates to ordinary people's everyday life and therefore no longer provides guidance to thinking and behaviour. On the other hand traditional Confucianism is not able to reestablish itself as an alternative moral system despite unprecedented enthusiasms of and promotion by many intellectuals. People's behaviour is largely driven by the market and self-interests, and intellectuals are no exception. They are generally preoccupied with their professional research, with elevating their status in the academia or winning favour with the government. Most of them do not know what kind of life people in the countryside live, nor do they really care. For the few who do care, they must often feel frustrated in face of a powerful discriminating system against the peasants. They will continue to feel the pain of the peasants until the government reforms its policy and takes the peasants as equally worthy citizens.



As a political scientist interested in issues of globalization, nationalism and identity, I am excited by the prospect of the diverse and wide-ranging conversations we will be having at Mutianyu. My main area of study has been gender and I have watched and participated in several major conferences and fora on Chinese women's liberation. What has increasingly intrigued me has been the relationship between Chinese intellectuals and how the discourse of location, place and "the land" are referenced in narratives of nationalism.

When I begin to think about gender and "the land", I am immediately confronted with that fact that for Chinese women, "the land" is an ambivalent and ambiguous location.

According to one modernist discourse, women had no "real" relationship with the land in "traditional" China, a location in Confucian time and space. Noted only as place-holders in the narrative of unbroken male descent, their role was to contribute their productive, sexual and reproductive labor to history. They did not own or control land or other resources, nor were they held responsible for agricultural production. That responsibility defined maleness. Such gender differences were marked by what was done, by what role and complimentary service was performed. Those who worked the fields were men and those who worked the loom were women, "men plow, women weave" (nangeng nuzhi 男耕女织).

These roles had political importance. Each made a contributed to clan's tax payments to the state and this "traditional" state with each contributing according to its role enacted and expressed a perfectly cosmically ordered state. In this way, labor created not just material products – grain and cloth as tax revenues, necessary for the orderly functioning of the state - but it also created beings with a specifically gendered consciousness and a perfect and orderly "traditional" state. i

Mao Tsetung changed that. (I believe, his specific contribution to this change in women's social and economic status, change in gender articulation, and change in the notion of a perfectly ordered state has not been fully appreciated) Part of China's quest for "modernity" and a modern nation-state form was a reconfiguration of gender and material resources and, therefore, a reconfiguration of "truth" in notions of femininity and masculinity. As the absolute definer, the arbitrator of "truth", Mao also had access to a vast and highly developed media/propaganda

network to spread this revolutionary truth about properly gendered beings in a properly well ordered state. For example, it is more than just a coincidence that the first two laws/regulations promulgated by the Party/state were the Land Reform Law, which allocated land to women for the first time in China's history, and the Marriage Law, which gave women the right to initiate divorce. These laws/regulations were the initial steps in the modern Chinese state's reconfiguration of the consciousness of both men and women about gender and material resources, including land. The media/propaganda network publicized these regulations.

Mao's media/propaganda state also set out to immediately create a modern gender consciousness which was linked to an expression of a specific sense of revolutionary nationalism. During these early years, Cai Chang (蔡畅), the newly-appointed President of the newly formed All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), longtime Communist Party activist, revolutionary, and the sister of influential Communist Party member, Cai Hesen (蔡和森), articulated the official gender policy Communist Party of China.<sup>ii</sup> In an article published in the ACWF journal, she wrote: Whenever I'm asked 'what can a woman do?', my response is 'whatever a man can do, a woman can also do; if a man can't do it, [then] a woman can't do it, either. <sup>iii</sup>

This meant that in the 1950s, an era of a growing polarization between liberal democratic/capitalist states and socialist/communist states that was metaphorically called a "cold war", the Chinese state publicly announced that it was an anti-hegemonic state in gender issues as well as in issues of political economy. It proclaimed itself a modern state in which men and women each held up half the sky. Many of the tasks that had been the responsibilities of the male-dominated clan – over-seeing marriages, allocating the various forms of female labor contributions, creating opportunities for male labor, etc. - were now to be done by the state and its agents. And additionally, in this state, men and women had the same labor potential, the ability to do the same work. The personal was not political; the political was personal.

Pictures, images and posters reflected a new kind of nationalism, a modern nationalism that taught the masses in this revolutionary, anti-hegemonic state how to think about themselves. <sup>iv</sup>

The first of the two images above is of Wu Chinghua, protagonist (and others of her detachment) from the ballet, "The Red Detachment of Women" (Hongse Niangzijun 红色娘子军). In the story upon which the ballet is based, Wu was the daughter of a poor peasant family from Hainan Island. She joined the revolution in order to avenge the mistreatment handed out by the local despotic landlord. After escaping from jail, and meeting a Red Army cadre named Hung Chang-ching, she joined the Party and learned how to fire a gun and toss a grenade. <sup>16</sup> The second image is of Lei Feng (雷锋), the subject of the "Study Comrade Lei Feng" (xiang Lei Feng xuexi 向雷锋学习) a national campaign inaugurated under the auspices of Chairman Mao Tsetung in March, 1963.

These images, created by artists and other cultural workers and promoted by cadres and ruling elites in China, speak to a sense of national identity and nationalism. They tell the Chinese who they are and what they should aspire to do. As instructions to the Chinese masses, they are

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<sup>16</sup> "The Red Detachment of Women" (Hongse Niangzijun) was a novel, ballet and film that became one of the "eight great works" authorized by Mao's wife, Chang Qing, to be shown to the Chinese people.

political and are derived from Mao Tsetung's 1942 speech, "Talks at the Yen-an Forum on Art and Literature". In these talks, Mao rejects "art for art's sake" and defines the source and purpose of socialist art. 17

Peasant women were frequent subjects of these posters and were, therefore, being re-narrativized as having a relationship to the land. They were now as important to the abundant harvests as was communist party rule. In "Use Some More Green Fodder to Fatten Pigs To Save More Grain for the Nation" (1956); "The Vegetables are Green, the Cucumbers Plump, the Yield is Abundant" (1959); "The Fragrance of Rice Floats a Thousand Miles. Everybody Becomes a National Hero" (1961); "People Work Hard. Flowers are Fragrant" (1962) and the "New Village" (1964) series of four panels, show unrealistically glamorous female peasants celebrating bumper harvest or temporarily resting on farming equipment, like shovels. The women in these posters are depicted through a rosy haze that recalls commercial advertising and borders on proletariat pornography. No peasant woman ever looked like them! With the exception of "We are Grateful for the Support of our Peasant Brothers for Ensuring Our Production" (1956), men are notably absent. The peasant women in these posters stand alone, picking wheat and vegetables. The competence shown in the posters is theirs alone.

Mao and the Party also reconfigured masculinity through Lei Feng. After diligently reading and memorizing the works of Chairman Mao, Lei Feng committed his life to living frugally, eschewing selfishness, and devoting himself to the revolution and the people. His goal was to become a "revolutionary screw that never rusts", a cog in the wheel of revolution. In order to do this, Lei Feng began to perform a series of good deeds. He reportedly swept the floor of a passenger train, served food and water to the other travelers, washed the feet of his fellow soldiers, and mended their socks and blankets. Emulating Lei Feng by doing good deeds, taking on mundane tasks without thought of reward, demonstrated a new revolutionary socialist consciousness among Chinese men. Like the ideal for women of an earlier generation, they never complained about their lives and thought only of what menial task they could do to promote socialist transformation. However, by doing the kind of tasks long associated with women's domestic labor, these new Chinese men could be praised by Chairman Mao, himself, for being an everlasting "cog in the machine" of revolution, like Lei Feng.

Under Mao, China became both a politically and a socially anti-hegemonic state. The nationalism of political ideals became a national social reality, as Chinese women were transformed into active women who could perform any task a man could perform and men were transformed into those who believed that the highest virtue they could achieve was in doing the repetitive tasks needed

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<sup>17</sup> Its source must be taken from the lives of the masses, the workers, peasants, soldiers and urban bourgeoisie, reworked, and returned to them to raise their level of understanding. Mao wrote,

Works of literature and art, as ideological forms, are products of the reflection in the human brain of the life of a given society. Revolutionary literature and art are the products of the reflection of the life of the people in the brains of revolutionary writers and artists. The life of the people is always a mine of the raw materials for literature and art, materials in their natural form, materials that are crude, but most vital, rich and fundamental; they make all literature and art seem pallid by comparison; they provide literature and art with an inexhaustible source, their only source. They are the only source, for there can be no other. <sup>17</sup>

for the maintenance of everyday life, also called housework.

So why is this important today? Modern Chinese nationalism has always been anti-hegemonic and the state has defined itself as being a land, a location, that was radically different and revolutionary. Its discourse on gender and its relationship to the land and other resources illustrates that. But I would like to push this analysis even further. China's foreign friends were also part of this construction of China as an anti-hegemonic land and location. In this regard, Africa presents us with an interesting discursive space, narrated by the CPC as being not different from China but being fundamentally similar. Both of these moves - the reconfiguring of the relationship between gender and land and the discovery of China and Africa's shared agricultural history (as reported in the pages of *The People's Daily* (人民日报) in 1955, in its reportage on the Asian-African Conference held that year in Bandung, Indonesia) - reinscribed an anti-hegemonic nationalism that is still an important aspect of Chinese nationalism today.

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<sup>i</sup> The image of the woman doing embroidery was such a strong metaphor for political and social order that one famous magistrate from Tongxing County wrote, "...the family that is poor longs for a good wife; the county that is in chaos longs for a good minister." Quoted in Susan Mann (1997) *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century*. (Stanford University Press: Stanford): 164.

<sup>ii</sup> Cai Chang joined the Chinese Communist organization in France in 1923 and had worked extensively with the Ugandan mass women's movement. She was selected as President of ACWF in 1950.

<sup>iii</sup> "Yoga nuren nenggan shenmene? Wo de huida shi.. 'Nenggan, shenme ye nenggan; bugan, shenme ye bunenggan.'" See Cai Chang. (1950) "The Thirteen Women of the Cooking Staff" (Shisange Nu Chuishiyuan). *Women of New China*. (Xinzhongguo Funu) (August) 13:40.

<sup>iv</sup> Imagistic (xingxiang) posters were a pivotal part of this network. They were cheap to produce and presented their message in a manner understandable for the majority of the Chinese population, the illiterate or semi-literate peasant masses. Some posters made aesthetic reference to traditional Chinese paintings (guohua) or the commercial advertising calendars (yuefenpai) popular in Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s, and, so, seemed familiar making their message more easily consumed. The new gender epistemology was a common subject for such posters.