

## Guest Editor's Introduction:

### The Local Intimacies of China's Rural-Urban Divide

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Reading through published books, news reports, web logs, and forum discussions in China, one finds that most of the well-intentioned discourses that take peasants as their subject are imbued with a sense of *wenti* (problem). Since economist Wen Tiejun in 1987 first launched the *sannong wenti* (three-*nong* problem) in his book, referring to “the three-dimensions” of “the rural issue,” he was speaking of, first, *nongcun* (rural areas), second, *nongye* (agricultural production), and third, *nongmin* (rural people). His analysis in particular made the three-*nong* problem (*sannong wenti*) a catchphrase that has been widely used in government policies and media treatments.<sup>1</sup> In particular, among the three “nongs,” the problem of the rural people (*nongmin*) has usually been seen as the most crucial issue. This is not to say that there has not been a certain concern for the well-being of rural people. However, attention to them tends to be expressed in statements about national wel-

fare, such as “for a long time peasants have been an important source of products, taxes, and cheap labor” and “the worsening of peasant existence would affect the whole society’s stability.”<sup>2</sup> When the “lived unevenness” of economic life in most rural areas is compared with the emerging bourgeois conformity of urban elites, the apparently uniform problematic character of the countryside asks to be interrogated: Why is *the* rural, especially its rural people (*nongmin*), always a *problem*? And why are they always, apparently, the same kind of problem?

Behind the increasingly hegemonic discourse on the problem of the peasantry lies China’s chronic rural-urban divide, the long-standing stereotyped ideology of which represents the vast rural population as a whole as if they were of one body—the mass of the peasants—and this one body has always been lagging behind. If China is to modernize, according to these discourses, it will have to transcend this grotesque body, which is characterized by tropes such as “backward,” “unenlightened,” “need-to-catch up,” “like sheep,” and worse. To adopt language from the social history of the body in England provided by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, the rural population in China is “symbolically central but practically peripheral.”<sup>3</sup>

Granted, some form of urban-rural discrepancy is recognized as a global social phenomenon. Moreover, the Chinese government has taken steps to bridge at least the economic gap with a commitment to “industry promoting agriculture and cities bringing along the countryside” (*yi gong cu nong, yi cheng dai xiang*).<sup>4</sup> Even more at issue, though, in the lumping of rural people into one problematic mass, is the profound impact of the legal institutionalization of an urban-rural divide. Of course, the most representative example of this is the *Hukou* (Household Registration) System, which since about 1958 has assigned everyone to membership in one of two groups, “agricultural” and “nonagricultural.” *Hukou* registration, deriving from the affiliation of the mother at birth, cannot be easily changed, and population movements from rural to urban areas are thus legally restricted.<sup>5</sup> Since then, the urban-rural divide has been further concretized, in law at least, with the *hukou* system remaining in effect up until today. Since the reform era began, however, migration of workers holding agricultural *hukous* to urban areas and Special Economic Zones in search of work has produced a flood of residents moving to live for long periods of time in areas where

they have only temporary residence permits. The term *floating population* (*liudong renkou*) thus emerged in the reform era as a generic term for an emergent major group within the Chinese population. Those who migrate for work, or *dagong*, regardless of where they come from or go to, are essentially defined as rural people.<sup>6</sup> This “floating population,” being away from their registered home place, often cannot get any local governmental protection in their workplace, nor do they qualify for most social services, and they tend to be treated by the local urbanites as “second-class citizens” 二等公民.<sup>7</sup>

Migrant laborers have thus become a “new lumpen proletariat,” forming a stark contrast to the new urban bourgeois elite who support the world’s most rapidly growing market in luxury goods.<sup>8</sup> Further, as Zhang Li (author of *Strangers in the City*) points out, more and more peasants have poured into towns and cities, where they have come to be regarded as a social problem despite their enormous economic contributions.<sup>9</sup> Like the stigmatizing term *blind flow* (*mangliu* 盲流), first used in the early 1950s to describe the peasants who moved to cities, the term *floating population*, despite its wide range of applicability in so many parts of China, in practice is little more than a subcategory of the generic term *nongmin*.

On top of the legally institutionalized urban-rural divide, there is now a market-oriented perceived urban-rural discrepancy that refers to an increasing gap in personal standards and ways of living in urban and rural areas.<sup>10</sup> The impact of what is now thought of as increasing cultural and even bodily difference between town and country can run very deep. Even in some of the most prominent social-policy contexts, and certainly in popular urban conversation, villagers tend to be thought of as having no culture, needing contact with urban life to be able to learn to consume wisely and work rationally, unable to manage their natural and social environment well, and so forth. Living with this divide, “rural” bodies continue to be deeply inscribed by national and transnational discourses on “the peasant.” These discourses systematically reduce diverse conditions into the characteristics of generalized objects, at the same time disguising polemical judgments as natural facts.<sup>11</sup> In particular, hegemonic elite discourses (those of urbanites, intellectuals, government officials, etc.) tend to produce a generic *nongmin* (peasant) at the level of image and language, contextualized in a condescending rep-

resentation of life in the countryside. This way of reducing heterogeneous rural lives to a monotone level of low development is consistent with the arbitrary state regulatory regime that, in a sense, has no choice but to function on an abstract “national” level and thus, for any given rural situation, is always only partial. If one wanted to make an effective intervention in these arbitrary state regulations, which as we know can change and are always changing, then a necessary step would be to not “see like a state” but to take into consideration the interactions of abstract and standardized government policy as it articulates (or not) with discordant local conditions, which are particular, concrete, and diverse.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, it must be borne in mind that rural life in China is not necessarily centered on the state or even the new government policy (2005) mandating the development of “a new countryside.”

It is with these considerations of the politics of knowledge surrounding research on rural society in China that I started to gather contributions to this special issue. All these articles, in a variety of ways, bring into visibility the heterogeneity of life in the countryside. Only with much richer forms of social-science representation, sensitive to “local conditions,” can we begin to penetrate and address China’s problematic rural-urban divide. Ethnography and field sociology are especially good ways of overcoming such stereotypes and of delivering more nuanced and diverse understandings of China’s many forms of modernity. These kinds of research also require and invite comparison of China’s “ruralities,” whatever those might be, with other situations around the world in which “peasants” might still be presented as a chronic problem.

One of the primary stereotypes seen in world journalism about China is the fabled monolithic or even totalitarian strength of the Chinese state. Destabilizing this image, the articles gathered here all contribute to an anthropology or sociology of the state as it is seen from the point of view of its relatively denigrated or subaltern peripheries, that is, rural China. The “state” with which people are in dialogue at the grassroots level is quite heterogeneous, and its powers are limited, contingent, tentative, even anxious. In this issue, for example, the secular imperatives of state policies against religious “superstition” are dealt with—in Gao Bingzhong’s narration of how a temple fair successfully worked itself into the official discourse of

intangible cultural heritage—by means of a “double naming” strategy. And villagers in Mikkel Bunkenborg’s article deal with state imperatives by erecting a parallel government in the cosmological dimension. Ying Xing’s study of barefoot lawyers, further, reflects the construction of a zone of negotiation between federal legal regulation and local interests, as does Anna Lora-Wainwright’s story of villagers’ simultaneous exploiting and being exploited by government agencies (among others). Lili Lai and Zhu Xiaoyang report the often unfortunate consequences of an unquestioning commitment to vast state programs of modernization and development, and Li Li’s article examines the relationship between central “government” concerns with cultural heritage and local appropriations of “heritage,” as they function in the domain of knowledge about the nation. Taken together, these articles document and analyze the penetration of the Chinese state into everyday lives and ordinary desires, as well as the many techniques by which people at the most local level in China construct a state interlocutor even as they work on the rich and heterogeneous cultural character of their local communities.

Allied to this, these articles demonstrate our anthropological appreciation of the fact that, despite what urbanites might think, “even villages have culture.” The richness and complexity of what I have elsewhere called “immanent sociality”—or everyday interdependence—and local senses of history and cosmic situation persuade us that there is nothing “backward” about villages;<sup>13</sup> simply the appreciative description of village and township cultural activism and heritage curation is a contribution, one that can function to challenge the pervasive developmentalism of the state, a vast policy environment that is criticized in Zhu Xiaoyang’s discussion of land appropriation in Yunnan.

Also, analyses made by Lili Lai and Anna Lora-Wainwright have shown that the description of rural people as victims of official policies (or failures to govern well, for that matter) is double-edged. The victims of poverty are often blamed for naturally producing the miserable conditions in which they are forced to live; at the same time, they may find ways to turn the status of victim to good political account by demanding the responsible government that has always been promised. Along these lines, Zhu Xiaoyang takes issue with what he calls a “Scottian approach” to resistance. Once anthropologists start reexamining the idea that “where there is power

there is resistance”—an idea that has led scholars since Michel Foucault to look for many forms of power and numerous nonobvious forms of resistance—both terms are subject to empirical examination. In other words, both rural activism and apparent rural passivity, in different cases, when better understood in local historical contexts, give a specific historical character to “resistance” and to the political. Standard categories of the political no longer predict what struggles on the ground, in the countryside, and in migrant enclaves will be.

This has been shown explicitly in the articles gathered here: Villagers in Gao Bingzhong’s article resist secularizing policy by reviving their Dragon Tablet cult even as they denature its cosmic force with a harmless-looking museum project. Mikkel Bunkenborg’s research subjects bypass state demands for a “culturalizing” of “religious heritage” by quietly building a governmentality that is cosmic in origin. Ying Xing’s barefoot lawyers refuse the authorized marketization of legal rights by forming a cooperative legal-services exchange with their neighbors and fellow townspeople. Lili Lai’s Henan villagers do their best, in the absence of a waste-management infrastructure, to control public waste, but they have no choice but to prioritize their own hygiene and health, thus complying with rather than resisting a political economy that treats the countryside as a dump. Villagers whose houses and land are under threat from development, in Anna Lora-Wainwright and Zhu Xiaoyang’s field sites, fight government corruption with personal stratagems even as they “reconfigure their local moral universe” and mobilize their “local knowledge” in a conflicted social life. Li Li’s heritage curation projects give us perhaps the most nuanced picture of interwoven resistance and compliance as people assert local culture both against and within the expectations of the state.

All these studies are ethnographic. The theoretical resources that they engage tend to be from anthropology or sociology. One could ask to what extent they are critical or engaged vis-à-vis Chinese developmental politics, or challenge their contribution to social theory. But here we also consider how sympathetic description and interpretation of diverse rural conditions might itself bring about cultural and social change. Certainly, the Chinese authors in this issue see their field research and appreciative accounts of rural situations and initiatives as a form of engagement and critical com-

mentary. The political contingency of rural cultural production is also highlighted by Lora-Wainwright and Bunkenborg. Field research rescues complexity from overgeneralizing policy-oriented research; these articles give us such diverse conditions in China that it becomes impossible to sustain simplistic dualities such as rural and urban. This is in itself critique.

## Notes

1. Wen Tiejun is a widely read economist who was at the time researcher at the Rural Development Research Center of the State Council. Other social scientists published critical accounts in league with Wen's analysis of the *sannong wenti*. On February 8, 2004, Xinhua News Agency published the No. 1 Document (*yi hao wen jian* YHWJ) of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) for the year 2004, which directly addressed rural development and the improvement of the income of peasants.
2. Guo Yuhua, "Weapons of the Weak and The Hidden Transcript—A Perspective on the Peasant Resistance from the Bottom Level" ("弱者的武器"与"隐藏的文本"—研究农民反抗的底层视角), *Dushu (Reading)*, no. 7 (2002): 11–18.
3. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986), 20.
4. See the Xinhua News Agency's official web portal: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-11/15/c\\_132892185.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-11/15/c_132892185.htm).
5. The purpose of this system has been to restrict the flow of rural migrants into the cities. According to the "Explanatory Notes on the Regulations for Household Registration of the People's Republic of China," which was published in 1959, the importance of forbidding immigration to the cities is explained as follows: "Why do we have these regulations? Because in the past few years there has been a serious tendency for the rural population to move into the city. This has aggravated the present unstable conditions, resulting in difficulties with the urban construction plan, the stability of urban life, and social order. As a result, problems have occurred in city transportation, housing, market supply, employment, and educational opportunity" (1959, p. 212, cited in Potter and Potter 1990: 302). The tone in this explanation is obviously urban-centered, and the focus of concern is "the stability of urban life," while rural migrants are considered as disturbing this secure urban life. As Potter and Potter have observed, "the possession of the identification card of an urban resident [becomes] an important mark of status" (303). See Jack Potter and Sulamith Hein Potter, *China's Peasants: The Anthropology of a Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
6. See Lei Guang, "Rural Taste, Urban Fashions: The Cultural Politics of Rural/Urban Difference in Contemporary China," *positions* 11, no. 3 (2003): 613–46; Attane Isabelle, "A Half

- Century of Chinese Socialism: The Changing Fortunes of Peasant Families,” *Journal of Family History* 27, no. 2 (2002): 150–71; Peilin Li, *Peasant Workers: A Social Economic Analysis of China's Peasant Workers Coming into Town* (农民工: 中国进城农民工的经济社会分析) (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press [社会科学文献出版社, China], 2003); Dorothy J. Solinger, *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China: Peasant Migrants, the State, and the Logic of the Market* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Li Zhang, *Strangers in the City: Reconfigurations of Space, Power, and Social Networks within China's Floating Population* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).
7. Of course, many elite workers also move. But they are not thought of as “floating.” Furthermore, there are many “white collar” employees of transnational companies in big cities who do not have the *hukou* either; they have not been grouped as part of the “floating population,” either.
  8. See Maurice Meisner, *Mao's China and After: A History of the People's Republic*, 3rd ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1999), 468–536.
  9. See Zhang, *Strangers in the City*, 23–46; and Yan Hairong, “Neoliberal Governmentality and Neohumanism: Organizing Suzhi/Value Flow through Labor Recruitment Networks,” *Cultural Anthropology* 18, no. 4 (2003): 493–523.
  10. See Zhang, “Strangers in the City”; Yan Hairong, “Spectralization of the Rural: Reinterpreting the Labor Mobility of Rural Young Women in post-Mao China,” *American Ethnologist* 30, no. 4 (2003): 1–19; Lei Guang, “Rural Taste, Urban Fashions: The Cultural Politics of Rural/Urban Difference in Contemporary China,” *positions* 11, no. 3 (2003): 613–46; and Liping Sun, *Cleavage: Chinese Society since the 1990s* (断裂: 20世纪90年代以来的中国社会) (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press [社会科学出版社], 2003). A professor of sociology based at Tsinghua University, Sun Liping, explicitly discusses the “cleavage” in Chinese society since the 1990s, pointing out there is a perceptible discrepancy between the 1980s and 1990s, the latter of which is when China saw the formation of “two societies co-existing within one country.” And the solution to this problem, Sun suggests, is to conduct a complete urbanization, especially “big-city-ization” (*da chengshi hua*). Liping, *Cleavage*, chap. 5.
  11. A parallel situation can also be found in Stacy Leigh Pigg’s description of “the village” of Nepal. See Stacy Leigh Pigg, “Inventing Social Categories through Place: Social Representations and Development in Nepal,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34, no. 3 (1992): 491–513.
  12. See James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, Yale agrarian studies, 1998).
  13. See Lili Lai, “Immanent Sociality: Open-ended Belonging,” *Theory and Event* 16, no. 3, (2013): muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory\_and\_event/vo16/16.3.lai.html.