

## The End of the Peasant? New Rural Reconstruction in China

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“The peasants’ lot is really bitter, the countryside is really poor, and agriculture is in crisis.”<sup>1</sup> So said Li Changping, a rural cadre from central China’s Hubei Province, in an open letter to Premier Zhu Rongji in early 2000. The letter’s publication in a national newspaper helped spark a debate concerning the causes of and solution to the problems of rural China, reformulating the way intellectuals and government officials talk about the rural and leading to major changes in government policy.<sup>2</sup> Alarm over the crisis

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1. The letter, written by Li Changping in early 2000, was sent to Premier Zhu Rongji and later published in *Southern Weekend* in the issue dated August 24, 2000. See Li Changping, *Wo xiang zongli shuo shihua* [I spoke the truth to the premier] (Beijing: Guangming ribao chubanshe, 2002), 20.

2. In 2004, the state refocused its attention on rural issues after decades of neglect. The state began by looking for ways to increase rural incomes, with the abolition of the agricultural tax and grain production price supports as its primary methods. By late 2005, the state called for a major new program that called for the “building of a socialist new

of Chinese rural society has led to official and unofficial efforts in recent years to address the problems of rural China. It is the unofficial efforts, led by concerned intellectuals, that are the subject of the discussion here.

In the 1980s, the main people expressing discontent were urban, and the reform of rural China was largely judged a success. While throughout the 1990s rural unrest intensified markedly, it was not until the publication of Li's letter that this crystallized into a new recognition within the public sphere that rural China was in a crisis. This anxiety has given rise in recent years to a diverse set of rural activities, experiments, and research that have coalesced into a rural social and cooperative movement, the so-called New Rural Reconstruction Movement (*Xin xiangcun jianshe yundong*, hereafter NRRM).

This major intervention by intellectuals and rural activists, who argue that this rural crisis cannot be understood simply as a problem of rural economics and agricultural production but as a social crisis that calls for the reconstruction of rural social life, is best grasped as a Polanyian social protective movement in reaction to the marketization of society and perceived lack of an urban solution. As a critique of developmentalism and the economic mode of analysis, it turns to culture and cooperative relations as vital to the reorganization of rural social life. The contemporary rural social and cooperative movement is marked by diversity and complexity, as had been its antecedents in the 1930s, to which many of the activists look for inspiration. This essay focuses on the politics and practices of one effort at transforming rural society, led by the influential intellectual Wen Tiejun, who has played a seminal role in articulating problems of rural China and in promoting the NRRM.

My underlying premise here is that contemporary China's rural problems need to be viewed in a global perspective. These problems have much to do with China's plunge into globalization over the last decade and a half, and the marginalization of the Chinese peasantry is part of a global trend. Within the next few years, half the world's population will be urban—a world historical milestone.<sup>3</sup> This global urbanization process has been uneven, however, and has provoked powerful, sometimes violent, resistance. This resistance belies the teleological necessity often assumed by ideologues of globalization. Home to the world's largest rural population, China is a

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countryside" (*jianshe shehuizhuyi xin nongcun*). It is as yet unclear what this will mean for the countryside, but the state is now investing heavily in rural education and infrastructure development.

3. Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006), 1.

key site to investigate this transformation and how people react to and understand it. From this perspective, it is not surprising that the NRRM has strong resonances with non-Chinese rural social movements of the 1990s that came to prominence in the antiglobalization movement, such as the Zapatistas in Mexico or the Landless Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil.<sup>4</sup> Activists seeking to resolve problems of rural China are part of this global effort to find an alternative to the future envisaged by champions of globalization.

### **Wen Tiejun and the Intellectual Foundations of the NRRM**

Most of the intellectual and rural activists of the NRRM are not state officials, but they have an entangled relationship with the state, and, as they seek both to shape government policy and open a political space for experimentation, intentionally so. In other words, this movement is not one of intellectual dissidence against a unified state but is a powerful critique that operates across a diverse array of actors with varying relationships to the state. New rural reconstruction, taking its name from a rural Chinese populist movement of the 1930s, stems from a reflection on the history of Chinese development and a recognition that the present is a turning point that offers an opportunity for a new direction for rural society. It is at once a critique of capitalist market economics and a budding practice of rural experimentation that looks for solutions to rural problems by transforming rural society and the rural-urban relationship. It is an attempt to reconstruct the social, economic, and cultural relations of rural society, relations that were repeatedly in crisis across the twentieth century.

The NRRM grew out of a shift in the debate on rural problems—from the promotion of rural and agricultural economics to a focus on the peasantry—that began in the late 1990s. Wen Tiejun, an agricultural economist and perhaps the most important intellectual activist promoting new rural reconstruction,<sup>5</sup> was a key figure in producing this discursive shift. In the

4. See, for example, Nora McKeon, Michael Watts, and Wendy Wolford, “Peasant Associations in Theory and Practice,” *Civil Society and Social Movements*, programme paper, no. 8 (Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 2004).

5. Wen has been the dean of the School of Agricultural and Rural Development at Renmin University of China—now a center of rural reconstruction activity—since its founding in 2004; before that he was the chief editor of a key journal of the movement, *Zhongguo gaige (nongcunban)* [China reform (rural edition)], until it stopped publication and Wen moved to Renmin University. Earlier he was a researcher at the Agriculture Ministry’s

late 1990s, Wen used the media to promote the formulation *sannong wenti* (*sannong* is *nongmin*, *nongcun*, *nongye*—“peasants,” “rural society,” and “agriculture”; *wenti* means “problems”), which he first devised in the late 1980s while conducting rural experiments for the state. He now argued that surplus rural labor and the well-being of the peasantry, not agricultural production, were the key to understanding the long-term development strategy of China as well as its current problems. In this formulation, the three aspects of *sannong wenti* must be treated holistically and systematically.<sup>6</sup>

Wen rejects viewing rural issues as a problem of rural economic and agricultural development, as most state policy discussion on agriculture in the 1990s did. At the same time, he rejects separating a discussion of the peasant population from one on agricultural and rural social issues, as many intellectual discussions on urbanization have. Underlying the state’s rural reform strategy is the economic rationale that giving land to households to manage under a market economy would increase economic incentives and, in turn, production. From decollectivization in the 1980s until the eruption of the debate on rural China at the end of the century, this atomization and marketization strategy has not changed dramatically, and for most of that time, rural China receded into the background as discussion focused on urban reforms. Wen’s formulation and Li’s public letter brought the peasant back to the foreground. In the first years of the twenty-first century, the *sannong wenti* formulation became shorthand for all rural problems, largely replacing the categories of agricultural economics (*nongye jingji*) and rural development (*nongcun fazhan*). Now, whenever state officials, intellectuals, or the media discuss rural issues, *sannong wenti* is the category they use. Its newfound discursive dominance means that it is much harder to consider rural problems as simply a matter of agricultural technical development or urbanization. This formulation was not simply a quick political intervention but was built on a reflection on the last two hundred years of Chinese history and its relationship to the rest of the world.

The anxiety of the late 1990s concerning rural crisis drove scholars such as Wen Tiejun and Cao Jinqing, an influential writer on rural issues,<sup>7</sup>

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Rural Reform Experimental District Office; he left because of differences in the direction of rural experimentation.

6. Li Changping adopted the *sannong wenti* formulation from Wen Tiejun. The quote at the beginning of this article is a modification of *sannong wenti*. After Li’s letter was published in the *Southern Weekend*, Li joined *Zhongguo gaige* (*nongcunban*) at the invitation of Wen. Personal interview with Li Changping, Guizhou, January 24–25, 2005.

7. Cao Jinqing is a professor of sociology at East China University of Science and Tech-

to reconsider the long history of Chinese development. Their historicization of the condition of rural China is founded upon the limits global capitalism placed on China's industrialization process and the attendant necessity of delinking from that world system for development to take place.<sup>8</sup> Cao Jinqing places current rural problems in the long-term context of China's industrialization and the uneven development of the capitalist world system. State-driven internal accumulation of capital meant that agriculture bore the burden of the industrialization process, and this created the tense relationship between the peasantry and the local government, responsible as it was for the extraction of agricultural surplus.<sup>9</sup>

Wen's reflections on Chinese history at the end of the twentieth century focus on the attempt to industrialize the Chinese economy from the late Qing dynasty on, an attempt which was continually thwarted.<sup>10</sup> The main problem China faced, according to Wen, was that it could not plunder foreign resources through colonialism as the West had done in order to begin the industrialization process; it had to accumulate primary capital internally, in the form of agricultural surplus, through a process Wen calls "State Capitalist Primitive Accumulation." It was the necessary process of primitive accumulation during the Maoist period that determined the structural relation between the countryside and urban China and the institutions needed to organize the transfer of surplus to begin industrialization. These included the commune system, state-controlled purchasing and marketing,

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nology in Shanghai. He is the author of *Huanghe bian de Zhongguo* (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 2000), translated as *China Along the Yellow River: Reflections on Rural Society* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005). Cao is not an activist in or vocal advocate of the rural reconstruction movement per se, but he is supportive of the general project, and his positions are close to those associated with rural reconstruction.

8. For many of those of whom we could loosely say are on the left in China, such as Cao and Wen, this reflection on modern Chinese history has been brought into conversation with world-systems analysis, which has become an increasingly popular weapon in the critique of Chinese liberal ideology as an abstract universalism. The Maoist influence on world-systems analysis concerning delinking should be noted as well. Along with the influence of world-systems theory, the New Left in China is also deeply Polanyian. This is the subject of the fourth chapter of my dissertation, "The Return of the Peasant: History, Politics, and the Peasantry in Postsocialist China" (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Cruz, 2007).

9. Personal interview with Cao Jinqing, Shanghai, June 24, 2004.

10. This discussion comes from Wen's important article "'Sannong wenti:' shiji mo de fansi" [End-of-century reflections on *sannong wenti*], *Dushu* [Readings], no. 12 (December 1999): 3–11; translated as "Centenary Reflections on the 'Three Dimensional Problem' of Rural China," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 2, no. 2 (August 2001): 287–95.

the rationing of grain and urban welfare, and the dual household registration system, which kept rural residents firmly in the countryside, all of which were instituted in the 1950s. These institutions reduced the cost and increased the efficiency of transferring rural surplus into the industrialization process, thus bringing about the industrialization of China and producing “the property owned by the whole people”—which Wen critically notes is now being redistributed with people making various claims to it.<sup>11</sup>

This process allowed China to accomplish the primitive accumulation necessary to the foundation of industrial society; nevertheless, according to Wen and others, China is still not in the position to shift to the American path of development.<sup>12</sup> This is because of the intertwining of the contradictions produced by the process of delinking from global capitalism as well as conditions particular to China’s internal development (both world-structural and national difference). These conditions form the *raison d’être* for new rural reconstruction. I will isolate four key issues here: first, the sheer size of the population, the ratio between it and arable land, and surplus rural labor; second, the character of land use, in which farmland is used as a means of subsistence more than as a factor in production; third, the binary separation of the urban and rural populations put into effect in the 1950s and the attendant inequality in income (now above 3 to 1);<sup>13</sup> and fourth, the destruction of rural culture and social structure during the twentieth century.

First, according to Wen Tiejun, relying on urban migration to solve issues of surplus rural population would mean the Latin Americanization of China—the creation of urban slums to warehouse poor rural migrants.<sup>14</sup> He Xuefeng<sup>15</sup> points out that the most optimistic estimates of the urbanization rate would mean that in fifty years the urban population would roughly double to 800 million people. With population growth, however, this would not reduce the rural population, which would remain between 800 and 900

11. Wen, “‘Sannong wenti:’ shiji mo de fansi,” 9–10.

12. Wen, “‘Sannong wenti:’ shiji mo de fansi,” 10.

13. In 1985, it was about 1.8 to 1.

14. Wen, “‘Sannong wenti:’ shiji mo de fansi,” 11. Also see Wen Tiejun, “Jiegou xiandaihua” [Deconstructing modernization], in *Jiegou xiandaihua—Wen Tiejun yanjiang lu* [Deconstructing modernization—the speeches of Wen Tiejun] (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 2004), 10. An English translation of this article is available as Wen Tiejun, “Deconstructing Modernization,” *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology* 39, no. 4 (Summer 2007): 10–25.

15. He Xuefeng is a professor at China Central Technology University’s China Rural Administration Research Center and editor of *Sannong Zhongguo* [Sannong China], one of the most important journals linked to the NRRM.

million.<sup>16</sup> In addition, rural labor-power, when viewed from an economic standpoint as a commodity, is in surplus.<sup>17</sup> Chinese agriculture, according to Wen, could operate with around 100 million people, while the rural laboring population is about 600 million. At least 100 million of that population are working in the cities at any one time and another 200 million in rural secondary and tertiary industries; that still leaves a huge surplus population.<sup>18</sup> With such a large surplus in the countryside, is it possible to treat labor-power as a commodity? And if not, how is the rural population to sustain itself within a market economy? If the urban employment market cannot absorb the rural unemployed, then who will support them? At this juncture, Wen points out, a social security system for rural residents would be too expensive for the Chinese state.

Second, as Wen Tiejun argues, in a society with a high population and a small amount of arable land, land becomes a “subsistence resource” (*shengcun ziliao*), not just a “production resource” (*shengchan ziliao*).<sup>19</sup> This distinction, in addition to Wen’s argument about surplus rural labor, echoes Karl Polanyi’s discussion of “fictitious commodities.” For Polanyi, land, labor, and money could not be full commodities, and treating them in such a utopian manner would lead to the destruction of both society and nature, engendering a social protective movement in which society reacts against the market to maintain its existence.<sup>20</sup> This issue becomes a centerpiece for Wen’s policy argument about China’s development strategy. Chinese peasants need to survive somehow, and if privatization of agricultural land pushes them off the land, what are their alternatives? If land is primarily a “subsistence resource,” and not a profit-making resource, then it must be distributed equally among villagers; economic efficiency becomes

16. He Xuefeng, *Xin xiangtu Zhongguo* [New rural China] (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2003), 245. This argument is also made by other scholars of rural China: see, for example, Huang Ping, “Bu pingheng fazhan geju xia de nongcun kunjing” [The predicament of rural China under uneven development], *Shijie* 9 (2002): 29–52; Wen Tiejun, “Di er bu nongcun gaige mianlin de liang ge jiben maodun” [The two basic contradictions that the second step of rural reform faces], *Zhanlue yu guanli* 3 (1996): 111. This article was one of the first in which Wen promoted the concept of *sannong wenti*.

17. Much of the economic literature on rural China speaks of peasants as “surplus agricultural labor-power” (*nongye shengyu laodongli*).

18. See He Xuefeng, *Xiangcun yanjiu de guoqing yishi* [Rural research and national conditions consciousness] (Wuhan: Hubei Renmin Chubanshe, 2004), 81.

19. Wen, “‘Sannong wenti:’ shiji mo de fansi,” 8.

20. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 75–77.

second to equality under these structural conditions. These arguments form the foundation for the NRRM as a movement to protect rural society from its utopian marketization.

Third, the Maoist industrialization strategy of delinking China from global capitalism, while necessary, left the country with a binary system that places the city and the countryside in an “antagonistic contradiction” with each other, producing the present *sannong wenti*.<sup>21</sup> As Wen argues, the rural sector was made to sacrifice for the development of the nation, and, in part because of this, it is not in a position to be able to compete within the global capitalist market. Cao Jinqing points out that China’s small family farms brought about with decollectivization in the rural reforms early in the 1980s have no chance of operating efficiently within the national and international market system, but rural households also rely on those markets for agricultural inputs and sales. This central *sannong* contradiction means that land privatization would lead to rural poverty, unrest, and growing inequality, not agricultural efficiency and smooth urbanization.<sup>22</sup> Cao Jinqing sees peasant organization as a key to overcoming the contradiction between “the small peasant household and the big market.”<sup>23</sup> Yet the project of peasant organization is fraught with difficulties: Cao, for example, believes that a peasantry with production based on small households does not have the ability to organize on its own.<sup>24</sup> Overcoming this weakness within the national economy and within political society thus requires outside intervention.

Fourth, rural reconstruction also means the rebuilding of rural social life and the organization of the peasantry. Here, the influence of the 1930s rural reconstruction movement, and in particular of Liang Shuming, an active leader and theorist of the earlier movement, is clear. Liang argued that to surmount the rural crisis of the 1930s, which he largely blamed on foreign influence, rural social relations would have to be reconstructed and developed to a new level of collective responsibility through education and training under the guidance of enlightened intellectuals.<sup>25</sup> Cao Jinqing, an

21. Wen, “‘Sannong wenti:’ shiji mo de fansi,” 10.

22. Cao Jinqing, “Shehui zhuanxing guocheng zhong de sannong wenti” [*Sannong wenti* during the process of social transition], *Sannong Zhongguo*, no. 5 (Spring 2005): 13 and 19.

23. Cao, “Shehui zhuanxing guocheng zhong de sannong wenti,” 17–18.

24. Cao, “Shehui zhuanxing guocheng zhong de sannong wenti,” 15–16.

25. Guy Alitto, *The Last Confucian: Liang Shu-ming and the Chinese Dilemma of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).



admirer of Liang, argues that the land reform movement at the time of liberation in 1949 and the state-run collectivization process destroyed the old rural society—one that had been in crisis, both economic and social, for some time. Commune-based rural society, in turn, was similarly disrupted by the decollectivization that began the reform period. Collective farming was replaced by individual household farming, but rural public society was not rebuilt.<sup>26</sup> As many on the left in China put it, after the new household farming system increased agricultural production, the state largely divested itself of rural public works and social welfare: collectively owned irrigation, public medical care,<sup>27</sup> and schooling fell into disrepair, and often the local government took on a predatory relationship to the rural population.<sup>28</sup>

For those connected to the movement, to reconstruct rural culture and social relationships primarily means to build cooperative and community social relations that transcend the interests of individual household productive units and their mediation by the market. It is these relationships that will allow rural villages to protect themselves against the predatory behavior of state actors or market forces. Li Changping, for example, argues that even if individual households were given formal property rights over the land they till—one argument put forward by advocates of land privatization—acting as individual households, they would still not have the power to resist land seizures. The best way for them to protect themselves, he says, is collectively, but this would take the reconstruction of collective social relations, a major project of the NRRM.<sup>29</sup>

*Sannong wenti*, therefore, is a condition particular to the reform period in which China once again has been opened to global capitalism,

26. Personal interview with Cao Jinqing, Shanghai, June 24, 2004.

27. Many argue that the SARS epidemic was made worse by the lack of state attention to rural public health care since the reform period began. See, for example, Wang Shao-guang, “Renmin de jiankang ye shi ying daoli,” *Dushu*, no. 6 (June 2003): 16–24; translated by the China Study Group as “People’s Health Matters Too,” available at <http://www.chinastudygroup.org/index.php?action=front2&type=view&id=37>. This article was one of the most controversial published in *Dushu* in recent years. Also see Arif Dirlik, “Global Modernity, Spatial Reconfigurations, and Global Health: Perspectives from the People’s Republic of China,” *boundary 2* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 99–122.

28. Even after the period of heavy “primitive accumulation,” to use Wen’s phrase, the rural local government often used high taxation and fees as a form of rent seeking. This predatory relationship, particularly egregious during the 1990s, is clearly rendered in Li Changping’s “The Crisis in the Countryside,” in *One China, Many Paths*, ed. Chaohua Wang (London: Verso, 2003), 198–218.

29. Personal interview with Li Changping, Guizhou, January 24–25, 2005.

and market relationships have developed rapidly. Yet, no matter how bad the situation in the countryside is, new rural reconstruction advocates and other rural scholars recognize the present as an opportunity for rebuilding rural society. For Wen Tiejun, China has entered a period in which primitive accumulation for industrialization has now stopped. Cao Jinqing likewise sees the present as a moment in which agriculture will no longer have to support the state and industrialization.<sup>30</sup> For Li Changping, China is now moving into the “post-taxation period” (*hou shuifei shidai*), in which primitive accumulation from agriculture ends. Under the formulation “building a socialist new countryside” (*jianshe shehuizhuyi xin nongcun*), the CCP itself has recently proposed that it is time for “industry to help agriculture” (*gongye fanbu nongye*).<sup>31</sup> This recent shift in the political economy of China’s development, and in response the shift in government policy, has opened a new opportunity for rural society, and it is here that new rural reconstruction is located.<sup>32</sup> The new situation calls for rural experimentation and institutional innovation, the heart of the emerging NRRM.

Rural social relations and politics in the post-1949 period were defined by the extraction of surplus from agriculture for industrialization; this has produced a tense relationship between local Party representatives and the peasantry. Li argues that with the end of extraction there is a chance to rebuild the social life of the countryside; in particular, the relationship between the local government and the peasantry could improve, with peasants gaining control over local resources and aid coming from

30. Cao, “Shehui zhuanxing guocheng zhong de sannong wenti,” 16.

31. *Fanbu* implies that agriculture has nourished industry, but the situation reverses where industry must now nourish agriculture. This major new government policy on rural China should be seen as a response to a complex series of factors. On the one hand, the CCP is responding to rural unrest that increasingly became visible from the late 1990s on and damaging to the legitimacy of the CCP. On the other hand, the new leadership of the CCP is clearly moving away from the economic policies of the previous regime that relied so heavily on the export economy and infrastructure investment. Rural development is vital for building internal consumer demand, which cannot be sustained by the urban middle class alone. Discussions on *sannong wenti* by intellectuals such as Wen Tiejun have also played a role in the drafting of these new policies.

32. Recently, those associated with Wen Tiejun have changed the second term in this category from *xiangcun* to *nongcun*. Both can be translated as “rural,” although only *xiangcun* can be translated as “village.” This change brought the terminology more in line with the CCP’s new formulation—as of late 2005—for rural work, *jianshe shehuizhuyi xin nongcun* (building a socialist new countryside), thus creating more political space for the movement to develop.

the central government. Li sees this as an opening for a third cooperative movement.<sup>33</sup>

If what we are witnessing now are the initial stages of a third rural cooperative movement, perhaps one way to understand twentieth-century Chinese history is as a history of attempts to develop cooperative social relations in order to protect and transform a rural society in crisis, a crisis always related to global capitalism. As Wen Tiejun has commented, the present cooperative movement has a greater chance of success than that of the 1930s, because in the meantime rural China went through land reform, and China has already successfully industrialized—revolution has made reconstruction possible. Here we could note, following Wen, that it was exactly through collectivization in the 1950s that China was able to industrialize. In other words, it has been rural cooperative relations, whether imposed by the state or not, that have given China some breathing space within global capitalism. Yet the collectivization of the 1950s might be seen as somewhat of an aberration in the history of twentieth-century rural cooperative movements. First, it was largely pushed by the state. Second, it paid little attention to local circumstances. And, third, it was chiefly instituted to facilitate the extraction of surplus to aid the industrialization process. Perhaps the present, as Cao, Li, and Wen, among others, suggest, is the best opportunity for rural cooperative social relations to succeed.

The former rural reconstruction movement of the 1930s, like the present one, brought together a wide range of rural reform efforts, which had been building particularly since 1927 in reaction to the Communists' efforts at rural organization.<sup>34</sup> The most important activists of the former movement were Liang Shuming, who promoted a Confucian form of activism in which intellectuals went to the countryside to rebuild rural society and conducted extensive rural experimentation in Shandong Province in the 1930s, and Yan Yangchu,<sup>35</sup> whose rural reconstruction ideas developed out of his work in mass education and who experimented with rural reconstruction in Ding County, Hebei Province, in the 1930s.<sup>36</sup> Both intellectuals have

33. The first being that of the rural reconstruction movement of the 1930s, and the second that of collectivization during the 1950s.

34. Alitto, *The Last Confucian*, 228.

35. For more on Yan, see Charles W. Hayford, *To the People: James Yen and Village China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

36. Yan's rural activities were based in Zhaicheng Village, Ding County, the present site of the Yan Yangchu Rural Reconstruction Institute and the Zhaicheng rural cooperative, both founded by locals with the help of Wen Tiejun and development NGOs.

inspired activists in the present-day NRRM, in particular for their populist insistence that intellectuals “go to the people,” and that only out of practice and experimentation would China find a route out of national crisis. Liang Shuming’s vision was the most comprehensive, seeing rural reconstruction as a harmonious Chinese path to development, and his activity the most effective, helping to found hundreds of cooperatives in Shandong Province without foreign support before the experimentation was stopped by the Japanese invasion in the late 1930s. Liang believed that this voluntary development process would lead to collective ownership and the blending of rural and urban society. Rural reconstruction meant cultural revival for Liang, who believed that Chinese culture was superior to Western culture, and that a Chinese cultural awakening, based on village culture, would be of great value to the world in overcoming the problems of Western-style industrialization with its strong rural-urban split. Yan Yangchu was a Christian and thus much less critical of the West, although he still believed that rural industrial development could allow China to bypass the problems of Western industrialization.<sup>37</sup>

Tying the cooperative movements of the twentieth century so firmly to the rural reconstruction movement of the 1930s has facilitated the operation of a dichotomy between traditional culture and Western modernization within rural reconstruction discourse. Critical of the assumption that modernization equals urbanization, Li Yuanxing,<sup>38</sup> for example, characterizes the NRRM as the latest stage of a century of attempts to find an alternative modernization path based on rural China instead of urban China.<sup>39</sup> The rural Chinese path (*xiangtu Zhongguo de lujing*) is native to China and traditional culture, whereas the urban route is a Western import and comes at the price of sacrificing the peasantry as well as the environment. Modernization, according to Li, is a Western theory that takes as its object the non-West and should be understood as “Westernization.” It has gained legitimacy through its linkage to nationalism in a globalizing world of com-

37. Others involved in agricultural development during the 1920s and 1930s never made a connection between the rural and the native. Many Christian missionaries were also involved in attempts to transform village life and agriculture. See Randall E. Stross, *The Stubborn Earth: American Agriculturalists on Chinese Soil, 1898–1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

38. Li Yuanxing is a professor of sociology at Anhui University.

39. Li Yuanxing, “Xiangtu Zhongguo vs chengshi Zhongguo—dangdai Zhongguo xiandaihua lujing xuanze chuyi” [Rural China vs. urban China—a modest proposal for contemporary China’s choice of modernization path], *Sannong Zhongguo*, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 79–85.

petition between nation-states, valuing the strength of the nation before the “people’s livelihood” (*minsheng*). This point echoes the arguments of Liang Shuming eighty years earlier. At the time, prominent liberals responded to Liang by saying that his rural-centered development plan would mean a weak Chinese nation on the international stage.<sup>40</sup> But, as Li Yuanxing points out, just as Liang did earlier, in the end the urban-centered industrialization strategy is unsustainable and destructive. Li sees the rural Chinese path, which, like the urban modernization path, is a response to globalization, as the result of a reflection on the problems of the urban modernization path in relation to “national conditions” (*guoqing*). This reflection, according to Li, has led to a century of alternative rural modernization experiments, from Yan Yangchu’s rural reconstruction to the NRRM of the present. Li, however, is silent on the Maoist period. This alternative modernization path means putting the people’s livelihood first; here Li explicitly ties the alternative he advocates to the guiding formulation of the development and governance strategy of President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao, “taking people as the root” (*yi ren wei ben*). Li’s conscious subsumption of his “modest proposal” within the dominant Hu-Wen formulation is replicated throughout rural reconstruction discourse, an attempt, no doubt, both to create political space for the movement and to influence government policy.

Culture itself has become an important category in the theory and practice of new rural reconstruction. Within rural reconstruction discourse, *culture* is used in a number of senses. First, it is used as a mobilization tool—activists often use cultural troupes (*wenyi dui*) in order to build group cohesion before developing larger projects. Second, it is often used to designate rural social relations and organization, which are not reducible to economic categories; this includes productive relations as well as projects such as women’s associations and old people’s associations. He Xuefeng and Li Yuanxing go further, however, using the term *culture* to argue that the value system of rural China itself must be rebuilt. This value system stands in opposition to that of Western-style development with its focus on economics.

Thus He Xuefeng, at odds with some other advocates of rural reconstruction, stresses that rural reconstruction is not primarily a solution to the problems of the rural economy, and that a focus on the rural economy conceals the importance of the social and cultural problems of rural China. He argues that traditional rural social organization was shattered by the revolu-

40. See Alitto, *The Last Confucian*, 270.

tion and market reforms, and that “the provision of basic, rural public goods has increasingly become a problem.”<sup>41</sup> The central problematic is rural social relations and the public sphere. Thus, while the government decided to significantly increase its rural investment since 2003, He cautions that such investment should not go to individual households but to the building of public goods and the support of rural cultural projects, which have been marginalized by the market economy.<sup>42</sup> Rural reconstruction, according to He, can organize public and cooperative projects through which a new culture that values human relationships and the relationship with nature can be established.<sup>43</sup>

Liu Laoshi, one of the most active organizers of the movement, also stresses that the movement should not raise peasant expectations that it can considerably increase their incomes. Instead, the movement should focus on fostering the culture of cooperation.<sup>44</sup> Yet establishing a culture of cooperation is one of the difficulties of building cooperatives, according to many rural activists, who say the household responsibility system, the basis of reform period agriculture, has atomized rural society.<sup>45</sup>

### The New Cooperatives

Peasant and intellectual activists have initiated many attempts over the last several years to create peasant cooperatives. Much of this activity initially had little or no connection to the NRRM. But several key experiments that began independently have, as they developed, come under the rubric of the movement, gaining national support and recognition as models of rural development.

41. He Xuefeng, *Xiangcun yanjiu de guoqing yishi*, 82.

42. He Xuefeng, *Xiangcun yanjiu de guoqing yishi*, 83.

43. See He Xuefeng, “Xin nongcun jianshe yu Zhongguo daolu” [New rural construction and the Chinese path] (2006), available at <http://www.wyzxwyzx.com/Article/Class19/200608/8853.html> (accessed November 2006). An English translation of this article is available as He Xuefeng, “New Rural Construction and the Chinese Path,” *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology* 39, no. 4 (Summer 2007): 26–38.

44. It is in part this focus on culture that has led many within the movement to a new appreciation for Liang Shuming.

45. Personal interview, Liu Laoshi, Beijing, July 2006; Liu Laoshi, “Nongcun de jingshen wenhua chongjian” [Rebuilding the rural spirit and culture] (2006), available at <http://www.wyzxsx.com> (accessed August 10, 2006); and “Xin nongcun jianshe zhong de wenhua chongjian” [Cultural reconstruction in new rural reconstruction] (2006), available at <http://www.snzg.cn/shownews.asp?newsid=14129> (accessed August 10, 2006).

One of the most discussed cooperative models is that of Lishu County in Jilin Province.<sup>46</sup> The Lishu cooperatives were developed independently under the guidance of Jiang Bailin, a bank employee. In the mid-1990s, he took part in a major reform in rural banking and a push toward government divestment and privatization. An attempt to make the rural credit cooperatives into peasant-shareholding organizations was not successful, however, as peasants did not buy into the cooperatives, which meant that the government still had to fund them. At the same time, the credit cooperatives did not usually loan money to peasants, as there was little to guarantee repayment and little profit to be made. In 2000, Jiang decided to experiment with peasant-run cooperatives in order to guarantee the loans. Jiang saw peasant-producer cooperatives as the missing institution in the new, post-reform countryside. By 2004, Jiang had helped to establish nine “new cooperatives” (*xin hezuoshe*), as Jiang calls them, in Lishu County.

The Taiping Town cooperative, established in 2001, is one of the most successful and comprehensive. When I visited the cooperative in 2004, it had 36 member families; by October of 2005, member households reached 330.<sup>47</sup> It began as a purchasing-marketing cooperative with eight member families who raised and sold pigs. Jiang Bailin arranged for them to receive a loan for pig feed that was collectively guaranteed by the members of the co-op. Buying the feed collectively also meant a significant drop in the price of feed, most of the savings being reinvested in credit union shares. Collectively selling the pigs also helped increase the price, and this profit was kept by the members. As members bought more shares in the credit union, the amount loaned to them increased as well. The pigs, although individually owned, were raised together in a building equipped with a bio-gas facility that provides energy for member households.

The government itself operates a large number of specialized cooperatives both for credit and for purchasing and sales, but these are top-down organizations with no democratic management. Jiang stresses that his cooperatives are different in two senses: they are voluntary, democratically run—organized and managed by peasants themselves—and are

46. I visited the Lishu cooperatives in the summer of 2004 together with Robert Weil. For Weil's account, see “Conditions of the Working Classes in China,” *Monthly Review* 58, no. 2 (June 2006): 25–48.

47. Xie Yongmo, “Taiping Baixin Nongmin Hezuoshe gaikuang” [The general situation of the Taiping Commoner Trust Peasant Cooperative], in *Xin nongcun jianshe shijian zhan-shi* [The practical exploration of new rural reconstruction], ed. Wen Tiejun (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 2006), 151.

comprehensive. Jiang's "new cooperatives" attempt to combine credit co-ops, production co-ops, and purchasing and sales co-ops in one organization. This comprehensiveness makes these cooperatives more of a process than a static form and allows the cooperatives to develop along with the rural community.

When I visited the Taiping Town cooperative in 2004, it was building a feed processing plant, since completed, that uses locally grown inputs. The plant was intended to produce pig feed that could supply up to a thousand households. Members would receive cheap feed, and the rest would be sold at market value. The operation of the plant encouraged a rapid growth in cooperative membership. The cooperative planned to hire a manager for the feed plant, with some members giving up farming altogether to work in the plant for a wage. This locally driven industrialization, therefore, is shifting some farm laborers into nonagricultural work, bringing about the transformation of village society and slowly overcoming the rural-urban divide. This development utilizes cooperative social relations to help further integrate local society; the "interaction of industry and agriculture" (*gong nong hudong*) means that the local need for agricultural inputs drives local industrialization, and that industrialization, in turn, helps to develop local agriculture.<sup>48</sup>

Unlike the initial establishment of cooperatives in Lishu County, which came to the attention of rural reconstruction activists only after they had been founded, the cooperatives of Lankao County, Henan Province, were always under the supervision of new rural reconstruction activists, in particular He Huili, an assistant professor at the China Agricultural University and a tireless advocate of rural reconstruction.<sup>49</sup> One of the strengths of the NRRM has been Wen Tiejun's ability to incorporate the innovative work of others within the movement. By the time the cooperatives were established in Lankao, Jiang's Lishu cooperatives had become a model for rural reconstruction activists.<sup>50</sup> The Lankao cooperative experiments began

48. Xie, "Taiping Baixin Nongmin Hezuoshe gaikuang," 152.

49. The information on the Lankao cooperatives comes from discussions with He Huili and other activists as well as from He Huili, "Xin xiangcun jianshe shiyan zai Lankao" [New rural reconstruction experiments in Lankao], in *Xin nongcun jianshe shijian zhanshi*, 84–102. An English translation of this article is available as He Huili, "Experiments of New Rural Construction in Lankao," *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology* 39, no. 4 (Summer 2007): 50–79.

50. Jiang Bailin led a training session on cooperatives at the Yan Yangchu Rural Reconstruction Institute in Zhaicheng in the spring of 2004, with Zhaicheng peasants founding a cooperative at the time.



when He Huili temporarily worked as a deputy director responsible for agriculture in Lankao County. With the assistance of student and rural reconstruction activists, she guided peasants in six villages to found five cultural troupes, four cooperatives, and two associations for the elderly.

In He Huili's experience, the cultural troupes have been vital in developing cooperative relationships that form the basis for economic cooperatives. Echoing He Xuefeng and others, she sees the culture of cooperation and not just economic cooperatives as crucial to the reconstruction of rural society. In Chenzhai Village in Lankao, for example, a women's cultural troupe was established first, and its members later formed the core for the establishment of an economic cooperative in Chenzhai in 2004. The cooperative, which by 2005 had thirty-two members, consisted of a vegetable and fruit small group, a financial aid center, and a pig-raising small group, which invested in building a store to market pig feed. Her explanation of co-op building emphasizes its processual character: "Because we cannot coerce people, therefore we need to use guidance and education, first allowing a portion of peasants to freely proceed to economic, social, and cultural cooperation, and hopefully in the end a village with complete cooperation and real self-rule is achieved."<sup>51</sup>

A larger cooperative in He Village, also in Lankao, was established after rural reconstruction student activists from Henan University conducted training sessions and set up an information and consultation center. Through their activity they met Wang Dexian, a peasant from the village, and he went to a training session on cooperatives at the Yan Yangchu Institute in Zhaicheng. After he returned, he and a group of rural reconstruction activists held a conference on cooperative economics in He Village, which included the participation of members of a cooperative from Shandong. Shortly afterwards, in September of 2004, the He Village cooperative was formed with fifty households and has since grown to more than eighty-eight households. Its projects include an information center and library, mutual financial aid (helping at least twenty families so far), a planting group, and a breeding group. As a group, they have completed plowing, grown wheat, and purchased fertilizer and other inputs at reduced prices. They have also done public service work, including repair of about three kilometers of village roads. In contrast to the experience of the Chenzhai cooperative, in He Village a cultural group was a spin-off project, not its founding core.

While much of this organizing work was done by outside intellectu-

51. He Huili, "Xin xiangcun jianshe shiyan zai Lankao," 90.

als and student volunteers, local village Party cadres often were involved. A cooperative in Nanmazhuang Village, Lankao, was established after village members, sent by the village Party secretary, participated in the He Village cooperative conference. With the help of Jiang Bailin, Wen Tiejun, and others, Nanmazhuang's cooperative has begun raising pigs, growing wheat and rice, offering financial mutual aid, and organizing a dance troupe to spread cooperative culture. The cooperative organized the production of environmentally friendly rice, which was then directly marketed in Beijing with the help of He Huili.<sup>52</sup>

The lessons of these experiments are spreading, both through the activity of the rural reconstruction activists and their training sessions, and through direct links between peasants themselves. The cooperative movement itself has also created a good deal of media attention and support. It still operates, however, on a very small scale.<sup>53</sup> The activists of the NRRM all realize that cooperatives will not develop on their own within the competitive environment of the market economy. Outside support is particularly important at the early stage, in terms both of education and technical information and of investment capital. Jiang and his brothers, for example, have individually invested large sums of money in the Lishu cooperatives. Many activists are hoping that the model will attract the attention of government officials and then government support.<sup>54</sup>

Jiang sees the "new cooperatives" as the best model for dealing with the *sannong wenti*. They help peasants increase agricultural (*nongye*) productivity. They will increase rural (*nongcun*) purchasing power. And most importantly, they will raise the level of peasant (*nongmin*) organization. According to advocates of rural reconstruction, without overcoming the atomization produced by the household responsibility system, rural industrialization and development are impossible. This conviction differentiates

52. Li Guangshou, "Ai dami de ren, lianhe qilai: He Huili yu ta de chengxiang hezuo lixiang" [Rice lovers, unite: He Huili and her dream of urban-rural cooperation], *Shimin* (March 2006): 46–51.

53. Activists give different numbers of rural cooperatives that they consider part of the movement, but the numbers seem to be around sixty or so nationwide.

54. Activists argue that cooperatives should be given tax breaks and loans. At present, the new cooperatives often have to register as companies, if they register at all. There has been a cooperative law in draft for some time, but it is unclear when it will finally become law. In the 1950s, the state used supply and marketing co-ops and credit co-ops to entice peasants into mutual aid teams and agricultural production co-ops. See Vivienne Shue, *Peasant China in Transition: The Dynamics of Development Towards Socialism, 1949–1956* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 196–97.

their analysis from mainstream economic approaches to rural problems, which tend to argue for increased marketization of relationships, specialization of production, privatization of land, and the development of rights consciousness—maintaining the household or individual farmer as the basic unit of rural society and reinforcing that unit through the heightened mediation of relations by the market and the institution of private property.

According to Jiang, the argument that land privatization and its concentration in the hands of rural capitalists, who would then hire rural surplus labor as wage workers, is the only way to develop rural social organization and the scale of farming in China is abstract and only pays attention to economic factors. Jiang believes that this is neither politically possible for the central government, because of the instability it would provoke, nor acceptable to peasants themselves. Yet he agrees that the issue of scale of production is important. The “new cooperatives” offer another route to rural development: instead of privatization (*siyouhua*), which would bring economic development, cooperativization (*hezuo*) and the interaction of industry and agriculture (*gong nong hudong*) that it engenders would link economic development and social security. As He Huili says, “We need a new round of rural reconstruction, which would attempt to use certain types of organization and institutions to bring about the association of rural surplus labor and the mobilization of laborers’ enthusiasm, turning it into the social capital of rural reconstruction, and in the end efficiently promoting rural social development.”<sup>55</sup>

For Jiang, therefore, the “new cooperatives” not only offer a different model of development but are also conceptualized as a form of social protection for “vulnerable social groups” (*ruoshi qunti*). *Ruoshi qunti* is a term that began to be used in the 1990s to name social groups that were weak in economic, educational, and political terms—that is, in terms of economic, cultural, and social capital. It has become a popular term to designate those who have been socially excluded from the reform process. One central concept of the NRRM is that peasants are a weak social group within the market. Peasant organization is a method to strengthen the position of the peasant *ruoshi qunti* in the face of the market.

Cooperatives give peasant members the group strength to get loans for rural industrialization projects and to demand both cheaper prices in purchasing inputs and higher prices in selling products. In addition, mutual aid (*huzhu*) among cooperative members can strengthen their ability to

55. He Huili, “Xin xiangcun jianshe shiyan zai Lankao,” 90.

withstand market forces. The Taiping cooperative in Lishu County facilitates the spread of technical knowledge and has collectively supplied inoculations for pigs, yet they still get sick and die. Early on in the history of the cooperative, one member (one of the original eight) had all forty of his pigs die, meaning he had no resources to start again. The other members did very well and loaned him enough to restart; he was quickly able to repay the loan and turn a profit.

The cooperative movement, therefore, is a form of social protection of vulnerable and atomized social groups against the privatization and marketization of society. Yet Jiang and others stress that the cooperatives are part of a market economy, not its replacement. Jiang argues that the market grew out of rural society in the early 1980s with the household responsibility system. But that market has grown too strong for individual households to operate within it, and many farming families no longer make a profit at farming. Jiang argues that all societies rely on capital and labor: in capitalism, capital is in command; in socialism, labor is in command. But what needs to be worked out is how labor can command capital without smothering it. "New cooperatives" within the context of a market economy are an institution that will allow peasants (as *ruoshi qunti*) to bring capital under their command in a democratic fashion. In the long run, this will allow capital to be used more efficiently in the countryside, Jiang argues. Under the *ruoshi qunti* formulation, exploitation is understood as the result of unfair competition between weak peasant producers and big capital. Jiang extends this concept to argue that global competition is not only between products on the market but also between forms of organization. Competition with big agriculture in the United States brought about by China's entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001 is a challenge to Chinese agriculture. But he argues that Chinese agriculture cannot compete if organized through the privatization of land and the development of individual capitalists; only cooperative organization will allow Chinese peasants to survive global competition. In a politically savvy argument, the *ruoshi qunti* formulation helps to place rural reconstruction within the discourse of market socialism: it is a critique of utopian marketization, not of the economic use of markets per se; it is an attempt to put the market under the command of society in a society in which marketization has gone too far.

A further development in the movement is inter-cooperative cooperation. Within both the Lankao and Lishu cooperatives there is some county-wide cooperation, but beginning in the spring of 2006 this was taken a step further: seven of the more successful cooperatives, including some

Lankao and Lishu cooperatives, came together to form a mutual aid and marketing cooperative alliance (*guoren lüse lianmeng*). This alliance aims to organize urban consumer cooperatives to market cooperative-grown agricultural products, in particular environmentally friendly products like Nanmazhuang's rice, attempting to cut out the marketing middlemen.<sup>56</sup> It is only through cooperatives in alliance, promoters suggest, that the atomized peasant producers can enter the "mighty market economy" with any strength.<sup>57</sup>

## Conclusion

New rural reconstruction is a response to and critique of much of the discourse of the 1990s, which sought a solution to the problems of the peasant population in urbanization. Yet the phenomenon of urbanization in China is much more complex than this dichotomy at first implies. Its difficulty is compounded by the fact that the rural-urban divide in China is not readily translatable into English: terms like *nongmin*, *chengshihua*, and *chengzhenhua* are often too easily rendered as "peasant" and "urbanization." *Chengzhenhua* in Chinese does not necessarily imply the movement of the rural population into preexisting cities; conversely, it can imply the in-place transformation of rural villages and townships, what Gregory Guldin calls "townization."<sup>58</sup> Guldin, following Chinese anthropologists such as Fei Xiaotong and his student Ma Rong,<sup>59</sup> convincingly argues that "urbanization" is occurring all along the rural-urban continuum. According to Guldin, "townization" is marked by a process of increasing flows of information, goods, capital, and people between the rural and urban spheres that brings

56. The alliance works out of an office at the recently founded Liang Shuming Rural Reconstruction Center on the outskirts of Beijing. The center, like the Yan Yangchu Institute in Zhaicheng, operates under the auspices of the Rural Reconstruction Center at the School of Agricultural and Rural Development that Wen Tiejun heads at Renmin University of China.

57. See Bai Jiechun, "Guoren lüse lianmeng: chuanguo nongmin hezuo zuzhi xiang shengceng ci yanshen," *Xinhua she* (May 9, 2006), available at <http://www.cqagri.gov.cn/detail.asp?pubID=179793&page=1> (accessed August 2006).

58. Gregory Guldin, *What's a Peasant to Do? Village Becoming Town in Southern China* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001).

59. See Fei Xiaotong, *Xiaochengzhen Siji* [Four articles on small towns] (Beijing: Xinhua chubanshe, 1985); Ma Rong, "The Development of Small Towns and Their Role in the Modernization of China," in *Urbanizing China*, ed. Gregory Guldin (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1992), 119–53.

about their blending.<sup>60</sup> New rural reconstruction (and the old as well, as Liang Shuming argued) and the new cooperatives, such as the Taiping cooperative, can be seen as a blending of the rural and urban, an alternative form of “townization” that maintains a certain degree of autonomy for rural society from market forces. Unlike the almost evolutionary process that Guldin describes, new rural reconstruction should be seen as an active rural social protection movement against the complete marketization of social life through the building of new social and cultural relations of cooperation in the countryside. The townization put into practice within rural reconstruction might even be seen as a development of earlier Maoist practices of integrating rural industrialization and agriculture, calling into question reified conceptualizations of the break between Maoist and reformist China.

Clearly rural crisis cannot be solved through changes solely located in the rural sphere or simply by limiting rural marketization. While critics of rural market utopianism are for the most part well aware of this problem, a politically acceptable solution largely escapes their grasp. On the one hand, a semiautonomous rural sphere constructed upon peasant cooperation and state subsidies, investment, and agricultural price supports<sup>61</sup> would certainly ameliorate the poor conditions of the peasantry. On the other hand, since it would still be integrated within the global capitalist market to some extent, the state could use the countryside as a social safety valve, in which urban social and economic problems could be shuffled into the rural sphere, as the dual urban-rural structure has allowed throughout the post-1949 period. At the same time, capital could continue to use a semiautonomous rural population as a source of cheap, underpaid labor. Semiautonomy can be a double-edged sword, and thus rural crisis dictates a more global solution.

For Guldin, the increase in urban-rural flows through townization foretells the end of “peasant China.” Several Chinese anthropologists, most prominent among them Li Peilin, have argued that we are presently witnessing the “end of the peasantry” (*nongmin de zhongjie*) in China.<sup>62</sup> New rural reconstruction intellectuals and activists dispute this, however,

60. Guldin, *What's a Peasant to Do?* 14–16.

61. Such investments and subsidies have been the policy of the Hu-Wen administration since 2004.

62. See Li Peilin, *Cunzhuang de zhongjie: yangchengcun de gushi* (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2004). Li's Chinese translation of Henri Mendras's *La fin des paysans* [*The Vanishing Peasant*] (Paris: Seuil, 1967) appeared as *Nongmin de zhongjie* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1991).

suggesting that the necessity of rural semiautonomy from market forces—without which the peasant would be turned into an urban slum dweller—also means that the peasant will continue to exist for a long time to come in China. The issue is partially a matter of defining the category *nongmin* (peasant/farmer). Does *nongmin* designate the practitioners of small, household farming, as the work of Wen Tiejun implies, or is it defined by lack of involvement in the flows between the city and country, as Guldin suggests? It is also an issue of regional focus: the anthropological fieldwork for Li's study was based in economically well-off coastal regions, as was much of Guldin's fieldwork; the focus of the rural reconstruction movement, in contrast, has been on inland and central provinces, where rural incomes have stagnated since the late 1990s. On the one hand, village society is becoming more townlike; on the other hand, the income gap between rural and urban China has grown dramatically since the mid-1990s. Alternatively, even if we view the peasantry as a disappearing social class, we need to ask what they are becoming. Perhaps in many cases they are shifting from one form of excluded population—the peasantry—to another—an urban underemployed underclass or a surplus population of slum dwellers.

These different positions, although partially based in both definitional and regional focus, lead to different forms of political practice and policy suggestions. Those involved in the NRRM believe that rural society, though it certainly will be transformed, will not disappear; thus, their experimentation is directed toward finding ways to build a vibrant and prosperous rural society and culture. The “new cooperatives” developed by Jiang Bailin in Siping and the comprehensive cooperatives that He Huili has helped to develop in Lankao are attempts at institutionalizing the semiautonomy of rural society through the protection and facilitation of nonmarket and cooperative activities. Such semiautonomy would regulate urban-rural flows by limiting the effectiveness of the market economy to promote the privatization of land and the outflow of people, goods, and capital from the countryside, but it is less clear how the resulting social formation should be characterized.

The peasantry as a global, active subject, however, has not disappeared; in fact, if anything, it has recently taken on new significance. Nora McKeon, Michael Watts, and Wendy Wolford's study of contemporary peasant associations in Senegal and Brazil argues that their organization is a social protective response to the deepening of the self-regulating market during a period of globalization comparable to that of Victorian era capitalism, a response that has pushed them to the front of antiglobalization

struggles in the 1990s.<sup>63</sup> I argue that China's NRRM and current rural social disruption should be seen in a similar context, as a social protective movement responding to the marketization of social relations and exclusion of the "surplus rural population" (*nongye shengyu renkou*). In China, too, there have been calls for rebuilding peasant associations. Yet most new rural reconstruction activists and intellectuals, possibly out of political caution, usually stop short of calling for actual peasant associations.<sup>64</sup> Rebuilding peasant associations would likely be politically untenable at the moment, with the CCP fearful of political organizations outside of the Party.

Liu Yuanqi argues that neoliberalism brought on a global rural crisis in the 1990s, leading to rural uprisings and protests. Influenced by the work of Samir Amin and Mike Davis, Liu contends that capitalism is unable to solve the enormous exclusion produced in this crisis and that the Euro-American form of agricultural modernization, which relied on colonialism and international migration to avoid internal instability and the proliferation of slums, is untenable for developing countries.<sup>65</sup> Lü Xinyu points out that agriculture has not been fully integrated into the capitalist market economy even in Europe and the United States, maintained there as it is by government subsidies.<sup>66</sup> When viewed from a global perspective, I argue, China's

63. McKeon, Watts, and Wolford, "Peasant Associations in Theory and Practice." Also see Marc Edelman, "Transnational Peasant and Farmer Movements and Networks," in *Global Civil Society*, ed. Mary Kaldor, Helmut Anheier, and Marlies Glasius (London: Oxford University Press, 2003), 185–220; also available as an electronic document at <http://www.lse.ac.uk/Depts/global/Yearbook/outline2003.htm> (accessed August 20, 2006).

64. Shortly after the 2004 No. One Document of the State Council called for the organization of the peasantry and during Wen Tiejun's editorship of *Zhongguo gaige (nongcun ban)*, an issue of the magazine focused on peasant organization. The issue contained an interview with Du Runsheng, one of the Party's top officials responsible for agriculture since the 1950s, in which he called for the establishment of peasant associations (*nong xie*). Du had called on Deng Xiaoping to set up peasant associations in the 1980s, but after the Tiananmen incident in 1989, the issue was put aside. See Li Guangshou, "Du Runsheng: rang nongmin jianli ziji de zuzhi," *Zongguo gaige (nongcun ban)*, 239 (April 2004): 12. Also see Yu Jianrong, "Wo weishenme zhuzhang chongjian nongmin xiehui?" [Why do I propose the reestablishment of peasant associations?] (2003), available at <http://www.nongyou.org>.

65. Liu Yuanqi, "Xinziyouzhuyi yu fazhan zhong guojia de nongye weiji" [Neoliberalism and agricultural crisis in developing countries], *Waiguo lilun dongtai* [Foreign theoretical trends] (September 2004): 15–19.

66. Lü Xinyu, "'Mingong chao' de wenti yishi" ["Migrant tide" problem consciousness], *Dushu*, no. 10 (November 2003): 52–61. See also Niek Koning, *The Failure of Agrarian Capitalism: Agrarian Politics in the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, and the USA, 1846–1919* (London: Routledge, 1994).



NRRM, like the peasant organizations that sparked much of the antiglobalization movement of the 1990s,<sup>67</sup> signals a profound anxiety about whether global capitalism, particularly in its neoliberal mode, will benefit the majority of the world's population or whether the global slums, urban and rural, will simply continue to grow as warehouses of the excluded.<sup>68</sup> The reaction against utopian attempts to marketize social life takes the shape of diverse social protective movements similar to those described by Polanyi in *The Great Transformation*, and within these movements the construction of new social relations of cooperation also point to a world beyond exclusion.

67. The Zapatistas of Mexico, Brazil's Landless Workers Movement discussed in Nora McKeon, Michael Watts, and Wendy Wolford's study, and the Karnataka State Farmers' Association were key in the founding of People's Global Action, one of the most important, early network organizations that initiated the global days of action in the 1990s that came to be known as the antiglobalization movement.

68. See Davis, *Planet of Slums*.