Singapore Management University
Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University

Research Collection School of Social Sciences | School of Social Sciences

4-2019

# Review of China's peasant agriculture and rural society

Qian Forrest ZHANG
*Singapore Management University*, forrestzhang@smu.edu.sg

Follow this and additional works at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soss_research

Part of the Agricultural and Resource Economics Commons, and the Asian Studies Commons

## Citation
ZHANG, Qian Forrest.(2019). Review of China's peasant agriculture and rural society. *Journal of Agrarian Change, 19(2)*, 380-384.
**Available at:** https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soss_research/3202

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Social Sciences at Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Collection School of Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. For more information, please email cherylds@smu.edu.sg.

Zhang, QF. 2019. China's peasant agriculture and rural society by Jan Douwe van der Ploeg & Jingzhong Ye. Abingdon and New York: Routledge. 2016. ISBN 978–1–138-18717-7 (hb). ISBN 978–1–138-36397-7 (pb). Journal of Agrarian Change, 19 (2): 380-384. https://doi.org/10.1111/joac.12299

*China's Peasant Agriculture and Rural Society*, edited by Jan Douwe van de Ploeg and Jingzhong Ye,

QIAN FORREST ZHANG[1]

Jan Douwe van de Ploeg, Jingzhong Ye and their colleagues have written an important book that will rekindle old debates and spark new discussions in the fields of critical agrarian studies and China studies. The book is a collection of 12 chapters, each co-authored by members of the research team. The two editors are also the key authors, with de Ploeg involved in all 12 chapters and Ye in eight. Together, the chapters provide a comprehensive coverage of topics central to the rural economy and livelihoods in China, and to theories in critical agrarian studies.

In chapter one, de Ploeg and Ye suggest that the success of Chinese agriculture is a conundrum when viewed from what they call the Western paradigm. From this perspective the many handicaps facing Chinese agriculture, especially its miniscule scale and massive rural outmigration, make it seem "destined to fail". A new paradigm, therefore, must be introduced to make sense of the success of Chinese agriculture. The alternative paradigm they propose envisions a peasant-based agriculture that, in contrast to the Western model that centers on large-scale, corporatized producers who rely on capital- and technology-intensive production methods and full-time, specialized wage workers, thrives through the circularity and pluriactivity of family labor and is based on a deep emotional bond between the household and land.

Each of the following nine empirical chapters studies one issue, and adds one piece to the proposed paradigm. Chapter 2 examines the circular migration and multiple jobs of rural residents. Chapter 3 focuses on the central place of land in peasant agriculture, and how it organizes family life and inter-generational relations. Chapter 4 describes how peasants try to improve agricultural productivity through labour intensification. Chapter 5 studies the newly emerged entrepreneurial peasants and the challenges they face. Chapter 6 looks at three examples of what the authors consider "capitalist modes of farming": centralized dairy cow operations, horticultural cooperatives, and a land-renting, labor-hiring vegetable farm in Sichuan. After introducing new types of agricultural producers in the two preceding chapters, Chapter 7 then looks at how peasant households also re-invent their traditional peasant farming through introducing new products and new technology. Chapter 8 uses survey data from one village to investigate a feature of Chinese agriculture that has been viewed as a handicap under the Western paradigm for its sustained growth – the feminization of agriculture. The authors instead found evidence of the empowerment of women in household decision-making and continuity of agricultural growth. Chapter 9 takes a detour from the countryside and studies how university students from both rural and

[1] Singapore Management University, forrestzhang@smu.edu.sg.

urban origins view agriculture, the countryside, and peasants. Chapter 10 highlights another unique yet under-studied feature of the Chinese agriculture – the deep penetration of the market, and especially the prevalence of real market places and small producers' direct participation in them. After the empirical analyses of Chinese agriculture are presented, Chapter 11 locates the Chinese experience in its international context and argues that some of the key elements are in fact widespread elsewhere, and thus adopting this paradigm elsewhere is feasible and desirable. Chapter 12, the last chapter, brings a synthesis to the previous chapters and integrates features of Chinese agriculture discussed earlier to delineate the contours of the new Chinese paradigm.

The nine empirical chapters in the book are well researched. Their findings on issues such as the circulatory nature of rural-to-urban migration, the multi-functionality of rural families and the intergenerational division of labor within them, the feminization of agriculture, and the entry of new producers into agriculture should be familiar to students of rural China. Contributors to this book, especially the research team at China Agricultural University led by Jingzhong Ye, have done a remarkable job in their previous publications – some of which are partly reproduced in this book – in establishing these findings. What makes this book especially thought-provoking and interesting is the ambitious theoretical synthesis that tries to integrate all these empirical findings into an overarching Chinese paradigm. While this theoretical ambition is commendable, the paradigm they propose, in my view, does more to obscure and misinterpret their empirical findings than to illuminate and synthesize them. In the following, my critique of this "paradigm of peasant agriculture" focuses on four key components: first, the non-commodity nature of farming; second, the emotional and moral bonds between peasants and land; third, an essentialized peasant identity; and, last, the nature of peasants' circular migration and multiple job-holding.

The new paradigm proposed by the authors sees Chinese agriculture today as a 'peasant agriculture', one that is fundamentally different from – and in many ways superior to – the capitalist agriculture of the West and deeply Chinese – in the sense that it is a continuation of a timeless Chinese tradition. Few would dispute that Chinese agriculture remains distinctive from Western agriculture – if there is also one paradigm for that. But, in the face of all the changes taking place, as documented in the book's empirical chapters, can Chinese agriculture still be accurately – and singularly – understood as a 'peasant agriculture'?

De Ploeg and Ye are very clear about what they mean by a peasant agriculture: "peasant agriculture is generally grounded on *self-controlled and autonomous resource base*. This resource base is delivered through socially-regulated exchanges that take place within the family farm and/or through reciprocal networks that operate at village level (p. 85, original italics)." There are two key elements in this definition: first, a self-controlled and autonomous resource base; and second, the socially and morally embedded nature of farming production and exchanges. We shall look at these in turn.

The self-controlled and autonomous resource base of the peasant agriculture means that, as Chapter 2 states, "the farming domain is primarily a non-commodity domain (p.35)." Oddly, the empirical analysis in the book elaborates on how deeply commodity relations have penetrated into every aspect of agricultural production. Farm inputs (fertilizers, pesticides, seeds, machineries, etc.), most of which we know are mass-produced by manufacturers in towns and cities, are bought from markets; family labour is sold on markets, both local and distant, for farm work and non-farm work; wage incomes earned from labor sales are then turned into remittances which are invested in farm inputs or land

improvement; products are sold on markets (in one case, into metropolitan Beijing with the help of the authors); land is rented in and out; and hired labour is used even in some family farms.

In Chapter 8, for example, the authors document in great detail the division of labor between husbands and wives when it comes to these commodity relations (p.165). The finding is that 100 per cent of the sample engaged in all the studied activities of buying inputs and selling outputs. Similarly, in Chapter 2, a village in Hebei is studied in order to demonstrate that "the farming domain is primarily a non-commodity domain (p.35)." There then follows a description of multiple elements of production bought or sold on markets. They point out that the money used to buy all the inputs was not loaned from outside, but self-earned through members' non-farm wage work and thus consider this a non-commodity input in farming. This view neglects the fact that such money was really wages earned from selling their labor as a commodity. They also argue that agricultural products are only sold after family needs and social needs are met and consider this another proof of the non-commodity nature of the farming domain. One has to ask why peasants would spend money to buy fertilizers and pesticides, and often specialize in just one crop, if the products are only for family consumption and social exchange? In fact, later analysis in the same chapter shows that among farming households in the village, "(t)he higher the non-agrarian income, the more (of farming output) is sold (p.38)". The commoditized proportion reaches as high as 67 per cent. Chapter 6 further provides cases of entrepreneurial farming where family-accumulated capital was re-invested into expanded production, land rental and labour hiring. With all these commodity relations present in every aspect of the farming enterprise, how is farming still a non-commodity domain?

It is true that a large percentage of rural residents in China still receive their land rights as an entitlement (although this is no longer true for the younger generations born after the second-round of land contracting), but this does not mean this allocated entitlement cannot then be turned into a commodity and traded. Many studies have documented the rapid growth of commoditized land transfers in rural China (including Ye's own work [Ye 2015]), as do chapters 5 and 6 in this book. When all aspects of agricultural production are deeply integrated into commodity relations and agricultural producers (even small family farms) are dependent on markets for their social reproduction, to what extent can they still be considered 'peasants'?[2]

The non-commodity nature of peasant agriculture, as proposed by de Ploeg and Ye, determines that farming, or the farm enterprise, "is not explicitly *perceived* nor *organized* as an *economic* activity." Instead, "the farm and farming are seen (and understood) *as integral parts of social life* (p. 9, original italics)." If we follow Karl Polanyi and the new economic sociology that his work has inspired, few would dispute that most, if not all, economic activities are socially embedded, even in a capitalist market economy. Thus, even farming in the West is still not entirely disembedded from social relationships, insulated from moral considerations, or devoid of cultural meanings. This embeddedness is probably stronger in family businesses (farming or non-farming), where the household and the enterprise are combined; but this should not make Chinese farming households entirely unique.

[2] In my own work (Zhang and Donaldson 2010, Zhang 2015), I have proposed an alternative framework for conceptualizing the various forms of non-peasant agricultural production and the classes of producers engaged in these.

De Ploeg and Ye focus mainly on peasants' special bonds with the land to demonstrate this 'moral economy' aspect of the peasant agriculture, especially in Chapter 3, entitled "Man and the Land". For Chinese peasants, they argue, land has a strong moral quality: "land is to be cared for," "(t)o have land and not to work it is seen as immoral (p.56);" "working the land well and developing it further are seen as moral obligations (p.57)." Such strong emotions about land are not too hard to find when one studies rural China, but this is not the only kind of relationship with land, nor is it unchangeable. Nowadays, one could just as easily find rural residents who view farmland primarily, if not purely, as a commodity and are perfectly willing to sell this commodity at the right price – especially if that paves their (or, more likely, their children's) path into urban citizenship and lifestyle.[3] After all, we should not forget that in a short period of three to four decades, hundreds of millions of former Chinese peasants have severed their ties with agriculture, farmland, and the countryside (not always voluntarily), and this process only seems to be accelerating.[4] How many of them were engulfed in moral guilt for abandoning their land and rural roots? The book does not directly answer that, but claims that "(i)t is quite unlikely that Chinese peasants will abandon their land (p.61)."

Contrary to their claims that "(l)and is almost never left idle and that people do not sell the right to use it (p.57)", Chapter 5 describes how in a Hebei village the increasing commodification of land is driven by mining for iron ore – probably the most destructive, disrespectful, and 'immoral' way of using farmland. Yet villagers complied quite readily, selling their land rights to outside businesses. Similarly, in Chapter 6, in a village in Sichuan, they also find little resistance from villagers to land transfers to a large producer (p.125).[5]

This close or even inseparable bond with land and the countryside is also the central feature in their conceptualization of the peasant identity. Compared with their lucid definition of peasant agriculture, de Ploeg and Ye are less clear about what makes one a 'peasant' in today's China – and, at what point one stops being a peasant, if one ever can. Is it household registration (*hukou*)? Or doing farming? Or having land allocation? Or maintaining traditional cultural practices? Or being socially embedded in a village community? Or no longer depending largely on land for their social reproduction?

---

[3] The most institutionalized practice of this is the "land bill" (*dipiao*) system in Chongqing Municipality, under which rural residents can voluntarily convert their land entitlements into financial gains or urban citizenship (Yep and Forrest 2016).

[4] According to official statistical data, China's rural resident population (defined as those who live for more than half a year in rural areas) peaked at 859.47 million in 1995. Since then, it has declined steadily to 576.61 million by 2017, a decrease of 282.86 million and now only 41.5 per cent of the total population. Given that the total national population has increased by 178.87 million during this period, it is safe to conclude that more than 300 million rural residents have moved to cities over the past 22 years. However, how many of these migrants have changed their household registration or lost their land entitlements is not known. In the most recent national survey of rural migrants (NBS 2018), the number of migrants who live in urban areas outside their places of household registration is 137.1 million, much smaller than the 300 million decrease in rural residents.

[5] Other studies that focus on the resistance to land transfer also find that only a small minority resisted, while the majority readily complied, or even embraced it (Luo, Andreas and Li 2017, Gong and Zhang 2017).

In Chapter 1 (pp. 14-16), most of the quoted interviewees perceive their peasant identity as based on *hukou*-based entitlement differences. While such differences and the different identities they give rise to are certainly real, such a conceptualization faces two problems. First, the rural-urban entitlement differences have changed greatly in recent years, eroding the basis of such a peasant identity (Chen and Fan 2016). Second, such an identity is then independent from one's relationship with land or farming – or, in other words, being a peasant or not.

To de Ploeg and Ye, one's peasantness is not even lost when one fully engages in wage work in cities, because, "through their household relations migrants remain peasants," as "they don't give up land; their women do the farming, if they have time they come back and support farming (p.13)." Here an essentialized view of peasantness is partially separated from economic activities, and perhaps inadvertently helps to perpetuate the urban bias of migrants as unalterably 'backward' and alien. Is that how migrants really see themselves and want to be perceived?

The book demonstrates very well that circular migration and multiple job-holding across the rural-urban divide is indeed the norm for many rural households in China. But to infer from this firstly that migration is only temporary, and secondly that migrants are pulled back by some deep, inseparable ties with the land and countryside is problematic – not least for younger generations for whom rural-to-urban migration is increasingly not temporary or circular, or at least not intended to be so (Tang and Feng 2015). In fact, in Chapter 3, we are told that "travelling through rural China and talking with urban workers it is abundantly clear that alongside those who will sooner or later return to their villages and work the land, there are probably as many others who won't (p.63)." So why also claim that in general migrant workers "leave in order to return (p.52)."

More importantly, the multiple job-holding in most instances is not some heroic act of preserving a treasured past of peasant agriculture and resisting unwanted urbanization, but merely an economic compromise out of necessity. Circular migrants between countryside and city cannot support their social reproduction solely with either the precarious wage work in cities or the small-scale family faming in the countryside. They have to combine both to make ends meet. For those who can meet their social reproduction entirely in cities, their permanent migration to cities is rarely held back by just the emotional ties with the countryside or moral obligations to land. In fact, if cultural or social considerations play a role, it is more likely in preventing people from returning to the countryside and doing scaled-up farming, even when that is more economically rewarding than wage work in cities (Tang and Feng 2015). So, contrary to de Ploeg and Ye's dismissal of the view that Chinese farms are too small (calling it "nonsensical [p.25]"), Chinese farms are *too small*! Why would rural migrants separate from their families and go to cities to toil and suffer (and even violate the moral obligations to care for the land, as the book suggests), if it were not because their farms are too small to support their social reproduction and not viable as the sole source of income?

My point is not to dispute the existence of things such as circular migration, ties to the land, a distinctive rural identity (self-imposed or other-imposed), continuation of traditional farming practices, and socially embedded exchanges. The issue here is whether the conceptual paradigm of peasant agriculture proposed in the book is useful in helping us understand Chinese agriculture today.

De Ploeg and Ye are aware of the fluidity in Chinese agriculture today. Chapter 1 has a section entitled 'tensions' (p.18), where they list a series of questions about what changes

would tear apart the “organic whole of land, labor and households” that form the Chinese peasantry. Yet, despite plenty of evidence presented in the book that shows the disintegration of the peasant agriculture as an “organic whole”, in the end, the conceptual paradigm is still preserved.

The authors have done their fine empirical analysis a disservice by putting it into a conceptual straightjacket of peasant and peasant agriculture. Nothing seems to be gained from hanging on to the peasant concept. Rather, important findings have been obscured by this paradigm. For example, in Chapter 2, the authors show that in a village in Hebei the growing differentiation among the village population divides it into four segments: de-activation (de-agrarianization), peasant development, pauperization, and *dahu* (big, specialized household) development. Even what they call ‘peasant development’ here is in fact specialized commodity production. Wouldn’t examining the process of differentiation and the diverging livelihood strategies created by it be more rewarding than sweeping all these new developments under the rug of a persistent peasantry?

Despite these issues, this book provides researchers and students interested in critical agrarian studies and China studies rich and highly informative empirical materials to engage with. The authors’ attempt to construct a peasant-based paradigm for understanding Chinese agriculture can also push researchers to think more deeply about various aspects of contemporary agrarian change.

REFERENCES


Chen, C. and C.C. Fan, 2016. ‘China's Hukou Puzzle: Why Don't Rural Migrants Want Urban Hukou?’ *China Review*, *16*(3): 9-39.

Gong, W. and Q.F. Zhang, 2017. ‘Betting on the big: state-brokered land transfers, large-scale agricultural producers, and rural policy implementation’. *The China Journal*, *77*(1): 1-26.

Luo, Q., J. Andreas and Y. Li, 2017. ‘Grapes of Wrath: Twisting Arms to Get Villagers to Cooperate with Agribusiness in China’. *The China Journal*, *77*(1): 27-50.

National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), 2018. ‘National survey report on rural migrants, 2017’. http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/201804/t20180427_1596389.html

Tang, S. and J. Feng, 2015. ‘Cohort differences in the urban settlement intentions of rural migrants: A case study in Jiangsu Province, China’. *Habitat International*, *49*: 357-365.

Ye, J., 2015. ‘Land Transfer and the Pursuit of Agricultural Modernization in China’. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, *15*(3): 314-337.

Zhang, Q.F., 2015. ‘Class Differentiation in Rural China: Dynamics of Accumulation, Commodification and State Intervention’. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, *15*(3): 338-365.

Zhang, Q.F. and J.A. Donaldson, 2010. ‘From peasants to farmers: Peasant differentiation, labor regimes, and land-rights institutions in China’s agrarian transition’. *Politics & Society*, *38*(4): 458-489.