

Reconstructing the Rural:  
Peasant Organizations in a Chinese Movement for Alternative Development

Matthew A. Hale

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

University of Washington

2013

Reading Committee:

Ann Anagnost, Chair

Stevan Harrell

Alexander Day

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Anthropology

University of Washington

## **Abstract**

Reconstructing the Rural:

Peasant Organizations in a Chinese Movement for Alternative Development

Matthew A. Hale

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Professor Ann Anagnost, Anthropology

This ethnography examines four peasant organizations affiliated with New Rural Reconstruction (NRR), an ongoing alternative development movement in China. NRR consists of a diverse network involving hundreds of organizations, loosely united by the goals of reversing the rural-to-urban flow of resources and “(re)constructing” sustainable, self-sufficient communities based on cooperation among peasant households, supported by agroecological skill-sharing and alternative marketing. While many NRR advocates draw ideas and inspiration from China’s Rural Reconstruction Movement of the 1930s, the movement is better understood as a Chinese and postsocialist counterpart to the global wave of responses to neoliberalism associated with the Global Justice Movement (GJM). Both NRR and the GJM could be characterized as predominantly *alternativist* in their focus on fostering “alternative” economic forms (neither capitalist nor socialist), such as co-ops and “fair trade” networks. Another commonality with NRR is the GJM’s revival of “the peasantry” as a central political subject. In contrast with mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Third Worldism, NRR and the GJM represent the peasantry as primarily oriented not toward modernization, but the defense or revival of traditional lifeways

now valued as more sustainable than either capitalist or socialist models of industrial development.

I argue that, under present conditions, “success” at reversing the rural-to-urban flow of resources through commercial means tends to require further integration into capitalist processes, both increasing vulnerability to global economic forces and undermining values such as equality, sustainability, and participatory democracy. On the other hand, these values continue to distinguish NRR-affiliated organizations from conventional capitalist enterprises, creating tensions that point toward possibilities of confrontation with their broader social conditions. I thus engage critically with economic anthropology and the interdisciplinary literature on alternative economic forms, peasant cooperation, “culture,” and “value(s).” Drawing on a critical return to Marx in light of the failures of 20<sup>th</sup> century Marxisms, I introduce the concept of “alternativism” and a focus on the tension between alternative values and the capitalist form of commodity value. These innovations contribute to anthropological theory by providing tools for dealing with the post-1960s “epistemic impasse” of global political thought and the post-1990s situation, in which capital seems to be excluding an increasing portion of the peasant and semi-proletarian bodies it continues to dispossess from complete integration into wage relations, which Marx had seen as the fulcrum of capitalist society’s self-overcoming.

## Table of Contents

	<u>Page</u>
Acknowledgments.....	v
Unit Conversions.....	vii
Preface.....	1
Introduction: Overview of This Project and Chapter Summary.....	3
Part I: New Rural Reconstruction and Alternative Social Relations	
Chapter 1: Alternative Economic Forms and Peasant Cooperation.....	14
Chapter 2: Theory and History of New Rural Reconstruction.....	29
Chapter 3: Chinese Peasants and the Politics of Value.....	70
Part II: Case Studies of Peasant Organization in NRR	
Chapter 4: Wansheng Co-op, Anhui.....	114
Chapter 5: Raoling Co-op, Shanxi.....	158
Chapter 6: Liao Flats, Sichuan.....	211
Chapter 7: Peppercorn Village, Guizhou.....	253
Conclusion.....	282
Endnotes.....	288
Bibliography.....	306

## Acknowledgments

I dedicate this dissertation to my mom and dad, Linda Castle and J. Gregory Hale, for the immeasurable support and love you have provided throughout my life, without which this never would have been possible.

I extend special thanks to my friends in the New Rural Reconstruction movement for your hospitality and for sharing your lives and work with me. You are too many to list here, and I do not want to risk offending some by naming others. I hope that this dissertation has only positive influences on your lives and projects.

I would like to thank my mentors Ann Anagnost, Stevan Harrell, and Alexander Day for their guidance leading up to and throughout the research and writing processes. Few students are fortunate enough to have such an attentive and helpful committee.

I would also like to thank Jasmine Zhang for inspiration in this project and in life, help with research, suggestions on the writing, and patience; Peng Yinghao for help with research, hospitality, friendship, and ideas; He Siying for companionship and support throughout most of the research; Chang Tianle for hospitality, good food, and brutal honesty; Terry Narcissan for compassion at a crucial moment; Wang Juan for help with research, hospitality, and forgiveness; Christof Lammer for sharing his research, introducing me to the concept of “solidarity economy,” and commenting on the writing; He Yufei for help with research, thinking through it with me, and commenting on the writing; Jennifer Tippins for sharing her research, explaining settlement patterns, and sushi nights; Shayan Momin for sharing his research and helping me think through some of the issues; Trang Ta for hospitality and encouragement; Fan Jun, Gong Zhiwen, Ju Zheng and Savina Choi for help with research and ideas; Hairong Yan for inspiration, inviting

me to a conference that convinced me to resume this project, and commenting on the writing; Pun Ngai for being a role model and providing guidance at an early stage; Mindi Schneider, Ralf Ruckus, Yiching Wu, Jonathan Lassen, Li Derui, Ge Jian, Joseph Kurina, and Phillip Neel for friendship and ideas that influenced this project. I take full responsibility for any inaccuracies in this dissertation.

The research was funded by a University of Washington China Studies grant for pre-dissertation research (summer 2006), a Fulbright-Hays grant for Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad (December 2009-November 2010), an Association for Asian Studies grant for short research travel (summer 2012). Much of the material from my *Dialectical Anthropology* article (Hale 2013) has been interspersed throughout this dissertation, in thoroughly reworked form.

## Unit Conversions

1 Chinese yuan = 0.16 US dollar (as of April 2013)

1 Chinese yuan = 0.12 US dollar (as of April 2000)

1 *mu* = 1/6 acre = 1/15 hectare

## Preface

Body under a thatched roof,  
Eyes on the planet;  
Feet in the mud,  
Mind on the world's affairs.

— Dong Jiageng, 1961<sup>1</sup>

One hot summer day in 2010, this poem was shared with me by an elderly farmer called Auntie Wu in the Sichuan village of Liao Flats (discussed in Chapter 6).<sup>2</sup> She could not remember where she learned it – “perhaps in school,” but she would have completed the little schooling she had by the time this poem was written. It came to her mind one afternoon as we were pulling weeds and discussing how the small but influential organic farming project, in which she and her family played a prominent role, had connected them and many other Chinese peasants to activists from all over the world through shared concerns about global issues such as climate change, economic crisis, and the possibilities of more sustainable and dignified ways of life.

Later I noticed that her version of the poem differed slightly from the 1961 original, mainly in her substitution of the last line, “Heart/mind *caring* about the world's affairs” (心怀天下), with “Heart/mind *worried* about the world's affairs” (心忧天下). This is a subtle and probably insignificant difference, but I point it out in order to highlight the general decline in optimism between the 1960s and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century – a decline I associate with what some



have called the global post-1960s “epistemic impasse” characterized by the “unraveling of historico-political categories,”<sup>3</sup> the “depoliticization of politics,”<sup>4</sup> postmodernity, and catastrophism,<sup>5</sup> in which it is now “easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.”<sup>6</sup> This dissertation reflects such a decline in optimism, along with the desire to critique something like what Lauren Berlant (2011) calls the “cruel optimism” of the post-1980s era: “a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility” – a sort of dysfunctional adaptation to capitalism’s increasing socioecological precarity, in which “the object that draws your attachment” (fantasies of “the good life” as well as certain modes of political commitment) “actively impedes the aim that brought you to it,” leading to “the attrition or wearing out of the subject.” I would apply this term to certain tendencies on the global and Chinese left examined in this dissertation, which seem committed to wearing themselves out by repeating the mistakes of the past century, attempting to act in ways that reproduce their compromising conditions. The alternative I propose is not pessimism, but the hope of increasing our slim chances of “winning” by helping to clarify what that would have to entail – the conditions that would need to be transformed in order for “human community” to assert itself over “the community of capital” (Camatte 1988).

This ethnography attempts to do that by examining some limitations and alternative possibilities within a few modest and unevenly successful projects, such as Auntie Wu’s “sustainable living” collective in Liao Flats. I hope that a more widespread and critical awareness of such experiences contributes to the development of more transformative interaction between the bodies under thatched roofs and “the planet,” their muddy feet and “the world’s affairs.”

## Introduction

“New Rural Reconstruction” (NRR) is an ongoing alternative development movement in China. It consists of a diverse network directly involving thousands of people and hundreds of organizations, including NGOs, peasant organizations, academic institutions, student groups, “social enterprises,” and a few state agencies. It has also had broader indirect influence via news media, state policy, and overlapping social networks such as China’s broader environmentalist and cooperative movements. NRR is loosely united by the goals of reversing the rural-to-urban flow of resources and reviving, strengthening or creating – in a word, “(re)constructing” (*jianshe* or *chongjian*) – sustainable, self-sufficient communities based on cooperation among peasant households, supported by agroecological skill-sharing and alternative marketing.

Starting in 2002, a few intellectuals began publicly reviving the term “Rural Reconstruction” (*xiangcun jianshe*) from a Chinese social movement of the 1920s-1930s centered on mass education and agricultural cooperatives. Some NRR advocates actually use the term “New Rural Reconstruction” (*xin xiangcun jianshe*), whereas others say this is a “second wave” (*di er bo*) of the earlier movement (e.g. Pan and Du 2011a), and still others use neither term, yet they collaborate and share key ideas with the others, so it is appropriate to describe them all as part of a broad “NRR movement.” To complicate matters, in 2005 the Chinese party-state announced a broad rural development campaign titled “Construct a New Socialist Countryside,” often nominalized as “New Countryside Construction” (*xin nongcun jianshe*) – almost identical to the Chinese term for “NRR.” In response, many NRR advocates adopted this latter term, framing their position as a particular approach to implementing the state’s policy. (I discuss this policy and its relation to NRR in Chapter 3.)

While many NRR advocates draw ideas and inspiration from their historical namesake, overall the movement is better understood as a distinctly Chinese and postsocialist counterpart to the global wave of responses to neoliberalism associated with the World Social Forum and terms such as “the Global Justice Movement” (GJM, often dated symbolically to the Zapatista uprising of 1994).<sup>7</sup> The GJM (to which I argue NRR has been China’s main point of connection), is highly diverse, but like NRR its predominant currents could be characterized as *alternativist* in their focus on fostering “alternative” (neither capitalist nor socialist) economic forms – such as cooperatives and “fair trade” networks – under conditions dominated by capitalism, as if the two could coexist harmoniously.<sup>8</sup> Another commonality with NRR is the GJM’s revival of “the peasantry” as a central political subject. In contrast with mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Third Worldism (including China’s Maoism), NRR and the GJM both represent the peasantry as primarily oriented not toward modernization, but toward the defense or revival of traditional ways of life now valued as more ecologically sustainable than either capitalist or socialist models of industrial development. Both NRR and the GJM emerged in response to popular unrest in the 1990s, initially uniting the energy of multiple local struggles and eventually channeling that energy away from more oppositional expressions and into alternativist projects. One important difference is that, while for many the (now predominantly pacifist) GJM continues to derive legitimacy from its rowdier past and its continued appearance of grassroots militancy, for the most part NRR advocates have sought to distance themselves from any form of conflict, some encouraging peasant protest movements to reorganize into “constructive” co-ops (such as my first case, discussed in Chapter 4), and even framing NRR as a way to prevent Chinese peasant unrest from developing into the destabilizing forms associated with the early days of the GJM.

NRR is thus also similar to the “New Socialist Countryside” campaign, in that both emerged in response to peasant unrest and the contradictions of China’s postsocialist development in the 1990s and early 2000s. A key difference is that the ideology underlying NSC tends to treat these problems as primarily symptoms of rural China’s relative poverty that can be solved by more (capitalist) development, whereas NRR advocates generally regard certain aspects of that very development as the culprit.

This dissertation examines four peasant organizations affiliated with NRR, focusing on their efforts to negotiate the tension between their alternative *values* and the capitalist law of *value* under which they operate. I argue that, under present conditions, “success” at reversing the rural-to-urban flow of resources through commercial means tends to require further integration into capitalist processes, both increasing vulnerability to global economic forces and undermining values such as equality, sustainability, and participatory democracy. I thus engage critically with the interdisciplinary literature on alternative economic forms, peasant economy, and cooperatives, considering how such experiments might move beyond the limits of alternativism to play a role in the transformation of their socioeconomic context.

### ***This Research Project: Background and Methods***

I first became aware of NRR in the summer of 2005, when I visited China for pre-dissertation research on migrant worker organization. I was having second thoughts about this topic because, on the one hand, I realized that my attention would probably do more harm than good to those workers and advocates involved in organizational forms with which I sympathized the most, while on the other, I did not want to write a purely negative critique of those with which I disagreed more strongly. Meanwhile, some of these activists had noted that many

migrant workers maintained strong ties with the countryside, some hoping to return one day and retire from wage-labor, if only rural conditions improved. They told me about NRR, and out of curiosity, I attended the founding ceremony of the Rural Reconstruction Center at Renmin University in Beijing, followed by a workshop at the James Yen Institute for Rural Reconstruction in Hebei<sup>9</sup> – at the time, the movement's main base for networking, skill-sharing, and training among peasant activists and student volunteers.<sup>10</sup> There I talked to peasants (including returned migrant workers), along with students, academics, and NGO personnel from throughout China, as well as a few visiting activists from other parts of the Global South, such as India. I was immediately impressed by the energy and diversity of this movement – unlike anything I had seen in worker-advocacy circles.

One reason NRR had become so vibrant in the three years since its formal emergence (with the first national NRR meeting in December 2002) was that it now fit in with the Chinese party-state's new focus on rural development and institutional innovation since 2004. This major shift in policy responded to the rise of peasant unrest throughout central and western China in the late 1990s (along with the capitalist crisis of overaccumulation in the early 2000s<sup>11</sup>), and was influenced theoretically by both mainstream economists such as Justin Yifu Lin (former Chief Economist of the World Bank) as well as (to a more limited extent) a few left-leaning intellectuals now associated with NRR, such as Wen Tiejun, now Dean of the School of Agricultural Economics and Rural Development at Renmin University, and founder of the aforementioned NRR center there.<sup>12</sup> NRR began before these policy changes and remained basically independent from the party-state and its rural development initiatives. This independence and theoretical difference from China's mainstream developmentalism<sup>13</sup> have elicited mild repression at times, probably making NRR advocates more cautious or conservative

than they might otherwise be on certain issues. Overall, however, the party-state's relatively pro-rural policy changes created more space for NRR to develop, and made it a safer topic for my dissertation research. Since Alexander Day (2007, 2008, 2013) was already researching the intellectual debates influencing NRR from above, and since this movement has been oriented toward peasants, I decided to focus on the experience of peasant organizations affiliated with NRR.

I began networking among NRR advocates and visiting potential fieldsites in 2006, moving to Chengdu (where I found jobs teaching English and anthropology). After some twists and turns, in 2009 I stumbled upon a “community-supported agriculture” project in a nearby village I call “Liao Flats” (introduced in Chapter 6). At first I thought of switching my focus to China's growing movements around food and “sustainable living” (*kechixu shenghuo*), but soon I realized that the Liao Flats project was actually connected to the Beijing-based network I had associated with the term “NRR,” and the latter had also come to focus much of its work on organic farming, alternative marketing, and consumer education, beyond its original focus on peasant cooperation. NRR and the sustainable living/ alternative food movements had become deeply intertwined. Moreover, after attending a few conferences and visiting more sites associated with these movements, I came to identify several distinct currents that could be considered part of “NRR” in a broader sense (some using that term, some not, but all collaborating and acknowledging certain mutual affinities and differences from mainstream developmentalism). In 2010 I settled on the four main cases examined in this dissertation, because I felt that each exemplified one of four NRR currents or models (among perhaps seven total). Later I abandoned this idea of classification, but I still think each of my cases illustrates distinctive responses to a set of common problems.

This selection is fairly representative of situations throughout NRR as a whole. For example, the sites are distributed throughout northern, central, midwestern, and southwestern China.<sup>14</sup> All are predominantly Han Chinese areas.<sup>15</sup> Two (Raoling and Liao Flats) are in relatively wealthy areas for inland rural China, and the other two (Wansheng and Peppercorn) are relatively poor. Liao Flats is close to a major city, and the other three (like most NRR-affiliated peasant organizations, and most inland villages) are between one and three hours away from smaller cities, and at least a day's travel from major cities. Three are among the peasant organizations most widely publicized by NRR advocates, and the other (Peppercorn) is among the many lesser-known cases directly connected to NRR networks. Raoling is one of the largest and most successful peasant organizations in China (other than conventional enterprises and re-collectivized villages such as Nanjie, which are not affiliated with NRR<sup>16</sup>), whereas Wansheng is medium-sized, and the co-ops in Peppercorn and Liao Flats were both small until they dissolved. Raoling and Wansheng both began as independent peasant initiatives, while the other two were initiated by NGOs. (Missing is a government-initiated project; Lammer's [2012] study of one is discussed in the concluding chapter.) Finally, Wansheng is one of the few peasant "rights-defense" (oppositional) organizations that survived by re-organizing as a co-op, following the advice of NRR intellectuals. Although this is exceptional among NRR-affiliated organizations that still exist, it is important because NRR (like the state policy changes mentioned above) is largely a response to peasant unrest, and most of the peasants who attended the first NRR conference in 2002 came from rights-defense organizations. (I discuss the relation of intellectuals to peasants in Chapter 2, and the background of peasant rights-defense in chapters 3 and 4.)

I visited each site on at least three occasions between fall 2010 and summer 2012, each

time staying for between three days and one month. I also visited the offices of affiliated NGOs and attended related conferences on several occasions starting in 2005. Most of my information came from observation and formal interviews supplemented by informal conversations with members of the organizations, other villagers, visitors (such as customers, NRR volunteers, and other researchers), party-state officials, and NGO personnel, along with primary and secondary textual sources (internal documents, personal narratives, news reports, academic writings), as well as related videos and photographs.

My account of these projects and NRR in general is probably more critical than any English writings so far except that of Christof Lammer (2012). Most (as with much academic writing on activist projects in general) tend to be framed as something like advertisements, perhaps out of concern for how our writing might affect our informants and their work. I would therefore like to clarify here that my intention is not to belittle this important work that NRR practitioners are doing under difficult circumstances. Nor is my intention to offer them advice – many have asked me for advice, and my response is that it would probably be disastrous to follow any specific, practical advice I dared to give! My goal has been rather to learn from them in the hope of benefiting people with similar goals and ideals in other parts of the world. My primary audience, therefore, is not NRR practitioners, although I am of course sharing my work with them and trying to write in a way that will affect them positively if at all, awkwardly juggling three concerns: ethical care for my informants, the professional imperative of intellectual rigor, and the political desire to help push the global left beyond its present limitations.

### *Chapter Summary*



The bulk of this dissertation is divided into two parts, the first focusing on theoretical background, and the second on my four case studies. Part I has three chapters, on alternative economic forms, the theory and history of NRR, and Marxian theory of value. Chapter 1 introduces some interdisciplinary debates about alternative economic forms (social, solidarity, community, and peasant) of particular relevance to anthropology and NRR. Chapter 2 examines a few salient themes in NRR theory and history: NRR-affiliated theories of peasant cooperation (focusing on He Xuefeng and Wen Tiejun); Wen Tiejun's Polanyian theory of market utopianism and social protection (in relation Polanyi's own work and other recent adaptations thereof); NRR advocates' interaction with certain transnational trends (neoliberalism, landlessness, peasant unrest) and social movements (alternative development, especially the experience of Kerala, India); and the NRR discourses of "culture" and "values," with attention to both their contemporary transnationality and their distinctly Chinese genealogy. Chapter 3 reviews Marx's theory of commodity value as a lens for examining the theme of "alternative values," starting with a critique of Alice Bryer's ethnography of Argentinian co-ops, and introducing Ann Anagnost's analysis of the neoliberal Chinese discourse of *suzhi* ("human quality") as a more coherent interpretation of the relation between subjective values and commodity value. I then explain David Harvey's elaboration of Marx's crisis theory, focusing on "accumulation by dispossession" as both a salient characteristic of "neoliberal" or post-1970s responses to the declining rate of profit, and the most common target of peasant resistance, globally and in China. I interweave this theoretical explanation with an overview of relevant aspects of Chinese history since the 1960s, up to the emergence of NRR and the state's New Socialist Countryside campaign as two different responses to the rise of peasant resistance to

dispossession since the mid-1980s, and to fears that China might be headed for its own economic crisis.

Part II, the four case studies, starts with Chapter 4 on Wansheng Co-op in Anhui, one of the first dozen or so grassroots peasant organizations to be influenced by NRR. Wansheng began as a “rights-defense” movement against local state corruption and continues to combine such oppositionality with the sort of “constructive” cooperation promoted by NRR advocates. The chapter focuses on the co-op leaders’ efforts to navigate the tension between their commitment to alternative values such as economic justice and participatory democracy, on the one hand, and the need to generate income in order to fund community-oriented projects and attract young people back to the countryside, on the other. Chapter 5 turns to another grassroots organization with a very different background and trajectory, to which Wansheng leaders look for inspiration due to its relative economic success: Raoling Association in Shanxi, one of the largest independent peasant organizations in China. The chapter focuses on how Raoling’s commercial development seems to be generating capitalist relations within the organization and in relation to the broader peasant community. It also examines some of Raoling’s non-profit work, including quasi-feminist interventions into domestic relations which tend toward reforming patriarchy in ways amenable to the development of capitalist relations within the peasant community, as a deterrent against young women’s tendency to flee into urban wage relations.

Chapter 6 examines an NGO-initiated project in Liao Flats, Sichuan, focusing on how the tension between economic pressures and alternative values (especially informed by certain transnational currents of Buddhism and sustainable living that overlap with NRR) have contributed to several splits among and within cooperating peasant households. The chapter also looks at how the remnants of this NRR project relate to a new state project to relocate peasants

into new housing complexes, which I interpret as an effort to increase peasants' integration into the monetary economy to stave off capital's crisis of overaccumulation, and as a form of capitalist "accumulation by dispossession."

Finally, Chapter 7 introduces another NGO-initiated project in Peppercorn Village, Guizhou, whose main goal was to create income-generation opportunities for villagers laid off from coastal export-processing jobs after the financial crunch of 2008. The chapter shows how a co-op inspired by this project became a front for a private business based outside of the village, and relating to villagers and other peasant organizations throughout Guizhou in a basically capitalist way. The chapter then examines three land struggles involving co-op members and other villagers, arguing that such contentious action was more successful than the co-op in generating alternative values and broad-based cooperation.

The concluding chapter argues that all four projects were shaped by their capitalist context, and that the development of their alternative ideals and autonomous peasant power would require an outward expansion of their oppositional elements toward transforming that context.

**Part I:**

**New Rural Reconstruction and Alternative Social Relations**

## Chapter 1: Alternative Economic Forms

In this chapter I briefly review two areas of interdisciplinary theoretical debate with special relevance to my study: the mainly anthropological and geographical literature on alternative economic forms (under the labels “social,” “solidarity,” and “community,” with co-ops featuring prominently in each case), and the largely Chayanovian or “substantivist” literature on peasant economy and cooperation, with consideration of the less examined question of peasant class composition. In Chapter 2 I then relate this more general literature to the specific theory and practice of NRR.

### *Theories of Social, Solidarity, and Community Economy*

The terms “social economy” and “solidarity economy,” buzzwords for cooperative experimentation in Global Justice circles for over a decade, finally made it into recent issues of *Dialectical Anthropology* and *American Ethnologist* – via the Argentinean movement of occupied workplaces (Bryer 2012), Brazilian grassroots politics (Junge 2012), and the global “#Occupy” movement (Juris 2012). Alice Bryer (2012:22-23) notes that “In recent years, many scholars have begun to highlight the growing importance of cooperatives and other ‘participatory’ economic forms... as part of a social economy,” but “there remains no definitive concept of the social economy.” The most common definition, according to Bryer, is a set of “orientating principles” proposed by the European Committee of Cooperatives, Mutuals, Associations and Foundations (CMAF) in 1998, emphasizing “the primacy of the individual and the social purpose over capital” and “the coincidence of the interests of user members and the public interest”

(cited in Bryer 2012:23). According to Defourny and Develtere (1999:3), the term “social economy” was coined in early 19<sup>th</sup> century France (as “a different approach to the problem of political economy”), and by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century it had become associated specifically with “cooperative, mutualistic and associative organisations,” understood as constituting a “third sector” alongside “the private, for-profit sector” and “the public sector.” Some advocates have championed this “third sector” as central to efforts at forging a “third path” of economic development – “a middle way between capitalism and centralised socialism,” with examples ranging from Tito’s Yugoslavia to Nyerere’s Tanzania and Allende’s Chile (Defourny and Develtere 1999:9).<sup>17</sup>

By the 1980s, however, this “social economy” had become widely perceived (in countries such as France) as a set of “inflexible businesses indistinguishable from many others operating under private ownership” (Lewis and Swinney 2007:13). Activists in France, Colombia, and Chile thus proposed “solidarity economy” as a “more transformative approach to economic activism” (Miller 2010:2) – a political or ethical orientation which, for some advocates, might be applied to any of these three sectors, although in general it is more closely associated with the “social” or “cooperative” sector.<sup>18</sup> Since the mid-1990s this term and its associated networks and practices have spread throughout the Americas and Europe, becoming central to the Global Justice Movement and the World Social Forums. According to Miller (2006):

The first World Social Forum in 2001 marked the creation of the Global Network of the Solidarity Socioeconomy... By the time of the 2004 World Social Forum in Mumbai, India, the Global Network had grown to include 47 national and regional solidarity

economy networks from nearly every continent, representing tens of thousands of democratic grassroots economic initiatives worldwide. At the [2006] World Social Forum in Venezuela, solidarity economy topics comprised an estimated one-third of the entire event's program.

Miller (2006) argues that this spread of “the idea and practice of ‘solidarity economics’” stemmed from the historical convergence of three trends: First, “the economic exclusion experienced by growing segments of society, generated by deepening debt and the ensuing structural adjustment programs imposed by the International Monetary Fund, forced many communities to develop and strengthen creative, autonomous and locally-rooted ways of meeting basic needs.” Second, “growing dissatisfaction with the culture of the dominant market economy led groups of more economically privileged people to seek new ways of generating livelihoods and providing services,” leading to initiatives that “all shared a common set of operative *values*: cooperation, autonomy from centralized authorities, and participatory self-management by their members.”<sup>19</sup> (This notion of alternative values in relation to the capitalist value-form will be a central theme of this dissertation that I will introduce in Chapter 3.) And thirdly, “emerging local and regional movements were beginning to forge global connections in opposition to the forces of neoliberal and neocolonial globalization.” These movements, despite their diversity, tended to agree on “[s]eeking a democratic alternative to both capitalist globalization and state socialism,” emphasizing “community-based economic projects as key elements of alternative social organization.” In these senses, the idea and politics of “solidarity economy” are thus roughly equivalent to what I have been calling “alternativism,” except that the former does not necessarily exclude the possibility of more coherently anti-capitalist politics.

More recently, some activist scholars have attempted to refine the norms for intervention beyond the conventional senses of “social” and “solidarity” economy (e.g. Miller 2010, Wright 2013). Especially influential has been the work of geographers Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson (often writing together under the pen name J.K. Gibson-Graham), notably their theories of “economic diversity” and “community economy.” Their “economic diversity” framework developed from the critique of “totalizing narratives of capitalism” (whether liberal or Marxist) which describe capitalism as globally triumphant and all-encompassing. Gibson-Graham argue that such narratives lead to pessimism and foreclose discursive spaces that could facilitate the elaboration of noncapitalist economic forms. “The language of the diverse economy,” they explain, “widens the identity of the economy to include all of those practices excluded or marginalized by the theory and presumption of capitalist hegemony... If we can recognize a diverse economy, we can begin to imagine and create diverse organizations and practices as powerful constituents of an enlivened noncapitalist politics of place” (Gibson-Graham 2006a:xii). This framework thus complicates the conventional categorization of economy into private, public, and social sectors: on the one hand, it pluralizes each of these categories, while on the other, it brings into view the economic nature of other spheres of life, such as housework, gift economies, and (of particular relevance here) non-commercial aspects of “peasant economy” such as household production for use and the cooperative provision of public goods.

Gibson-Graham’s theory of “community economy” builds on this pluralistic framework to refine the normative coordinates for political or ethical intervention. Drawing on philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy’s reconception of “community” as an open-ended project of “being together” (as opposed to exclusionist ideas of community as “common being”), Gibson-Graham attempt to open up the discourses of “community economy” and “solidarity economy” to allow for a more



open-ended politics of experimentation that avoids drawing blueprints for an ideal mode of organization. Instead they propose defining “community economy” by a recognition of the interdependence of all beings and an ethical negotiation of questions such as “what is necessary to personal and social survival” and “whether and how a social surplus is to be produced and consumed” (2006b:88).

As examples of “community economy,” Gibson-Graham (2006b) examine several cases comparable to the NRR projects in my study. Their “first and theoretically formative encounter” with such an economy was the Mondragón Cooperative Corporation (MCC, in Spain’s Basque region), widely touted (including by NRR advocates) as the world’s most successful co-op (Gibson-Graham 2006b:124). MCC’s experience, they write, illustrates the ethical negotiation of economic interdependence, for example, through the democratic determination of how to distribute “communally-appropriated surplus,” and how to balance industrial growth with the increase of social well-being, including the setting of wages as well as the provision of social services for the wider community (Gibson-Graham 2006b:124-126).

They frame their account of MCC as “an ethical practice of weak theory,” “a partial counter to the tradition of essentialist or structural (and thus largely negative) readings of cooperative experiments, treating the circumstances confronting the cooperators as... material to be worked with and negotiated, rather than intrinsic obstacles or advantages” (Gibson-Graham 2006b:103). In contrast, this tradition they dismiss has argued that “the cooperative sector is insignificant and unthreatening to the dominant economic order, that cooperatives are unable to build sustainable interdependencies, that they are... not really distinguishable from capitalism, that cooperators are prone to the individual self-interest of the cooperative, and that cooperatives are... politically conservative and disinterested in solidarity with the more political struggles of

the left” (Gibson-Graham 2006b:111). These points roughly summarize the conclusions of anthropologist Sharryn Kasmir’s (1996) ethnography of MCC and working-class politics in the town of Mondragón. However, I would argue that Kasmir’s approach to co-ops is not “essentialist,” although “structural” may be an accurate description, if we understand that to mean that she (1) identifies consistent patterns in the history of co-ops in general (thus identifying tendencies that might be considered structurally inherent to the cooperative form), and (2) shows how these patterns are influenced by broader social structures or forces. In particular, she argues that patterns such as those outlined above (by Gibson-Graham) may be at least temporarily averted if a co-op is formed by participants in a widespread anti-capitalist mobilization, like the workplaces occupied and cooperatized in Argentina in the early 2000s. Kasmir (2012:61) comments on Bryer’s (2012) ethnography of these workplaces:

In the 1990s, with a disorganized working-class movement, and as part of an effort to make the labor market more flexible, the Argentinean state encouraged social economy businesses. Significantly, the state enacted cooperative legislation that allowed businesses to avoid the social security costs that were tied to formal labor, thus undermining workers’ past achievements.

Workers occupied their workplaces in the early 2000s in the context of the failure of neoliberalism in Argentina. The individual occupied firms were united, under left-Peronist and trade union leadership, into a national political movement (MNER), which as Bryer tells us, articulated a campaign for “dignified work” that linked workers’ struggles to other social movements. The [occupied workplace] movement distinguished itself from the social economy businesses of the neoliberal epoch, and it fractured in the

following years over issues of politics and purpose, a testament to many of the activists' devotion to meaningful social change.

In other words, “business forms, no matter how equitably designed, are not social actors; they do not make history or effect social change” (Kasmir 2012:60). The key question about alternative economic forms such as co-ops, then, should be “what kinds of political connections, networks, organizations, and aspirations are made in the formation and development, of a cooperative and its business practices?” (Kasmir 2012:61). This attention to the sociopolitical context in relation to which cooperation takes particular forms will be one of themes of this dissertation that I take up more explicitly in the concluding chapter. While on the one hand, Chinese NRR advocates have attended World Social Forums, visited the Zapatistas in Mexico, invited delegates from the transnational peasant network La Via Campesina to China, and at least one even protested against the WTO in Hong Kong, in general they have tried to distance themselves from popular struggles in China and advised “rights-defense” (anti-corruption, oppositional) collectives to “make the transition” (*zhuanxing*) into “constructive” organizations (as mentioned above and discussed in Chapter 4). Such a strategy would seem necessary in order to stay out of prison, but this approach to popular struggles is also consistent with the basically Polanyian framework of many NRR advocates, introduced below (a framework which overlaps with alternativism).<sup>20</sup> While such Polanyian and alternativist frameworks have become associated with peasant advocacy in recent years (e.g. Edelman 2005, McMichael 2008), Alexander Chayanov – the early theorist of peasant economy and co-ops – actually foreshadowed Kasmir’s approach in analyzing how peasant cooperation takes different forms in relation to different political contexts.

### *Peasant Economy and Cooperatives*

While some NRR advocates have embraced terms such as “social economy,” the academic literature on this discourse has tended to focus on urban co-ops, rather than cooperative experiments based on what many activists still call “peasant economy.” The idea of peasant economy was most influentially theorized by Alexander Chayanov (1986 [1925]) as differing from capitalist enterprise, even when peasant production (traditionally centered on production for use by the household and tribute to rulers, often supplemented by marketing) becomes incorporated into capitalist relations. Whereas capitalist enterprise is based on the extraction of surplus-value from workers through the wage relation, the peasant economy is based on the “self-exploitation” of a peasant household. Since the labor employed in the peasant economy is not calculable as a “cost” separate from “profit,” production is organized not according to the “cost—benefit analysis” of capitalist enterprise, but by the “labor—consumption balance” between “the drudgery of labor” and the satisfaction of household needs. In other words, peasants choose to work more or less, to invest in more or less labor-saving inputs, to expand or decrease production, to switch to different crops or specialize in certain cash crops, to invest in sidelines such as handicrafts, etc., according to a logic quite different from that of a capitalist enterprise. In general, peasant households tend to take fewer risks than capitalist enterprises. Therefore the latter (which also have more capital to make risky investments in the first place) are more likely to make larger profits, but they are also susceptible to closing and laying off workers, whereas peasant households can neither lay off workers nor close – at worst they can only die of starvation, migrate, or rebel against some perceived source of their poverty. However, to the extent that peasants maintain diverse systems of production for use without becoming

dependent on expensive inputs, they can be somewhat cushioned from the effects of market fluctuation, even when they also specialize in cash crops.

Feminists such as Hill Gates (1996) have pointed out that the so-called “self-exploitation” of household enterprises is usually, in fact, the exploitation of women and children by the male heads of households (or clans, in lineage-based societies such as southern China).<sup>21</sup> At the same time, as Chayanov already noted and others (e.g. Shanin 1987) have elaborated, the peasant household as a whole has usually (or always, as in Wolf’s [1966] definition of “peasant” as opposed to “primitive cultivator”) been exploited by external interests through taxes, rent, interest on loans, wage labor, *corvée*, and “unequal exchange”<sup>22</sup> in the markets for agricultural products and inputs.

More recent theorists have explored the ways in which the peasant condition has transformed through deeper integration into capitalist relations, and the globalization thereof. Already in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was widely believed that all peasants would soon be transformed into either capitalists or proletarians (whether due to capitalist development or socialist collectivization), but, as early as the 1890s, theorists such as Karl Kautsky (1988) began to argue that the peasant condition could continue indefinitely despite capitalist development. This prediction seems to have been correct, but it must be noted that the peasant condition has transformed over time, in different ways depending on the context. Historian Hamza Alavi (1987) coined the term “pre-formal subsumption” (of labor under capital) to describe the relation of South Asian peasants to British capital in the colonial context. Like the English peasants who made crafts at home for urban merchants in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (prior to their “formal subsumption” with the development of wage relations in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and “real subsumption” with mechanization, etc., in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – the terms are from Marx [1990:1019-1038]), colonial

Indian peasants effectively controlled their main means of production (land, livestock...), and capital's extraction of surplus-labor took place not through the wage relation, but through interest on loans and the "unequal exchange" of capital's control over the markets for products (and eventually inputs).

As many more recent studies imply (e.g. Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2009), such a framework could be extended beyond colonialism to the situation of peasants in many countries today, including China, except for two developments: (1) the term "pre-formal" should be dropped, since this situation has tended not to "evolve" into wage-based agriculture, but capital has nevertheless transformed the production process (as in "real subsumption") through off-farm relations of "unequal exchange"; and (2) at the same time, the same peasant households have also tended to undergo "semi-proletarianization" (or partial "real subsumption" through the wage relation) outside of agriculture, as they become increasingly dependent on wages earned by young family members working under modern industrial conditions (often for transnational corporations and their local contractors). This hybrid condition, which has come to predominate among peasant households in many countries including China over the past few decades, has led scholars to coin new terms, such as "semi-proletarian peasantry," "peasantariat," "polybian" (Kearney 1996), "worker-peasant" (Hann 1987) or "peasant-worker" (literal translation of the Chinese term *nongmingong*, normally rendered "migrant worker"). For the purpose of this dissertation, I stick with the term "peasant" when referring to households and communities as a whole, both out of convenience and because the households and communities in my study are still predominantly peasant in character, with wage labor and commercial activities generally treated as supplemental to the reproduction of the peasant household and community.<sup>23</sup> (There is a grey area between this norm and those former villagers who have settled down in the city and

cut off ties with the village, and also between peasant and capitalist farmers, for which cases terms such as “peasant-worker” may be helpful.) Another reason to use the term “peasant” is that, subjectively, two central goals of NRR – from the perspectives of both intellectual initiators and many peasant participants – are (1) to improve living conditions on the basis of peasant economy and community, as opposed to urbanizing the countryside or turning peasants into capitalists or wage-laborers, and (2) something akin to what Van der Ploeg (2008) calls “repeasantization” – in the case of my study, conceptualized as attracting the “social capital” of (often more educated, skilled, or worldly) villagers who have left to work in urban areas back into service for the peasant community (although in this case they are not necessarily expected to become peasants, but merely to somehow serve the community founded on the peasant economy – as in the NRR project discussed in Chapter 7).

After studying a variety of cooperative arrangements throughout Russia and Europe for many years, Chayanov wrote his *Theory of Peasant Cooperatives* (1991 [1926]) as a policy recommendation against the forced collectivization of agriculture that had been attempted briefly in 1918, and whose revival was being debated in the 1920s. (He was later executed for criticizing Stalin’s revival of forced collectivization.) Chayanov emphasized (in good faith, apparently) that collectivization was not necessarily bad, as long as it was voluntary, but he argued that (1) certain sectors of agricultural production were technically more convenient if managed by households instead of collective farms, and (2) in any case, collectivization was not an alternative to the development of a multi-tiered system of agricultural cooperatives and associations, whose members could be either peasant households or collective farms. Collective farms were, like capitalist farms, a means of “horizontal concentration” of agricultural production (like the concentration of industrial production from households and small workshops

into large mechanized factories), whereas agricultural cooperatives were a means of “vertical concentration,” like the capitalist institutions for financing farmers, producing and supplying agricultural inputs, and processing, transporting and marketing products. Different sectors of agricultural production and distribution were “optimized” (in terms of efficiency) at different scales, so even the largest collective was too small for some sectors and too large for others, whereas cooperatives of various scales could be set up for each sector (or each set of sectors at the same optimal scale) beyond the primary farming unit. In the capitalist context of Western Europe and Russia before 1917, market-oriented peasants and their advocates devised cooperatives of various kinds and scales as a defensive response to capitalist encroachments into the process of agricultural production and distribution before and after products left the peasant farm – capitalist “vertical concentration” that facilitated extraction of surplus-value from peasants via the “unequal exchange” of high capitalist prices for credit, inputs, processing and marketing relative to the low price capitalists paid peasants for their products. In the new “socialist” context of 1920s Russia, Chayanov argued that the existing cooperative system could expand to replace those capitalist institutions, instead of the state attempting to control agricultural production and distribution directly from the top down.

#### *Toward Autonomous Peasant Power, or Class Composition?*

One question that this literature has not explicitly examined is whether and how peasants might constitute a class in the Marxian sense of “class composition.”<sup>24</sup> Much of the “peasant studies” literature – as in the *Journal of Peasant Studies* and its spinoff *Journal of Agrarian Change* – have been devoted to debates about whether peasants might constitute a class in some Marxian sense, but this has largely been polarized between Marxist (exemplified by Henry



Bernstein and Terence Byers) and Chayanovian (or what these Marxists disparagingly call “populist”) perspectives (exemplified by Teodor Shanin and James Scott). In these debates, the Marxists (often explicitly following Lenin’s analysis of the Russian peasantry in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and Mao’s analysis of China’s peasantry in the 1920s) have generally emphasized the tendency toward class differentiation among peasants in contexts of external capitalist pressures and peasants’ increased dependence on ever larger scales of commodity relations (regarding both household production and migrant wage labor). The Chayanovians (or “substantivists” as an overlapping framework is called in economic anthropology – associated most closely with Karl Polanyi and his followers – discussed in the next chapter) have tended to emphasize the enduring commonalities among peasants, even in contexts shaped by external capitalist pressures, against which most peasants in general tend to share common interests.

Both approaches have merits, but regarding the question of peasant agency in relation to capitalism, I would like to push these discussions in the direction of the active composition of the autonomous power of peasants as a class against capitalist interests. The outlines of such a framework can be discerned in some of Marx’s writings, but it was first theorized as such by Italian *operaismo* in the 1960s. As the name of this tendency (literally “workerism”) indicates, this referred only to wage-laborers as such, but, following the Marxian approach to the relation between capital and peasants initiated by Alavi (introduced above), I argue that the “composition” framework may be extended to peasants as such (i.e. primarily as family farmers rather than as wage-laborers). Much of the relevant Italian literature has yet to be translated into English, so I rely mainly on its elaboration by the German groups Kolinko (e.g. 2001) and Gongchao (e.g. 2013), which has also been informed by the independent work of sociologist Beverly Silver (2003).

According to Kolinko, traditional Marxist notions of class are “*formal*” in that capital is reduced to “surplus labour-time... appropriated by private hands or by the state” and “working class” is reduced to “a mass of exploited individuals who have to sell their labour-power due to their non-possession of the means of production” – i.e. “objective class-in-itself” which might become a “subjective class-for-itself” through the development of “class consciousness” – either through Leninist pedagogy, on the one hand, or the autonomous experience of workers (according to various “ultra-left” tendencies), on the other. In contrast, Kolinko argue:

The mere fact that they are all exploited does not create a real coherence between the individuals. The possibility of self-organization can only be derived from the fact that workers have a *practical* relation to each other and to capital: they are working together in the process of production and they are part of the social division of labour...

To this end, Kolinko develop the *operaismo* notion of class composition by distinguishing between (1) technical composition, and (2) political composition. The former refers to “how capital brings together the work-force; that means the conditions in the immediate process of production (for instance division of labour in different departments, detachment from administration and production, use of special machinery) and the form of re-production (living-community, family-structure, etc.).” The latter, “political composition,” refers to “how workers turn the ‘technical composition’ against capital,” taking “coherence as a collective work-force as the starting-point of their self-organization and use the means of production as means of struggle.” In other words, “class” is not a meaningful category except when workers – or, I would add, peasants – *act* as a class through collective resistance to capitalist exploitation, in the process

creating new, autonomous social relations (and values) that point beyond capitalist relations and their regime of value. Moreover, this is not a linear process: the (technical and political) composition of a class is often reversed through strategies of “decomposition,” but that in turn may later be overcome through “recomposition.”<sup>25</sup> In Chapter 3 I return to the question of how this framework might apply to Chinese peasants, and in the conclusion I apply this to the analysis of my case studies.

## **Chapter 2: Theory and History of New Rural Reconstruction**

NRR advocates have developed their own set of theories in conversation with both the classic Chayanovian and substantivist frameworks and some of the more recent debates about alternative economic forms introduced in Chapter 1. In this chapter I examine a few aspects of NRR theory most relevant to my study: (1) NRR-affiliated theories of peasant cooperation, focusing on the work of He Xuefeng and Wen Tiejun in relation to the theories of Chayanov, James Scott, and Elinor Ostrom; (2) Polanyian aspects of Wen Tiejun's work as a non-Marxian framework for interpreting the relation of peasant communities to China's postsocialist marketization; (3) NRR advocates' interaction with certain transnational trends (neoliberalism, peasant landlessness and unrest) and social movements (alternative development, with Kerala as the most influential model); and (4) NRR discourses of "culture" and "values," with attention to both their transnationality and their distinctly Chinese genealogy since the Song Dynasty Confucian intervention into peasant culture, often cited by NRR advocates as a precedent for their work. Since NRR theory is inseparable from the movement's history, this theoretical overview is intertwined with some discussion of NRR's historical context. The latter is then examined in more detail in Chapter 3.

### ***Co-ops vs. Cooperation***

Historian Philip Huang (2011) – loosely affiliated with NRR – drew on Chayanov's theory of peasant co-ops in his own policy recommendation for postsocialist China's "new-age small farms and their vertical integration." Whereas Chayanov had advocated the organization of

co-ops into a system that would coordinate agriculture in the absence of capitalist competition, Huang advocates a “third path” that would “combine capitalist and socialist components,” with co-ops competing against capitalist enterprises on the same (state-regulated) market. Huang is confident that co-ops could out-compete capitalist enterprises, if only the state were to level the playing field by providing co-ops with the same advantages it has given to capitalist “dragonhead enterprises,” such as subsidies and tax holidays. Huang’s co-ops thus seem to remain at the level of Russian co-ops prior to 1917, “nothing more than an adaptation by small-scale commodity producers to the conditions of capitalist society and a weapon in the struggle for existence” (Chayanov 1991:22).

Such a Chayanovian critique of Huang’s proposal would resonate with sociologist He Xuefeng’s critique of the main current of NRR associated with Wen Tiejun. This critique is summarized in an influential article (He 2007a) distinguishing He’s “central China” approach to NRR from Wen’s “northern China” approach (the latter still less market-oriented than Huang’s proposal, as discussed below).<sup>26</sup> He cautions against the promotion of (commercial) co-ops, arguing that “under the conditions of a market economy and [an] extremely large number of peasants” with little land or other resources per capita, “peasant cooperatives can only be organized at the periphery of the highly competitive market for meager profits, but at a high cost of organization” (He 2007a:31). At a 2009 lecture on this topic, He estimated that over 90 percent of market-oriented peasant co-ops fail within the first year, whereas the economic and social costs of attempting to organize such co-ops often greatly outweighed potential benefits.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, He argues, “The predicament that the peasants are facing at this moment is not [primarily] the slow increase in incomes, but the rapid increase in expenditures” and “lack of supply of public goods” due to dissolution of socialist-era institutions and the marketization of

services. In addition, He believes a deeper problem facing Chinese peasants is their “loss of meaning in life” and the dissolution of both traditional (kinship-based) and socialist mechanisms of social cohesion, exacerbated by the “invasion of consumer culture.”

Therefore, instead of (market-oriented) *co-ops*, He Xuefeng advocates the promotion of (community-oriented) *cooperation* such as “cultural cooperation” (e.g. recreational activities) and the cooperative provision of public goods. He has promoted the cooperative provision of public goods in the form of village irrigation projects (discussed in Luo 2006). As an example of “cultural cooperation,” He (2007a:35) mentions his project promoting recreational clubs for the elderly (*laonian xiehui*) in Hubei. He and his followers (along with other currents of NRR – including that associated with Wen Tiejun) intend such “cultural cooperation” both to increase peasants’ sense of happiness and to foster cooperative norms and “social cohesion” (*shehui guanlian*). The former concern with “happiness” or “meaning” may seem to be a distraction from more pressing issues (as if such NRR advocates hope that peasants might forget about their material interests), but many of these scholars believe that the loss of both traditional and socialist forms of “cultural cooperation” (traditional folk opera, socialist propaganda troupes, public film screenings) has played a major role in pushing young people out of the countryside and hurting the quality of life for those who remain behind. He’s student Wang Ximing (2009:152) notes that in one of the villages where they initiated such recreational organizations, “the most obvious change since their seniors’ association was founded is that no one has committed suicide,” in contrast with the alarming increase of the suicide rate among elderly peasants throughout China, with “one-third of elderly deaths of the past ten years to be self-inflicted” in one village.

As for promoting social cohesion through cultural projects, NRR advocates such as He Xuefeng regard this as both an end in itself (in opposition to the social atomization they associate with consumerism and the marketization of rural life), and as an aid to more material forms of cooperation. This dual approach is informed by the literature on “collective action,” which Daniel Little (1989:38-43) summarizes in his discussion of the “moral economy” debate about peasant societies in Asia. Little identifies five social mechanisms that “facilitate collective action by rational individuals and offset the workings of narrow individual rationality”: stability, isolation, availability of information about other members of the community, shared values, and “multistrandedness” of relationships among community members. These mechanisms facilitate forms of cooperation such as mutual aid, risk-sharing arrangements, generalized cooperation and redistribution of wealth. According to James Scott’s (1976) study of peasant rebellion in Southeast Asia, modernization and the expansion of market relations into (in these cases, previously less marketized) peasant societies tend to undermine such mechanisms, leading to the violation of peasants’ “moral economy.” NRR advocates in both He Xuefeng’s “central China school” and Wen Tiejun’s “northern” current believe that such mechanisms have been similarly undermined in rural China over the past three decades of (more profound) marketization, preceded by socialist campaigns against some of their traditional cultural foundations.<sup>28</sup> The historical coincidence of these two processes in China has thus exacerbated problems in the cooperative provision of public goods associated with “narrow individual rationality,” such as “the free-rider problem.”

The free-rider problem is a notion from institutional economics that has become a key point of debate regarding the direction of rural development in China. Elinor Ostrom (often cited – along with Scott and Little – by NRR advocates in these debates), summarizes the problem

thus: “Whenever one person cannot be excluded from the benefits that others provide, each person is motivated not to contribute to the joint effort, but to free-ride on the efforts of others” (Ostrom 1990:6). Although theorists since Mancur Olsen (1965) have long explained how mechanisms such as those summarized by Little enable cooperators to overcome this problem in practice, popular accounts such as Garrett Hardin’s (1968) “tragedy of the commons” have spread the idea (including in China) that the tendency to free-ride dooms voluntary cooperation to failure, requiring public goods and common pool resources to be either nationalized or privatized. NRR advocates respond to such claims by historicizing the free-rider problem (following substantivists such as Scott) and then arguing that neither the Chinese state nor the market is capable of satisfying peasants’ needs for public goods under present conditions (because neither the state nor most peasants could afford it), so the best solution would be to revive or create social mechanisms facilitating cooperation and offsetting individualistic tendencies such as free-riding (e.g. He Xuefeng [2007b]; Peng and Chen [2011]).

Another historical factor that NRR advocates (such as He Xuefeng [2012] and Mao Gangqiang [2010]) have highlighted is the “ossification” of household land-use contracts in most parts of rural China – that is, their lack of periodic adjustment for demographic change or the construction of public infrastructure such as roads and irrigation ditches. Such construction often requires some villagers to sacrifice part of their land, and the state is usually unwilling to compensate for their loss (since villages are technically “self-administered” or “autonomous” from the Chinese state). This problem has been exacerbated since the early 2000s, when the state began prohibiting village committees<sup>29</sup> from levying fees for such projects on villagers without going through a complicated process of consensus-building, which (according to these scholars) is too time-consuming for village officials. Village officials’ workloads were already increasing



with the merging of administrative villages (usually three villages into one) around the same time (in order to decrease state expenses, as village officials' salaries were raised slightly in order to discourage embezzling from state development projects and the now illegal fees that had previously constituted a major part of their actual income). All this was aimed at decreasing the "peasants' burdens" (a term usually referring specifically to taxes and fees) in response to the widespread corruption and unrest of the late 1990s to early 2000s, but some of these changes led to a new set of problems for peasants, including the increased difficulty in providing public goods.

Chapters 4 and 7 include examples of peasant cooperation in providing public goods and dealing with the free-rider problem – in ways consistent with NRR theory, although both were independent peasant actions (those in Chapter 7 possibly influenced by external NRR advocates). These could be interpreted as something like "neoliberal" solutions to a partial "retreat of the state," but in these cases, what the state had retreated from was peasant resistance to the corruption endemic to the previous system of public-goods supply. In Chinese debates, this cooperative solution is generally posed as an alternative to both statist and neoliberal (private profit-oriented) models of public goods supply (e.g. Peng and Chen [2011]) – something like the idea of "social economy" as a "third sector" or "third path" discussed in Chapter 1, except that "social economy" includes market-oriented cooperation, whereas here we are dealing specifically with community-oriented cooperation.

It should finally be noted that He Xuefeng's aforementioned critique of Wen Tiejun's more market-oriented current of NRR seems a little unfair: the latter also promotes such community-oriented cooperation, albeit in combination with income-generation projects, advocating "comprehensive (*zonghe*) co-ops" as opposed to the "specialized" or "professional"

(*zhuanye*) co-ops favored by the Chinese party-state as well as both some (right-leaning) liberals<sup>30</sup> and more ambiguous academics such as Philip Huang. Whereas He Xuefeng sees *material* (public goods) and *immaterial* (cultural) forms of community-oriented cooperation as mutually complimentary, Wen and his followers tend to treat *community-oriented* and *market-oriented* cooperation as complimentary. All but one of the four main NRR projects in my study exemplify such a “comprehensive” model.

### ***NRR’s Polanyian Framework***

Alexander Day (2007, 2008, 2013) has discussed the intellectual and political background of NRR in great detail.<sup>31</sup> Here I highlight one aspect of that background: the basically Polanyian framework developed most explicitly by Wen Tiejun,<sup>32</sup> but which resonates across China’s postsocialist left (including other currents of NRR), and across those predominant currents of the contemporary global left that target neoliberalism instead of capitalism as such. According to Day (2008:25-26),

With the global rise of neoliberalism, the global left has taken a largely Polanyian political narrative, and this is true in China as well. Much of the postsocialist left in China views the market as an institution that must be restrained by social power if it is not to dominate society—a position somewhat close to that taken by the party during the first phase of the reforms in the 1980s. It was the second phase of the reforms, which began in the early 1990s, that became the primary target of the left.

Below I introduce Karl Polanyi's own framework in some detail, since the widespread adoption of his terminology is often divorced from the context of their theorization, and because I find this an illuminating angle from which to develop this dissertation's critique of alternativism. I then move on to certain Polanyian aspects of Wen Tiejun's own historical theory in relation to NRR.

### *Background on Polanyi*

Hungarian historian Karl Polanyi, writing in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, drew on the tradition of structural-functionalist anthropology to create what is probably the most influential alternative to Karl Marx's critique of economics, with significantly different political implications. Polanyi (1957:46, 57) argued that, whereas "man's economy, as a rule, is submerged in his social relationships" of a complex nature involving kinship, spirituality, etc., capitalism's marketization of society in the 19<sup>th</sup> century meant that, for the first time, "social relations [became] embedded in the economic system." Polanyi draws a distinction between traditional, socially-regulated "markets" and capitalism's self-regulating "market economy": "Though the institution of the market was fairly common since the later Stone Age, its role was no more than incidental to economic life" (Polanyi 1957:43). Whereas the previously dominant economic principles (reciprocity, redistribution, and self-provisioning) "do not create institutions designed for one function only," marketing requires "a specific institution, namely, the market." When marketing becomes the dominant principle, therefore, it creates its own autonomous economic system, dis-embedded from customary social arrangements, so "society must be shaped... to allow that system to function according to its own laws." In other words, "a market economy can function

only in a market society”: the transition from “isolated, [socially] regulated markets into a self-regulating market” requires the transformation of society in conformance with “the laws of the market” (Polanyi 1957:57, 71).

That transformation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however (attributed primarily to the “artificial” application of liberal doctrines, rather than “any inherent tendency of markets towards excrescence”), threatened to “annihilate” society by commoditizing its very “substance” – humans, our natural environment, and our “purchasing power” – under the economic categories of land, labor, and money.<sup>33</sup> In response to this threat, society resorted to various “protective countermeasures... designed to check the action of the market relative to labor, land, and money” (Polanyi 1957:57, 76). These included trade unions, factory laws and social policies with respect to labor; agrarian tariffs and land laws with respect to land; and centralized banking with respect to money.

Legislation for environmental protection was only just beginning at the time of Polanyi’s writing, but I find it symptomatic that he does not mention modern peasant movements or co-ops, since they were already a significant social force by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and more recently they have become perhaps the most commonly cited examples of contemporary “social protection” against neoliberalism (e.g. Edelman 2005, McMichael 2008, not to mention NRR advocates such as Wen Tiejun). Polanyi’s chapter on the social protection of land focuses instead on the reactionary movements of feudal “landed interests” to slow or reverse the commoditization of land through top-down legislation. In typical structural-functionalist fashion, Polanyi (1957:183) argues that “no institution ever survives its function – when it appears to do so, it is because it serves some other function... Thus feudalism and landed conservatism retained their strength as long as they served a purpose that happened to be that of restricting the disastrous effects of the

mobilization of land.” Feudalism could finally be abolished, he argues, only when states instituted new checks to the commoditization of land, and this occurred through the prudence of state policy-makers, rather than in response to the sort of modern peasant resistance described by Chayanov, Kautsky, et al., for the same time period.<sup>34</sup> Regardless of whether Polanyi’s account is historically accurate, it reveals something about his political orientation: the tendency to side with top-down state regulation to preserve social order against the action of subordinate groups. The latter he repeatedly describes as blindly pursuing their particular interests at the expense of other groups and society as a whole, and he especially highlights the conflicts of interest between peasants and workers, arguing that this was one of the key factors leading to the World Wars and fascism, for example (e.g. 1957:243) – as opposed to Marxian accounts that emphasize bourgeois politicians’ manipulation of peasants and workers to suit the needs of capitalist accumulation.

Contra anti-neoliberals who adopt terms such as “social protection,” therefore, we should keep in mind that Polanyi did not advocate such “countermoves,” at least not those involving the action of subordinate groups. His argument was that liberalism’s “utopian experiment” in “market economy” inevitably generated movements for social protection, and that the clash between these two tendencies led to war, fascism, and Stalinism. Instead of a market economy tempered by such protective measures, therefore, Polanyi advocated some form of socially-regulated or socially-planned economy. This distinction has led some scholars (e.g. Dale 2010) to argue that Polanyi’s position was ultimately not significantly different from that of Marx – that he advocated the replacement of capitalism with something else. This may have been true in Polanyi’s later writings, but in his most influential book, *The Great Transformation*, Polanyi made clear that (1) the technical and organizational aspects of modern industrial production could not be fundamentally transformed or overcome, (2) this meant that a “socially-regulated

economy” would actually be a state-regulated economy, in a system of competing nation-states, and (3) (state-regulated) markets, money, private property, and wage-labor would continue to play a major role in these “post-capitalist” economies – the main difference being that land, labor, and money would not be treated as commodities. As I discuss later in this chapter, Marx differed significantly in his conception of capitalism and the social processes (proletarian struggle against the capitalist value-form) that would be necessary to overcome it. Ultimately, therefore, the common use of Polanyi for reformist politics is basically consistent with Polanyi’s own position. More of a stretch, but still basically consistent, is the post-1980s adaptation of this framework to support alternativist projects aiming to (re)construct self-sufficient peasant communities buffered from the fluctuations of (ideally more state-regulated) markets. The confusion about “social protection” seems to be a merely terminological issue; for Polanyi, if markets are state-regulated, then there is no capitalism and thus no need for such potentially destabilizing “countermoves.” On this last point NRR advocates such as Wen Tiejun seem closer to Polanyi than many of the more confrontational anti-neoliberals in other countries.

### *Wen Tiejun’s Polanyi-esque Framework*

Wen and his influential “northern” current of NRR recently became more accessible to English speakers beyond the field of China studies due to an essay on “Ecological Civilization, Indigenous Culture, and Rural Reconstruction in China,” by Wen and three other founders of movement (including Lau Kin Chi, introduced below), published in the American socialist magazine, *Monthly Review* (Wen, et al. 2012:34-35). The essay says little about the theory or practice of NRR, but it is likely to be many English speakers’ introduction to this movement as

an important current of China's postsocialist left. One of the essay's main points is that NRR echoes its namesake (the 1930s Rural Reconstruction Movement) by "work[ing] with peasants in the countryside to deal with the same problem of natural and human resources being converted into commodities by the government's pro-capital policy, which was aimed at accelerating industrialization and its related urbanization. Like today, it also occurred during a time of suffering caused by the impacts of an overseas crisis" (Wen, et al. 2012:34-35). While somewhat vague, this comment indicates how Wen's framework resembles Polanyi's. Like Polanyi, Wen blames not capitalism but the supposedly misguided ideology and policies of economic liberalism for the "fictitious" commoditization of humans, nature, and purchasing power. One key difference from Polanyi is that, for Wen and his followers, this was less of a problem for the West, and became a more serious problem in China due to the latter's unique history and "national conditions" (*guoqing*).<sup>35</sup> These are believed to have left China with a more pronounced antagonism between the urban and the rural, so that "excessive" marketization has led to the rampant out-flow of these "fictitious commodities" from the countryside to the city, in a vicious circle where the loss of resources makes the countryside ever less capable of regeneration. The development of capitalist agriculture only accelerates this process, as it creates an incentive for the grabbing of land farther from big cities, by industrial farms requiring few of the displaced peasants as labor-power, thus hastening proletarianization and the destruction of even remote ecosystems.<sup>36</sup> Wen and his followers fear that, if these processes of de-peasantization do not slow, China's cities will be flooded with landless vagrants who cannot be stably absorbed and reproduced by the capitalist economy.<sup>37</sup> This would lead to unrest akin to that which Wen has observed in other developing countries, and which many Chinese intellectuals associate with a recurring cycle of peasant rebellions leading to the periodic collapse of Chinese civilization into

barbaric warlordism.<sup>38</sup> NRR is thus often posed, in conjunction with certain aspects of the party-state's pro-peasant reforms since 2004, as a Polanyian "social protection" against the specter of "chaos" (*dongluan*).<sup>39</sup> This should come as no surprise when we recall that one of the unifying goals of the original Rural Reconstruction Movement (including James Yen's later work in Taiwan and the Philippines) was to restore social order and prevent the revolution advocated by Communists at the time (Alitto 1979, Hayford 1990).

NRR thus comes across to some critics as an effort by urban intellectuals to re-attach the peasantry to the land, stemming the flow of unruly bodies into the cities, lest they degenerate into "Latin Americanized" slums, dens of vice and social unrest.<sup>40</sup> However, many NRR advocates grew up in the countryside and maintain relationships there, some privately describing themselves as "organic intellectuals" of the peasantry, even conducting "class struggle" against the "urban bourgeoisie" in the form of policy recommendations and NGO work.<sup>41</sup> This confrontational framing is less common than the more politically correct appeals to "harmony" and "stability," but it should also be noted that NRR is promoted by a diverse group of actors with a variety of goals, interests, and conceptual frames, from grassroots peasant organizations pre-dating NRR as such (like my first two cases in chapters 4 and 5), to the academics who started bringing them together in 2002, to student volunteers who vary from NGO careerists to would-be revolutionaries to would-be corporate executives. Despite this diversity, however, the various NRR perspectives tend to share some version of this basically Polanyian framework and the goal of social stability.

### ***NRR's Engagement with Global Trends and Movements***



This engagement with Polanyi's theory is an example of NRR's transnational interaction, even if NRR advocates add their own twist to that theory and describe China's problems as uniquely Chinese. As noted at the start of this chapter, since the late 1990s the intellectuals and (to a lesser extent) peasants who would form NRR have been deeply influenced by transnational trends and social movements. Negatively, one of NRR's starting points was the recognition among a group of intellectuals that some of the goals guiding China's development strategy had already been achieved by other developing countries, with disastrous results. These intellectuals deduced that China must change its course if it wanted to survive as a nation-state, and like many early 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese intellectuals grappling with a similar problematic (including the original Rural Reconstruction advocates as well as the Maoist wing of the Communist Party), they turned to the peasantry as a possible foundation for forging an alternative "Chinese" path of development. Positively, NRR advocates have been inspired by other developing countries' social movements and alternative experiences of development that took shape in response to such failures of mainstream development.

### *Negative Lessons of Neoliberalism and Peasant Rebellion*

As Day (2007, 2013) explains, the intellectual foundation of NRR could be traced to the critical reflection among scholars such as Wen Tiejun on both China's century-long experiences of development *and* the fate of other so-called "late-developing societies" that had already achieved some of the goals guiding China's development strategy, especially as refocused and deepened since 1992. That strategy emphasized marketization, privatization, and the industrialization of agriculture as necessary for raising China's level of economic development.

As mainland scholars began to notice the social problems caused by China's very developmental successes of the 1990s, they also began to visit other developing countries and meet scholars and activists there who had long been struggling with similar problems. As Wen wrote in his essay "Deconstructing Modernization" (2007:16-17):

Communicating with intellectuals from developing countries yielded completely different ideas [from those prevailing in both China and the West]. Especially in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and South America, I discovered that the problems they thought about were almost totally beyond our field of vision. In fact, many of the goals that China planned to achieve had already been achieved in these countries.... Mexico [for example] is far ahead of China in terms of its degree of privatization, liberalization, democratization, and marketization... Yet Mexican society is extremely polarized with huge disparities between urban and rural areas. The problems in rural areas are complicated and at times lead to intense conflicts.<sup>42</sup>

They interpreted the Zapatista uprising, Brazil's landless movement, and guerilla activity throughout South Asia as examples of violent popular responses to the problems caused by development according to what they call the "the Western model" of "vulgar economic growth," defined by high levels of urbanization, GDP growth, and per capita consumption. That model, they now realized, depended on colonial expansion, genocide, and ecological destruction that could not be replicated by nations such as China within the present global conditions. When such nations attempted to do so within the confines of their own territories, numerous problems ensued, the most important for NRR advocates being the formation of large populations with

neither traditional means of subsistence nor secure employment in the globalized market economy.

These scholars' recognition that China's development was leading to such an outcome became their primary moral and governmental justification for launching NRR.<sup>43</sup> Morally (often framed in terms of "values"), these scholars proposed that people would be better off as peasants, using the market only to supplement their subsistence economies, than as landless urbanites unable to earn enough money through legal channels to lead a dignified existence. Governmentally, they argued that such a development strategy would only increase the instability that state leaders associate with China's rural and semi-rural population. As Wen wrote in one policy recommendation, "As soon as large-scale slums form in the cities, they simply cannot be penetrated by regular governmental control. That means control by criminal organizations; the spread of prostitution, gambling, and drugs; the unprecedented intensification of social contradictions; and the impossibility of establishing the rule of law" (cited in He 2007b:6). Other NRR advocates (e.g. He 2003, Tan 2007) discovered through sociological and ethnographic research that even without advanced urbanization, aspects of China's development, such as the atomization of rural communities and the marketization of social relations, had already led to some of these problems becoming common throughout the countryside itself.

At the extreme, these critics noted that, as people in other developing countries lost their means of subsistence and were unable to integrate fully into the market economy, they often resorted to violent forms of resistance similar to that once led by China's own Communist Party. In Wen's (2003) report on his visit to Mexico, he wrote that his conversations with Zapatistas there taught him that their struggle was analogous to China's earlier land reform movement, and that, for all of China's rural problems today, collective ownership of land ensured that China's

peasants at least enjoyed the means of subsistence that people in many countries were still struggling to acquire. Wen later made a similar point at the 2005 founding ceremony of the Center for Rural Reconstruction at Renmin University, where foreign guests spoke of their experiences with movements in other countries where many peasants and former peasants lack basic resources. Opposition to privatization and revival of the collective aspects of China's ambiguous system of rural land tenure thus became cornerstones of NRR's engagement with state policy – reflecting the Polanyian idea of reversing the commoditization of land and labor.<sup>44</sup>

Among social movements in other developing countries, then, those involving violent struggles over resources became a negative foundation against which NRR took shape. For obvious political reasons, NRR advocates have been hesitant to publish approving statements about such movements, but some are interested in the positive lessons to be learned from them. In Wen's 2003 report from Mexico, his main questions for the Zapatista leaders concerned "the structure, functioning, and financial basis" of their *difang zizhi*, that is, local autonomy or self-governance. Wen likened this system to the Chinese notion of *cunzhi* or "villager self-governance," a concept I discuss below as one starting point of China's original Rural Reconstruction Movement, and which some NRR advocates also apply to their own experiments.<sup>45</sup> Wen also likened the Zapatista system to China's Communist "liberated zones" of the 1920s-1940s, noting that the Zapatista army and government rely mainly on their own "collective economy," and that they voluntarily provide public goods such as education and health care. Two years later, Lau Kin Chi – professor of cultural studies at Lingnan University (Hong Kong) and one of NRR's main links to overseas currents – made the bold step of teaming up with mainland feminist scholar Dai Jinhua to translate and edit mainland China's first collection of Zapatista writings, photographs, and artwork (Dai and Lau 2006). Both the choice

of material and the focus of Dai's introduction are consistent with NRR's emphasis on "cultural" mobilization that I discuss below. The book avoids any direct statement about how the Zapatista experience might relate to China or NRR, but it does mention that the editors' 2002 visit to Chiapas, along with Wen Tiejun and sociologist Huang Ping, was part of a "social research trip," one of several this group has made to developing countries since the late 1990s. According to interviews with other NRR advocates, however, the Zapatista experience is mainly regarded as a negative lesson that China should not privatize rural land or relinquish state protection of the peasant economy.<sup>46</sup>

### *Kerala's Positive Lessons of Alternative Development*

The more important positive influences on NRR have been those movements forging alternatives to mainstream development through mainly non-violent means. Among these, the most influential is the experience of Kerala State in India, especially its combination of mass education led by the non-governmental People's Science Movement, or KSSP, since the 1970s, and increased state support for local "participatory development" projects under the Communist Part of India (Marxist), or CPIM, since 1996. This combination has helped Kerala to achieve a First World level of "social development," defined by quality of life indicators such as life expectancy, despite the state's low level of "economic development."<sup>47</sup>

NRR advocates' attraction to Kerala might best be summarized by sociologist Huang Ping's comment that "We all want revolutionary change without a violent, bloody revolution," and Kerala seems to offer a model of "reformist revolution (*gailiangzhuyi de geming*) in both technological and institutional senses" (Huang, et al. 2001). This statement comes from 2001, when Lau Kin Chi helped organize a group of mainlanders, including Huang Ping and Wen

Tiejun, to visit Kerala and learn about its alternative development experience. Upon their return, several of these visitors met to discuss “Kerala’s lessons for China,” and two of China’s prominent intellectual magazines published excerpts from the discussion (Lau , et al. 2001; Wen, et al. 2001).<sup>48</sup> This was the first time China’s original Rural Reconstruction Movement was compared to a foreign experience of “alternative development” (*linglei fazhan de moshi*)<sup>49</sup> in a core Chinese periodical.<sup>50</sup> A mainland anthropologist named Wu Xiaoli commented that “Kerala isn’t the first place where the ideal of ‘bottom-up’ democracy has emerged; it was also doubtless a part of Gandhian thought, and in China, this sort of ideal can be found in the Rural Reconstruction programs of people like Liang Shuming” (Lau, et al. 2001:55). The main difference seemed to be “the power of practice,” that is, that “Kerala isn’t a treatise on bottom-up, participatory democracy, but rather a more complex living experience full of tensions and unpredictable factors” (Lau, et al. 2001:56). Most salient to these Chinese observers seemed to be KSSP’s ability, starting with only a handful of academics in the late 1960s, to grow within two decades into a state-wide movement with over ten thousand members and significant contributions to Kerala’s development record, for which it won the Right Livelihood Award in 1996 (called the “alternative Nobel Prize” in these transcripts).<sup>51</sup> “Was such a movement possible in China?” asked Wu (Lau, et al. 2001:56). Wen Tiejun pointed out that China already had over ten million state-funded personnel comparable to KSSP cadre in the fields of science and technology popularization, supply and marketing cooperatives, and so on. The problem was how to imitate Kerala’s “bottom—up” system of determining the provision of public goods (Lau, et al. 2007:56-57). Wen and others had been promoting similar experiments for years, but these efforts seemed to have little effect on a national scale. The key, they argued, was to “unite these scattered efforts” into a coherent “movement,” and Lau pointed out that KSSP’s success in

creating such a movement lay in its combination of long-term extra-governmental work with participation in state and local policy-making via the CPIM (Lau, et al. 2001:57 and Huang, et al. 2001).<sup>52</sup>

The discussion of Kerala's Maoist-inspired CPIM and its association with mass education points to the developmental mobilization of "culture" that NRR shares with both the original Rural Reconstruction movement and foreign currents such as KSSP. I analyze this notion of "culture" in more detail in the next section; here I just want note that in these 2001 transcripts, Lau explained that many KSSP leaders also belong to the CPIM and draw inspiration from their impressions of China's Cultural Revolution, "emphasizing cultural over material change because they aim for long-term, profound transformation" (Huang, et al. 2001). Lau's mainland interlocutors seem to have dealt with the tension between their attraction to Kerala and their mixed feelings about (Chinese) Maoism by attempting to delink "revolution in a cultural sense" from China's "Cultural Revolution," linking the former instead to Gramsci, Gandhi, and Liang Shuming. For example, Dai Jinhua interjected that "Actually this is Gramscian, it is a strain of Marxist cultural theory; it doesn't necessarily come from China. I think that when we talk about cultural revolution against China's historical background, first we have to distinguish 'the Great Cultural Revolution' from *revolution in culture*, in the sense of values (*linian*) and thought. I believe that cultural revolution [in the latter sense] is primarily Gramscian" (Huang, et al. 2001).<sup>53</sup> Sociologist Huang Ping granted that China had at times experienced a "lively, self-confident atmosphere formed by people's active participation," but said that this atmosphere was in each case "replaced by the bureaucratic system, and the creativity and imagination of the commoners vanished, leaving only a relation between managers and managed" (Huang, et al. 2001:53-6). Kerala's "revolution in a cultural sense," on the other hand, appeared to be a

“Gramscian” “process of reorganizing people,” of “preparing the organizational basis for social democracy” and “mobilizing [the masses’] consciousness of being democratic subjects (*minzhu zhuti yishi*)” (Lau, et al. 2001:52; Huang, et al. 2001). As in both Liang Shuming’s Rural Reconstruction and much NRR discourse, then, the “social movement” envisioned here consists of intellectuals going down to the countryside, less to learn from the peasantry so much as to transform them through education to be capable of better governing and developing themselves, with “culture” understood as the sphere of this transformation. (This developmental mobilization of “culture” resonates with certain discourses of pre-modern Confucianism and modern colonialism, Maoism, and neoliberalism I will discuss in the section on “culture” below.)

This 2001 study tour coincided with the debate over China’s entry into the WTO, framed by postsocialist Chinese leftists (including NRR advocates) as a question of “neoliberal globalization,” or integration into a global market dominated by transnational capital. NRR advocates argued that China should either withdraw from the WTO or press to change its policies to protect China’s “peasant economy/ies”<sup>54</sup> from competition from foreign agribusiness, but, at the same time, that China should to continue to serve as the world’s workshop to give peasants the chance to earn a little money through migrant wage-labor to supplement their locally self-sufficient economies. This dual position is consistent with the Polanyian framework outlined above, in that it treats markets as on the one hand potentially threatening to peasant communities, but on the other hand as something to be embraced if regulated by state intervention to protect those communities.

China’s entry into the WTO became a “basic state policy” in 1999, so since that time most (proto-)NRR advocates have not explicitly argued against China’s membership, but some have continued to criticize WTO policies, including details of China’s 1999 agreement with the



US on “agricultural cooperation.”<sup>55</sup> As late as 2007 Li Changping (the former county-level official who played an even bigger role than Wen Tiejun in popularizing the plight of China’s peasants with his open letter to Premier Zhu Rongji in 2000) boldly declared, “Within the WTO framework, the free and equal exchange of farm products is pure hogwash (*wu ji zhi tan*).”<sup>56</sup> This was also one of the few mainland publications mentioning the 2005 protests against the WTO meeting in Hong Kong. To support his argument, Li cited the words of a protestor from the Filipino peasant organization KMP (Peasant Movement of the Philippines) to WTO director-general Lamy: “Now that most of our peasants have been forced into bankruptcy, only a few have become agricultural workers. Most have crowded into the cities, but there are not enough jobs in the cities. Hong Kong alone has over 700 thousand highly-educated Filipinas (working as domestics).”

Beginning with the 2001 study tour, Kerala became the most frequently invoked example of a viable alternative to both the neoliberal model associated with the WTO, on the one hand, and the fully state-planned model associated with Mao-era China, on the other.<sup>57</sup> In one excerpt from the Kerala discussion, significantly titled “What Kind of Globalization?,” Wen Tiejun’s opening lines were his observation that Kerala was, like China, “basically a peasant economy,” with state-imposed limits on land tenure preventing the return of landlordism, but that, unlike China, it seemed to have solved the problem of “effective rural governance” and public goods provision by giving peasants the material and “cultural” resources to govern and develop their own village communities. KSSP’s educational work had, according to Wen, established the “organizational basis and behavioral patterns” necessary for peasants to participate in planning and implementing the use of state funding in combination with the “traditional low-cost mechanisms” of “villager self-governance” (Wen, et al. 2001:3-5). Lau Kin Chi pointed out that

Kerala's developmental success was being threatened by globalization, including the importation of cheap products from China that put local enterprises out of business, so the first demand of the CPIM's platform was that India withdraw from the WTO (Wen, et al. 2001:6-7). This did not mean, however, that India and China had to stop trading. "What we really want is a market in the original sense," said Huang Ping, referring to historian Fernand Braudel's (basically Polanyian) distinction between markets and capitalism, and to a CPIM leader's statement that Kerala was practicing "people's capitalism," since the state "criticizes big capital and promotes people's participation, women's groups, microfinance, etc." (Wen, et al. 2001:10 and Lau, et al. 2001:27). The real enemy, therefore, was not the international market, nor even capitalism as such, but "big transnational capital," based mainly in the US, so India and China could cooperate in resisting globalization and developing their national economies in alternative ways that would not destroy their peasant communities, natural resource bases, or social stability.<sup>58</sup>

When NRR made its public debut with the 2002 national meeting in Beijing, attended by dozens of peasant and students activists from throughout China, Lau lectured and distributed materials on Kerala's alternative development experience and its relevance to China's "rural reconstruction." One of these peasants from "a poor mountainous region in western China," wrote a letter of thanks to Lau and the two KSSP leaders whom she had discussed at the workshop and her publications, explaining that his village's "mutual aid association" (*huzhuhui*) was applying their lessons by establishing a village library, a clinic with public lectures on health and hygiene, and a school (*buxiban*) for popularizing science and technology (Ma 2004). Lau and her Hong Kong colleagues published this letter and their response<sup>59</sup> in *China Reform – Rural Edition* (Wen Tiejun's magazine that served as NRR's main public forum from 2001 until its closure in 2004), along with several articles and interviews on Kerala and KSSP (Lau, et al.

2003). Once the James Yen Institute for Rural Reconstruction opened in 2003, Lau and other activists introduced such alternative development experiences and ideas to hundreds of other peasant and student activists who attended dozens of workshops there until the institute's closure in 2007.<sup>60</sup> Lau's Hong Kong-based NGO<sup>61</sup> and several mainland academic institutions supporting NRR<sup>62</sup> have also arranged several opportunities for overseas activists to travel to China and interact directly with Chinese peasants, students, and intellectuals, and another visit by mainland activists to Kerala and the World Social Forum in 2004. Overviews and transcripts of several of these events have been published online and in core periodicals.

### *Ambiguous Lessons from Korea*

As NRR's coherence as a movement became complicated by factors such as the "New Socialist Countryside" campaign, so did its references to foreign experiences become somewhat convoluted. Academics, officials, and journalists of all stripes flooded the bookstores with policy recommendations, and Kerala became just another name among dozens of overseas models for "constructing a new countryside." However, NRR advocates continued to argue against neoliberal globalization, the Western model of rural development and its Eastern variants such as Korea's *Saemaul Undong*.<sup>63</sup>

At a 2006 international conference on "Constructing a New Countryside" attended by specialists from India, Vietnam, and the Philippines, Wang Ximing (one of a few NRR advocates among over 60 presenters) analyzed the rural development experiences of France, Japan, Korea, and Kerala. He concluded that only Kerala's experience was "worth emulating" and "surpassing" because only India's "level of economic development," population to resource ratio, and "place in the international division of labor" was comparable to China's.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, he recommended

that China be especially wary of Japan's mistake of losing much of its arable land to urbanization and becoming over-dependent on grain imports. Finally, he added that, due to the extreme diversity of China's rural areas and the limitation of resources available for rural development, "New Countryside Construction" should focus on mass education and "cultural reconstruction" to "mobilize peasants' initiative and creativity" in "improving the self-governance of village communities" and "raising the level of physical and spiritual welfare."<sup>65</sup>

Few NRR advocates have published explicit criticism of Korea's *Saemaul Undong* (SU), probably the most frequently invoked mainstream models by policy advisers such as Justin Yifu Lin. According to Looney (2012:202), "since 2005 tens of thousands of Chinese officials have studied the New Village Movement [*Saemaul Undong*] as a model rural development policy." Even in Wang Ximing's (2006) conference paper, the only reason he gave against adopting the SU model was Korea's different "national conditions" from China. In an interview,<sup>66</sup> however, Wang said that some of the SU's basic goals and results were the opposite of NRR's: the SU aimed to speed up urbanization and the transfer of labor-power from agriculture to other sectors, stimulate consumption, and "modernize" rural culture, in effect destroying the traditional peasant culture and economy, reducing the rural population to only 15%, and making Korea heavily dependent on grain importation (like Japan, whose development model he had criticized more explicitly in the article). NRR, on the other hand, aims to slow down urbanization to a rate more suitable for China's "national conditions," and to preserve and revive certain aspects of traditional peasant culture and economy, including its basic self-sufficiency through production for subsistence rather than sale, and its overall frugality (valued by NRR advocates such as Wang for both ecological and social reasons – as discussed in the section on "values" below).<sup>67</sup>

On the other hand, Wang disagrees with a mainstream critique of the SU made by Shi Lei (2004)<sup>68</sup> – actually (according to Wang) directed against NRR. Shi Lei had written that the SU was largely based on state mobilization of the peasantry, and in this regard it reminded him of China’s Mao-era mass mobilization, which some NRR advocates (including Wang and others in the “central China” current) appraise more positively than mainstream academic and party-state discourse. Shi Lei warned that such mobilization is dangerous because the state can lose control of the popular forces it has unleashed (on the extent to which that happened in the SU, see Moore [1984]).<sup>69</sup> Wang agrees that the weakness of Maoist mobilization is that it “failed to find a solution to the problem of how to maintain order under the conditions of Big Democracy,” but he disagrees that mass mobilization is inherently dangerous, maintaining his position that NRR should use some form of mass mobilization and “mass supervision” of the party-state to “prevent bureaucratization” and ensure that the state serves the interests of the peasantry. (Wang [2009] also alludes to this potentially supervisory role of autonomous “mass organizations” in his report on associations for the elderly that he helped establish in Hubei.) It is in this respect that Wang believes certain aspects of Korea’s SU may be worth emulating.<sup>70</sup>

### ***The Genealogy of Culture and Values in (New) Rural Reconstruction***

As mentioned in reference to NRR advocates’ interest in Kerala and their efforts to revive social cohesion in China’s countryside, the ideas of “culture” and “values” have played an important role in NRR, as they have in Chinese intellectuals’ efforts to transform the peasantry throughout modern times and its proto-modern antecedents. Lydia Liu (1995:239) notes that the modern Chinese word *wenhua* (redefined from its traditional sense of “artistic cultivation” or “literary transformation”<sup>71</sup> to become a translation of European terms for “culture” around 1900)

became one of China's "principle sites of ideological struggle in the twentieth century." She argues that "the changing meaning of *wenhua* has to be investigated in light of its specific historical ties to other languages and discourses" (Liu 1995:240). NRR discourse on *wenhua* intersects with transnational discourses that have similarly emphasized culture, generally as something in need of transformation by enlightened intellectuals in order to promote one or another version of development. These discourses could be traced back at least to early modern European imperialism and some of its Third World anti-imperialist alternatives, but they also continued through late Maoism and its transnational influences – both on alternative development practices in places such as Kerala, and on the post-1960s "cultural turn" in Western/global political thought (Ross 2005). The extent to which Maoist ideas such as "cultural revolution" were in turn influenced by distinctly Chinese precedents is debated.<sup>72</sup> In any case, the old and new Rural Reconstruction discourses of "culture" and "values" have explicitly drawn on pre-modern Chinese elements while giving them new meaning in relation to the modern, transnational discourse of development and its capitalist regime of value.

### *Modernizing Culture*

The Rural Reconstruction Movement interwove pre-modern Chinese ideas with the modern discourse of culture that emerged – in China and elsewhere – in response to global capitalism and its 19<sup>th</sup> century manifestation in European imperialism. Guy Alitto's (1979) study of Liang Shuming (the Rural Reconstruction theorist most studied by NRR advocates and student volunteers –with Alitto's book as their most common source!) addresses this discursive hybridity, although in different terms than mine: when non-Western societies "were confronted with modernization," he writes, "'culture' came to be understood in an important new way"

(Alitto 1979:10). Already “within the heartland of bourgeois utilitarian society itself,” he notes, “the idea of culture also appears and performs a function quite similar in some respects to its role in the more traditional societies.” As Raymond Williams’ observed about this idea’s emergence in 18<sup>th</sup> century England, “culture” became “an abstraction” indicating “the practical separation of certain moral and intellectual activities from the driven impetus of a new kind of society,” and “the emphasis of these activities as a court of human appeal, to be set over the processes of practical social judgment and yet to offer itself as a mitigating and rallying alternative” (quoted in Alitto 1979:10-11). This modern sense of “culture” developed in a slightly different direction in societies encountering or perceiving modernization as a foreign incursion, such as post-Enlightenment Germany, which “most systematically developed a concept of culture which focuses on people’s interior feelings in opposition to the social and economic rationalizations that were changing Europe’s exterior” (Alitto 1979:11). This separation between spiritual and indigenous “culture” as opposed to material and foreign “civilization” led – throughout the “non-West” – to “claims both to the superiority of indigenous spiritual culture as well as for the progress made possible by a selective borrowing from Western material culture” (Alitto 1979:12).

One point that Alitto glosses over is the element of imperialist force that distinguished many non-Western, often anti-imperialist formulations of “culture” (such as those in China) from European Romanticism. This meant that debates about “indigenous spiritual culture” and their relation to “Western material culture” became matters of life and death, involving questions such as: to what extent must a society westernize in order to survive in the modern (capitalist) system of nation-states? Which elements of indigenous culture should be retained? The latter question usually focused on the emerging notion of national identity, but sometimes it involved a broader

critique of Western civilization or capitalism, in some cases (arguably including Liang Shuming) aspiring to solve universal problems of modernity by drawing on elements from Chinese tradition.

Another layer of cultural discourse that Alitto overlooks is the more active, transformative role that culture played in the European colonial ideology of modernization and its “localization” (Barlow 1991) by non-Western elites, as opposed to the merely defensive, mitigating, or ornamental role of culture that Alitto discusses. The European ideology of colonialism had asserted a “white man’s burden” of transforming the “backward” cultures of colonized societies (and semi-colonized societies such as China) – through education and disciplinary practices – toward a “modern” state of civility, upon achieving which the colonized subjects were to become capable of democratic self-government and entrepreneurial self-development (see, for example, Mitchell 1988). Native elites then internalized this ideology, replacing the white (and modernized Japanese, in cases such as China) colonizers as the agents of cultural transformation, now directed specifically at the peasant masses and intertwined with biopolitical visions of national liberation and development (Chatterjee 1986; Anagnost 1997). In China, early modernizing intellectuals (including some of the Rural Reconstructionists such as James Yen) and eventually the socialist party-state embraced this developmentalist approach to culture, investing the term *wenhua* with a new layer of meaning, as “the highly contested ground on which a national culture must be reconstituted in the project of moving toward *wenming*, a state of civility that is closely identified with the advanced industrial cultures of Asia and the West” (Anagnost 1997:79). Still later, since the 1980s, this idea of cultural transformation has become integrated with neoliberal ideology, in which the market is treated as a disciplinary mechanism for raising peasant “quality” (*suzhi*) to a level appropriate for the needs of



transnational capital (Anagnost 1997:75-97), and in which state-led “community building” (*shequ jianshe*) reconstructs living environments to create new cultural foundations for devolving risk onto responsibilized, entrepreneurial citizens (Hammer 2005).<sup>73</sup> Hints of this now dominant neoliberal sense of cultural transformation will emerge throughout my case studies, sometimes as elements of NRR projects themselves, persisting incongruously alongside alternative, more communitarian elements.

Chinese “localization” of Europe’s colonial ideology of cultural modernization seems to have been facilitated and shaped by its resonance with pre-modern Chinese civilizing projects, carried out by the imperial state (whether Han or Manchu – the latter having embraced in the governance of rural Chinese society a notion of Han culture as the universal apex of civilization) on “barbarian” (non-Han) ethnic groups. As Stevan Harrell (1995:4) explains, such civilizing projects drew their “ideological rationale from the belief that the process of domination is one of helping the dominated to attain or at least approach the superior cultural, religious, and moral qualities characteristic of the [civilizing] center itself.” In China’s pre-modern civilizing projects, the term *wenhua* also played a role, but in those contexts it was understood in a Confucian sense as “the literary transformation that brings forth civilization” (Harrell 1995:25), or (following Schwartz, cited in Harrell 1995:18) “the molding of the person (and by extension of the community to which the person belongs) by training in the philosophical, moral, and ritual principles considered to constitute virtue.”<sup>74</sup> For our purposes, this means that Confucian civilizing practices involve a duty on the part of intellectuals to improve peasant livelihood through moral education, centered on the promotion of certain values. Another salient aspect is the specific content of those Confucian values and theories of social organization.

### *Confucian Interventions into Peasant Culture*

I would argue (contra Lydia Liu) that elements of this Confucian sense of *wenhua* remained important – at least in certain contexts, such as (old and new) Rural Reconstruction – even after the term also became linked to modern European notions of “culture.” According to Alitto (1979:205, 192, 199), Liang Shuming believed that “China’s various problems... were merely distinct manifestations of an underlying cultural crisis,” and could be solved only by a “Confucian response” of “modernization through cultural revival” that would “Combine the [peasants’] motive force with that [of the intellectuals].” Liang believed that, “although only the peasants knew their problems first-hand, they were unable to define, articulate, and analyze these experiences to produce systematic solutions,” so instead they tended to undertake “blind acts” of rebellion, with which Liang clearly disapproved because they threatened to throw China into “chaos.” Liang thus admonished China’s modern intellectuals (*zhishifenzi*)<sup>75</sup> to emulate the traditional scholar-gentry or literati (*shi*), who “represented rationality and maintained society” as “teachers... responsible for leading [the peasant masses] and for their ethical transformation” (Alitto 1979:200).<sup>76</sup>

Liang was inspired by the mass education projects of the Village Self-Government (*cunzhi*) movement initiated in 1904 by the Mi family in rural Hebei – later the site of James Yen’s Rural Reconstruction school (1926-1937) and then of NRR’s Yen Institute for Rural Reconstruction (2003-2007). Liang agreed that village self-government, mass education, and technical modernization should be central to China’s “modernization through cultural revival,” but he disagreed with these early efforts’ less critical embrace of Western influences – to which he also attributed Chinese intellectuals’ moral decline and alienation from the peasant masses, dooming their efforts to failure. In order to improve those efforts, Liang recommended that they

seek guidance from Confucian tradition, especially a model of community self-governance known as *xiangyue* (乡约) – “an institution he believed ‘the Westerners were incapable of even imagining’” (Alitto 1979:206).

*Xiangyue*, translated as “community compact” by Monika Übelhör (1989), was proposed by Song Dynasty neo-Confucian Lü Dajun (1029-1080) as an alternative to contemporary Legalist initiatives for the extension of state control below the county level, in response to a rise in social disorder and the dissolution of previous means of local governance. Lü tried out the *xiangyue* in his village in 1077, hoping other members of his emerging literati class would follow suit. According to Übelhör (1989:376), Lü’s original compact “offers a vision of a community wherein people behave well,” and in which “the trustworthy shouldering of public responsibilities is encouraged, abuse of powerful position is castigated, and the danger of dire impoverishment... is reduced.”<sup>77</sup> According to Kandice Hauf (1996), this model did not spread until the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), when a few literati followed Lü’s example in their home communities, and others imposed modified *xiangyue* on communities they governed in official capacity as state bureaucrats. By the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), *xiangyue* had almost universally become a top-down institution “run by officials and the purpose was much more one of ideological control” (Hauf 1996:27).<sup>78</sup> According to Alitto (1979:207), Liang Shuming “completely dissociated his own concept” of *xiangyue* from the more statist Qing model, instead aiming to foster a “voluntary social group through which the villagers would cooperate to meet their common economic, educational, and military needs outside of the official governmental structure” (Alitto 1979:207). As in Lü’s original model, this cooperation would be founded on the mutual “scrutiny and perfection of each other’s moral character,” aiming (as Lü wrote) “to turn the masses into exemplary persons (*junzi*).”<sup>79</sup>

Particularly significant in its resonance with both old and new Rural Reconstruction movements is one of the main motives behind the invention and eventual state institutionalization of the community compact: elite perception of peasant unrest and social disorder caused by broad societal changes including commercialization, landlessness, and the dissolution of previous institutions for local governance. According to sociologist Cao Jinqing (2006), in a speech admonishing NRR advocates to learn from such experiences of “the reconstruction (*chongjian*) of rural organization since the Song Dynasty,” the chaotic period between the Tang and Song dynasties (907 to 960 CE) was characterized by major transformations including: (1) the disappearance of the “great families” (*shijia dazhu*) that had functioned as an aristocracy during the Han and Tang dynasties, and the rise of a new scholar-gentry class from “commoner” (*shumin*) backgrounds through the combination of landlordism and the imperial examination system; (2) the commoditization of land rights, facilitating the rise of landlordism and landlessness; (3) the development of monetary economy;<sup>80</sup> (4) peasants’ increased integration into market relations and differentiation into classes; (5) social unrest, including banditry and petty crime; (6) urbanization (“the spontaneous formation of cities among the people” as opposed to the previous military garrisons); (7) problems with the collection of taxes due to people’s increased mobility. Cao argues that both Rural Reconstruction movements responded to a similar set of transformations.

Cao’s description should be understood in the context of postsocialist discussions of (global capitalist) modernity and Chinese responses thereto, in which this Tang-Song transition is often invoked as foreshadowing elements of China’s integration into modernity. Most influential in these discussions has been the work of “New Left” historian Wang Hui. According to Viren Murthy (2006:138), Wang’s magnum opus *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought* argues that “the

tension between the practices of Song Confucianism and the structures of capitalist modernity generated a space for a critique of global capitalist modernity.” However, Wang’s analysis differs subtly but significantly from that implied by (New) Rural Reconstruction advocates such as Cao and Liang Shuming. The latter (like much of the contemporary global left) essentially advocate an *alternative* (in this case *Chinese*) modernity made more tenable (socially stable, ecologically sustainable, etc.) by (re)constructing self-sufficient peasant communities to interact harmoniously with a more state-regulated form of capitalism. Wang Hui, on the other hand, argues that modernity can only be a global capitalist modernity, into which China became integrated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and has yet to overcome.<sup>81</sup> In other words, (N)RR positions tend to be alternativist and Polanyian, whereas Wang seems closer to a Marxian anti-capitalist perspective – at least in this respect (according to Murthy), even though Wang (like the postsocialist Chinese left in general) tends to avoid Marxian categories.<sup>82</sup>

Buddhism has been another important intellectual resource for both old and new Rural Reconstruction movements’ interpretation of such societal transformations, and for these movements’ corresponding interventions into peasant culture. This played a role in only one of my case studies (Liao Flats), so I save that discussion for Chapter 6. However, this type of Buddhism is similar to the Confucian elements of (N)RR outlined above in its emphasis on fostering alternative, more altruistic or communitarian values against the capitalist value-form’s “icy water of egotistical calculation.”<sup>83</sup>

### *(Re)constructing Peasant Values*

One of the main lessons that Cao draws from Confucian responses to the Song Dynasty's proto-modernity<sup>84</sup> is the importance of “cultural (re)construction (*wenhua jianshe*)” and “values” in “reconstructing rural organization” in order to overcome social instability:

What does it mean to promote organization (*zuo zuzhi*)? The key is to make sure that the organization is effective, that authority takes shape; [it] must have a complete set of cultural mechanisms to safeguard [it]. *Culture means values* (*wenhua jiu shi jiazhi*). [When we] say it is better to live this way than that way, this is a value. We have our [own] way of life – that is exactly what Liang Shuming was talking about; this point became his central concept: we Chinese can only live this way, not that way. This is the central idea of cultural (re)construction. Thus, in an era of monetarism (*huobizhuyi*), marketism, individualism, and consumerism, if we want to construct a new countryside, it is extremely difficult to effectively resist the [social] erosion [caused by] urban consumerism... So without cultural (re)construction, it would be impossible to (re)construct rural organization, and without organizational (re)construction, it would be impossible to (re)construct [i.e. develop] the countryside. [Cao 2006]

Here Cao seems to follow in the footsteps that Wang Hui analyzed, “reinterpret[ing] the past in order to critically understand the present” (Murthy 2006:138), in this case interpreting pre-modern history and thought through modern terms such as *wenhua* (culture) and *jiazhi* (values), invested with the multiple pre-modern and modern associations introduced above (as Cao himself disclaims at the start of the talk). Such an anachronistic move is necessary because these words have become central to NRR discourse, providing – among other things – a framework in

which today's intellectuals can simultaneously participate in transnational discussions of contemporary global problems while searching for solutions in proto-modern and early modern China. Just as certain modern senses of "culture" have circulated transnationally since the 19<sup>th</sup> century in relation to the capitalist transformation of societies, so has "values" – a key component of "culture" as Cao emphasizes – become central to transnational discussions of what "another world" might look like, and how to get from here to there.

While many leftists speak of fostering alternative (more solidary, sustainable, etc.) values, few have explained what they mean by this term (as David Graeber [2001] noted about anthropologists). He Xuefeng is the main NRR advocate who has developed a theory of values, and his theory seems consistent with both general NRR usage and what is implied by the Confucian precedents outlined above (at least as they have been interpreted by old and new Rural Reconstruction advocates). As noted in the earlier section on cooperation, He Xuefeng echoes Chayanov in highlighting the limitations and social costs of market-oriented cooperation within a capitalist context. Instead of advocating a fundamental transformation of that context, however, He recommends strengthening the less market-oriented aspects of peasant economy and sociality by promoting community-oriented cooperation in the provision of public goods and "cultural" activities – the latter as a means toward both increasing happiness and promoting social cohesion. In both respects, a key role is played by the (re)construction of alternative peasant values in opposition to broader social forces – among which He most frequently emphasizes consumerism. In the article cited above, He (2007a:34-35) writes,

Not only is the supply mechanism for public goods disintegrating, but the ties between people are also weakening and the [ability to produce] interpersonal *values* is decreasing. The consumer culture that is external to peasants is constantly telling them that their localized knowledge is wrong, their beliefs are ignorant, and their life objectives are uninteresting and ridiculous. But consumer culture is unable to provide a satisfying way of life for peasants with limited incomes...

Therefore, the core of [NRR] from [the peasants'] perspective [should be] to reconstruct (*chongjian*) [the peasant] way of life[, and thus give meaning to peasant life (*wei nongmin de shenghuo yiyi tigong shuofa*)]. In social and cultural terms, [this would mean] increasing [peasants' well-being (*fuli*),] constructing a way of life with “low consumption and high [well-being],” a way of life that is different from that of consumer culture. A way of life thus constructed could help [increase] peasant satisfaction without money being the major criterion for [the] *value* of life...

This approach does not take the consumption of nonrenewable resources and pollution of the environment as [verifying (*zhengming*)] human [**worth (*jiazhi*)**]. Instead, human [**worth (*jiazhi*)** would be verified] by the harmonious coexistence of [hu]man[kind] and nature, [among humans], and [between humans and their] inner world.<sup>85</sup>

I have translated *jiazhi* as “worth” in the last paragraph because that makes more sense in the context, but it is the same term as that for “value” or “values” (just as the German *Wert* means both “value” and “worth” – these Chinese and German terms became linked through



Marxist translingual practice). In each usage, we see an effort to distinguish more solidary, frugal, and environmentally-friendly traditional values from those individualistic and short-sighted values imposed upon rural society by an “external” “consumer culture.” (Elsewhere He [2007b] characterizes consumerism as “urban” and “bourgeois.”) Under present conditions (of “market economy”), most peasants cannot make enough money to fulfill the desires elicited by consumerism (and in any case, to do so would be ecologically unsustainable), so – instead of transforming those conditions – He argues that NRR should attempt to revive traditional values so that peasants are willing to accept what amounts to a fate of relative economic poverty, but which He believes is counterbalanced by other forms of “well-being” (the countryside’s potentially more healthful environment and way of life, etc.).

This position seems even more conservative than that of Wen Tiejun, despite He’s reputation as further “left” than Wen in his more negative attitude toward “market economy” and his more positive appraisal of certain Mao-era institutions. (In Chapter 5, I discuss a similar value-oriented or idealist conservatism on the part of grassroots activists with regard to women’s power.) This conservative dimension becomes more complex in He’s writings on “the transformation of peasant values” (e.g. He 2007c), summarized in an ethnographic article by his student Chen Baifeng. Chen (2008:40-41) explains,

*Essential values* [*bentixing jiazhi*] concern the fundamental meaning of one’s existence, and they give one the peace of mind to settle down and get on with one’s life (*an shen li ming*). *Social values*, on the other hand, concern social interaction and how one is appraised by others (He 2007c). In particular, ancestor worship and belief in spirits

belong to the level of essential values, and village public opinion, competition for face, and so on belong to the realm of social values...

[When] people's lives have a sense of history at the level of essential values, it is easy to develop a sense of [place] (*dangdigan*) in one's secular life, and this ensures that social values will play an active role in the production of village social order. If people know how to treat their relatives, by extension, they also know how to live in a village, and how to pursue social values such as wealth, honor, or face. They know that the pursuit of social values must conform to the pursuit of essential values, and only that kind of life is considered worth living. Only then does village public opinion have any force. The village can then have healthy competition for face, positive standards of "the good life," and a virtuous moral order. People have a long-term perspective on their past and future, so they are not only concerned with short-term self-interest...

Following the loss of essential values, all kinds of negative social values come to the surface, doing further damage to the village social order, as well as causing positive social values to be further abandoned. As the force of village public opinion increasingly weakens, people increasingly focus only on undisguised, secular self-interest, and village life increasingly lacks long-term perspectives on the past and future.

Following He (e.g. 2007c), Chen attributes "the collapse of peasants' value-world" not only to consumerism, but also to its historical combination with socialist campaigns against traditional beliefs. These destroyed the "essential values" that might otherwise curb the more self-serving and "negative" social values exacerbated by consumerism. This was less of a

problem during the Mao era – not only because consumerism was not an issue, but also because Maoist socialism was able to substitute its own solidary “value-world” for the traditional ones it destroyed.<sup>86</sup> After marketization, however, Maoism both lost its material foundation (the people’s commune system, etc.) and was replaced ideologically by the more individualistic and commercial orientation promoted by Deng Xiaoping and his followers.<sup>87</sup> In contrast with Yunxiang Yan (whose book *Private Life under Socialism* [2003] Chen critiques in this article), Chen (2008:32) argues that “uncivil individuals” (young peasants who abuse their elderly parents, etc.) are not “abnormal results or ‘freaks’ of the ‘normal’ development of individualism” in the wake of these socialist campaigns and marketization, but simply manifestations of the general collapse of both traditional and Maoist “value-worlds” and the exacerbation of “negative” values by influences such as consumerism.

I would develop this critique further, however, and question any strategy based on attempting to revive traditional values or create new ones. As with much of alternativism in general, this values-centered framework strikes me as “idealist” in both sense of the term: *lixiangzhuyi* – focused on subjective ideals about a preferable way of life, rather than objective forces, structures, or tendencies; and *weixinzhuyi* – non-materialist, implying that the world is primarily shaped by ideas rather than vice versa. (Many NRR advocates – especially young volunteers and interns – embrace the term “idealist” in the first sense, and the slogan “struggle for ideals” – *wei lixiang er fendou* – is written on the entrance to the Liang Shuming Center for Rural Reconstruction, for example.) Instead I would recommend focusing on the system of material processes and social relations that underlie the transformation of such (subjective or ideational) values, and which would have to be reconfigured in order for alternative values or ideals to develop beyond merely defensive, unsustainable subcultures or “temporary autonomous

zones.”<sup>88</sup> In the case of postsocialist rural China and NRR, this would mean shifting from a focus on subjective values in the abstract to their concrete interaction with the capitalist form of commodity value that defines their social conditions. In the following chapter, I consider what such an approach might look like before elaborating on the historical context of NRR as a particular response to peasant struggles over value.

### Chapter 3: Chinese Peasants and the Politics of Value

In this final chapter on this dissertation's theoretical and historical context, I introduce Marx's theory of commodity value as a lens for examining the theme of "alternative values" throughout my NRR case studies. I start with a critique of Alice Bryer's ethnography of Argentinian co-ops mentioned in Chapter 1, since it is the most recent anthropological work that comes closest to what I am trying to do in this dissertation: namely, to analyze the relationship between alternativist interventions into subjective values and the capitalist law of commodity value, with regard to cooperatives and "social economy." Bryer's work thus serves as a bridge between the NRR discourse of values discussed in the previous chapter and the Marxian theory of value. It is also a useful starting point for clarifying Marx's theory, since it reflects some common misunderstandings (or perhaps intentionally "weak theory," as J.K. Gibson-Graham put it) typical of alternativism that resonate with NRR discourse. I then introduce Ann Anagnost's analysis of the neoliberal Chinese discourse of *suzhi* ("human quality") as a more coherent interpretation of the relation between subjective values and commodity value. The second half of this chapter introduces David Harvey's elaboration of Marx's crisis theory, focusing on "accumulation by dispossession" (ABD) as both a salient characteristic of "neoliberal" or post-1970s responses to the declining rate of profit, and the most common target of peasant resistance, globally and in China. I interweave this theoretical explanation with an overview of relevant aspects of Chinese history since the 1960s, up to the emergence of NRR and the party-state's New Socialist Countryside campaign as two different responses to the rise of peasant resistance to ABD since the mid-1980s, and to fears that China might be headed for its own economic crisis.

### ***Bryer's "Politics of Value Creation"***

In Alice Bryer's (2012) article on workplaces occupied by their workers and cooperatized in early 2000s Argentina, she focuses on "the politics of value creation," using the term "value" in a double sense as both (1) "surplus value" and (2) "subjective values and needs" or "forms of consciousness." Bryer never defines "the politics of value creation," but she implies that this refers to cooperators' struggle or negotiation between "the pressure of generating socially necessary value, i.e., profitability," on the one hand, and their "alternative goals and values" or "alternative aspirations" on the other. This approach breaks from the anthropological trend of focusing on "the cultural dimensions of objects" in theorizing value, associated with Appadurai (1986) and Graeber (2001), by turning to "anthropological subjects as 'object-creators'" and analyzing "the dialectics between meaningful action within a given cultural context and the systemic need for profitability." She suggests that both senses of value are consistent with Marx's theory of value as an objectification of "labour," which according to Bryer means "a meaningful social process, an embodiment of 'self' realised by individuals within society." In particular, she argues that cooperators' different approaches to financial accounting in the two co-ops she examines reflects different ways of negotiating the "dialectic" between these two forms of value to shape their cooperatives in different directions, illustrating both their "internal socialisation of capitalism" and their "institutional expression of new cultural needs" beyond the "systemic rationality" of neoliberalism.

In Chapter 1 I discussed how Sharryn Kashmir's commentary on Bryer highlighted the specific political contexts in relation to which co-ops take on particular forms. Sally Weller's

(2012:52-53) commentary is also helpful for my study, in that she notes how “Bryer’s framework has borrowed terminology from Marx’s value theory, but detached the words from their anchors in Marx’s political economy. As a result, words like “surplus” and “value” have diminished meanings.” Below I explain what Marx actually meant by these terms and how they relate to subjective values in a way differently than that suggested by Bryer, with different implications for co-ops, alternativism, and my case studies. Another relevant problem that Weller points out is that the organizational differences among co-ops observed by Bryer may be better understood not by the differing values of co-op members, but by “their different forms of embeddedness in wider processes of capitalist competition.” In particular, the cooperative hotel in her study (comparable to cooperative hospitality businesses in three of my case studies) was uniquely positioned to “create a less price-sensitive (quasi-monopolistic) market niche that leveraged from the enterprise’s public promotion of its social values; for instance, by marketing to a clientele committed to supporting subaltern economic forms.” Therefore, “it made capitalist economic sense to adopt forms of accounting that ‘count’ the value of intangibles like reputation and service quality. Capitalist market pressures condition internal possibilities in both cases, but with quite different effects.”

This is particularly relevant to my study because the economic success of all my case studies have depended (to varying degrees) on certain market niches of “clientele committed to supporting subaltern economic forms,” which has allowed these peasant organizations to translate alternative values (or at least the appearance of promoting alternative values) into economic value. These niches are “quasi-monopolistic” in that most peasants lack the social capital necessary for entry, but even if many more somehow managed to break in, the increased competition among co-ops would result in a situation similar to the one they started with,

pushing down prices, driving up the rate of (self-)exploitation and encouraging the emergence of capitalistic relations within co-ops (like that described by Kasmir in Mondragón and by Christof Lammer in another NRR project discussed in my conclusion), along with the dissolution of less competitive co-ops and the continued outflow of disillusioned peasants into conditions of increased precarity. This would eventually occur regardless of how much alternativists such as NRR advocates manage to expand these niches through consumer education – at least as long as such co-ops are competing within a broader capitalist context.

This ability to translate what Weller calls “intangible” or “social” values into “economic” (i.e. commodity) value does not mean that the two are commensurable in a Marxian sense. It is not as if the one type of value can transform into the other, nor is it possible – as Bryer claims – that ideological debates over how a co-op should be organized could change the average rate of productivity against which it must compete. Bryer’s account may be accurate in the sense that ideas have some impact on class struggle, and that a general increase in workers’ and/or peasants’ power can temporarily push down the average rate of exploitation for a given industry, country, or sector of the global economy, thus allowing co-ops in that sector to be less (self-)exploitative, and therefore to be organized more democratically, or to become more environmentally-friendly or community-oriented. However, Bryer’s basically alternativist and idealist approach – like the NRR discourse on values introduced in Chapter 2 – tends to obscure the facts that (1) this is primarily a matter of class power, not of subjective values or consciousness, and (2) regardless of the temporary balance of class power (and therefore the rate of exploitation) within a given sector, the capitalist form of value remains intact for the system as a whole and must eventually reassert itself, either through crisis or some kind of temporary “fix” – whether spatial,



technological, inter-sectoral, or financial, as Beverly Silver (2003:39) puts it (drawing on Marx's analysis of crisis as elaborated by David Harvey, which I explain later in this chapter).

### ***Marx and the Commodity***

Marx's theory of value emerged from his critique of political economy, teasing out its implications in light of 19<sup>th</sup> century history, especially the history of class struggle. Marx aimed to overcome the fragmentation of modern knowledge (stemming in part from the capitalist division of labor) by theorizing the totality of modern society in order to identify which of its internal contradictions would (he believed)<sup>89</sup> result in modernity's dialectical transformation into a post-capitalist condition that he called "communism" – a term he adopted from French radical discourse but redefined in terms of capitalist society's self-negation: "not... an ideal to which reality [will] have to adjust itself," but "the real movement which abolishes the present state of things" (Marx and Engels 1845).<sup>90</sup> Marx's presentation of this totality in *Capital* opened with and continually returned to the commodity and its "value-form" because, as observed in *Capital*'s first sentence, "The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an 'immense collection of commodities'..." (Marx 1990:125).

This already points to a much-debated question of particular relevance to NRR, alternativism, and Polanyian perspectives: does Marx's analysis refer to commodities in general, or to the specific form that commodities take in "societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails"? According to Chris Arthur (2005), "the most enduring myth of Marxology" is the idea proposed by Engels that "Marx takes simple commodity production as his historical presupposition," so that the analysis could begin "from the simple commodity and not from a

conceptually and historically secondary form, the commodity as already modified by capitalism.” Arthur points out that “Marx *never used the expression ‘simple commodity production’* in *Capital*. Likewise... he never referred to the capitalistically produced commodity as a secondary derivative form... Rather... the simple circulation discussed in the first few chapters is that of the capitalist economy.” Actually Marx does not make this clear, and I have even noticed indications of more continuity between modern and pre-modern commodity production than either Engels or Arthur imply – with implications for how we interpret the interaction between capitalism and other modes of production, as discussed in my case studies.<sup>91</sup> It is true, however, the concepts of *abstract labor* and *socially-necessary labor-time* are central to Marx’s analysis of the commodity form, and these seem to make the most sense in a context of “generalized wage-labor” (implying the widespread proletarianization of peasants like that still occurring in China today), where it can be taken for granted that labor-power is also a commodity.

This approach differs from the Polanyian approach of NRR advocates such as Wen Tiejun, which claims that labor-power has never become a true commodity, but was only imagined to be one by the wrong-headed ideologies of liberalism and neoliberalism. The Polanyian solution, shared by many contemporary leftists such as NRR advocates, has been to adapt state policy and entrepreneurial practices (including co-ops and alternative marketing networks) so that they give greater security to the human bearers of labor-power (including peasant-workers) through means such as collective land tenure and the (re)construction of self-sufficient communities capable of providing alternatives to wage-labor. In practice such an approach can only be incoherent, however, because the commoditization of labor-power has already become deeply rooted in the material conditions that predominate globally; it is the foundation of the modern form of value upon which our entire social formation is founded.

## *The Secret of Value*

Commodity value in Marx's sense is not "socially meaningful" in the idealist sense implied by the alternativist discourse of "values" shared by both Polanyian NRR advocates and more quasi-Marxian alternativists such as Bryer. Although Bryer is right to say that Marx regarded value as an objectification of labor, she then goes on to define labor as "a meaningful social process, an embodiment of 'self' realised by individuals within society." This phrasing – and more importantly her implication that Marx's definition of value could apply to both commodities and subjective values – imply that (abstract?) labor and the value it produces are things that people are aware of and recognize as such. For Marx, on the other hand, value "does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, men try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of their own social product" (Marx 1990:167).<sup>92</sup>

Bryer seems to be conflating the two forms of labor and their corresponding forms of value, the contradiction between which is a recurring theme throughout *Capital*: *use-value* as an objectification of *concrete* labor, and *value* as an objectification of *abstract* labor. As noted above, Marx begins his analysis of capitalist society by examining its most basic building block: the commodity. First he dissects the commodity into its most apparent qualitative and quantitative aspects: use-value (i.e. usefulness) and exchange-value (basically synonymous with price). After considering some examples, he deduces that "exchange-value cannot be anything other than the mode of expression, the 'form of appearance,' of a content distinguishable from it" – a content "characterized precisely by its abstraction from use-values." However, if we

“disregard the use-value of commodities, only one property remains, that of being products of labour” (1990:127-128):

But even the product of labour has already been transformed in our hands. If we make abstraction from its use-value... [i]t is no longer... the product of the labour of the joiner, the mason or the spinner... [all] the different concrete forms of labour [disappear]. They can no longer be distinguished, but are all together reduced to the same kind of labour, human labour in the abstract.

Let us now look at the *residue* of the products of labour. There is nothing left in them but the same *phantom-like* objectivity; they are merely *congealed* quantities of homogeneous human labour... As *crystals* of this social substance, which is common to them all, they are values – commodity values.<sup>93</sup>

I italicize the chemical metaphors and gothic imagery in this passage, because it helps to clarify what Marx meant in contrast with Bryer’s use of the terms “value” and “labor,” and the difference between commodity value and subjective values. As Diane Elson (1979:133) points out, Marx’s frequent use of chemical imagery illustrates that “The quantity of socially necessary labour-time does not determine the magnitude of value in the logical or mathematical sense... but in the sense that the quantity of a chemical substance in its fluid form determines the magnitude of its crystalline or jellied form.” Elsewhere (1979:161), Elson notes that Marx’s adoption of the term “law of value” from political economy takes on a new twist, since for Marx, “The term ‘law’ and the explicit comparison of the law of value with ‘a regulative law of nature’”

is “a reference to the naturalistic aspect of this process, the fact that it takes place ‘behind the backs’ of the commodity owners.” (It is in this sense that I use the term “law of value” throughout this dissertation.) Later in this opening chapter of *Capital*, Marx observes that, “in the midst of the accidental and ever-fluctuating exchange relations between the products, the labour-time socially necessary to produce them asserts itself as a regulative law of nature,” just as “the law of gravity asserts itself when a person’s house collapses on top of him” (Marx 1990:168).

Comparing these categories of value to subjective values, we see that Bryer is right to call them all “socially meaningful,” but they are each meaningful in very different senses. Subjective values come closest to Marx’s category of *use-value*, in that their meaningfulness is something that people are aware of and recognize as such. We could call these types of value *socially legible*. Use-value has the additional characteristic of *transparency* regarding its origin in a specific kind of concrete labor, whereas this is true for some subjective values but not for others. Ideologies, for example (such as neoliberalism, He Xuefeng’s “consumerism,” or certain forms of Marxism) function by obscuring their origins and the interests they serve. In this sense, ideological values more closely resemble *exchange-value*, which is also socially legible but *deceptively* so, “chang[ing] constantly with time and place,” “appear[ing] to be something accidental and purely relative,” whereas in reality exchange-value is merely the “form of appearance” of *value*, which is not accidental (determined by supply and demand), but ultimately anchored to socially necessary labor-time (Marx 1990:126-128). Value as such is not socially legible at all, since it appears only in the deceptive form of exchange-value. It *is* socially meaningful, but in a very different sense than all these other types of value, namely in the force that it secretly exerts upon society. This is a type of meaning that can be deduced from value’s effects only through conscious and imaginative analysis – again, much like natural forces such as

gravity, except that Marx diverges from political economy in foregrounding the unnatural, even supernatural quality of this social force, alluded to above in his use of the term “phantom-like.”

This naturalistic but supernatural quality of commodity value becomes clearer as Marx progresses from the surface of modern society into the depths of the value-form’s historical conditions and their implications. As Ann Anagnost (2006:523) notes (quoting Chris Baldick), “Marx is careful to locate this ghoulishness in the ‘hidden abode’ of production, for ‘the truth of capitalist production lies not in the open market, but in the enclosed, secret lair or workshop, like all the best family skeletons and Gothic terrors.’” Perhaps the most striking image is also Marx’s most succinct definition of “capital” (referring specifically to modern *industrial* capital based on the capitalist mode of production, in contrast with the pre-modern capital of merchants or money-lenders): “Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks” (Marx 1990:342).<sup>94</sup>

This description appears in the context of Marx’s dramatized staging of how value – as this supernatural, objective force – possesses humans and shapes their behavior, regardless of any subjective values they might entertain. Capital (actually just a phase that value must pass through in its vampiric cycle of endless self-augmentation) cannot function without possessing a human body and turning it into a capitalist. As “capital personified,” his soul becomes “the soul of capital” (Marx 1990:342). In Marx’s example, the capitalist happens to be “a model citizen,” a member of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and a Christian notable for his “odour of sanctity.” As capital personified, however, he finds himself compelled by competition to make his employees work as long as possible, extending the working day past the point necessary for their basic health and reproduction. The workers send a delegate to demand a reduction of the working day, but he must have already recognized that commodity value

predominates socially over subjective values, because he says, “I demand [this reduction] without any appeal to your heart, for in money matters sentiment is out of place”; “the thing you represent when you come face to face with me has no heart” (1990:343). There is one subjective value that at first seems to offer a common ground for negotiation, since it is backed up by the capitalist state: the liberal right to private property and free trade. However, when the worker attempts to use this hegemonic right, he finds “an antimony of right against right, both equally bearing the seal of the law of exchange. Between equal rights, force decides. Hence... the establishment of a norm for the working day presents itself as a struggle... between collective capital, i.e. the class of capitalists, and collective labour, i.e. the working class” (1990:344).

Subjective values thus seem to have lost some of their social meaning in the face of commodity value, which speaks only the language of power – in particular, a class-based power whose dynamic emerges from the structure of the value-form. Traditional Marxism has treated class struggle and the movement to overcome capitalism as involving or even centering on subjective values (often called “class consciousness”), in ways foreshadowing (and probably influencing – as suggested in Chapter 2) NRR efforts to revive certain elements of “peasant values” as a bulwark against “(urban bourgeois) consumerism.” The preceding quotations from Marx, however, suggest that this ideational level is less important than (1) workers’ simple need to rest, and their general aversion to capitalist conditions of production (“The body’s impulse is to shrink from the machine and the machine’s impulse is to shrink from the body – no other intimacy was ever so frigid”<sup>95</sup>); and (2) the power that workers derive from collectively withholding their labor. This more materialist strand of Marxian thought has probably been elaborated to its most extreme implications by Monsieur Dupont (2009), who argue that “The proletariat will not be motivated by political values in its resistance to work, but by its selfish

interest to assert its species-being; its bodily desire to be human floods across the barriers of its separation.” This sort of corporeal determinism (developed in response to the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s anti-capitalist failures and recuperations) assumes that there is some innate humanity within the body that “ahistorically” (as the Duponts assert elsewhere) strives to break free from the alien, historical force that Marx describes value to be. As we have seen, however, value functions only by possessing human bodies, and it is unclear to what extent any human essence remains (if there ever was such a thing).

### ***Bodies of Value***

Marx had already observed that, in early modern England, the transformation of peasants into modern proletarians required the corporeal inculcation of “the discipline necessary for the system of wage-labor” through state implementation of “grotesquely terroristic laws” against vagrancy, theft and “vagabondage,” involving whipping, ear-cropping, and branding,<sup>96</sup> but he believed this became unnecessary once the proletariat had come “by education, tradition and habit [to look] upon the requirements of [the capitalist] mode of production as self-evident natural laws” (1990:896-899). Even after that turning-point, however, capital has continued to transform and manipulate the human body, as, for example, Anagnost (2004, 2006) has observed in postsocialist China – with implications for my case studies.

Anagnost’s work focuses on two types of bodies: the peasant-worker and the urban middle-class child. In the most striking cases, capital’s vampiric nature achieves almost literal expression through biotechnology, as “the dead labour of capital finds itself revived through the extraction of biovalue,” turning to the “the body’s own vitality” – human blood – as “a new



frontier” of accumulation (2006:521). This has transformed the body not only temporarily through the loss of blood plasma, but often permanently through the spread of HIV (in an epidemic that has affected the part of Anhui discussed in Chapter 4). Some of the value extracted in ways such as this<sup>97</sup> becomes “invested” in the bodies of middle-class children (through physical nurturing practices along with less tangible forms of education) with the aim of increasing their *suzhi* (roughly translatable as “quality” but similar to the idea of “human capital”). Anagnost (2004:189-190) argues that such uses of the term *suzhi* are related to the “changing relationship between value and bodies” in postsocialist China. Concurrent with China’s increased integration into global capitalism since the 1980s, *suzhi* “acquired new discursive power when it became conjoined with the idea of population (*renkou*),” becoming “an ideological formation that enables the transfer of economic value from one body to another.” This means that the middle-class body “recognized as having value” in the sense of *suzhi* is ideologically represented as “a body to which value has been added through educational investment rather than one from which surplus value has been extracted. *Suzhi* not only codes that difference but channels it toward capital accumulation” (2004:191).

This seems to be a more coherent way of linking the subjective and economic senses of “value” than that attempted by Bryer, as well as by NRR’s tendency to reduce capitalism to ideological aspects (such as consumerism and neoliberalism) that might be overcome by (re)constructing alternative peasant values. *Suzhi* discourse plays a role in my first two case studies, as young people discuss whether to orient their lives around urban wage-labor or NRR projects in the countryside. As Andrew Kipnis (2007) has noted, however, the term *suzhi* has also been used in ways that diverge from its neoliberal sense, for example by peasants to critique official corruption. Similarly, the term has been central to how peasants in my second case study

(Raoling, Chapter 5) have conceptualized their NRR-affiliated project – as an effort to “raise the *suzhi* of the peasantry,” not through urban wage-labor but through something like the opposite: projects aimed at encouraging young people to settle down in the countryside and contribute to the development of peasant communities. Even there, however, *suzhi* discourse’s ideological function continues to haunt these projects, playing a role in the development of their more entrepreneurial, self-responsibilizing aspects. This ideological or cultural haunting is one way the capitalist value-form asserts itself to shape such projects, in addition to the more obvious aspect of economic competition.

All four of my case studies illustrate a tug of war over the human body between the capitalist value-form and NRR’s alternative values. In a general sense, there is a geographic tug of war between the city and the country, with (often transnational) capital pulling young peasant bodies into the cities to extract surplus-value from them, and NRR projects trying to pull them back to the countryside with the lure of alternative values. In Chapter 6 we also see a tug of war regarding which bodies should be privileged in the development of alternative (organic, herbal, and Buddhist) techniques of self-care – the bodies of peasants or of middle-class urban consumers.

### ***Postsocialist China, Neoliberalism, and Peasant Resistance***

If NRR is a Chinese postsocialist counterpart to the global wave of alternativist responses to neoliberalism associated with the Global Justice Movement, what is Chinese postsocialism and how does it relate to neoliberalism? Dirlik (1989:364) first used the term “postsocialist” to designate “the condition of socialism in a historical situation where” socialism had “lost its

coherence as a metatheory of politics because of the attenuation of the socialist vision in its historical unfolding,” but where at the same time, “the articulation of socialism to capitalism is conditioned by the structure of ‘actually existing socialism.’” Postsocialist efforts to correct the deficiencies of “actually existing socialism” by “resorting to capitalist methods of development” (in China generally dated to 1978) “are conditioned by [an] awareness of the deficiencies of capitalism in history,” such that postsocialism “strives to keep alive a vague vision of future socialism as the common goal of humankind while denying to it any immanent role in the determination of present social policy.” Day (2007:21) elaborates that the postsocialist Chinese state is defined by “administrative post-politics” in its “attempt to isolate its management of the economy (as it became marketized and joined the global capitalist economy) from the pressures of social movements and social power—from class struggle and class conflict” – in contrast with the Maoist blurring of the line between state administration, mass mobilization, and semi-autonomous popular struggles, especially in the early stage of China’s so-called “Cultural Revolution” (1966-1968). I follow Yiching Wu (2007), however, in highlighting the continuity between certain aspects of Maoism and the development of capitalist relations from China’s socialist mode of production, which had predominated from 1956 until the 1980s.

To clarify, I use the term “socialist” in a somewhat unusual sense (roughly following Wu and Day, among others), denoting China’s “actually existing socialism” as a mode of production (centered on state-led industrialization) distinct from capitalism and yet conditioned indirectly (mainly through imperialist pressures) by the capitalist law of value, such that capitalist relations tended to emerge from the material foundations prepared by socialist modernization. *Objectively*, socialism thus tended toward integration with global capitalism, but it differed from capitalism in key ways, including a *subjective* commitment (by many party-state leaders and their popular

supporters) to at least appear to be moving toward something like the classical sense of “communism” (implying common access to the means of production, distribution according to need, and the “withering away” of the state). Like alternativist movements such as NRR, then, socialism was characterized by a tension between its subjective *values* and its objective conditioning by the global dominance of the capitalist law of *value*.

### *The Maoist Contribution to Capitalist Development*

The Maoist practice of “Cultural Revolution” was an expression of this tension – one that continues to haunt postsocialist politics, including NRR. According to anthropologist Yiching Wu (2007:406-407), Mao and his followers launched the Cultural Revolution “precisely to prevent the degeneration of the revolution and the slide from socialism to capitalism,” but it failed because it “lacked a clear class focus as defined in structural terms”: “By focusing on bureaucratism, revisionist lines, and distributional privileges... the Cultural Revolution attacked the bureaucrats, their ideological affiliations, and members of the remnant exploiting classes,” diverting attention away from “the system of bureaucratic domination itself.” This was not just a failure; ironically, Maoism facilitated the development of capitalist relations – not only by ultimately privileging “development of the productive forces” and state power over the popular agency that Mao sometimes championed (against his more productivist opponents such as Deng Xiaoping), but also by brutally suppressing popular tendencies that emerged from his own campaigns when they pointed beyond ideology – in some cases (such as the Shanghai general strike of 1966 and “ultra-left” currents such as Shengwulian [discussed in Wu 2007]) pointing more clearly toward something like communism. “Cannibalizing its own rebellious children, Maoism quickly exhausted its political energy” (Wu 2007:410).

In its wake, the Cultural Revolution left “a regime in deep disarray” along with “significant weakening of its general social base” in the early 1970s (Wu 2007:336-337). “The decline of the Party’s capacity for control was accompanied by slackened work discipline, sabotage of production, increasing common crimes,” including bank robberies and the looting of state granaries, along with “illegal exchange of goods and services” and “open attacks on CCP offices” – all “indicative of a looming *general crisis of hegemony*.” After Mao’s death in 1976, this unrest became more politicized, drawing on ideas that had survived the 1968 repression and developed in “underground spaces of political, literary, and artistic activities among rusticated youth, young workers, and students,” culminating in further “ultra-left” writings, mass demonstrations, and clashes with police in the April Fifth Movement of late 1976.

According to Wu (2007:358), the economic liberalization that Deng Xiaoping initiated in 1978 is better understood not as a “bourgeois restoration” (as claimed by Maoists and implied by many other leftists), but more a “continuation... of the processes of rebuilding and restructuring the bureaucratic apparatus” after the 1968 suppression of the popular discontent that Mao had unleashed in 1966. The first phase of marketization helped the bureaucracy to reconsolidate its hegemony by building a “transient alliance” with certain disaffected groups through reforms that tended to divert their energy toward individualized economic interests: giving peasants household contracts over land and more control over farming, increasing the supply of consumer goods for urbanites, and especially elevating the status of intellectuals, who had been vilified throughout the Mao era and now became Deng’s strongest supporters outside the bureaucratic elite.<sup>98</sup> As Deng and his followers sought to consolidate their power inside the party, they bolstered that power (somewhat like Mao had done) by appealing to these external interests. One of Deng’s early moves was to publicly reverse the party’s condemnation of the April Fifth

Movement. When that inspired the Democracy Wall Movement in late 1978, Deng initially expressed sympathy, allowing the movement to spread among dozens of cities and publish over 150 mimeographed journals, involving not only intellectuals, other urbanites, and rusticated youth (returning illegally to demand urban employment), but also peasants who flooded Beijing protesting “oppression and hunger in the countryside” (Wu 2007:355). Once the Dengists had consolidated intra-party power in 1979, they finally turned to gradually suppressing this mass movement over the following two years while simultaneously “deepening” the economic reforms.

According to Hart-Landsberg and Burkett (2004:9), “Once the path of pro-market reforms was embarked upon, each subsequent step in the reform process was largely driven by tensions and contradictions generated by the reforms themselves. The weakening of central planning led to ever more reliance on market and profit incentives, which in turn encouraged the privileging of private enterprises over state enterprises and, increasingly, of foreign enterprises and markets over domestic ones.” Like Wu, Hart-Landsberg and Burkett reject that Maoist claim that Deng and his followers were secretly “capitalist roaders” representing an earlier bourgeoisie that resumed power through the reforms. Instead, they argue that the Dengists sincerely intended the reforms to temporarily resolve some of the problems (inefficiencies, etc.) that had emerged in “the first stage of socialism” as part of a gradual path to communism. In other words, regardless of the Dengists’ *subjective* intentions, the reforms created conditions in which the capitalist law of value *objectively* took over and propelled the reforms toward full-sale “capitalist restoration” or integration into global capitalism. Later alternativist projects such as my NRR case studies face a similar situation, as they attempt to develop alternative economic forms, based on alternative values, in a context dominated by the law of value, and in ways (e.g. commercial activities) that put them into direct interaction with that law.

Among Wu's correctives to Hart-Landsberg and Burkett's analysis, most relevant to this dissertation is his clarification that the development of capitalist relations in China was neither a "restoration" of something that existed before, nor the creation of something new, but the transformation of (socialist) bureaucratic power into bureaucratic-capitalist power, not only in response to technical problems (inefficiencies due to the nature of a planned economy, for example), but also in response to popular unrest throughout the Mao era, some of it taking the form of proletarian and peasant class struggle against the bureaucracy, with some dissidents beginning to theorize it as such. NRR and the peasant organizations in my case studies emerged against this background, permeated by a vague but usually incoherent awareness of the failures of socialism, the historical continuity of class struggle before and after the reforms, and the continuing intertwining of the power of China's party-state bureaucracy, China's bourgeoisie, and, to a smaller but perhaps growing extent, the transnational bourgeoisie.

### *China and Neoliberalism*

Wu thus provides a corrective to popular ideas about Chinese postsocialism, with implications for how we understand global capitalism and its potential alternatives. Throughout the global left – including the Global Justice Movement and NRR – there has been a tendency to focus not on capitalism but neoliberalism (or, following Polanyi, to equate "capitalism" with something like [neo]liberalism), and to blame the latter on the evil or mistaken ideas of certain economists and policy-makers – sometimes including Deng Xiaoping as part of a transnational cabal including Thatcher, Pinochet, and Milton Friedman. David Harvey's (2005:16-19) *Brief History of Neoliberalism* seems to diverge from such subjective accounts by explaining neoliberalism as not primarily a "utopian project" aimed at restoring health to economies

overtaxed by the welfare state (or China's "iron rice bowl"), but rather a "*political* project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites."

Such an account seems more consistent with Wu's analysis of China's semi-(neo)liberalization, and it helps to explain why "when neoliberal principles clash with the need to restore or sustain elite power, then the principles are either abandoned or become so twisted as to be

unrecognizable" (Harvey 2005). Perhaps the most significant case of such twisting has been China's "construction of a particular kind of market economy that increasingly incorporates neoliberal elements interdigitated with authoritarian centralized control" (Harvey 2005:120).<sup>99</sup>

However, Harvey's explanation of China's restructuring and its relation to global capitalism is less coherent than one would expect from someone who wrote a book elaborating Marx's theory of crisis (Harvey 1982), and another applying that to the apparently increasing salience of "accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey 2003) – both of which are frequently invoked in discussions of Chinese postsocialism, in particular with regard to peasants (e.g. Walker 2008).

The gist of Harvey's (2005:120-121) analysis of China's restructuring is simply that it "just happened to coincide—and it is very hard to consider this as anything other than a conjunctural accident of world-historical significance—with the turn to neoliberal solutions in Britain and the United States," which "opened up a space for China's incorporation into the world market in ways that would not have been possible under the Bretton Woods system." What was this "world-historical significance"? Apparently little more than the obvious points that many foreign companies outsourced low-end production to China, and that China's dependence on imported resources increased. For Harvey, the main significance of these changes is that they have enriched transnational and Chinese "elites" while hurting workers and peasants and increasing socioeconomic instability.<sup>100</sup>



A more important point that Harvey's account implicitly rejects is that China's restructuring has played a major role in helping global capitalism to temporarily overcome its crisis of overaccumulation (or stagnation due to declining profitability), which has plagued capital since the 1970s according to Harvey himself (2003) along with many other observers (e.g. Brenner 2002). Aufheben (2006) go so far as to argue that the combination of neoliberalization (in countries such as the US) and China's transformation into "a distinct epicentre within the global accumulation of capital" contributed to the actual restoration of the global profit-rate by the mid-1990s:<sup>101</sup>

Squeezed between a falling rate of profit and an entrenched working class within the advanced capitalist economies, capital in the 1970s and 1980s had been driven to seek out sources of cheap and compliant labour-power around the world... [I]t was also necessary that the social productivity of labour could be raised to levels comparable with that prevailing in the advanced capitalist economies... The authoritarian regimes of East Asia had been able to provide such essential pre-conditions [after] several decades of protected national accumulation of capital during the Cold War years... China has taken over the lead in Asian capital accumulation because it has been able to provide these basic requirements on a far larger scale...

[T]he gain from the increased level of exploitation of Chinese labour-power is generalised through the falling costs of both the means of production and the cheapening of the means of subsistence... This disinflationary pressure has played a major role in curing the endemic inflation that had built up during the period of intense class conflict and [neoliberal] restructuring of the 1970s and 1980s in the advanced capitalist

economies... [China's] integration within the global accumulation of capital, has served to prolong and deepen the reinvigoration of capitalism, which resulted from the restructuring... China has [thus] established a relation of mutually re-enforcing growth with the advanced capitalist economies in general, and particularly with its main trading partner - the USA.

Harvey's account implicitly rejects such an analysis, not only because he believes that the post-1970 crisis of overaccumulation has never been overcome, but also – ironically – because of the way he uses “the restoration of class power” to explain neoliberalism and China's restructuring: “If we lay aside... the claim that neoliberalization is merely an example of erroneous theory gone wild... then we are left with a tension between sustaining capitalism, on the one hand, and the restoration/reconstitution of ruling class power on the other... Paradoxically, a strong and powerful social democratic and working-class movement is in a better position to redeem capitalism than is capitalist class power itself” (Harvey 2005:152-153). It is true that, historically, the left has repeatedly saved capitalism from its own contradictions by channeling unrest (or the “bodily desire to be human”) into mediating institutions and reformist demands. (In Chapter 7 I discuss Piven and Cloward's [1977] study of this topic and its implications for peasant resistance to capitalist dispossession.) Similarly, Wu's study showed how Maoists and later Dengists channeled popular discontent into different kinds of reformism that saved socialism by turning it into capitalism. In the long run, however, Harvey's own analysis (and that of many others) demonstrates that in the long run, far from “sustaining capitalism,” the sort of Polanyian, Keynesian, or Social Democratic regulation or “re-embedding” implied by such recommendations must eventually succumb to the law of value and attempt to

restore the rate of profit, either by collapsing into the sort of crisis he fears, or adopting the sort of temporary “fixes” associated with (neo)liberalism (as noted earlier in this chapter with regard to co-ops).<sup>102</sup>

### *Fixing Overaccumulation*

Harvey’s elaboration of Marx’s scattered writings on crisis focuses on “overaccumulation,” a term that Marx used only rarely. Harvey (1999:195) prefers this to terms such as “overproduction,” “underconsumption,” or “the tendency of the rate of profit to fall” (TRPF) because “In the world of appearance, falling rates of profit and a glut of commodities are both surface representations of the same underlying problem,” namely, “the opposition between the productive forces and the social relations.” For Marx, however, it is only inasmuch as the profit rate is low that capital may be considered “surplus,” so I use the two terms basically interchangeably.<sup>103</sup> Marx (1990; 1967:212) had sought to explain the TRPF as an effect of the tendency of the “technical composition of capital” to rise. This refers to the ratio of dead to living labor, or means of production to workers, in a given firm, industry, or society as a whole. In terms of value, this is expressed in the “value composition of capital”: the ratio of constant (“c”) to variable capital (“v”) –  $c/v$ . As noted in the section on Marx’s value theory above, profit derives from the surplus-value extracted from the “variable” component of a given investment (i.e. labor-power), so a rise in the ratio of constant to variable capital leads to a fall in the rate of profit. If the latter (“p”) is expressed as  $s / (c + v)$ , with “s” indicating surplus-value, which is the same as  $s/v / (1 + c/v)$  (with “s/v” indicating the rate of exploitation), then the profit rate is proportional to the rate of exploitation and inversely proportional to the value composition.<sup>104</sup> A continuous rise in productivity and therefore  $c/v$  is driven by “the general competitive struggle

and the need to improve production and expand its scale merely as a means of self-preservation and under penalty of ruin” (Marx 1967:244-245).

According to Marx (1967:232-240), the TRPF may be temporarily offset by a number of factors that, following Harvey (1999) and Silver (2003) we could call “fixes”: (1) “increasing intensity of exploitation” ( $s/v$ ); (2) “depression of wages below the value of labor-power” (decreasing  $v$  and thus increasing  $s/v$ ); (3) “cheapening the elements of constant capital” (decreasing  $c$ ); (4) “relative over-population” (again leading to decreasing  $v$  and thus increasing  $s/v$ ); (5) “foreign trade” (decreasing both  $c$  and  $v$ ). Elsewhere, Marx frames these and other “counteracting influences” as “moments in the developed movement of capital which delay this movement [of rising  $c/v$  and falling profit] *other than by crises*,” with both crises and these delaying “moments” characterized by “devaluation” (*Entwertung*) of constant capital and labor-power (1993:750, my emphasis).<sup>105</sup>

According to Harvey’s (1999) elaboration, such “devaluation” plays the key role of either slowing down the TRPF or restoring profitability once a production cycle has completely collapsed. If the rate of profit is low or approaching zero because  $c/v$  is too high, profitability can be restored if  $c$  falls relative to  $v$  (the devaluation of constant capital), or if  $s/v$  rises, either through a fall in  $v$  relative to  $s$  (the devaluation of labor-power), or through intensifying or prolonging exploitation in some way that does not make  $c$  rise. “Devaluation of labor-power” simply means lowering the wage, and this can happen either through the downward pull of the industrial reserve army or the cheapening of basic necessities (the latter achieved either through increased productivity or foreign trade – each of which have opposite effects on the composition of capital and thus the profit rate). “Devaluation of constant capital” is defined, among other things, in relation to what Harvey calls “socially necessary turnover time”: capital realizes and

accumulates value to the extent that it is in motion, and loses value to the extent that it is at rest.<sup>106</sup>

For example, what Marx calls “foreign trade” includes importing cheaper commodities, which would reduce  $v$  with the importation of cheaper consumer goods (as Aufheben argues occurred in the old core of capitalist countries after China’s re-integration into global capitalism), and reduce  $c$  for the importation of cheaper raw materials (a central aspect of neoliberal “accumulation by dispossession” according to Harvey). Foreign trade also includes measures that overlap with what Harvey (1999) calls “spatial fixes,” such as exporting capital to places with cheaper commodities and thus lower  $v$  and  $c$  (another central aspect of neoliberalism and China’s re-integration).  $C/v$  can also be reduced by moving into new industries with a lower composition of capital – what Silver calls a “product fix” (although she does not theorize in this way). Finally, Harvey points out that “vertical integration” can decrease  $c$  by decreasing transaction costs among firms in different industries.

### *Capitalist Exploitation and Expropriation of Chinese Peasants*

I would add – following our discussion of Chayanov in Chapter 1 – that capitalist vertical integration of peasant agriculture also increases  $s/v$  by squeezing more surplus-value out of peasant labor via interest on loans, the cost of inputs peasants buy from capitalist firms, and the decreased price that capitalist firms pay for peasant products (to which industrial workers then add value through processing and transportation). Some Marxists would disagree that this is capitalist exploitation as such (since it does not occur through the wage relation), but following others such as Alavi (1987), I think that in a context dominated by the value-form, capital

similarly reduces concrete peasant labor to abstract labor, measuring it in socially necessary labor-time, just as capital relates to contract workers. This means that peasant resistance to such vertical integration, although taking place in the realm of exchange (as opposes to wage-laborers' resistance in the realm of production), is also a form of class struggle. One politically important difference from wage-laborers' resistance, however, is that such peasant resistance often takes the form of market-oriented cooperation (financial – to decrease exploitation by finance capital; in the supply of inputs – to decrease exploitation by agricultural companies; and in processing and marketing – to decrease exploitation by food and textile companies, etc.). As we will see in my case studies, such market-oriented cooperation tends to generate new capitalist relations internally – something that does not occur in wage-laborers' resistance, except when workers appropriate (or buy) workplaces and run them as co-ops (as in Bryer's study).

Another form of peasant resistance to capital is resistance not to exploitation (extraction of surplus-value), but to expropriation, or what Harvey calls “accumulation by dispossession” (ABD) – the most salient form in China and globally now being land grabs (Borras and Franco 2012). I examine two examples of such resistance to land grabs in Chapter 7. Various other forms of ABD were equally or more salient in 1990s China, peasant resistance to which led to the widespread unrest that inspired both NRR and the state policy reforms of the 2000s. In Walker's (2006:7) list of “common themes” of peasant resistance from the mid-1980s until the early 2000s, most could be characterized as ABD (as Walker does as well), including:

the issuing of IOUs in lieu of payment of cash for crops by local officials, who used the funds for speculative real estate and business deals...; cadre diversion of state-allocated inputs for agriculture; the pocketing of TVE [“collective” township and village enterprise] profits by local and mid-level cadres; the imposition by local cadres of a host of ‘illegal’

or ‘unaccounted for’ fines, fees, and taxes to pay for ‘development’ projects and/or for personal use; the forcible confiscation of the land, belongings, and food of peasants who could not or would not pay the extra taxes and fees; the expropriation of arable land without adequate compensation (for highways, real estate development, and personal use, or to attract industrial investors through the creation of ‘development zones’); the issuing of inferior and fake chemical fertilizers, pesticides, seeds, and other supplies by corrupt cadres; and finally the pollution of local water supplies by development projects, which has not only angered peasants but affected agricultural production as well... Decreasing prices for agricultural products, increasing prices for inputs, and a rural inflation rate of more than 11 percent have exacerbated and intertwined with the above economic abuses.

Walker (2006:2) borrows the term “gangster capitalism” from Chinese economist He Qinglian to describe “the plundering of public wealth by power-holders and their hangers-on,” or what He glosses as “the marketization of power” (quoted in Walker [2006:3]) – echoing Wu’s description of the development of capitalist relations from socialist relations above (Wu also borrows the term “marketization of power” from He). However, I avoid the term “gangster capitalism” because He Qinglian (unlike Walker) coined this term to argue that China’s transformation was abnormal from the norm of capitalism in Western countries – which she implied to be preferable. This approach resonates with denunciations of neoliberalism, common on the post-1990s global left, such as Naomi Klein’s (2007) influential notion of “disaster capitalism.” As I explain below, many other analysts such as Marx, Harvey, and Midnight Notes have demonstrated that such ABD has been the norm of capitalism since its origins in early modern European colonial plunder and domestic land enclosures – a global norm that has

become more salient again since the 1970s, now as a fix to the drawn-out (or recurring) crisis of overaccumulation, and as a (re)assertion of bourgeois and state power in response to the proletarian and peasant unrest of the 1960s and 1970s (including in socialist countries such as China). Capitalism – based primarily on the less obvious, normal dispossession that takes place every day through the wage relation (and for peasants, through “unequal exchange”) – cannot function without occasional supplementation by “gangsters,” “corruption,” and “disasters.”

In my analysis, Chinese state extraction of taxes and fees from peasants, from the mid-1980s until those forms of extraction were gradually abolished between 2000 and 2006, was capitalist in the sense that it transferred value from peasants into various development projects that either provided infrastructure for capitalist enterprise or directly funded “collective” TVEs, some of which were actually capitalist enterprises, while others were eventually appropriated by their local managers or bought (often below their value) by capitalists. After China’s reintegration into global capitalism starting in 1992, these privatized TVEs became the main initial vehicle through which Chinese and transnational capital exploited local and increasingly migrant peasant-workers. To be clear, such state extraction was not entirely capitalist. For the most part it was simply *tributary* (Gates 1996:21) in the sense that it functioned primarily to fund the salaries and (sometimes extravagant) personal expenditures of the bureaucracy, and to finance state projects that cannot always be easily lined up with capitalist development as such. This did not differ qualitatively from the socialist era, in which such extraction – coupled with the state-regulated “price scissors” between urban and rural products – was a central mechanism through which the state exploited the peasantry for “primitive socialist accumulation” to fuel China’s industrialization (Husunzi 2010). The difference in the 1990s was that, in the increasingly globalized market context dominated by the commodity form of value, such



extraction became integrated into local, national, and global processes of capital accumulation, and thus became more ravenous, “disembedded” or alienated from the subjective values of peasants and their ostensible representatives in the village committees and township governments. These latter representative or bureaucratic roles increasingly became embodiments of capital, subservient to the objective drive to channel value into capitalist production, and – sometimes directly (through labor recruitment projects such as the one studied by Yan [2008]) – to channel peasants into wage-labor.

### *Accumulation by Dispossession*

Harvey (2003) proposed the concept of ABD as a general term for certain kinds of temporary fixes to crisis (or the TRPF). Harvey regards ABD as the most salient characteristic of actually existing neoliberalism (as opposed to neoliberal theory) due to the drawn-out crisis of overaccumulation since the 1970s, but it has existed throughout capitalist history, starting with the “so-called primitive accumulation of capital” examined by Marx at the end of *Capital*’s first volume. Harvey coins the term ABD to describe phenomena that resemble primitive accumulation (land grabs, imperialist plunder, etc.) but now serve a different function. Whereas primitive accumulation served the historical function of separating people from direct access to the means of production, thus creating the conditions for generalized wage-labor (the commoditization of labor-power), ABD serves the function of staving off crisis by temporarily raising the rate of profit, either by reducing the cost of constant capital ( $c$ ) or increasing the rate of exploitation ( $s/v$ ). ABD reduces  $c$  by plundering land, raw materials, machinery, etc., or

purchasing it below value. It increases the rate of exploitation by pushing down the social wage and increasing the industrial reserve army.

In the latter sense (increasing s/v), I would add – following Midnight Notes (1990:4) – that ABD (which they call “new enclosures”) is actually fulfilling a similar function as primitive accumulation, in that it is “uproot[ing] workers from the terrain on which their organizational power has been built, so that... they are forced to work and fight in a strange environment where the forms of resistance possible at home are no longer available.” In addition to being a capitalist response to the TRPF, then, ABD is also “a structural component of class struggle” (Midnight Notes 1994:2).

### *Chinese Peasant Resistance to ABD*

The Anhui co-op discussed in Chapter 4 originated from peasant resistance to ABD in the 1990s, Chapter 7 describes two cases of such resistance in contemporary Guizhou, and it was primarily in response to the widespread unrest and “crisis of hegemony” (like that Wu described for the 1970s) associated with such resistance that both NRR and the state policy reforms of the 2000s emerged. Kathy Le Mons Walker (2006, 2008) provides a good overview of this background: “In the mid-1980s when the protests first began, many took the form of acts of ‘revenge’ [*baofu*] or violence directed at local cadres, the newly wealthy in villages (often also cadres), and tax collectors,” such as “the beating of cadres and their families” and “the destruction of property by arson” (Walker 2006:8). In 1988, “more than 5,000 cases of ‘violent’ tax resistance involving injuries and the death of tax collectors had occurred over a two- year period.” Throughout the 1990s, such “tactical use of ‘revenge’ against corrupt, ‘bourgeois’

cadres increased in scope and intensity,” while increasingly taking more collective forms. In 1993, for example, “15,000 angry peasants in Renshou County in western Sichuan rose in response to the increasingly arbitrary and high fees imposed by local cadres.” During this six-month uprising, the peasants “blockaded traffic, held police officers hostage, set police cars ablaze, attacked officials, rampaged through government offices and marched en masse through town streets, nearby mountains and fields and on local highways carrying pitchforks, rods, and banners.” The same year in Guangdong, “several thousand peasants blocked a major highway with trucks to protest the expropriation of their fields for a highway improvement project.” (Chapter 7 deals with a much smaller action in 2010 Guizhou against the expropriation of land for a highway project.) Several major actions occurred that year in Anhui (the location of my first case study that started as a protest movement in the 1990s). In one such action,

[A]n ‘Autonomous Peasant Committee’ seized members of a work team from the county party committee and demanded a 50 percent tax reduction, the dismissal of a township head and party committee, and the dissolution of the township militia... [300] members of the committee attacked the county government building. Also in Anhui, more than 2,000 peasants from seven villages organized against both the issuing of IOUs and government payment for crops in material rather than cash. At their meetings they ‘openly’ displayed banners that contained such slogans as ‘All power to the peasants!’ and ‘Down with the new landlords of the 1990s!’

According to Walker, it was in response to such unrest that the central party-state leadership increased its efforts to implement “villager self-government,” i.e. democratic election of “villager committees” – the lowest level of *de facto* government, which had usually been appointed by the lowest *de jure* level, known as “commune” in the socialist era (1958 through

early 1980s), and “township” thereafter (although in theory they had always been democratically elected). Some NRR advocates such as He Xuefeng began their research in the 1990s wave of intellectual interest in the prospects of village elections for China’s “democratization,” only to be disillusioned to discover that, when elections were not simply bought off by (re)emerging local elites, at best they did not mitigate the growing social contradictions, but merely created a new arena for conflict (e.g. He 2003; Wu Yi, et al. 2008). In my Anhui study (Chapter 4), peasants from the protest movement (directed at corruption at both village and township levels) eventually recalled village committees and won election into them, only to discover that in the position of village committee members, there was little they could do to help their communities – for one, because the party-state had already defined the responsibilities of village committees as primarily extractive (collecting taxes and fees – although this role was gradually being abolished when they were in office) and disciplinary (enforcing birth control, for example). Related to this role, many peasants still had an ingrained sense that the village committees were a branch of the state as an alien and generally antagonistic force, so in their capacity as committee members, the former protesters found it difficult to inspire active participation in community development projects.<sup>107</sup> This experience, among others, drove them to develop the nascent co-op as an alternative vehicle for such projects (eventually yielding mixed results).

Regarding the party-state’s attempt to use elections to mitigate the development of class contradictions in the late 1980s and early 1990s, “initially many peasants showed little interest,” seeing them as little more than a formality, but over time, the central party-state’s promotion of democratic elections “enabled Beijing to promote itself as an ally and protector of peasant interests and, thereby, both potentially minimize opposition to its own policies and suggest that the real problem lay with local officialdom” (Walker 2006:9). When elections failed to curb the

growing unrest, Beijing issued new regulations. In 1992, the central government “prohibited local governments from levying taxes and fees at rates greater than 5 percent of the average net income in a village,” sending an “Urgent Circular” to all rural officials “instructing them to comply immediately so as to ‘ease the burden’ on peasants” (Walker 2006:10). In 1993, central leaders “wrote provisions into a new Law on Agriculture that gave peasants the legal right to ‘refuse’ to pay excessive or unauthorized fees and taxes.” “The government’s tacit support for the peasants seems to have been mostly ignored by local gangster capitalists whom Beijing found increasingly difficult to supervise or control,” but it did influence the mode of peasant resistance and contribute to its proliferation after 1993. That year saw an upsurge in recorded “protests and risings” to 8,700 cases, many invoking these two new policies in what Li and O’Brien (1996:29) call “*policy-based resistance*”: “peasants’ practice of defending their ‘legitimate rights and interests’ by citing laws, policies, and other official communications to challenge over-taxation and the excessive use of force, to demand the dismissal of corrupt cadres and greater accountability, or to protest against rigged elections and call for the repeal of ‘local policies’” (paraphrased in Walker 2006:10). Henceforth, peasants began to refer to articulate their resistance to expropriation in terms of “rights defense” (*weiquan*), and to call their oppositional collectives “rights-defense organizations” – like the one in Chapter 4. Chapter 7 will examine some limitations of this discourse, and in the concluding chapter I will consider collective or class “power” as an alternative frame for theorizing the new social relations emerging from peasant resistance to capitalist expropriation.

The 1993 Sichuan riot mentioned above, for example, “started when, soon after its promulgation, local peasants invoked the 5 percent limit to resist paying fees for a highway construction project the county was trying to impose.” After several hundred peasants burned a

police vehicle and marched on the county seat, a national newspaper ran an article supporting the peasants, “charging that Renshou officials were defying the ‘Urgent Circular’ by imposing new levies and attempting to conceal central directives from the local population”:

Peasant leaders made more than 1,000 copies of the article, which they posted on walls and roads and sold to villagers. Reportedly emboldened by the ‘support’ of the central newspaper, the growing numbers of participants moved on the county party committee (more than 40 cadres were beaten), attacked the county government offices, and destroyed numerous vehicles...

Needless to say, the central authorities had precipitated more than they bargained for.

“Contingency plans were... laid in the event that the protest resulted in the toppling of the county leadership. In that event, the ‘riot’ was to be redefined as a rebellion and crushed ‘at all costs’” by an army unit “that was mobilized and ready to move” (Walker 2006:11).

With the combination of this new posture of support from the central party-state and the development of class contradictions, after 1993 “rural society grew further out of control. In some places resistance assumed a more radically militant form, resulting in ‘paralyzed’ and ‘run-away’ villages where local cadres were killed and the rural administration either ceased or turned wholly away from state extraction and policy implementation” (Walker 2006:12). This foreshadows the Wukan Village Incident of 2012, in response to which NGOs advised peasants in Chapter 7 to channel their discontent into less antagonistic forms of “rights-defense.” Wukan, however, seems tame in comparison to the uprisings of the late 1990s, which were characterized by “greater militarization and an openly insurgent politics, including the formation of dissident organizations and paramilitary forces,” such as the Chongqing “Anti-Corruption Army of the

People, Workers and Peasants” (Walker 2006:12). In the larger rebellions of 1997 (in Anhui, Henan, Hubei, and Jiangxi), respectively 70,000, 200,000, 120,000, and 200,000 participants “attacked government buildings, took party secretaries hostage, burned government vehicles, wrecked roads, commandeered government cement and fertilizer, and in at least two instances seized guns and ammunition” (Walker 2008:470).

### *State and Intellectual Responses to Peasant Unrest and Economic Uncertainty*

In response to this worsening situation in the late 1990s, “the party-state stepped-up efforts to both defuse the rural movement and reign in local gangster capitalists” (Walker 2006:13). First in 1998, “under the rubric of expanding ‘democratic decision making’ in the rural areas, it revised the 1987 regulations on village committee elections.” At the same time, however, it “strengthened the role of local party committees to whom village officials are answerable,” while also implementing “a new programme of increase repression and control” which “jettisoned the tolerance it had shown in the 1980s and 1990s for rural protest that remained small-scaled, targeted only local leaders, and did not assume explicitly political form” (Walker 2008:470). This new program has included “greater use of armed police, paramilitary troops, tear gas and other weapons, more frequent arrests... the formation of specialized, heavily armed riot police units stationed in 36 cities, and the creation of 30,00 new police stations in rural areas for both control and surveillance” (Walker 2008:471). A co-op leader in Chapter 4 discusses the impact of such increased repression and its coordination with the party-state’s efforts to promote commerce at the expense of “civil society” or independent community-oriented projects. In contrast with the liberal belief (common among both Chinese liberals and American sinologists

and journalists) that “free enterprise” leads to the development of “civil society,” which then leads to “democratization,” in fact we see that the state combines formal democratization with increasing repression of autonomous social relations in order to promote capitalist enterprise.

When this “deepening” of “village democracy” proved insufficient as a carrot of legitimacy to balance the stick of repression, central leaders “put forward a new ‘strategic line’ on rural and urban development” in 2000, announcing that “‘protecting’ peasants’ interests and rights had now become a top priority.” This shift in rural development strategy – which culminated in the abolition of most rural taxes and fees and the launching of the New Socialist Countryside (NSC) campaign in 2006 – corresponded to what Day (2007) calls China’s “the third wave” of post-Mao intellectual debates on “the figure of the peasant” in Chinese development, from which both NRR and NSC emerged. All three waves (the first centered on the decollectivization of agriculture in the early 1980s, the second on the development and globalization of TVEs in the early 1990s) concerned questions such as: “Was the peasantry going to disappear, be included within a new Chinese capitalism, or form an excluded class, marginalized and continually disruptive?”

This third wave began in the late 1990s in response to this surge of rural unrest. At first most intellectuals framed it in terms of “the peasants’ burden” (*nongmin fudan*), generally limited to “excessive” taxes and fees caused by the corruption of local officials (Day 2007: 189, 236-253). Gradually more sophisticated analysis took shape, such as Wen Tiejun’s reformulation of the contemporary *sannong wenti*, or “rural problem in three dimensions” (peasants, rural social institutions, and agriculture or rural production) as caused by the commoditization of land, labor, and money after three decades of “primitive socialist accumulation” (industrialization fueled by state extraction of surplus from peasant labor), shaped by China’s semi-peripheral



position in the modern world (outlined in Chapter 2 and elaborated in Day [2007:195-223]). It was on this intellectual foundation – along with others, such as He Xuefeng’s analysis of transforming peasant values, social cohesion, and “modes of rural governance” – that NRR emerged as an alternative or compliment to the party-state’s responses to rural unrest. Both NRR and NSC also responding to fears (by policy-maker and intellectuals, such as former World Bank economist Justin Yifu Lin [Day 2007:232]) that China might be headed for economic crisis following the Asian financial crisis of 1997 (which China managed to avoid – and benefit from – because it was still less integrated into global capitalism than the countries that were hit the hardest), growing instability in the global economy after 2000, and signs that China’s production capacity was overrunning its consumption capacity. In addition to gradually eliminating most rural fees and taxes, a major concern of these new policies was to increase rural consumption through means such as subsidizing peasant consumption of household appliances and improving infrastructure (e.g. building and widening roads – as we will see in Chapter 7, and transferring peasants into more modern housing complexes – as in Chapter 6 – thus also freeing up land to be used in either commercial agriculture projects or more real estate development).

As Wen Tiejun (2010:5) noted in a 2005 speech (revised as the introduction to a 2010 collection of NRR student intern narratives):

We know that an important reason many peasants rose up (*qiyi*) and joined the Red Army in the 1920s-1930s was that there were about 20 million landless peasants; now we have 40 million. That biggest condition preventing them from rising up (*nao bu qi lai*) today is that China is the only populous developing country that completed that main content of democratic revolution: land revolution. China thoroughly implemented the egalitarian distribution of land among peasants, so peasants cherish their little plots of land, so they

usually don't rebel (*nao shi*) in the countryside – [instead] they [usually] rebel in the cities, [where] they face extreme abuse and oppression, [so] the smallest rumor leads to major unrest (*dongluan*). Comparable incidents of rebellion (*fankang*) [usually occur in the countryside only when their] land, their last piece of insurance (*baozhang*), the fruit given to them by the democratic revolution, is forcefully expropriated by monopoly capital. This has led to [a situation where] both the scale and frequency of collective public security cases (*qunti zhi'an shijian* [i.e. protests and uprisings]) in the countryside are now much greater than those in the cities. **This began in 1999,<sup>108</sup> and this led to the upper levels [of the party-state] accepting the framework (*tifa*) of “the rural problem in three dimensions” – [their acceptance of this framework] wasn't because I wrote an article [theorizing it] in 1996! This was the result of ordinary people (*laobaixing*) voting with their feet and educating the upper levels to accept [this] policy framework (*zhengce sixiang*), and to repeatedly [elevate it to the status of] the ruling party's “top priority” (*zhong zhong zhi zhong*) in the new century.** This is because in the stage of rapid industrialization and urbanization, social contradictions in the countryside are inevitably serious.

As Walker's studies make clear, Wen is mistaken here to imply that land grabs were the only form of capitalist expropriation in the countryside (or that the agent was “monopoly capital” – a term many Chinese postsocialist leftists adopt from American Third Worldists such as Paul Sweezy – rather than an alliance of [normal, competitive, local and transnational] capital and postsocialist party-state bureaucrats), and that peasant resistance began only in 1999. However, this speech is important in part because it is a rare acknowledgment by an NRR advocate that

peasant unrest was the main impetus behind the post-2000 reforms, and that the situation today is comparable to that which gave rise to the peasant rebellions, Communist movement, and NRR in the 1920s-1930s. The speech also illustrates that the position of both the party-state reforms and NRR is defensive (or “socially protective” in Polanyian terms) in relation to that peasant agency.

Later in this speech Wen explains the origins of NRR and the overlapping movement of student “rural-support” (*zhinong*) activities. Part of the background not mentioned here is that in 1999, when Wen’s daughter mentioned that her university classmate could not afford to return to her rural home during summer vacation, Wen funded her travel on the condition that she write a report on the social conditions in her village. This was the legendary beginning of the student rural-support movement, which would later come to include not only research but also active support for NRR projects. In 2000, a young intellectual named Liu Xiangbo (affectionately called Liu Laoshi – “Old Stone Liu” – by his students and colleagues, in reference to a rustic saying about an old stone in the outhouse being “stinky and hard” – i.e. frank and stubborn) moved to Tianjin to teach political economy at a university, and to be closer to Wen and other, mainly left-leaning intellectuals concerned with rural China who were moving to the Beijing area at the time.<sup>109</sup> Also in 2000, another young intellectual named Qiu Jiansheng (who would found the James Yen Institute for Rural Reconstruction in 2003, and whose personal starting point had been his independent discovery of the pedagogical theory and practice of James Yen) began reviving the term “Rural Reconstruction” in this circle, organizing a “salon” under that name (a group for reading, research, and discussion about China’s “rural problem in three dimensions”).<sup>110</sup> Through these discussions, Liu drew inspiration from Wen’s experiment in student rural-support and began promoting the formation of student organizations and facilitating their rural-support activities in the countryside – first at his university, then throughout China,

under the name of the Liang Shuming Center for Rural Reconstruction (formed in 2001 but registered as a Beijing NGO in 2004). By 2011, “the student rural-support movement, launched by young intellectuals with Liu’s contingent at the core, has already mobilized tens of thousands of students to participate in going to the countryside to assist rural communities and volunteer in rural schools” (Friends 2011):

The Liang Shuming Center has organized 11 large-scale national conventions for rural support and research, each lasting one week, and attended by several hundred student volunteers from throughout China. On this foundation, the Center has facilitated the establishment of over 200 student rural-support organizations (with Liu Laoshi personally visiting and lecturing to many of them each year), influencing over 10,000 volunteers. Each year since 2008, it has held contests to honor ten “outstanding rural-support organizations and individuals.” Each year since 2005, the Center has administered one-year internships for about 30 recent college graduates, providing guidance and arranging for interns to live and work with peasants in the countryside, thus fostering about one hundred committed rural development workers to date. On this basis, the Center has also promoted the return of college graduates to their rural homes to pursue careers there, and it has organized multiple conferences to this end.

In Wen Tiejun’s speech quoted above, he highlights the role of his short-lived magazine, *China Reform – Rural Edition* (2001-2004), in publishing reports by such student volunteers, along with letters by peasants about rural conditions, including peasant rights-defense movements as well as early cooperative experiments. (In Chapter 4 I discuss one of several

reports from this magazine about the Anhui rights-defense movement that became a co-op.) This confluence of “social forces” (*shehui lilian* – a common term in NRR discourse) – peasant activists, student volunteers, and public intellectuals (echoing the Confucian ideal discussed in Chapter 2) – led to the emergence of NRR by “taking the cities’ surplus social capital and transferring it to the capital-lacking countryside” (Wen 2010:7). Student and intellectual “volunteers” (*zhiyuanzhe*)<sup>111</sup> – embodiments of “the cities’ surplus social capital” – “take the social resources in the countryside and capitalize (*zibenhua*)<sup>112</sup> them as factors of sustainable development, turning them into rural social capital, [thus helping to] stabilize rural society.” The commodity form of value has become so hegemonic that even such attempts to reverse the flow of resources are framed in terms of “capitalization,” and my case studies will demonstrate that sometimes this is more than a metaphor, as cooperative projects give rise to new capitalist relations internally, and external “volunteers” assume the role of alternative middlemen and advertisers in the flow of value from peasants to conscientious urban consumers, with NGO personnel comparable to banking staff in the flow of funding from charitable foundations to NRR projects.

Here Wen (2010:7) contrasts this form of intervention with the “pan-politicization” (*fanzhengzhihua*) that he associates with liberal intellectuals who “take their ideological stuff to the countryside, creating a lot of trouble.” In particular, Wen refers to liberal promotion of “rights” discourse and village committee elections, saying that these tend to “transform traditional, small rural disputes into political contradictions,” causing great harm (*shuai de tou, po xie liu*) and “social costs” to many peasants while failing to “resolve the contradictions” (Wen 2010:8). Instead, “our volunteers... strive to dissolve (*huaqie*) rural conflicts, using reformist (*gailiang*) Rural Reconstruction to take the divisive (*paixing*) organization(s) already formed

through these confrontational (*duikangxing*) rural conflicts and turn them into an active force participating in Rural Reconstruction”:

For China must be stable before it can stand up in the forest of the world’s nations. Rural unrest, in particular, must be avoided, because when urbanization and industrialization accelerate, the countryside tends to decay (*shuaibian*) due to the net outflow of factors [of production, i.e. land, labor, and money]. We are already in a period of heightened contradictions; if [we] deal with them through pan-politicization, of course [it] will lead to an increase in conflicts!<sup>113</sup>

In Chapter 4, the head of the Anhui co-op calls into question such privileging of stability over confrontation, inasmuch as the latter confronts dispossession and increases peasants’ collective power (even as expressed through the discourse of “rights” and “corruption” – which limits their action to the legal framework of a state deeply intertwined with capitalist interests). On the other hand, the co-op director echoes Wen in arguing that elections tend to exacerbate dissention among the ranks of peasants. Unlike Wen, however, his goal is not to mitigate conflict in general, but to increase solidarity among peasants against external predation. In Chapter 5, Raoling Peasant Association seems more consistent with Wen’s “reformist” framework, except that it uses a village election to help develop its power against local rivals. When the association’s early non-profit activities develop into a participatory mass movement, economic problems lead to conflict among cooperators, compelling the association leaders to reorganize into something more like a capitalist enterprise. In Chapter 6, economic pressures and ideological differences drive cooperators apart and prevent the NRR project from developing

beyond a few small-scale enterprises, and the disorganized peasants' compliance with a state-led relocation project seals the project's fate. Chapter 7 demonstrates how peasant resistance to external interests (as well as to internal free-riding) can be at least as successful as "constructive" or "reformist" forms of cooperation.

More generally, these cases illustrate various strategies through which peasants and their intellectual advocates have attempted to create alternative social relations, corresponding to alternative values, in response to this development of social contradictions in the wake of China's socialist modernization, marketization, and integration into the global capitalist regime of commodity value. The concluding chapter will return to this broader historical context to consider what these experiences might teach us about the potential development of autonomous peasant power.

## **Part II:**

### **Case Studies of Peasant Organization in New Rural Reconstruction**



## Chapter 4: Wansheng Co-op, Anhui

Wansheng was one of the first dozen or so grassroots peasant organizations to be influenced by NRR. Like most of those that sent delegates to the first national NRR convergence in December 2002, it started as a “rights-defense” movement against local state corruption in the late 1990s, but Wansheng is one of only two I know of that survived the early 2000s crackdown on such oppositional movements by transforming into a co-op. Partly through the influence of NRR advocates, Wansheng has come close to the ideal of “comprehensive co-op” theorized by Wen Tiejun, combining market-oriented and community-oriented projects.

This chapter introduces Wansheng’s structure and history, focusing on the experiences of two co-op members as shared in conversation and writing: co-op director Gao, and a young woman named Jingjing who decided to stay home and work at the co-op instead of going back out to work in coastal factories. The main theme I highlight is the tug of war between economic pressures and certain alternative values (in this case, economic justice, participatory democracy, and community solidarity). This tug of war is expressed in Jingjing’s personal experiences, as well as in co-op leaders’ efforts to navigate the tension between their commitment to certain community-oriented projects, on the one hand, and the need to generate funding for such projects and to attract young people (such as Jingjing) back to the countryside, on the other. One manifestation of this tension is a two-year conflict that emerged after one co-op leader was accused of embezzling, which led to Wansheng’s (at least temporary) abandonment of its original ideal of periodic elections for the co-op’s directorate (*lishihui*). Another is the commoditization of hospitality – a subtle but culturally significant expression of the capitalist

value-form's transformation of peasant sociality. At the same time, the co-op's uneasy relationship with the local party-state politically reinforces the economic pressure on Wansheng to become more like a conventional enterprise. Finally, I discuss certain Wansheng leaders' attraction to Raoling Peasant Association (Chapter 5) as a model that they believe to have resolved this tension between market and community, or between commodity value and alternative values.

### ***East Bridge Township***

As of 2012, Wansheng had about 400 member households from 12 hamlets (*zhuang*) in three administrative villages of East Bridge Township (population ca. 35,000), about 45 minutes by bus from a minor prefectural capital in central China's Anhui province. Anhui is the poorest province in the heartland of Han Chinese civilization (ranking by per capita GDP), and the sixth poorest of China's 31 province-level divisions, with a per capita GDP of 25,300 yuan (3,900 USD) compared to 35,000 yuan for China as whole in 2011, and a rural per capita net income of 5,280 yuan compared to 5,919 yuan for China as a whole in 2010.<sup>114</sup> The prefecture that administers East Bridge is one of the poorest among Anhui's 16 prefectures, with a per capita GDP of about 7,500 yuan and a rural per capita net income under 3,000 yuan. Two indications of its poverty are the prefecture's infamy for party-state corruption (giving rise to Wansheng's early rights-defense mobilization) and for the illicit blood trade and resulting HIV epidemic mentioned in Chapter 3. East Bridge is fairly typical for this prefecture's rural townships (with a per capita GDP of about 5,800 yuan and a per capita net income of 2,700 yuan in 2008, compared to 4,761 yuan for rural China as a whole that year<sup>115</sup>), perhaps slightly better off than other townships

because East Bridge is relatively close to the prefectural capital, for whose market some residents produce food, and in whose small service sector some younger residents work (although most migrate to higher-paying jobs in larger cities, one or two days away by train). (According to my informants, the HIV epidemic has not affected East Bridge.) The prefecture has one post-secondary school, a teacher's college that became an important resource for Wansheng's community-oriented projects. There is little industrial development, and the climate is dry for central China, so the prefecture's main products are corn and wheat, all monocultured with heavy reliance on well irrigation and chemical inputs – a pattern that has contributed to declining soil fertility and rising input costs (providing a demand for Wansheng's farm supply division – the co-op's main source of income until recently). (A few years ago soy was another major crop, but a pest outbreak – exacerbated by monocropping – led to its widespread replacement by wheat.) A few farmers grow vegetables for the small urban market, but the poor environment creates a market requirement for expensive greenhouses that most residents cannot afford. This combination of factors helps explain why East Bridge has a lower per capita income than my sites in Shanxi (Chapter 5) and Sichuan (Chapter 6), about the same as my site in Guizhou (Chapter 7).

### ***Overview of Wansheng's Structure and Projects***

As of summer 2012, Wansheng had about 25 “core members” (*gugan*),<sup>116</sup> judging by the number of people who attended the co-op's weekly meetings. These meetings were open to all members, but required of those in the (often overlapping) positions of directorate members, division heads, and delegates from Wansheng's 12 hamlets. In principle, the directorate was

elected by all Wansheng members, and the heads of each division were elected by division members, although in practice this was more complicated (as discussed below). According to Director Gao, none of these members received any compensation for their work in the co-op, except the three “young people”: Gao (about 40 years old) and the two women in their early 20s (Jingjing and Rong – the latter a former NRR intern who decided to settle down in East Bridge), who received salaries of about 1,000 yuan a month – Rong’s funded by the Wansheng credit union, the other two by NGOs.

The co-o’s regular activities could be classified into three categories: (a) three main income-generating projects, (b) five non-profit or community-oriented projects, and (c) five minor income-generating projects. In addition, in 2008 the co-op worked with the state in implementing an infrastructure development project – a good example of the “cooperative provision of public goods” and “mass supervision of the state” advocated by NRR advocates such as He Xuefeng and Wang Ximing (discussed in Chapter 2). Below I list these projects in order of importance (by my own approximation), with brief explanations, before going on to the main narrative of this chapter.

#### A. Three main income-generating projects

##### *1. Cooperative farm supply store*

This was Wansheng’s first market-oriented project, initiated in 2004 with the advice of NRR advocates, and it is still the main way in which most members are involved with Wansheng on a regular basis. By becoming a member of Wansheng (by buying between one and five shares in the co-op at 200 yuan per share), one becomes a member of this store and is thereby entitled to the discounted purchase of farm supplies (i.e. agro-chemicals) and an annual dividend of any profit, derived from the sale of supplies to non-members at market price. The dividend has

always been small – 35 yuan per share at the most – so the main benefits are the discount and a money-back guarantee that the supplies are real (fake farm supplies being common in this area – and in all the parts of rural China where this topic came up during my research). This guarantee and the discount are possible because Wansheng buys them directly from the manufacturers, thus “cutting out the middleman” (as per the standard rationale for farm supply co-ops in general). The store is run out of Wansheng’s main building by an elderly core member named Mr. Li. Instead of a salary or commission, he receives the right to use part of the building for his own convenience store. Four other core members take care of bookkeeping, ordering supplies, and running two branches of the store in other hamlets – apparently all without monetary compensation.

## 2. *Credit union (zijin huzhu – “financial cooperation”)*

Several core members proposed this during my first visit in the fall of 2010, following the example of several co-ops in northeastern China (discussed in Day 2007:339-352) that have been popular models in NRR circles. Below I discuss the process of establishing this credit union in 2011. By the summer of 2012, it had become Wansheng’s main source of income, funding the salary of one new member (Rong) and most of Wansheng’s basic expenses such as rent and electricity, and accumulating a fund for the construction of a new building to be used as a guesthouse for the evolving hospitality business. It is a separate entity from the co-op, with Wansheng owning 20% and about 10 individual co-op members owning the remaining shares at 2,000 yuan per share. Some of these members do not live in the area and were recruited in order to raise money for the credit union; they became members due to the legal requirement that such “financial cooperation” be limited to co-op members (otherwise the institution must be registered as a bank, which would require a much higher initial capital, among other things). That law also

requires people to become co-op members before they can use the credit union to deposit money or take out loans. (The above figure of 400 co-op members does not include the many people who joined the co-op just to use the credit union.)

### *3. Distillery*

Like the credit union, this is an independent enterprise in which Wansheng owns 20% and several individual members own the rest, at 1,000 yuan per share. It was initiated in 2010 by a middle-aged man named Mr. Shu, who runs the distillery with input and help from the other individual shareholders. It makes a small profit and helps cover some of Wansheng's expenses. One shareholder said that most choose to receive their dividends in kind (i.e. bottles of liquor) since they can use the liquor as gifts on which they would have otherwise wasted money. (Gifts are one of the main monetary expenses in rural China, especially for the elderly, who no longer have to spend money on their children's education, building houses, etc.)

## **B. Five non-profit projects**

### *1. Performing arts troupe (wenyidui)*

This was Wansheng's first "constructive" project after the rights-defense collective reorganized as a co-op in 2003. Several members of the collective had been trained as musicians during the Cultural Revolution, and the rights-defense movement inspired them to revive that talent in order to mobilize other peasants to join their struggle against corruption. After the movement subsided and they reorganized as a co-op, they continued to compose and perform songs against corruption, now combined with songs about the co-op (advertising its farm supply business, for example) and promoting Communist Party policies (such as practicing birth control

and placing equal value on sons and daughters), along with old “revolutionary” songs. The troupe now has about 20 members, who meet at least once a week to rehearse and sporadically perform publically for free (at the local market, for example) and occasionally at weddings, etc., for a small fee that helps cover their costs such as replacing equipment.

## *2. Old People’s Club (laonian xiehui)*

This has two main parts: a teahouse run by Mr. Li outside his convenience store (where locals meet every day to play mahjong), and dancing organized periodically by an elderly female core member of the co-op.

## *3. Children’s activity center*

This is a room in Wansheng’s main building with an NGO-funded library. It also used include a set of NGO-donated computers, until the children broke several of them and the rest were locked up. During the school year (when more children are at home – during the summer many of them go to urban areas to see their parents, where they work as migrants), local children come to read books, play outside, or (previously) to play on the computers, and one of the young co-op members (usually Jingjing) keeps an eye on them. On Saturdays, students from the prefectural college come and organize activities for the children and help them learn to read and use the computers.

## *4. Thrift store*

This is a room in Wansheng’s main building full of donated used clothes collected by the student volunteers. Locals buy the clothes for a small price (about 5 yuan per item), and the proceeds go to helping needy local families. For example, this fund helped pay for the surgery of a local boy whose family would not have been able to afford it otherwise.

### 5. *Occasional pro-bono legal service*

According to Director Gao, locals suffering from various injustices (unpaid wages, abuse by village officials, etc.) occasionally come to him for legal advice, which he provides for free if he thinks the case is worthy. During my second visit in the summer of 2011, a young lawyer from another province had come to volunteer at Wansheng, and he was also providing such services (he had dealt with three minor cases over the three months he had been there). He also set up a microblog to attract media attention to one of these cases, which apparently worked (the case was won), but it also seems to have played a role in worsening Wansheng's relationship with the local government (as discussed below), so the microblog was discontinued, as were such legal services in general – at least until relations with the government improve.

### C. Five minor income-generating projects

#### 1. *Small grain farm*

This consists of 10 *mu* rented by Wansheng and farmed conventionally by Mr. Shu using his own equipment. He sells the grain and splits the small profit with the co-op.

Wansheng previously had a collective organic vegetable farm on this land but it discontinued, partly because there is not much local demand for organic vegetables, so the most economical use of this land seemed to be conventional grain farming. In 2010 co-op leaders were discussing other possible agricultural projects, but by 2011 they had changed their focus to preparing the credit union, and the two small agricultural projects initiated in 2012 adopted the more common cooperative model of “collective management, individual” – also that adopted by Raoling after a failed attempt at collective farming (Chapter 5).



## 2. *Hospitality business*

This emerged from a series of requests by NGOs for Wansheng to host events such as workshops since 2011. During one I observed in 2012, Jingjing and Rong did most of the work preparing food and lodging for the guests, with the help of voluntary labor (cooking, etc.) from a few older co-op members. The small profit went into the fund toward building a guesthouse with a restaurant (apparently in imitation of Raoling), which they hope will generate more income.

## 3. *Methane harvester installation*

One co-op member installs methane harvesters in local homes for a small fee, with equipment is subsidized by the state.<sup>117</sup>

## 4. *Cooperative supply and marketing of individually farmed free-range chickens*

This was just getting started by Mr. Li in the summer of 2012.

## 5. *Cooperative supply and marketing of individually farmed chrysanthemums*

This was also just getting started in 2012, by Wansheng's Youth Center (i.e. Gao, Jingjing, and Rong), as Wansheng's first project in cooperation with another peasant co-op that joined the local co-op network initiated by Wansheng a few months before. The other co-op – which specialized in farming medicinal herbs – sold Wansheng seedlings and signed a contract to buy the harvested flowers at a certain price (which it would then process and sell to an herbal distributor). However, the Wansheng members discovered that the other co-op had tricked them by setting a price much lower than the market value for this type of chrysanthemum, saying it was a different type, so after this first transaction, Wansheng decided to refrain from further “cooperation” with that co-op.

#### D. Cooperation with the State in Providing Public Goods

In addition, the co-op worked with the state in carrying out an infrastructure project in 2008, called an “Agricultural Development” (*nongye kaifa*) project. This unprecedented direct collaboration between an independent peasant organization and the state (at central and prefectural levels) was proposed by Director Gao to China’s Ministry of Finance as part of a national pilot project aimed at cutting down on embezzlement by local officials (at the township and village levels). The possibility for such an institutional innovation emerged back in 2001, when Wansheng’s predecessor organization petitioned the Ministry of Finance to investigate the embezzlement of funds allotted for a similar infrastructure project. As a solution to this widespread form of corruption, Gao proposed that independent peasant organizations might do a better job than local officials when it came to supervising the implementation of such projects. The investigator then pitched this idea in the Ministry for several years, which finally initiated a national pilot project for state cooperation with several peasant co-ops in Anhui, including Wansheng. The Wansheng project invested over 1 million yuan in building roads and irrigation facilities (1.6 kilometers of roads, about 6 kilometers of ditches, 70 bridges, and 17 wells with pumps), and planting several thousand trees. Overall, the Anhui pilot was successful, and according to Gao, the Ministry was discussing whether to promote this model nationwide as of 2011.<sup>118</sup>

#### ***Economic Opportunity and Democracy***

The infrastructure project’s only problem was that, while the main purpose of this innovation was to cut down on embezzling, it turned out that someone embezzled anyway – ironically, a member of Wansheng Co-op. At least this was what Director Gao, Mr. Li, and a few

other core members believe, since some of the state funding for the project went missing, and the man in charge of overseeing that part of the project – a middle-aged man named Mr. Quan who had joined during the rights-protection days and now served on Wansheng’s general directorate – was beginning to develop a reputation for frequently borrowing money from the co-op and individuals for trivial things such as cigarettes, and apparently needed a larger sum of money to pay off personal debts.<sup>119</sup> Mr Quan denied the accusation and mobilized a few supporters, leading to open conflict among co-op members and a re-election of the directorate. According to Gao, Quan went around bribing members to vote for him, but even so he was not re-elected, so Quan accused Gao and his “faction” (*pai*) of rigging the ballots. Quan was not able to rally enough support to justify a re-vote, so he and a few of his supporters dropped out of the co-op. For the next two years, he tried to get revenge by having his supporters (mostly relatives) disrupt Wansheng’s public events (meetings with NGOs and other co-ops, for example), shouting that Gao was a cheat and the co-op was a farce.

All this foreshadows similar accusations, splits, and conflicts in my other three case studies. NRR advocates and volunteers have told me that such incidents are common among peasant organizations. Some blame the conditions of rural life, whereas others (for example the late Liu Laoshi – founder of the Liang Shuming Center for Rural Reconstruction) say this is more of a problem in organizations with more contentious backgrounds, since they are more accustomed to “struggle” than “constructive cooperation.”<sup>120</sup> Both explanations may have some merit, but the latter does not account for cases such as my other three studies, which have no such background. In one case (Peppercorn, Chapter 7), three experiences of contention (over land rights) actually managed to reunite villagers who had previously been driven apart by the economic opportunity created by an NRR project in “constructive cooperation.” In another case

(Liao Flats, Chapter 6), it is even clearer that such a project in market-oriented cooperation contributed to several splits among and within the erstwhile cooperating households.

On the other hand, the first explanation (rural conditions) does not account for what I observed to be a comparable frequency of splits and conflicts among urban-based organizations and projects, including NRR-affiliated projects such as farmers' markets and bulk-buying clubs. In most cases urban and rural, the immediate causes of such conflicts seem to be centered on divergent economic interests among cooperators. If they are more common among peasant cooperators, that is probably because the peasants start out as independent producers accustomed to doing business individually (as households), and because the benefits they gain from cooperation can often be approximated either individually (for example by buying a van so they can deliver their own products – as three households did in Liao Flats) or through conventional economic relations – that is, through selling one's products to a middleman, taking out loans from a bank or microfinance company, etc. It is therefore easy for peasants to split as soon as they feel marginalized or disempowered within a co-op, and the economic nature of that cooperation presents many opportunities for apparent conflicts of interest to arise (as well as conflicts over subjective values, as discussed in Chapter 6). I would thus rephrase the “rural conditions” explanation in terms of economic conditions, with market-oriented cooperation among independent producers as a specific way of relating to those conditions that lends itself to conflict. This is one reason He Xuefeng recommends that peasants focus on community-oriented cooperation rather than market-oriented cooperation (as discussed in Chapter 2).

The case of Mr. Quan's alleged embezzlement may not seem to fit this framework, but Director Gao's explanation was actually somewhat similar. Gao mentioned that the Quans were particularly independent, having a background of minor disputes with other families, and it was

only the context of shared exploitation by corrupt officials that brought Mr. Quan into cooperation with villagers outside his customary circle. Quan's enthusiasm in rights-defense gained him enough respect to win election to Wansheng's directorate in 2005, but with the transition from rights-defense to "constructive," mainly market-oriented projects, his old "selfish" ways gradually resurfaced, with increasing frequency leading up to the 2008 incident. Mr. Quan's situation as an independent producer thus seems to have played a role, and the opportunity to embezzle – while not exactly market-oriented cooperation as such – was clearly a case of divergent economic interests among cooperators, and could be analyzed as a case of "free-riding" in the cooperative provision of public goods.

As noted in Chapter 2, the free-rider problem has been a key point of debate regarding the direction of rural development in China. Chapter 7 discusses a more typical example that inspired peasants to solve the problem through spontaneous collective imposition of sanctions. In Wansheng, on the other hand, the case of Mr. Quan was more complicated because no one observed him embezzling, and he was able to mobilize enough supporters to disrupt the co-op repeatedly over the course of two years. Director Gao said this harmed the co-op by convincing members to drop out (some because they supported Quan, others because they did not understand the situation), driving potential members away, and making a bad impression on visitors (some of which might otherwise have donated resources to Wansheng). (This disruption may have even influenced the Liao Flats project discussed in Chapter 6: On two occasions Peng Wei, the head of Liao Flats' main collective, cited such a disruption he observed while visiting Wansheng as an example of why he disliked co-ops, and why he opposed his sister's proposal to reorganized their own collective.)

In the end, it could be said that Wansheng overcame the free-rider problem by turning to the mechanism of democratic elections. According to Gao, however, the election was even more disruptive because it exacerbated the selfishness and factionalism that had already emerged (in my analysis, due primarily to the transition from collective resistance to economic cooperation). Gao seemed to be drawing on the work of NRR advocates such as He Xuefeng when he said that “Elections are not really suitable for rural China,”<sup>121</sup> reasoning that there tend to be many “contradictions” among peasant households (conflicting interests regarding land, water, etc.), often magnified by long-standing family feuds and gossip, and that the competitive nature of elections tends to bring these tensions to the surface, whereas overt conflict could usually be avoided otherwise. After the experience with Quan, therefore, Gao and the other leaders apparently<sup>122</sup> decided to postpone the next general election indefinitely, instead “developing” new directorate members through personal recommendation and dealing quietly with any conflicts that emerge. (For example, the man who now holds the second highest position in Wansheng under Gao was not elected, but recruited by Gao and other leaders in 2010.) Setting aside the question of whether elections are a desirable form of democracy,<sup>123</sup> the case of Mr. Quan illustrates how conflicts of interest, created or exacerbated by economic pressures and opportunities, tend to compromise efforts to realize alternative values such as democracy (at least in this sense of the term) and community solidarity.

### ***Expanded Reproduction***

Among the NRR-affiliated peasant organizations I have observed, Wansheng has probably been the most active in stimulating the creation of new organizations and interaction among existing ones. It was Gao’s visit to Guizhou that inspired the creation of the Peppercorn

Village co-op discussed in Chapter 7. Also, in combination with the Raoling Association (Chapter 5), Wansheng initiated China's first "study network" of peasant organizations organized by the peasants themselves.<sup>124</sup> More recently, Wansheng initiated the formation of a local network of co-ops in the same prefecture, which have met to exchange information and briefly cooperated in the production of chrysanthemums (until Wansheng members discovered the other co-op was deceiving and taking advantage of them).

When asked about the difficulties facing the co-op, one core member put it this way: "The problems of our co-op are the problems of rural China: (1) lack of money, (2) lack of young people."<sup>125</sup> I asked other members and all answered one or the other or both (in addition to other factors discussed below). This is consistent with the general sentiment in all the NRR sites I visited – even Raoling, widely admired for its economic success and the large number of young people working there for a salary.

Efforts to attract young people (in particular *educated* young people) back to the countryside and into NRR projects are a central concern for Wansheng and NRR in general, a necessary condition for the sustainable (re)construction of self-sufficient communities. As Jingjing put it, "if no young people were to come back and participate [in such projects], the countryside would have no hope at all."<sup>126</sup> I therefore dedicate the next long section of this chapter to examining Jingjing's experience as recounted in conversation and writing, before moving to the experience of Director Gao and some recent tendencies in the co-op's development.

If NRR projects are supposed to counter the effects of economic downturns on rural communities, migrant peasant-workers, and China's overall social stability, the global financial crash of 2008 might be considered a test of this strategy. As it turned out, most of the 23 million

migrants laid off from export-processing jobs in late 2008 managed to find new jobs (mainly in smaller cities closer to home) by mid-2009, and by mid-2010 China's economy seemed to be in full recovery. Meanwhile economists continue to warn of an impending, more comprehensive crash.<sup>127</sup> If they are right, the blip of 2008 to 2010 may not have been much of a test after all. In any case, let us consider how Jingjing responded to the concurrence of that blip with a job opportunity at the NRR-affiliated co-op near the village with which she identifies as "home" (although she spent most of her childhood in the coastal city where her parents worked as migrants). More generally, this is a particular response to the experience of migrant wage-labor in relation to the contemporary Chinese peasant condition and the alternative futurity posed by NRR.<sup>128</sup>

### *Jingjing's Ambiguous (Re-)Ruralization*

Like many "peasant" children throughout China, Jingjing grew up in the coastal city where her parents worked, one to two days from their village by train.<sup>129</sup> In 2005 her grandmother fell ill, so Jingjing and her parents came home, where she completed middle school and, two years later, enrolled in a private vocational high school, with a major in basic computer skills. (According to her estimate, about 20% of children in her village have some high school education; 40% go no further than primary school.<sup>130</sup>) After a year of coursework, the school sent her to Nanjing for "internship" in an electronics factory. This is how Jingjing described the experience in a narrative she wrote for an NRR-affiliated NGO:

I was really depressed [*yumen*]. I felt that the school was a big scam [*da pianzi*], that the whole world was a scam. [The work] wasn't related to my major at all, plus with the



financial crisis, the factory barely got any orders, so the wages were only a few hundred yuan a month, sometimes as low as 300 – not even enough to eat. So with an angry heart I quit and went home.

After the Chinese New Year she went out again, this time to another city on the coast where her cousin works in an apparel factory. The cousin had said she could make over 2,000 yuan a month there, but when she got there she discovered “such a high salary came at a high price”:

Every day we had to work 12-hour shifts, and every week we rotated between day shift and night shift. So [I was] always nodding off, and if you weren’t careful the machine would injure your hands, especially at night. I was always sleepy at night, and after three hours my eyes looked like a panda’s. I couldn’t handle that kind of stress [*jingshen de daya*], so I quit that job too.

Not wanting to go home empty-handed, she found a third job selling shoes on commission. At first the shop-owner was always scolding her for her poor salesmanship, but “there were only a few months left until the New Year, so I wanted to hold out at least until then.” After a month of practice she was selling more shoes than anyone except the owner, but competition among the staff led to conflicts.

Looking back, it seems ridiculous that we would compete for such a small commission, but this is just what the boss wanted: it was his strategy, making ugly faces at whoever sold the least... Only now do I understand why the boss didn't intervene whenever we quarreled!

As the new year approached, whole families came to buy shoes, and their excitement about going home made me think: all these peddlers on the sidewalk, tending their stalls in the cold, even when barely anyone came to buy, what was all this for, if not to make a living, to make a little money? Why not just make money at home [rather than spending] all year running around in the rain and wind? [We have] become slaves to money [*qian nu*], **slaves to life** [*shenghuo de nupu*]. Ask [your]self: when can [you/we] stop and go home to see the family to which [you/we] haven't returned in so long? The white-haired elders, the children in school – are they waiting for nothing but a handful of cash and a few days together? I thought, I should spend more time with my family...

I highlighted “slaves to life” because I found it unusual and hard to translate. *Shenghuo* here probably refers to the sense of “making a living,” but this usage seems to imply that life (under capitalism) not only requires money; it is nearly synonymous with money.<sup>131</sup> It is not even an option to consider “returning to the land,” in the sense of retreating from the monetary economy to any degree worth mentioning. The only choice is between obtaining money relatively near or far from home. Jingjing continues:

I saw a lot in that year or so out working, and began to understand a few things. Once you go out to work, every year you only have a few days at home with your family. How many years must pass before you can spend a whole year together? And I didn't even make much money, but I caused my parents to worry every day. What was the point? So I decided to stay home in 2010.

In a conversation we had during my first visit to Wansheng Co-op in November 2010, Jingjing explained her decision to return somewhat more pragmatically:<sup>132</sup>

Nowadays when people come home for New Year dressed up in nice clothes, they're completely packaging themselves [i.e. just putting on a show]. How much sweat and blood did they have to shed to buy those clothes? ... When I came home on New Year, in order to keep my parents from seeing how bad I had it out there, I made a point to buy some nice clothes and fix myself up to look pretty... Actually I don't like to dress up. Outside I dress just like this [i.e. jeans and a sweater, hair in a ponytail, no make-up], but whenever anyone comes back for New Year they... [*inaudible*], so people say "you must have made a lot of money out there!" Actually you don't make anything, if you're just working [*ganhuo*], unless you've got some special skills, or unless you've got a mind for business. Some people will say they've found some place with really high wages in some city somewhere, but that's impossible: the higher the wages, the higher the living expenses, so in the end you're left with only a few hundred [yuan per month], no matter where you go. Nowadays you can only get rich if you do business; if you're just doing

wage-labor [*dagong*] there's no way you're going to get rich. Doing business requires the brains [for it], or skills. I have neither skills nor brains, so I decided not to go back out.

Here I joked that surely she had “brains” (*tounao*), otherwise she could not be there talking to me. At first she was a little confused: “brains” has become so associated with “business” that (in this context, anyway) it is as hard to imagine a non-capitalist brain as it is to imagine a life without money! This resonates with the neoliberal discourse of “suzhi” as a form of “human capital” (introduced in Chapter 3), in which wealth and success are said to derive not from one's relation to the means of production, but from the inherent and/or acquired intelligence and “overall quality” of an enterprising individual. Although Jingjing seems not to question this ideology, she does imply a degree of disapproval for such “brains” in her description of the shoestore owner's manipulation, above. There is the trace of a split in values between this dog-eat-dog “outside” and the rural place with which she identifies more closely as “home” than the coastal city where she grew up – even if their universal dependence on money subjects both to the same law of (commodity) value.

In addition to needing money, Jingjing had already become accustomed to an urban lifestyle, so rural life seemed a little boring. Such a contrast is frequently mentioned by migrants in their explanation of why they choose not to stay at home, despite long hours and low pay in the city, or even when they cannot find a job. (I have frequently heard this in conversations with migrants, and it is a recurring theme in narratives such as those recounted in Pun [2006] and May [2010].) The way Jingjing expressed this contrast, however, was somewhat surprising: it was not

the hustle and bustle of city life that she missed so much as the distraction from boredom and “thinking” provided by 12-hour workdays.

When I first came home I kept thinking, what kind of job can I find? Because I couldn’t just stay at home every day. If I stayed at home there would really be nothing to do. Other than housework, washing clothes, the rest of the time was idle. There wasn’t any work to be done in the fields [this was during the slow farming season, and they have little land in any case]. So I wanted to go back out to get another job. Although the work is hard, at least you’re busy all the time, so you don’t have time to think. Idle at home, I would think all kinds of random things (*luanqibazao de dongxi*). Outside I had become accustomed to being busy all day, so there was no time to think... But I decided to stick it out and spend some time with my parents. I thought about working in [the nearest city], but the salary was low: only 400 before commission. Plus you had to pay rent and whatnot – after that you wouldn’t even make a cent.<sup>133</sup>

It is difficult for me to relate to such an experience – nearly the opposite of my own, in which free time for thinking has always seemed a precious luxury. We must keep in mind, however, that for many “peasant” children such as Jingjing in contemporary China, life has consisted of little but work – from school (limited mainly to memorizing data to regurgitate on exams) to housework (including a little simple farm work) to the migrant wage-labor described above. None are done for fun, and if any time is left for non-work besides sleep, that has mostly been colonized by passive, alienated experiences such as television – especially in the countryside, as

Jingjing and others complain when explaining the importance of the co-op's activities for children. Such a condition is in some ways universal to advanced capitalism in general (as theorized by Vanageim [2001], for example). If there is something distinctive here, it may be that Jingjing has less sense of identification with anything besides work (e.g. sports, religion, politics, etc.), except for her duty to "spend more time with her family" – itself also described more as a form of work than something she was doing for fun (hence the boredom). Based on her 19 years of experience with such conditions, her natural response was to seek out more work, but this conflicted with her sense of filial obligation, and with her awareness of the futility of seeking wealth or meaning through migrant wage-labor, leaving her in a double-bind. This bind seemed to achieve partial resolution through the opportunity to work for the co-op.

After a couple months of looking for a job closer to home, in April Jingjing's elderly neighbor recruited her to work for the co-op, where he was one of the core members. They had long been hoping to recruit young people from the area, and recently an NGO had offered to pay a modest salary of 600 yuan to anyone they could find with basic computer skills. (At the time Wansheng was still not making enough to pay anyone a salary. At the end of 2010, the annual dividend for one share in the co-op was only 35 yuan – higher than it had ever been – and the co-op still owed its members for their work in constructing their first independent building in 2007 to 2008.)

Jingjing had no idea what a "co-op" was, and at first she just saw it as the job option closest to home. At first she was nervous about working with so many elderly people, whom she had thought of as "feudal" and "ceremonious" (*guban*), but she was surprised to find them light-hearted and, moreover, more straightforward than younger people she had worked with in coastal cities. The latter (as suggested by Jingjing's account of working in the shoe store above) had

driven her to “paranoia” (*duoyi*) with their more self-interested and instrumental way of interacting, “always scheming for a little money,” which required one to constantly read between the lines of anything they said or did in order to figure out their ulterior motives. She had found this exhausting and corrosive of her ability to trust others. By contrast, in the co-op “people just say what they mean.” She had no reason to be suspicious of anyone, since they had no conflicts of interest. (She was referring to her relation with the core co-op members; the aforementioned case of Mr. Quan indicates the existence of conflicts among the latter.)

Only a few weeks after Jingjing started working for the co-op, however, her mother was injured in a farming accident: their motorized cart fell over in a ditch and crushed her leg. The medical bills came to about 10,000 yuan. China's state subsidy for peasant health care (the so-called “Cooperative Health Care” improved in recent years as part of the “New Socialist Countryside” policy) covers only illness, not accidents, and Chinese hospitals require payment upfront, so the family had to sell their grain reserve for a few thousand yuan and borrow from friends and relatives to cover the rest. Why not take out a loan from Wansheng Co-op? Jingjing said she had simply not thought of that option at the time, but come to think of it she would have preferred that to informal borrowing from others, despite the interest, since with informal borrowing you “feel uncomfortable,” replacing monetary interest with a more complex sort of personal, affective debt associated with the term *renqing* (literally “human feelings”).<sup>134</sup>

The accident occurred at the start of the busy farming season, so Jingjing took a break from the co-op for a few months to take care of her mother and do housework while her father worked in the fields. In September, once her mother was able to walk again, she decided to return to the co-op. Her friends could not understand this: China's economy seemed to be in recovery, so now it was easy to find higher-paying jobs in coastal cities, plus her family was in

debt, so why settle for 600 yuan a month? To this she replied, “Don't be so short-sighted!” (*ni muguang bu yao neme duanqian*). Here Jingjing's narrative voice suddenly slipped and expanded from her individual perspective to identify with the co-op, her rural community as a whole, and rural China in general, as if their plight naturally extended outwards from that of her family (something like the “concentric circles” of rural Chinese identity described by Fei Xiaotong [1992:63] in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century):

One day [it] will be better. Maybe in five years, maybe 10, but one day [it] will be better. The co-op is gradually developing. Maybe it's not much to look at now, but one day, if we have enough enthusiasm (*requing*). The people who come here all love our *jiaxiang* (native place or community),<sup>135</sup> they're all committed to improving things for our *jiaxiang* and our families. I think coming to the co-op has had a big impact on me (*gei wo ganchu ting da de*). The old people here are very enthusiastic. They're all retired, they could just stay at home relaxing and playing cards like everyone else, so why come here? They're not getting a salary, so why? They come here so that one day, the countryside will be better. Maybe what we're doing hasn't yet brought much economic change to the people around us, but if none of China's co-ops did this, the countryside would have no hope at all. Look at our children's library, for example: maybe it can't help many children, but if every library did this maybe they could help lots of children; if none did it, not even one child would be helped... One day [the co-op will be successful enough that] the old people will get salaries too, and then their children will join them, because young people will come if they can get paid... Then the countryside will be like the city, maybe even better.<sup>136</sup>



Once Jingjing's mother also expressed skepticism about the co-op, saying “you're dreaming” to think the co-op would eventually be able to have a significant impact on the community. Again Jingjing responded, “Don't be so short-sighted!”

I said, “Look at how far we've come already: at first all we had was a performing arts troupe and an old people's club, and now we have this infrastructure [i.e. the co-op building] and the farm supply store, at least this benefits the people around us by selling farm supplies cheaper than other stores, plus it's guaranteed [to not be fake]... The arts troupe performs in the market for free, enriching rural culture... And this library, when it first started I told my mom... and she asked “How much does it cost?” I said “It's free.” She said... “How could such a good thing be possible?” I said “Well it is. How come all you adults<sup>137</sup> think about is money?” Then I explained how we applied to get the computers and books donated from [an NGO]...<sup>138</sup>

Jingjing told me this in November 2010. When I returned in June 2011, Jingjing had gone back out to the coast to work. I will not get into the complicated personal reasons; the upshot is that “returning home to the country” is often easier said than done, particularly for a young woman under present conditions (cf. May 2010).

Before Jingjing left, she had managed to recruit a friend (another young woman, aged 20 at the time) to keep her company at the co-op, and possibly stay there long-term. The latter,

however, had returned home (from working in the city) mainly just to have a baby. Once she gave birth, she left the co-op to take care of the baby, and a few months later went back out to the city to work. Meanwhile a young lawyer from an eastern city came to volunteer at the co-op for a few months, after having read about the co-op's adoption of *Robert's Rules of Order* for their meetings (from an NRR-affiliated student volunteer who had translated the *Rules* after discovering it while studying in the US). So for a few months in the spring of 2011 the co-op had three full-timers under the age of 30, and four under the age of 40 (co-op director Gao was 38 at the time). (The next youngest core member was in his 50s; most were over 60.) Director Gao later said this convergence of "young talent" greatly boosted his confidence in the co-op after a period of discouragement.<sup>139</sup> He formed a new section of the co-op called the "Youth Center," aimed at applying for grants to fund young cooperators, attract new young people to the co-op, and initiate their own projects. The Youth Center eventually did manage to acquire higher stipends (over 1,000 yuan per month) for Gao and Jingjing, making it more feasible for her to return in 2012 (which she did). In addition, a young college-educated woman from another rural area named Rong came to Wansheng as an NRR intern (from the Liang Shuming Center for Rural Reconstruction) in late 2011, and after her internship ended in the summer of 2012, she decided to stay at the co-op indefinitely, with a salary funded by the co-op's credit union (which re-organized and expanded in the summer of 2011 and finally began making money right at the time when her internship stipend expired). So things seemed to be looking up for Wansheng Co-op during the two years between fall 2010 and fall 2012, particularly in their two major problem areas: funding and "young talent." In the middle of that period, however, when I visited in the summer of 2011, director Gao had again become less optimistic, and was even considering

giving up on the project to which he had devoted most of his adult life (and which many of China's NRR advocates touted as one of a handful of successful models of peasant organization).

### ***Director Gao***

If it is generally unappealing for young people to return to the countryside, it is much rarer for college graduates to return, and this was especially true in the late 1990s, when taxes and fees made rural life even more onerous, and getting into post-secondary school was more difficult. (For one, that was before the explosion of for-profit diploma mills in the 2000s.) According to China's 2010 census, only 1.3% of rural residents in director Gao's age cohort (born in the first half of the 1970s) had received some kind of higher education (not necessarily graduating).<sup>140</sup> In 1998, Gao had recently graduated from law school and was preparing to take the bar exam when, during a visit home, several dozen villagers were involved in a campaign against the illegal collection of fabricated fees (*luan shou fei*) by village and township officials. As discussed in Chapter 3, this was one of the most common forms of peasant resistance to systematic expropriation in the 1990s (expropriation often linked directly or indirectly to China's emerging capitalist interests). Most intellectuals and the news media followed party-state discourse in framing this as merely the immoral behavior of a few small-town officials "exacerbating the peasants' burden" (*jiazhong nongmin fudan*).<sup>141</sup> Gao decided to help them with this case and, winning it, eventually sacrificed his potential future as a lawyer to immerse himself in years of *pro bono* "peasant rights-defense" against all kinds of corruption. Although Gao championed the use of juridical methods for conflict resolution, often these campaigns involved direct action (protests, blockades), and at least once he was beaten and thrown in jail.

Several of the first publications about Gao and the Wansheng Co-op (starting in 2003, mostly in the short-lived NRR journal *China Reform – Rural Edition*, edited by Wen Tiejun) framed their chief significance as providing a model to channel “social contradictions” into “constructive” and “legal” directions, away from the threat to social stability posed by peasant direct action. For example, one wrote:

As soon as peasant interests are infringed upon, often the first solution that comes to mind is to petition higher authorities (*shangfang*). Therefore, an extremely populous “petitioners class” (*shangfang-zu*)<sup>142</sup> is wandering (*liulang*) all over China. For various reasons, however, their problems remain unsolved, it’s hard to return home, and eventually they turn into vagrants. Some of them resort to adventuristic behavior (*ting er zou xian*), carrying out personal vendettas, and leading to immense social destruction. But in [...], a peasant rights-defense association led by [Brother Gao] has given people a ray of hope.<sup>143</sup>

Articles such as this go on to explain that Gao – enlightened by the “legal consciousness” he gained through law school – initiated three crucial turning points in the transformation of his fellow villagers’ anger into “constructive” behavior. First, he taught them how to use the law to seek justice. Second, he initiated their organization into a semi-formal (but still technically illegal) “Peasant Rights-Defense Association.” Finally (through the guidance of NRR advocates he met at the 2002 convention in Beijing), he initiated that association’s transformation into a co-op, focused on economic and cultural (rather than political) activities. The co-op finally

registered with the government to become a legal entity after China passed its law on “professional economic peasant co-ops” in 2007.

During my first visit to the co-op in 2010, I asked Gao about this transformation from rights-defense association to co-op. He said,

Actually this is really interesting, because the first time I went to Beijing for one of those conferences organized by Professor Wen [Tiejun] and them [in December 2002], I was surprised to find there were lots of rights-defenders, lots and lots of peasant rights-defense organizations... But a few years later, starting in 2006, at the Rural Reconstruction meetings, there were basically no rights-defense orgs any more. The fate of many peasant rights-defense orgs was extremely tragic (*beican*). Many were arrested, sent to prison, disbanded. At this point I know of only a few that still exist... Like the first one we ever heard of, from Dangshan... It was really large-scale, with thousands of participants, it was forced to disband. [*Names a few others...*] Now [one in eastern China] managed to undergo a transition (*zhuanxing*) like us.<sup>144</sup>

I asked, “Why there were so many in the 1990s, and so few now?”

At the time there was a broad environment (*hen da de yi ge huanjing*) for rights-defense. Later the government made lots of adjustments (*tiaozheng*) to this environment. This demonstrates that Chinese common people (*laobaixing*) are not willing to defend their rights unless they are forced into an unbearable situation. The common people have a saying, “[Even if you] starve to death, don’t become a thief; [even if you are] wronged to

death, don't sue a government official" (*e si bu zuo zei, qu si bu gao guan*)... So after the government made some policy adjustments, lots of people stopped doing rights-defense, and those who tried were suppressed and disbanded. At this point, I know of only us and a couple other organizations that haven't been disbanded.<sup>145</sup>

By "policy adjustments" Gao is referring to the major changes to rural policy that began tentatively in 2000 and became the central party-state's national priority under the Hu-Wen leadership in 2004, including the abolition of most rural taxes and fees, the "New Socialist Countryside" campaign announced in 2006, and the peasant co-op law passed in 2007. As discussed in Chapter 3, these changes responded primarily to the widespread peasant unrest of the 1990s, along with fears about China's economic stability. NRR intellectuals' celebration of Gao's "constructive" interventions thus need to be understood in this light. From the beginning, such intellectuals have framed NRR as a way to mitigate the "social contradictions" that have deepened through the process of China's capitalist development, posing an alternative development path based in rural communities that runs parallel to capitalist development, without challenging the latter. Gao's narrative reflects a partial internalization of this alternativist discourse, while maintaining and developing his own distinctive positions. For example, while most NRR intellectuals have generally frowned upon "rights-defense" activities (which some call "destructive" and associate with "right-wing liberalism"), encouraging peasant organizations to make the "transition" to "constructive" forms of cooperation, Gao said (during my second visit in June 2011),

Those intellectuals are so caught up in abstract debates, they don't understand what's going on at the grassroots (*jiceng*). This has nothing to do with "left" and "right." This is about justice... Intellectuals think there are no more contradictions because there are no more taxes and fees. Actually there are just as many contradictions as before. It's just that it's harder to organize collective resistance nowadays.<sup>146</sup>

"Why is it harder nowadays?"

Well for one the types of contradictions are different. Back then there would be things like illegal fee collection, problems that equally affected all the peasants in an area, so it was easy to mobilize, it was easy for peasants to see our common interests, and it was easy to see who our common enemy was. Nowadays there are more individual disputes...<sup>147</sup>

But I think the main problem now is – compare the Chinese Communist Party's rule (*tongzhi*) over society in the 1980s with today, and you know. Nowadays the state's rule over society is more and more... stringent (*yan*). And the state's monopoly over technical means and economic resources (*caili*) is more and more seamless (*wukong*). Have you noticed? For example even a peasant co-op like ours, all of our activities, they aren't even political activities, just cultural activities, but still the ruling class (*tongzhi jieji*) monitors everything. If they want to know what you're doing, they can know at any time... Including your telephone calls, email... Plus they have enough economic resources and personnel. You take our township-level police station. Ten years ago they didn't even have a car, they had a motorcycle, and they had to pay for their own

gas. Now they have two cars... Every year they get tens of thousands of yuan just for gas... And ten years ago they had only three cops, now they have seven... How does the foreign theory go? “Small state, big society”? “Economic development makes the government smaller, and society governs itself”? Well we're the opposite.

Note that Gao is not simply saying that China has a “big state” and a “small society,” but that China's (market-oriented) economic development since the 1990s has made the state bigger and “society” smaller. In contrast with liberal and neoliberal frameworks (predominant in China and globally), that consider “the market” as part of “society” as opposed to the state, Gao sees China's “market economy” as growing hand in hand with state repression, at the expense of “social organizations,” such as peasant co-ops conceived as anything other than for-profit enterprises. This collaboration of state and market forces at the expense of “civil society” or “the third sector” is not necessarily unique to China – theorists such as Michael Hardt (1995), David Harvey (2005), and Peck and Tickell (2002) have argued similarly about post-1970s global capitalism in general, with China's “authoritarian semi-neoliberalism” as a model emulated by other countries such as the US (as discussed in Chapter 3). Gao's account also differs somewhat from the Polanyian framework of NRR advocates such as Wen Tiejun, who tend to interpret the problems of China's marketization and globalization as caused by “the retreat of the state” from its different mode of economic regulation in the 1980s. Gao elaborates:

These days, the Chinese Communist Party recognizes (*chengren*) only the market, it doesn't recognize society... If you're doing business and making money, you can do as you like... But [the CCP] doesn't accept the construction of non-profit organizations, civil



society (*gongmin shehui*), because “society” can only mean an *organized* social condition.

If you want to do something like a co-op, even performing arts, singing – if you charge money, then that’s ok, but if you perform for free, if you’re propagating some kind of ideas, then no way.<sup>148</sup>

This brings us back to Gao's momentary discouragement mentioned above, in the middle of what would otherwise seem to be a two-year upward swing for Wansheng. There were three main factors disheartening Gao at that time, all intertwined: (1) shortly after establishing the co-op's “Youth Center,” the two young women left, and the lawyer’s stint as a volunteer was coming to a close, leaving only 38-year-old Gao as by far the youngest member of the co-op; (2) the co-op was in debt and dependent on foundations and voluntary labor for its basic functioning, and its “economic development” appeared to be growing more slowly than Gao had expected by this point; and (3) recently local state authorities had shown their teeth and put pressure on Gao and the co-op on several occasions, after a period of several years of apparent rapprochement.

The connection between the latter two factors may not be as obvious as the first two, but it was especially clear the day of the conversation quoted above. That morning, a local state agency (responsible for food safety) had come and notified the co-op that its distillery must stop production and sales until it acquired a certain sanitation permit – a costly and time-consuming procedure which co-op members described as “selective enforcement of the law.” They knew of other small-scale commercial distilleries in the area without such a permit, and they already had other permits authorizing them to sell their liquor. In the cooperators’ analysis, local state authorities had singled out Wansheng because it had recently been reviving its “rights-defense”

activities, including one case that had gotten some media attention, making local officials look bad.

A week before the distillery incident, some mysterious entity had similarly used “selective enforcement of the law” to impose a last-minute cancellation of a gala (called “City and Country, Dancing Together” - *cheng xiang gong wu*) that the co-op had spent months organizing together with students at a nearby college. The night before the gala, a college authority told the participants that the PSB (Public Security Bureau) had just informed them that the gala would violate safety regulations and therefore could not take place. Gao wrote a letter to the PSB asking exactly which regulations would have been violated, so they could avoid such problems in the future. (He asked me to present the letter, in order to apply the pressure of a foreign face, but I decided that was too big a risk; instead we had a visiting Chinese academic present it.) The PSB simply replied that they knew nothing of the incident.<sup>149</sup>

On the night after we received that reply, I sat in the empty co-op building with Brother Gao, the lawyer volunteer, and the Chinese academic (the older cooperators having gone home for the evening), cracking melon seeds and reflecting on the co-op's predicament. “I've been doing a lot of introspection (*fansi*) lately,” Gao said plaintively.

People used to criticize us for being too idealistic – maybe they're right. Look at [the Raoling Association]: they don't have any contradiction with the government, and economically they're doing well. They don't take any money from foundations, and yet they're still able to pay salaries to over 30 employees [*over 40 as of summer 2012*]. And many of those are young people... I think our problem is that we're too idealistic. We've

focused too much on public service (*gongyi*), on rights-defense, so now we don't have any money, and the government won't let us do anything.<sup>150</sup>

On another occasion during this period, Gao said a friend had recommended that he “move on” from the co-op – that he had done all he could there, and the longer he stayed the more trouble he would get from the local authorities. He could get a job for some NGO in Beijing, or perhaps finally take the bar exam become a practicing lawyer, and still help peasants, but from a distance. Perhaps Wansheng Co-op would develop more successfully without him, since he was perceived as the main ringleader for their continuing rights-defense work. Gao said he was considering this option, but he was hesitant to give up his baby, and he knew that in reality the co-op would probably dissolve without him (as other co-ops composed entirely of older peasants dissolved as soon as the young NRR volunteers who initiated them left). Instead Gao chose to stay, but to lay off on the rights-defense work, patch up relations with the local authorities, and focus more on developing the co-op's “economic” aspects, in part by adopting more conventional business methods – as the Raoling Association had done.

### ***Liquor, Loans, and Lodging***

The distillery was actually a first experiment with this strategy of adopting more conventional business methods. Technically it is not part of the co-op, but an independent enterprise in which the co-op is one among several shareholders. Each share costs 1,000 yuan, and the co-op owns 20%. The distillery's founding director and chief shareholder, Mr. Shu, is a local businessman of peasant background in his 50s, who was recruited into the co-op mainly

because of his farm equipment and his knowledge of distillation. He looks like a younger Chinese Santa Claus, with his round belly and bright red face, which he anoints with pungent liquor during co-op meetings to give himself “energy” (*jingshen*). His other sources of income include custom farming (using his equipment to plow, plant, and harvest for peasants with land but no equipment – including a small plot of land owned by the co-op), raising deer to sell their antlers (for medicinal use), and demolition. Once, while eating a stew made from a deer that one of his dogs had killed (other than Mr. Shu, I was the only person at the table who had eaten venison before; the others were co-op members, one over 80 years old!), Mr. Shu asked if I knew any journalists, because there was a case of “injustice” he wanted to report. As he explained the situation (in local dialect, which I could only partially understand), at first I thought the “injustice” referred to the state's forceful eviction of villagers from their homes in order to make money from re-development. Finally another guest explained that Mr. Shu was the “little boss” of a demolition crew, and he would not get paid until the last residents moved out.<sup>151</sup> The “injustice” was that the state had not “done its job” and forced them out! Mr. Shu had heard that the co-op did “rights-defense” work, and he thought this would fit into that purview.

Later Brother Gao explained that he had to work with people like Mr. Shu because of their technical knowledge and capital (in this case both equipment and money). He said it was similar to working with NGOs and foundations whose ideas he did not necessarily accept. “Just because [someone] has milk doesn’t mean she’s your mom, but if [someone] has money, he’s definitely your daddy!” (*You nai bu yiding shi niang, dan you qian yiding shi ye*).<sup>152</sup> The hope was that by making more money through business, the co-op could become less dependent on foundations and even expand its non-profit activities and salaries for potential new young members. I asked whether he was worried that the co-op might become “enterprized” (*qiyehua* –

a common term in NRR and NGO circles about non-profits that become for-profits), and he said “Of course there’s that risk, but at this point I don’t see any other way out (*chulu*). In any case, becoming an enterprise that actually makes money would be an improvement over what we have now.”<sup>153</sup>

However, the distillery had not made much money by the end of its second season (spring 2011). In dividends, the shareholders received a few dozen bottles of the liquor (which they sold or gave as gifts – the gift economy still being an important part of China’s “peasant economy,” although now it is thoroughly intertwined with the capitalist economy). The co-op received a few hundred yuan, which put a small dent in its basic expenses, such as rent and electricity, but was far from enough to begin financing salaries or non-profit activities, not to mention augmenting the measly dividends of ordinary co-op members – 35 yuan at the end of 2010, which was the highest ever. (Ordinary co-op shares cost only 200 yuan and were basically shares in the farm supply store, where members also received a small discount.)

By the time of Gao’s introspection in June 2011, he and two other co-op leaders were investing more hope in a plan to re-organize and expand the co-op’s credit union. The credit union had been a minor project under full ownership of the co-op, providing small loans to co-op members only, as per China’s cooperative law (which allowed “internal financial cooperation” but not for-profit financial business with non-members). Since its founding in 2008, it had benefited a few dozen co-op members, but the little interest it made on those loans barely covered the costs of operation.

Meanwhile, a few prominent NRR advocates (including Li Changping – famous for bringing “the three-dimensional rural problem” to China’s national attention in an open letter to

Premier Zhu Rongji in the year 2000<sup>154</sup>) had been promoting larger-scale financial cooperation as a key to “the East Asian model of peasant cooperation,” exemplified by the cooperative systems in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.<sup>155</sup> During my first visit to Wansheng in November 2010, one of these advocates attended the first meeting of the “Study Network of Peasant Organizations” (initiated by Brother Gao and the director of Raoling), where he held a workshop on financial cooperation. I could tell Gao and these other two Wansheng leaders were especially interested in this workshop, especially the intricacies of the new law on financial cooperation that these advocates had been pushing the central government to finalize for several years (meanwhile experimenting with financial cooperation in a few pilot sites throughout China).

By June 2011, although the law had not passed yet, Wansheng had voted to go ahead with re-organizing their credit union to make it as large-scale and profitable as possible within the confines of the existing law. For one this meant finding several rich people willing to join the co-op and invest in the credit union. (Anyone can join the co-op by purchasing a 200 yuan share and agreeing to certain principles. I am a member, for example, even though I cannot regularly attend meetings, as per the technical qualifications.) Several of my evenings were spent in the nearest city accompanying Gao on fancy dinners with wealthy friends of friends whom he was courting as potential investors. (As we sat watching the room spin after one such drunken meal, Gao explained that actually he hates alcohol, but that there is no other way to do business in China.) Another stipulation was that customers would have to pay 200 yuan and become formal members of the co-op before they take out a loan or make a deposit. Although the credit union was licensed as part of the co-op, as with the distillery it would function as an independent enterprise, with the co-op as 20% shareholder (but for this shares cost 2,000 yuan). By the time I left in late July, they had begun advertising and were converting a room in the co-op

headquarters into a lobby for serving customers, “just like a real bank,” as they put it. (“Only this will be the peasants' own bank.”)

Later that summer, they began operation, and by the summer of 2012, they were making enough in interest to afford a reasonable salary for Rong (the former NRR intern who decided to stay after the end of her internship). In the lobby (which indeed looked like that of a “real bank,” there were pictures of Brother Gao and another co-op leader shaking hands with peasants who had taken out loans, mainly to finance agricultural investment (one had built a pig pen and bought a breeding sow; another had built a greenhouse). Another display explained the credit union's guidelines. Those ineligible for loans included the “dishonest and unreliable,” those who had “lost the ability to work,” those who “participated in illegal activities,” and those who “do not have a proper job” (*bu wu zhengye*) and have “bad habits such as gambling and drinking to excess.” These guidelines struck me as somewhat disturbing in their reproduction of the mainstream governmentality aimed at shaping people to better fit the needs of capital accumulation, and excluding those who do not or cannot conform (e.g. the elderly or handicapped). On the other hand, one of these exclusions highlights something distinctive about this form of finance: “those away from home for most of the year” are not eligible for loans. Brother Gao explained that such “financial cooperation” is not just a way for the co-op to make money and finance their own non-profit activities; it provides loans specifically to *peasants* (who might otherwise be unable to attain loans, and at an interest rate slightly better than that of banks), for *investment in income-generating and job-creating projects in the countryside*. From a broader perspective, Gao described this as something like a collective or class-wide<sup>156</sup> action of peasants against urban financial and industrial capital: he said that normally peasants go out to work for companies that profit from peasant labor, then the peasants deposit their wages into

banks, which in turn lend that money to the same companies to expand and reap more profit from peasant labor – a vicious cycle. Financial cooperation among peasants may help to break that cycle, Gao argued, since now peasants can lend their money to other peasants for investment in the countryside.<sup>157</sup>

At that time (August 2012) the co-op had also begun three other projects aimed at income-generation: the production and sale of chrysanthemums, chickens, and hospitality. The chrysanthemum project was initiated by the Youth Center (now consisting of Gao, Jingjing, and Rong), in collaboration with other co-ops in the area, as the first project of both the Youth Center and the local cooperative network (the latter itself initiated by Wansheng a few months earlier). It was still in an early stage, but the idea was for Wansheng and other co-ops to purchase chrysanthemum seedlings from a co-op specializing in such medicinal plants, distribute them to member households to grow at home, then collect the leaves and sell them in bulk together with the other co-ops to a pharmaceutical company, splitting any profit among the Youth Center, the farmers, and the co-op. The free-range chicken project was also just getting started and was similarly organized in a sort of “putting-out system,” only it was directed Mr. Li (who ran Wansheng’s teahouse and farm supply store). Both these projects reflected Wansheng members’ disillusionment with collective farming, after a failed experiment several years before – itself conditioned by this area’s relatively negative experience with collective farming during the Mao era (according to historical data, although the Wansheng members I interviewed tended to differentiate their memories of that experience into good and bad aspects of the Maoist collective system). The Raoling Association, discussed in the next chapter, similarly experimented unsuccessfully with collective farming and then switched to “collective management, individual production.”



Along with finance, and cooperative supply and marketing for household farming, a growing trend among NRR-affiliated peasant organizations is to turn hospitality into a business. In part this is merely making a virtue of necessity, or formalizing a change that had been creeping up informally for some time. Since the students of NRR-affiliated academics such as Wen Tiejun and Liu Laoshi began “going down to the countryside” to do research and “support the peasantry” (*zhinong*) in 1999, they consciously followed the example of China's historic Red Army in “taking nothing from the masses, not even a single needle or thread.”<sup>158</sup> They interpreted this to mean that they should pay peasants in cash for room and board, even though this violated traditional norms of hospitality, transposing it from a morality (or at least the *performance*) of relatively open reciprocity<sup>159</sup> to a more closed framework approaching the capitalist value-form of abstract labor discussed in Chapter 3 (which had already come to dominate both the common sense of students living in the city, and other spheres of peasant life). One NRR volunteer told me that at first peasants refused to accept payment, but eventually they got used to the idea.<sup>160</sup> I have similarly noticed a general transformation in some of the rural NRR sites I have visited between 2009 and 2012 (as well as in other Chinese villages I have visited since 2003 – although there, of course, NRR is not be a factor). In a context of (a) increasing demand for hospitality from NGO personnel, journalists, academics (such as me), and even random tourists in some cases, along with (b) increasing pressure for co-ops to make money, and (c) the capitalist value-form's increasing colonization of all spheres of life and imagination, it was only a small step from this well-intentioned monetization of hospitality (aiming for something like “balanced reciprocity”) to the transformation of hospitality into a business (more like “negative reciprocity,” since the intention is profit, although it is qualified by ideals of

“solidarity economy,” etc., so still less purely commercial than the conventional hospitality industry).

When I arrived at Wansheng in August 2012, there were about a dozen NGO interns staying in the headquarters for a week-long gathering to conclude their “ecological agriculture” internships in various other parts of China. At first I was confused, because Wansheng’s last organic farming project (the collective farm mentioned above) had discontinued several years before, and the two new projects were minor and only just beginning. After a few conversations with the interns and NGO personnel, I realized that some of them knew almost nothing about Wansheng Co-op (even though they had already been there for several days). They were just paying for room and board there as a cheaper and more rustic and socially responsible alternative to a conference center. Although cheaper than a conference center, at 50 yuan per person per day, Jingjing said the co-op managed to make a little profit after subtracting the cost of food they bought at a nearby store for the occasion. (That was their main expense, but she seemed not to calculate other costs such as electricity, and of course all the time Jingjing and other cooperators spent cooking for the guests, etc.) She said the co-op’s next big project was to build a new building specifically for what she called the “hospitality business” (*zhaodai shengyi*), including bedrooms, modern toilets and showers, a modern kitchen and dining room (which might double as a restaurant – in imitation of Raoling’s staff cafeteria), and an office for buying train tickets. With these new facilities they could host more guests (including people who might otherwise be unwilling to pay for the co-op’s present simple accommodations) and charge more per guest. Two of my other three main sites (Raoling and Liao Flats) have already undergone similar transformations, and I know of similar cases in other NRR-affiliated sites, including one (in Guangxi) with a formal hotel that charges 150 yuan for standard rooms and 250 yuan for

suites.<sup>161</sup> Of course this is a rational adaption to the situation, but it highlights the transition from one system of value and reciprocity to another.

## *Conclusion*

This chapter focused on the experiences of Wansheng's two main younger members, highlighting the tug of war between economic pressures and alternative values. It examined Jingjing's ambiguous description of her experiences with labor migration and the decision to return home and work for the co-op. Then it recounted Director Gao's efforts to navigate the tension between his commitment to alternative values and community-oriented projects, on the one hand, and the need to generate funding for such projects and to attract young people back to the countryside, on the other. Another expression of this tension was the conflict that emerged after Mr. Quan was accused of embezzling, which compromised Wansheng's ideal of community solidarity and led to the (at least temporary) abandonment of one form (general elections) of the democracy upon which Wansheng members pride themselves. At the same time, the co-op's uneasy relationship with the local party-state was shown to politically reinforce the economic pressure on Wansheng to abandon some of its community-oriented activities – not only rights-defense but even “cultural” activities and interaction with students.

Co-op leaders such as Gao have responded by turning to Shanxi's Raoling Association as a model that they believe to have resolved this tension due to its relative economic success, which has enabled it to fund the salaries of over 50 full-time employees, including over 30 under the age of 35, and to fund a variety of community-oriented projects, without the need for any external support. This success, however, reflects (1) Raoling's more favorable geographic

conditions, and (2) its more conventionally entrepreneurial values and organizational form, so there is less tension between its ends and its means, and between these and its capitalist context. As of fall 2012, Wansheng's credit union seemed to be generating more income than any of the co-op's previous projects, so it may help to offset its geographical disadvantages, attract more young employees, and fund the development of community-oriented projects. However, it is also possible that Wansheng's increased focus on generating income may continue to undermine its alternative values and shape its development toward something more like a conventional enterprise.

## **Chapter 5: Raoling Peasant Association, Shanxi**

This chapter examines a second grassroots organization with a very different background and trajectory, to which Wansheng leaders look for inspiration due to its relative economic success. Raoling is one of the largest independent peasant organizations in China (other than conventional enterprises and re-collectivized villages such as Nanjie, which are not affiliated with NRR). This chapter focuses on how Raoling's commercial development has generated capitalistic relations within the organization and in relation to the broader peasant community. It also examines some of Raoling's non-profit work, including quasi-feminist interventions into domestic relations, which tend toward reforming patriarchy in ways amenable to the development of capitalist relations within the peasant community, as a deterrent against young women's flight into urban wage relations. First I provide some background on the community of 20-some villages in which the association is based. Then I devote about one third of the chapter to explaining the association's complex structure, interspersing this description with fragments of Raoling's history. I then elaborate on this history, focusing on Director Tang, her relatively entrepreneurialistic values (influenced in part by a liberal NGO not affiliated with NRR), the rise and fall of a more communal ethos during a period of mass mobilization, Raoling's restructuring around more capitalistic lines thereafter, and Tang's efforts to transform peasant culture and develop a certain type of "rural community."

***Raoling "Rural Community," Shanxi (Northern China)***

One of several difficulties that other researchers and I have grappled with in attempting to understand and explain Raoling is that, since 2010, core members have used the term “[Raoling] Rural Community (*shequ*)” both as a new name for the association, and to invoke the idea of a broader collective of over 6,000 peasant households in 20-some administrative villages<sup>162</sup> that the association aims to “serve” (*fuwu* – I discuss what they mean by this below). These villages fall under two townships, Rao and Ling, constituting about one third of their total population and half of their villages. Rao and Ling lie between the Yellow River and the capital of a county-level municipality (*xianjishi*), only about 15 kilometers away (less than an hour by bus from the association’s main village; about 20 minutes by car). The area is rather wealthy for inland rural China, due to the combination of proximity to the Yellow River (which has irrigated and fertilized this area since the dawn of Chinese civilization), several historical sites that support a local tourist industry, a large prefectural capital an hour away (from the municipal capital – so two hours away from Raoling’s main village) that is a regional transportation hub, and proximity to Xi’an – one of China’s biggest and wealthiest inland cities – about 3 hours away by bus. Whereas the per capita GDP of Wansheng’s prefecture was only 7,500 yuan in 2010, that for Raoling’s prefecture was 14,000 in 2009, and that for the county-level municipality was almost 18,000 in 2010 (the latter difference reflecting this municipality’s prosperity compared to other parts of the prefecture, along with inflation). Per capita net income in Rao and Ling townships was about 6,000 and 7,500 yuan, respectively (in 2010), compared to 2,700 yuan for Wansheng’s township (in 2008) and 5,919 yuan for rural China as a whole (in 2010).

Whereas the poor environmental conditions and small urban market in Wansheng’s prefecture limit most farmers there to corn and wheat, and reduce their ratio of yield and income to input costs, Raoling’s more favorable environment and market opportunities allow its farmers

to produce a larger variety of products at more favorable ratios. Corn and wheat are also major crops here, but most farmers also produce other, more expensive products including cotton (Raoling Association's major crop), sunflower seeds (the main oil crop in this area), sesame seeds (another oil crop), various fruits and nuts (the main source of agricultural income for many farmers), local specialties such as Chinese toon (*xiangchun*, the leaves sold as food and the wood sold for making furniture), and asparagus (probably the most lucrative crop, for a number of nearby canneries that sell the canned asparagus to other countries – the result of a local state development project in the 1990s; farmers only grow this for a few years at a time, since it depletes the soil), various other vegetables for local markets, and fish (raised in collective ponds rented by individual farmers).

The ability to make a comfortable income from farming, and the relatively large number of jobs, markets, and post-secondary schools in nearby cities, have been important factors shaping the distinctive development of Raoling Association compared with Wansheng as well as Peppercorn Village (Chapter 7). Similar conditions come into play in Liao Flats (Chapter 6), but there other factors – such as closer proximity to an even larger city, and its initiation by NGOs with different goals from those of Raoling's grassroots initiators – led in a very different direction.

### ***Reversing the Flow of Youth***

At the closing ceremony of Raoling's second annual summer camp for children of the association's full-time staff in 2012, Director Tang (a former primary school teacher now in

her early 40s), addressed the crowd of 60 or so parents, children, and student volunteers, peppered with a few visiting researchers:

What most of us parents think about every day is how to improve our children's grades... But many don't see that all children have their own strengths. Closing their lives up in the classroom only separates children from nature (*ziran*), from their own playful natures (*ai wan'er de benxing*). Children can actualize (*fahui*) their potential and creativity only following their own natures (*tianxing*). We had all the children, of all ages, climb [a nearby] mountain to its peak. At first some adults worried that their kids were too young, that they'd get tired. But our volunteers led the kids, singing as they marched. They ran out of water, but they persevered, and finally even the youngest child made it to the top. *This is the unleashing of potential*. At this summer camp we taught the kids to climb trees, to recognize [various] crops – this was in order to cultivate their affection for the countryside. Because many parents don't realize that, even if some children manage to get into a vocational college or even a university in the city, once they get out it's still not easy to find a job. What *we* hope is to lay a foundation for these children to come *back* to the countryside and (re)construct (*jianshe*) their own home.<sup>163</sup>

This speech exemplifies central features of Director Tang's philosophy that has guided the association's development since its beginning in 1997. Her background as a teacher is apparent not only here but in how she runs the organization and interacts with staff on a daily basis – such as in their daily pre-work dance routines and pep talks, weekly report-backs, and monthly written examinations. A major early step in Raoling's development was Ms. Tang's



recognition – after amateur dance competitions led to fights among village women – that this “uncivil” behavior reflected the general lowness of Chinese peasants’ *suzhi* (“quality,” discussed in Chapter 3), and her determination to increase this *suzhi* through various educational activities, from agricultural lectures to adult literacy training, a debate club, and eventually training in the use of computers. (The headquarters of Raoling’s Farm Supply Department bears a large sign exhorting visitors to “Raise the *suzhi* of the peasantry.”<sup>164</sup>) At the same time, Tang is not simply reproducing the discursive practices of China’s urban elite. As a particular grassroots form of what has come together nationally as NRR (in the broader sense), Tang’s appropriation of this discourse seeks not to promote de-peasantization and push young people into the city with the elusive hope of achieving “self-development” there (as Yan [2008] observed of *suzhi* discourse in the early 2000s), but something like the opposite: to counteract that rural-to-urban flow by encouraging young people to “come back to the countryside and (re)construct their own home,” and creating conditions of possibility for them to do so. This is a goal shared by NRR in general (and as we saw in Chapter 4, has recently become a major concern of Wansheng), but Raoling has been the most successful in beginning to achieve this goal, at a local level. How has Raoling done that? Answering that question will require some patience as we go through the complex structure and history of the association. After this long overview, we will return to the efforts of Director Tang and her colleagues to transform their peasant community and reverse the flow of youth.

### ***Overview of the Organization***

As mentioned above, other researchers and I have encountered multiple difficulties in trying to understand Raoling, as well as to explain it to outsiders who have not undergone our experience of gradually developing a feel for its structure, ethos, and trajectory of development. One reason is that its structure is quite complicated and has significantly changed several times between its beginning in 1997 and my last visit in 2012. In director Tang's words, "each year it's a different organization" (*yi nian yi ge yang*).<sup>165</sup> Another complication is that some of Raoling's core members present the organization in ways differing from information I have gathered from other sources (direct observation and the words of others members, unaffiliated locals, and outside observers), yet that information is also inconsistent, so I cannot assume that any given account is simply right or wrong, but that they reflect different dimensions of reality (some probably more accurate than others). The following overview is based on what I have pieced together from these various sources. To break up the monotony inevitable in outlining such a complex structure, I intersperse this with some related observations that give a feel for what we might call "the spirit of Raoling."

### *Raoling in a Nutshell*

Raoling Peasant Association is a group of about 10 intertwined enterprises with about 60 full-time employees, between 100 and 400 part-time and occasional employees, and between 1,000 and 3,000 farmers who sell products to the association on a regular basis, and to whom the association provides agricultural training, inputs and services (some for free, others at a discount). In addition, as mentioned above, since 2010 core members have used the term "[Raoling] Rural Community" both as a new name for the association, and to invoke the idea of a broader

collective with over 6,000 peasant households that the association aims to “serve,” starting by sending its staff to regularly visit these households, develop relationships with them, record information and maintain a database. These visits, they say, help them to assess the peasants’ needs and put them in touch with relevant departments of Raoling, or create new services tailored to their needs.

Below are two tables listing data provided by the association in its official self-descriptions (*jianjie*) from 2012 and 2010.<sup>166</sup> The data are not entirely accurate, but they provide a useful starting point for explaining Raoling’s structure. (Asterisks indicate items explained in the key on the next page. The rest will be explained gradually below.)

**2012 Table:**

#	Department	Purpose*	Status*	Households	Staff
1	Farm Supply	Economic	C	400	4
2	Handicraft Co-op	Economic	B	400	10
3	Organic Farming Co-op	Economic	C	1,500	10
4	Eco-Home	Service	A	40+ hamlets	40+ part-time
5	Youth Farm	Economic	A	50	1
6	Urban-Rural Interaction	Economic	C	50	1
7	Peasant School	Service	A	300	6
8	Financial Cooperation	Economic	C	800	10
9	Computer Service Center	Service	B	100	1
10	Land Transfer	Economic	C	50	1
11	Health & Happiness Center	Service	A	150	20
12	Hospitality	Economic	B	150	5
13	Accounting	Economic	A	350	7
14	Community Office	Service	A	150	4
15	Farm Equipment Team	Service	A	[blank]	3
16	Two Urban Marketing Teams	Economic	B	9,000	15
	<b>Total (excluding depts. #4 &amp; 16)<sup>167</sup></b>			<b>4,450</b>	<b>83</b>

***Key to the 2012 Table***

“**Economic**” is short for “Economic Cooperation”; “**Service**” is short for “Public Service.”

“**Status**”: The document classifies each department according to the letters A, B, or C, defined as:

A. “Responsible for its own gains and losses” (*zifu yingkui*),

B. “Planning to become profitable” (*lueyou yingli*),

C. “Profitable” (*yingli*).

**2010 Table:**

#	Department	Purpose	Households	Staff
1	Farm Supply	Income generation	1,000	10
2	Women’s Reading Center	Gender & development	700	3
3	Traditional Culture Center	Public service	200	3
4	Handicraft Co-op	Income generation	200	10
5	Eco-Home	Environmental protection	350	3
6	Organic Farming Co-op	Income generation	800	5
7	Peasant Training School	Adult education	60	5
8	Youth Farm	Income generation	20	5
9	Elderly Center	Welfare <sup>168</sup> & development	500	3
10	Children’s Education Center	Children’s education	40	3
	<b><i>Total</i></b>		<b><i>3,870</i></b>	<b><i>50</i></b>

### *Subsidized?*

The 2012 document also includes a fourth category, “D. Subsidized (*buzhu*),” but none of the departments are listed under this category. Core members said that some of these departments (e.g. Health and Happiness) are indeed subsidized by the profit-making departments. We could take this discrepancy as indicating that this document indicates goals rather than contemporary reality. I was told that the difference between “economic cooperation” and “public service” is that the main purpose of the former departments is to generate income, whereas the latter are primarily intended to provide services for the good of the community. Director Tang’s 10-year plan drafted in 2008 aims to make Raoling’s “public service” departments generate sufficient income to cover their own expenses (i.e. to make them “responsible for their own gains and losses”) by 2014, so that they would no longer be dependent on subsidies.

### *Departments*

Actually these documents use the term “project” (*xiangmu*), but in conversation members refer to them as “parts” or “departments” (*bankuai’r* or *bumen*). According to Director Tang, among these departments “there is a division of labor, but they all belong to the same family” (*fen gong bu fen jia*), meaning that each department is responsible for specific tasks, but at times may be called upon to help other departments, or for association-wide activities. The **Community Office** (consisting of Director Tang and three assistants) is responsible for coordinating relations among the other departments, as well as managing public relations with external entities such as the party-state, the news media, NGOs, and visitors. Specifically *commercial* relations are delegated to the **Urban-Rural Interaction Department**, and the “**Two Urban Marketing Teams**” seem to be two of its projects or branches, with all three

“departments” headed by the same person (Mr. Niu). **Accounting** does the bookkeeping for Raoling as a whole, and the **Hospitality** department mainly prepares meals for the full-time staff and visitors. The remaining 11 departments listed in the 2012 table could be described as 10 semi-autonomous enterprises (the **Farm Equipment Team** being part of the **Organic Farming Co-op**) supported by these four essentially administrative or logistical divisions. Below I introduce each department in detail, but first I should explain what these tables mean by “households” and “staff.”

### *“Member Households”*

Both documents (as well as almost all the 20 or so reports on Raoling I have read from academic journals, NGO periodicals, and news magazines dating from 2005 to 2012) state that Raoling has a little under 4,000 “member households” (*sheyuan*, *huiyuan*, or *hezuo nonghu*) The Raoling self-descriptions from 2010 and 2012 call these “the general assembly of members” (*sheyuan dahui*), although it seems clear that no such assembly has taken place since 2004, when most of the people associated with Raoling would have been different (since most of Raoling’s projects from that time dissolved by 2007, and the projects since 2008 have recruited different people). In another part of the 2010 document, the table translated above lists the same number of households split into these 10 departments. Here they are called “peasant households served” (*fuwu nonghu*), but the total numbers are the same, and a core member told me that the two terms are interchangeable. The 2012 table substitutes the term “members served” (*fuwu sheyuan*), and the total comes to about 13,500 households and over 40 hamlets, but 9,000 of those presumably refer to urban households surveyed by the two marketing teams, and the 40-some hamlets would include all the rural “member” households. This still leaves us with 4,450, several hundred more

households than those listed separately in the same document as “the general assembly of members” (3,870). Does this mean that Raoling’s “membership” remained the same from 2005 to 2010, then increased by a few hundred in 2011, and the author accidentally carried over the old number under “the general assembly of members”?

Actually the meaning of “membership” is different in each case. Presumably the author of the 2010 document took the old number from 2005 (whose origin we can only surmise) and then divided it among the 10 departments, in some cases according to their actual number of participating households, in other cases simply assigning numbers that would add up to the same total.<sup>169</sup> In the 2012 table, on the other hand, most of the departments’ “member households” refer to the number of households that the department’s staff is responsible for *surveying*. This would explain why most departments list 50 “member households” per staff member (since most staff members are responsible for surveying 50 households), including departments with no members or affiliates in any sense other than their staff (such as Accounting).

### *Staff*

Raoling’s staff is divided into “full-time” and “part-time” employees. In 2010, there were 30-some full-timers, and by 2012 this had increased to about 60. (The 2012 table lists many more, but core members said there were about 60, and about 50 regularly took part in plenary activities such as meetings, dancing, and exams.) Almost all came from local peasant families, or had married into the area. All work six days a week (including Saturday meetings) from 7:30 AM until sundown (later in the summer, earlier in the winter), with a two-hour break at noon for lunch and a nap. In 2010, core members said the association paid all full-time staff a flat monthly salary of 800 yuan, in addition to food and lodging (most chose to return home in the evening if



they lived nearby) and access to a laptop computer (in 2010 groups of about three employees each shared a computer; by 2012, most employees had their own). Other full-timers alluded to also receiving commission or bonuses beyond this salary. In 2012, the salary had differentiated into a range from 1,000 to 3,000 yuan per month, depending on how each employee valued his or her contribution to Raoling, in consultation with Director Tang.

Not all full-time employees were “members” of their department or Raoling as a whole, in the sense of owning shares or participating in management. About ten full-timers were referred to informally as “core members” (*gugan*). They sometimes met separately from the other employees, and one mentioned owning shares in her department.<sup>170</sup> These core members could be further classified into a three-tiered hierarchy: (1) Director Tang; (2) two college-educated men in their 30s, one (Mr. Niu) in charge of the “Economic Division” (including all “economic” departments in the table), and the other (Mr. Ran) in charge of the “Public Service Division” (including all “service” departments); and (3) the heads of about seven main departments (mostly women in their 40s who cofounded the association with director Tang, and a couple other men in their 30s).<sup>171</sup> Most of the other full-time employees were women under the age of 35 who had recently married into the area and/or had been recruited from colleges in the two nearby cities. There was a higher turnover among these non-core full-time positions (most of those I met in 2010 had been replaced by 2012), and several of the young women I interviewed regarded their jobs as temporary (to the chagrin of core members, who expended great effort trying to foster a sense of community among these younger employees). All full-time employees were required to participate in plenary activities, formalized in August 2012 to include:

- (1) meeting in a central location at 7:30 every morning (except Sundays – their day off) to participate in a collective dance and receive a pep talk from director Tang, before going to their respective departments to begin work;
- (2) meeting every Saturday to go over the past week's work and plan for the next week, and listen to lectures by Director Tang (and sometimes guest lecturers – such as me);
- (3) meeting once a month to take a written, open-book exam, including questions about their department, Raoling as a whole (the association and the broader “community”), and other issues such as the history of Chinese and foreign co-ops; and
- (4) helping the director of Eco-Home to sweep Raoling's base village once a week.

In addition, “young” (under 35 years old) full-timers were also required to work on the Youth Farm during the busy farming seasons (older people having their own farm work to do at home), and to help out with the summer camp for staff children that began in 2011. All full-time employees were also expected to help organize occasional activities, such as weddings connected to the association. Finally, each full-timer was assigned between 50 and 150 households from the Raoling area to visit periodically in order to collect information for the association's database, and to serve as a feedback mechanism between the association and its broader “community.”

Besides these full-time employees, the term “part-time staff” is used to indicate a number of other work arrangements. The only case of part-time work listed in the 2012 table is under Eco-Home, which consists mainly of trash pick-up. In that case, the association itself does not hire these “40-some” (actually about 6)<sup>172</sup> people. Instead, with the association's guidance, the governmental committee<sup>173</sup> of each village assigns people to pick up trash from the homes of villagers who pay 2 yuan a month for this service. Raoling core members also refer to the “400

member households” of the Handicraft Co-op (as listed in the 2012 table) as “part-time staff.” These women are paid at a piece rate by the co-op for work they do at home in their spare time. Finally, the “20 staff” listed under the “Health and Happiness Center” in the 2012 table seems to refer to home caregivers. (Only two had actually started working when the table was written, but arrangements were being made for more.) These are people who provide care for fellow villagers with disabilities, and they are paid directly by the client’s family, with the center’s one employee acting as intermediary to set up the arrangements.

### *Overview of Each Department*

#### **I. The Four Logistical Departments**

The **Community Office** and **Accounting** were explained above. Of the remaining four administrative or logistical departments:

##### **A. Urban-Rural Interaction**

This department consists primarily of two staff members (Mr. Niu and another man named Mr. Jin, also in his 30s, who is listed on the 2012 table as this department's only staff member). Their main responsibility is marketing products from the association and its broader “community” to external buyers. They purchase both organic and conventional agricultural products (at market price) from the Organic Farming Co-op, the Youth Farm, and unaffiliated farmers from the Raoling area. In some cases this department coordinates processing (milling wheat into flour, for example) and packaging (using bags from the Handicraft Co-op) for these products. They then arrange for the products' transport and sale through one of five channels: (a) wholesalers in the three nearest cities, (b) a Hong Kong-based fiber company (which buys most of Raoling’s cotton), (c) what I call “enlightened middlemen,” namely retailers who specialize in

“fair trade” organic products, (d) consumers in the two nearest cities and Beijing (personal contacts who order certain products in advance), (e) other local middlemen (as a last resort).

The 2012 table lists **Two Urban Marketing Teams** as separate departments, but the staff discussed these as if they were parts of the Urban-Rural Interaction Department, with Mr. Niu in charge of all three. These teams (15 full-time staffers according the table) consist of college students in the two nearest cities who were (as of summer 2012) in the process of doing marketing research and planning to set up retail outlets. These teams’ 9,000 “member households” probably refers to the potential urban consumers these students were surveying. The Urban-Rural Interaction Department's 50 “member households” probably refers to those peasants the department’s one official staffer is responsible for surveying.<sup>174</sup>

#### **B. Hospitality<sup>175</sup>**

This department’s main function is to prepare meals for the full-time staff and any visitors. A driver buys and transports and the supplies from nearby markets, the Youth Farm, and various local peasants. The two women who work in the main cafeteria also occasionally wash bedclothes for visitors. There is a plan to eventually open the cafeteria to the public as a for-profit restaurant.

In 2010 and 2011, staff meals were split into two locations. In the Peasant School, a local woman was hired to cook for the school staff, any visitors, and other staff when they went to the school for meetings. In Raoling's base village – where most of the other staff worked – meals were contracted to a family who cooked and served in their house. In 2012, Raoling and a Hong Kong fiber company (discussed under the Organic Farming Co-op below) collaborated to rent space from another local family and build a two-story building to be used as a cafeteria (with the upstairs reserved for the Community Office and general meeting space). Around the same time,

the school's remaining staff members transferred to other departments, most working in Raoling's base village, so the new cafeteria began serving all full-time staff on a regular basis.

When the Hospitality Department was formalized in 2012, the driver remained the same (a middle-aged man previously not classified under a particular department). The woman who occasionally cooks in the school is new. (Each time I visited Raoling – in 2010, 2011, and 2012 – a different middle-aged woman from the school's village was cooking for the school. Each had no connection to Raoling other than this job, which was considered “part-time” and paid about half the wage of full-time staff.) The two women who run the main cafeteria were transferred from the Handicraft Co-op. The 2012 table lists five full-time staff members: the fifth may refer to the woman who sells homemade buns (*mantou*) to the cafeteria, or one of a few women who occasionally help the two main cooks. The department has no “member households” in any sense other than surveying, so the 150 mentioned in the table probably refer to households surveyed by the two main cooks and one of the other staff members.

## II. The Six “Economic” (For-Profit) Departments

### **A. Farm Supply**

It is appropriate that both documents start with this department, since it was the association's historical foundation, and remains its main source of income. In 2010 the Farm Supply Department had six branch stores in villages throughout the Raoling area. By the summer of 2012, two stores had split off to become independent businesses, leaving Raoling with four. According to one report, the department grossed 310,000 yuan in 2011, 70,000 of which went to subsidizing other departments.<sup>176</sup> It would be difficult to determine the department's ownership structure for certain, but we know it was founded as a private enterprise by Raoling director-to-

be Ms. Tang and her husband, Mr. Qi, in the mid-1990s. In the late 1990s the enterprise entered a partnership with Mr. Qi's sister and her husband, Mr. Ouyang, who eventually helped Ms. Tang to found Raoling Association and became head of its Accounting Department. Around this time, Ms. Tang began a series of agricultural training activities and experiments with alternative business arrangements that eventually led to the founding of Raoling Peasant Association in 2004.

One of these experiments was with cooperative ownership.<sup>177</sup> She initiated this experiment because customers had been buying farm supplies on credit (common practice in rural China) and taking a long time to pay off their debt. Ms. Tang had encouraged customers to invest in raising chickens and growing asparagus, signing as guarantor for their loans in some cases (which ended up losing her a lot of money). Customers claimed they had lost out due to falling prices for these products and therefore could not pay off their debts, but upon investigation, Ms. Tang found that most of the farmers actually had enough money; they were just taking advantage of the situation. It occurred to her that this problem could be avoided if the customers became shareholders in the farm supply business, so they would identify with its interests. She convinced about 20 customers to buy shares for 2,000 yuan each, and indeed this helped their business, allowing them to open five new branches in the next two years. However, in 2004 the local government declared this cooperative arrangement illegal<sup>178</sup> (probably at the instigation of rival villagers, since around this time Mr. Qi was elected head of the villager committee of Raoling's base village). The company reverted to a more conventional (private) ownership structure, which has apparently remained to the present. In order to deal with the problem of financing, the company began providing discounts to customers who paid in advance.

*This discount for advanced payment seems to be what “membership” has meant for the farm supply business for the past few years,* according to interviews with several store employees and many customers in several villages. Core members of Raoling and posters displayed in their offices claim that the business is still a co-op, explaining a complex system for calculating the price of shares based on the member's amount of farmland, and for calculating annual dividends through a combination of shareholding and the value of supplies purchased each year, but apparently these claims have no connection to present reality.

The number of staff listed in the tables for 2010 and 2012 fell from 10 to 4 because previously Raoling's Accounting Department was considered part of the Farm Supply Department. But why did the number of “member households” fall from nearly 1,000 to 400? The coincidence of numbers seems to imply that each staff member was responsible for surveying 100 peasant households, and that these numbers refer to that relation.<sup>179</sup>

## **B. Organic Farming Co-op**

This is Raoling's largest department in terms of staff and official membership. It may also be the second most important source of income, but on paper it is separated from the Department of Urban-Rural Interaction, which sells the co-op's products. This may be why the 2012 table classifies the co-op's economic status as “A” (merely covering its own expenses) rather than “C” (making a profit).

Actually it is called a “federation of co-ops” (*lianheshe*). China's 2007 Law on Specialized Economic Farmers' Cooperatives stipulates that a co-op must specialize in one type of product, so in 2008 Raoling registered 20-some separate co-ops for various products, but those still affiliated with Raoling are run together by this department's approximately 10 staff members. In

this case the tabulated figures of 800 and 1500 “member households” refer not only to a relation of being surveyed (as in the aforementioned departments), but also to a specific commercial relation.

In 2006, several core members of Raoling visited the famous recollectivized village of Nanjie in Henan, from which they drew inspiration to attempt something similar.<sup>180</sup> In Raoling's base village they encouraged several hundred villagers to pool their land, creating a collective farm of over 50 hectares. This ran into management problems and dissolved after about a year (becoming one of the issues about which villagers complained to the local government – allegedly due to instigation by the village party branch – leading the government to temporarily withdraw Raoling's registration as a legally-recognized association in 2007). Some of the core members involved in the farm then took advantage of the new Cooperative Law to register 20-some co-ops and use them as a framework for more decentralized cooperation among farmers throughout Raoling's broader “community” of 20-some villages. From 2008 to 2010, they focused on guiding a few dozen farmers in experiments with modern organic farming methods on small plots, providing inputs (via Raoling's Farm Supply Department) and training with agronomists from nearby universities. The co-op bought some of the products and sold them via personal connections and NGO networks.

In 2010, the co-op expanded these services to about 800 farming households, and by 2012 this had increased to about 1,500 (according to the table) or 3,000 (according to another source). At the same time, Raoling expanded its processing and marketing of agricultural products. The co-op's major crop is cotton. Until 2011, its main buyer was Raoling's Handicraft Co-op, which processes the cotton into a variety of textiles sold to other departments and external buyers. In late 2010, Raoling signed a contract with a Hong Kong-based fiber company



that began buying the majority of Raoling's cotton, in addition to providing non-GMO seeds (somewhat ironically imported from the USA, since now it is even more difficult to obtain certified non-GMO cotton seeds in China). The company now requires Raoling-affiliated farmers to use these seeds universally. In the fall of 2011, the co-op purchased 135,000 kilos of cotton from its farmers, and all of this went to the fiber company (at a 20 to 30 percent premium).<sup>181</sup>

Other products of the Organic Farming Co-op include wheat, corn, soybeans, and various fruits. These are not yet such an important source of income, but Raoling has begun processing and selling them to external buyers via the Urban-Rural Interaction Department. This marketing of food products is in turn increasing the demand for cotton, since the food is packaged in sacks made by the Handicraft Co-op from cotton grown by the Organic Farming Co-op's farmers.

There seems to have been no formal membership until the fall of 2012 (after my last visit), when another researcher observed co-op staff distributing membership cards to farmers. Starting in 2008, the co-op staff began developing relationships with farmers, keeping detailed records on their farming practices, along with personal information such as income and expenses (partly for use by the co-op, but also as part of Raoling's project for maintaining a comprehensive database on the “community” as a whole). This has enabled the co-op to ensure whether the products it purchases from particular farmers are indeed organic, and to continually adjust its extension work based on the farmers' changing situations. In some cases the co-op has signed contracts with farmers, stipulating that the co-op would purchase a certain amount of product for a certain price, but in most cases there has been no formal contract. After brief experimentation with fixed prices and dividends, the co-op decided to purchase all its products at the market price (for conventional products, since there is no established local market for organic products), and to reward its farmers not through cash dividends, but through a set of benefits including free

seeds for cotton (provided by the fiber company), discounts on other inputs (arranged by advanced payment to the Farm Supply Department), discounted or free equipment services (plowing, planting, and harvesting – provided by the co-op's Farm Equipment Team – listed as a separate department in the 2012 table), and “dividends in kind” (understood by the farmers as “prizes”), which last year consisted of toothbrushes and cups.<sup>182</sup> Core members explained this change (from fixed prices and cash dividends to these various benefits in kind) by saying that previous experiments had led to conflicts with farmers over prices and dividends.

Apparently there are no meetings of “co-op members” or mechanisms for participating in co-op management. I did not ask “members” if they desired such participation, but they described the co-op as similar to any other middleman, the main difference being that the co-op provides certain benefits and training in organic methods. No one mentioned shareholding, and I was hesitant to bring up the topic. It may be possible that ordinary “member” households may purchase shares in the co-op (as with the Handicraft Co-op), which might entitle them to some participation in management, but the only management meetings I observed consisted of a few of the department’s employees, director Tang, and her assistants.

### **C. Handicraft Co-op**

The Handicraft Co-op buys cotton from the Organic Farming Co-op, using traditional local methods and equipment to spin, weave, sew, and embroider a variety of products including bags (to package agricultural products for sale by the Urban-Rural Interaction Department), clothing (worn as uniforms by Raoling staff and sold externally), bedclothes and tablecloths (used by Raoling and sold externally), and toys and accessories (sold, for example, to a “fair trade” group in Hong Kong). The 2012 table classifies the Handicraft Co-op's economic status as

“B” - already covering its own expenses and planning to generate profit in the future. For the past few years, it has employed about 10 full-time staff, who do most of the work. According to the tables for 2010 and 2012 (as well as a poster in the workshop and interviews with core members), the co-op has also had between 200 and 400 “ordinary member households,” alternately called “part-time staff.” These are women who work at home in their spare time. A few are older women who use their own spinning wheels. Most borrow equipment (spinning wheels, looms, and sewing machines) from the co-op, which also provides the raw materials (cotton, thread, and cloth). All work at a piece rate that (according to the co-op director) comes out to about the same as the rural minimum wage for women in the area. In 2007, after the co-op received its first big order for traditionally-made bags from the Hong Kong “fair trade” group, the son of one of the elderly spinners complained that his mother was being overworked, so the co-op set a limit of 150 grams of thread to be spun by each person per day, no more than three days a week.

None of the (four) part-time or (five) ordinary full-time employees I met owned shares in the co-op, but the co-op director said that any employee could buy up to ten shares for 100 yuan each. She said that she, the other founders, and some of the other employees owned shares. Other researchers and I attempted on several occasions to meet some of the part-time employees, but never found any except for two elderly spinners (introduced by the co-op's former director) and two middle-aged women who had previously woven for the co-op at home. Of the latter two, one said she stopped because she found a higher-paying job near home, and the other because she had a grandson and needed to focus on raising him. Both said they knew of only a few others who used to work part-time for the co-op, but none who still did.<sup>183</sup> Another villager said he thought the co-op no longer hired part-time workers, only young women who work full time in

the workshop. When asked about this, the co-op director said that currently the co-op was focusing on designing new patterns for embroidery and sewing, and so was not hiring part-time employees, but that they would again when they resumed spinning and weaving.

The co-op was started in 2004 by a few of the women mobilized by Ms. Tang for collective cultural activities (discussed below). They started with modern sewing and embroidery for local markets. With the guidance of a folklorist doing research in Raoling, they began consulting elderly women about traditional production methods and patterns in 2006, and visitors from Hong Kong informed them that such traditional labor-intensive and distinctive products could fetch higher prices in “fair trade” markets. They then developed the production chain outlined above, from spinning to the finished product.

#### **D. Youth Farm**

This department now includes three plots of land, each about one to two hectares in area, two in two of Raoling's villages, and one rented from the township's collective land on the alluvial plain of the Yellow River. It is run by one young man (also about 30 years old) from a neighboring county, who spends most of his nights in a shack on the main farm, visiting his wife and kids on Sundays and holidays. It is called the “Youth Farm” because one of its stated purposes is to provide young employees with an opportunity to learn how to farm, since most do not have their own land, and in any case would not normally see any reason to farm (like the overwhelming majority of young people in China – one of the problems toward which NRR in general is directed).<sup>184</sup> In addition to fulfilling this function, the farm serves as a laboratory for the Organic Farming Co-op. New seeds, inputs, and techniques are tested here before being introduced to the co-op's farmers, and non-GMO seeds can be bred here. Director Tang has also

proposed that one or more of these plots can eventually be developed into agro-tourist resorts, somewhat along the lines of Liao Flats (Chapter 6), which would provide young employees with an opportunity to learn about running their own businesses, as well as providing another source of income, while fostering appreciation for farming and rural life. At this point, the farm's only source of income is selling its products to other departments (cotton to the fiber company and Handicraft Co-op, food to the Cafeteria and Urban-Rural Interaction Department, seeds to the Organic Farming Co-op) – enough to cover its expenses. The 20 “member households” in the 2010 table referred to Raoling's full-time staff under the age of 35. This number's increase to 50 in 2012 seems to reflect a change in the meaning of “membership” to those peasant households the farm's director is responsible for surveying (in line with most of the other departments).

#### **E. Financial Cooperation and Land Transfer**

The **Department of Land Transfer** (listed in the 2012 table) was not mentioned by Raoling members. Another researcher mentioned it, but he had thought “land transfer” (*tudi liuzhuan*) meant “soil conversion” (*turang zhuanhua*), and so assumed it referred to the Organic Farming Co-op's guidance of farmers' transition from conventional to organic farming, thinking this department was part of the co-op (like the Farm Equipment Team). Actually “land transfer” refers to the transfer of use-rights, so this department would involve coordinating the transfer of land use-rights from various peasants to the association. According to a third researcher's description, this department functions essentially as a second farm aimed at utilizing land that peasants abandon temporarily when they go to work in the city. For rent, the department pays these peasants in grain instead of cash.<sup>185</sup>

The first researcher also mentioned a “secret office” in a remote village that Raoling members refused to discuss. Later one employee told me that the office was used for “**Financial Cooperation**” (*zijin huzhu*), but that this was still in the planning stage and had not yet begun operation. If this department is secret, this is probably in order to avoid conflict with a local microfinance company that cooperated with Raoling in the past but now has some friction with the association.

### III. The Four “Public Service” (Not-For-Profit) Enterprises

#### **F. Peasant (Training) School**

This department could be dated back to director Tang's earliest proto-Raoling activities in the late 1990s: inviting agronomists from nearby universities to give lectures about the use of agro-chemicals. According to Tang and other core members from this period, the social interaction occasioned by these lectures led to “cultural” activities among the women who attended, starting with dancing, for which they pooled money to hire an instructor. (This was the origin of Raoling's Women's Center, as well as the staff's daily dance routine.) They eventually organized dance competitions, and this led to conflict among dancers. As mentioned above, Tang felt that the dancers' “uncivil” way of dealing with competition reflected the lowness of their *suzhi*, and that this evinced the low *suzhi* of Chinese peasants in general. Tang proposed to increase the peasants' *suzhi* through a number of educational activities, extending from the agricultural lectures to adult literacy training, reading and discussion (the origin of today's reading groups now affiliated with the Health and Happiness Center), a debate club, and eventually training in the use of computers (provided by a Beijing NGO with which they began

cooperating around 2005). These activities required space, so they began using empty rooms in the primary school of Raoling's base village.

Eventually this use of the village school became an issue in the broader conflict between Raoling core members and other locals who claim to have been wronged by the association, centered on the Communist Party branch of Raoling's base village. This conflict seems to have emerged when Mr. Qi (Tang's husband and not a party member) became elected as head of the villager committee in 2005. The next year, the party branch contacted township authorities and claimed that Mr. Qi was abusing his power in letting the association use the school. Raoling members then found an abandoned primary school in a neighboring township's village, arranged to rent it from the township (initially with funding from the NGO), moved Raoling's equipment there, and eventually registered with the county government as an educational institution. After two or three years of cooperation with the NGO, Raoling came to a disagreement about how the school should be used. (According to Tang, the NGO wanted to use it mainly for microfinance-related activities, and Raoling members wanted to continue with "cultural" activities as well.<sup>186</sup>) Raoling returned the money the NGO had invested in the school (for rent, computers, new buildings, etc.) and cut off formal relations with the NGO, making the school (and Raoling Association in general) completely independent from external funding and control.<sup>187</sup>

The tables for 2010 and 2012 suggest that the school increased its staff by one (from 5 to 6) and its "membership" from 60 to 300 households during these two years. Actually all the former staff members either left or transferred to other departments, some continuing to do the same work under newly differentiated departments (the Community Office, Urban Rural Interaction, and the Computer Service Center). I was told that a man in his late 30s – one of Raoling's founders who had been away doing "public relations" work in 2010 and 2011 – was now the

school's director and its only full-time staff member. If there *were* 6 employees, 300 “member households” would give each of them the standard allotment of 50 peasant households for surveying, so perhaps both these numbers refer to an anticipated situation. Either way, I do not know what the 60 “member households” of 2010 refers to, since at that time the 5 employees each had 50 peasant households to survey (which would have brought the total to 250), and the school has had no other long-term relationship with particular peasants other than providing a space for periodic agricultural training (organized by the Organic Farming Co-op). Other than that, the school has been primarily used for weekly staff meetings (including lectures, exams, and singing), occasional staff training (in computer use, for example; also once a hair stylist lectured the staff on how to improve their appearances!), and hosting visitors (the school has several dorm rooms and a large cafeteria, for which visitors pay a modest standardized fee). In the spring of 2012, Raoling built a couple of buildings back in the base village, certain functions of the school were split off into separate departments housed in those buildings (the Community Office, the Cafeteria, and Computer Service), and most of the collective staff activities began taking place there as well, leaving the school to function primarily as a venue for occasional activities such as agricultural training and NGO workshops.

In 2011 and 2012 the school hosted two summer camps for the children of staff members. In 2012, since the school now had only one staffer, a few employees of other departments took off from their regular work to help run the summer camp, along with student volunteers from two universities. The director said he hoped that other children from the area could attend next year's summer camp, and that this would be a step toward eventually providing weekly services for children. (This is the meaning of the **Children's Education Center** in the 2010 table – it is a plan that they hope to implement in the next few years.)



### **G. Health and Happiness Center**

This department resulted from the merger of two departments listed on the 2010 table as the **Women's Reading and Activity Center** and the **Elderly Health and Happiness Center**. These two departments had also overlapped with the **Center for Transmission of Traditional Culture**, but that department's director left Raoling in 2011.<sup>188</sup> By 2012, the Elderly Center's director had also left to work for a village committee (where, she said, she hoped to continue promoting the sort of "cultural work" she had done before through Raoling). The remaining director of these "cultural" projects decided to focus on two activities: (1) buying reading materials (mainly a Beijing NGO's magazine for rural women, along with technical guides to farming, childrearing, etc., depending on demand) at a bulk discount and selling them at a small profit to women's reading groups throughout the area, which would in turn sell them to other women; and (2) arranging home caregiver services. The latter was originally proposed (apparently by general director Tang<sup>189</sup>) as a way to provide care for elderly people whose children had moved to the city, but during my last visit in the summer of 2012, the two cases that had materialized actually involved elderly people taking care of middle-aged villagers with disabilities. The clients' families paid the caregivers directly, with the Health and Happiness Center functioning as intermediary. The 2012 table lists 20 staff members for this center, but there was only one at the time, so apparently these 20 refer to anticipated caregivers (although they would not be paid by the association, and the two existing caregivers did not participate in regular staff activities). The 150 "member households" in the 2012 table probably refers households surveyed by the director. The 2010 table's much higher figures (700 for the Women's Center, 500 for the Elderly Center, and 200 for the Traditional Culture Center) had referred to

those who participated in various “cultural” activities originally initiated by Raoling (dancing, singing, calligraphy, etc., by women and the elderly) but now organized independently from time to time, mainly by village committee personnel.

## **H. Eco-Home**

Until 2011 this department was grouped together with the three “cultural” centers (for Women, the Elderly, and Traditional Culture), sharing the same office for “public services.” At first it consisted of mobilizing staff to clean up the village once a week by sweeping and picking up trash. In 2011 the Women's Center director proposed the idea of charging a small fee (one yuan per month) to households who wanted their trash picked up, and using that money to hire a couple of workers to pick up the trash and transport it to the nearest dump. Almost all the 360-some households in Raoling's base village agreed to this arrangement, and the pilot project went smoothly. (These were 350 the member households in the 2010 table.) The second step was to sort trash into three types: (1) plastic that could be recycled, (2) organic matter that could be used for compost, and (3) the rest, which would go to the dump. The project director purchased sacks and distributed these to households, asking them to put recyclable plastic in the bags. She then stored these until they had a truckload to take to the nearest center, which paid a small price for the plastic, covering the cost of the bags and transport. Raoling also began providing training in the composting of organic waste, and some households sold their waste to others for farming.

After working out this system in Raoling's base village, the project director then talked to the governments of Raoling's other 20-some villages about organizing trash-sorting and pick-up there as well. So far six have agreed. The project director is working with these village committees to train personnel to carry out these tasks, with the villagers paying them directly

(two yuan a month). In the 2012 table, the 40-some “part-time staff” must refer to these personnel, anticipating the expansion of this project to all 40-some of Raoling's hamlets (in 20-some administrative villages).

### **I. Computer Service Center (and Library)**

Like the Community Office (and in some senses the Cafeteria and Urban-Rural Interaction Department), this department and its one staff member were split off from the school in 2012. The director – a local man in his late 20s who studied computers in college – provides basic computer services (repair, etc.) to anyone in the area for a small fee, as well as running the association's network and maintaining its computers, and occasionally teaching classes on computer use. Presumably the 100 “member households” on the table refers to the households he surveys.

He also runs a small library housed in a neighboring building, which seems to be locked all the time unless someone asks him to unlock it. The building bears two signs: one says Raoling Community Library; the other, [X] Village Library. Village libraries – initiated nationwide a few years ago as part of China's “New Socialist Countryside” policy – are normally housed in the village headquarters, where they are similarly locked up, and I have never seen or heard of anyone using such a library among the 20 or so villages I have visited. In this case, the villager committee (headed by Raoling director Tang’s husband Mr. Qi) agreed to house the village library in this free-standing building next to Raoling's Computer Center and Farm Supply headquarters, and to combine the state-supplied books for the village library with the books and other materials accumulated by Raoling over the past decade (some donated, others purchased). The state-supplied books consist mainly of agricultural manuals and overviews of China's laws

and state policies. The Raoling books include other technical books on agriculture as well as computers, health and nutrition; the NGO magazine for rural women distributed by the Health and Happiness Center; other NGO books and periodicals (including NRR books by Wen Tiejun, et al.); a few news magazines; children's books, inspirational self-help and business management guides; Chinese classics and books on Chinese history; a few novels; and at least one book on the global history of co-ops.<sup>190</sup> Anyone may check out the books by registering with the director and leaving a small deposit. He showed us a list of all the books checked since the library opened a few months before: about ten books had been checked out by himself and three other Raoling core members, mainly technical books.<sup>191</sup>

### ***Director Tang and Governmentality***

By the time I began research in 2009, I had frequently heard Raoling mentioned as perhaps the largest and most successful peasant organization in China, with Director Tang as a famous grassroots woman leader, one of the 108 “Peace Women” from Greater China and Mongolia selected (by NRR-affiliated academic Lau Kin Chi) as nominees for the 2005 Nobel Peace Prize.<sup>192</sup> In the summer of 2009 I met Director Tang and other Raoling members (along with Director Gao from Wansheng and people affiliated with my other two cases) for the first time at a national conference on “peasant co-ops and rural social work” organized by academics and attended by a combination of Chinese and foreign academics, NGO personnel, and peasant activists/ practitioners (with the latter in the majority). Among the speakers, Director Tang made one of the deepest impressions on me, not only because she was the only peasant organization leader who was a woman, but also because she spoke more standard Mandarin than almost all the other peasant speakers (so I could understand much more of what she said), and she was

familiar enough with the various issues (agro-ecology, state policy, women's issues) that she could hold her own in sophisticated discussion with the Chinese and foreign academics and NGO personnel, speaking from over a decade of practical experience. This relative cosmopolitanism reflects her years of interaction with such outsiders, starting in 2003 with the Beijing NGO whose magazine *Raoling* now sells, followed by (relatively limited) interaction with Wen Tiejun's "northern" current of NRR, and closer collaboration with a Beijing-based liberal NGO and its affiliated microfinance company from 2006 until they cut off formal relations in 2009 (after which they collaborated informally through a local branch of the microfinance company, until *Raoling* became a competitor by starting its own financial project). The liberal NGO in particular seems to have influenced some of *Raoling*'s ideas and practices, as discussed below, although it is also possible that these quasi-neoliberal elements simply reflect the pervasiveness of such ideas throughout postsocialist Chinese culture and their ability to link up with local conditions and personal propensities. The productive "friction" (Tsing 2005) of this fortuitous connection between globalizing discourses and local conditions has given rise to a unique a hodgepodge of elements drawn from not only neoliberalism but also NRR, Maoism, the "East Asian Model of Comprehensive Farmers' Associations,"<sup>193</sup> and of course local history.

Tang showed part of a local TV documentary about *Raoling* – one of several (the others made by national TV stations) made around 2006, before the association temporarily lost its license and reorganized in 2007 (after which *Raoling* leaders tended to refuse interviews with news media until recently). The first remarkable point in the documentary is Tang's account of her refusal to sell a farmer as much fertilizer as he requested from her farm supply store, telling him that using more than a certain amount would not increase output and only waste his money.

At first her refusal angered the farmer, and he stormed out, saying he would just buy fertilizer elsewhere, but upon reflection he returned and thanked her for putting his interests before hers.

This incident is now widely cited as a key moment in Raoling's evolution from a conventional enterprise into a distinctive, more community-oriented project. Tang's refusal to sell the farmer more fertilizer than he needed suggests a sort of altruism or community solidarity in contrast with the predominant (more or less "neoliberal," or simply capitalist) rationality of short-term individual self-interest (the ideational value most consistent with the law of commodity value – until self-interested competition results in crisis, as discussed in Chapter 3). This altruism or solidarity is shared with other NRR-affiliated peasant organizations, such as Wansheng (Chapter 4) and Liao Flats (Chapter 6). However, if we interpret this incident in the context of Raoling's later development, and in comparison with these other organizations, it becomes clear that this is a particular kind of altruism, distinct from those characterizing Wansheng and Liao Flats: rather than economic justice, participatory democracy, Buddhist ethics, or harmony with the natural world, the primary goal here is the cultivation of a certain entrepreneurial rationality.

Before introducing more examples, let me explain this pedagogy's similarities to and differences from neoliberal *governmentality* – not to be confused with the sort of neoliberal *policies* selectively adopted by states from Chile to the UK to China since the 1970s (as discussed in Chapter 3), or the neoliberal *ideology* justifying these policies, on the other. Wendy Larner (2000) proposes this helpful distinction, referring to the Foucauldian concept of governmentality as the particular logic and mechanisms of governance in a broad sense ("the conduct of conduct") characterizing a certain historical period. Foucault identified a new governmentality that emerged in 1920s German economic discourse and developed through the

postwar Chicago School (Milton Friedman, et al.), differing from classical liberalism by treating the self-regulating market not as something natural to be protected from state intervention, but as an ideal to be actualized through “incessant social intervention” aimed at “the universalization of the entrepreneurial form,” beyond what had traditionally been regarded as the economic sphere, to encompass all aspects of life (Lemke 2001). According to scholars such as Larner (2000:13), since the 1980s this new governmentality has spread from state policy to diffuse social practices that encourage people “to see themselves as individualized and active subjects responsible for enhancing their own well-being,” involving “a particular politics of self in which we are all encouraged to ‘work on ourselves’ in a range of domains, including... ‘counter-cultural movements.’” According to Anagnost (2013:26), “the essence of neoliberal subjectivity” that this governmentality fosters is the notion of “human capital,” in which “the worker is understood as an entrepreneur who invests in his or her own self-development,” and whose colloquial Chinese synonym is *suzhi*. Hairong Yan’s (2008) study of women from rural Anhui working as domestics in Beijing illustrates how *suzhi* discourse “forces the ethics of the market on the individual subject and codes its worth for Development,” helping to transform young peasants into self-disciplined and risk-bearing wage-laborers motivated by the elusive dream of “self-development.” Although Raoling could in some ways be considered a “counter-cultural movement” in relation to the predominant postsocialist culture examined by Yan, as noted above, something like this neoliberal aspect of *suzhi* discourse has also played a role in Raoling’s work, particularly in Director Tang’s efforts to transform peasant culture, but that role has been somewhat more ambiguous in its relation to capitalist development.

Like neoliberal governmentality, what might be called Raoling’s postsocialist cooperative governmentality involves a pedagogy of productive self-responsibilization, in a context

characterized by the gradual replacement of more stable and egalitarian institutions of social welfare with the more risk-dependent and competitive logic of commodity relations in ever more spheres of life. Raoling's governmentality differs from the typical neoliberal mode, however, in that it is partly an effort to *revive* collective support for the increasingly atomized peasants, and to thereby reverse the flow of young people (or human capital) from the cities back to the countryside. It thus also resembles Maoist governmentality, both in this ethos of reversing the rural-to-urban flow, and in its cultivation of *altruistic* or *collective-oriented* competition – a similarly productivist competition not (or not only) aimed at self-gain, but at the good of the collective. One significant difference from Maoism is the capitalist context, such that, for example, “the good of the collective” and the reversal of the rural-to-urban flow must include commercial success in competition with other enterprises – which tends to generate new capitalist relations and priorities internally. This context, coupled with the younger members' relative freedom of movement (compared with the Mao era), also creates a tendency toward their “deterritorialization” (to borrow a term from Deleuze and Guattari [1972]) from the disintegrating peasant society, putting pressure on Raoling's leaders to “reterritorialize” them into the new collective through a combination of ideological strategies and competitive wages. Raoling remains distinct from a conventional enterprise due to its leaders' subjective commitment to the alternative value of community solidarity – tempering the association's immediate commercial interests with more broadly-conceived interests of Raoling Rural Community. However, they tend to frame those broader interests in ways that are basically consistent with the needs of capital, in particular focusing on the transformation of irrational, lazy, and disorderly “peasants” (*nongmin*) into rational, entrepreneurial, and orderly citizens (*gongmin*).<sup>194</sup>



The fertilizer incident with the “irrational peasant”<sup>195</sup> inspired Tang to begin inviting agronomists to give lectures about the rational use of agro-chemicals. As Tang’s brother-in-law and business partner Mr. Ouyang (now head of Accounting) later put it in conversation,<sup>196</sup> at first these lectures simply made good sense as a marketing strategy, since farmers would buy chemicals after attending the free lectures, and this would also increase popular trust in the store owners (the risk of buying fake inputs being a prevalent concern among farmers). (Note the similarity with the cooperative hotel in Bryer’s study, introduced in Chapter 3, in that it also made economic sense for the hotel to provide free community-oriented services.) Eventually, however, these lectures became the starting point for a general educational project and “cultural cooperation” that went beyond such a logic of immediate self-interest. In the video, Tang said the dance lessons and competitions that developed from the agricultural lectures benefitted women in three ways:

First, if women don’t get together during the slack season, they gossip (*shuo chang dao duan*) and confuse right and wrong (*jiu meiyou shifei le*). Secondly, I discovered that through dancing, rural women’s efficiency in doing housework increased. Finally, I discovered that after dancing, we women are in a good mood, so when [we] go home, the phenomenon of quarrelling (*chaonao*) basically disappears, so that our *little families* (*xiaojia*) naturally become harmonious, and the *big family* (*dajia*) of our village in turn becomes harmonious.<sup>197</sup>

This quotation illustrates how, from the beginning, Raoling leaders’ turn from self-interest to altruism or collective self-interest has involved a governmentality that seems to lie

somewhere in between the Maoist and neoliberal modes. The goal of dancing is not simply to have fun (although that ludic aspect must be present in order to make such pedagogy more palatable), but to increase efficiency, to deter frivolous and potentially disruptive gossip, and to promote harmonious order in domestic relations as a model for the broader social order. When I first visited Raoling (in the fall of 2010), after a morning of lectures by Tang and other core members to the young employees, I was impressed that they took a break to sing karaoke, using a karaoke system donated by the provincial government. One of the main reasons that many young people flee the countryside (in addition to monetary and ideological reasons and the desire to escape patriarchal control) is simple boredom (as noted in Chapter 4, in reference to Jingjing's narrative) – a condition exacerbated by the replacement of socialist institutions, such as live performances and collective film-screenings, with capitalist institutions, characterized by atomized social relations and the commoditization of fun, in China's rural conditions lacking the "effective demand" for much commercial entertainment besides television. This is one of the reasons NRR advocates such as He Xuefeng advocate "cultural cooperation." However, I was disappointed to note that most of the young employees did not seem enthusiastic about singing karaoke (although they were rather enthusiastic to observe me and my foreign research partner singing old Chinese songs). During my second, longer stay in the summer of 2011, I realized that one likely reason for this aversion was that Tang treated singing karaoke as a chore, requiring each employee to choose one song and sing it every day for several weeks, until they had perfected it. In explaining this assignment to the newer employees, she explicitly described it as an exercise in self-development, aimed at cultivating the habit of pushing oneself to improve in general from day to day, as well as specifically overcoming shyness in order to improve one's

*suzhi* and facilitate what Tang regarded as mature, civilized social interaction within and beyond the broader community of Raoling.

### ***Harmony in “the Little Family”***

There is no doubt that overall Raoling has benefitted peasants (by increasing incomes and providing entertainment, for example), but these examples illustrate how the association’s work also helps to reproduce the existing hierarchical social order (including men’s power over women and children) while facilitating the development of capitalist relations *within the rural community itself* – not only by selling new agricultural inputs, helping peasants to take out loans for entrepreneurial investment, acting as a middleman for their products, and eventually hiring them as wage-laborers, but also through ideological and technical work (agricultural training, conflict resolution, *suzhi* development) that help these new relations to develop in a more orderly manner so that, for example, instead of wasting money on unnecessary inputs (or frivolous entertainment such as drinking or gambling – other targets of Raoling’s pedagogy), farmers use that money for more prudent investment and self-development.

With regard to patriarchy (in both senses of men’s power over women and of parents’ power over their children and daughters-in-law), Raoling could be seen as “reformist” in the sense of curbing its “abuses” in ways tending to re-legitimize existing and emerging hierarchies in a time of rapid social change and the flight of young people from the countryside. According to anthropologists such as Pun Ngai (2005) and May (2010), the desire to escape from patriarchy is one of the main factors driving young peasant women to become wage-laborers in the city. Women in Raoling did not mention this sentiment to me as such (my being male would have made that unlikely in any case). One full-time employee in her late 20s told me that she would

like to get a divorce due to “contradictions” with her husband and parents-in-law, but that it would be hard to carry out because of social pressures, from her family as well as Raoling authorities, who strongly discourage divorce.<sup>198</sup>

Around this time, the staff were organizing a wedding for a woman in her early 20s from another province, whom Raoling had recruited from a nearby college to work in the Handicraft Co-op. Tang had introduced her to a man in her husband’s lineage as a potential marriage partner, and the young woman had agreed (of course it would have been awkward to say no, considering the power relation). During one of my visits to the Handicraft Co-op during this pre-wedding period, Tang showed up and asked us to talk about the meaning of “love.” Unfortunately she asked me to chip in, specifically asking why divorce is more common in “the West” than in China. Trying to be diplomatic, I said that perhaps it was because the relationship between love and marriage is conventionally understood differently: that in China’s tradition of arranged marriage (and today’s semi-arranged marriages, where partners have some say in the matter), love is supposed to develop on the foundation of marriage, whereas in parts of the West where arranged marriage has become much less common, love is supposed to be a precondition for marriage. When the initial excitement of a relationship wears off, couples think their love is dead and get divorced, so it is increasingly common for young couples to see no point in getting married in the first place. Tang responded with sympathy for the sad fate of western relationships, using this to reinforce her argument for young people to avoid premarital relationships, get married to an “appropriate” partner at an “appropriate” age (early 20s), and work out any problems that come along rather than resorting to divorce.

On a separate occasion, Tang brought up the topic of domestic violence as an example of how Raoling’s “cultural” activities have benefitted women, saying that wife-beating has become

much less common since they started dancing in the early 2000s. She attributed this to women's increased self-esteem and communication skills, along with men's increased respect for women after seeing them successfully organizing such activities on their own. I asked how Raoling intervenes when they encounter a case of domestic violence, and she replied,

We don't name any names, saying who is hitting his wife, but in our women's activities we discuss the reasons for wife-beating. If the woman did something bad, if she never stops quarrelling – our village has a saying, “woman's mouth” (*nuren zui*): this beating is something you earned with your mouth, because you couldn't stop nagging (*nao*), so the man got angry and hit [you]. This is one [way we deal with such cases]. There are also women whose treatment of their parents-in-law is truly not up to par, not good enough... [Another] way is to hold a public meeting. We don't name any names, but we say that only the most inferior men hit their wives. This has some influence, gradually... You [have to] analyze the cause of [each case of] wife-beating; if you can't remember, we have no way to help you improve (*gaijin*).<sup>199</sup>

“So you don't directly intervene?” I asked.

Once one [of the women] in the Handicraft Co-op was hit by her husband. He gave her a black eye – it was bad. We got angry and sent two delegates to talk to him... We asked why he hit her, and he said they weren't getting along, that she wasn't good at housework... We said, ‘That's not a sufficient excuse for hitting her!’... Later we had a public meeting at the Co-op about this, saying if it happened again we would all go to her

home together... Mostly we try to deal with [it at the level of] relations between the woman and her mother-in-law. If that relationship improves, then the mother-in-law would definitely stand with her daughter-in-law if the man hits his wife.

Tang and her colleagues thus choose to intervene in gentle, moralistic ways that seek to make rural life more acceptable for young women by curbing the most flagrant “abuses” of patriarchy while preserving its basic structure, thus restoring “harmony” to both “little” and “big” families – individual households and the community as a whole.

A few days after this conversation, I had the opportunity to observe such moral suasion through “cultural work” in a monthly meeting of Raoling’s full-time staff. There Tang insisted that the men take part in a dance routine that the women had been practicing every morning. Tang explained their refusal to take part as a matter of gender equality (in this part of China, dancing is now considered a woman’s activity, and women have predominated in Raoling’s dance activities since the early 2000s). The men reluctantly took their turn on stage, imitating the women’s dance moves from memory – poorly, since most had not paid attention to the moves before. Disappointed, the women “penalized” the men by having them “walk like [fashion] models” on a catwalk (*zou mote bu*), which a few of them did with exaggerated effeminacy, to uproarious laughter. When the laughter subsided, Tang lectured on “the meaning of dancing” (*tiaowu de yiyi*):

Everyone take notes on this: “The Meaning of Dancing.” Just now did anyone observe why our men didn’t want to dance? When we started dancing back in 2001, that dance

instructor we hired said that having women do ballroom dancing (*jiaojiwu*) with other women, and men with other men, was simply an insult to ballroom dancing. We have always promoted male—female equality; we say that men and women are equal, so we observed this from the perspective of dancing. Dancing is absolutely *not* an exclusively female activity (*nü de de zhuan ye*). So from the perspective of dancing, men and women *are not* equal. In the past we thought that basketball was a only a man's activity, but then women started playing basketball, so now we realize that women can play basketball too... Today several men danced rather well, but [some people] say that as soon as a man dances, he's no longer a real man (*nanzihan*). From dancing we can see that men's style of dancing is different from women's. So [some people] want to dance separately, they don't have team spirit (*tuandui yishi*)... So starting in our first New Year's gala in 2001, we asked everyone to bring their spouses so that couples could do ballroom dancing together. Everyone admired those who danced well... It was such a moving sight, so romantic to see couples dancing together... It was such an admirable happiness (*rang ren xianmu de xingfu*)! So now in all our work, if we overlook gender awareness (*xingbie yishi*), we cannot progress.<sup>200</sup>

It is almost as if Tang is orchestrating the literal performance of a new, “modern” model of gender relations as represented in the 1990s films and TV dramas still popular with her generation, in which gender is imbued with a tame and regimented sort of romance, in contrast with Mao-era puritanism. Perhaps this, like the karaoke and computers, is partly intended to counter the outflow of young people by appealing to their dreams of urban romance (again see May 2010), but it seems rather out of touch with the “development” of gendered (and

transgendered) performances and media representations over the past decade, with which some of the younger employees seem more likely to identify (judging by their taste in television).<sup>201</sup> This may also help explain why many of the young people seem bored by such mandatory “entertainment.”

At the time I thought I was missing something: Tang kept saying that “we want to promote male—female equality through dancing,” but I did not catch any explanation of how men’s participation in dancing had anything to do with this community’s mild but deep-seated patriarchy enforced by the acceptance of violence against women. After listening to my recording of this 15-minute lecture repeatedly, however, I detected nothing further. Did this talk of “gender awareness” simply reflect a superficial understanding of the NGOs that probably introduced the term? Perhaps, but it is also consistent with Raoling’s efforts to “build community” and “team spirit,” to make rural life more acceptable for young women (and men), and to partially overcome the “traditional” gendered division of labor in ways compatible with the “progress” of both Raoling specifically (as a “social enterprise”) and the local development of capitalist relations in general. Later at the same meeting, Tang instructed the men to help out their wives with housework, and encouraged women to ask their husbands to help out. She framed this as a means toward both “domestic harmony” and helping women to get enough rest so they could work more efficiently outside their “little families” for the “big family” of Raoling. This resonated with what the head of Handicraft told me on a separate occasion: that at first her husband wanted her to quit working for the Co-op because it took time away from her housework and child-rearing duties, until Tang and other colleagues did “thought work” (*sixiang gongzuo*) on him to accept a bigger share of those duties.<sup>202</sup>



This articulation of “women’s liberation” with the needs of capitalist development resonates with Maya Gonzalez’ (2011:231) observations about the Women’s Movement globally:

[T]he ‘freedom’ that women have won (or are winning) from their reproductive fate has not been replaced with free-time, but with other forms of work... Women’s situation is thus increasingly split between, on the one hand, the diminishing but still heavy burden of childbearing and domestic work, and on the other hand, the increasingly primary role in their lives of wage-work – within which they remain, however, disadvantaged.

In Raoling it is unclear whether women in general remain disadvantaged in terms of salary or control over the association. The general director and several department heads are (middle-aged) women, but the base village chief, the heads of the two primary divisions (Economic Cooperation and Public Service), and the heads of the main profit-making and money-related departments (Farm Supply, Urban-Rural Interaction, Accounting) are (younger) men. Certainly women have more power in Raoling than anywhere else I have observed in rural China. While celebrating this achievement, however, it is important to note that the particular forms of Raoling’s interventions in gender relations (and in culture and subjectivity in general) tend to reinforce certain aspects of the traditional patriarchal structure (enforced by violence against women), while also promoting the development of new capitalist relations (in both the association and the broader community).

### ***The Rise and Fall of a Mass Movement***

The documentary film discussed above gives the impression that Raoling has hundreds or thousands of members who regularly active in large meetings, dancing, and other activities. This impression was corroborated by the official figures tabulated above, some of which were told to me by Tang before I first visited Raoling, such as the number of approximately 4,000 households in the “general assembly of association members” (a figure which is also reproduced in almost all the 20 or so academic articles and new reports I read about Raoling). When I visited for a few days in the fall of 2010, and then for a month in 2011, I was thus surprised to find that only about 40 – and later 50-some – people regularly participated in the association in an easily observable sense (other than customers at the farm supply stores, etc.). This was already a larger number than any other peasant organization I had visited (about 20 members attend Wansheng’s weekly meetings; the only team in Liao Flats with more than two households has only five that participate regularly; and the Peppercorn co-op is basically a private enterprise run by one peasant and two urban partners), but it was quite different from the impression given by the film and Raoling’s official numbers. Moreover, most of these regular participants seem to be little more than employees in a conventional sense. As noted above, they attend weekly meetings and lectures, and participate in group activities such as dancing every morning, but similar activities are common among enterprises in China, and most of Raoling’s employees do not own shares or play any role in management (nor do they seem interested in playing such a role). Raoling also maintains regular, long-term commercial and educational/ managerial relations with at least a few hundred (possibly a few thousand) local peasant households, who purchase farm supplies and services from, sell their products to, and receive free training from the association. Again, however, this almost purely commercial relationship is quite different from the impression given by the film, official self-description, and secondary sources.

Eventually I learned that this disconnect partly reflected a major transformation between 2006 and 2008. Another researcher described this as a transition from “social movement” to “formal institution,” with the early 2000s characterized by “mass mobilization,” and the past few years marked by restructuring into a more tightly knit organization with a few leaders, a few dozen employees, and more limited relations with the other few hundred or thousand “members.” After further research,<sup>203</sup> I would divide Raoling’s history into three periods:

- (1) 1996-2000: Conventional farm supply business (with free lectures on agro-chemical use starting in 1998)
- (2) 2001-2007: Mass mobilization, further divisible into:
  - a. Collective dancing and competitions (2001-2006)
  - b. Debates and free, collective adult education (2002-2006)
  - c. Public goods provision (mass voluntary sweeping and trash pick-up, alley-paving, ditch-digging and paving, 2003-2004)
  - d. Mass meetings leading to establishment and registration (with the local government) as “Raoling Peasant Association,” election of its leaders, and election of Tang’s husband Mr. Qi as head of the village committee of Raoling’s base village (2004-2005)
  - e. Cooperative enterprises (2004-2006)
  - f. Establishment of school (beginning of short-lived collaboration with liberal NGO/ microfinance company, 2006)
  - g. Collapse of most cooperative enterprises, complaints by villagers to local government, revocation of Raoling’s registration (2006-2007)

(3) 2008-present: Re-registration as 28 co-ops (now 22 – 5 split with the association; the remainder are the nominal components of the Organic Co-op); restructuring and development as a more conventional conglomerate of enterprises.

For the purpose of this dissertation's focus on "values," we could frame this history in terms of the emergence, through mass mobilization starting in 2001 and especially 2003, of a new, more participatory, inclusive, and egalitarian ethos less compatible with the capitalist value-form, which tended to contradict the commercial form of cooperative enterprise through which it eventually tried to achieve further development, under conditions where long-term, large-scale participation would require an increase in participants' monetary income.

As suggested above, Tang's 1998 decision to provide free lectures on agro-chemical use marked a turn from simple self-interest to a particular kind of altruistic or community-oriented ethos that I call "quasi-neoliberal" or "postsocialist cooperative governmentality," focused on turning "irrational" and disorderly peasants into entrepreneurial and orderly citizens, and on reforming existing and emerging hierarchies in order to stem the outflow of young people and mitigate conflict. While this differs from simple self-interest, it is also basically consistent with the capitalist regime of value, and indeed supplements the development of capitalist relations within the countryside.

The collective dancing, competitions, debates and adult education projects that emerged from the agro-chemical lectures in 2001 marked a second turn. On the level of ethos or governmentality, this was merely a development of that described above, and its detachment from the commercial logic of immediate self-interest. On the level of social form or practice,

however, the dancing unleashed a process of mass mobilization that eventually generated a different ethos, characterized by fun (not merely as a means of self-development, but for its own sake), egalitarian inclusiveness, and the somewhat “irrational” sense that enthusiastic participation in large-scale collective projects might lead to both personal enrichment and broad transformations in the community as a whole.

The latter two aspects seem to reflect some degree of influence by China’s Maoist legacy, due to the combination of this area’s relatively positive experience with socialist-era institutions (in contrast with Wansheng, for example)<sup>204</sup> and Raoling leaders’ 2004 visit to Nanjie (a recollectivized village in Henan that many leftists regard as China’s “last bastion of socialism,” although it is even less different than Raoling from a conventional conglomerate of capitalist enterprises).<sup>205</sup> This visit to Nanjie directly inspired Raoling’s large-scale collective farm project in 2005, and probably contributed to the development of Raoling’s new, more participatory ethos at the time. In addition to the collective farm (to which hundreds of peasants leased or traded land for shares in the collective of over 50 hectares) and the Handicraft Co-op (Raoling’s only cooperative enterprise that survived the 2007-2008 restructuring), this period also saw the formation of two other cooperative enterprises: a paint factory and a bread-steaming facility (*zheng mo fang*).

All of these emerged from the mass mobilization that started with dancing and mutual adult education in 2001, and then moved on to voluntarily picking up trash, paving alleys, and digging ditches in 2003-2004. Like most of the Mao-era mobilizations, these 2001-2004 projects produced public goods to be used by the participants, rather than producing commodities to be sold, so they could afford to be relatively spontaneous, chaotic, and democratic.<sup>206</sup>

Understandably, many participants hoped to channel that energy into projects that would yield

monetary income, but three of the four main cooperative enterprises failed within one to two years, largely because of poor management decisions related to participants' lack of relevant experience and commercial knowledge.

Both the paint factory and the bread steamery failed to secure appropriate marketing channels to regularly sell enough products to offset their costs and pay off their loans. According to the film and personal communication with Tang, she played a key role in attempting to make the paint factory more democratic and inclusive – contra some of its initiators (mainly returned migrant men), who had initially planned it as more like a conventional enterprise. Tang insisted that shares be cheap enough for more villagers to purchase, that all employees be shareholders, and that all shareholders have an equal say in management. This intervention (like her earlier effort to convert the farm supply business into a co-op) shows that, at the time, Tang actually hoped to promote a cooperative form of enterprise more in line with NRR ideals, but this form seems to have been a major reason for the factory's failure.

With the collective farm, on the other hand, the main problem seems to have been the unreasonable expectations of many participants, coupled with a growing crisis of confidence in both Raoling's leaders in particular and the cooperative form in general by 2006. The farm combined fruit trees intercropped with other plants such as cotton. The trees would have taken several years to begin bearing fruit, so the farmers should have known that they would not make a profit the first year, but many were disappointed by the small return from the other crops, which was significantly less than they would have earned otherwise. According to Tang and another core member, this disappointment was exacerbated by a rival faction of villagers in Raoling's base village, led by the Communist Party members whom Tang's husband Mr. Qi and his allies had replaced in the village committee election of 2004 (an election and rivalry

doubtless influenced by Raoling's mass mobilization and public services since 2001; the village party branch had attempted to maintain their declining power by refusing entry to Mr. Qi or anyone else in the preceding years). These rivals mobilized farmers disappointed by their economic loss in the farm (and perhaps other projects) to petition the local government, which then sent a team to investigate and eventually (in 2007) revoked Raoling's registration as a legal "association." I was unable to obtain detailed information about this investigation or the reasoning behind the revocation, but by that time, all the co-ops except Handicraft had dissolved, with the farm beginning its gradual transition into the present Organic Co-op – basically an agricultural extension service to supplement Raoling's farm supply and marketing (i.e. Urban-Rural Interaction) businesses.

Around the same time, Raoling's other activities also seem to have changed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The alley-paving and ditch-digging were one-off projects, and apparently no similar projects have been attempted since then. The sweeping and trash clean-ups has involved nearly everyone in Raoling's base village (even Qi's rivals in the party branch had felt obliged to help out), whereas now they are limited to Raoling employees as one of their weekly chores (with the addition of household trash pick-up as a specialized service for which villagers pay a small fee). The dancing had also involved hundreds of villagers on a regular basis, with occasional competitions, whereas now it is mainly limited to the mandatory daily regimen of employees, with occasional larger-scale events (such as at New Year). Mutual aid in adult education became decentralized into the independent reading groups, related to Raoling mainly through the sale of magazines. The debates discontinued.

These changes were also related to Raoling's 2006 co-founding (with the liberal NGO) of the Peasant Training School. At first they tried to use the school building in Raoling's base

village to store the computers that the NGO donated, and to organize activities there, but this was during the period of conflict with the village party branch. The latter reported to the township government that Raoling and the NGO were illegally using the public building for private purposes, so Raoling found an abandoned school building in a neighboring township and arranged to rent it (with the NGO initially paying the rent on condition that it could use the space for microfinance training). From then until 2012, Raoling shifted the focus of its activities to the school, at first helping the NGO with its microfinance business, and in 2008, formally splitting with the NGO, reorganizing along the lines described above, and taking advantage of the government's promotion of the new co-op law to re-register as 28 co-ops.

### ***Conclusion***

Raoling thus started as a conventional business (guided mainly by simple self-interest), expanded into funding free lectures on the agro-chemical use (guided mainly by Tang's altruistic desire to help peasants become entrepreneurial and orderly citizens), and those in turn led to dancing, first among a few women who attended the lectures, but eventually involving hundreds of people in Raoling's base village and influencing over a dozen surrounding villages in something like a mass movement. Although this movement was always shaped by its founders' predominant ("quasi-neoliberal") values, as it expanded in number of participants and types of projects, it also gave rise to other (more egalitarian, inclusive, etc.) values or ideals (or perhaps gave further expression to pre-existing elements). Given the capitalist economic context, participants' desires for material betterment pointed naturally to expanding the movement into cooperative enterprise, but the entrepreneurial form seems to have conflicted with the chaotic,



spontaneous energy of the movement and ideals such as democratic management, since many participants lacked the necessary experience and knowledge for running such enterprises. The commercial nature of these projects also gave rise to new conflicts of interest and some participants' suspicion that Raoling leaders were benefiting at their expense. Those conflicts and disappointments were exacerbated by local rivals, whose hostility to Raoling's leaders was doubtless fueled by the movement's popularity and commercial prospects. These contradictions (between alternative values and the logic of the market, along with conflicts of interest among participants and in relation to their rivals) led to the collapse of the mass movement and several of the projects it had spawned, with some reorganizing into more conventional entrepreneurial forms. In doing so, Raoling has developed into one of the largest and most economically successful peasant organizations in China, other than re-collectivized villages and conventional enterprises. Raoling still differs from the latter (although less clearly than before) because of its leaders' continued commitment to certain alternative ideals (as opposed to simple self-interest) – especially the ideals of (1) developing the material and cultural foundations for a modern but relatively self-sufficient community of peasants, and (2) reversing the flow of educated young people with high *suzhi* from the city back to the countryside.

## Chapter 6: Liao Flats, Sichuan

This chapter examines an NGO-initiated project in Liao Flats, Sichuan, which centers on the cooperative direct marketing of organic vegetables, grown individually by nine peasant households, to about 200 (mainly middle-class) households in the major city of Chengdu. After outlining the structure and history of this project, I turn to the experiences of several participants, focusing on how their narratives reflect the tension between economic pressures and alternative values (especially as informed by certain transnational currents of Buddhism and sustainable living that overlap with NRR), and how this tension has contributed to several splits among and within the cooperating peasant households. I also look at how the remnants of this project relate to a new state development project to relocate peasants into new housing complexes, which I interpret as an effort to increase peasants' integration into the monetary economy to stave off capital's crisis of overaccumulation, and a form of capitalist "accumulation by dispossession." I argue that both the relocation project and the conflicts among erstwhile cooperators illustrate the limitations of alternative values in the face of state-backed economic pressures, especially when those values emphasize personal lifestyle choices (including the choices of both peasants and consumers) over the development of community solidarity or resistance to external threats, and when the NRR project's objective means are narrowly focused on market-oriented activity – even if subjectively conceived as aiming to foster sustainable living in a more holistic and communitarian sense.

### *Liao Flats on the Chengdu Plain*

Liao Flats is an administrative village on the Chengdu Plain, a particularly fertile area

long known as the breadbasket of western China's vast province of Sichuan (population over 80 million, 110 million including Chongqing, which split administratively in 1997). This fertility stems from the combination of the Chengdu Plain's flatness in an otherwise mountainous province, its temperate climate, and especially the ancient Dujiangyan water conservancy system, which reliably irrigates and fertilizes the plain with meltwater from the Min Mountains to the north, while also providing flood control.

Liao Flats is only about an hour by car from the urban core of Chengdu, Sichuan's provincial capital and probably the most important city in western China (along with Chongqing, which is more important as a shipping hub). Compared with my other three sites, Liao Flats is by far the closest to a city this populous, wealthy, and cosmopolitan. Chengdu's urban core has over 7 million people, making it the seventh most populous city in mainland China (and the fourth most populous sub-provincial city). For Chengdu Prefecture as a whole (population 14 million, including four cities, four suburban districts, and six rural counties in addition to Chengdu's urban core), urban per capita disposable income was 27,000 yuan in 2012 (compared to 24,600 for China as whole), and rural per capita net income was 11,300 yuan, compared to 7,900 for China as a whole, just over 8,000 in Raoling's municipality, and under 6,000 in Wansheng's prefecture. Chengdu's GDP, moreover, was the third highest among China's sub-provincial cities in 2012, at 800 billion yuan.<sup>207</sup> The township to which Liao Flats belongs is fairly typical of rural Chengdu, with a per capita net income just over 11,000 in 2011.

The combination of Liao Flats' proximity to a major city and its favorable agricultural environment were major factors shaping both the design of this NRR-affiliated project and its unintended consequences. In particular, these factors made feasible the project's focus on producing a narrow range of perishable goods for a niche market of enlightened consumers.

However, both these factors also played a role in limiting the project's development, since there were more appealing options available to even those young peasants who liked the idea of living in the village: they could easily commute to relatively high-paying jobs nearby, or they could do less labor-intensive and more profitable forms of agriculture, such as ornamental horticulture for Chengdu's thriving urban landscaping market (fueled by both state projects for urban beautification and the – now apparently deflating – real estate bubble). In fact, many villagers did both, since horticulture – particularly arboriculture – is not very time-consuming and can be done on one's days off, whereas those villagers who became most committed to the organic vegetable project seem to work more for less money, often staying up past midnight and getting up before dawn in order to prepare vegetables for delivery. The project thus appealed mainly to those anomalous villagers who happened to embrace the alternative ideology of sustainable living.

Ornamental horticulture seems to be the most common source of income other than wages earned outside of Liao Flats. Nearly half of the village's 200 hectares of farmland was used for this purpose in 2010, mainly by households contracting with one of 10 landscaping companies. Liao Flats also has a few food processing plants and recollectivized land where farmers rent plots for intensive mushroom cultivation. Most of the remaining land is used for household production of rice, rapeseed, and vegetables – conventionally monocropped with large inputs of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides. All this semi-industrialized agriculture and processing plays a major role in the pollution of Chengdu's water supply, with 60% of contaminants attributed to “rural non-point source pollution” consisting chiefly of agricultural runoff.<sup>208</sup> It was for this reason that, in 2005, a local environmental NGO selected Liao Flats as a pilot site for sustainable agriculture and waste treatment.

### ***Overview of the Liao Flats Project***

The local NGO initiated this project in collaboration with an (expensive) alternative primary school in Chengdu's urban core and a Hong Kong-based NGO, both defined by similar ideologies of "reconnecting humans with each other and with nature."<sup>209</sup> They started in 2005 by organizing lectures about sustainability in the village, and installing three-part agroecological waste-treatment facilities in villagers' courtyards (urine-diverting latrines, methane harvesters, and constructed wetlands). In 2006, five households volunteered to try growing vegetables without chemicals on small plots of their own land. The first farming experiment went well, so three more households joined them for the second season, and three more for the third, bringing the total to 11 households in 2007. At this time the NGOs started promoting the idea of forming a co-op and marketing products via relatively personalized relationships with urban consumers. After some lectures, discussions, and a visit to a nearby co-op, the 11 households set up their own co-op. The NGOs helped the co-op begin developing a network of urban consumers, starting with their friends and relatives and the primary school, which also started sending students to experience life in the village.

The process of setting up and developing the co-op was rocky from the beginning. Informants place most of the blame on the negative influence of the NRR "volunteer" put in charge of this project at the time, coupled with the farmers' own lack of experience with cooperative enterprise. The "volunteer" (*zhiyuanzhe* – presumably he was paid as NGO employee), a young man named Xiao Wu, had recently completed an internship with the Liang Shuming Center, and he claimed to have aided in the successful organization of three peasant co-ops, so the NGOs chose him for this project. According to one of the Liao Flats farmers named

Mr. Ding, in the van on the way back from the visit to a nearby co-op, Xiao Wu and other NGO personnel informally proposed that a farmer named Mr. Fu act as director of the co-op on the grounds that he had the most education (high school) and the most experience outside the village. Mr. Ding did not feel comfortable speaking up against this decision at the time, but he thought it was a bad idea, both because such positions should have been chosen democratically by the members, and because Mr. Fu's education and experience as a migrant worker seemed less relevant to running a co-op than experience with farming and marketing, of which he had less than several of the other farmers (including Mr. Ding). Although the idea was mentioned of meeting to democratically determine the co-op's leaders, structure, and guidelines, such a meeting never took place, and Xiao Wu proceeded to act as if Mr. Fu were the director and himself the vice-director and/or bookkeeper. The two of them collected a batch of vegetables, drove them (using a van temporarily provided by one of the NGOs) into the city and sold them (some to NGO contacts, the remainder to conventional wholesalers, who paid only the price for non-organic produce). When the other farmers asked about the money, Xiao Wu simply said it was "not yet time" (*hai meiyou dao shihou*) to calculate the dividends, without ever clarifying when that time would arrive or how the dividends would be calculated. This happened twice more over the next few weeks, after which Xiao Wu organized an event for urban consumers to come to Liao Flats, have lunch in the farmers' homes, and pick vegetables to purchase. Xiao Wu insisted that instead of letting customers buy directly from the farmers, the farmers should pool their vegetables in a courtyard that the NGOs had rented, and the customers would pay Xiao Wu, who would then divide the money among the farmers. This angered most of the farmers, because of both the authoritarian way in which Xiao Wu attempted to impose this rule and their suspicion that he would embezzle. A few of the farmers defended Xiao Wu, and a quarrel resulted in the

dissolution of the co-op, after just two months since its formation. The NGO then fired Xiao Wu, and replaced him with a young woman named Yan, who was originally from elsewhere in rural Sichuan and thus better able to communicate with the Liao Flats farmers.

Six of the farming households gave up entirely on the project (most returning to jobs in Chengdu or other cities), leaving five to continue ecological farming without the co-op. With input from Yan, these five households worked out an informal arrangement for coordinating the sale and delivery of their vegetables (and eventually other products) to urban consumers. At this point Peng Linlin, a younger and more highly educated member of one of these five households, came home from working in a textile factory on the coast, learned to drive, and bought a van for delivery. A single mother in her 30s with a vocational high school education, Linlin became the driver and also the main coordinator, bookkeeper, and unofficial spokesperson for the group. Later her older brother, Peng Wei, also quit his urban job, moved back to the Peng family compound in Liao Flats, and took over Linlin's position, after which Linlin focused on running their family's farm. A conflict (both personal and economic) among the five families (mainly between the Pengs and the Dings) eventually led to a second split, resulting in two competing "delivery teams" of two and three households, respectively. Four more households eventually joined the Pengs' team, bringing their membership to seven, until the Ais also split to sell their products individually. (For convenience, I refer to the Ais' enterprise as a third "team.") Liao Flats thus has nine households in three teams farming "ecologically" (without chemicals, but without the costly certification required to use the term "organic") and selling their products to 200-some households, mostly in Chengdu's urban core. In addition to vegetables, some of the households also sell rice, oil, and meat directly to customers who come to the village.

Yet a fourth split was that of Linlin from both her family and their team. In the summer

of 2012 she began renting land from a nearby village and establishing her own experimental Buddhist farm with help from a few volunteers and interns funded by the Hong Kong NGO and a Chongqing NGO oriented toward sustainable living.

The Pengs are one of three families (along with the Dings and the Ais) that have completely reoriented their household economies around this project, and the only one that rents extra land<sup>210</sup> and hires workers – usually five, in addition to occasional volunteers and two adult family members who regularly perform farm work. They also lease small plots to about 40 urban families and two companies for weekend gardening. Many of these families also pay for lunch cooked by the Pengs during their visits, and some pay to spend the night, so the farm comes close to resembling a *nongjiale* (a popular model of agro-tourist resort that also originated on the Chengdu Plain<sup>211</sup>), although the Pengs dislike the vulgar commercial connotation of that term and insist that what they are doing is quite different. In the spring of 2011, the Pengs spent about 100,000 yuan building a new complex with a large, modern kitchen and dining area, two more toilets with showers, and several dormitory-style bedrooms to lodge their many frequent guests for a small fee (or in exchange for labor, in the case of interns and volunteers).<sup>212</sup> During my subsequent visits through summer 2012, the complex was always inhabited by at least two other guests or interns.

### ***Competition?***

“I don’t regard Zhang Jie as a competitor,” Linlin responded defiantly, referring to a larger-scale organic farmer in the same prefecture, who had likewise embraced the label and marketing strategy of “community-supported agriculture.”<sup>213</sup> “We have completely different



goals. He's just trying to sell commodities. What we're after is a way of life. Even if no one bought our vegetables, we'd still choose to live this way."

My well-intentioned question had been inspired by the owner of a Buddhist restaurant in Chengdu, who had hosted a short-lived farmers market to facilitate interaction between urbanites and the ecological farmers of Liao Flats. The restaurant owner had told me that the market ended after a few efforts, mainly because more commercially-savvy entrepreneurs such as Zhang Jie tended to seduce customers with their cheaper prices and broader selection of products. Although the market was intended primarily for the Liao Flats collective, attaining authorization from the municipal authorities was complicated and costly, and without that, the organizers had no way to exclude competitors. "We were trying to do something different from merely selling products," said the urbane owner in her 30s. "But we live in a consumerist society; it's hard to go against the mainstream."

Rather than questioning who is right, the more interesting point is Linlin's rejection of the very logic of competition. She did not use this occasion to point out (as Yan had done on another occasion) that the two parties catered to different types of consumers (the Liao Flats collective to socially-conscious middle-income consumers, and Zhang Jie to upper-income consumers concerned mainly about the food safety of their children). Instead Linlin flips the script, setting the Liao Flats project outside of commercial logic altogether: selling commodities, she argues, is only supplementary to their main goal – the cultivation of a more sustainable "way of life." Her ideal could thus be considered a form of "solidarity economy," since the profit motive is secondary to ethical concerns, or of "peasant economy," with commerce supplementary to subsistence.

Most members of the Liao Flats collective, however, did not share Linlin's "idealism,"

leaning more toward what they simply called the “economic” aspects of the project. Indeed, economic disputes led to four splits in the collective, including the defection of Linlin – hitherto the primary public face of the collective – due largely to disagreement with her brother about their farm’s degree of commercialization (such as whether the interests of customers should take precedence over those of farmers and the promotion of sustainable practices). These personal tensions give expression to what I repeatedly observed to be a central tension throughout NRR as a whole: between economic forces such as market pressures on the one hand, and the goal of doing something nobler than mere “business,” on the other.

### ***NGO Intervention: Promoting Cooperation or “Separatism”?***

In August 2011, business seemed to be doing fairly well for the two teams operating at the time, but tensions remained – between the teams, between Linlin and her family, and between some of the farmers and the NGOs. These three lines of tension are related, since some of the farmers feel that the NGOs played a role in the conflicts between and within households. At one point Linlin’s elderly father surprised me by invoking the language of international politics to describe the NGOs’ role, focusing on Yan in particular. When I asked for an example of why Mr. Peng had mixed feelings about the NGOs, he said:

For example, [Yan] is encouraging Linlin to split from the family... No matter how discordant a family is, it should stick together. Why did Russia crack down on Chechnya? Isn’t this a case of promoting separatism? ... [Yan also] bears a certain responsibility for [the initial split into two delivery teams]... She created the opportunity. Splitting seems like a small thing, but it’s caused serious problems for both parties.... Are [these NGOs]

coming to help us or to manipulate us? Aren't they manipulating our family? So of course we have mixed feelings about them... Everyone in [the village] feels this way, even if they don't say it.<sup>214</sup>

Among the farmers of Liao Flats, Mr. Peng was probably the most vocal critic of the NGOs on multiple occasions. Once, for example, he voiced suspicion that the NGOs were embezzling funds donated by international foundations, which should have gone to the farmers, but other farmers dismissed such claims. I find the above claim (that the NGOs were “promoting separatism”) more interesting, however, since the Dings *also* felt that the NGOs facilitated the split – although each side claimed the NGOs had favored their rivals. Relevant NGO personnel such as Yan, on the other hand, told me they had counseled both sides against the split, and likewise with regard to Linlin. In both cases, Mr. Peng's claim that the NGOs “created the opportunity” for “separatism” referred primarily to the *economic* opportunities that the NGOs helped provide. The split into two teams stemmed partly from the Ding family's perception that the Pengs were taking advantage of their plurality of land, labor, and capital (namely the delivery vehicle, and the social capital derived from the Pengs' Buddhism and higher level of education) to benefit at the expense of the Dings – the only other household whose livelihood had become entirely dependent on the sale of ecological farm products at the time. When the Dings' discontent erupted, their decision to split was influenced by the hope that the NGOs would help them to retain some of the old customers and find new ones, as in fact they did.

Regarding Linlin, the NGOs' role is even clearer – although technically it is hard to pin down which activities are supported by the NGOs and which are the independent initiatives of

Yan and others involved in Chengdu's informal "sustainable living" (*kechixu shenghuo*) network (focused on promoting environmentally-friendly lifestyle, mainly among urbanites, including urban farming, soap-making, and bulk buying traditional products from nearby peasants). Through years of interaction with people in China's overlapping movements for NRR, sustainable living, and socially engaged Buddhism (discussed below), facilitated by these and other NGOs, Linlin developed an interest and skill in growing and processing a variety of herbs, many of which are new to China and being promoted for medicinal, culinary, and agricultural uses. Her family dismissed this interest as a waste of time, and this conflict bled into the aforementioned tension over how the household and collective enterprises should be run, along with the question of Linlin's proper position in the family as a sister, daughter, and mother. As in the previous chapter, I find the Deleuzian concept of "deterritorialization" helpful here for describing the role played by these external forces such as NGOs and commercial opportunities: whereas patriarchal tradition had "coded" Linlin in relation to her family, these external forces weakened those familial bonds and provided opportunities for new external relations and alternative self-definition. Linlin's brother Peng Wei reacted by attempting to "put her back in her place," telling her, "Don't forget: in this family I'm the eldest son (*laoda*). There's no way around it (*mei banfa*), this was arranged by Fate (*lao tian*)."<sup>215</sup> This familial reactivity took material form when Peng Wei interfered in Linlin's herb business – secretly telling customers that the price had doubled, so they would cancel, and deleting orders from their shared phone and email. As with the split into two teams, outsiders such as Yan counseled the Pengs to stay together, and yet the same outsiders continued to facilitate the development of opportunities for Linlin to continue deterritorializing from patriarchal tradition, and reterritorializing (becoming re-coded or finding a place) into China's emerging herbal market and "Buddhist economy" as an

artisanal producer and pioneer of Buddhist agriculture.

### *Socially Engaged Buddhism*

I borrow this term from the transnational movement most closely associated the Vietnamese philosopher Thich Nhat Hanh and his followers' engagement with anti-war and social justice activism, but also sometimes associated more broadly with alternative development projects influenced by ideas such as "Buddhist economics" and "Buddhist agriculture." Among Chinese Buddhists involved in NRR and sustainable-living advocacy, I have not encountered the term "socially engaged Buddhism." Some identify with Thich, but more importantly, I use this term in order to highlight their commonality with this transnational movement, and to clarify their difference from the tendency toward quietism or inward, personalized disengagement normally associated with Buddhism – a tendency which persists in tension with the idea of social engagement even among some of these NRR-affiliated practitioners, as we will see below. Instead, these Chinese Buddhists simply speak of "Buddhism," or in specific contexts, "Buddhist economics" or "Buddhist agriculture."

### *Buddhist Economics*

This term was coined by British economist E. F. Schumacher in an essay republished in his collection *Small is Beautiful* (1973). That book's translation has been popular among Chinese sustainable living advocates, including some of those involved in the Liao Flats project, who gave a copy to the Pengs that at least Linlin and her apprentice Zining have read. Schumacher used the term "Buddhist economics" somewhat loosely, in relation to early post-independence Burma (where he briefly served as economic consultant for the first Prime Minister, U Nu). The

term was then adopted and developed as a framework for alternative development work, especially by certain Thai Buddhists in the 1990s. It seems likely that Thai elaboration of this concept entered mainland China via Hong Kong NGO personnel, since many of them are also Buddhists, and some worked on development projects in Thailand (where they also discovered the concept of “community-supported agriculture,” which they then introduced to the mainland via projects such as Liao Flats).

According to Wanna Prayukvong (2005:1174), the Thai notion of Buddhist economics differs from “conventional economics” by seeking “a balanced equilibrium which aims to achieve the satisfaction of achieving quality of life instead of the satisfaction of maximising consumption.” This resonates with elements of NRR discussed in Chapter 2, not only by echoing He Xuefeng’s slogan “low consumption, high well-being,” but also by promoting an ideal of locally “self-reliant and self-sufficient” communities that are guided by “[t]raining to develop the higher morality necessary to conduct one’s actions, speech, and livelihood in a moral and proper way” (Prayukvong 2005:1174).

In state policy and NGO practice, Buddhist economics is intertwined what Robert Dayley (2011:343) calls Thailand’s “agrarian myth,” associated with Buddhist fundamentalism, state discourse of “sufficiency economy,” and NGO discourse of “community culture,” all of which promote visions of “culturally-based, small-scale subsistence farming as the appropriate rural defense to erratic global markets and materialist values.” Dayley’s study of rural communities concludes that this “myth” is “romantic, reactionary,” and “inhibitive of farmer autonomy,” forming an important part of the Yellow Shirt ideology that has (not very successfully) sought to align peasants with elite, mainly urban interests.

In contrast, the Hong Kong and mainland Chinese Buddhists influenced by Buddhist

economics tend to be critical of elite urban interests, and to the limited extent that any of them express clear political orientation, it tends to be toward the “left” (sometimes explicitly identifying “capitalism” as a problem, for example, and identifying with the views of certain “New Left” intellectuals). However, there seem to be significant commonalities between Thailand’s “agrarian myth,” on the one hand, and the overlapping Chinese currents of engaged Buddhism, sustainable living, and NRR, on the other, which point to ambiguities in the left/right dichotomy, and to problems on both sides of it.

### *Hao Guanhui and Buddhist Fair Trade*

I first heard the term “Buddhist economics” from a young mainlander named Hao Guanhui in the summer of 2010, while visiting the small warehouse of Fertile Soil Workshop (*wotu gongfang*), his fair trade organization in Guangzhou. Hao had been one of the first student “rural-support” (*zhinong*) volunteers and founders of the James Yen Institute for Rural Reconstruction in 2003. The institute had been divided into (1) a local co-op of peasants from the village,<sup>216</sup> with support from the institute’s (external) founders; (2) a team for promoting peasant co-ops throughout China (by organizing workshops, doing research, etc.); and (3) a team for experimenting with and promoting organic (“ecological”) farming.<sup>217</sup> Hao had been in the latter team, and after the institute’s closure in 2007 (when the rest of the team founded what would become the Little Donkey Farm in Beijing), Hao and another NRR “volunteer” moved to Guangzhou and eventually founded the Fertile Soil Workshop.

I had first heard of Fertile Soil from Yan, the Chengdu NGO worker, as a model that her bulk-buying club was considering emulating. Fertile Soil purchases various products from peasants (both co-ops and individual households) throughout China (mainly Guangxi and

Guizhou), who used environmentally-friendly, mainly traditional methods to produce goods (e.g. traditional varieties of rice, tea seed powder – used for washing dishes), many of which cannot be purchased through other channels. Fertile Soil then sells those products to a network of mostly regular consumers, including several alternative primary schools throughout Guangdong (both the schools and parents of students).

When I asked Hao how his organization differed from a typical middleman between peasants and urban consumers, he said that Fertile Soil was guided by Buddhist economics. Hao's description was similar to that outlined above. He likened it to the ideal of "fair trade": that "both sides" (*shuangfang*) – in this case, peasants and urban consumers – should benefit, and that the intermediary or "social enterprise" (Fertile Ground) should take only a minimal cut to cover any costs (including small "stipends" for the basic living expenses of intermediary workers). To this, Buddhist economics adds the idea that Buddhist techniques of self-discipline and mindfulness (*nian*) can help the participants to overcome selfishness (*si*) and craving (*yu*), believed to be the cause of antagonism in commercial relations (rather than the inherent structure of such relations).

Hao and Yan seem to have both learned about Buddhist economics from Hong Kong sustainable living advocates whom they met through NGO circles. Apparently this and related ideas resonated with China's resurgence of interest in Buddhism by young people becoming disillusioned with mainstream values and lifestyle. Yan had become a Buddhist in this way in college, after which she travelled around Tibet working odd jobs for several years before returning to Chengdu, when she then became involved in sustainable living advocacy and NRR. Hao, on the other hand, had started with NRR before turning to sustainable living and then Buddhism. Only Linlin had been raised as a Buddhist, but her family's Buddhism – and



especially hers – became both more devout and more socially engaged after the NGO project began and they came into contact with Buddhist NGO workers such as Yan and other Buddhist supporters of the project, including visitors from Hong Kong and other countries such as Malaysia.

### *Buddhist Agriculture*

It was a visitor from Malaysia (introduced by the Hong Kong NGO) who introduced Linlin to the idea of Buddhist agriculture, and later the NGO funded her travel to Malaysia to observe his experiments in developing such an agriculture, which she (and less experimentally, her family) then attempted to develop at home – first on her family’s land in Liao Flats, then on land that she rented from a nearby village, in collaboration with two young apprentices and some occasional volunteers. Buddhist agriculture is a subgenre of “ecological agriculture” (along with traditional Chinese agriculture, modern organic agriculture, “natural” or no-till agriculture, and biodynamic agriculture) characterized by the Buddhist value of minimizing the suffering of all sentient beings, which for some practitioners (including Linlin) includes not only pests but also weeds. Buddhist agriculture thus attempts to create a certain micro-ecosystem (through intercropping certain combinations of plants, including various aromatic herbs, and introducing insect-eating animals such as frogs) that is appropriate to the area’s broader ecosystem and deters the development of certain weeds and pests without killing them (including through bug zappers) or introducing potentially disruptive chemicals (including so-called “organic” chemicals). Combined with these specific techniques is the more general idea of living simply and in accordance with Buddhist precepts, e.g. abstaining from intoxicants, animal products, gambling, or anything that might be considered harmful to oneself or others. Many of the latter are

important aspects of rural social life in China, so the Pengs' Buddhism – especially as developed since the NGO project began – has contributed to their tension with other villagers, while also positively coding them (especially Linlin), serving as cultural capital in relation to a niche of urban consumers and other outside supporters.

### ***Linlin's Idealism vs. Peng Wei's "Realism"***

In the summer of 2011, the prospects for Linlin's independent career seemed precarious – partly due to the continued trouble with her family, as well as the tension between her “idealistic” values and the “economic realities” of capitalism. The day before my conversation with her father quoted above, Linlin had explained her side of the story. Her narrative expressed both dimensions of conflict most clearly in the figure of her older brother, Peng Wei. When I asked why she wanted to rent land elsewhere to start her own farm (instead of developing her nascent herbal business using her own land in Liao Flats, which she had recently fenced off from the Pengs' other land), she began hesitantly (perhaps afraid to worsen the conflict by bringing it back to the surface): “I want to... live more simply (*danchun*)... I don't like the way there are so many people around here...”<sup>218</sup> I asked, “You mean all the customers?” Still somewhat enigmatically, she replied, “At the beginning, this thing” – i.e. the Pengs' Farm and their delivery team – “was done mainly by me and my parents, so a lot of the media reports focused on me. So I want to leave.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because this might... I don't know... Anyway my friends have warned me that this might hurt my brother.”

“How would it hurt your brother?”

Because some things... People warned me, and later when we quarreled, I think it made sense... You know fortune-telling? I don't know who my brother consulted, but he told my friends that my fortune (*ming*) is stronger (*qiang*) than his. So it seems that if I'm at home, I'll have some [negative] effect on him, so... no matter what he does, if I'm at home he won't succeed. And that creates pressure (*yali*) on me... Also, I'm the daughter of the family, so I shouldn't [take a leadership role] in the first place... People would say hurtful things... So for the past couple years I've been thinking about my options. I've looked for jobs, but none of them seem right for me.

“I thought you wanted to rent land and start your own farm.”

I'm not sure, and anyway, that would require money, and I don't want to ask [my parents] for money, so first I need to work.

“What about your own land here?”

I tried that, but [customers started] digging up [my herbs] and planting them on their own plots. They didn't ask me until afterwards, asking “What is this?” Some of the herbs had been acquired from far away, and [the customers] killed them, I can't get them back. So I built that fence around [my land], but my brother scolded me.

“Why?”

He said [the fence] makes it harder for the customers to access their plots, and it looks bad, and he said I'm being divisive of the family (*zai jiali gao fenlie*). So I tore down the [bamboo] door [I had built, but left the fence]. It's depressing (*yumen*); I can't [stay] at home... So now I let my brother take care of the guests, and I keep silent [when I'm] at home... Anyway there are a lot of matters in which I shouldn't intervene, because my ideas are quite different from those of my brother, and if I speak up about it, he gets angry.

“For example?”

For example, my brother thinks that first we need to make money before we can [do anything else]. For example, when it comes to promoting ecological farming, I'm [more concerned with] how to get the people around us to participate more quickly, but my brother [is more concerned with] how to manage [the business]. I'll say, “This is simple, we don't need management. We just need to do some publicity, let customers know about [what we're doing], and organize some simple training for the farmers here, introduce them to the customers, and then let them manage themselves, just like us [i.e. the Pengs' delivery team]. We don't need you to manage [everything for them]...” But he thinks we need a unified brand with unified management... If it were up to me, I would definitely mobilize the other peasants. If they want to cooperate we can cooperate, if not then they can manage themselves. This is a pluralistic society, you can't expect everyone to agree. The important thing is to let them know how to farm ecologically, [how to protect] the

environment we live in... But my brother thinks that a lot of problems can be solved economically. Not only this [the farming project], but also his family, he thinks if he gets rich, then [his ex-wife and child might come back]. But my thinking is, if someone is willing to be with you only because you have money, then why do you want that sort of person?

Here Linlin was referring to Peng Wei's divorce from a woman of urban background, which occurred around the time he decided to quit his well-paying job as a low-level construction manager in order to help his parents with their farm and delivery team. As with Linlin, Peng Wei had at first felt obliged (due to the traditional imperative of filial piety) to help his elderly parents with what Peng Wei and Linlin at first viewed as a strange new obsession with sustainable living, stirred up by the combination of NGO propaganda and a deepening of their parents' Buddhism. At first Linlin had secretly sprayed pesticides on their crops in the night, since she had thought the most important thing was to minimize her parents' workload. Later, after reading Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (as recommended by an NGO worker) and conversing with activists about sustainability and Buddhism, she adopted the cause – even more radically than her parents. Peng Wei had likewise adopted the cause, but as Linlin describes, he ended up taking a different direction in navigating the tensions among the three, somewhat conflicting imperatives of *filial piety*, *ideals of sustainability*, and “*the economic*” (*jingji*).

Peng Wei and other observers said that one factor in the divorce was a conflict of values: that a typical woman of urban background, accustomed to urban living and a moderate income, and trying to get a child into college, would not be willing to give that up in favor of a lower income and less comfortable (*jianku pusu*) lifestyle in the countryside. To this, Linlin's narrative

adds that Peng Wei continued to harbor the hope that, if only the farm could make enough money, his ex-wife would return, and that this desire has clouded his judgment, contributing to his focus on the business side of things at the expense of the (for her more important) goal of spreading sustainable practices among the other peasants and consumers. However, by the summer of 2012, Peng Wei had become engaged to another, moderately well-off urban woman who seemed more accepting of the project's alternative goals, and yet Peng Wei's tension with his sister – embodying the tension between capitalism and alternative ideals – had only deepened. The Ai household had left the delivery team (mainly, Mr. Ai said, because he could produce much more than the Pengs' had allowed him to sell), and the Pengs' team (now with only five main member households, and one that cooperated occasionally) continued to exclude other farmers who wanted to join them and learn their skills.

Linlin's commitment to the promotion of sustainable farming conflicted with economic pressures not only as expressed in her brother's exclusive business model, but even (to a lesser extent) as expressed in the marketing advice of NGO-affiliated sustainable living advocates such as Yan. As mentioned above, advocates such as Yan helped create the opportunity for Linlin (like the Dings and the Ais) to split from the Pengs' team and establish her own enterprise, both by assistance in marketing and by introducing volunteers and helping them apply for stipends from NGOs (as discussed below). One case of this mentioned in the conversations with Linlin and her father quoted above was the "Dinner with Peasant Friends" (*nongyou fanju*) periodically organized by Yan and other "sustainable living" advocates in the city. The purpose of these events was to develop more personalized relationships between farmers and their urban customers (an idea influenced in part by the European idea of "social agriculture," which like the concept of "community-supported agriculture" that has played a major role in the Liao Flats

project, seems to have been introduced to China primarily by the Hong Kong NGO via Thailand). For a few months, Linlin rejected Yan's invitations to these events, fearing the disapproval of her brother and parents, as well as other members of their delivery team:

Because [Yan] supported [the Dings] when they wanted to split from [our] delivery team, now [those who remained in the team] don't participate in [Yan's] activities. I'm the only one [in the team] who participates occasionally [*the Dings and the Ais also participate*], but when I do, [the others in the team] are unhappy, and they quarrel with me... Several times she asked me to go [to the "Dinners with Peasant Friends"] but I said no, since I know [the others] would scold me. But a few weeks ago she told me, "We want to organize a Dinner about your herbs. You can bring samples and show them how to make tea, season food, tell them about your essential oils – the uses of herbs." I said, "Let me think about it." But then I thought: I don't like the idea of showing these people how to pamper themselves (*xiangshou shenghuo*). Instead I wanted to publicize ecological farming [by explaining] the agricultural uses of herbs. As it turned out, though, that time they had the dinner at [a different Buddhist restaurant than usual,] so not many people came, only 30-some. [One of the other organizers] started by talking about health before handing the floor over to me, so I decided to start by talking about the health benefits of herbs. Some of the customers started asking questions, and before I knew it, I had talked for two or three hours without saying anything about agriculture. Four people were so excited that they signed up for vegetable delivery and paid for the first three months right then and there! Someone asked about organic certification, and only then did I finally get a chance to talk about agriculture, biodiversity, and so on. I told them, "If all you want is

a label that says ‘Certified Organic,’ you can buy that at the store. It’s hard for peasants to get certification, and even if [they] get it, it doesn’t necessarily tell you how the food was grown, or who grew it. If you know how hard the peasants work, if you know that when you buy these vegetables you’re supporting the spread of sustainable practices, then you’ll be happy... If a person’s state of mind (*xintai*) is good, if one is willing to do good things (*shan de shiqing*) – from a Buddhist perspective, ‘If you plant melons you get melons, if you plant beans you get beans.’ If the planting is healthful, then your life will be healthy.”<sup>219</sup>

As it turned out, in this case some of the consumers were especially receptive to Linlin’s approach, which could be characterized as “farmers and the environment first, consumers and their immediate desires second.” The occasion for Linlin’s decision to split from the Pengs’ team during my previous visit – in the spring of 2011 – had been her brother’s acquiescence to a customer’s request to rent a plot that Linlin had just painstakingly prepared for her own use. At the time she said that this exemplified not only her brother’s disregard for her labor and opinions, but also his tendency to put the interests of customers before those of farmers or the promotion of sustainable practices. In the quotation above, Linlin describes her small effort to reverse this bias that she perceives even in the well-meaning efforts of urban environmentalists.

Later in the same conversation, however, she praises Yan for generally giving equal weight to the interests of farmers and consumers – an evenhandedness that Linlin attributes to Yan’s own Buddhism. This came up when I asked why Linlin’s father scolded her for attending the dinner. Whereas his statement to me the next day (quoted above) emphasizes how NGO affiliates such as Yan “promote separatism” among cooperating farmers, Linlin’s account also



mentions her father's suspicion that NGO affiliates take advantage of peasants by using them to acquire money (from grants or business) without providing much service in return. Linlin contrasted this suspicion with her own judgment that Yan in particular is not only fair in balancing the interests of farmers and consumers, but also selfless in not taking too large a cut from the transactions she helps arrange (neither of us know whether she takes a cut at all, but we know that she lives very frugally, mainly off a small stipend from an NGO). Linlin said this is a tenet of Buddhist economy (a term she adopted from Yan and Hao Guanhui – who also spent some time in Liao Flats):

Basically it means that if you make any money, don't spend it on yourself. Buddhism has a word, *busi* (selfless); we say that you *busi* the money away. Both [Yan] and Guanhui are pious Buddhists, so they're afraid of karma, including on the economic level, so they don't live luxurious lives... [Yan] is like an intermediary link [in the food chain], but she isn't a businessperson (*shangren*), so she tries to serve the interests of both consumers and peasants. I told her, "When you do this you should be a neutral party – don't favor the peasants and don't favor the consumers; be fair." She asked, "What counts as 'fair'?" So we discussed pricing, and I said that food prices need to cover not only the cost of inputs but also everything that peasants need to spend money on in order to live.<sup>220</sup>

### ***Everything that Peasants Need***

Linlin's comment about pricing implies that, in contemporary China, food prices do not normally include the full value of labor-power. This is partly due to the nature of "peasant economy" (in the Chayanovian sense introduced in Chapter 1): most of the labor is not hired, but

internal to the peasant household enterprise, and much of its reproduction is self-provisioned (by growing their own food, building their own houses on their own land, etc.). Therefore, less of the income from farm sales must be spent on hiring labor-power (or purchasing food, etc., for the household members, who are both owners and workers) than would be the case for a capitalist farm. It is thus worthwhile for peasants to sell their products at low prices that would not be profitable for a capitalist farm. At the same time, when capitalist farms (and other enterprises) can hire peasants with family members nearby who grow most of their own food, etc., this also means that peasants may be willing to work for wages lower than the full cost of their own reproduction. Perhaps we could say that the cost of their labor-power (as semi-proletarian peasants) is lower than that of full proletarians because they have to spend less money on food, etc. On the other hand, and for the same reason (that peasant households can self-provision more of their own reproduction), peasants may be less desperate for money than full proletarians, and so may be less inclined to work for lower wages (one common explanation of the “labor shortage” that capitalists in China’s export-processing sector have complained about periodically since the Chinese state began its relatively pro-peasant policies in the early 2000s).<sup>221</sup>

In any case, it does seem likely that China’s food prices tend not to include the full value of labor-power – whether the food is produced by a peasant household or a capitalist farm. In 2011, the Pengs’ farm (occupying the grey area between peasant and capitalist production, but tending more toward the latter now) regularly employed 4 female farmhands at 35 yuan per day plus lunch. Before Linlin quit, she was receiving 1,000 yuan per month, which comes to about the same as the farmhands’ wages. (Her parents, who kept the books, did not allot wages to themselves, and Linlin did not know how much her brothers made; one had told me that family members did not receive wages.) As a family member and therefore co-owner, she could also

freely consume the household/enterprise's food, lodging, electricity, transportation, etc., whereas the farmhands had to acquire these by a combination of spending their wages and self-provisioning with the help of other family members (three of them lived in nearby villages, where they grew their own food, etc., and one lived with her son's family in a nearby town, where he worked to pay for many of her expenses).

However, this explains only why conventional food prices are lower than they might be if they included the full value of labor-power (basically because Chinese peasants have access to land and local networks of reciprocity, which they use to self-provision much of their own reproduction and thus subsidize the price of food for urban consumers and middlemen).<sup>222</sup> Linlin's comment, on the other hand, implies that peasants are not content with this situation – that, although they may be able to self-provision more than full proletarians, they also have needs or desires that require more money to be fulfilled. This is also one of the main factors driving peasants to become wage-laborers far from home (in addition to the ideological factors emphasized by anthropologists such as Pun [2005] and Yan [2008], and the general decline of social cohesion and public services in the countryside relative to the city, emphasized by NRR advocates such as He Xuefeng). As suggested by Jingjing's narrative in Chapter 4, and by the relative success of Raoling's attraction of young people back to the countryside described in Chapter 5, many peasants would prefer to stay in or return to their rural birthplaces if only they could fulfill more of their needs and desires beyond mere survival. Among those needs and desires, the two of most concern to Chinese peasants in general are health care and education. For example, when I asked Linlin about her comment at the start of this chapter (that she would continue to “live this way” even if no one bought her vegetables), she qualified that by saying, “If it weren't for [my teenage son's] school, his tuition and so on, I would have very little need

for money.”

### ***Linlin’s Apprentices and Their New Project***

It was this need to finance her son’s education, along with the need to raise capital for starting her new farm (since Linlin did not want to borrow money from her family), that drove her back out to look for work shortly after this conversation in the summer of 2011. Sales from the small amount of vegetables, herbs, and essential oils she produced on her 2 *mu* of land were not sufficient to cover these expenses, so she decided to take advantage of her driver’s license to drive a van for a nearby nursing home. By the time I returned in the summer of 2012, she had saved up enough money to rent land in a nearby village, which had pushed its residents off the land to become a “Modern Organic Vegetable Farming Zone.”<sup>223</sup> As with other such new “agricultural production zones” (*nongye shengchan jidi* – literally “bases”) throughout China, this village rents plots to companies including Wal-Mart and a local food company. The latter had been losing money on this farm, and so was looking for subletters. Linlin took advantage of this opportunity to rent 20 *mu* of certified organic land (meaning that no one in the area had used agro-chemicals for at least three years) for a relatively low price, so she quit her job at the nursing home and invited her “apprentices” back to help her start the farm.

One of these apprentices was a young woman from elsewhere in rural Sichuan named Zining, who could be considered more “radical” than Linlin in her rejection of even the mainstream value of formal schooling, in favor of sustainable living and (more recently) engaged Buddhism. At age 17, she had run across an article, in a popular magazine, about the NRR-affiliated Little Donkey Farm (founded by former Yen Institute members, as mentioned above) and its model of “community-supported agriculture.” This had resonated with her nostalgia for

her rural childhood (she had moved to a small city for secondary school), and her disillusionment with urban life and the rat race she had observed among her classmates in preparation for the college entrance exam, as well as in her parents' efforts to make money through business (they ran a barbershop). She looked online for nearby alternative farming projects, discovered Liao Flats, and went there to apprentice with the Pengs over the summer of 2010. When the school year began, she dropped out of her final year in order to continue her apprenticeship. At first the Pengs insisted that Zining return to her high school, but finally they caved in when Zining agreed to prepare for the college entrance exam and return home to take it in the spring. She did that, but only to appease the Pengs and her parents, telling me that even if she received high scores, she did not want to attend college.

Also during that year, she visited the Little Donkey Farm and met other eco-farming advocates in Beijing (accepting the invitation of the editor of an environmentalist magazine, who had met Zining in Liao Flats and paid for her airfare out of his own pocket). After taking the exam in the early summer, she went to Chongqing to intern at an NRR-affiliated farm there for a few weeks, before returning to her village and attempting to farm on her family's land. Normally her grandfather used that land, and at first he did not approve of her project (apparently because he thought she should be in the city working or studying, and because he found it regressive to abandon the use of agro-chemicals; she did not help matters by secretly disposing of his chemicals). Eventually she gained his approval, but not that of her parents, who insisted that she go out to work in the city, if she was not going to attend college. At first she conceded, taking a job at a Buddhist restaurant in Chengdu at the same time that Linlin's conflict with her family was escalating and she was also looking for a job.

Zining had become interested in Buddhism while apprenticing with the Pengs, but when I

interviewed her at the restaurant in late August of 2011, she still did not identify as a Buddhist. In the coming months she interacted with Yan and other urban engaged Buddhist in the sustainable living network more regularly, participating in projects with them such as attempting to start an urban farm. Eventually she became ordained (*guiyi*) as a Buddhist, quit her job at the restaurant, and went back home to resume her farming project. The project did not progress very smoothly, mainly due to lack of resources (she was attempting to do it by herself, with only some assistance by her grandfather), but during a brief retreat at her county's Buddhist temple, she met a young man with similar interests, from a nearby village. In the summer of 2012, she brought him to Liao Flats, where the two of them teamed up with two other volunteers in helping Linlin to start her new farm.

### ***“Building a New Rural Community”***

A few days after returning to China in July 2012, in Beijing I ran into one of the founders of the Little Donkey Farm, who had recently split to start another CSA (“community-supported agriculture” project), this time based on the Liao Flats model of peasants farming their own land. Although she had visited Liao Flats only once, she especially valued it as China's first peasant-run CSA and hoped to promote that model throughout China through her own work. When she saw me, one of the first sentences out of her mouth was “Did you hear the news about Liao Flats? It's being demolished!” I asked for details but she had heard only second hand. Later I sent a QQ message to Zining about it (my only contact in Liao Flats who is always online via cellphone), and she said “Yes, it's according to the principle of peasant willingness (*nongmin ziyuan*), they aren't going to give up [*haishi jianchizhe de*].”

“Who isn't going to give up what?” I asked.

“The Pengs and some of the other peasants. They aren’t going to move... It’s concentration of housing, the [farm] land isn’t being taken. But they think this is just a ploy (*jiaxiang*), that eventually the [farm] land will be taken as well.”

“Is anyone preparing to resist?”

“Aiya, Matt, you’re like the struggle faction (*douzhengpai*), how could there be so much resistance? Everyone is *choosing how to live their own lives* (*xuanze ruhe guo ziji de shenghuo*), their refusal to move is also a choice, the government is just giving the peasants another option, that’s all.”

“Well in that case there’s no problem then. I heard they were being forced to move.”

“Well I’m not really sure myself, you should come and investigate.”<sup>224</sup>

### *Idealism vs. Sly Expropriation?*

The subtext for Zining’s reaction to my question about resistance was two-fold: on the one hand, in the past she had astutely noticed my tendency to focus on conflicts of interest during conversations, especially when asked for my opinion, and even more so when asked what I knew about relevant issues in other countries.<sup>225</sup> Secondly, Zining’s exploration of Buddhism over the past year seems to have involved an inward and pacifistic turn in her ideas about how to address the world’s problems.

When I made it to Liao Flats a month later, Zining gave me some Buddhist relics (*shelizi*) that had been given to her by a teacher under which she had been studying (through the introduction of Yan and her circle). Zining asked what was the use of my academic research and writing, and I told her (as I had told her and the others before) that I thought what they were doing was important and resonated with what people in other countries were doing – trying to

create alternative, more sustainable ways of living – and I hoped that my writing would help more people to learn from each other’s experiments. She replied that she had decided it was more important to cultivate oneself (*ziwo xiuyang*), and to live properly. The next day she elaborated on this turn to a mutual friend by explaining the contrast between the Buddhist concepts of *yuan* (缘) and *yin* (因). Conventionally *yuan* is translated as “fate” with respect to relationships among beings (Carl Jung interpreted it as a form of “synchronicity”), whereas *yin* is translated as “cause” based on one’s decisions in the karmic pair *yin-guo* (“cause” and “effect”). For Zining however (apparently drawing on her particular school of Tibetan Buddhism), *yuan* and *yin* can be contrasted as concerned with the *social* vs. the *individual*, or the *external* vs. the *internal*. She said that in the past she had focused on *yuan* by, for example, rebelling against her parents and the mainstream, unsustainable and immoral values and social system they represented, and by networking among environmentalists and trying to promote moral, sustainable living among the broader population. In the past few months she had decided that it was more important to turn away from such external, social concerns and instead focus on *yin*, which she understand as self-cultivation through meditation, proper living, and appropriately cultivating the soil.

I thus interpret Zining’s jab against my focus on “struggle” and “resistance” as at least partly inspired by this inward turn – a turn that is not unique to her, but which exemplifies a widespread tendency among sustainability and NRR advocates – especially but not only those most influenced by Buddhism, such as Linlin in her way of dealing with the contradiction between her ideals and “economic” concerns, and with her family and their delivery team. Such problems are not seen as objective contradictions of interest or power, but as a subjective issue of having the right values, and an individual issue of making the right choices about how to live. As



with the academic NRR discourse of values discussed in Chapter 2, then, this tendency is “idealist” in both senses: *lixiangzhuyi* – focused on subjective ideals about a preferable way of life, rather than objective forces or structures; and *weixinzhuyi* – non-materialist, implying that the world is primarily shaped by ideas rather than vice versa.

Zining’s “idealism” could thus be seen as having colored her interpretation of the local state’s housing-concentration project, and the Pengs’ refusal to move, as not a matter of “struggle” over conflicting interests, but of various self-responsible subjects simply “choosing how to live their own lives” according to different values, and of the government benevolently “giving the peasants another option.” Zining’s brief comments on QQ had already suggested otherwise, that the Pengs suspected the government’s relatively light-handed approach to the project was “just a ploy” to eventually take the villagers’ farm land as well. When I got to the village a month later, the Pengs and a few other villagers were still uncertain about the government’s motives, but the willingness of most (reportedly over 90%<sup>226</sup>) of villagers to cooperate with the project meant that resistance would have been difficult, and in any case would not have made sense at that point (since all but one of those households who refused to move were not yet being forced to move). This arrangement showed how “sly” (*jiaohua*) the government had become, according to one villager.<sup>227</sup>

### *Concentrating What Benefits from Concentration*

According to several township and village officials and planners involved in the housing-concentration project, this was a pilot project for a new model of “new rural community construction” (*xin nongcun shequ jianshe*, part of the central party-state’s New Socialist Countryside campaign that began in 2006). This new model diverged from conventional projects

in three main respects: (1) it was strictly voluntary (villagers could keep their old housing if they so chose); (2) instead of concentrating the entire village into one apartment-style complex, it would be split into 10 complexes of free-standing houses roughly corresponding to existing neighborhoods; and (3) the new houses would be “*linpan*-style.” *Linpan* (literally “grove plate”) refers to a traditional settlement pattern on the Chengdu Plain that has recently been a subject of debate in Chengdu urban planning circles.<sup>228</sup> A *linpan* is a house or small cluster of houses sharing a courtyard, garden, etc., surrounded by small groves of bamboo and trees, irrigation ditches, and the household’s wet rice fields. This pattern contrasts with the “village” or “hamlet” pattern more common in rural China (including my other three sites, to varying degrees – especially Raoling), where larger clusters of houses from multiple households are concentrated in one area (often with temples or other shared spaces among the houses), separate from larger concentrations of farmland and woods shared by the whole community. The debate has concerned whether to preserve the *linpan* tradition for ecological and cultural reasons, or to replace it with concentrated housing complexes – valued both for ideological reasons (their association with modernity) and efficiency, particularly with the introduction of centralized gas, sewage, chemically-treated running water, and internet. The pilot project in Liao Flats seems to be an effort to compromise between these two positions: the new housing will not be *linpan* in the traditional sense, but at least the plans displayed at the village headquarters more closely resemble *linpan* than conventional new housing complexes. The township official directing this project described its innovation with the slogan “concentrate that which benefits from concentration, and disperse that which benefits from dispersal” (*yi ju ze ju, yi san ze san*).

*What about the Pigs?*

One important way the new housing will almost certainly diverge from *linpan* is that farm animals such as pigs may not be raised within the new complexes. This was a major concern of villagers who were considering relocating to the new housing, or who had already agreed to relocate before learning about this rule. When I asked the aforementioned official about this, he replied simply that none of the villagers raises pigs anymore – either an exaggeration or an indication that he has very little understanding of the actual situation in the village. (I never did a specific survey about this, but one farmer said he knew of at least a dozen farmers who raised pigs in his part of the village alone.<sup>229</sup>) On another occasion, two members of the Pengs’ team who had already agreed to relocate raised this concern to township officials who were visiting Liao Flats, but the latter evaded the question by saying that the purpose of their visit was not to discuss the relocation project.<sup>230</sup>

In fact the purpose of the officials’ visit was to reiterate their long-standing request that the Pengs’ team reorganize into a formal cooperative enterprise and register as such with the government. The farmers had refused for several reasons: (1) their brief negative experience with the cooperative form in 2007; (2) their belief that they had nothing to gain from registering as a co-op; (3) their suspicion of the government’s ulterior motives; and (4) the team’s economic decision to refuse to cooperate with other farmers and focus on developing their own business. The government stood to gain from the team’s registration as a co-op, at the most basic level, simply because it would be an achievement (in implementing the “New Socialist Countryside” policy) that they could add to their résumé toward a promotion. The farmers also suspected that the officials wanted to make themselves shareholders in such a co-op. The new housing project provided a new opportunity for the government to promote the development of cooperative enterprise in Liao Flats: a poster about the project listed three income generation schemes that

the project would facilitate (ecological agriculture, bonsai production, and tourism), and when I asked the official in charge of the project, he described them all as potential “cooperatives.”<sup>231</sup>

After the officials left their fruitless meeting with the Pengs’ team, the farmers pointed out the similarity between the housing project and the government’s promotion of co-ops. One of the three older male farmers in the team (all in their 60s) said,

It’s like taking off your clothes just to put them back on again. It’s redundant construction (*chongfu jianshe*). We’ve already got houses, why tear them down and build new ones? The same goes for the co-op. We’ve already got a co-op, it’s just not called a co-op. We cooperate, isn’t that enough? What’s the point of getting registered? It’s like a couple that’s already married, and the government makes them go get a marriage certificate.<sup>232</sup>

One of the younger farmers who had asked the official about pigs interjected, “They say they didn’t come here to talk about the relocation (*chaiqian*), they came to talk about ecological farming, but how can we do ecological farming if we don’t have a place to raise pigs?” Here the farmer was referring to the importance of pig manure for fertilizer. Only the Pengs did not raise pigs (for religious reasons), and this required them to expend more effort and money making compost, processing humanure, and purchasing other materials for fertilizer (and some observers have said that even so, their fields were still not as fertile as those fertilized by animal manure). Clearly the township officials had a different conception of “ecological farming” – the “modern” one more widely promoted by the state as a commercial opportunity, defined by increased scale, mechanization, specialization (monoculture), and distinguished from conventional industrial farming mainly by the substitution of “organic” or “harmless” (*wugonghai*) commercial inputs

(fertilizer, pesticide, etc.) for the more toxic varieties.<sup>233</sup> This reasoning could also be seen in the project director's explanation of how the concentration of housing would facilitate the development of ecological farming in Liao Flats – because it would free up land for larger-scale specialized farms.<sup>234</sup>

### *Trading Quotas for Development*

As Zining had said, the project itself was not supposed to affect existing farmland or how its use is allocated among villagers. However, the officials estimated that, by moving villagers to more compact housing and reclaiming the old residential plots, the project would create over 300 *mu* (20 hectares) of new farmland. This creation of new farmland, in fact, seems to be the local state's main economic incentive behind this project. Not only would it provide the means for new agricultural projects; the creation of new farmland creates land development rights (called “quotas”)<sup>235</sup> which can be sold to construction companies as permission for them to build on farmland elsewhere without violating the state's “red line” policy (established in 2006 to prevent China's arable land from falling under 120 million hectares, after having declined drastically over the preceding two decades, causing concerns about China's food security). Such production and sale of land development rights resembles carbon trading, and a sign at the village headquarters actually described it as “quota trading” (*zhibiao jiaoyi*). The sign also listed the “unified standard” price for such rights as 350,000 yuan per *mu*, which would come to 105 million yuan (16.56 million USD) for 300 *mu* of farmland created. One of the project's planners said that all this income would go toward financing the construction of the new housing, with the remaining cost to be covered by a combination of state subsidy and fees to be paid by participating villagers (*nongmin zichou*).<sup>236</sup> However, villagers and NGO workers expressed

certainty that the government would somehow make money off the project, since otherwise there would not be sufficient incentive. In Kristen Looney's study of the "New Socialist Countryside" in general, she writes (using an official term for the sale of land development rights – "linking rural and urban construction land"):

This policy of linking rural and urban construction land has created a significant source of revenue for local governments... [I]n a 2009 survey of experimental sites for linking rural and urban construction land, the [Ministry of Land Resources] found that at least 20% of land revenue was unaccounted for in local government budgets. Though it is difficult to estimate, some experts believe that within these experimental sites, *local governments can sell new construction land to developers for several million yuan per mu*. Meanwhile, villages may only receive 80,000-100,000 yuan per mu as compensation for lost construction land. The fact that local governments are making enormous profits off of land that technically belongs to villagers has made information about land revenues highly sensitive. During an interview with Chinese media, a central official from the MOLR stated that local governments keep separate accounting books for showing higher-level officials, and described actual land revenues as an "enigma" (*mi*).<sup>237</sup>

The official figures for the Liao Flats project may thus differ somewhat from reality. In any case, it is clear that the overwhelming majority of villagers had signed up to participate in the project, including two households in the Pengs' team.

***Mr. Ai's Dream and the Fragmentation of Peasant Power***

The Ai family (who had split from the Pengs' team a few months before) were the only villagers I heard of who were being forced to move against their will. This was mainly because their 20-something year-old son had signed the agreement on behalf of his parents (apparently against their will), and later they learned that the government would charge them 40,000 yuan for the new house because the son's wife had married into the village after a certain deadline. The Ais then told the government they would not move unless this fee were dropped, but the Ais shared a courtyard complex with other villagers who wanted to move, and this weakened their bargaining power.

This information came out only gradually: when I first ran into the Mr. Ai, he had told me boldly that he refused to move because he preferred their traditional *linpan* lifestyle and was concerned that they would not be able to raise pigs in the new complex. Later his son told me privately that the real issue was the money, and they would gladly move if the unreasonable charge were dropped or reduced. He gave me the impression that his father's fiery speech about the virtues of traditional housing was merely a show inspired by NGO personnel, who had been similarly speaking out against the relocation scheme. It is also possible that the parents truly preferred their traditional housing, and it was only their son and his wife who wanted to move.

The Ais' son had recently returned home from several years working on the coast, where he had learned to drive and saved up money to buy a van. After the last Chinese New Year (in early 2012), he was considering whether to stay at home and working as a driver, just as relations between his father and the rest of the Pengs' team began to worsen. The father had long complained that he could grow many more vegetables than the team allowed him to sell, and now he had access to a van and driver that could be used for delivery, so he no longer needed the Pengs to sell to the clientele he had built up over the years (partly by serving meat dishes to

visitors who tired of the Pengs' vegetarian fare, and by selling a few animal products from his home).

The final straw was a farmers' market organized by foreigners at a nearby university. The organizers had asked Peng Wei to invite everyone in their team, but they had neglected to invite the Ais. When Mr. Ai got wind of this, he asked Peng Wei for an explanation, and Peng Wei said it had just slipped his mind. That night, however, Mr. Ai had a dream where he saw the other team members socializing with the foreigners at the university, collecting orders for vegetables, when he overheard Peng Wei say to another farmer, "It's a good thing we didn't invite Mr. Ai – now that his son has a van, he could split from our team just like the Dings did and deliver his own vegetables!"<sup>238</sup> Mr. Ai interpreted this as a sign that he should indeed follow the Dings' example of starting an independent business.

Mr. Ai's decision to split would have made economic sense in any case – as Peng Wei rightly perceived (according to the dream). It is possible that Mr. Ai fabricated the dream in order to justify what he had wanted to do anyway – in which case, it would reveal that naked self-interest is still somewhat circumscribed (at least superficially) by alternative values of collective self-interest or solidarity, loyalty, etc. It is also possible that the dream was real, and it represents the imposition of a (perhaps subconscious and/or socially prevalent but still not openly accept) logic of economic self-interest upon Mr. Ai's consciousness, whose conflicting values (loyalty, etc.) had previously clouded his judgment, preventing him from appreciating the rationality of splitting with the team. On this level, it is almost as if the spirit of capitalism came to haunt Mr. Ai in his sleep, possessing his brain and implanting it with the "brains" (as Jingjing put it in Chapter 4) for how to take advantage of the opportunity that the NGOs, the environmentalist foreign consumers, and his son had helped to create.



If we take the dream at face value, however, its main theme is Mr. Ai's personal tension with the other team members, and his sense that Peng Wei in particular was attempting to marginalize him, apparently due to concerns about the balance of power within the team, which had been complicated by Mr. Ai's acquisition of a vehicle and development of social capital (connections in the micro-niche market of Chengdu's environmentalist meat-eaters). As with the other contradictions and splits described above, this is a personal tension that was exacerbated by the team's nature as (1) market-oriented (thus tending to generate conflicts of economic interest), and (2) among peasant households that could potentially succeed in the same or similar enterprise independently, given the right conditions (e.g. access to transportation and market connections). In this case, the tension seems to have emerged only through this cooperation: both sides (Mr. Ai and Peng Wei) say they did not know each other well before the cooperation, and the conflict emerged only after cooperation. Moreover, Mr. Ai made sure to concentrate the personalized expression of this structural, economic contradiction on the figure of Peng Wei, on whose "selfishness" he blamed the conflict, in contrast with the other Pengs, whom Mr. Ai still considered "good people." He even went so far as to say that he sympathized with Linlin's split from the family, likening it to both his own split and that of the Dings.

This points to the question of why none of these three "separatist" parties formed a new team. As mentioned above, the Dings did form a new team with another household that split from the Pengs' team. This reflected the two households' pre-existing friendship, but it was also economically required if the other household (the Zhangs) were to continue participating in the project, since they did not own a vehicle or have personal connections with consumers. I asked Mr. Ai why he did not join the Dings' team, but he evaded the question. Perhaps there was an unspoken personal background, but it also seems likely that, after having experienced the

uncomfortable tension that emerged through cooperation with the Pengs (whom he otherwise seems to have liked and respected personally), Mr. Ai would have been averse to attempting a new cooperation, particularly when he now possessed the means for individual enterprise.

While such “separatism” makes sense in terms of at least short-term economic self-interest, it also seems to have weakened the villagers’ power – both collectively and individually – in relation to the external interests of the state and the construction company (and perhaps external capitalist interests more generally). If Mr. Ai had not burned his bridges with the other team members, they might have been able to collectively rally some pressure (perhaps with other villagers with similar concerns) to reduce the 40,000 yuan fee, for example, or – since the two member households who agreed to move were also concerned about raising pigs – to make sure that the new complexes would allow them to raise pigs according to the farmers’ own understanding of sustainable practices. The Dings and the Zhangs also had the same concerns, so we see how this series of splits (although economic in nature, also generating personal hostilities) along with the Pengs’ team (and probably the others’) conscious exclusion of other potential cooperators, divided the initial alliance of 11 cooperating households, with potential solidarity among more villagers, that might have been used to defend their common interests against such external forces.

## ***Conclusion***

This chapter examined the experience of several participants in the Liao Flats project, focusing on how their narratives reflect the tension between economic pressures and alternative values, and how this tension has contributed to several splits among and within the cooperating peasant households. I also looked at how the remnants of this project relate to a new state

development project to relocate peasants into new housing complexes. I argued that both the relocation project and the conflicts among erstwhile cooperators illustrate the limitations of alternative values in the face of state-backed economic pressures, especially when those values emphasize personal lifestyle choices (including the choices of both peasants and consumers) over the development of community solidarity or resistance to external threats, and when the NRR project's objective means are narrowly focused on market-oriented activity, even if subjectively conceived as aiming to foster sustainable living in a more holistic and communitarian sense. The next chapter and final case study deals with similar situations, in that the project was also initiated by an NGO, led to a vegetable co-op, and dissolved, and the participants also faced a state-led housing relocation project. However, different conditions and different decisions on the part of participants ended up leading to very different responses to these similar situations, illustrating the diversity of possible peasant responses to the tension between values and value.

## **Chapter 7: Peppercorn Village, Guizhou**

In this chapter I recount a set of cooperative experiences in the project site of an NRR-affiliated NGO in Guizhou, focusing on a co-op and three cases of contentious collective action related to land rights. All four of these main experiences were initiated more or less spontaneously by the villagers, but they were all influenced by the NGO project (although not necessarily in ways the NGO intended). I explain how the co-op ended up becoming a front for a private business based outside the village whose relation to peasants in Peppercorn and elsewhere could be described as exploitative, whereas the three land actions arguably contributed more to fostering community-oriented cooperation and the development of alternative values – if only briefly and in very imperfect ways.

### ***Background on Peppercorn Village in Zunyi Prefecture, Guizhou***

According to sociologist Mao Gangqiang's (2010:26) dissertation on another village in Zunyi, this area is fairly typical for the hilly, less mountainous parts of northern Guizhou. Zunyi belonged to Sichuan until 1728 and is still culturally Sichuanese, including linguistically. Guizhou is the most monetarily poor province in China, with a per capita GDP of 6,835 yuan (1,039 US dollars) in 2008, compared to 22,640 for China as whole, but Zunyi is slightly less poor, with a per capita GDP of 7,574 the same year, accounting for one quarter of Guizhou's overall GDP.<sup>239</sup> Rural net income for the county to which Peppercorn belongs was about 3,600 yuan per capita in 2008, compared to 2,374 for rural Guizhou as a whole and 4,761 for rural China as a whole. This slightly higher income is due to a number of factors: (1) the government's preferential treatment of Zunyi due to its importance in Communist Party history (Mao Zedong

was first elected to the party's leadership at a meeting here during the Long March in 1935); (2) Zunyi's location between the regionally important cities of Guiyang and Chongqing, allowing it to become a minor shipping hub (in 2011, as part of a centrally-funded project to make Zunyi as developed as Guizhou's capital Guiyang, an old military airport was converted to civilian use – with a new highway running through Peppercorn, as discussed below); (3) most Zunyi residents' Han (Chinese) cultural and linguistic background, giving them advantages on the job market over many of the ethnic minorities that predominate elsewhere in rural Guizhou; and (4) Zunyi's more temperate climate, moderate rainfall, natural and constructed waterways, fertile soil and more level land than elsewhere in this extremely mountainous province. The latter factors enabled Zunyi to become one of Guizhou's main sources of rice, maize, wheat, rapeseed oil, tobacco, peppers, and certain medicinal herbs (Mao 2010:27). Of particular importance to the co-op discussed below, the prefecture recently became a poultry hub for southwestern China.

The administrative village<sup>240</sup> I call “Peppercorn” was over two hours from Zunyi's prefectural capital by bus, until the aforementioned highway was built in 2011, reducing that to one hour. According to official figures for 2009, Peppercorn had about 1,500 households with over 6,000 villagers. Among these, 4,800 had rights to the village's collective farmland (land use contracts having remained unadjusted for demographic change since decollectivization in 1980, as in most Chinese villages), with an average of less than one mu (0.067 hectare) per capita, slightly below the 2005 national average of 1.4 mu (0.09 ha) per capita. The village has two primary schools with about 700 students total, two paved roads, and two canals bringing water from a nearby reservoir (all built and maintained by the prefecture or county government). The canals are sufficient to irrigate about half of the village's wet rice fields – including the fields of Daxing villager team (*cunmin dazhu*),<sup>241</sup> the approximately 200-household administrative unit

where this study's co-op formed and derived most of its members. The village headquarters (a small cluster of two-story concrete buildings that house the village committee, an occasionally open clinic, a perpetually locked library, and a defunct "association for the elderly" – the latter formed as part of the NGO-initiated project in 2009) is a short walk from the market town where the township government is located. Daxing begins with the second hamlet (*zhaizi*) one approaches after a few minutes' stroll down the newly paved road (discussed below) away from town, past the village headquarters, and over a canal surrounded by wet rice fields, dry fields of corn, tobacco and vegetables, and orchards of plum and Sichuan peppercorn (*huajiao*) lining a few sparsely wooded hills. Most of the houses in these first two hamlets are simple but spacious two-story concrete structures built over the past decade, mainly by young villagers working in coastal cities (two or three days by train from Zunyi). A few older houses remain among the new ones, also two-story but made of wood and adobe or brick on stone foundations. Beyond this, the paved road gives way to a small footpath leading through the hills to other hamlets on this side of the village (the first few also belonging to Daxing, the rest beyond that to other teams).

### ***The NGO Project and Chu Yong's Co-op***

Yes, the co-op did dissolve, but why did it dissolve? You have to understand that Chinese culture cares a lot about face (*mianzi*). This was a way we came up with to save the face of those members who were becoming an obstacle to the co-op and needed to be kicked out. They would have looked bad if we had just kicked them out, so instead we decided to make a show of dissolving the co-op, then later reorganize without those disruptive elements.<sup>242</sup>

Chu Yong was getting flustered, his eyes darting around nervously, face turning red, sweat beads appearing on his forehead. I had not even mentioned the co-op's dissolution, nor let on that I knew about it to this early-middle-aged co-op director and villager team leader (a minor position appointed by the village committee, with a nominal salary). That afternoon in May 2011, however, while some of those former "disruptive elements" were telling me *their* side of the story in a neighboring house, a relative caught Chu eavesdropping outside the window. I had already grown suspicious the previous day when he sent someone to intercept my visit to alleged co-op members in another part of the village. Whenever I asked them a question ("So when did you join the co-op?" etc.), the loyal interceptor would answer for them ("She joined in December!").

I had high hopes for the Peppercorn village project, since it was initiated by the NGO whose founder (a middle-aged man originally from the area, whom we shall call "Yang Kun") seemed closer to my wavelength than most other NRR advocates I had met. For example he preferred the term "social movement network" to "NGO," since he regarded NGOs as part of the "ideological state apparatus" of transnational capital, functioning primarily to promote capitalist interests in the name of charity, whereas his goal was to promote "subaltern self-organization" and to facilitate networking among grassroots organizations.<sup>243</sup> (I still call his organization an "NGO" because it *is* one, essentially, and even Yang normally uses that term.) Moreover, he was the first professional activist I had met who attempted to put into practice something like He Xuefeng's theory of peasant cooperation (introduced in Part I).<sup>244</sup> Yang further distinguished among different types of market-oriented cooperation, according to their degree of risk, with (1) informal one-off bulk-buying as the safest type, followed by (2) formalized agricultural supply

co-ops, (3) co-ops that involve marketing, and finally (4) co-ops that also involve production or processing. In February 2010 I observed him explain this hierarchy to an assembly of about 200 residents of a village elsewhere in Guizhou, who were trying to decide how to use a grant for 10,000 yuan that the NGO had acquired from an international foundation. (This was part of a project involving 10 villages, each of which had to democratically decide how to use such a one-off grant, aiming for maximum villager participation in the decision-making process.) Later Yang explained that, although he follows He Xuefeng in recommending community-oriented over market-oriented cooperation, most recipients still prefer to risk market-oriented cooperation (since they want to make money), in which case he cautions them to start with informal bulk-buying before working their way up to cooperative marketing and production.

By the time I first went to Peppercorn in April 2010, Yang had already made such a speech, and the recipients had chosen to jump right into cooperative production and marketing. Actually this was funded by a different type of grant (from a different foundation), oriented toward the 500 young villagers (out of about 6,000 total villagers) who had returned from cities after losing jobs in the financial crash of 2008. Part of the grant was specifically earmarked for helping these returnees generate income closer to home, so it was bound to be used for some kind of market-oriented project, but Yang recommended postponing production and marketing until the recipients had experience in cooperative purchase, so some of the returnees started by using a portion of the grant for bulk purchase of farm supplies, which they later used for their cooperative farming project.

Another portion of the grant was allotted to community-oriented projects, facilitated by a village official I call “Wang Liu,” including one of China’s few village newspapers, an annual sports festival, a New Year’s gala, and later, a project to strengthen relations between the village



leaders and villagers still working in coastal cities, including the pursuit of compensation for vocational injuries, in collaboration with a coastal labor NGO. Some villagers saw these “community-oriented” projects as primarily efforts for Wang Liu to curry favor in preparation for his election to the position of village chief, after which he indeed discontinued most of these activities, saying he was too busy, and none of the other village leaders proved willing to devote as much energy to such voluntary projects. Wang did continue to write articles for the newspaper (now edited by a returned migrant worker who founded his own small NGO elsewhere in Zunyi), which, through the NGOs’ introduction, expanded its scope to include two affiliated villages and a town.

For the income-generation project, in the spring of 2009, Wang Liu and the NGO chose three of Peppercorn’s nine villager teams (administrative units of about 200 households each). 37 returnees from these teams signed up for a series of workshops, where they brainstormed ways to earn money close to home. They decided to form three “entrepreneurial groups” (*chuangye xiaozu*) which eventually merged into two: one for growing non-local varieties of vegetables in greenhouses (expected to fetch higher prices than local varieties), and one for raising chickens among fruit trees on 13 hectares of rented hillside (the idea being for the chickens to eat the fallen fruit and fertilize the trees). Although the chicken group did well (85% of the 3,000 chicks it bought survived and yielded 4 yuan per chicken in profit), six of its seven members left (dissatisfied with this margin), three returning to the city and the other three joining the vegetable group, leaving only one to continue raising chickens.

Chu Yong, the leader of Daxing villager team, was elected leader of the vegetable group, although his claim to returnee status was weak: he had gone out to work briefly a few times in

the past, but had been living in the village when the financial crash hit, making money from petty gambling and buying eggs from other peasants to sell to a local hatchery.

The vegetable group started in the spring of 2009 by growing vegetables individually on the members' own plots, testing new varieties and receiving guidance from older villagers more experienced with farming. By November they had made an average of 2,000 yuan each by selling these vegetables at the local market. They then used this profit to add 5,000 yuan to the 3,000 donated by the NGO, purchasing 8,000 yuan worth of materials to build greenhouses, where they planned to raise seedlings for the spring planting. Unfortunately, the combination of drought and lack of experience with this type of climate-controlled greenhouse led to a poor harvest. Meanwhile, most of the vegetable group had decided to reorganize into the co-op mentioned above, which eventually shed its membership to become a front for Chu Yong's poultry business.

In August 2009, the NGO had organized a forum in the prefectural capital, where delegates from Peppercorn and other project sites watched a video on Raoling and met Wansheng's director Gao. After the forum, Chu Yong proposed to his group that they reorganize as a co-op. Later when I asked Chu why, he emphasized that he was inspired by the examples of Wansheng and Raoling; that he felt the "entrepreneurial groups" really belonged to the village committee and not the group members; and that if they reorganized as a co-op they would have a sense of ownership and could operate more freely. (Also, by registering with the government as a co-op, they could legally operate as an enterprise without paying taxes, and they could get loans more easily and with lower interest than conventional enterprises. Chu did not mention this, and another former co-op member said she is not aware of the co-op or Chu's poultry business ever taking advantage of this status.) They mentioned this idea to the NGO personnel, but the latter

cautioned against it for the reasons mentioned above, and also because they worried it would lead to conflict with the village leaders.

After a few weeks of discussion, 13 of the 20 members of the vegetable group and five other residents of Chu's villager team decided to form a co-op, electing Chu as director and a woman in her 30s I call "Li Min" as treasurer. (Li Min actually *was* a returned migrant, although the main reason she returned was to take care of her children; her husband still worked on the coast.) Each household paid 300 yuan as a membership fee, giving the co-op an initial fund of 5,400 yuan. They invested most of this in the bulk purchase of farm supplies, some of which they kept for use, the remainder to be sold for profit out of Li Min's house.

Chu's sense that the vegetable group had been constrained by the village committee seems to have been confirmed shortly after the co-op's formation, when Wang Liu denied them permission to use the committee's van to visit a nearby co-op. Chu turned to the NGO personnel, who came and chastised Wang for suppressing the villagers' initiative, after which Wang caved in and allowed them to use the van. This was the beginning of the NGO's support for the co-op. Some informants say that, after this, the NGO started giving or lending money to the co-op, but NGO personnel deny this. In any case, it is clear that Chu at least *perceived* the NGO as somehow supporting the co-op, since after Chu "fired" the other members, he went to great lengths to deceive the NGO and other outsiders (such as myself) into believing that the co-op still existed.

Some co-op members planned to do more research on greenhouse farming and then resume the vegetable project. Meanwhile, Chu went into business with his brother (who had lived in the prefectural capital for many years buying and selling poultry) and his brother's friend

(who had experience with facilities for hatching eggs and incubating hatchlings). An NGO report on the Peppercorn project contains a selection of minutes from a co-op meeting attended by all members, including Chu's two business partners, in which they proposed the idea of opening a hatchery and an incubation facility, and in which other members, such as Li Min, expressed approval. However, Li Min and other members told me they had no recollection of such a meeting, that they were excluded from the poultry business from the beginning, and that when they raised concerns about it in the fall of 2010, Chu dissolved the co-op. In any case, the report and Chu both say that the co-op took out a loan for 20,000 yuan and invested it in opening an incubation facility, which made 26,100 yuan by mid-2010. After paying off the loan, they used the credit thereby established to take out another 60,000<sup>245</sup> and set up a hatchery, which began operation in early 2011.

Although there are other hatcheries and incubation facilities nearby, Chu and his partners decided to locate their facilities in the prefectural capital (over two hours away from the village by bus until the new highway was built, reducing that to one hour), because the two partners live there, and more importantly, it is a better base for a larger-scale operation: the hatchery purchases eggs from throughout the province – including from other peasant organizations initiated by the same NGO – and the incubation facility sells the hatchlings to companies that sell them to farmers throughout China. One NGO-initiated peasant organization (“village development association”), in a particularly remote village in one of Guizhou's poorest counties, signed a contract with Chu's co-op setting a minimum price of 2 yuan per egg, to be “adjusted according to market changes.” Actually the market price for farmers in Zunyi had not fallen below 4 yuan in several years and had increased to 6 yuan by 2011, but Chu still paid the farmers in that remote village only 2.5 yuan, since they had no other outlet for goose eggs, Chu having

personally donated the stock from Peppercorn and taught the farmers (along with NGO personnel) how to raise the geese. When Yang Kun learned of this (having already distanced himself from the Peppercorn project due to disagreements with the project director), he told me that Chu seemed to be exploiting the farmers in a way comparable to the transnational food corporations that exploit peasants in China and elsewhere, just at a much smaller scale.<sup>246</sup>

Chu told me that the two facilities made over 100,000 yuan in the spring of 2011, the hatchery's first season. He also claimed that the co-op had over 80 members, all residents of Peppercorn, who each received between 200 and 2,000 yuan in annual dividends. I could not find any of these members, however, except for three middle-aged women from another hamlet who sold eggs to Chu for the standard market price of 6 yuan, laid by geese raised from goslings they had purchased from Chu at a small discount. As mentioned above, when I went to interview two of these women, the third, clearly coached by Chu, intervened to speak on behalf of the others. Even she said no one had received any dividends – because, she surmised, the co-op was only just getting started and had not made any money yet.

That evening these three women, along with Chu's wife and sister-in-law (the only residents of Chu's hamlet willing to play his game anymore, according to former co-op members), held a cacophonous rehearsal for the co-op's new brass band in Chu's house. Chu said he had noticed that all the famous co-ops like Wansheng and Raoling seemed to have performing arts troupes, so he proposed that they organize one as well – “just for fun.” Although none of five women had any musical background, they decided to jump straight into buying two trombones, two trumpets, a western-style drum and a cymbal (instead of cheaper and more common traditional instruments such as the *suona* reed or Chinese drums), in the hopes that one day they could play for more money at weddings and funerals.<sup>247</sup> I found a dusty electronic

keyboard in the corner and used it to help the women learn scales. Chu explained that someone had donated that keyboard for the co-op's "Children's World" and "Old People's Association" run out of his house. The professionally-made placards for these projects lay upside-down in the corner, along with other remnants such as mahjong tiles and tea cups. Chu said the co-op was taking a break from these activities now that the busy farming season had begun, but during the winter the house was packed with children and grandparents. However, former co-op members and others from Chu's hamlet said these activities took place for only one day, as a "show" for visiting NGOs. They said that Chu promised elderly villagers he would pay them ten yuan each to come and pretend that they regularly played mahjong there, but in the end he did not even pay – "That's how much of a crook he is!"

Why would people not voluntarily come to play mahjong and drink tea if it was free? During my second and third visits to Peppercorn, in the summer of 2010, Chu's patio had been one of two places where people from throughout the hamlet congregated to chat in the evenings. By the time of the Potemkin activity center in December, however, everyone in the hamlet except for Chu's brother-in-law's family disliked him so much that he had to pay people from another hamlet to come, according to several informants. This was partly because of the co-op, and partly because of Chu's petty corruption as team leader (for example, allegedly pocketing part of the state funding for a road improvement project discussed below). Wang Liu – now village chief – said his hands were tied: he wanted nothing more than to find a replacement for Chu as team leader, but no one else wanted the underpaid position.

What motivated Chu and his small group of followers? The NGO personnel claimed they were not donating any money to Chu's enterprise, so the only monetary incentive would seem be the tax holiday and low interest rate it should legally receive as a "co-op," and one observer said

Chu did not even take advantage of that legal status – that the hatchery and incubation facilities were registered as conventional enterprises. Instead, they think Chu’s main motivation is the social capital and esteem he receives as a minor celebrity in NRR circles. I mentioned above how the business benefits from Chu’s contacts with a few other peasant organizations throughout Guizhou. Perhaps Chu has ambitions beyond the province as well; in any case, it cannot hurt to meet more people, especially when the travel and lodging are reimbursed. A couple months before my last visit in May 2011, for example, Chu had attended the second meeting of the “study network of peasant organizations” initiated by the leaders of Wansheng and Raoling, and this provided an opportunity to meet representatives from about a dozen other organizations throughout China (with whom I later saw pictures of him happily playing ice-breaker games in Wansheng). More concretely, these connections enabled Chu’s daughter-in-law to attend a free college for grassroots activists in Beijing that taught computer skills, etc., which might be beneficial for job prospects. (When I had spoken with her the previous year, she did not seem in the least interested in the co-op or NRR, and her parents had asked me to help her find a cheap college with low entrance requirements in Chengdu.) After my last visit, Chu himself attended a free one-month training course in Beijing – arranged, in fact, by Yang Kun’s NGO, apparently in response to the project director’s discovery (in which I seem to have played a small role – it was clear that he already knew at least part of the story) of what I perceived to be Chu’s deception and profiteering. The director believed that, despite these problems, Chu’s heart was in the right place and he just needed some guidance of the sort this course could provide.

This question of how Chu and his followers benefitted from the co-op dovetails with Christof Lammer’s analysis of a group of NRR-initiated co-ops in Henan. If it was true, as the co-op leaders told him, that the co-ops were losing money (contra what their critics – who had

similarly been expelled from that project – told him), then why would they continue to invest so much effort into the co-ops? Lammer (2012:155) draws on David Graeber’s anthropological theory of value to argue that “the value of creative energy expended on action in NRR experiments could be realized in material tokens others than money,” such as socially meaningful gifts and news reports. However, Lammer’s only examples of such tokens come from a villager who had been expelled from the project, rather than its current leaders. In a socioeconomic context where creative energy is increasingly measured by the capitalist value-form (as opposed to the “societies without a market” for which Graeber intended his framework), it seems unlikely that the co-op leaders would continue to invest at a loss for very long unless they perceived some potential long-term monetary benefit.<sup>248</sup>

### ***Contentious Cooperation***

I attempted to visit Peppercorn once more in September 2012, but the NGO said that two groups of visitors to two of their other project sites (a group of Chinese journalists and a group of foreign foundation personnel) had recently elicited attention from the state (in one case from the police, in the other from the provincial Publicity Office of the Communist Party). They said this was because the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress was scheduled to take place at some undisclosed date in the near future. At first I did not understand what my visit to a fairly typical village in Guizhou had anything to do with a congress in Beijing. The NGO explained that the authorities were worried that outside observers might encounter something controversial in this historically conflict-ridden province, publicize it, and thus worsen the national and global public opinion that had already been troubled by China’s dispute with Japan over the Diaoyu/ Senkaku Islands, along



with a wave of protests, strikes and riots affecting high-profile companies such as Foxconn over the preceding months. That still seemed to be a bit of a stretch until I learned that a series of land struggles had taken place in Peppercorn and neighboring villages throughout the summer, and that the NGO had played a role in educating peasants there and elsewhere about land rights, going so far as to distribute a pamphlet about land rights with funding from a foreign foundation. Considering that land disputes have been the main expression of class struggle in rural China for the past decade, and that another Guizhou NGO had been shut down for collaborating with foreign foundations to promote “rights awareness” in 2008 (also at a sensitive time when the party-state sought to pacify public opinion – in that case in preparation for the Olympics),<sup>249</sup> it is understandable that this NGO would be particularly wary about the presence of foreigners in affected areas during such a politically sensitive time.

Yang Kun had again distanced himself from this new project (as with the earlier Peppercorn project) due to both ideological differences and practical concerns about the political risk involved in such a controversial topic and approach. However, this was the third in a series of land-related disputes in Peppercorn that seem to have all been at least as successful as the NGO-initiated “constructive” projects in fostering cooperation and the development of alternative values against the competitive individualism favored by commodity relations. Although He Xuefeng and his followers (like NRR advocates in general) tend to distance themselves from peasant conflicts (except as something to mitigate through “constructive” cooperation), they have also occasionally referred to contentious collective action as related to the cooperative provision of public goods (e.g. He 2008). We could thus regard these phenomena in Peppercorn as basically consistent with He’s preference for community-oriented to market-oriented cooperation (his argument that it offers a better benefit-to-cost ratio, etc.). It is also

consistent with one of this dissertation's arguments: that the capitalist value-form tends to undermine alternative values (so that commercial cooperation tends to degenerate into either capitalistic relations within the organization or increased competition among peasants), whereas resistance (especially anti-capitalist resistance, but possibly including other types of contentious collective action) tends to foster community-oriented cooperation and the development of alternative values.

### *Keeping Free-Riders off the Road*

The parenthetical qualification about “other types of collective action” mainly refers to this first case, which is not anti-capitalist except with regard to its assertion of a peasant community's collective interests over the competitive individualism favored by capitalism, throwing otherwise atomized peasants into the assertion of force against one relatively privileged family that hoped to benefit at the others' expense. This brief experience of collective action could thus be seen as almost spontaneously eliciting the formation of alternative values and mechanisms that the development of non-capitalist relations would require – arguably more so than many of NRR's market-oriented projects.

In July of 2010, the evening of my second arrival in Peppercorn (after one brief visit that spring), a fellow researcher and I crowded into Chu's living room along with twenty or so fellow villagers, mainly children and a few adults. I expected to be deluged in the usual questions about foreigners, but surprisingly my hosts seemed more eager to tell me about what seems to have been their first taste of collective action, beginning three months earlier but climaxing with an incident just days before. In April, the co-op (or more typically Chu in his official capacity as

team leader, but he and the NGO project director both said it was the co-op) had applied to the township government for funding to widen and pave a stretch of the road from the adjacent town to the three hamlets where Chu and most of the other co-op members lived. (Beyond that the road still shrinks into a path leading through the hills to other parts of the village.) The government agreed, on the condition that the co-op (or Chu) work out how to compensate those villagers whose land would be occupied by the project. Chu and other core co-op members did this by organizing meetings with all the affected villagers, determining how much money needed to be transferred from the road beneficiaries to non-beneficiaries whose land would be occupied, and adjusting the numbers according to household size and degree of benefit. The total came to 16,000 yuan. In order to allay any suspicion of corruption (Chu having already begun to attract some criticism by this time, starting with his work as team leader since 2008), these calculations were posted outside the houses of Chu and another co-op member. Also – as in Wansheng (Chapter 4) – the co-op organized volunteers to take turns supervising the construction process to make sure the work was up to par. One possible reason for shoddy work would have been for Chu (or any other co-op members in charge of the money) to have pocketed a cut of the state funding intended for the construction crew (as also occurred in Wansheng), and indeed Chu was accused of this (in particular, of keeping 2,000 yuan intended for installing benches and garbage storage areas; I have no way of knowing whether this was true, but such facilities were not installed). Otherwise, everything went smoothly: all the beneficiaries paid except for five households, the non-beneficiaries received the 16,000 yuan, and a road of standard quality was built.

The only other small hitch was the incident that occurred a few days before my arrival in July, concerning one of those five free-riding households. The co-op had no formal authority to

force free-riders to pay, but it – or the participants in this project more broadly – found a way to do so, thus overcoming the classic free-rider problem in the cooperative supply of public goods. As discussed in chapters 2 and 4, this problem has been a key point of debate regarding the direction of China’s rural development. Wansheng’s less typical case of this problem was solved only at great costs, including loss of members and compromise regarding the co-op’s ideals of democracy and community solidarity. In Peppercorn’s more typical case, the villagers came up with a solution similar to those theorized by NRR advocates such as He Xuefeng.

A few days before my arrival in Peppercorn, the young adult son of one of these two free-riding families, who had been out of town working in the army, returned to Peppercorn in a shiny new SUV, damaging part of the road which had not finished drying. When someone saw this, they notified the other project participants, who went to the free-riders’ house, demanded a fine of 2,000 yuan, and blocked the road – preventing anyone in the family from leaving – until they paid up. The family called the township police to ask for help, but the latter refused to intervene, saying this was a civil dispute outside their jurisdiction. Finally the family caved in and paid the other villagers 500 yuan (all the cash they had on them) and made a public apology (*qiuqing*) and “self-criticism.” When the other four free-riding households heard about this, they volunteered to pay their share of the land compensation. Some of the money was used to widen a bridge, and the rest to buy cigarettes and candy for the project participants, suggesting that the damage was secondary to the symbolic significance of this victory of the cooperators over the free-riders. Afterwards, some of the cooperators volunteered to take turns supervising the road in case it was damaged again.

The cooperators thus overcame the free-rider problem through spontaneous collective action to impose an informal sanction on the would-be free-rider, and this arguably illegal “mob

behavior” was facilitated by the state’s non-intervention. Some of these villagers had already come to distrust Chu by this time (I am not sure whether the embezzlement accusation occurred before or after this, but for other reasons a group of villagers had already petitioned the village committee to recall Chu from his position as team leader). Even so, apparently this incident and the overall process of cooperating to build the road pushed that distrust into the background. This was to happen again during my fourth visit the following spring, even after villagers’ distrust of Chu had become stronger and more widespread.

### *Keeping the Heart in the Hill*

In May of 2011, at the same time as I was gradually discovering that the co-op had dissolved and that I could no longer trust Chu, another process of contentious cooperation was bringing Chu back together with the former co-op members and other villagers who in other contexts would have nothing to do with him. When I arrived back in the village and walked past the village headquarters to Daxing, I noticed a construction crew building a highway through the rice fields – a prefectural highway, it turned out, from the capital to an old military airport that was being converted to civilian use (as part of a centrally-funded campaign to make Zunyi as developed as Guizhou’s capital Guiyang). Once I got to Chu’s house, I asked his wife, her sister-in-law, and two other villagers what they thought about the highway, and to my surprise, they said they supported it because it would bring rich people from the city who would spend money in their county, possibly on investment in industrial development, creating jobs. One said she looked forward to working in a factory so she could get out of the hot sun. I asked if she had ever worked in a factory, and she said “no.” One of the others had, and she pointed out that factory

work is “dull” (*kuzao*) and does not allow you to walk around and breath fresh air, so she actually prefers farm work. She also noted that industrialization would bring pollution, so instead she hoped the investors would develop Peppercorn’s agriculture. I asked why the villagers don’t develop agriculture themselves – isn’t that what the co-op was trying to do? She said the urban businesspeople have more connections for marketing products.<sup>250</sup>

I asked if they saw any potential problems with the highway, and they said no, it seemed to be good in every way. I was thus even more surprised when, several hours later, someone started shouting and the two of these women who remained in the house ran to help stand in front of a hydraulic excavator, which the construction crew was using to quarry stone from a hill. Later they explained that the highway itself is good, the problem is just that the crew should get their stone elsewhere.

I followed the women and about 30 other villagers to the scrubby hill, which strangely juts up from the rice fields between Daxing and the neighboring village. It is called Ox Heart Hill, for historical reasons unclear to everyone I asked. The construction crew had made a dirt road from the construction site to the hill; previously there had been only a small footpath. By the time we got to the hill, several villagers – including Chu – were already standing in front of the excavator, and the driver had turned it off and gotten out. Eventually the foreman drove over to the hill and shouted at the villagers. After about twenty minutes of shouting back and forth (during which I realized that this had already happened several times over the past few days), both sides agreed to schedule a meeting with the vice-mayor of the township (*fuzhenzhang*).

It took me three days to figure out what was going on. At first, as I stood with a few villagers watching the shouting match, they said the problem was that the crew had used

dynamite to blast the hill, and the vibrations had damaged the homes of several Daxing residents. They worried that their houses were now unsafe and that further blasts would increase the hazard. The next day, after the crew again tried to dig stone from the hill until the villagers stopped them, about 10 villagers composed a letter stating their demands, which about 50 eventually signed:

We the citizens (*quantì gongmin*) of [Daxing] Villager Team, [Peppercorn] Village, [X] Township, whose houses have been severely damaged by the dynamite used to excavate the hill (*kaishan*) to build the new highway, submit the following concerns (*yijian*):

1. In light of the damage to our houses, we propose that the excavation (*kaishan*) no longer take place here.
2. If you (*duifang*) agree to no longer excavate here, then the damage to the houses must be dealt with.
3. If you insist on excavating here, then you must relocate us to live in a place with comparable conditions [to Daxing].
4. The territorial (*dipan*) issue of the excavation [i.e. compensation for violated land rights] must also be dealt with. Otherwise, the hill may not be excavated.
5. If any of us wronged citizens meets with any kind of punishment or intimidation, [you] may not stand on the sidelines (*xiuzi pangguan*), [you] must provide help in our time of need (*xue zhong song tan*).

This is also how the issue was framed in the discussions with the construction foreman, village chief Wang, and vice-mayor Zhao. I found this a little confusing from the start, and my

confusion only grew the more I learned about the situation. For example, the foreman said they could complete the excavation without further blasting, and I did not hear any blasting during these first few days. I asked to see the damage to the houses, but all the villagers showed me were a few superficial cracks in the plaster. The vice-mayor told them they would be monetarily compensated for any damage to their houses according to a third-party assessment, but the villagers adamantly refused to entertain this option, insisting that the damage and possibility of further damage constituted a safety hazard, and that money was therefore irrelevant. I asked several villagers if they considered relocation a viable option, and they said no, they just wanted to make a demand that the government would be less likely to accept than their primary demand of ceasing the excavation. And what about the “territorial” issue – if the hill belonged to Daxing or Peppercorn, could they not just assert their collective right to the land? Later I learned that the neighboring village claimed the right to half the hill and received partial compensation, and the government planned to compensate the Daxing villagers eventually, but this was complicated by territorial disagreement between the two villages. Peppercorn chief Wang said that prior to this incident, neither village had paid much attention to the hill, except occasionally for use as a graveyard (there are only a few graves on the hill – the main graveyard was elsewhere).

It was this ceremonial use as a graveyard that first clued me in on the actual reason for the villagers’ resistance. After fulfilling the request of a middle-aged villager to film the grave of his wife, which lay close to the excavation site and he feared would soon be destroyed, I overheard other villagers say something about *fengshui* (Chinese geomancy). I asked what they meant, and they said that the night after the construction crew had detonated the first dynamite, an apparently healthy 19-year-old villager mysteriously died in her sleep, and older villagers said this must have been a result of the blast’s disruption of the hill’s *fengshui* (geomantic condition).



Later I asked other villagers and they confirmed that this was the real reason they wanted to prevent further excavation of the hill, but that the state would not recognize the legitimacy of such “superstition,” and the question of which village owned that part of the hill was unclear, so they framed it as a matter of personal safety. This reminded me of Anagnost’s (1997:138) analysis of the film *Qiu Ju*, in which a peasant woman, whose husband had been kicked in groin by the village chief, petitions the state in order to obtain a *shuofa*, “a public avowal of where the limits to power lie.” At one point Chu similarly explained that the villagers of Daxing did not want monetary compensation, just a *shuofa* (along with an actual end to the excavation, in this case). Their need to cover up the “superstitious” nature of their grievance by translating it into the “modern” language of the state, and to express their grievance in written form, also resembles Qiu Ju’s predicament, the “difficulty of communication between the language of the law and that of everyday life” (Anagnost 1997:146). As Foucault noted more generally, “The language of the law, which is supposed to be universal, is, in this respect, inadequate; it must, if it is to be effective, be the discourse of one class to another, which has neither the same ideas as it nor even the same words” (quoted in Anagnost 1997:138). In the case of Daxing, the villagers’ effort to translate their grievance ultimately failed, in part because (as I had already observed), any physical damage that the blasts might have caused to the houses was too mild to constitute a safety hazard on a non-geomantic level.

That evening, vice-mayor Zhao phoned Chu and asked him to come to his office. At the time I was interviewing two people who had been “fired” from Chu’s co-op, so it was a little awkward when he came over and asked me to go with him to meet Zhao. At first I thought this might be an attempt to prevent me from talking to his opponents, but Chu immediately implied a more damning possibility by saying – in front of the two former co-op members and their

neighbors – that he needed me as a witness in case other villagers later accused him of accepting a bribe from Zhao. I reluctantly walked with him to the township headquarters, worried that Zhao would accuse me of overstepping my bounds as a researcher on co-ops and meddling in the land dispute (which he in fact did the next day, nearly kicking me out of the village until village chief Huang and the NGO project director both vouched for me, and I promised not to attend any more events related to the land dispute). The most interesting part of that evening’s private meeting was Zhao’s comment that while, on the one hand, it was important to “consider the opinions of the masses,” on the other hand, as Deng Xiaoping had said, “development is hard logic” (*fazhan shi ying daoli*), and the road must be completed by October 1, so there was no time to waste on “such nonsense” (it seemed clear that Zhao was aware of the “superstitious” nature of the villagers’ actual grievance). Zhao then reminded Chu to keep in mind his role as a cadre of the Communist Party and how his actions would influence his career. After the meeting, Chu met with some of the other villagers and recounted this “threat” (as Chu put it), assuring the others that he would not back down because “the interests of the masses come first.” At this point it became clear to me how Chu was squeezed between the conflicting interests of the state and “the masses” – a common description of village officials (by sociologists such as He Xuefeng, for example), but even more true of such team leaders, the lowest *de facto* level of state power.<sup>251</sup>

The next day vice-mayor Zhao came to Peppercorn and held a public meeting in the village headquarters. About ten of the affected villagers attended the meeting, along with village chief Huang. I was not allowed in (this was when the police came for me on behalf of Zhao), but the result was a victory for the state and the capitalist interests it serves over the villagers’ “backward superstition.” Zhao reaffirmed his earlier position that the villagers would be

compensated monetarily for their part of the hill, and he would send a third party to assess any damages to their houses and compensate them accordingly, but the excavation of Ox Heart Hill must continue – for the sake of Zunyi’s development, which would ultimately benefit Peppercorn, he assured them.

The battle was lost (except that it probably increased the likelihood that the villagers would actually receive compensation), but while it lasted, it compelled them to overcome their differences (most prominent being the antagonism between Chu and his few supporters, on the one hand, and everyone else, on the other) and forced Chu to act responsibly in his role as team leader. One expression of this popular pressure on Chu to act responsibly was the husband of one of the former co-op members, Mr. Nie, who had recently returned from working in a nearby city. Before this incident, village chief Wang had already resorted to asking Mr. Nie to help Chu carry out his duty as team leader (in that case, asking other team members to set aside plots of their land for a state agricultural study). Due to Chu’s growing reputation as a cheat, many villagers were unwilling to cooperate with him, whereas Mr. Nie was on better terms with those families, so chief Wang was considering replacing Chu with Nie as team leader, if only Nie would accept the post. During meetings about the hill, although Chu acted as facilitator and would – because of his position – be the obvious delegate to negotiate with vice-mayor Zhao, Mr. Nie often spoke up and inspired more enthusiasm among the villagers. It was he, for instance, who took the lead in writing the letter translated above. It seemed to me that Chu felt pressured to respond to this situation by acting more responsibly himself, even in the face of Zhao’s threat about Chu’s official career and the possible chance to receive a bribe.

We thus see that the threat to the villagers’ common interests and the energy inspired by this struggle spontaneously brought together more villagers and inspired individuals such as Chu

to act more responsibly than the earlier “constructive” projects had done, at least for a short period.

### *Keeping a Cool Head with NGO Guidance*

As mentioned above, the NGO told me not to visit Peppercorn when I last went to Guizhou in 2012, but I had the opportunity to see Chu when he visited Guiyang for a meeting with the NGO, and he mentioned a series of new land struggles in Peppercorn and neighboring villages. NGO personnel also gave me a report about the province-wide land rights project that intervened in the Peppercorn struggle. Judging by my past experience, I should take the word of both Chu and the NGO with an especially large grain of salt, but apparently the state confiscation of peasant land in this Zunyi township were similar to that in Liao Flats (discussed in Chapter 6), in that the local state framed it in terms of “Building a New Socialist Countryside” and used recent innovations in land rights manipulation to work around the central state’s efforts to curb peasant resistance and decrease the loss of arable land. Two main differences from Liao Flats seem to have been that in this case (1) the confiscation was connected to the highway project discussed above, with the idea that the highway would increase the value of new housing in the area, and (2) whereas in Liao Flats the township officials said that the housing was specifically for villagers, in this case apparently anyone could buy the housing, with villagers merely having preferential treatment in this regard. (However, in Liao Flats the officials also said that the new housing would be “commodity housing” no different from urban housing, so the villagers could sell their new houses to outsiders if they chose – so perhaps there is not much of a difference.)

For our purposes, I will focus on the significance of this collective action in comparison with both the previous two cases and the more “constructive” projects such as the co-op. According to Chu and the NGO project report, unlike in the struggle over Ox Heart Hill, in this case the villagers did not attempt to prevent the confiscation, but only to increase compensation. That means that the actual concerns of the villagers were more closely in line with the state’s legal framework, so it made more sense to express those concerns through legal channels, and it also made it easier to “win.” In the hill struggle, the state had already offered to provide monetary compensation, so the villagers had already “won” the sort of results aimed for in this new case.

At the same time, it seems clear from the NGO report that one of the main goals of the NGO’s intervention was to deter the peasants from resorting to the sort of direct action used in the hill struggle and encourage them to align themselves more clearly with the state’s legal framework. For example, the NGO invited a lawyer from Guangdong to discuss the infamous “Wukan Incident” of late 2011, in which peasants’ adoption of direct action escalated into a violent stand-off with the local government.<sup>252</sup> The NGO also invited an official from the county to which Peppercorn belongs, who warned that, “at present petitioning higher authorities was ‘not permitted,’ and the stakes of doing so were high, so he recommended that peasants stick to judiciary procedure, since as soon as [an action] is labeled ‘violent rights-defense,’ it would become much more difficult to achieve any results.”<sup>253</sup> At this point, one “peasant representative” spoke up and contended that, although “understanding the law and using it is a basic requirement of being a citizen,” on the other hand, “China has not yet become a law-based society, so the chances of success are low no matter which procedure one takes.” According to the report, “This statement led to a heated discussion among participants,” in which the NGO project director

intervened by arguing that “no matter what, first and foremost we should act as citizens who understand, use, and respect the law. This... is the starting point for democratization, for the transition from the ‘rule of individuals’ to the ‘rule of law,’ and the transition from quantitative change to qualitative change.” Such an argument is typical of both liberal and left-leaning ideologies of NGO intervention into the action of both peasant and (usually peasant-)workers against expropriation (usually of land) and exploitation (usually in coastal factories). The problem with such approaches, as observers such as Gongchao (2013) have pointed out, is that they are largely based on a misunderstanding of the history of “the development of civil society” in Western countries. In that history, as for example Piven and Cloward (1979:36) concluded from their analysis of 20<sup>th</sup> century “poor people’s movements” in the United States, “Whatever influence lower-class groups occasionally exert” toward institutional change has resulted primarily from “the disruptive consequences of protest.” Formal organizations such as NGOs, unions, and political parties have attempted to increase the power of disruptive mass movements by channeling their energy into legal channels of representation, but such “efforts to conciliate and disarm usually lead to the demise of the protest movement, partly by transforming the movement itself, and partly by transforming the political climate which nourishes protest. With these changes, the array of institutional controls which ordinarily restrain protest is restored, and political influence is once more denied to the lower class” (1979:32). Unlike the Wukan incident, the struggle for compensation in Peppercorn Village fits into an acceptable framework of struggle which reinforces rather than challenging the existing system of power.

In addition to Wukan, this NGO intervention also seems to have been inspired by the villagers’ failure to protect Ox Heart Hill through direct action. The NGO and the legal advisors it invited seem to have been right in the sense that the villagers’ adoption of a more legalistic

approach and (apparent) avoidance of direct action resulted in a more positive result than that in the hill struggle, since in most cases (including Peppercorn), the villagers managed to increase the amount of compensation for the confiscated land. However, as noted above, the two struggles are not really comparable, since with the hill their goal was not compensation by an end to the excavation for “superstitious” reasons that could not have been articulated in legal discourse. More importantly, this more complete turn to legality also marked a change in power relations. The NGO and the legal advisors (including one from the local government) became the authorities guiding the peasants’ action, and ultimately the authority became the state-defined legal system itself, which in this case and more generally can be seen as basically subservient to capitalist interests (including both immediate gains such as real estate development and the accelerated circulation of capital through the highway and airport, as well as capital’s longer-term gain by increasing the process of peasants’ semi-proletarianization and their more complete integration into the monetary economy).

On the other hand, in comparison with the “constructive” projects such as the co-op, this third case of contentious collective action also seems to have been more successful at fostering a broader cooperation among peasants – in this case, not only from Peppercorn but also from other villages throughout Guizhou – into a common project that seems to have benefitted them all, rather than exacerbating economic competition among peasants or generating capitalistic relations among cooperators. Like the previous two cases, this action seems to have fostered the alternative value of cooperation, and arguably to have contributed to the building of collective peasant power. The main difference is that, in this case, that collective power was articulated through the basically capitalist form of legality, so any tendency toward developing an *autonomous* collective power was weakened.

In the final, concluding chapter, I will connect these experiences from Peppercorn to those of the other three case studies in order to draw some more general conclusions about how such efforts to foster alternative values and cooperation relate to the capitalist form of value and the development of autonomous peasant power.



## Conclusion

These ethnographic case studies point toward multiple trajectories of analysis, but for the purpose of this dissertation, I have focused on how a few Chinese peasants are attempting to negotiate a central contradiction in market-oriented experiments with “social economy”: between commercial means and non-capitalist ends, in a game where the rules are set by capital, so commercial success tends to require the adoption of capitalist logic. This is not to dismiss such projects as hopeless, but to add a “structural” awareness of the forces at play, and of the rules that must be changed in order to redefine “success” beyond the limits of alternativism.

Returning to the literature on alternative economic forms introduced in Chapter 1, “what kinds of political connections... are made in the formation and development” of these cooperative experiments? Among these four, the one that started as an oppositional movement and continued to show its teeth to local authorities every now and then – Wansheng – seems to have been the most community-oriented and active in promoting “subaltern self-organization,” but its leaders interpreted these very characteristics as their main stumbling blocks to the economic development and political space they felt necessary to survive and increase their impact on the broader community. They and I both interpret Raoling’s relative success (in generating income, funding a variety of projects, and reversing the flow of “young talent”) as stemming from its combination of (a) more conventional commercial form and content, and (b) its different way of dealing with power: instead of confronting official corruption in the name of ideals, Raoling’s founders seem to be using their commercial success, community service, and kinship alliances to *become* local authorities, in a sense.

Here it should be noted that some of Wansheng's founders also got elected as village leaders after leading a campaign to recall the previous leaders for corruption, but after a few years in office they concluded that village leaders must obey the party-state in fulfilling tasks that did more harm than good to the community, so instead they tried to develop the co-op as an independent sort of "counter-power" (my term). It is arguable that Raoling's "empire" is also a counter-power, since it is based primarily outside of the party-state, but structurally it resembles a government or corporation. (One observer compared it to a "people's commune" of the Mao era, since it combines economic, cultural, and governmental functions in a single hierarchical structure.)

As mentioned in Chapter 5, Raoling also encountered mild state repression on one occasion, but apparently this was quite different from that affecting Wansheng: instead of backlash for asserting peasant economic interests against state corruption, in this case state authorities were responding to complaints from other local peasants who felt that Raoling had wronged them. Raoling leaders said these trouble-makers had been paid by former village authorities whose (already limited) power was being displaced by Raoling's development. Regardless of who is right, this seems to be more a matter of competition among interests within the rural community, rather than a confrontation with party-state power and the broader capitalist interests it serves.

To clarify, I interpret China's postsocialist party-state and its corruption, along with many forms of NGO intervention, as on the one hand relatively autonomous (having their own distinctive interests and logics), and yet (intentionally or not) tending to support the capitalist drive for expanded reproduction of surplus-value in various ways. This analysis is supported by Wansheng Co-op director Gao's comment (in Chapter 4) that the party-state "recognizes only the

market, it doesn't recognize society. This is also supported by Christof Lammer's (2012) ethnography of an NRR project in Henan, which exemplifies this tendency more clearly than my own more ambiguous cases.

### ***Capitalist Relations in "Imagined Cooperatives"***

The Henan project, initiated by academics in collaboration with the local (county-level) state, started as a fairly participatory co-op oriented toward the village's common welfare, but the combination of market pressures and corruption exacerbated pre-existing inequalities, transforming the co-op into a more narrowly profit-oriented enterprise run by four village leaders, hiring workers to buy, package, and sell products from farmers, similar to any other "middleman." Lammer (2012:147) concluded that "through the cooperative projects, a capitalist mode of production entered the village and led to relations between capitalists and workers... within the village," whereas previously peasants had engaged in such class relations only *outside* the village. Ironically (and dialectically), these projects point toward non-capitalist possibilities – mainly by *bringing capitalism closer to home*:

Those who appropriated the value produced by the peasants in order to realize it in the sphere of exchange were now more visible and feasible. This spatial change, in combination with the organization's claim to be a cooperative, opened new possibilities for struggles concerning the appropriation of value. Some peasants started to challenge the cooperative and those who dominated it, with the alleged aim to transform it into what they referred to as "real cooperatives" (Lammer 2012:162).

This NRR project thus unintentionally opened a new space for post-capitalist imagination by bringing capitalist relations into the village, where exploitation could be more easily observed and contested, as well as by claiming these relations were “cooperative,” with the implication that “cooperative” means something other than capitalist.

Drawing on Marc Edelman’s (1999) notion of “imagined organizations,” Lammer coins the term “imagined cooperatives” in reference to two senses: (1) that the co-ops were a “fake” image created by proponents to gain support from NGOs and enlightened consumers, and (2) that disillusioned peasants’ negative critique also involved a positive imagining of the possibility of a more ideal form of “real cooperative.” Lammer then mobilizes this real but imaginal space, observed in peasant discourse, to critique Gabriela Vargas-Cetina’s (2005) proposition that anthropologists should forsake the “prospective” approach to peasant co-ops proposed by June Nash and Nicholas Hopkins (1976). The latter had framed the anthropological study of co-ops as oriented less toward the problems of existing co-ops and more toward “the social forms into which we may be about to move,” including co-ops’ ideal of promoting participants’ “willful control of one’s own social forms” (Nash and Hopkins 1976:4, quoted in Lammer 2012:159). In contrast, Vargas-Cetina argued that anthropologists “have to be humbler; where Nash and Hopkins wanted to look into the future, we find ourselves trying to grapple with the constantly changing present” (quoted in Lammer 2012:159). She thus proposed that, instead of comparing some ideal or “prospective” cooperative form with the form of actual organizations calling themselves “co-ops,” we should simply examine the latter as they exist. Lammer objects to this approach on the grounds that that “Studying cooperatives would be no longer about imagining possible social relations that are different from what exists in the present,” so our work’s “creative tension would be lost” (2012:160). I agree with this objection; my main difference

from Lammer is that I do not identify such “possible social relations” with any ideal cooperative form, on the grounds that even those co-ops that come closest to alternative ideals tend either to dissolve in the face of competition with “fake” co-ops or capitalist enterprises, or to generate capitalistic relations internally. Instead I argue that the more community-oriented cooperation and alternative values associated with some co-ops as well as contentious collective action tend to point beyond the cooperative form of market-oriented enterprise.

Wansheng comes closest to the NRR ideal of a “real co-op” among any co-op I have observed or read about (except perhaps the cooperative hotel described by Bryer in Argentina). I do not know how Wansheng could become more “real” within its capitalist context and still be able to generate the income necessary for the survival and development of even its community-oriented activities. This is thus my critique of the alternativism that might be read into even Lammer’s conclusions: the non-capitalist ideals inspired by these NRR projects might achieve realization, but they seem unlikely to do so except by expanding outward into confrontation with their broader social conditions – by becoming *anti*-capitalist. Obviously this is easier said than done: the rights-defense work of Wansheng and the villagers of Peppercorn (Chapter 7) could be understood as the beginning of an attack on these conditions,<sup>254</sup> and we have seen how such action has elicited repression that constricted Wansheng’s space for even non-political activities. On the other hand, such militancy on the part of peasants and peasant-workers has probably contributed more toward improving peasant conditions over the past decade than any “constructive” projects, by forcing the state to adopt policy changes such as the abolition of most taxes and fees levied on peasants, and by forcing capital to increase wages for peasant-workers. Retreating inward to focus on market-oriented alternative development alone seems to point at

best toward *the development of alternative capitalism* – bringing the specter of class struggle home to haunt the village, as suggested by Lammer’s study.

Projects such as Raoling, Liao Flats, and Peppercorn may thus be interpreted as more modest success stories of alternative capitalism or “social economy”: they are more environmentally sustainable, they allow members to make money closer to home and “keep one foot in the soil” of something like a “peasant economy,” and some provide more community services than a typical capitalist enterprise. Even this modest success, however, has depended on participants’ further integration into an unstable globalized economy, rather than buffering them from its fluctuations. Those, such as Liao Flats, oriented entirely toward niche markets for a narrow range of perishable goods seem especially vulnerable. Those, such as Raoling, with a more diverse range of income streams combined with the internal production of necessities seem better prepared to weather the socioeconomic storm predicted (in different ways) by both NRR advocates (such as Mao Gangqiang) and outside observers (such as Foster and McChesney [2012]).

Although NRR advocates tend to advise against oppositional activities and effectively end up supporting the development of (alternative) capitalist relations, the movement has also helped stimulate vibrant collaborations among many thousands of peasants, workers, and students, as well as connections beyond China. These may facilitate the creation of yet unforeseen alternatives to the convergence of crises known as global capitalist modernity.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> My translation. This poem was quoted to me as “身居茅屋，眼看全球；足踩污泥，心忧天下” (more literally, “Body dwelling under a thatched roof, eyes looking at the entire planet; feet treading on the earth, heart/mind worrying about [everything] under heaven”). That differs slightly from the original (身居茅屋，眼看全球；脚踩污泥，心怀天下), as discussed below.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this dissertation, all names of individuals and places below the prefectural level have been changed to protect informants, except for certain well-known intellectuals. “Auntie Wu” wrote this poem in my notebook on June 10, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> On the post-1960s epistemic impasse and unraveling of historico-political categories, see Alexander Day’s (2007:11-16) discussion of Alessandro Russo’s work.

<sup>4</sup> On the depoliticization of politics, see Wang Hui’s (2009) book on this topic.

<sup>5</sup> On “catastrophism – the apocalyptic politics of collapse and rebirth,” see Lilley, et al. (2012). For a different take on a similar theme, see Williams’ (2011) study of the “apocalyptic fantasies of our collapsing era” of “late capitalism,” which Williams dates to the mid-1970s.

<sup>6</sup> Apparently this phrase (which by 2008 “was everywhere, but came from nowhere in particular”) first appeared as such in Jameson (2003:76).

<sup>7</sup> For an overview of the Global Justice Movement, see Della Porta (2006).

<sup>8</sup> I borrow the term “alternativist” from French *communisateur* discourse, where it refers to “those who believe it possible to fulfill their desire for change within capitalist society, alongside the mainstream, in an alternative or countercultural world – a kind of third option between reform and revolution” (Noys 2011:264). Since the 1990s, alternativism has tended to fill the vacuum of disillusionment with both capitalist reformism and what passed for socialist revolution in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The concept is similar to the anarchist idea of “prefigurative politics,” except that alternativism tends to drop the idea of building toward a future revolution or systematic change; instead of “building the new world within the shell of the old” (as the old IWW slogan put it), alternativists attempt to build alternative worlds *alongside* the old, some even saying that capitalism is equally acceptable as long as tempered by other economic forms (e.g. Gibson-Graham 2006a).

<sup>9</sup> This short-lived but important NRR base was at the site of James Yen’s first Rural Reconstruction base in the 1930s.

<sup>10</sup> After the Yen Institute’s closure in the 2007, this role was largely adopted by the Liang Shuming Center for Rural Reconstruction in Beijing, discussed in Chapter 3.

<sup>11</sup> I discuss the Marxian concept of capital’s crisis of overaccumulation in Chapter 3. In Chinese state policy discourse, a similar concept is referred to as “overproduction” and the need to increase domestic demand (as discussed, for example, in Day [2007:232]).

<sup>12</sup> I discuss this background of peasant unrest, intellectual politics, and policy changes in Chapter 3.

<sup>13</sup> I discuss postsocialist China’s mainstream developmentalism (and its relation to global developmentalism) in Chapter 2. For now it can be summed up in Deng Xiaoping’s slogan “Development alone is incontestable logic” (*fazhan cai shi ying daoli*), and the goals of economic growth, increasing consumption, increasing productivity, urbanization, etc. I borrow the term “developmentalism” from the postcolonial critique of post-WWII development policy discourse summarized in Escobar (2001). Some of these critics (including Escobar) consider proposals for “alternative development” (of which NRR would be an example) as still subject to the flawed logic of developmentalism, but I limit the term to mainstream (capitalist and socialist) ideologies of development.

<sup>14</sup> Missing is the northeast; Day (2007, 2008, 2013) has written about a project there. In the more industrialized southeast, NRR-affiliated activists tend to focus on food and migrant labor issues. The northwest has been less important for NRR.

<sup>15</sup> I visited a few ethnic minority sites but decided against them for consistency, and because I could not understand the everyday speech there.

<sup>16</sup> Some NRR advocates – including the leaders of peasant organizations (as discussed in Chapter 5) – do look to re-collectivized villages such as Nanjie for inspiration. However, even in those cases NRR advocates are pretty consistent about distinguish their own model of rural development from the re-collectivization model. The

---

organization introduced in Chapter 5, for example, briefly attempted to emulate Nanjie in organizing a collective farm, but that project failed after a year, and the leaders decided on separating “collective management” (marketing, etc.) from “household production.” Such a separation (first theorized by Chayanov, as discussed below) is one of a few characteristics shared among otherwise diverging currents of NRR and distinguishing them from other left-leaning Chinese currents such as Maoism (although there is some overlap).

<sup>17</sup> For a recent effort to retheorize “social economy” as a “niche in capitalism” that might become part of “a pathway beyond” under certain circumstances, see Erik Olin Wright (2010, 2013). Wright (2010:23) argues that if certain institutional supports were implemented, “the space for the various forms of the social economy would certainly expand,” but “What remains unclear is whether, even with these supports in place” such an expansion would be sufficient to “contribute to eroding the dominance of capitalism.”

<sup>18</sup> Miller (2010:2) notes that this term was also used in revolutionary Spain in 1937, “when Felipe Alaiz advocated for the construction of an *economía solidaria* between worker collectives in urban and rural areas.” He does not indicate whether those reviving this term in the 1980s were aware of this earlier usage.

<sup>19</sup> My emphasis on “values.”

<sup>20</sup> To clarify, this orientation is considered to be “left-leaning” in China. Support for “rights-defense” is generally associated with (right-wing) liberalism, because many liberals indeed try to channel popular unrest into a program of strengthening of private property rights and “the rule of law.” The moderate left, on the other hand (including most NRR intellectuals – there are also radical left, right-wing, and “apolitical” NRR advocates), tend to discourage “rights-defense” out of concern for (1) maintaining social stability, and (2) channeling that energy into “constructive” directions.

<sup>21</sup> This pattern has changed somewhat in China today, as, from about age 16 to 25, both male and female peasants increasingly devote most of their labor-power to capitalist firms, sending some of their wages home and saving up to found their own households, after which women either marry and return to the traditional pattern, or give their children to their in-laws to raise and continue working until middle age, now contributing their wages both to their parents and their husbands’ households. Men usually continue to focus on wage labor until they get too old to find worthwhile employment, when they finally return to something like their traditional role as working heads of the peasant household/enterprise (this position is, in general, not as privileged as in the past due to the increased power of young people through their access to wages, and the history of movements to increase the power of women and children in China).

<sup>22</sup> Chayanov did not use the term “unequal exchange” – it was coined by Arghiri Emanuel in reference to commercial imperialism and applied by Hamza Alavi (1987) to capital’s exploitation of peasants via price mechanisms, as mentioned above. I use it here out of convenience, since Chayanov’s analysis implies something like this concept.

<sup>23</sup> It should be noted here that it has been common for peasant households to supplement their cash income with wage labor – in China, Europe and elsewhere – for centuries. However, there does seem to be a global trend for peasant households to become increasingly dependent on wage income over the past few decades or years, thus warranting the introduction of terms such as “semi-proletarian.”

<sup>24</sup> One study that comes close to this approach is that of Ann Lucas de Rouffignac (1985), on Mexican *campesinos* in the 1980s. I will address this study in the concluding chapter.

<sup>25</sup> This *operaismo* approach is consistent with Marx’s comments, for example, in the *Communist Manifesto*’s outline of a historical process through which “the collisions between individual workmen and individual bourgeois take more and more the character of collisions between two classes”: “Now and then the workers are victorious, but only for a time. The real fruit of their battles lies, not in the immediate result, but in the ever expanding union of the workers.” Marx (1848) also notes that a class can decompose: “This organisation of the proletarians into a class, and, consequently into a political party, is continually being upset again by the competition between the workers themselves.” (Note also the different sense of “party” from that prevalent since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century – for Marx and his contemporaries, a “party” is simply an alliance based on common interests and goals.)

<sup>26</sup> He Xuefeng does not use the label “northern China current” for Wen Tiejun and his followers. I heard this term (*huabeipai*) from self-described members of a “southern China current” (associated with a network based in Guangxi called Aionghui, as well as with organizations involved in my third case study, Liao Flats). He Xuefeng and his followers do embrace the label “central China current (or school)” (*huazhong xiangtu pai*). This primarily refers to their scholarship rather than their social practice and policy recommendations, but I think it is appropriate to extend this label to the latter.



---

<sup>27</sup> One reader noted that 75 percent of enterprises in general fail. To clarify, He Xuefeng is not arguing that peasants should focus on non-cooperative forms of enterprise, but that they should focus on non-entrepreneurial forms of cooperation.

<sup>28</sup> It should be noted that certain parts of rural China (such as the Yangzi Delta researched by Huang [^]) had long been much more commercialized than the Southeast Asian peasant communities examined by Scott. “The question,” as Stevan Harrell notes (personal communication), “is not markets but how much markets and how their rules and institutions for exchange (particularly price-setting mechanisms) operate.”

<sup>29</sup> By “village committee” I mean the “two village committees” (*cunliangwei*) that function as *de facto* government in rural China below the level of township – technically the lowest level of the Chinese state, with the village committees technically “autonomous” or “self-administrated” (*zizhi*). A village committee consists of (1) the village branch or committee of the Chinese Communist Party, and (2) the *villager* committee, consisting of about five members elected democratically (in principle, at least) by all adult villagers. I use the single term “village committee” since these two committees usually function as one body, often consisting of the same people. (One important exception among my case studies is discussed in Chapter 5.)

<sup>30</sup> Such as Peng Dapeng.

<sup>31</sup> One quite different NRR-affiliated theorist who has risen to prominence more recently is Yang Tuan, researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and founding director of the NGO “Center for Consultation of Farmers’ Associations.” Among my case studies, Yang’s current has had the most interaction with Raoling Association (Chapter 5) since about 2009. In short, Yang has been promoting what she calls the “East Asian model of comprehensive farmers’ associations” represented by the major farmers’ associations in Korea, Japan, and especially Taiwan. This current seems to navigate the grey area between NRR and the mainstream ideology of rural development in China. In general it seems to differ from other currents of NRR in its less critical position toward capitalism and large-scale bureaucratic organization. (As Stevan Harrell described Taiwan’s Farmers’ Associations [personal communication], they have been “mainly a state vehicle to regulate rice supply and prices by a fertilizer monopoly that enforce a partial grain monopsony and thus stabilized rice prices. But they were clearly quasi-state agencies, not organic associations of any kind” – and thus quite different from the ideals of other NRR advocates.) Hairong Yan’s (forthcoming) article begins to address Yang’s ideas and influence.

<sup>32</sup> As Alexander Day notes (personal communication), it appears that Wen Tiejun’s research and reflection on Chinese history had already pointed him in a similar direction as Polanyi’s work, then Wen later began to adopt some Polanyian terminology. Wen does not explicitly state what I am calling his “adaptation” of the Polanyian framework – instead, I am noting the subtle differences between Wen’s framework and Polanyi’s. The same could be said of writers from other countries who use terms such as “social protection” and “fictitious commodities” without necessarily acknowledging the origin of these terms or how Polanyi used them.

<sup>33</sup> “Robbed of the protective covering of cultural institutions, human beings would perish... as the victims of acute social dislocation through vice, perversion, crime, and starvation. Nature would be reduced to its elements, neighborhoods and landscapes defiled, rivers polluted... the power to produce food and raw materials destroyed. Finally, the market administration of purchasing power would periodically liquidate business enterprise...” (Polanyi 1957:73).

<sup>34</sup> According to Polanyi (1957:182), the state started recognizing the need to regulate land use in the 1870s.

<sup>35</sup> Wen’s complex account of China’s unique history and national conditions is summarized in Day (2007). “National conditions” has been a key concept in Chinese intellectual engagement with global capitalist modernity since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, including by founders of the original Rural Reconstruction Movement such as Liang Shuming, as introduced below.

<sup>36</sup> For an example of NRR critique of the capitalist development of agriculture, see Wen (2007). This resonates with recent concerns among the global left about the “global land grab,” and the debate between advocates of “land governance” and “land sovereignty” (Borras and Franco 2012). Land grabbing in China and globally have been driven by the financialization of food as a sector of speculative investment, which both caused and took new impetus from the global food crisis of 2008.

<sup>37</sup> This fear resonates with concerns among the global left about de-peasantization and “urban involution,” such as Davis (2006).

<sup>38</sup> In interviews, certain NRR advocates explicitly referred to China’s history of peasant uprisings as a major impetus for their promotion of peasant organization as a means of “social protection” in the present. For a (less apocalyptic) example of NRR discourse about the threat of “chaos,” see Wen (2012).

---

<sup>39</sup> This specter often appears as a central rhetorical device in policy recommendations written by NRR advocates as well as their liberal opponents. Regarding land tenure, for example, NRR advocates argue that the commoditization of land is driving China to chaos, so state and collective control over land should be strengthened, whereas their liberal opponents argue that the weakness of legal protection for private land tenure is driving China to chaos, so land should be more fully commoditized. It should be noted that this fear of unrest and exultation of “stability” are not uniquely Chinese: they have long been invoked on both the left and right globally, in recent years taking new forms in response to uprisings such as the food riots of 2007-2008, and in growing worries about the convergence of crises in the intertwined spheres of economy, climate, and energy. For an analysis of such discourses, see Wildcat (2011).

<sup>40</sup> For an example of the NRR fear of China’s “Latin Americanization,” see Wen (2007). For an example of liberal critique of this aspect of NRR, see the work of Peng Dapeng.

<sup>41</sup> Interviews with two NRR-affiliated academics, November 21, 2007 and February 15, 2008.

<sup>42</sup> Translation slightly modified.

<sup>43</sup> I use the terms “moral” and “governmental,” rather than “political,” because these critiques share with both the original Rural Reconstruction movement and much recent leftist discourse, in China and elsewhere, an emphasis on personal morality and statist approaches to popular agency, focused on preserving “social stability.” My choice of terms is also in reference to Wang Hui’s (2009) writing on the post-1960s “depoliticization of politics” in China and globally, and to Foucault’s (2008) lectures on “governmental rationality.”

<sup>44</sup> This new awareness among Chinese intellectuals of such struggles abroad coincided with a major debate (going back to the mid-1990s) over whether land should be privatized. This debate was revived in 2007 as new state-led experiments in the increased commoditization of land (formally owned collectively by villages with various restrictions on land use) began in China’s pilot sites for “comprehensive integration of urban and rural development” (*tongchou chengxiang zonghe peitao gaige*). (In Chapter 6 I discuss the friction between this policy and one NRR project.) One NRR-affiliated statement about this policy (Hu 2008) called such experimentation in Chongqing “an extremely risky move” because China’s existing system of land tenure played the important role of “substituting for unemployment and retirement insurance” for the majority of Chinese households – something the author believed neither state nor market were capable of providing. For example, some of these experiments aimed to replace household contracts with shares in agricultural enterprises (from which shareholders could divest at will, thus losing their access to land), with the idea of stimulating economic development by increasing the scale of agricultural production. The author responds (echoing Chayanov) that this logic is based on “a misunderstanding of agriculture,” whose “performance, especially in the scale economy of field crops, is completely different from other industries.” These experiments in the increased commoditization of land, therefore, would not only result in failed enterprises, but also, as rural shareholders divest of their bankrupt enterprises and thus lose access to land, numerous “peasants” (*nongmin*) will become “refugees” (*nanmin*). (My translation.)

<sup>45</sup> As Wang Ximing (2007:3-5) notes, the term *cunzhi* (村治) was first coined by the Village Self-Government Movement (discussed below) in 1904, which eventually became part of the Rural Reconstruction Movement. In the 1980s, political scientists redefined the term as “villager self-government” (村民自治), referring to villagers’ election of their own governmental bodies (villager committees). In the early 2000s, the “central China school” of rural studies and NRR (associated with He Xuefeng, as discussed above) again redefined the term as “rural governance” (乡村治理), defined as “the processes and effects of people’s use of public power to govern rural society,” referring mainly to “villagers’ cooperation with the state, through [official villager committees as well as unofficial organizations such as seniors’ associations] to provide public goods beneficial to raising the level of public welfare” (translated in Wang Ximing 2009:668 n. 2). For further discussion of this concept, see the collection Day and Hale, eds. (2008).

<sup>46</sup> Interviews with Luo Xingzuo, February 17, 2008; Wang Ximing, March 7, 2008; Tan Tongxue, March 7, 2008.

<sup>47</sup> For more details on Kerala’s “alternative development” experience, see Parayil (2000).

<sup>48</sup> Huang, et al. (2001) is an online transcript that contains some but not all passages from both these texts, with a few differences in organization and a few sentences not published elsewhere.

<sup>49</sup> This positive use of the term *linglei* was introduced to the mainland by Hong Kong advocates such as Lau Kin Chi in publications such as her reports on Kerala and her interviews with KSSP leaders, including two publications in the same issue of the left-leaning literary journal *Tianya* as the transcription of this discussion (Lau 2001; Sit and Lau 2001). It has been occasionally adopted by mainland NRR advocates, but more common are terms such as “rural-centered” (*yi nong wei ben*) or “peasant-centered” (*nongmin benwei*), or, when making policy

recommendations, Hu Jintao's terms "scientific approach to development" and "ecological civilization" (*kexue fazhan guan* and *shengtai wenming* – similar to the English term "sustainable development," but with consideration of China's "national conditions" added to the notion of sustainability). According to one informant, a likely reason the term *linglei* has not caught on among mainland NRR advocates is that the term has a negative connotation in Chinese political discourse. (Interview with Peng Yinghao, February 22, 2008.) Another reason is that terms like "peasant-centered" or "from the peasantry's perspective" are both more specific than *linglei* and add a vaguely class-based implication that some NRR advocates (e.g. those associated with the He Xuefeng's "central China" current) consider important to NRR (and which they criticize Wen Tiejun in particular for neglecting). (Interview with Tan Tongxue, March 7, 2008; also see He 2007a.)

<sup>50</sup> According to a search of the Chinese Academic Journals Full-text Database, [www.cnki.net](http://www.cnki.net), February 11, 2008.

<sup>51</sup> Less clear from these discussions is how to define such "alternative development" in contrast with "mainstream development." Lau's colleague Hui Po-keung seems to have come closest in his influential article on "developmentalism" (Hui 1999), where he called for "alternative paths of development (or 'non-development') that might more directly improve people's lives," "raise people's quality of life," or "improve people's welfare," as opposed to focusing on economic growth as a prerequisite for such improvements. The excerpts from a 2003 "Sino-Indian Rural Reconstruction Exchange Meeting" (Bolan 2004:4) between NRR advocates and KSSP leaders, noted that KSSP won the Right Livelihood Award for its contribution to "human-centered social development" (*yi ren wei ben de shehui fazhan*). This term refers to a set of (mainly English-language) debates about measuring development, in which terms such as "human development" and "social development" are used to describe Kerala's high ranking in quality of life indicators, "capabilities," "political participation," "sustainability," etc., despite the state's low level of "economic development" (defined by GDP, per capita income and consumption, etc.). (These debates are summarized in Parayil [2000]). In the 2001 proto-NRR publications on Kerala, Lau Kin Chi comes close to defining alternative development with the term "development and happiness with low consumption" (Sit and Lau 2001:58), but the aspects of Kerala's alterity that the speakers emphasized were its alternative *means* of development, especially KSSP's mass education work and its role in mobilizing peasants to participate in democratically planning and carrying out local development projects with state support.

<sup>52</sup> This comment about "uniting scattered efforts" was made by Dai Jinhua, but it seems to have been a consensus among the participants. More recently, some of the most prominent NRR advocates have disavowed the term *yundong* ("movement" or "campaign"), which they associate with Mao-era mass mobilization (to which they are clearly opposed), saying that they prefer the terms "experimentation" (*shiyang*) and "social practice" (*shehui shijian*) to describe their activities, which they think should be organized primarily through NGOs and universities in cooperation with the party-state. (Interview with Wen Tiejun, March 12, 2008; He Huili, March 13, 2008.) Other NRR advocates, however, continue to embrace both the term *yundong* and certain aspects of the type of mass mobilization and autonomous "mass organizations" they associate with both the late Mao era and the Kerala experience, which they criticize for disturbing social order, but affirm as "the best way to actualize mass supervision" of the party-state to "prevent bureaucratism" and ensure that the party-state serves peasant interests, and also as a way to mobilize mass participation in cooperative projects such as irrigation projects. (The quotations are from an interview with Wang Ximing, March 7, 2008, but this is also a theme throughout the work of He Xuefeng and his vision of "cultural reconstruction.")

<sup>53</sup> The term "revolution in a cultural sense" seems to be an editorial change in the *Tianya* version (Lau, et al. 2001) from the term "cultural revolution" in the online version, but I continue to use it to indicate the difference that Dai and others clearly intend (whether the difference is tenable is another matter). The second sentence above, about China's Cultural Revolution, was omitted from the *Tianya* version.

<sup>54</sup> Since there is not difference between singular and plural in Chinese, it is often unclear whether this term (*xiaonong jingji*) implies that China has one national peasant economy (as in Wen's phrase quoted below, that "China is still basically a peasant economy") or whether each household or rural community has its own semi-autonomous peasant economy (in Chayanov's sense). Chinese language allows for this term to mean both at the same time.

<sup>55</sup> E.g. Wen Tiejun, "WTO yu Zhongguo 'sannong wenti,'" *Shandong nongye*, no. 1 (2000): 25, a longer version of which was published online as "WTO yu Zhongguo nongye, nongcun, nongmin wenti," *Sannong Zhongguo*, <http://www.snzg.cn/article/show.php?itemid-100/page-1.html>, accessed February 13, 2008).

<sup>56</sup> ("Xuyao chongfen taolun de liang jian nongye da shi," *Sannong Zhongguo*, <http://www.snzg.cn/article/show.php?itemid-4987/page-1.html>, accessed February 13, 2008).

<sup>57</sup> According to a search of the Chinese Academic Journals Database, [www.cnki.net](http://www.cnki.net), February 11, 2008.

<sup>58</sup> This issue of the left-leaning (mainly literary) journal *Tianya* also included a report by Lau on her research in

---

Kerala since 1996 and interviews with two KSSP leaders, and *China Reform* (a popular news magazine edited by Wen Tiejun at the time), published one of these interviews with the title “Bottom-Up Policy-Making for Public Goods.” All these texts emphasized that KSSP’s two decades of training grassroots cadre in mass education and resource-mapping laid an “organizational foundation” for Kerala’s devolution of state funds to local governments and organizations in 1996, and that “grassroots” control over public property and “participatory local governance” were the keys to sustainable development for “small peasant economies,” thus echoing Liang Shuming’s theory of Rural Reconstruction and foreshadowing major themes of subsequent NRR theory and experimentation (Lau 2001; Lau and Sit 2001; Raina 2001).

<sup>59</sup> Lau Kin Chi, et al., “Xiangcun jianshe,” *Zhongguo Gaige (Nongcun Ban)*, no. 5 (2003):42.

<sup>60</sup> Insiders were unwilling to make a public statement about why the institute closed, but it was probably due to the threat it posed to the party-state’s hegemony in the sphere of rural development.

<sup>61</sup> The China Social Services and Development Research Centre (CSD), run entirely on donations by members (mainly Hong Kong academics) and voluntary labor. CSD is affiliated with the Asian Regional Exchange for New Alternative (ARENA), an umbrella of similar NGOs, including KSSP, throughout Asia, which Lau has chaired for several years. CSD and ARENA have served as institutional links between NRR and foreign organizations and activists, for example by organizing the 2001 visit to Kerala and several international workshops. CSD was also one of the three funding institutions of the Yen Institute, along with the UK-based NGO Action Aid and Wen’s institution – first the China Reform Institute (publisher of the *China Reform* magazines), later the School of Agricultural Economics and Rural Development at Renmin University of China.

<sup>62</sup> These institutions are the School of Sociology at CASS (Huang Ping’s unit), the School of Agricultural Economics and Rural Development at Renmin University (Wen Tiejun’s unit), and the Center for Rural Studies at Zhejiang Normal University (Wang Jingxin’s unit).

<sup>63</sup> Since 2008, Yang Tuan has been promoting what she calls the “East Asian model of comprehensive farmers’ associations” represented by the major farmers’ associations in Korea, Japan, and especially Taiwan. See my endnote on Yang Tuan from Chapter 2. I am unclear to what extent the party-state has embraced this model – state officials have attended conferences on this topic organized by Yang Tuan, but I do not know of any state efforts to promote this model. This current seems to navigate the grey area between NRR and the mainstream ideology of rural development in China. In general it seems to differ from NRR in its less critical position toward capitalism and large-scale bureaucratic, quasi-state organization.

<sup>64</sup> Wang Ximing and Peng Xiaowei, “Xin nongcun jianshe zhi guoji jingyan: yi Ri, Han, Fa, Yin wei li,” in *Zhongguo xin nongcun jianshe: lilun, shijian yu zhengce*, edited by the Rural Studies Center of Zhejiang Normal University (Beijing: China Economic Publishing House, 2006), 81.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 81-82.

<sup>66</sup> March 7, 2008.

<sup>67</sup> In this sense, NRR is also opposed to the “New Socialist Countryside” campaign’s (basically Keynesian) strategy of increasing peasant consumption (along with China’s postsocialist ideology in general), although that campaign also distinguishes between “productive” and “wasteful” forms of consumption. In contrast with party-state discourse, however, some NRR advocates blame peasant “wastefulness” on the influence of “bourgeois culture of consumerism,” rather than an inherent defect of “traditional peasant culture” (e.g. He Xuefeng, *Xiangcun de qiantu*).

<sup>68</sup> (“Xunqiu ‘linglei’ fazhan de fanshi: Hanguo Xincun Yundong yu Zhongguo Xiangcun Jianshe,” *Shehuixue yanjiu* (2004), no. 4: 39-49)

<sup>69</sup> Mick Moore, Mobilization and Disillusion in Rural Korea: The Saemaul Movement in Retrospect, *Pacific Affairs* 57: 580

<sup>70</sup> The same year as that international conference (2006), US-based labor scholar Andrew Ross commented that “China is the black hole of the Global Justice Movement.” That may have been partly true relative to China’s population and importance in the global economy, but NRR advocates have also downplayed the transnational dimension of their ideas and activities for political reasons. At the same time, much of this transnational dimension has been indirect, via the ideas of a few major theorists, or unconscious, in that Chinese peasants and their intellectual advocates are responding to similar global trends. In the concluding chapter of this dissertation, I will discuss these trends – described above in NRR advocates’ own terms such as “neoliberalism” – in a more Marxian framework, according to which the capitalist value-form requires the appropriation of any remaining “commons” outside its control while declining in its ability to support the people it has thereby dispossessed.



---

<sup>71</sup> Liu defines the traditional sense of *wenhua* as “artistic cultivation”; Stevan Harrell defines it as “literary transformation,” as discussed below.

<sup>72</sup> On the influence of pre-modern Chinese ideas on Maoism, see, for example Madsen (1984) and Wakeman (1973). Some Chinese New Leftists such as Han Deqiang have also emphasized the continuity between Maoism and earlier Chinese ideologies.

<sup>73</sup> *New Urban Spaces for a Twentieth Century China*.

<sup>74</sup> From this conception of *wenhua* followed “a scale of civilizedness, with the most civilized being those who had the greatest acquaintance with the relevant literary works, namely the scholar-officials who served the imperial state.” Next on the scale were other Han, whose “family life, religion, language and other attributes were similar to those of the literati, even if they had no... direct knowledge of the important literature.” At the bottom of the scale were other ethnic groups, assumed to be “not even indirectly acquainted with the moral principles laid out in the classics” (Harrell 1995:18).

<sup>75</sup> On the difference between China’s modern intellectuals and pre-modern scholar-gentry (*shi*), see Barlow 1991.

<sup>76</sup> The main pedagogical model that Liang sought to develop from Confucian tradition was *jiangxue* (讲学), “the custom of disciples living and learning together in a small group formed around a teacher” (Alitto 1979:124). This model had traditionally been inaccessible to the peasant masses that Confucian literati were supposed to serve, but Liang noted that certain Ming Dynasty neo-Confucians such as Wang Yangming (1472-1529) had developed *jiangxue* in a more inclusive direction by inviting uneducated students of humble background to join the pedagogical circles, and Liang hoped to develop this further to “make Confucius’ path broad and universal” (Alitto 1979:124).

<sup>77</sup> According to Übelhör (1989:373), “The Lü compact centered on four types of injunctions: the first two concerned proper personal conduct; the second two consisted of provisions for the exchange of gifts on the occasion of marriages and funerals and provisions for mutual help in times of need. Desirable behavior... was to be furthered by publicly acknowledging laudable acts, exposing infractions and, if necessary, fining those who violated the terms of the agreement. Praise and blame were to be administrated during monthly assemblies of the compact members and recorded in respective registers. The assembly also was to elect one or two orderly, upright, and incorruptible persons to act as heads of the compact who would be responsible for conducting a fair discussion about appropriate rewards or punishments...”

<sup>78</sup> Similarly, regarding the postsocialist Chinese party-state’s promotion of a comparable model of “villager self-government” involving “village compacts” (*xianggui minyue*), Anagnost (1997:139-140) comments, “these compacts are intended to reinstitute normative rule by means of an economy of ‘face’ in communities whose social order has become threaten by the disintegration of collective organization and the new mobilities in rural areas... The compacts imaginatively position the rural masses as their author *and* object. The ‘masses’ are thereby made subject to a pedagogical practices that they, as active subjects, are said to be the authors of - a neatly recursive maneuver that covers over the fact that the compacts frequently work to reaffirm the power of the local party apparatus.”

<sup>79</sup> Translation paraphrased from Alitto (1979:207).

<sup>80</sup> According to Cao, the development of monetary economy was related to China’s switch from the gold standard to silver in the Song Dynasty, and eventually to the vast influx of silver in the Ming Dynasty. Since the vast importation of silver (mainly from Spanish mines in South America) did not begin until the Ming Dynasty – as Cao mentions – it is unclear how this is related to the Tang-Song transition. Cao seems to slip from a narrative of 10<sup>th</sup> century changes to a longer-term narrative of broader changes from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, then back to the shorter-term narrative. This seems to imply a more linear long-term transformation (toward modernity, apparently) than Wang Hui’s work on the same topic, discussed below.

<sup>81</sup> Wang also makes clear that Maoism failed to overcome modernity, merely reproducing the structures of (capitalist) modernity in “socialist” forms. Note that Murthy’s interpretation of Wang borrows the Marxian concept “global capitalist modernity” from the work of Arif Dirlik (2001). I also find this concept useful and will utilize it in the conclusion.

<sup>82</sup> In other contexts, Wang Hui seems closer to NRR positions, but perhaps this reflects the tension that between reformist practice and utopian theory that, according to Murthy, characterizes many Chinese thinkers since the Song Dynasty.

<sup>83</sup> The phrase is borrowed from Marx (1969). Stevan Harrell notes that “Neo-Confucian thought, particularly the rather ruralist branch associated with Fan Zhongyan, consisted in many ways of a co-optation of Buddhist morality into Confucian ontology.” Alitto’s (1979) study of Liang Shuming also discusses the influence of Buddhism on Liang Shuming and Rural Reconstruction in general.

---

<sup>84</sup> “Proto-modernity” is Murthy’s term for Wang Hui’s description of the elements of Song-Ming society that resembled modernity, but were distinct from modernity as such. As noted above, Cao would probably not draw this distinction, and so would probably not use this term.

<sup>85</sup> My emphasis. Translation modified based on the original (He 2006).

<sup>86</sup> For a similar argument on Maoism’s substitution for (and integration of) traditional values and ideology in rural China, see Madsen (1984). (Thanks to Stevan Harrell for pointing out this connection.)

<sup>87</sup> Chen and He do not spell all this out in their articles – I am also drawing on multiple conversations with them and other students of He.

<sup>88</sup> The term “temporary autonomous zone” (coined by Hakim Bey) is associated with alternativism in the anarchist milieu (against which the term “alternativism” was coined, apparently), but I think it could be extended to NRR projects and their ideal of self-sufficient peasant communities with alternative marketing networks. I would argue that in neither case are these “zones” actually autonomous from the capitalist law of value, even temporarily.

<sup>89</sup> I say “would” because Marx seems to have been convinced that this transformation was inevitable, seeing the role of communists as primarily about helping to speed up and streamline the process. Engels (1877) seems to have been the first Marxist to admit the possibility that this transformation was not inevitable when he wrote, “*If the whole of modern society is not to perish, a revolution in the mode of production and distribution must take place.*” Rosa Luxemburg (1916) later elaborated on this possibility on the eve of World War I, writing that “*Bourgeois society stands at the crossroads, either transition to Socialism or regression into Barbarism.*” According to Alessandro Russo (1998), China’s Cultural Revolution – along with other events of the 1960s-1970s – marks a global “epistemic impasse” due to the “unraveling of historico-political categories,” reflected in Mao Zedong’s oft-repeated statement that “the revolution would probably be defeated” starting in 1965. To clarify, I interpret Mao’s own self-contradictory politics as ultimately tending more toward the capitalism that eventually triumphed than communism in Marx’s sense, but (as suggested in this dissertation’s preface) I agree with Russo in regarding this “thesis of the probable defeat” as symptomatic of a global epistemic shift since the 1960s that defines the space in which communists must now operate.

<sup>90</sup> After 1871 the Paris Commune became the main referent for both Marxist and anarchist communists, so that to be a communist meant to carry out the world-historical consequences of that event, different interpretations of which resulted in various factions among communists (Bestor 1948). However, taking this and subsequent events (such as the global 1960s, as mentioned in the previous footnote and this dissertation’s preface) as points of reference can be consistent with Marx’s anti-ideological formulation of communism as “the real movement...” For some very different recent examples, see Badiou (2010) and Endnotes (2008).

<sup>91</sup> At the end of Chapter 1 Marx writes, “this fetishism of the world of commodities arises from the peculiar social character of the labour which produces them” (165), but that character could refer to commodity production in general rather than capitalism in particular. I have noticed scattered indications throughout Marx’s writings that basically the same type of commodity existed before (modern industrial) capitalism, and that its “law of value... only begins to develop itself freely on the basis of capitalist production” (Marx 1990:676). Marx also mentions that pre-modern social mechanisms actively discouraged the development of capitalist relations from commodity production, for example “The guild system of the Middle Ages therefore tried forcibly to prevent the transformation of the master of a craft into a capitalist, by limiting the number of workers a single master could employ to a very low maximum” (1990:423). This seems similar to Polanyi’s account of how societies before the 19<sup>th</sup> century regulated marketing practices (and to Hill Gates’ argument in *China’s Motor*). *I would therefore liken the commodity in general to a seed that has existed throughout history, but which never had the opportunity to germinate and socially assert its own form of value except under rare conditions*, such as those in parts of Western Europe starting around the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and perhaps earlier in China, as suggested above (although Chinese historians have reserved the term “sprouts of capitalism” for the Ming Dynasty). These proto-capitalist sprouts from the commodity-form still did not grow into something recognizable as the capitalist mode of production until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the necessary combination of local and global conditions came together in England (largely through historical accident, according to Pomeranz [2001]), after which – like kudzu in North America – the modern capitalist form of commodity production sent out its runners across the planet, subordinating and transforming (through “articulation” [Wolpe 1980]) all other modes of production with which it came into contact.

<sup>92</sup> Marx also describes the relation between value and (abstract) labor as “a secret hidden under the apparent movements in the relative values of commodities” (168).

<sup>93</sup> My italics added.

<sup>94</sup> Another of Marx’s gothic images is perhaps an even better illustration of value’s supernatural and external, objective nature (in contrast with subjective values): “Modern bourgeois society, with its relations of production, of

---

exchange and of property, a society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, is like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells” (Marx and Engels 1848).

<sup>95</sup> Dupont (2009).

<sup>96</sup> Apparently Marx’s comment quoted above, that “Value... does not have its description branded on its forehead,” was an allusion to the branding laws beginning in 1547, requiring “anyone [who] refuses to work... to be branded on forehead or back with the letter S” (marking him as a slave to “the person who has denounced him as an idler”); requiring “vagabonds” to be branded with the letter V, and “rogues” to be branded with the letter R (1990:897-898).

<sup>97</sup> I am not sure where the value of this blood plasma derives from – the labor of donating blood and regenerating it? Its price (exchange-value) would probably be much higher than its value since its supply is probably much lower than its demand – originally for cultural reasons that Anagnost discusses (one way in which subjective values interacts with value), and now due to fear about contracting HIV.

<sup>98</sup> According to Joel Andreas (2009), another way that the Cultural Revolution inadvertently laid the foundation for the development of capitalist relations was by targeting the privilege of “political” and “cultural” elites, thereby pushing these two previously conflicting groups together in support of Deng Xiaoping and his reforms.

<sup>99</sup> Anagnost (2013:12) remarks that “the question of whether we can use the term *neoliberal* to transformations of economy and society” in a given country should focus less on specific policies and more on “whether there is a prevailing ethos of ‘empowering’ individuals as risk-bearing subjects and unleashing the power of markets to order human affairs.” In Chapter 5 I address this more Foucauldian sense of neoliberalism as a governmentality.

<sup>100</sup> Another point he mentions (without clear explanation of how it relates to these others points) is that “neoliberalization in authoritarian states such as China and Singapore seems to be converging with the increasing authoritarianism evident in neoliberal states such as the US and Britain.” The block quotation from *Aufheben* below more coherently explains why this is important for the health of capitalism. This will enter my analysis of an NRR-affiliated peasant organization in Chapter 4.

<sup>101</sup> Elsewhere (*Aufheben* 2011:26), they argue that the financial crash of 2008 and subsequent recession in countries such as the US was not (as many Marxists continue to argue) caused by “an underlying crisis of stagnation of the real accumulation of capital,” but merely “an oversupply of loanable money-capital within the global banking and financial system [due to] developments in the real accumulation of capital – such as the rise of China, the take-off of the ‘new economy,’ and the continued liquidation of the ‘old economy’ – that have been central to the long upturn” since the mid-1990s. Therefore, “The nature and significance of the financial crisis is not that of a decisive turning point leading to an economic downturn or the end of neoliberalism,” but more of “an earthquake caused by the shifting tectonic plates of global capital accumulation as the centre of accumulation gradually shifts away from the USA and the old advanced capitalist economies towards China and Asia.”

<sup>102</sup> For example, earlier in the same book (Harvey 2005:12), he notes: “By the end of the 1960s embedded liberalism began to break down, both internationally and within domestic economies. Signs of a serious crisis of capital accumulation were everywhere apparent... Keynesian policies were no longer working... The embedded liberalism that had delivered high rates of growth to at least the advanced capitalist countries after 1945 was clearly exhausted... Some alternative was called for if the crisis was to be overcome.” Harvey seems to imply some alternative to either “embedded liberalism” or neoliberalism, but as long as it is capitalism, the law of value would still operate, so similar problems would emerge.

<sup>103</sup> For Marx, declining profitability also involves an increasing ratio of constant to variable capital in particular firms and industries and, in the society as a whole, an increasing volume of capital in various states – money sitting in the bank, idle productive capacity in enterprises, commodities sitting on the shelves of warehouses – alongside an increasing mass of unemployed and under-employed workers, with no profitable way to put this “surplus labor-power” together with the surplus of capital.

<sup>104</sup> In Marx’s example (1967:212), if  $v$  is \$100 and  $s/v$  is 100% (that is, if \$100 is paid to 100 workers for one hour of work, they produce \$200 worth of products during that hour), and  $c$  is \$50, then  $p = 100/150 = 66.6\%$ . If  $s/v$  remains constant and  $c$  increases to \$100, then  $p = 100/200 = 50\%$ , and so on. If  $c$  continues to increase and  $s/v$  remains the same, then  $p$  will eventually approach zero, and capital will lose its *raison d’être*.

<sup>105</sup> Here Marx uses the English terms “depreciation” and “degradation” alongside the German word *Entwertung*, apparently intending them as equivalents (Marx 1983b:643-4), but I think “devaluation” better conveys the specificity of this concept, which seems to indicate not a mere fall in prices (which is but the appearance of value in the sphere of circulation, and often fluctuates above or below the value contained in a commodity), but the annihilation or negation (*Vernichtung*) of value (e.g. 1983b:643). Harvey (1999:193 note 3) notes that “Those who

interpret Marxian value theory as a pure accounting system can make no sense of the idea of ‘devaluation’ .... Quite simply, we can say that if value is interpreted as human labor in its social aspect under capitalism, then ‘not-value’ can be interpreted as human labor that has lost its social meaning.”

<sup>106</sup> For a capitalist, “time is money,” because the faster capital moves through various phases of the production/valorization process (M-C-P-C’-M’), the faster surplus-value accumulates in his bank account. If my capital moves through the various phases more slowly than yours because, for example, my products are being transported via donkey-cart whereas yours are being flown in airplanes, then my capital is losing value as long as it sits in that donkey-cart (in excess of the time it would have taken to fly). This sort of devaluation is bad for me (inasmuch as I identify with my capital), but it’s good for the health of “the economy,” that is, capital as a whole, inasmuch as it lowers the composition of capital as a whole and thus raises the average profit rate. If this is the case, then even more so does the sort of large-scale devaluation that occurs in a crisis or a slump, where great volumes of capital are forced to sit around losing value (through physical deterioration of commodities and fixed capital; loss of enterprise assets to interest on loans, rent, etc.; decline in the value of money sitting in the bank due to inflation) until the amount of value/ capital in circulation relative to the average rate of exploitation falls back to a level low enough to restore the rate of profit (known to bourgeois ideology as “confidence”).

<sup>107</sup> See Thaxton (2009) on how the Great Leap Famine turned peasants against the party-state, creating a deep sense of antagonism that has influenced peasant-state relations ever since – despite efforts at “democratization.”

<sup>108</sup> Surely Wen Tiejun knew that such rural unrest had been growing since the mid-1980s, and he referred to it (obliquely at least) in his dissertation, written in the late 1990s. By saying “this began in 1999,” he may mean that the scale and frequency of rural unrest surpassed urban unrest in 1999, although that too is incorrect (as we have seen – no urban unrest I am aware of has involved over 100,000 participants in attacks on government buildings, weapons seizures, etc. (The 1989 Movement probably involved more participants but did not involve such violent attacks on the government.)

<sup>109</sup> Some of this information comes from an obituary for Liu, who died in an automobile accident in 2011. For an English translation, see Friends of Liu Laoshi (2011).

<sup>110</sup> On Qiu Jiansheng, see Gongyi Baike (2010). For an English translation of an article by Qiu about the Yen Institute, see Qiu (2007).

<sup>111</sup> “Volunteer” (*zhiyuanzhe*) does not necessarily involve unpaid labor, and is not limited to student volunteers, although it tends to imply the latter. It is a broad term for any NRR participant other than peasants in their own villages, denoting that the primary goal of participation is not to make money but to support peasants or NRR. Peasants are also called “volunteers” when they work in other villages, paid staff and interns of NGOs such as the Liang Shuming Center are called “volunteers,” and Wen describes himself as “an old volunteer among the volunteers, helping the young people to do things” (Wen 2010:7).

<sup>112</sup> Wen inserts the English word “capitalization” in parentheses after *zibenhua*.

<sup>113</sup> As a guide for such a “reformist project” (*gailiangzhuyi shiye*), Wen (2010:8) points to the old Rural Reconstruction Movement, adding that “the goal of New Rural Reconstruction is to alleviate (*huanjie*) the three-dimensional rural problem through reform, because these problems cannot be solved, only alleviated.”

<sup>114</sup> I am defining “the heartland of Han Chinese civilization” as those areas east of Gansu in the north and Guizhou and Guangxi in the south. Ranking by disposable income per capita, Anhui fares better, at number 18 among all 31 divisions (i.e. provinces and province-level municipalities and autonomous prefectures), as of 2010 (the GDP figure is from 2011). All such figures throughout this dissertation are from China’s National Bureau of Statistics, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>115</sup> The rise in China’s rural net income from 4,761 yuan in 2008 to 5,919 in 2010 reflects a combination of rising wages and inflation, which have continued into 2013.

<sup>116</sup> “Core member” is a commonly used informal term among Chinese peasant organizations too large for all members to directly participate in decision-making on a regular basis. It is roughly synonymous with “leader,” except that the egalitarian ethos of NRR and the peasant organizations in my study tends to exclude that term. Formally most organizations have a directorate (*lishihui*), whose members are occasionally called “leaders” in some cases, but usually that term is avoided in favor of familiar terms such as “Big Brother” (for Gao) or “Teacher” (for Director Tang, in Chapter 5). Also, “core members” are not necessarily members of the directorate or heads of divisions – they may just be particularly active members without a formal leadership position. (For example I would include the two young women in this category.)

<sup>117</sup> I am unclear of the exact relationship between this service and Wansheng, except that it is listed on some of Wansheng’s signs among its other projects.



---

<sup>118</sup> As of 2012, however, no further mention of this model has been made in the media.

<sup>119</sup> Most of my information about this dispute comes from a conversation with Director Gao on November 3, 2010. This information was supplemented by an internal NGO report and conversations with Mr. Li (November 4, 2010) and another informant (June 18, 2011). I did not meet with Mr. Quan or his supporters because a visiting volunteer (who seemed to understand the situation well) cautioned that to do so might hurt my relations with core members of Wansheng. The volunteer had talked to Mr. Quan and believed that Director Gao's account was basically accurate.

<sup>120</sup> Interview, June 2010.

<sup>121</sup> November 3, 2010.

<sup>122</sup> They did not actually say this but they implied it. Wansheng has a reputation as a particularly democratic co-op, so this is not something that could be said explicitly, but apparently no election has taken place since 2008. Whenever they I asked about it, Gao would say something like "We might have an election soon, but we don't think elections are really suitable for rural China. We prefer to develop new core members through recommendation..."

<sup>123</sup> Gao and the urban lawyer volunteer both emphasized that democracy does not necessarily involve elections, and that more important was the ability of members to participate in decision-making on a regular basis, which Wansheng sought to implement primarily through the weekly meetings (in which all members could participate, although it was mainly only core members who did so), and the relative autonomy of Wansheng's various divisions.

<sup>124</sup> China also has one comparable network organized by an NGO (headed by an academic), along with several marketing networks organized by NGOs.

<sup>125</sup> Interview, June 18, 2011.

<sup>126</sup> Interview, November 3, 2010.

<sup>127</sup> For summaries of such predictions, see Foster and McChesney (2012), and Edwards and Yao (2012).

<sup>128</sup> Chapter 7 (on Peppercorn Village) will examine a project conceived specifically to locally employ young migrants who returned home after losing their coastal jobs in 2008. That case can more clearly be judged a failure in that regard (although it could be considered successful in other respects). Jingjing's experience, on the other hand, is more ambiguous, and points to the possibility that such projects may in fact contribute toward (re)constructing some kind of buffer or alternative to the fluctuations of global capitalism – at least in the medium-term.

<sup>129</sup> Anhui is not far from the coast, but there is no direct train to certain major coastal cities, so one must first travel overnight to a bigger city and then transfer for a second day of travel.

<sup>130</sup> From a statement Jingjing wrote on April 12, 2011.

<sup>131</sup> "Slaves for life" (as in for one's whole life) would be *yi sheng de nupu*.

<sup>132</sup> Interview, November 3, 2010.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> On the concept of *renqing*, see Yan (1996:122-146).

<sup>135</sup> "Community" would probably be the most accurate here, except that the term "community" is linked to the Chinese term "*shequ*," another key term in NRR discourse with slightly different associations (see, for example, Hammer 2005). For one, *jiaxiang* has a more traditional, native feel to it, whereas *shequ* is clearly a foreign import and is associated with NGO jargon, on the one hand, and new housing complexes, on the other. It's normally translated as "home town" but we're not talking about a town here, nor a village, but a more vaguely defined rural community including the several villages with residents in the co-op. *Jiaxiang* has the sense of being one's native and ancestral community.

<sup>136</sup> Interview, November 3, 2010.

<sup>137</sup> Jingjing was 19 at the time – technically an adult by Chinese law, but conventionally people are considered to be children until they get married.

<sup>138</sup> Interview, November 3, 2010.

<sup>139</sup> Interview June 22, 2011.

<sup>140</sup> Thanks for Josiah Byers for directing me to relevant data. For more on Chinese education statistics, see Byers (unpublished).

<sup>141</sup> For a typical Chinese media representation of these phenomena in English, see Chen and Wu (2007).

<sup>142</sup> *Zu* is not really "class" in the sociological sense but literally "clan," "lineage," or "ethnic group," and is frequently used to refer to emerging cultural identities. Migrant wage-laborers from the countryside are called the "work-*zu*" (*dagonzu*, in contrast with the older term for "working class," which is associated with urbanites with permanent jobs for state-owned enterprises). Fans of Korean pop culture are called the "cheer-for-Korea-*zu*" (*hahanzu*). College graduates who cannot find a job and live crowded together in tiny apartments (like ants) are called the "ant-*zu*" (*yi-zu*).

---

<sup>143</sup> Source omitted for anonymity.

<sup>144</sup> Interview, November 3, 2010.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Interview, June 22, 2011.

<sup>147</sup> Unfortunately we were interrupted at this point, and later I was unable to elicit an elaboration of what Gao meant by contradictions becoming more individualized, except that most of the cases for which peasants have consulted Gao (and the young lawyer volunteer) in the past few years have concerned individual issues (although there were also collective issues – such as land grabs – with which Gao was unwilling to get involved due to political sensitivity).

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> It was almost certainly the PSB that had told the college to cancel the event, so either the officer was lying or belonged to a different department than the one responsible. In any case the officer did not want to discuss the matter.

<sup>150</sup> June 19, 2011.

<sup>151</sup> Actually the state does not pay demolition crews (at least in this case). Instead, the crew's boss has the right to sell all the construction materials left behind. (This dinner took place on November 5, 2010 – shortly after the new distillery had completed its second batch of liquor, which we drank with the meal.)

<sup>152</sup> Interview, June 22, 2011.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> For a translation of the letter, see Li (2003). For a discussion of Li and the significance of this letter and the discourse of “the three-dimensional rural problem,” see Day (2007).

<sup>155</sup> See my endnote on Yang Tuan and her “Center for Consultation of Farmers’ Associations” from Chapter 2.

<sup>156</sup> Gao never used the standard Marxian term for class (*jieji*) in reference to peasants (note that he did use that term in reference to “the ruling class” above- although he used it in a non-Marxian sense, apparently, referring to either the Communist Party or the broader party-state bureaucracy). I recall hearing the term “peasant class” (*nongmin jieji*) only once from an NRR advocate, and his perspective was more Marxian than typical among NRR advocates (or the postsocialist Chinese left in general). A few other NRR advocates sometime used the term *jieji* (as opposed to the more politically-correct sociological term *jieceng* – which implies fluidity rather than the inherently conflicting interests of *jieji* [q.v. Yan 2008]), but when they did it was attached to a vaguer, non-Marxian qualifier such as “disadvantaged class” (*ruoshi jieji*) vs. “advantaged class” (*qiangshi jieji*). (For example Liu Laoshi used these terms in a conversation in August 2009). Here, I say “class-like” because I think an idea similar to the Marxian sense of class is implied by Gao’s description of the relation of peasants to urban capitalists (he did use the term “capitalist” – *zibenjia* – instead of the more politically-correct “businesspeople” (*shangren*)).

<sup>157</sup> Gao and another credit union leader explained this during the planning phase on June 17, 2011, and Gao reiterated these ideas after the re-organization in August 2012.

<sup>158</sup> This came up in conversation with NRR volunteers and interns on several occasions starting in 2009. The quoted phrase is from the Red Army’s “Three Rules of Discipline and Eight Points for Attention” issued by Mao Zedong in 1928.

<sup>159</sup> “Open reciprocity” is from Graeber (2001:219). It is a relative concept contrasted with “closed reciprocity,” as opposed to the earlier anthropological categorization of reciprocity as “generalized,” “balanced” or “negative.” The term is useful here particularly because it is difficult to classify traditional Chinese peasant hospitality as either generalized or balanced – on the surface, there is a performance of generality, but implicitly there is calculation aiming for balance. (One reader pointed out that traditional Chinese gift exchange – as in wedding gifts – is precisely calculated and even written down, but here I am referring specifically to hospitality – a sphere that in many cultures seems unique in retaining at least the *performance* of generality, so its commoditization seems especially significant.)

<sup>160</sup> Interview, July 3, 2010.

<sup>161</sup> Thanks to Jasmine Zhang for this information. To clarify, in contrast with Wansheng, Raoling, and Liao Flats, the hotel in Guangxi did not emerge from an NRR project but vice versa: the project started as a commercial center for cancer rehabilitation, and from that basis developed into a center for agroecological experimentation frequented by activists in China’s sustainable living movement, which overlaps with NRR. In late 2012, activists stationed in the center were attempting to help local peasants organize into a co-op and market their products through alternative food networks, so the overlap with NRR became even clearer, with the housing now doubling as a hotel for activists (i.e. sustainable living advocates, including NGO personnel, interns, and volunteers).

---

<sup>162</sup> An internal document from 2010 (discussed below) lists the numbers 6,000-some households from 30-some hamlets (*zirancun*) in 20-some administrative villages. A similar document updated for 2012 increases the broader “community” to 40-some hamlets in a slightly smaller number of administrative villages, but does not state the number of households. (The slightly smaller number of villages is probably no more than an effect of confusion about what counts as a “village” and what counts as a “hamlet.” Throughout these documents the terms are used inconsistently.) Core members said that the hamlets “served” have increased, so it is possible that the number of households “served” has also increased from 6,000-some, although it is also likely that the 2010 number was simply the total number of households officially registered in those villages – it is unclear how many of those have actually been “served.”

<sup>163</sup> Transcribed by He Yufei, July 27, 2012. Emphasis mine. Thanks to He for suggesting I use this quotation here.

<sup>164</sup> The full sign reads “Increase the *suzhi* of the peasantry, develop the countryside toward *xiaokang*.” *Xiaokang* means a situation without poverty, where everyone is at least moderately well-off. The term is now associated with Dengism (where it replaces communism as a supposedly more modest short-term goal), but derives from ancient Chinese texts.

<sup>165</sup> Reported to me by Gong Zhiwen on July 26, 2012.

<sup>166</sup> To help preserve anonymity, I have omitted staff names and rounded off some of the numbers from these tables.

<sup>167</sup> The original tables did not include these totals – I add them for convenience. The reason two departments are excluded is explained below.

<sup>168</sup> “Welfare” is my gloss here for *shebao*, literally “social security.” The idea is that, by fostering community among elderly people, they were more likely to take care of each other, when many of their children (traditional caregivers) do not live nearby. At first this primarily took the form of cultural activities, but since 2011 this has taken the form of paid caregiving. Although the idea of caregiving was proposed as a way to take care of the elderly, ironically the two cases that had materialized by summer 2012 consisted of elderly people taking care of middle-aged people with disabilities.

<sup>169</sup> It is also possible that it is merely a coincidence that the total number of “member households” for 2005 and 2010 are the same. I doubt this, however, not only because that would be statistically unlikely, but also because several of the departmental numbers on the 2010 document did not refer to contemporary reality (such as that for the Children’s Education Department, which was and is still only a plan), or could have only been roughly estimated, since participation was informal (as in the Traditional Culture Department).

<sup>170</sup> When she mentioned this, I asked for more information, but she seemed hesitant to discuss it. The head of another department (Farm Supply) claimed that all (about 1,000) of its “member households” owned shares in the department and received annual dividends, but I knew from interviewing many of its “members” (i.e. customers) that this was not true. Such inconsistencies discouraged me from inquiring further about shareholding.

<sup>171</sup> One exception to this hierarchy seems to be Mr. Ouyang, who is both head of Accounting and managing co-owner of the Farm Supply Department along with Director Tang’s husband. His authority in Raoling as a whole seems second only to Tang, but he is not so active in the meetings I observed.

<sup>172</sup> At the time the 2012 document was written there were actually only six participating hamlets; the 40-some listed in the table probably refers to an anticipated situation.

<sup>173</sup> See note on “village committees” in Chapter 2..

<sup>174</sup> This department is difficult to observe, and people who should know about it have been reticent, except for one meeting toward the end of my last visit, when Mr. Niu quickly provided some basic information. In 2010 and 2012 Mr. Niu and Mr. Jin were already doing the same work, but their formal positions were in other departments, and when asked related questions (What do you do? How are Raoling’s products sold? Why were you driving that big truck full of vegetables?), they responded only vaguely and then changed the subject. Only in 2012 was this work acknowledged as a formal department of Raoling, with Mr. Jin as director. I rarely saw Mr. Jin during any of my visits, and when I did, I was unable to gather much information from him (most of the time he was driving trucks full of vegetables or fertilizer). Mr. Niu, is not listed anywhere in the 2012 table (perhaps because he is in charge of the entire “Economic Division”), but his narrative implied that he was the real director of the Urban-Rural Interaction department, and other staff referred to him as such.

<sup>175</sup> The Chinese name of this department is *Houqin*, normally translated as “logistics.” I instead call this department Hospitality, since it is mainly responsible for preparing food for staff and visitors, arranging lodging for visitors, and cleaning up after they leave. It could also be called the Cafeteria, since that seems to be basically what this department is, but I prefer “Hospitality” since it highlights the NRR-wide trend I observed in Chapter 4 – the

---

commoditization of hospitality. I reserve the term “logistical” as a general label for all four of these departments, since their functions are basically supplementary to the entrepreneurial departments.

<sup>176</sup> The report was published in *Zonghe Nongxie*, 2012. Details omitted to preserve anonymity.

<sup>177</sup> Information on this experiment was gathered from interviews with Raoling members, an unpublished report by He Yufei, and a report from *China Development Brief*. Other information throughout this chapter comes from these sources, along with several reports in *Zonghe Nongxie*, and a documentary on the association from 2006. The titles of these reports are omitted to preserve anonymity.

<sup>178</sup> Director Tang described this as an arbitrary act by the government instigated by rival villagers, and a way for the government to make money through fines. She implied that there was no clear legal basis for the action.

<sup>179</sup> It is also possible that the 2010 number included all regular customers, and the 2012 number limits the meaning of “membership” to those who receive a discount by paying in advance.

<sup>180</sup> On Nanjie, see Muldavin (2000) and Liu Qian (2004).

<sup>181</sup> The Handicraft Co-op did not buy cotton in 2011 since it had enough cotton in storage for its needs, which declined that year due to a temporary focus on designing new patterns for embroidery and sewing.

<sup>182</sup> It is also possible that these “dividends in kind” were distributed by the Farm Supply Department. Those “members” who received such “prizes” seemed uncertain of their exact origin or significance. One recent report from the news magazine *NanFengChuang* includes a statement from Ms. Tang that “dividends in kind” include “financing the remodeling of peasants’ kitchens, toilets, etc.” Other researchers and I had observed a few remodeled toilets (from traditional dry latrines to flushing toilets), but all these were in the homes of full-time employees, and courtyards that Raoling was renting for office space. (It may be that other “members” also received this “dividend” – I did not investigate this, since it was not mentioned as such before, but I do recall observing a few traditional dry latrines in the homes of people affiliated with Raoling.)

<sup>183</sup> Each was in one of the three villages where the co-op director had said most of their part-time weavers lived.

<sup>184</sup> All the young employees I asked about this seemed to enjoy working on the farms because it provided a change of pace from their usual work routines, but they were ambivalent about whether they would do their own farming in the future.

<sup>185</sup> This third researcher says the department is not called Land Transfer but Land Trust (*tuoguan*), and that Raoling is not “renting” peasants’ land but merely using it in return for grain. That seems to me no more than a difference in terminology, and in any case, Raoling’s 2012 self-description does use the term Land Transfer (*liuzhuan*) for this department (the term “trust” does not appear in the document).

<sup>186</sup> According to another informant who used to work for the NGO, the conflict was more complex, but she declined to elaborate.

<sup>187</sup> The latter then set up an independent microfinance company in 2009, naming Tang “vice general manager,” a position which she left in 2012, complaining that the company was alienating itself from the peasant community by increasing its employees’ salaries to 6,000 yuan a month. This company and the “NGO” that founded it are significant factors in the history of Raoling that I unfortunately cannot discuss in detail due to the their potentially sensitive nature, and because further details might reveal informants’ identities.

<sup>188</sup> Several informants (including this ex-director himself) gave different explanations, and I do not know which one is the most accurate. One was that Director Tang disapproved of his behavior – for example, his decision to get a divorce (Tang’s disapproval of divorce is discussed below).

Each of several informants told me quite different accounts of why this project director (one of Raoling’s founders) left the association. Another researcher and I tracked him down, but he seemed wary to discuss the matter.

<sup>189</sup> The Elderly Center’s director had expressed disagreement with the idea, saying that it risked changing the center’s nature from being a public service to being more like a commercial enterprise.

<sup>190</sup> I donated one such book in 2011, but the librarian did not know what happened to it, so I donated a second copy in 2012. However, some such material must have been available in the months before that, since a recent exam included questions about the history of co-ops in Europe.

<sup>191</sup> Surprisingly I noticed a copy of *Weapons of the Week* by James Scott (in Chinese translation) on the shelf of the Youth Farm director. He said he had borrowed it from Raoling director Tang (not from the library), and had just begun reading it, so did not have a clear idea of its contents yet.

<sup>192</sup> This nomination was part of the Swiss initiative “1,000 Peace Women Across the Globe.” For details see [1000peacewomen.org](http://1000peacewomen.org) (accessed January 23, 2013).

---

<sup>193</sup> Raoling has also worked with Yang Tuan's "Center for Consultation of Farmers' Associations" since about 2009. See note on Yang's "East Asian model of comprehensive farmers' associations" in Chapter 2.

<sup>194</sup> Only once did I hear a Raoling core member invoke this distinction between *nongmin* and *gongmin*, so it should not be construed as a typical feature of Raoling's pedagogical discourse, but I do think it is consistent with the latter, which often involves the term *gongmin*. Apparently this distinction was popularized (if not coined) by the influential liberal theorist Qin Hui, for whom *nongmin* often figures as "a generic category that simply stands in opposition to the category 'citizen' (*gongmin* or *shimin*)" (Day 2007:93).

<sup>195</sup> Tang did not use this term; I am playing on the term "rational peasant" from the economic formalist Samuel Popkin, who argued – contra Chayanov and James Scott, introduced in Part I – that peasants exhibit the same rationality of individual self-interest as entrepreneurs in a capitalist economy. On Popkin's debate with Scott and its Chinese counterpart in Wen Tiejun's debate with Justin Yifu Lin, see Day (2007:223-235).

<sup>196</sup> Interview June 2011.

<sup>197</sup> My translation of lines from the video (whose title I omit to help maintain anonymity).

<sup>198</sup> This discouragement of divorce is consistent with at least some academic NRR advocates. For instance, in Wen Tiejun's (2010) speech introduced at the end of Chapter 3, as part of his critique of the "rights" discourse and "pan-politicization" promoted by liberals, Wen says that such "politicization" of domestic relations leads to divorce, and that divorce can be disastrous for women in rural China (with the implication that divorce should therefore be avoided).

<sup>199</sup> Interview July 27, 2012.

<sup>200</sup> Lecture recorded August 2, 2012.

<sup>201</sup> For a now also somewhat dated study of the "modernization" of gender and sexuality in Shanghai around 2000, see Farrer (2002).

<sup>202</sup> Interview, June 6, 2012.

<sup>203</sup> My reconstruction of this history is somewhat rough and should be taken with a grain of salt, especially regarding the transition from mass mobilization to restructuring in 2006-2008, since most of those participants willing to discuss that sensitive period did so only vaguely (and with some inconsistency among different participants' accounts).

<sup>204</sup> I have not systematically researched this question; this appraisal is based merely on a few scattered comments in interviews with Raoling participants and one other researcher.

<sup>205</sup> On Nanjie, see Muldavin (2000) and Liu Qian (2004).

<sup>206</sup> I do know how democratic these projects were, but they did involve mass meetings with hundreds of participants, and the co-ops seem to have had a larger number of shareholders and decision-makers than Raoling's present enterprises.

<sup>207</sup> This high GDP partly reflects the relocation of industrial jobs (especially of electronics companies such as Foxconn) from coastal cities (partly as a "spatial fix" in response to growing worker militancy on the coast).

<sup>208</sup> Personal communication with Wang Ningzen. This percentage was from 2002, but I was told it hasn't changed much in the past decade.

<sup>209</sup> This phrase is associated with the Hong Kong-based NGO, but it is consistent with the guiding ideologies of the primary school and the Chengdu NGO, as well as the form of Buddhism shared by the Pengs (one of the main peasant families most deeply involved in this project) and some of the NGO personnel. The HK NGO is also a major funder of mainland NRR organizations and projects, and this project's initial point of connection with NRR.

<sup>210</sup> As of summer 2011 they rented about 15 *mu* (about one hectare), in addition to their five *mu* contracted from the village. The village average is about one *mu* per capita (typical for most of rural China, other than the north).

<sup>211</sup> For an ethnographic study of *nongjiale*, see Park 2008.

<sup>212</sup> For this investment they borrowed 60,000 yuan from friends and relatives, which they expected to pay back about in about two years. Interview, August 27, 2011.

<sup>213</sup> The term "community-supported agriculture" (CSA) was coined in the USA in the 1980s, where it usually refers to arrangements in which a group of consumers purchase products from a farm at the beginning of the season, to be delivered or picked up as they are harvested throughout the season. The consumers share in the risk of poor harvests, thus helping to support local, organic farmers. In China, the term was first introduced around 2006 by a Hong Kong-based NGO (which adopted the term from Thailand), using it more broadly to describe "fair trade" arrangements between farmers and consumers in general.

<sup>214</sup> Interview, August 29, 2011.

<sup>215</sup> Reported by Linlin on August 28, 2011.



---

<sup>216</sup> This village was Zhaicheng (in Dingzhou, Hebei) – the location of the Yen Institute, where the Mi family had started the “village self-government” movement in 1904 and James Yen had established his Rural Reconstruction base in 1926. For the English translation of a report on the NRR Yen Institute (2003-2007) by its main founder Qiu Jiansheng (mentioned in Chapter 3), see Qiu (2007).

<sup>217</sup> These were the three main divisions; there were also other projects, such as a village newspaper; a village library with computers, tutoring, and other activities for children; and a team for developing and promoting skills in building ecological housing (led by an architect from Taiwan).

<sup>218</sup> Interview, August 28, 2011 (ibid. for quotations below).

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> For an early report on such complaints, see Yardley and Barboza (2005). For a report on more recent complaints, see Chu (2013). Typical of journalistic amnesia, such reports rarely mention that such complaints have been made periodically for nearly a decade, sometimes even describing them as if they were new and strange. For an academic analysis, see Chan (2010).

<sup>222</sup> Another factor pushing down the price of food is competition with more industrialized farms.

<sup>223</sup> This “land transfer” differed from that in Liao Flats – discussed later in this chapter – in that it involved agricultural land, whereas the transfer in Liao Flats involves only residential land (at least officially, at this stage, although some villagers suspect that this limitation is merely a tactic in order to facilitate the eventual transfer of agricultural land – which is now more tightly regulated by the government than several years ago, when the transfer took place in the other village).

<sup>224</sup> QQ exchange July 25, 2012. My emphasis.

<sup>225</sup> In general I tried to keep quiet on my own perspectives in order to minimize my influence on informants’ self-expression – especially because I knew that most of the farmers in Liao Flats tended to shy away from issues of “social contradiction” – in contrast with certain core members of Wansheng (Chapter 4).

<sup>226</sup> According to a township government official who was one of the main directors of the housing-concentration project. Several villagers said they doubted that figure and estimated that more like 80% of villagers had agreed to move into the new housing.

<sup>227</sup> August 29, 2012.

<sup>228</sup> Most of my information about *linpan* is derived from conversation with Stevan Harrell, Dan Abramson, and Jennifer Tippins. Also see Yang, et al. (2011).

<sup>229</sup> September 15, 2012.

<sup>230</sup> September 15, 2012.

<sup>231</sup> August 28, 2012.

<sup>232</sup> September 15, 2012.

<sup>233</sup> See Schneider (2013) for an in-depth study of the industrialization (often framed as “Americanization”) of pig farming China.

<sup>234</sup> August 28, 2012.

<sup>235</sup> I borrow the term “land development rights” from Wang, Tao, and Tong (2009), who do not provide an equivalent Chinese term. The full term used by the officials involved in this project (集体建设用地增减挂钩指标) translates roughly as “linking quotas for the increasing and decreasing of collective construction land”; for short they simply said “quotas.” However, their explanation of the concept sounded the same as what Wang, et al. mean by “land development rights.” Looney (2012:277) translates a similar term (挂钩周转指标) as “linked transfer of land quotas.”

<sup>236</sup> None of the several villagers I interviewed were aware that they would be charged a fee for moving into the new housing, although this was announced on a poster at the village headquarters.

<sup>237</sup> Looney (2012:277-278), my emphasis.

<sup>238</sup> September 15, 2012.

<sup>239</sup> <http://number.cnki.net/> (accessed February 23, 2011).

<sup>240</sup> Here the term “administrative village” refers to the administrative unit that resulted from the merging of three villages in 2002. There is one pair of village committees (the Village Branch of the Communist Party and the democratically-elected Villager Committee) per administrative village.

<sup>241</sup> “Villager teams” are sub-village administrative units formerly known as “production teams” (*shengchandui*) under the “people’s commune” system (dismantled in 1984). When three villages merged to form Peppercorn in 2002, about 30 “small teams” (*xiaozu*) merged to form the nine “big teams” (*dazu*). In this chapter, “team” refers to

---

such “big teams.” Teams have leaders (*zuzhang*) appointed by the village committee, responsible for helping the latter with tasks such as birth control and mediating disputes among team members.

<sup>242</sup> Fieldnotes, May 14, 2011.

<sup>243</sup> Interview February 2010, and internal documents from the NGO.

<sup>244</sup> Another interesting difference is that, whereas many NRR advocates draw inspiration from Confucianism or Buddhism (along with elements from Polanyi, etc., discussed in Chapter 2), Yang Kun distinguished his approach by drawing instead on the ancient philosopher Mozi (470–391 BCE), whose teachings were founded on a more universalist and egalitarian critique of Confucius (551–479 BCE). I find it significant, however, that one of Mozi’s main points of agreement with Confucius (a point consistent with Yang Kun’s politics) was the privileging of social stability over particular desires or interests (sometimes called “state consequentialism” since the consequence of state stability is privileged over the means whereby that is achieved). Yang Kun distinguished his approach from the more common Confucian models of Rural Reconstruction by drawing instead on the ancient philosophy of Mozi.

<sup>245</sup> Another source said the second loan was for 30,000 yuan.

<sup>246</sup> Interview, May 17, 2011.

<sup>247</sup> Some said Chu put up the money for these expensive instruments, others said the women paid. Chu said he hoped the NGO would reimburse them, but later the project director said it would not.

<sup>248</sup> Another possible type of non-monetary benefit is suggested by Chu’s behavior toward a young female friend to whom I had introduced him, which she interpreted as flirtatious. After my last visit he continued to phone her every few days “just to chat,” and eventually he showed up in her city (a day’s travel away), saying he had business there. At that point she began ignoring his calls and text messages until he stopped contacting her. Perhaps he had heard of peasants such as Mr. Ding from Liao Flats, who had divorced his wife and married a younger, more highly educated woman from the same city after having similarly become a minor celebrity in NRR circles. (In Mr. Ding’s defense, his parents initiated the divorce because they perceived his first wife as disrespectful.)

<sup>249</sup> That NGO was the Guizhou Institute of Highland Development (GIHD). Although some of its work could be considered similar, it was generally considered to be on the right of the political spectrum and connected to US foundations known for promoting “pro-democracy” movements (such as the “color revolutions” in the former Soviet republics), whereas the NGO in my study – like NRR in general – is more left-leaning and unwilling to accept funding from such foundations. As suggested above, there is a political division within this NGO – between Yang Kun and his followers (who are more left-leaning) and some of the personnel involved with the Peppercorn and land rights project (more sympathetic to liberalism, although critical of neoliberalism), but even the latter consider GIHD to have gone too far (for example, by testifying in US Congress about human rights violations).

<sup>250</sup> This was one of the women who were pretending to be co-op members, and this conversation was the first time I noticed that she seemed to have little idea of what a co-op was supposed to be. When I asked the difference between their co-op and a company, she said that companies are bigger and set up by the government, whereas co-ops are smaller and set up by commoners (*laobaixing*). She hoped that one day their co-op would be big enough to become a company. (May 10, 2011.)

<sup>251</sup> Technically the township is the lowest level, and villages are autonomous.

<sup>252</sup> On the Wukan Incident, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wukan\\_protests](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wukan_protests).

<sup>253</sup> My translation from the NGO report.

<sup>254</sup> The anti-capitalist nature of such rights-defense is clearer in cases of resistance to land grabs (as in Peppercorn) and in Wansheng’s occasional support for workers’ effort to retrieve stolen wages, since both are directly opposed to the interests of particular capitalist enterprises. This is less clear in most of Wansheng’s earlier struggles, which were oriented toward local state corruption. I regard such resistance as also (at least partly) anti-capitalist in that such corruption was intertwined with capitalist interests (as explained in Chapter 3). For example, corrupt officials tended to use the money and resources it took from peasants (either directly or indirectly through state development projects) to invest in capitalist enterprise. They were thus “accumulation by dispossession,” and as such they also helped push peasants into wage-labor.

## Bibliography

- Alavi, Hamza. 1987. Peasantry and Capitalism: A Marxist Discourse. In *Peasants and Peasant Societies*, ed. Teodor Shanin, 185-204. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Akram-Lodhi, Haroon and Cristóbal Kay. 2009. *Peasants and Globalization: Political Economy, Rural Transformation and the Agrarian Question*. London: Routledge.
- Anagnost, Ann. 1997. *National Past-Times: Narrative, Representation, and Power in Modern China*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Anagnost, Ann. 2004. The Corporeal Politics of *Suzhi* (Quality). *Public Culture*, 16(2): 189-208.
- Anagnost, Ann. 2006. Strange circulations: the blood economy in rural China. *Economy and Society*, 35(4):509-529.
- Anagnost, Ann. 2013. Introduction: Life-Making in Neoliberal Times. In *Global Futures in East Asia: Youth, Nation, and the New Economy in Uncertain Times*, edited by Anagnost, Arai, and Hai. Stanford University Press.
- Aufheben. 2000. A Commune in Chiapas? Mexico and the Zapatista Rebellion. *Aufheben*, 9.
- Aufheben. 2006. Welcome to the Chinese Century? *Aufheben*, 14.
- Berlant, Lauren. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Bolan Qunshu. 2004. Tantaoling lei fazhan de kenengxing: Zhongguo-Yindu xiangcun jianshe jiaoliuhui zhaiyao. *Bolan Qunshu*, 1.
- Borras, Saturnino M. Jr. and Jennifer C. Franco. 2012. Global Land Grabbing and Trajectories of Agrarian Change: A Preliminary Analysis. *Journal of Agrarian Change* 12:34-59.



- Bradsher, Keith. 2012. "Facing Protests, China's Business Investment Slows." *New York Times*, November 6, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/07/business/global/facing-protests-chinas-business-investment-may-be-cooling.html>.
- Bryer, Alice Rose. 2012. The politics of the social economy: a case study of the Argentinean *empresas recuperadas*. *Dialectical Anthropology* 36:21-49.
- Byers, Josiah S. Unpublished. Educational Progression and Attainment in the 2010 Chinese Census.
- Camatte, Jacques. 1988. *Capital and Community: The Results of the Immediate Process of Production and the Economic Work of Marx*. London: Unpopular Books.
- Cao Jinqing. 2006. *China Along the Yellow River: Reflections on Rural Society*. Trans. Nicky Harman and Huang Ruhua. RoutledgeCurzon.
- Chan, Kam Wing. 2010. A China Paradox: Migrant Labor Shortage amidst Rural Labor Supply Abundance. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 51(4):513–530.
- Chayanov, Alexander. 1986. *The Theory of Peasant Economy*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Chayanov, Alexander. 1991. *The Theory of Peasant Co-operatives*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Chu, Kathy. 2013. China: A Billion Strong but Short on Workers. *Wall Street Journal*, May 1, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887323798104578455153999658318.html>.
- Chung Hsiu-mei, Ku Hok-bun, et al. 2012. Shehui jingji zai zhongguo, xia (Social Economy in China, Part Two). *Kaifang Shidai* (Open Times) 2.
- Chen Guidi and Wu Chuntao. 2006. *Will the Boat Sink the Water? The Life of China's Peasants*. Trans. Zhu Hong. Public Affairs.

- Dai Jinhua and Lau Kin Chi, eds. 2006. *Mengmian qishi: Moxige fusiling Makesi wenji*. Shanghai: Shiji chubanshe jituan.
- Davis, Mike. 2006. *Planet of Slums*. London: Verso.
- Day, Alexander. 2007. *Return of the Peasant: History, Politics, and the Peasantry in Postsocialist China*. PhD Dissertation, University of California, Santa Cruz.
- Day, Alexander. 2008. The End of the *Peasant*? New Rural Reconstruction in China. *Boundary 2*, 35(2):49-73.
- Day, Alexander. 2013. *The Peasant in Postsocialist China: History, Politics, and Capitalism*. Cambridge University Press.
- Day, Alexander and Matthew A. Hale, eds. 2007. *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology*, special issue on New Rural Reconstruction, 39(4).
- Day, Alexander and Matthew A. Hale, eds. 2008. *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology*, special issue on The Central China School of Rural Studies, 41(1).
- Defourny, Jacques and Patrick Develtere. 1999. The Social Economy: The Worldwide Making of a Third Sector. In Defourny, et al., ed., *Social Economy North and South*. Brussels: De Boek, <http://orbi.ulg.ac.be/handle/2268/13613>.
- Della Porta, Donatella. 2006. *The Global Justice Movement: Cross-national and Transnational Perspectives*. New York: Paradigm Publishers.
- Dirlik, Arif. 2001. *Global Modernity: Modernity in the Age of Global Capitalism*. New York: Paradigm Publishers.
- Dupont, Monsieur. 2009. *Nihilist Communism: A Critique of Optimism in the Far Left*. Oakland: Ardent Press.

- Edelman, Marc. 2005. Bringing the Moral Economy Back in... to the Study of 21st-Century Transnational Peasant Movements. *American Anthropologist*, New Series, 107(3):331-345.
- Edwards, Nick and Kevin Yao. 2012. Hand Forced, Beijing Opts for Old Fix. *New York Times*, July 16, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/17/business/global/hand-forced-beijing-opts-for-old-fix.html>.
- Escobar, Arturo. 2001. *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton University Press.
- Foster, John Bellamy and Robert McChesney. 2012. The Global Stagnation and China. *Monthly Review* 63(9):1-28.
- Foucault, Michel. 2008. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978—1979*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Friends of Liu Laoshi. 2011. The Achievements of Comrade Liu Xiangbo (1968-2011). *China Study Group*, <http://chinastudygroup.net/2011/04/liu-xiangbo>.
- Galt, Ryan. 2013. The Moral Economy is a Double-Edged Sword: Explaining Farmers' Earnings and Self-exploitation in Community-supported Agriculture. *Economic Geography*, pre-publication version: [hcd.ucdavis.edu/faculty/webpages/galt/personal/Galt\\_Faculty\\_Page/CV\\_files/Galt%20in%20press-Moral.pdf](http://hcd.ucdavis.edu/faculty/webpages/galt/personal/Galt_Faculty_Page/CV_files/Galt%20in%20press-Moral.pdf).
- Gates, Hill. 1996. *China's Motor: A Thousand Years of Petty Capitalism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Gibson-Graham, J.K. 2006a. *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- Gibson-Graham, J.K. 2006b. *A Postcapitalist Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gongchao. 2013. Against the Fetish of Representation: Class Struggle in China Beyond the Leftist Grand Narrative, <http://www.gongchao.org/en/texts/2013/against-the-fetish-of-representation>.
- Gongyi Baïke. 2010. Qiu Jiansheng. *Gongyi Baïke*, <http://wiki.ngocn.net/index.php?doc-view-115>.
- Hale, Matthew A. 2013. Tilling Sand: Contradictions of “Social Economy” in a Chinese Movement for Alternative Rural Development. *Dialectical Anthropology*, 37(1):51-82.
- Hann, Chris. 1987. Worker-peasants in the Three Worlds. In *Peasants and Peasant Societies*, ed. Teodor Shanin, 114-120. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Harrell, Stevan. 1995. *Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Harvey, David. 1982. *The Limits to Capital*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Harvey, David. 2005. *The New Imperialism*. Oxford University Press.
- Harvey, David. 2007. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press.
- Hayford, Charles W. 1990. *To the People: James Yen and Village China*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- He Xuefeng. 2003. *Xin xiangtu zhongguo: Zhuanxingqi xiangcun shehui diaocha biji*. Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press.
- He Xuefeng. 2007a. New Rural Construction and the Chinese Path. *Chinese Anthropology and Sociology* 39(4):26-38.

- He Xuefeng. 2007b. *Xiangcun de qiantu: xin nongcun jianshe yu zhongguo daolu*. Ji'nan: Shandong renmin chubanshe.
- He Xuefeng. 2007c. Nongmin jiazhi guan de bianqian dui xiangcun zhili de yingxiang (The Influence of Changing Peasant Values on Rural Governance). *Xuexi yu tansuo* (Learning and Exploration), 5.
- He Xuefeng. 2012. *Zuzhi qi lai: quxiao nongye shui hou nongcun jiceng zuzhi jianshe yanjiu*. Shandong renmin chubanshe.
- Huang, Philip. 2011. New-Age Small Farms and Their Vertical Integration: Agribusiness or Co-ops? *Modern China* 37(2):107-134.
- Huang Ping, et al. 2001. Kalala de qishi: Zhongguo zhishifenzi yanzhong de Kalala bang (Kerala's lessons: Kerala state in the eyes of Chinese intellectuals). *Shiji Zhongguo*, <http://www.cc.org.cn/old/wencui/030728200/0307282000.htm> .
- Hui Po-keung. 1999. Fazhanzhuyi de misi. *Dushu*, 3:18.
- Husunzi. 2010. A Commune in Sichuan? Reflections on Endicott's *Red Earth*. *China Left Review*, 3, <http://chinaleftreview.org/?p=294>.
- Jameson, Fredric. 2003. Future City. *New Left Review*, 21:65-79.
- Junge, Benjamin. 2012. NGOs as shadow pseudopublics: Grassroots community leaders' perceptions of change and continuity in Porto Alegre, Brazil. *American Ethnologist* 39(2):407–424.
- Juris, Jeffrey. 2012. Reflections on #Occupy Everywhere: Social media, public space, and emerging logics of aggregation. *American Ethnologist* 39(2):259–279.
- Kasimir, Sharryn. 1996. *The Myth of Mondragon: Cooperatives, Politics, and Working-Class Life in a Basque Town*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

- Kasmir, Sharryn. 2012. Alternatives to capitalism and working-class struggle: a comment on Alice Bryer's "the politics of the social economy." *Dialectical Anthropology*, 36:59–61.
- Kautsky, Karl. 1988. *The Agrarian Question*. London: Zwan.
- Kearney, Michael. 1996. *Reconceptualizing the Peasantry: Anthropology in Global Perspective*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Kolinko. 2001. Class Composition,  
[http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/kolinko/engl/e\\_klazu.htm](http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/kolinko/engl/e_klazu.htm).
- Lammer, Christof. 2012. *Imagined Cooperatives: An Ethnography of Cooperation and Conflict in New Rural Reconstruction Projects in a Chinese Village*. Diploma Thesis, Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Vienna.
- Lau Kin Chi. 2001. Biji: Yelinyuan de xiangxiang (*Notes: Imagining the coconut jungle spring*), *Tianya*, 4: 63-66.
- Lau Kin Chi, et al. 2001. Duihua: Kalala de qishi (Dialogue: Kerala's Lessons). *Tianya*, 4:48-57.
- Lewis, Mike and Dan Swinney. 2007. Social Economy, Solidarity Economy: Exploring the Implications of Conceptual Nuance for Acting in a Volatile World. BALTA,  
<http://hdl.handle.net/2149/2649>.
- Li Changping. 2003. A Letter to Premier Zhu Rong Ji. *China Study Group*,  
<http://chinastudygroup.net/2003/01/a-letter-to-premier-zhu-rong-ji/>.
- Lilley, Sasha, David McNally, Eddie Yuen, and James Davis. 2012. *Catastrophism: The Apocalyptic Politics of Collapse and Rebirth*. Oakland: PM Press.
- Little, Daniel. 1989. *Understanding Peasant China: Case Studies in the Philosophy of Social Science*. Yale University Press.

- Liu Qian. 2004. *Nanjie Shehui* (Nanjie Society). Shanghai: Xuelin Chubanshe.
- Lora-Wainwright, Anna, Yiyun Zhang, Yunmei Wu, and Benjamin Van Rooij. 2012. Learning to Live with Pollution: The Making of Environmental Subjects in a Chinese Industrialized Village. *The China Journal*, 68:106-124.
- Luo Xingzuo. 2006. *Zhishui: Nongmin hezuo yu guojia jieru* (Water control: peasant cooperation and state intervention). Wuhan: Hubei Renmin Chubanshe.
- Ma Changhua. 2004. Zuo xiangcun jianshe daolu shang de maqianzu: Yi wei Zhongguo nongmin xie gei Yindu liang wei xiangjian zhuanjia de xin (*To be a soldier on the road of rural reconstruction: A letter from a Chinese nongmin to two Indian rural reconstruction experts*). *Zhongguo Gaige (Nongcun ban)*, 12:59-60.
- Madsen, Richard. 1984. *Maoist Morality and Power in a Chinese Village*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Mao Gangqiang. 2010. 少数决定多数：土地视野下农村公共品供给的历史与现实 ——基于贵州鸣村的个案研究(1980-2009). PhD Dissertation, Huazhong University of Science and Technology.
- Marx, Karl. 1948. *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. Trans. Samuel Moore, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/>.
- Marx, Karl. 1967. *Capital*, volume 3. New York: International Publishers.
- Marx, Karl. 1990. *Capital*, volume 1. Trans. Ben Fowkes. London: Peguin.
- May, Shannon. 2010. Bridging Divides and Breaking Homes: Young Women's Lifecycle Labour Mobility as a Family Managerial Strategy. *The China Quarterly*, 204:899-920.

McMichael, Phillip. 2008. Peasants make their own history, but not just as they please....

*Journal of Agrarian Change*, 8(2-3):205-228.

Miller, Ethan. 2006. Other Economies are Possible! Organizing toward an economy of cooperation and solidarity. *Dollars & Sense*, issue 266,

<http://www.dollarsandsense.org/archives/2006/0706toc.html>.

Miller, Ethan. 2010. Solidarity Economy: Key Concepts and Issues. In *Solidarity Economy I: Building Alternatives for People and Planet*, eds. E. Kawano, T. Masterson and J. Teller-Ellsberg. Amherst: Center for Popular Economics.

Muldavin, Joshua. 2000. The Paradoxes of Environmental Policy and Resource Management in Reform-Era China. *Economic Geography* 76(3):244-271.

Nang, Leung Pak and Pun Ngai. 2009. The Radicalisation of the New Chinese Working Class: a case study of collective action in the gemstone industry. *Third World Quarterly* 30(3):551-565.

Noys, Benjamin, ed. 2011. *Communization and Its Discontents: Contestation, Critique, and Contemporary Struggle*. Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia.

O'Brien, Kevin and Lianjiang Li. 2006. *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Pan Jia'en and Du Jie. 2011a. Alternative Responses to the Modern Dream: Sources and Contradictions of Rural Reconstruction in China. Trans. Matthew A. Hale. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 12(3):454-464.

Pan Jia'en and Du Jie. 2011b. The Social Economy of New Rural Reconstruction. Trans. Matthew A. Hale. *China Journal of Social Work*, 4(3):271-282.



- Parayil, Govindan, ed. 2000. *Kerala: The Development Experience: Reflections on Sustainability and Replicability*. London: Zed.
- Park, Choong-Hwan. 2008. *Delights in Farm Guesthouses: Nongjiale Tourism, Rural Development, and the Regime of Leisure-Pleasure in Post-Mao China*. PhD Dissertation, University of California, Santa Barbara, Department of Anthropology.
- Peng Yinghao and Chen Canping. 2011. 村庄内生秩序与农村公共服务供给绩效——基于对贵州省遵义市 S 村的考察. 《西南民族大学学报：人文社会科学版》2011 年 第 7 期.
- Polanyi, Karl. 1957. *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. New York: Rinehart.
- Prayukvong, Wanna. 2005. A Buddhist economic approach to the development of community enterprises: a case study from Southern Thailand. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 29:1171–1185.
- Raina, Vinod. 2001. Zi xia er shang de ‘gonggongpin’ juece: Fan Yindu Renmin Kexue Yundong lingdaoren Wen Nuo (*Bottom—Up Making of ‘Public Goods’ Policy: An Interview with KSSP leader Vinod Raina*). *Zhonguo Gaige*, 7: 54-56.
- De Rouffignac, Ann Lucas. 1985. *The Contemporary Peasantry in Mexico: A Class Analysis*. Praeger Publishers.
- Schneider, Mindi. 2013. *Modern Meat, Industrial Swine: China and the Remaking of Agri-food Politics in the 21st Century*. PhD dissertation, Cornell University, Department of Development Sociology.
- Shanin, Teodor. 1987. Peasantry as a Concept. In *Peasants and Peasant Societies*, ed. Teodor Shanin. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Sit Tsui and Lau Kin Chi. 2001. Fangwen: Di xiaofei de fazhan yu xingfu. *Tianya*, 4:58-62.

- Silver, Beverly. 2003. *Forces of Labor: Workers' Movements and Globalization since 1870*. Cambridge University Press.
- Tan Tongxue. 2007. Paths and Foundations of Rural Greying: The Case of Two Townships in Southern Hunan. *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology* 39(4): 39-49.
- Thøgersen, Stig. 2009. Revisiting a Dramatic Triangle: The State, Villagers, and Social Activists in Chinese Rural Reconstruction Projects. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 38(4):9-33.
- Van der Ploeg, Jan Douwe. 2008. *The New Peasantries: Struggles for Autonomy and Sustainability in an Era of Empire and Globalization*. London: Earthscan.
- Wakeman, Frederic. 1973. *History and Will: Philosophical Perspectives on Mao Zedong's Thought*. University of California Press.
- Walker, Kathy Le Mons. 2006. "Gangster Capitalism" and Peasant Protest in China: The Last Twenty Years, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 33(1):1-33.
- Walker, Kathy Le Mons. 2008. From Covert to Overt: Everyday Peasant Politics in China and the Implications for Transnational Agrarian Movements, *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 8:462-488.
- Wang Hui. 2009. *The End of the Revolution: China and the Limits of Modernity*. New York: Verso.
- Wang Hui, Ran Tao and Ju'er Tong. 2009. Trading Land Development Rights under a Planned Land Use System. *China and World Economy*, 17(1):1-17.
- Wang Ximing. 2009. Seniors' Organizations in China's New Rural Reconstruction: Experiments in Hubei and Henan. Translation and introduction by Matthew A. Hale. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 10(1):138-153.

- Wen Tiejun. 2003. Xianchang muji Moxige ‘mengmian jun’ (An eyewitness account of Mexico’s “masked army”). *Zhongguo Gaige (zonghe ban) (China Reform general edition)*, 9.
- Wen Tiejun. 2007. Deconstructing Modernization. *Chinese Anthropology and Sociology* 39(4):10-25.
- Wen Tiejun. 2010. Dangdai zhongguo de daxuesheng zhiyuanzhe yu “xin xiangcun jianshe.” In *Xie gei women shidai de qiliangmen*. Beijing: Liang Shuming Center for Rural Reconstruction.
- Wen Tiejun. 2012. Zhongguo nongdi gao siyoushua jiang daoxiang shehui da dongluan (The Privatization of Land in China Will Lead to Serious Social Chaos). *Wu you zhi xiang* (Utopia), <http://www.wyzxsx.com/Article/Class19/201202/295171.html> .
- Wen Tiejun, et al. 2001. Zenyang de quanqiuohua? (What kind of globalization?), *Dushu*, 8: 3-12.
- Wen Tiejun, Lao Kin Chi, Cheng Cunwang, He Huili, and Qiu Jiansheng. 2012. Ecological Civilization, Indigenous Culture, and Rural Reconstruction in China. *Monthly Review* 63(9):29-44.
- Wildcat. 2011. Flight from the Land and Food Riots. *Wildcat* 89, [http://www.wildcat-www.de/en/wildcat/89/e\\_w89\\_nahrungsmittel.html](http://www.wildcat-www.de/en/wildcat/89/e_w89_nahrungsmittel.html) .
- Williams, Evan Calder. 2011. *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse: Luciferian Marxism*. London: Zed Books.
- Wolf, Eric. 1966. *Peasants*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Wright, Erik Olin. 2010. Social Economy: A Niche in Capitalism or a Pathway Beyond? *Paper prepared for a meeting of the Analytical Marxism Group, Oxford*, [www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright/Social%20Economy%20PDFs/EOW--Social%20economy.pdf](http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright/Social%20Economy%20PDFs/EOW--Social%20economy.pdf) .

- Wright, Erik Olin. 2013. Transforming Capitalism through Real Utopias. *American Sociological Review*, 78(1):1-25.
- Wu, Yiching. 2007. *The Other Cultural Revolution: Politics and Practice of Class in the Chinese Cultural Revolution, 1966-1969*. PhD Dissertation, University of Chicago, Department of Anthropology.
- Yan, Hairong. 2003. Neoliberal Governmentality and Neohumanism: Organizing Suzhi/Value Flow through Labor Recruitment Networks. *Cultural Anthropology*, 18: 493–523.
- Yan, Hairong. 2008. *New Masters, New Servants: Migration, Development and Women Workers in China*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Yang Qingjuan, Li Bei, and Li Kui. 2011. The Rural Landscape Research in Chengdu's Urban-Rural Integration Development. *Procedia Engineering* 21:780–788.
- Yardley, Jim and David Barboza. 2005. Help Wanted: China Finds Itself With a Labor Shortage. *New York Times*, April 3, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/03/international/asia/03china.html>.
- Zhang Shuguang, Huang Wansheng, et al. 2012. Shehui jingji zai zhongguo, shang (Social Economy in China, Part One). *Kaifang Shidai* (Open Times) 1.