



Journal of Current Chinese Affairs

China aktuell

Zhang, Heather Xiaoquan (2009),
Guest Editor's Preface, in: *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 38, 4, 3-7.
ISSN: 1868-4874 (online), ISSN: 1868-1026 (print)

The online version of this and the other articles can be found at:
<www.CurrentChineseAffairs.org>

Published by
GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of Asian Studies
in cooperation with the National Institute of Chinese Studies, White Rose East Asia
Centre at the Universities of Leeds and Sheffield and Hamburg University Press.

The *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* is an Open Access publication.
It may be read, copied and distributed free of charge according to the conditions of the
Creative Commons Attribution-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.

To subscribe to the print edition: <ias@giga-hamburg.de>
For an e-mail alert please register at: <www.CurrentChineseAffairs.org>

The *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* is part of the GIGA Journal Family which includes:
Africa Spectrum • Journal of Current Chinese Affairs • Journal of Current Southeast
Asian Affairs • Journal of Politics in Latin America • <www.giga-journal-family.org>



German Institute of Global and Area Studies
Institute of Asian Studies

Guest Editor's Preface

Heather Xiaoquan Zhang

Despite the initial success of the post-Mao rural reforms, by the end of the twentieth century China's agriculture faced serious challenges and rural areas were in crisis. This crisis was manifested, for example, in constantly re-emerging rural poverty; alarmingly widening inequalities between urban and rural areas, and between industrial and agricultural sectors and coastal and inland regions; and the many pressing issues related to migrant workers (*nongmingong*) in respect of the recognition of their equal rights and citizenship. Since the mid-1990s the term "three rural issues" (*sannong wenti*), referring to problems related to agriculture (*nongye*), the countryside (*nongcun*) and farmers (*nongmin*), has entered the lexicon of ordinary Chinese, catching the attention of researchers, policy makers, and the general public alike.

The new rural policies examined in depth in this special issue are initiatives that have been put forward and have gradually gained momentum since the early part of this decade, precisely in response to such rural development crises. These broadly entail the important policy measures specified in the Document No. 1, issued by China's central government at the beginning of each year between 2004-2009; the construction of the new countryside movement since 2006; the urban-rural integration programme officially initiated in 2007 (though various local experiments were piloted earlier); and more recently the decision made at the third plenum of Seventeenth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee on promoting agricultural and rural development in the country. Most of the papers in this special issue were presented at Ninth European Conference on Agriculture and Rural Development in China (ECARDC9), which I, together with my colleagues, organised and hosted at the Department of East Asian Studies, the University of Leeds and the National Institute of Chinese Studies, White Rose East Asia Centre, UK, 3-5 April 2009. The conference – which attracted more than 60 participants from different parts of the world, including not only scholars based in Europe as its name might indicate but also academics, policy makers, and practitioners from China, Japan, Australia and the United States – yielded a large number of cutting-edge research and policy papers that explore agricultural and rural development in China from different theoretical and disciplinary perspectives,

applying diverse methodological approaches. ECARDC9 has thus helped advance our knowledge and understanding of the complex and multidimensional process of agrarian change in response to and in interaction with policy interventions at the local, national and global levels.

This special issue contains four contributions from ECARDC9, plus two other papers on closely related topics. The first article, by Stig Thøgersen, explores how the long-term quest for and experiments with building rural communities in China have historically affected policy making and continue to do so. He considers rural reforms as a transformation process more than just reshaping economic relationships or concerning issues of technological change but entailing fundamental community building – a way of thinking with roots that stretch back to eminent Chinese intellectuals of the 1920s and 1930s such as Liang Shuming, who promoted grass-roots actor participation instead of top-down project implementation. Through a range of case studies, Thøgersen shows that these historical ideals and practices are still of considerable relevance today, both in our understanding of the design of policy and practice, and in the values and beliefs of those involved. Also examining the practice of policy making, Anna Ahlers and Gunter Schubert take a different perspective by looking at local policy implementation practices. They examine how China's Building a New Socialist Countryside programme, announced in 2006, is being adapted in local contexts, and they attempt to identify the core actors in the process of policy adaptation and evaluate the ways in which support for change is structured. The emphasis on the perceptions of local officials, elicited during their 2008/09 fieldwork, provides a fresh understanding of and sheds light on the ongoing processes.

The relationships and interactions between state and non-state actors, between local and outside actors, and in particular their "interface", are explored in the context of "new ruralities" by Norman Long and Liu Jinlong. The "interface", Long and Liu note, is broadly defined as "social discontinuities" stemming from discrepancies in values, interests, priorities, knowledge, and power among the actors that shape the outcome of policy interventions. Taking an actor-oriented theoretical perspective and drawing on a case study of a national forest management programme initiated near the end of the 1990s in north-western China, Long and Liu illustrate vividly how policy interventions and practices essentially entail a series of interlocking "actor projects" cross-cutting different sociopolitical domains and involving complex negotiations and accommodations

among all the parties involved. The final outcome of policies, Long and Liu argue, is often vastly different from the official rhetoric or formally proclaimed policy objectives. They call for more in-depth ethnographic research and comparative studies in order to achieve a deeper and fuller understanding of the complexities and dynamics of agrarian change and rural development, both in China and globally. Linking rural and urban livelihoods and life worlds, Andrew Watson examines how the state is experimenting with and attempting to extend a social security scheme, including pensions, to migrant workers. Drawing on up-to-date data and the most recent debates, he provides a comprehensive analysis of how a significant new policy was piloted and extended nationwide, what implications it has for one of China's most vulnerable groups, the challenges that the new policies face, and possible institutional responses.

The two detailed analyses that follow provide overviews of the new rural policies centring on the core theme of urban-rural integration. Ye Xingqing systematically discusses the key issues and debates surrounding the urban-rural integration policies, which were first announced by the central government, as a comprehensive set of policy initiatives, in 2007 and proclaimed in further detail in October 2008 at the third plenum of the Seventeenth CCP Central Committee. Drawing on his intimate knowledge of and involvement in the decision-making processes at the State Council, where he works as a senior researcher, Ye shows how a series of important policy measures introduced since 2002, following the convening of the Sixteenth Party Congress, have aimed to fundamentally alter the entrenched urban-rural dualistic structure that has underpinned China's urban-centred development approach for a prolonged period of time. Despite the recent positive turn in the policy direction, Ye argues that the heated debates over these policies within China's high-level policy circles and their uneven local implementation, as well as the latest downturn in central government expenditures on and support for agriculture, suggest that the existing power imbalance and vested urban interests still constitute serious obstacles to the realization of these policy goals. The recent reforms to rural public finance – an essential component of the urban-rural integration initiative – are closely examined by John Tian in the following paper. Public finance, Tian notes, concerns issues relating to the sources of local-government revenues and the level of expenditure, as well as the ways rural public and social services are funded and sustained. He argues that a solid foundation of rural public finance in China is still developing, with its basic structure having come

into existence as a result of a series of reforms: the 1994 tax-assignment reform, the 2000 tax-for-fee reform, the 2006 abolition of agricultural taxes, the adjustment of the tax-sharing system, and the more recent expansion of intergovernmental transfers. In this dynamic process of chain reactions, Tian shows, the unexpected consequences of the earlier measures have precipitated deepening reforms which have led not only to major changes in rural public finance but also to an overhaul of local institutions of governance.

As a whole, the papers in this collection provide new insights into the most important policy processes and debates in China regarding agriculture and rural development during the past decade or so. While it may not be a straightforward exercise to judge the rural policies in terms of the extent to which they are going to effectively address the fundamental problems that have divided urban and rural societies, it is possible to draw the conclusion from the papers that core issues are being identified and tackled, and that the new policies have started affecting the lives and livelihoods of large parts of the rural and migrant populations. The views expressed in the papers also suggest that the current Chinese leadership has deemed unacceptable and even dangerous (in terms of maintaining political stability and social solidarity/ harmony) the continued expansion of the urban-rural income and development gaps. The leadership is therefore determined to curtail this trend by redirecting resource flows as well as through various policy experiments and institutional innovations, including not only the traditional top-down approaches but also local initiatives and grass-roots participation and empowerment. With the deepening of such efforts, it is reasonable to believe that the once seemingly insurmountable urban-rural boundaries and divide will be increasingly blurred and reshaped through profound institutional change and the interactions between diverse actors, be they local, regional, national or global. In addition, the arguments articulated in the papers indicate that in researching China's agrarian change and policy interventions, it is not enough to look at the country's rural policy as merely a top-down programme; rather, it has to be understood as a highly dynamic process with local practices and outcomes that need to be analysed and comprehended in terms of their full contextual complexities and dilemmas. Also in this sense, the papers together point to new challenges and set new agendas for future research on China's rural transformations and policy processes.

Acknowledgements

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Worldwide Universities Network (WUN), the Ford Foundation China, the School of Modern Languages and Cultures at the University of Leeds and the White Rose East Asia Centre for providing generous financial support, which enabled us to successfully organise and host The Ninth European Conference on Agriculture and Rural Development in China (ECARDC9) at the Department of East Asian Studies, University of Leeds, United Kingdom on 3-5 April 2009. I would also like to express my sincere thanks to all those who have worked hard to produce this special issue, including the authors for their enthusiastic participation in ECARDC9 and the subsequent writing and revising of their manuscripts to meet very tight deadlines, and the editorial and publication team of the *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* at GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies/ Institute of Asian Studies at Hamburg for their strong support to the project as a whole, with special thanks to Petra Brandt and Christine Berg for their effective work throughout the publication process.

Dr. Heather Xiaoquan Zhang is a senior lecturer of Chinese studies in the Department of East Asian Studies, University of Leeds and the director of postgraduate studies at the White Rose East Asia Centre, UK. Her research deals with the fields of social development, political economy, and contemporary change and transformation in China and South East Asia. Her current research is focused on urbanization, migration and livelihoods; social risk and social policy; health and well-being; poverty dynamics and institutional change; and globalization, gender, and agricultural and rural development. She has published extensively in these areas, including journal articles in *Development and Change*, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, *Journal of International Development*, *Women's Studies International Forum*, *Geoforum*, *Public Administration and Development*, as well as an edited volume (with Wu, B. and Sanders, R.) *Marginalisation in China: Perspectives on Transition and Globalisation*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007. She is currently co-editing a book – a collection of papers from ECARDC9 – entitled *Rural Livelihoods in China: Political Economy in Transition* which is to be published by Palgrave Macmillan.

Contents

Introduction

- **Heather Xiaoquan Zhang**
Guest Editor's Preface 3

Research Articles

- Stig Thøgersen
 Revisiting a Dramatic Triangle: The State, Villagers, and
 Social Activists in Chinese Rural Reconstruction Projects 9
- Anna L. Ahlers and Gunter Schubert
 "Building a New Socialist Countryside" – Only a Political
 Slogan? 35
- Norman Long and Liu Jinlong
 The Centrality of Actors and Interfaces in the Understanding
 of New Ruralities: A Chinese Case Study 63
- Andrew Watson
 Social Security for China's Migrant Workers – Providing for
 Old Age 85

Analyses

- Ye Xingqing (Translated by Flemming Christiansen)
 China's Urban-Rural Integration Policies 117
- John Q. Tian
 Reorganizing Rural Public Finance: Reforms and
 Consequences 145

- Contributors 173