Journal of Current Chinese Affairs

China aktuell

Thøgersen, Stig (2009),
Revisiting a Dramatic Triangle: The State, Villagers, and Social Activists in Chinese Rural Reconstruction Projects**, in:** ***Journal of Current Chinese Affairs***, 38, 4, 9-33.
ISSN: 1868-4874 (online), ISSN: 1868-1026 (print)

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Published by
GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of Asian Studies
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Revisiting a Dramatic Triangle: The State, Villagers, and Social Activists in Chinese Rural Reconstruction Projects

Stig Thøgersen

Abstract: As part of the movement to "construct a new socialist countryside", Chinese officials and social activists are experimenting with transforming rural social and economic relations. They often draw on discourses dating back to the Rural Reconstruction Movement of the 1920s and 1930s, which saw urban intellectuals making similar efforts to modernize the villages and their inhabitants. This paper analyses the different types of relationships between the state, social activists, and villagers in a number of rural reconstruction projects. The state is still the major player in this field, but traditional top-down procedures are often perceived to be unproductive when it comes to micro-level community building, so state actors are forced to find allies among village elites and social activists.

■ Manuscript received May 28, 2009; accepted September 02, 2009

Keywords: China, rural reconstruction, new socialist countryside

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Introduction

The idea and practice of "constructing" (建设) the Chinese countryside according to the political and social visions of the state and of individual reformers date back at least to the 1920s. In line with this tradition, the "construction of a new socialist countryside" (新社会主义农村建设) has become the official guiding principle for the rural policies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) since the fifth plenary session of the Sixteenth Party Congress in October 2005. The aim of this campaign is not simply to develop the economy and improve rural infrastructure and social services. Like its Republican era antecedents, it also has a civilizing mission and aims to promote a civilized lifestyle (乡风文明), make villages clean and tidy (村容整洁) and introduce democratic administration (管理民主).

These "soft" goals call for the reconstruction of rural communities and the reformatting of social relations, but who has the knowledge, authority, resources, and political vision to draw blueprints for the new model villages? Who should be the active subjects in the transformation process? What are the proper roles of the state, ordinary villagers, village elites, and social activists in the reforms? Such questions were already being asked in the 1920s and 1930s, and they are still highly relevant today as we witness a new wave of rural reconstruction projects embodying their designers' ideas about the proper roles of internal (rural) and external (mainly urban) actors and about state-society relations at a more general level.

One of the reformers who raised these issues most consistently during the Republican period was Liang Shuming (1893-1988), and the first part of this paper[1] will briefly discuss his opinions on the relationship between the state, urban intellectuals, and peasants in rural development. In the main part of the paper I shall then look at how this triangular relationship is interpreted in rural reconstruction projects today, when Liang has again become relevant because present-day reformers consciously position themselves in relation to experiences from the Republican era. In this latter section I shall draw on observations from visits to a number of projects in Hubei Province in 2008 as well as on the Chinese

1 I am grateful for the comments on this paper which I received at the 9th ECARDC conference in Leeds, April 3-5, 2009, and to the three anonymous *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* reviewers. A slightly different version of this paper will appear in Chinese in the journal *China Studies* (中国研究).

academic literature.[2] The paper does not attempt to cover the entire New Socialist Countryside campaign. The purpose is rather to look at experiments that are conducted under this umbrella, and which illustrate present explorations of the state-activist-villager relationship.

Liang Shuming on Rural Reconstruction

Towards the end of the 1920s many Chinese social reformers turned their attention to the countryside, and up through the 1930s hundreds of surveys and development projects were implemented in China's villages. Several Republican reformers addressed the issue of rural-urban relations, but one of the most significant positions was that of Liang Shuming, who conducted his main rural reconstruction experiments in Zouping County, Shandong Province between 1931 and 1937 (Alitto 1986; Thøgersen 2002).

Liang's view on rural-urban relations was determined by his belief that Chinese culture in general, and Confucianism in particular, held the key to solving the moral and ethical questions facing China and the rest of the world. In the cities, however, traditional Chinese culture had completely disappeared. It was almost dead in the countryside too, but there, at least, its roots were still alive in the memories of old people, and new shoots could grow from them under careful protection (Liang 1936a). Another feature that made villages superior to the cities was that they were China's primary source of wealth. Unlike their Western counterparts, Chinese cities consumed more than they produced, according to Liang, so the urban population – and the intellectuals in particular – were "eating the blood and sweat of the peasants" (Liang 1937: 988). Liang's aversion to urban life and culture was particularly pronounced in the field of education: he wanted rural schools to respond to rural needs instead of just turning generation after generation of educated village youth into parasitic urbanites (Liang 1931).

Although there was a considerable element of anti-urban agrarianism in Liang's thinking (Alitto 1986: 12-13), he certainly did not idealize life in Chinese villages in his own days. By that time, he believed, the organic social structures and moral codes of traditional rural communi-

2 My visits were arranged by the Centre for Rural Studies at Huazhong Normal University. I am grateful to Xu Yong (徐勇) and Liu Yiqiang (刘义强) for arranging these visits, and to Chen Xiangying (陈祥英) for accompanying me to the projects.

ties had already been smashed by the Western modernity that had been forced upon China, so if the villages were to fulfil their historical role they would have to be resurrected through educational reforms implemented by idealistic urban intellectuals. Liang therefore organized Zouping around village and township schools that took over local government functions and responsibilities. Members of the existing village elite were placed in charge of these new organs of power. Liang preferred to leave existing social hierarchies intact because he believed that China's villages had no class contradictions, only social differences based on wealth and occupation. A violent revolution would be harmful, because it would disrupt the surviving remains of the original social structure and marginalize the most resourceful villagers.

The young activists in Liang's movement should help organize village life and introduce new technologies, but they should never force change upon the villagers as was being done in top-down state-sponsored rural reconstruction programmes elsewhere in China. The fundamental problem with these other programmes, according to Liang, was the role of the state. The state based its power on violence rather than on education and ethics, and this was the root of many problems. The rural reconstruction movement must therefore be independent from the state and work directly with the peasants to gain their confidence. This exclusion of the state from the community-building process was an essential element of Liang's vision, but in the end he was forced to admit that he failed in this respect. In 1936, after five years of work in Zouping, Liang drew the disillusioned conclusion that the peasants remained the objects of the reforms; they never became their active subjects. They were often hostile to the urban intellectuals and resisted change (Liang 1936b). Frustration spread among Liang's activists, and some of them argued for using coercive measures in order to make villagers attend school (Thøgersen 2002: 114). A further irony was that Liang could never have carried out his experiments if it had not been for the local warlord Han Fuju, a most unpleasant practitioner of the violent and top-down ruling style that Liang detested.

Liang was a cultural conservative, but he combined his belief in traditional Chinese values with strong support for the technological modernization of agriculture, rural cooperatives, education for girls, and the other favourite causes of progressive reformers of that time. His firm conviction that Chinese village culture could solve the problems not only of China but also of the entire world was quite extreme, but his trust in

the villages was not. Around this time reformers from other ideological backgrounds similarly emphasized the importance of the villages for China's future. Liang Shuming's collaborator in the Rural Reconstruction Movement, Yan Yangchu (James Yen), was a liberal and a Christian, but although his ideological point of departure was very different from Liang's, he also found superior cultural qualities in the rural areas. He felt that there was a spirit of mutual help and understanding which was missing among city dwellers, so for him the peasants also represented China's hope for the future (Hayford 1990; Yen 1929).

As this brief outline of Liang Shuming's ideas shows, Liang represents a significant pre-1949 tradition for thinking about rural reforms according to a triangular framework of state actors, villagers, and intellectual social activists. Thinkers inside this tradition favour a participatory approach to rural development and are sceptical of projects implemented by state representatives. Participants in the Chinese debate today do not ignore, of course, the many differences between how the state functioned in the 1930s and how it operates today, and they recognize the deep influence on rural communities of more than 20 years of collective agriculture (for a systematic comparison of the Republican experiments with political trends in the reform era, see Yu 2008: 169-234). However, as the writings of scholars such as He Xuefeng, Wen Tiejun, Yu Keping and many others show, the experiments of the 1930s, and in particular the work and ideas of Liang and Yan, are major reference points in the present debate on rural reconstruction.

Rural Communities, Social Activists, and the State Today

During the late 1990s the lack of social cohesion in the villages and the rural-urban discrepancy that had occupied the social reformers of the 1930s returned to the top of the Chinese political agenda. In the late 1970s and early 1980s Chinese agriculture was in reality privatized after almost 30 years of collective organization. The dissolution of the collective structures created more social differentiation and markedly greater social and geographic mobility. This meant that traditional forms of social organization, such as families and lineages, that had structured village life before the socialist transformation came under pressure. Many villagers – especially but not exclusively young people – sought employment far from their native home, and this had a deep impact on the family's

traditional areas of responsibility, such as childrearing, care of the elderly, and public order.

Due to the weakening of both socialist and pre-revolutionary structures, social organization dissolved in many places, and the provision of public goods and services deteriorated. This led to a widespread fear of what Yan Yunxiang (2003) has called the rise of the "uncivil individual", who is guided neither by socialist norms nor by traditional morality. As each family worked only for itself, irrigation works, roads, schools, and health clinics were neglected. Gradually, conflicts between the rural population and representatives of the local state intensified (Bernstein and Lü 2003). During the 1990s more and more Chinese academics and officials reacted to these signs of crisis and pointed out that rural social development had been ignored during the transformation to a market economy and that rural communities must be reconstructed. With the campaign to construct a new socialist countryside, social cohesion and community building became official policy priorities.

In the remaining part of the paper I shall look at some of the ideas and projects that have come out of the growing interest in rural reconstruction in order to show how different actors initiate and negotiate processes of change. I shall divide the actors into three main groups, roughly similar to the categories that informed Liang Shuming's thinking on the topic: state representatives, social activists, and local actors. State (and CCP) representatives can have different agendas depending on their position in the hierarchy (township, county, district, province, or central) and other factors, but in relation to the rural communities they represent formal state power. Besides officials directly responsible for the locality, state actors can also be institutions, typically government organs, appointed by the state to sponsor specific village or rural reconstruction projects. Social activists can be organized in NGOs, or they can be scholars with a professional interest in rural reconstruction. Such scholars are normally employed by state universities or research institutions, but they have no direct authority over the villages and their mode of operation is, in my experience, close to that of an NGO, so in the present context I see them as social activists rather than state actors. Local actors can be both ordinary villagers and members of the rural elite (entrepreneurs, village party secretaries, etc.), as well as grass-roots organizations such as farmers' associations and producers' cooperatives, lineage and temple associations, and informal networks.

Rural reconstruction projects are shaped by varying constellations of these three groups of actors. The initiative can come from each of the three corners of the triangle, but in the implementation phase we normally find several actors working together according to different patterns.

Top-down State-initiated Projects

After decades of neglect, there are now clear signs that the state sees urban-rural disparities as a major problem and is willing to make large-scale investments in the rural areas. A recent survey (Liu et al. 2009) showed high and growing state investments in rural infrastructure accompanied by an increasing quality of the projects. The government has also presented substantial plans to improve rural social services, not least in education and health. However, the state's ambition is not just to generate economic development and improve living standards. Social cohesion is just as vital in order to achieve the social stability that is an overarching goal of the party-state's rural policies.

The traditional ways for the CCP to implement such fundamental social change in rural areas have been to "send down" (下派) cadres and work teams (工作队) from higher bureaucratic levels, and to develop model villages through special material and organizational inputs. These well-tried methods are also used today when villages are sponsored by higher-level organs (部门包村) or when work teams are sent out to stay for longer periods of time in rural communities. Scholars and NGOs tend to be deeply sceptical about this type of project, which they often, in line with Liang Shuming, consider to be bureaucratic, superficial, and lacking in genuine grass-roots participation. However, the organizational capacity of the state makes this by far the most common type of rural reconstruction. When Jiangxi Province implemented this method between 1994 and 1997, it sent down 42,000 cadres to more than one-fourth of its villages (Yan and Xiao 2004). A non-state actor could never carry out an operation on this scale.

An interesting case study on this type of project in Jiangxi Province shows both its strengths and its weaknesses (Yan and Xiao 2004). In 2001 a city-level *danwei* (work unit) was ordered to sponsor Hucun (the name has been changed by the authors), a rather poor village with just over 1,000 inhabitants. The *danwei* was told to contribute 100,000 CNY to projects in the village, and the provincial and city-level administrations

set up a series of detailed targets that should be reached within the three-year sponsorship period. When the village party secretary lacked enthusiasm for the reform plans, the higher-level authorities had him replaced. In the end the team managed to draw up a development plan that included the construction of an elementary school and several projects intended to increase the collective income of the village, such as a rabbit farm and an oil-tree grove.

Although the Hucun team was the most successful of the four teams sent out by the county in question, its results were far from impressive. The villagers appreciated their new school and other infrastructure projects, such as a cable TV network and better roads, financed by donations from the work unit. The agricultural projects, however, which were supposed to give a lasting boost to the collective economy, were less successful. The rabbits died, and the oil-trees were not properly looked after. The authors of the report concluded that resourceful work units that can offer substantial material inputs and access to important social networks may benefit the villages they sponsor, but that the large majority of *danweis* lack the means to do so. And

> if the danwei has no money to invest in the village, nobody listens to the work group, and there is no way to do the job (Yan and Xiao 2004: 75).

Even after the investment of over 360,000 CNY in Hucun (some of this money was paid out of the employees' own pockets), the results were a far cry from the ambitious development goals set by the higher levels, and when the province told this *danwei* to sponsor another village for the following three-year period, its initial enthusiasm was gone. The report concludes that the meagre results of the sponsorship did not match the sponsoring *danwei's* considerable investment, and that this type of top-down project cannot promote rural development in the long run. Instead, the authors suggest a participatory approach.

It is possible to find more positive reports on the effects of work teams and the sending down of cadres. The so-called Nanping experience (南平经验) from Fujian was praised by Pan Yue, then deputy director of the Economic Restructuring Office of the State Council, and several others as a feasible way of promoting new technology and social development by sending "technological emissaries" (科技特派员) and higher-level party leaders to the villages (Pan 2003). As always in such campaigns, however, there seem to be considerable differences between model units and ordinary villages, and there are also risks involved in the

"experiments". Wang Yalin and Yang Xue (2007) have demonstrated how centrally directed campaigns often lead to severe economic losses for the farmers. They use the top-down promotion of dairy farming in a province in North China as an example of how the political pressure to follow a new economic "strategy" was transmitted down through the bureaucratic levels without considering the logic of the market or the farmers' economic interests. Such tragedies are well known from other parts of China as well, when the whims of county or township leaders lead to the introduction of new crops or industries.

The top-down, state-dominated approach outlined in this section is still the most common in rural reconstruction projects. There is a growing awareness, however, that it is not the most constructive. Social activists and scholars have long been advocating a more participatory model of rural development, and the state is also looking for more cost-efficient alternatives. As the next sections will show, the state in some cases relies on village elites and external social activists in community-building projects.

State and Village Elites

A state-sponsored rural reconstruction project that goes through the ordinary channels of command will, of course, involve the political elite of the village in the form of the "two committees" (两委), that is, the elected villagers' committee and the village party committee. If these committees do not have the villagers' respect and trust, or if they are unwilling or unable to collaborate, higher-level authorities can decide to work with other local actors. This method is different from sending down cadres or developing model villages because it rests mainly on the mobilization of internal resources through local actors whose legitimacy is based on their positions in local lineages, their age, their local reputation, etc.

The strategy has been tested with success, particularly in areas with powerful lineages. The so-called Ganzhou Model (赣州模式) draws on experiences from Ganzhou municipality in Jiangxi Province, where the introduction of peasants' councils (农民理事会) is reported to have been extremely successful in promoting rural reconstruction. The councils are directly elected, either by all villagers or by household representatives. The councillors cannot be incumbent village cadres or team heads but are elected from among the so-called "five olds": former cadres at the

village, township and county levels; former teachers; retired workers; older model personalities; and older party members. Older people are preferred partly because they have more social prestige, and partly because the most capable members of the younger generation in many cases have migrated to more industrialized areas. The councils can either be formed for undertaking a specific task, such as constructing a road or repairing the village electricity system, or they can be more permanent, but they have to gain acceptance from the villagers each time they initiate a new project (Li and Huang 2007).

The media have heaped praise on the Ganzhou Model and emphasized its fundamental difference from a top-down approach to rural development. This report from the CCP theoretical organ *Qiushi* is quite typical:

> Before, the village cadres took the initiative when something was to be done, but now it is the council. It is no longer the higher levels that tell you what to do, now "we all consult with each other about how we should get our own work done" (Yang 2006).

Why does it apparently make such a huge difference that village cadres are replaced by councillors when both groups are directly elected by the villagers? One reason, according to two Chinese researchers, is that the councillors are not only members of the village elite "in the modern social sense", but are also often at the same time prominent members of the lineages represented in the village (Li and Huang 2007). This gives them a special historically based moral authority, particularly in the Ganzhou area, which is dominated by Hakka people who, according to the report, have a particularly deep respect for Chinese traditions and culture and a solid tradition of establishing such committees to organize collective tasks. The authors provide a telling example of how traditional authority is used to persuade villagers to take part in projects initiated by the councils: one man who was unwilling to paint his house was visited by a councillor who was also head of his lineage and told that if he did not keep his house in proper shape he would not be allowed to be buried inside the village.

It is not surprising that strong lineage organizations are used by the state to build "new socialist villages". Lily Tsai (2007) has convincingly shown that the existence of strong "traditional" community organizations such as lineage and temple associations is a better guarantee for the provision of public goods than democratically elected village committees, so there is obviously large potential in activating such organizations.

Mette Halskov Hansen (2008) has demonstrated how local authorities in Fujian, where lineages are also strong, rely on Old Peoples' Associations led by elderly lineage leaders who represent local traditional authority. Hansen found that:

> [I]n rural areas of Southern China male seniority first of all becomes powerful when based on the combination of traditional prestige (for instance, due to lineage affiliation, or family tradition), earlier positions, and new formalized prestige connected to the leadership of an officially established "popular organization" (Hansen 2008: 1076).

It is exactly this combination of different sources of authority that makes the Ganzhou peasants' councils efficient while still enabling the CCP to prevent the reliance on traditional authority from leading villages to break loose from party-state control. Many older councillors are former cadres and party members, and younger councillors are actively recruited to the party. In some cases the CCP even establishes party groups inside the councils or sets up party groups to supervise them (Zhu and Zhong 2007). "Traditional" and "modern" sources of authority become inseparable, and rural reconstruction projects can be implemented without the passive opposition with which they are often met. Besides Jiangxi there are also reports from Fujian about how the state has co-opted lineages in this way (Li 2008).

However, a precondition for the success of the Ganzhou Model is apparently that the state can piggyback on local actors with prominent positions in traditional social organizations. In many parts of the country lineages are too weak to play this role and there are no alternative social structures of comparable strength for the state to rely on. One possible solution in such cases can be to ask an NGO to bridge the cleavage between the state and villagers. The following section presents some experiments in this field.

The State and External NGOs

Chinese NGOs are often said to live in a symbiotic relationship with the state (Saich 2000: 139). The state is increasingly dependent on social organizations in such fields as environmental protection, cultural activities, and social work among marginalized groups, while the NGOs need the support of the state, or at the very least its passive acceptance, if they want to have a real impact on social life. The field of rural reconstruction is no exception to this rule. The following two examples show how

Green Cross (绿十字), a Beijing-based NGO founded by the painter Sun Jun (孙君), cooperated with state actors and villagers in two rural reconstruction projects in Hubei Province.

Yanhe Village: Classic Rural Reconstruction with a Green Profile

The first project was carried out in Yanhe Village (堰河村) in Wushan Town (五山镇), Gucheng County (谷城县), west of Xiangfan City (襄樊市). Yanhe has 870 inhabitants divided into four villagers' groups and an annual average per capita income of 3,680 CNY. Yanhe is a rural reconstruction success story, and in 2005 the national-level committee for civilizing the rural areas selected it as an "advanced unit" in the field of rural civilization. It is also economically successful thanks to organic farming, tea production and bourgeoning tourism. The village is beautifully situated in a fertile valley; most of its families live in new houses with modern facilities; the roads are well paved; and the surroundings are extraordinarily clean and tidy.

Yanhe's rise to fame started with a project initiated in 2004 by Green Cross, which emphasizes values that were also central to many rural reconstruction projects in the 1930s such as participatory development, community building, the construction of a local collective identity, and cultural change as a precondition for economic and social progress. Green Cross has added environmental awareness to this list of principles, and its first project in Yanhe aimed at raising the villagers' environmental consciousness by organizing them to separate and recycle their garbage. Other project activities included the protection of local water resources from pollution, partly for the villagers' own sake and partly because Yanhe is close to Hanjiang River, which is now being redirected towards the north in order to supply water to large northern cities such as Beijing and Tianjin. This huge undertaking will undoubtedly have serious consequences for the local ecology.

Yanhe has specialized in tea production, and its tea plantations are collectively owned by the village and contracted out to local families. This gave the village a collective income of over 200,000 CNY in 2006 and made it possible for it to invest in public facilities. In order to boost the economy further, a cooperative was established to process the tea and market it under a common trademark. The idea was that the tea should be organic, in line with the environmentally friendly profile of

Green Cross, and this was expected to become a strong sales argument in the future. By April 2008 approximately 20 households had bought shares in the cooperative for between 500 CNY and 2,000 CNY each. The 20 shareholders had equal influence regardless of the size of their investment. The cooperative was purely commercial and operated on market conditions, and it hired temporary workers from other provinces to pick the tea. I asked some villagers who had not joined the cooperative about their motivation for staying out. They said that there had been a public meeting before the establishment of the cooperative and that everybody had been invited to join, but that some had felt that only wealthy families were welcome while others found the economic risk too big or simply could not afford the investment.

Yanhe's green surroundings gave the villagers the idea of attracting tourists, and organic farming added to the attraction for city dwellers tired of urban pollution. Several village families built small hotels (农家乐) where city people could spend weekends and holidays. In 2008 there were already 20 such hotels with restaurants and other facilities in the village and more were under construction.

Green Cross introduces Yanhe's new organization of village life as the "Wushan Model" (五山模式) and has published a set of five books presenting this model and other aspects of rural reconstruction (Sun 2006a). The project is supported and promoted by the local government, and even the central authorities in Beijing praise it. With its combination of environmental concerns and market-oriented economic thinking, Yanhe appears to have struck a note that is popular with almost everyone.

Wangtai Village: Rural Reconstruction as a Solution to Ethnic Problems

If the Yanhe experiment was designed as a response to China's environmental crisis, Wangtai is intended to show how rural reconstruction can be used to solve ethnic conflicts. Wangtai Village (王台村) is situated in Banqiaodian Town (板桥店镇), Yicheng County (宜城市), south of Xiangfan City. It is supported by the Xiangfan Municipality as an "experimental village for unity and harmony among the nationalities" (民族团结和谐的试点村). The story behind this status is that a large group of people from the Muslim Hui minority (回族) were resettled as Wangtai's Team 3 in 1966 after they had been forced to leave their own village

because of the construction of the Danjiang Dam. Team 3 now has 276 inhabitants who are all registered as belonging to the Hui ethnic group. The resettlement has led to regular conflicts between the Hui and the local Han population. Up to the start of the rural reconstruction project in 2007, there were on average 34 officially registered conflicts each year between Team 3 and its neighbours, and a major clash between Hui and Han villagers occurred every second year on average (Beijing lü shizi 2007). In order to solve these problems and improve the team's economy, the municipality called in Green Cross, which had operated with so much success in Yanhe in the preceding years.

Green Cross started out, just as it had done in Yanhe, with a garbage-sorting programme, but the role of Team 3 as a model village also involved a broad range of additional development targets. High-quality housing and a clean and healthy environment were among the main goals, and large posters with paintings of elegant and spacious family dwellings among green trees were on display in the village. A few houses had already been constructed in accordance with the new design, which, according to the posters, should demonstrate the "ethnic characteristics" (民族特色) of the Hui inhabitants.

Team 3 also established a cooperative, but in contrast to the shareholding model used in Yanhe, the Team 3 cooperative included all of its 62 households. The cooperative was led by an elected board with five members who were not identical with the team's leadership group. Because the inhabitants had originally been compulsorily resettled, they still received monthly compensation from the government. Those who had been born after 1966, when the resettlement took place, had their compensation paid into a fund which could only be used for collective projects. Team 3 was now spending this accumulated capital of 369,000 CNY on the construction of a cow house with room for 500 cows, and the municipal government added 200,000 CNY from its rural reconstruction fund. When I visited the team in April 2008, the new cow house was under construction and the cows were therefore still tied to trees outside each individual residence. Moving them to the cow house was expected to save time and work, reduce pollution around the private residences, and improve the quality of the meat.

The model status of Team 3 also involved political goals such as the establishment of a "green channel" for complaints through letters and visits (信访绿色通道) and – not least – an improvement of the relations between the two ethnic groups. Green Cross approached this issue by

mobilizing the villagers' religion as a positive force, which Sun Jun hoped could be the key to social stability. Sun Jun therefore directly encouraged the villagers to study Islam and build their collective identity around their religion (Sun 2006b).

In both these projects there was close cooperation between Green Cross and the local party-state. Green Cross was invited to the district by local authorities, who saw a need for outside input in order to solve the problems of environmental degradation and ethnic conflict. The higher-level cadres knew that "people [in Wangtai] no longer trusted the government" because of the failure of its earlier interventions. Green Cross could communicate with the villagers and win their confidence in a way that government cadres would never be able to (Hong 2007).

Green Cross, on the other hand, needed the state's political and economic capacity in order to gain access to the villages, and it also relied on state funding. From the NGO's own detailed account of the history of the project, it appears that crucial elements such as garbage recycling, the emphasis on Islamic belief and values, and the participatory approach all came from Green Cross.[3] Sun Jun followed his own agenda, which differed from the state actors' usual way of doing things, but he identified with the larger goals of the New Socialist Countryside project.

Scholars as Social Activists

Chinese social scientists played a significant role in directing the authorities' attention towards the "three rural questions" (三农问题) around the year 2000, and some researchers are regularly consulted by central and local authorities in connection with the formulation of new rural policies. A few of them are also actively engaged in carrying out rural reconstruction experiments (see Day and Hale 2007 for a presentation). In the two cases discussed in this section, scholars have initiated projects that aim to create more organic and self-governing rural communities below the level of the administrative village.

3 The different steps of the Wangtai project are described in 绿十字通讯 no. 1, 2007, and on the organization's homepage: <www.bjlsz.org.cn>.

He Xuefeng and Old People's Associations in Hubei

He Xuefeng is one of the most influential scholars in the field of rural reconstruction. In addition to pure research, he is also engaged in experimental projects in his home province of Hubei. He is inspired by Liang Shuming, and his end goal is to establish a new way of life in rural China based on a model of "low consumption and high welfare" (低消费，高福利). The idea behind this formula is that China's hundreds of millions of peasants cannot create a satisfactory future by relying on the market economy and urbanization alone, at least not in the short run. The many smallholders cannot compete according to market conditions because of their shortage of land and several other restricting factors, so it is necessary to transfer funds from urban to rural areas in order to guarantee the villagers a decent standard of living. Furthermore, if all Chinese peasants were to reach the same level of consumption as Westerners, the world's resources would very soon be exhausted. Because the high level of consumption in the industrialized world is unsustainable, He believes that the "low consumption, high welfare" lifestyle offers a long-term alternative for the rest of the world as well (He 2007: 99).

While most other rural reconstruction projects focus on increasing villagers' collective and/ or individual income, He Xuefeng is primarily interested in establishing popular organizations that increase quality of life, particularly for weak and marginalized groups in rural society. The elderly are one such weak group, so starting in 2002 He Xuefeng helped to establish Old People's Associations (OPAs, 老年人协会) in four villages in Hubei Province, beginning in Honghu Fish Farm (洪湖渔场), a village in Honghu municipality (洪湖市) with around 1,500 inhabitants, 135 of them over the age of 60. The main activity of this OPA was to run an old people's activity centre that showed videos and organized singing, calligraphy and other cultural activities; however, the association also mediated in domestic conflicts and educated young people who did not treat their parents well.

The OPA in Honghu was run by an elected board, and most of its core activists were former village cadres and other old people with above-average resources. It funded some of its own activities by collecting garbage, but it also received yearly financial support of 5,000 CNY from its external sponsors, which corresponds to only 0.1 CNY per day for each of the elderly people. According to He Xuefeng, the establishment of the OPA had a strong impact on social life in the village. The elderly now had a place to meet, and this made them happier and less

isolated. When younger women saw the positive effect of the OPA, they organized their own cultural group without any external support (He 2007: 181-204).

The project shows clear traces of Liang Shuming's legacy. The role of the outside social activists is mainly to introduce the idea of establishing an association and contribute very limited funding. The focus is on cultural revival within the Chinese tradition, but through such cultural activities major social problems, in this case the vulnerable position of the elderly, are also addressed.

The Nannong Experiment in Guangdong

The Nannong (南农) experiment in rural reconstruction is being carried out in four villages in Guangdong by the Center for Rural Studies at Huazhong Normal University (华中师范大学中国农村问题研究中心) in cooperation with the newspaper *Nanfang nongcunbao* (南方农村报). In December 2005 the newspaper advertised for villages interested in taking part in a rural reconstruction experiment, and four of the many applicants were selected (the section on the Nannong experiment is based on Peng 2008 and Ma 2008).

The project emerged from the need to transform a "passive and static" peasant society into an "active and positive civil society full of vitality" (Peng 2008). To achieve this aim, it would be necessary to make better use of the existing social capital of the rural communities, while at the same time bringing in material, technical and intellectual resources from the outside. A report from one of the four villages, Guangyu village (广育村) (Ma 2008), shows how the academic activists are deeply engaged in solving local disputes and establishing more participatory and democratic procedures. They first made a detailed study of the actual power relations in the village, which turned out to differ considerably from the formal political structure. Based on this understanding, they tried to solve a dispute between village cadres, villagers, and an entrepreneur about an iron mine through meetings, long talks with all involved parties, and careful mediation. Another project activity in this village was to conduct a questionnaire survey in order to create conditions for establishing a committee in charge of the village water supply, and a third task was to train and organize villagers to supervise the construction of a road. A characteristic element of all three projects was thus practical training in participatory development at the most fundamental level: How to hold a meeting; how to make a transparent budget; how to su-

pervise a community project. The focus of the Nannong experiment is on micro-level decision making and community building rather than on large-scale economic development.

It is evident that the mutual dependency that characterizes the relation between the state and NGOs also exists between the state and academic activists. The latter can use rural reconstruction projects to test their own ideas and substantiate their points in the ongoing political and academic debate about the future development of rural China. Their experiments are on a much smaller scale than those carried out by Liang Shuming and Yan Yangchu in the 1930s, who could use entire counties as test sites, but they still need the cooperation of local authorities in order to be able to operate. From the state's point of view, the academic activists can contribute new ideas and perspectives, and their status as social scientists gives their reports more credibility than the writings of local government cadres, notorious for manipulating facts in their own favour.

Local Entrepreneurs

In the examples above, the initiative behind the rural reconstruction projects came from external actors, but village elites are, of course, not just passively waiting for others to come and "reconstruct" their social environment. Local entrepreneurs often have ambitious plans, not just for their own businesses but also for their local communities. The state has long tapped into this social energy resource by encouraging successful business people to run in village elections, but the emphasis on rural reconstruction has opened up a new possibility for local entrepreneurs to create company towns that live up to the goals of economic development, community building, and a "civilized" physical environment. Agrarian capitalism is a forceful trend in the development of Chinese agriculture at the moment and can take several different forms (Zhang and Donaldson 2008). These changes in economic relations can also lead to the restructuring of rural social life when agribusinesses build new housing and provide social and material infrastructure for the villages they are engaged in.

I saw an example of how private entrepreneurs can carve out a role for themselves in rural community building in Y village in Dongqiao town (东桥镇), Zhongxiang County (钟祥市). Y has 1,078 inhabitants who are divided into six groups corresponding to six natural villages.

With its average annual per capita income of 3,812 CNY, this is not a poor village. Rice, cotton and watermelons are the main local crops and prices had been good in 2007, so many families were building new houses in 2008.

However, Y village had many problems typical of inland agricultural villages. The quality of public goods and services did not match the relative prosperity of the individual families. A paved road led from the township to the seat of the village committee, which was relatively close to the main road, but further out towards the natural villages there were only dirt roads, which were impossible to pass when it was raining. Many of the crops depended on irrigation, but there was no money for building a canal that could have solved this problem for everyone. Instead each farmer had installed his own electric pump, an expensive and inefficient solution. The village leaders had tried in vain to collect money for the construction of an irrigation system. A bridge leading to one of the teams had recently been partly washed away by a flood. The village committee had no money to repair it, and the team members could not agree on a model for sharing the expenses between them. Medical care was inadequate, with only one poorly trained village doctor (referred to as a barefoot doctor (赤脚医生) by the villagers) for the more than 1,000 inhabitants.

The main reason for this lack of public facilities, according to the party secretary of Y village, was that the village quite literally had no income following the abolition of the agricultural tax. However, he also complained about a lack of collective spirit and sense of public responsibility that made it very hard to organize any activities. The villagers owed the village committee 260,000 CNY in tax arrears, but the party secretary doubted that he would ever be able to collect this debt. As a consequence, the village was no longer able to remunerate team-level cadres, which again made it harder to organize the villagers. The only way for the village leaders to generate money was to design projects for which they could apply to the township or county government for funding. Through these channels Y village received 120,000 CNY in 2007. The party secretary emphasized that only villages with well-connected leaders got money for projects. Y village had been part of an old revolutionary base area, so many high-level cadres had their roots in the village and were therefore willing to help. The party secretary could also draw on his wide personal network, built up during his many years as a cadre at dif-

ferent levels. Some villages, however, received no project funding at all from above.

The complaints from Y village's party secretary about the poor quality of public goods and the lack of public spirit echo reports from many other villages. What made Y village interesting in a rural reconstruction context, however, were the plans of a private entrepreneur to restructure the six natural villages and turn them into a single modern community with a wide range of cultural and social facilities. This businessman, Mr. Li, had lived in Y village until the age of 14, when his father took him to Japan. As an adolescent he worked in Japanese greenhouses, and based on this experience he had developed the idea of sending young Chinese villagers to Japan to work in parks, gardens and greenhouses. He was now running a large enterprise with a broad range of activities, and he had already sent more than a thousand workers to Japan, including 81 from Y village.

Mr. Li's labour export had helped Y village to prosper, as workers often brought back considerable sums of money when they returned after a year or two abroad. He had now thought out a new and ambitious plan, however, which he hoped would make his entire native village modern and wealthy. His idea was to run the village as one large agribusiness. Instead of small private plots, all land should be pooled and divided according to the quality of the soil and other natural conditions, so that each plot would be reserved for the crop it was best suited for. There would be separate areas for fruit trees, vegetables, rice, cotton, potatoes, etc. (一区一品), and a machine station with modern equipment would cover all needs for mechanization. Everyone presently living in the six natural villages would move to a brand new residential area, and their old houses would be torn down. The new central village would be equipped with office and meeting facilities, a kindergarten, a school, a health clinic, an activity centre for the elderly, a supermarket, a sports ground, restaurants and a karaoke bar. The spacious and standardized family dwellings around these public facilities would, of course, all have running water and electricity.

Mr. Li had presented his plans to the villagers at a meeting, and according to the party secretary most of them were positive, although some thought it was a terrible waste that their newly built houses were to be demolished. The exact location of the new central village had not yet been decided, because Mr. Li wanted a *fengshui* master to find a suitable spot. The economic organization of the enterprise was also unclear.

Would the farmers become company employees, would they be shareholders, or would they farm on contracts with the enterprise? Such questions were apparently still floating in the air, but it was evident that Mr. Li was a powerful player in Zhongxiang County. His proposal was taken very seriously by the local political leaders, and he cooperated closely with township- and county-level cadres.[4]

In a rural reconstruction context, it is interesting to note how the economic transformation of the village was only one part of Mr. Li's plans. Fully in accordance with the rural reconstruction discourse, his aim was to build a modern rural community with all the facilities and social services that are offered to the urban population.

Discussion

Under the present slogan of constructing a new socialist countryside, we find an updated version of the triangular drama between the state, villagers and activists that Liang Shuming found himself stuck in during the 1930s. Most state actors and social activists seem to agree that the social fabric of China's villages has been severely damaged since decollectivization and must be replaced by something new. It is remarkable that few people apparently see the official organs of rural self-governance, the villagers' committees, as the solution to this problem. These committees are, according to Xu Yong (2005), who is one of the most influential voices on these issues, often the extended arm of the state apparatus and therefore part of a top-down command system, which leaves little room for genuine self-governance at the basic level. A general uneasiness about state actors manipulating and dictating rural communities and a growing feeling that classic CCP governing mechanisms are unable to solve the problem of community building dominates the present discourse on rural reconstruction, much as was the case among social reformers in Republican times. The state is therefore looking for other types of actors that can bring social organization to the villages in ways that are compatible with the political agenda of the CCP. These can be members of the village elite, such as lineage leaders or successful businessmen, or they can be NGOs and scholars from outside the rural community.

The models that are being tested in the New Socialist Countryside projects are so diverse that they create the impression that any method

4 Mr. Li's company presents itself on its homepage: <www.pqcac.com>.

goes as long as it contributes to the construction of viable and, not least, governable communities. Even among the few projects I visited there were at least three different economic arrangements: a shareholding cooperative with hired workers, a cooperative that included all members of a team, and a privately owned company. In terms of ideology, the Green Cross projects were based on environmentalism and appeals to ethnic-religious identity, while others were built on lineage authority or the common identity of a marginalized group (the elderly).

This methodological pluralism does not mean that reformers have a free hand to experiment in all fields, however. Back in 2003, when the rural reconstruction movement was beginning to attract more attention, Yu Jianrong (于建嵘) pointed out that one weakness of the whole project was that it was impossible to form the "truly self-governing peasant associations" (真正自治性的农会) that China, according to him, needed the most (Wen et al. 2003). This still appears to be a valid point. Most experiments deal with quite small social units, such as a team or a village, and the focus is on community building rather than on interest articulation. In this sense, Liang Shuming's ambition of turning peasants into the active subjects of the rural reconstruction process still has not been fulfilled. Farmers are encouraged to solve their own problems through intra-village cooperation, but they are not supposed to organize across administrative borders.

Rural reconstruction projects run by NGOs and scholars are limited in scale and number, much smaller than Liang's and Yan's experiments in the 1930s, and they depend on the goodwill of state actors; however, in spite of their limitations they are interesting breeding grounds for ideas that may later be developed into models and even policies (Heilmann 2008). They often focus on restructuring the minutest details of rural social life, thereby reflecting contemporary Chinese thinking about "the good society" and opening up the possibility of a potentially fruitful discussion of power relations between the state, social activists and villagers. Will the social activists be able to make the villagers the active subjects of the community-building process? And if they are successful in this 80-year-old dream, what will this mean for rural social relations? What will happen if the communities that are constructed in the process do not match the party-state's criteria for a "civilized" countryside? How far will the state allow NGOs and academic rural activists to go in their experiments if they move towards the creation of independent peasant

associations? That Liang Shuming is attracting so much attention today is probably because of the continued relevance of such issues.

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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