Whither Rural China? A Case Study of Gao Village

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Abstract

This case study of Gao Village has two aims: to provide an update on Gao Village since 1997, when Gao Village (Gao 1999, 2014) leaves off, and to ponder the future direction of rural China. The article begins with an update on the development of Gao Village from the late 1990s up to 2015, dealing with several major thematic topics such as demography, family and marriage, living standards, education and health care. Using empirical evidence gathered during several years of fieldwork as background, the paper then moves on to discuss the future direction of rural China. This second part covers the current intellectual and policy debate on two crucial issues: land ownership and urbanization. The paper concludes that the Chinese state is still undecided on a grand narrative: whether to travel further in the direction of full-scale capitalism or whether to retain some kind of socialist collectivism.

Keywords: rural China; family; education; demography; land ownership; urbanization

This study of Gao Village has two aims. The first is to provide an update on Gao Village since 1997, when my previous study of Gao Village ended.[1] The second aim is to ponder the future direction for rural China, perhaps an overly ambitious undertaking but one which is significant. Gao Village is located in Jiangxi province, an agricultural area similar to the second-tier provinces of Anhui, Sichuan, Hunan, Hubei and Henan. What happens in Gao Village is indicative of what happens in this vast area of central China. Like Gao Village, the future direction of all rural areas, and even the more industrialized Yangtze and Pearl River deltas, is tied up with the settlement of two crucial issues: land ownership and migrant workers. The future directions these two issues take have the same impact for Gao Village as they do for all of rural China. Finally, even without macro-generalizations, a micro-study is of significance in the field, as shown by previous successful case studies.[2] As Daniel Little argues, "differentiation rather than generalisation is most useful for social sciences."[3] Gao Village is neither

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1 Gao 1999; 2014.

2 See, e.g., Skinner 1977; Naquin 1976; Perry 1980; Marks 1984; Geertz 1968.

3 Little 1989, 212.

 doi:10.1017/S0305741016001533 First published online 23 January 2017

idiosyncratic nor unrepresentative and thus can provide insights and empirical data that can be tested by other case studies.

Background

My previous study, *Gao Village*, a cross and trans-disciplinary study that documents the changes in Gao Village from 1949 to 1997, came to three critical conclusions: life was spartan and the villagers suffered constantly from hunger until the 1990s; there was serious soil erosion because of the exploitation of almost every inch of land (crops were planted even on the two sides of a narrow path); and there was an almost complete destruction of vegetation as a result of the demand for firewood for cooking. However, the empirical study of Gao Village also found that grain production had been steadily rising, and that dramatic improvements in education and health care in Gao Village occurred in the two most controversial periods, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, and especially during the latter, as was the case all over rural China.[4]

By 1984, the collective system in Gao Village had been dismantled and, beginning in the early 1990s, Gao villagers had started to leave for the south-east coast to work or to look for work. Even though Gao Village migrant workers, like migrant workers from other rural areas,[5] had to endure sweatshop working conditions, migrant work had two immediate positive impacts on Gao Village: it reduced the demand for village resources and brought in extra cash income. Also since the 1990s, modern technology such as fertilizer and insecticides began to be widely available.[6] Together, these factors have meant that Gao villagers no longer experience hunger and their material life has improved.

Against this background, the following section will provide an update on the situation in Gao Village. This is necessary for the second part of the article, which aims to ponder the future direction of rural China. This study is a result of the author's many years of close contact with Gao villagers which has involved regular visits to the village, participation in village activities such as wedding and temple ceremonies, and conversations with almost every one of the 400 or so villagers on one occasion or another, as well as interviews with many of them.

Part 1: Changes in Gao Village

According to the clan records, the village has a history of more than two hundred years. For much of that time, Gao village life remained the same. Villagers lived in the same style of dwelling, ate the same kind of food, wore the same kind of clothing, experienced the same kind of education and health care, if any, had the

4 Pepper 2000.
5 Solinger 1999; Pun 2005; Pun and Chan 2012; Gao 1994; 1997; 1998; Chang 2008.
6 Chemicals were used in the 1970s but not widely and chemical fertilizer was still rationed. Small home-made fertilizer industries and new seed varieties, such as high-yielding hybrid rice, were either just introduced or at an experimental stage.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741016001533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

same kind of social structure, family formation and mode of production as they had always done until the 1950s. However, the 1949 Revolution changed the social structure and the mode of production in the village, much for the better for the majority, but at a personal cost for some.

Today, the newly built large and ornate houses in Gao Village are extremely impressive, with flush toilets, running water, and even marble work tops in some of the kitchens. Every house has electricity, whereas until 1988 Gao villagers had to use oil lamps at night. The clothes worn by Gao villagers now are not so different from those worn by the average urban resident. That is the exterior of Gao Village; but what about the internal, social side of the village? What do the villagers think and feel about their life and the world?

In 2011, I spent six months at the Research Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities in Tsinghua University conducting a reading workshop for a dozen postgraduates from Tsinghua University, Peking University and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. I had the opportunity to find out first-hand what the young Chinese intellectual elite thought about the state of affairs in China and the rest of the world. Basically, there was a great deal of resentment and complaints about corruption, the unaffordability of housing, and the increasing inequality and structural problems within the economy. In short, there was widespread frustration about the lack of a narrative that could shape China's future direction.

However, when I arrived in Gao Village soon after, I found that the villagers were optimistic.[7] The Gao villagers smiled broadly, carried out their work and lived life with confidence and vigour. This is not a patronizing observation by an outsider who visits an exotic place and finds nothing but happy people of blessed ignorance; I know these villagers very well because I have lived and breathed with them for more than 20 years. I know intimately and instantly what they think when I talk to them. That genuine happy mood in the village surprised me because it was so different to the mood I encountered in Beijing. There was a complete contrast between the urban and rural, between the elite and the people at the lowest stratum of Chinese society.

On my numerous previous visits to Gao Village, I always encountered complaints, resentment and sometimes even despair among the villagers. But now (my most recent visit was in February 2015), things seem different. For the first time in more than 2,000 years of China's history, rural people are not targeted for taxation anymore. There is no per capita tax or land tax; instead, there are various kinds of subsidies for farming. The Chinese authorities have been trying to invest in country roads, in health care and in social security. For instance, for the first time in 20 years, and starting in 2014, Guoneng's two disabled sons had begun to receive disability benefit of 2,000 yuan a year.

7 This is consistent with a large-scale and comprehensive citizen satisfaction survey, conducted from 2003 to 2011 under the leadership of Anthony Saich, which shows that the rural and more marginalized sectors of Chinese society are more satisfied (Saich 2007; Han 2012).

And, after more than 20 years of stagnation, migrant workers' salaries had begun to rise in the last few years and especially since 2009.

Population and Family Planning

There are now 105 households in Gao Village, and 412 people are registered as villagers. Several villagers have actually obtained urban household registration but still have allocated land in Gao Village. According to official statistics, in 2010 urban residents accounted for 49.68 per cent of the total population of China. This figure is based on the number of people who have lived and worked in an urban area for six months or more. According to this definition, nearly 30 per cent of the 412 Gao villagers should be counted as urban residents. However, those Gao villagers do not consider themselves to be urban residents. And practically speaking, they are not. They retain a share of land in Gao Village, their children mostly live back in the village, and they have no access to the majority of urban facilities and welfare benefits. They are barred from most of the job opportunities in the cities where they live. Nationally, there are 261.39 million so-called urban residents whose *hukou* is registered somewhere other than where they work and live, and of these, 240 million are migrant workers from rural regions.[8]

In China, the family planning policy is generally taken to mean one child per family; however, there are few families in Gao Village with only one child.[9] Even prior to the 2015 state decision to relax the policy, tensions between the state agents and the villagers over family planning quotas had already been hugely reduced over the last decade. One reason is that more and more people can afford the fine for having more children. In fact, it is no longer called a "fine"; nowadays, it is called a *shehui fuyang fei* 社会抚养费 (social maintenance fee). Up to the end of 2015, the policy stipulated that a couple could have a second child if the first one was a girl. If the first one was a boy, then a fee of 10,000 yuan would be imposed for the second child. Many villagers were ready to pay to have another child. Local governments seemed happy with this arrangement since they could collect the revenue without seeming to be inhumane. Another reason why there are more births than the policy allows is that some of the young couples have babies who are born far away from the home where the family is registered. There has also been a reduction in tensions as more and more young villagers find life too busy to have children and see that children are expensive to raise. Underlining this attitude change are several factors, including better education, jobs far away from home, and changing expectations for children such as a higher educational attainment. Furthermore, infant mortality rates are now

8 Wang, Su 2011.

9 "China's natal programme is inaccurately termed as a one child-policy. It actually is anywhere from a 2.1- to a 2.6-child policy in rural China. A PRC official has been quoted as stating that 90% of rural families have two children and others have more." Sautman 2001, 123.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741016001533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

very low and the villagers do not see the need to have more children as a security measure.[10]

During the 1990s, family planning was a big deal for everyone: for the local authorities because population control was their key performance index, and for the villagers because their very existence was under threat. At that time, both the intellectual and political elite in China treated the control of the Chinese population as a national emergency, and a "war strategy" was devised, seemingly as if China were threatened with invasion.[11] Now, with the drastic slowing of the growth in population and the resultant shortage of labour, the Chinese political and intellectual elite have begun to realize their folly.[12]

Income and Living Standards

In material terms, life in Gao Village is better than it has ever been. Even the poorest villagers have good quality housing and land on which to grow food for their own consumption. The two poorest families in Gao Village are those of Lati and Changfan. Lati is poor for two main reasons: he suffers from a chronic respiratory illness and cannot work to his full capacity, and his two sons have had a limited earning capacity. One son died in 2006 at the age of 30 because of epilepsy. The other son is intellectually challenged and is barely able to earn enough to support himself as a migrant worker.

Changfan is poor for a different reason. His son repeated Year 12 five times before he could get the grades to enter a college. But, after eight years of senior high school and four years at college, his son has still not been able to find a suitable job – either because the pay is too low or the job is not to his liking. Changfan's son moves from one job to another, unable to earn a good income for the family. In addition, the family ran up a considerable debt paying for their son's education.

It is hard to earn an adequate income by just farming the land. Take the case of Lati as an example. He and his wife work on 6.2 *mu* 亩 of land, four *mu* of which is leased from another villager.[13] To cultivate one *mu* of the leased land, Lati has

10 As I have described in *Gao Village*, my mother gave birth to 14 children but only four survived.

11 This is one policy made by the political elite and supported by the intellectual elite that is actually not discriminatory against the disadvantaged. The rural Chinese and the so-called national minorities can have more than one child, whereas one child per family was very strictly implemented in the urban sector, irrespective of class or social status.

12 For a long time, the post-Mao official propaganda repeatedly stated that Mao had encouraged the rapid growth of the Chinese population, and that his criticism of Professor Ma Yinchu, who advocated population control, resulted in an extra 200 million people. Anti-Mao dissident writer Xin Zilin even goes as far as to say that the rejection of Professor Ma's advice led to an extra 400 million people being born (Xin 2007, 177). Such a claim would have been believed by many intelligent people simply because any such accusation against communism or Mao is believable. Now, however, new evidence has been published that shows that Mao actually supported population control and that there was a population-control policy during his era, that Professor Ma Yinchu was not an expert on demography, and that Ma was not criticized for his population control views per se but for advocating Malthus' ideas (Gao 2008; Liang, Zhongtang 2011 and Qian 2008). For the most recent myth-busting research in English, see Wang, Feng, Cai and Gu 2013 and Whyte, Wang and Cai 2015.

13 One *mu* is equivalent to 0.0667 hectares.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741016001533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to pay 200 yuan in rent, 100 yuan for the chemical fertilizers and insecticide, and 100 yuan for the harvesting machine. The crop would usually yield a little more than 500 kilograms of rice. The selling price at the market since 2010 has been a little over 100 yuan per 50 kilograms. Lati's gross income from working one *mu* of land is a little over 1,000 yuan. Taking away the 500 yuan input including rent, Lati gets only 500×4 (*mu*) = 2,000 yuan for all his and his wife's work on the land he contracts. Since Lati does not have to pay rent for the other 2.2 *mu* of land, this income amounts to about 1,500 yuan. Typically, Gao villagers would plant and harvest two rice crops a year. Assuming that other crops will make the same kind of income as rice, the total annual income from Lati's farming is around 10,000 yuan a year, depending on the market prices. In 2010, his total income was 7,000 yuan, and in 2014, it was almost 10,000 yuan.

Nowadays, the villagers can keep or sell what they produce. They do not even have to go to a market because the buyer comes to them. One day, I saw Changkuan, his wife and their school-aged daughter passing by, with Changkuan pushing a wheelbarrow carrying the peanuts they had just harvested. They had been walking along the village's one and only cement road for no more than three minutes when three truck drivers stopped, all attempting to buy the peanuts that were still in the wheelbarrow. Changkuan eventually sold his peanuts for 1.5 yuan per 500 grams. However, according to Changkuan, the money he made from selling the peanuts barely covered his costs.

The Chinese government has actually been trying to implement measures to maintain some level of agricultural income for the farmers. Once, I witnessed some Gao villagers selling rice at 110 yuan per 50 kilograms when a purchasing truck stopped along the road. I asked how the selling price of 110 yuan came about. It turned out that the Chinese government had set the protection price for rice at 102 yuan per 50 kilograms for 2011, and so the market price had to be higher than that, or else the farmer would not sell.

Even for Lati, the poorest in Gao Village, the cash income from farming exceeds China's official poverty line which, according to the government's definition of poverty in 2011, was 1,274 yuan a year.[14] The income Lati's family receives from growing crops is more than that, and does not include the income from the vegetables that Lati grows for his own consumption or the money that Lati and his wife earn from occasional short-term work such as planting rice during the busy season for other families, carrying bricks or making cement at construction sites. Usually, for this kind of work, Lati would get 80 to 100 yuan a day, plus a free lunch and a package or two of cigarettes, the last freebie especially appreciated by Lati, although he looks like he is dying from lung disease. In 2014, Lati was also employed to collect rubbish along the main road, for which he was paid 15,000 yuan a year.

As an indication of living standards and income, by 2015, 30 to 40 per cent of the Gao Village households had air-conditioning, 60 to 70 per cent had fridges,

14 Krishnan 2011.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741016001533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and almost every family had an electric bike or a motorbike. Most households had mobiles, but only Anyuan had access to the internet. Anyuan is a teacher at the local school who also drives a truck to earn some extra income. As it is mostly the young who use the internet, there is no point in installing internet access since young villagers are not around. There is one shop in Gao Village, which is run by the grandson of a former rich peasant. When there are no customers, he and his wife make clothes for the villagers. In 2011, only one villager had a car; in February 2015, several village migrant workers returned home in their own cars for the Chinese Spring Festival. By 2016, there was almost one car for every ten Gao villagers.

Migrant Workers and the Urban–Rural Divide

All the migrant workers that I talked to indicated that when they were old, they would like to live back in Gao Village. At the same time, they would like their children to succeed in being urban. This is consistent with the results of a large-scale survey done by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, which showed that only 3.9 per cent of the surveyed rural people wish for the next generation of their families to live in rural China.[15] This is in some way contradictory: the villagers are found to be content and optimistic about their life and yet they would prefer their children to live in different circumstances.

One of the explanations for this is that the concept and structure of the family is different from the traditional one in that the family is now usually split into two. Either the husband and wife are in an urban centre working while their children and parents are back in Gao Village, or the husband is working away and his wife and children are back home with his parents. Although the villagers see many improvements in their standard of living now, they are still uncertain as to what the future may bring.

Therefore, one crucial issue concerning rural China is the fate of migrant workers. For many years now, the usual practice has been for a young man or woman, usually a teenager, to leave the village to become a migrant worker. They then work for a few years, or even 20 years, and send money home to help the family pay for their siblings' education, pay for medical costs and, above all, to save up to build a house – a prerequisite for the marriage of any male in the family. They might then get married but leave the village again to work to earn money for their own children. Finally, when their children are teenagers, they return to the village, and their children in turn become migrant workers.

During the Mao era, one way to gain an urban *hukou* was to marry someone from the city, and this usually, if at all, happened to women. There were five Gao Village women who gained urban registration through marriage in the 1950s and 1960s. Since then, the urban–rural divide has grown as fewer urban men want to

15 Ding et al. 2016.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741016001533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

marry rural women. Since 1997, there have only been a couple of women in Gao Village who have succeeded in gaining urban registration through marriage. And, only a couple of villagers have succeeded in gaining an urban *hukou* through work experience. One of them is Chaoqiu, who started out as a migrant worker when he was barely 17 years old. After many years of dedication and hard work, Chaoqiu was hand-picked by the owner of the factory in which he worked to be a shop floor supervisor. His Hong Kong boss also got him a Xiamen *hukou*. Now, his children can go to school like a local Xiamen person and his family have access to the government-subsidized medical service.

From the 1950s to the 1990s, if a rural person was enrolled in a college, they were guaranteed an urban *hukou* status because the state would assign work for all the graduates. Today, that is no longer the case. If a rural student enrols in a college or university, they take their *hukou* with them. Upon graduation, their *hukou* is transferred to wherever they work. If they cannot find work, they will have not have *hukou* anywhere. For a long time, male and female migrant workers from Gao Village, although working far away, would use a go-between to find a marriage partner in one of the villages near Gao Village; however, that is now changing. By 2015, there were a dozen Gao villagers who had married partners from Hunan, Henan, Hainan, Fujian and Guizhou provinces, which are where most migrant workers come from.

Health Care

China has made remarkable economic progress in the post-Mao era, but its citizens' health has not improved as much. Chinese official data suggest that average life expectancy in China rose by only about five years between 1981 and 2009, from roughly 68 years to 73 years. In contrast, life expectancy had increased by almost 33 years between 1950 and 1980. It is true that once life expectancy gets to a certain threshold, any increase will be slow and less dramatic. But China could have done better. In countries that had similar life expectancy levels in 1981 but which experienced slower economic growth thereafter, for example, Colombia, Malaysia, Mexico, and South Korea, by 2009 life expectancy had increased by 7–14 years. According to the World Bank, even in Australia, Hong Kong, Japan and Singapore, countries that had much higher life expectancy figures than China in 1981, those figures rose by 7–10 years during the same period. As Philip C.C. Huang argues, the post-Mao Chinese leadership has single-mindedly pursued a policy of economic growth while for a long time ignoring the issues of public health.[16]

That being said, Gao villagers on the whole are healthier. With improvements in living standards such as a better diet, no more starvation, better living conditions owing to modern housing with improved light and hygiene, and the

16 Huang 2015.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741016001533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

introduction of modern conveniences such as fridges, signs of old common diseases such as smallpox, cholera and leprosy, for example, are absent, and some other common problems such as fever, diarrhoea, boils and other infectious skin diseases have been brought under control. Up until the end of the 1990s, there was not a single person in Gao Village who had lived beyond 80 years old. Now, there are six men and two women who are over 80 years old. Not surprisingly, none of the eight octogenarians smokes. Smoking is probably now the biggest killer in Gao Village, and indeed in rural China. It is still customary to offer a male villager a cigarette whenever he visits you, otherwise you will be considered to be stingy or rude.

In spite of the huge improvements to the health of the villagers, mostly achieved during the Mao era, medical costs remain a great concern for Gao villagers. They rarely, if ever, visit doctors, and usually just let an illness take its natural course. Decades after the abandonment of the effective and affordable "barefoot doctor" system, the Chinese authorities were late to realize the stupidity of "throwing out the baby with the bath water." As recently as 2011, most villagers refused to pay the ten yuan required to enrol in the medical insurance programme. This seemed irrational since ten yuan was not that much money for the villagers then. On one occasion, I witnessed a fruit-seller's truck stop in the village to sell apples and pears. At least half a dozen Gao villagers spent ten yuan or more on buying fruit. This scene surprised me a little, because I know that Gao villagers never used to eat fruit; instead they used to, and still do, eat a lot of vegetables, but not fruit. If they ate any fruit, it would only be the fruit grown on the trees around their houses. They would only buy fruit for special occasions. In any case, the fact that they did not hesitate to spend ten yuan or more on buying fruit from a passing truck meant that paying out ten yuan to join the medical insurance scheme should not have been a big deal for them. Nonetheless, they were reluctant to do so, because the medical insurance policy does not reimburse the cost of treating common complaints. Members of the scheme are only covered if they are hospitalized and only in the designated hospital, which is in a town about 15 kilometres away. Even then, reimbursement only covers 70 per cent of the full cost. This insurance policy was launched only in 2011 in Gao Village. Villagers at the time did not have much trust in the insurance programme, possibly because state agents were seen to be consistently rent-seeking in the post-Mao era and also because the policies were always changing. However, by 2015, the villagers, after witnessing the aftermath and effects of motor accidents, were able to see the benefit of the policy and most of them were happy to pay the premium, which had increased to 90 yuan a year.

Farming

Land is distributed to each household on a per capita basis. Currently, the land per capita is 0.6 *mu* of paddy field and 0.2 *mu* of dry land in Gao Village. In order to account for demographic changes, land is re-distributed every five years, even

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741016001533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

though the official policy is that the distribution should remain unchanged for 30 years. Virtually none of the young villagers work on the land anymore. Generally, the land is worked by the elderly and some young women who stay in the village to look after children. Gao villagers still grow rice for the most part, but they also grow soya beans, peanuts, sesame, wheat, canola seeds and vegetables for their own consumption. There is some limited use of small machines, for example, for rice harvesting and tilling. Draught animals are not used anymore. In fact, the main draught animal previously used, the water buffalo, has been banned by the local authorities. The villagers have been told that water buffalo are the main source responsible for the transmission of schistosomiasis (or snail fever). Farming work, at the same time, has become less demanding since it is very much dependent on chemicals, for fertilizing the crops, insect control and even for weeding. The villagers pay the tractor owner between 8 and 90 yuan for tilling one *mu* of land, and 60 yuan for harvesting one *mu* of rice crop. The ploughing machines are small, handy ones designed especially for working small pieces of land in terraced fields.

Education

One major development since the beginning of the 21st century in rural China is the introduction of nine years of compulsory free education for all. However, the percentage of students from rural China attending universities is on the decline. This is counter-intuitive if one assumes that free education should mean an increase in the percentage of rural students at tertiary level, as the majority of the population is rural. However, the fundamental reason for the decline is that the rural–urban income gap is still too huge. When they finish year nine education, most rural people become migrant workers whereas urban students continue with their education in tertiary institutions. The tiny percentage of rural children who manage to enter tertiary education are disadvantaged in terms of academic performance and finding employment after graduation.

Another development in education since the 1990s has been the flourishing of private providers. By 2015, there were already half a dozen private high schools in Poyang Town 鄱阳, the headquarters of Poyang County where Gao Village is located. I was somewhat shocked to learn that the principal of the first private school in the county earned 10,000 yuan a month ten years ago. (As a comparison, that is about the same amount a professor earns at Peking University today.) These private schools enrol only the children of the rich and powerful, and occasionally, gifted students on scholarships. The average fee including boarding is 10,000 yuan a year. In order to build up a good reputation, the private schools have now started competing to enrol the best performing students. Raozhou 饶州 School goes around all the rural schools in Poyang County and handpicks the most promising students, offering them scholarships. To have a pupil accepted by Peking or Tsinghua University is such a cause for celebration that

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741016001533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the successful candidates don big red flowers and lead a parade, with a music band and great fanfare, through the main street of Poyang Town.

Another consequence of the marketization of education is the brain drain from the public sector. Private schools lure the best teachers away from the public sector. It is widely reported that a large number of rural schools are closing down as a result of the shrinking numbers of students and the lack of qualified teachers.[17] As a result, some rural children have to travel further to get to school or else have to board in order to attend even primary schools.

The Environment

Rural development since the late 1990s has been both good and bad news for the environment in Gao Village. Since more than a quarter of Gao Villagers no longer live in Gao Village on a permanent basis, the ecological pressures have been reduced considerably. As Gao villagers have moved from coal to gas and electricity to cook, there is now no need to use the local vegetation and trees for firewood. Trees and bushes have started to grow, and grasses and reeds are now growing taller than humans along the footpaths. The marshes and wetlands are covered in grass. The other good news is that the birds have returned, including sparrows, crows, magpies, little yellow birds and many other kinds.

The bad news is that agricultural chemicals have wiped out many animals that the villagers used to encounter and love such as frogs and many kinds of fish that could be found in the ponds, streams, ditches, rivers and lakes. Farmers now are required to spray all of their crops once a week. In the past and up until the early 1970s, chemical sprays would only be applied to cotton and rice crops and only once or twice over the growing season. Now, even aubergines and sesame are frequently sprayed with pesticides. However, new arrangements have been made to deal with rubbish. Encouraged by the local authorities, who themselves were pressured by the higher authorities, the villagers now have bins in which to collect their rubbish, and two villagers are paid to collect rubbish.

Conclusion of Part 1

The above update on life in Gao Village since the late 1990s discusses major thematic topics such as population and family planning, health care, education, migration, farming, income, living standards and the environment. It shows that there have been some welcome developments in the village, such as the abolition of agricultural taxes, the introduction of free schooling for up to nine years and the efforts to build up an affordable health care system, along with developments which bring more questionable benefits, such as the emergence of private schools. Environmentally speaking, it is a mix of both the good and the bad. Whilst the return of the trees, grass and wetlands as well as the birds is very

17 Wang, Dan 2013.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741016001533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

positive, aquatic life has almost been wiped out, although there were signs of this development before 1997. Another positive is that environmental awareness has improved and efforts are being made to deal with the issue of rubbish.

Living standards in general have been improving since the late 1990s, and there has been a boom in housing construction. However, this kind of material improvement has been paid for by the sweat of the young Gao villagers working away from home, a situation described in *Gao Village* with a note of uncertainty. Nearly 20 years on, this pattern has not changed. The village economy is still sustained by migrant working and the young Gao villagers are still uncertain where their future lies, much in the same way that the whole of China is uncertain. For this reason, the second part of this article provides some retrospective discussion of what the future direction of Gao Village is likely to be.

Part 2: Whither Rural China? Two Issues

According to a 2013 news report published in the *China Youth Daily*, nearly a million villages disappeared in the preceding ten years.[18] One of the villages referred to in the report, Nankang Village 南坑村, which used to have 136 villagers but now has only two, is actually only 80 kilometres away from Nanchang, the capital of Jiangxi province where Gao Village is located.

For most of the year, Gao Village looks deserted: many houses stand empty or are occupied only by the elderly, children and some women. Yet, there has been a real estate boom in the village since the late 1990s, and some of the houses are very grand. For two weeks during the Chinese New Year, Gao Village is bustling and hustling. Cars are parked along the street and in front of many houses during that time, and the one and only street running through Gao Village looks like any urban street in, say, Jinan, the capital of Shandong province, only with better looking and more spacious houses. Why do migrant workers continue to build houses that they do not live in? The answer to this question is related to two important issues in contemporary China: land ownership and urbanization.

Land Ownership

The current land ownership system in rural China is neither strictly public nor strictly private. Throughout history, and certainly before the 1949 Revolution, villagers inherited the land, which is effectively collectively owned by the village, as it was during the Mao era. However, in the post-Mao era, the right to use the land has been privatized, as the collective land is allocated to households on a per capita basis. The amount of land that a person is allocated depends on how much land the village collectively owns. A Xu villager might have more, or less,

18 "Huibuqu de jia: Zhongguo guoqu 10 nian jin bai wange zirancun xiaoshi" (Can't go home: in the past ten years, China has lost nearly a million natural villages), *Zhongguo qingnian bao*, 1 August 2013, http://news.creaders.net/china/2013/01/08/1223256.html. Accessed 27 April 2015.

allocated land than a Gao villager, depending on the land and people ratio at any given time. Currently, Gao villagers demand that land allocation is renewed every five years in response to demographic changes, although different arrangements are being carried out in other places across rural China. One could argue that this system of ownership of the means of production is neither communist nor capitalist. The issue, as elaborated below, is whether this ambiguity should be clarified.

Urbanization and Rural Communities

One could argue that there is no intrinsic reason why human beings should live in urban centres, either for survival or for comfort. When asked whether Gao Village would eventually disappear, the villagers I talked to all seemed surprised by such a question. They never imagined that Gao Village would not be there anymore. They felt that life in the cities was not safe. As one villager, Changxian, explained to me, according to the dynastical history of China, whenever there is war, the city people run away to rural villages. The city is too noisy and polluted. When I asked Yineng (male, aged 42), Fengying (female, aged 38), Wengui (male, aged 40), Xiying (female, aged 39) and Xindan (male, aged 43) whether they would like to move to the cities, their responses were that they might move to the cities for the sake of their children. They felt that conditions in Gao Village were reasonable, although there was some inconvenience in terms of entertainment and shopping, but this could only get better.[19] As Lü Xinyu points out, along the lines of Liang Shuming, Chinese rural communities are the roots of Chinese culture and civilization.[20] To modernize by uprooting the rural communities will have traumatic implications for so many people. To the east of Gao Village, there is Wang Village, which is four times the size of Gao Village; to the south-west, Xu Village is twice as large; and to the west, there is Jiang Village, which is twice as large as Xu Village; and finally to the north, there is the smaller Lai Village. All of these villages are just a few hundred metres away from each other. This kind of density is not unusual in Jiangxi province.

The Debate

In recent years, there have been more calls for the wholesale privatization of land in order to put an end to the ambiguity resulting from the private ownership of land-use rights and the collective ownership of land rights. Those who push for privatization are in fact advocating for the capitalist commercialization of

19 In some other more prosperous areas, rural people are even less keen on being urbanized. According to a survey, 80% of the students from a rural background at Zhejiang University did not want to change their household registration from rural to urban. Another Chinese Academy of Social Sciences study shows that 80% of farming households do not want to relinquish their rural registration (Xie 2011).

20 Lü 2013; Liang, Shuming 2014.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741016001533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

farming and the proletarianization of the villagers.[21] These critics argue that if land is privately owned, it cannot be taken away by the state agent at will unless the owner is compensated at the market price. However, as those who are against privatization point out, what is often ignored is that vast areas of rural land have no commercial development value.[22] Only a small percentage of land has commercial development value and it usually lies on the fringes of a city or in strategically important project areas. There has never been a land seizure issue in Gao Village for it is not situated in such areas.

There are also those who advocate privatization for a different reason: the possibility of large-scale farming in order to increase productivity and efficiency. This view is endorsed by capitalists who wish to gain from the profits of commercial farming, as well as by ideological liberals who think that public ownership only leads to slavery.[23]

Any Chinese visiting the US, Australia, Canada or New Zealand cannot fail to be impressed by the fact that only a small percentage of the country's population, around 5 per cent or less, is engaged in farming yet it can produce not only abundant food for domestic consumption but also a surplus for export. Would it not be wonderful if China could copy this model by developing such an efficient farming system? For liberals and some economic rationalists, the first step in this direction is privatization, because only privatization can lead to commercial farming on a large scale. Villagers would sell their land and resettle in the urban centres, thus achieving efficiency in farming and urbanization at the same time.

Aside from ignoring the fact that farming is heavily subsidized in affluent countries, there is another issue that those who advocate for privatization fail to address: the environmental implications of large-scale commercial farming. To achieve efficiency and productivity on such a scale so as to turn a profit, large-scale capitalist farming tends to be monoculture. And, as Manu Saunders argues, single-crop farming destroys biodiversity, with very serious environmental consequences.[24]

As Lin Chun so neatly summarizes, there are currently three schools of thought in this debate. The dominating school is the liberal market school of privatizers.[25] The second school argues for small-scale household farms that, with the support and guidance provided by the state, together form cooperatives to deal with the market forces.[26] In the last couple of years, another school has emerged which takes up the unfashionable class theory.[27] This Marxist school argues that the Chayanovan idea of agricultural cooperatives cannot be applied to China for several reasons: the Chinese rural economy is already enmeshed in the chain of

21 Zhou 2014; Wen, Guanzhong 2014.
22 He 2014; 2015.
23 Hayek 1994.
24 Saunders 2015.
25 Lin 2015.
26 He 2015; Huang 2015.
27 Yan and Chen 2015.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741016001533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

global capitalism; there are already disparities between farmers; and there has already been commercialization and proletarianization even among the rural communities.[28]

The Marxist school and the school that advocates cooperatives have one idea in common, which is their stance against wholesale privatization. As Philip Huang repeatedly argues, the liberals tend to ignore what the Chinese conditions are.[29] China's ratio of arable land to people is one of the lowest in the world and is fast shrinking. One of the very important factors behind the feasibility of large-scale farming in countries like the US and Australia is the abundant amount of arable land available for food production that can supply populations beyond their borders. Second, much of the agricultural land in the south, south-east and west of China is terraced and so is unsuited to large-scale mechanical farming methods. Third, unit production in China is very high, compared with the world standard, as labour-intensive farming tends to yield better results. It is quite likely that large-scale farming would lead to a reduction of total grain output and therefore place China at greater risk in terms of adequate food supply. Fourth, large-scale farming requires less manpower, which would mean that China would have to provide job opportunities for a huge redundant rural labour force, a capacity that China does not have. Finally, family farming acts as social security for millions of migrant workers who can return home when and if they find no work in urban areas.[30]

From the point of view of the Western model of urbanization, the logic of privatization is compelling. Nonetheless, the Chinese policymakers themselves, including senior officials such as Chen Xiwen 陈锡文, know also that the reality in China is far more complex than the abstract economic rationalist logic assumes.[31] They are aware of the practical and conceptual problems outlined above.

There is another obstacle that the liberals have to overcome and that is the Chinese state constitution which stipulates that, as a socialist country, land must be publicly or collectively owned. This is by far the most important stipulation in the Chinese constitution at this juncture in contemporary Chinese politics. China uses this fig leaf of public ownership of land in its claim to be a socialist country. Even Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 dared not remove the fig leaf, hence the arrangement of the private ownership of use rights but not land rights.

Whither Gao Village?

The issue of land ownership is closely related to the issue of urbanization. Currently, as the threshold is still set too high for Gao villagers to become urban citizens, migrant Gao villagers return to the village once they are too old to work in the urban centres. Despite the occasional strict enforcement of

28 Chayanov 1986.
29 Huang 2010a; 2010b; 2014a; 2014b; 2014c.
30 He 2014; 2015.
31 Chen, Xiwen 2013.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741016001533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

birth-control policies and the small number of people who drift away, the Gao Village population has been increasing slightly. As the birth-control policy seems to be relaxing, population growth is unlikely to decline, although it is unlikely to increase dramatically either.

But is the current model of generation after generation migrating to work when they are young and returning home when they are old, leaving their young children behind to be looked after by grandparents, sustainable? Gao villagers are motivated to work hard and save by the prospect of building their own house. It is unlikely that the real-estate boom will last much longer, not because there is a bubble to burst, since these houses are not built with borrowed money from the bank or any financial institutions, but because there are not enough people to live in them. Another reason Gao villagers work hard and save is so they can afford the cost of a wedding. The two weddings that I attended each cost around 200,000 to 300,000 yuan. The families probably recovered a third or half of the cost from gifts and congratulations payments. Nevertheless, that is still a lot of money for a migrant worker who earns anything between 2,000 and 4,000 yuan a month.

A complaint often heard from young Gao villagers is that life is boring back home and there is no entertainment or place to have fun, although working in Foxconn as a migrant worker is anything but fun. There is not a single cinema, theatre or sports ground, no police station, law office or post office, or even a proper medical clinic, anywhere in the administrative region that falls under the jurisdiction of Qinglin 青林 Village Committee, a region which consists of six villages and which had a registered population of 3,149 in 2015. (There are a couple of doctors who work from home, but they have no reception or designated office.) There are several little family-run shops, which sell more or less the same thing, but the only supermarket is located in Youdunjie 油墩街, 15 kilometres away from Gao Village.

Whither Rural China?

The retreat of the state from the rural sector has been halted in recent years. However, some policy developments do not go far enough, while others have reached their limits. Medical care is still a huge problem. The majority of Gao villagers have almost no access to any medical services. Agricultural subsidies seem to have reached their limit. According to an authoritative account by Chen Xiwen, under the clauses and terms agreed to by the Chinese government under the-then Premier Zhu Rongji 朱镕基 to gain entry to the WTO, China has reached its limit for agricultural subsidies.[32] At the same time, government-protected prices of agricultural produce have, or very nearly have, reached the level of international market prices. China has run out of ways to boost income generated in the rural sector.

32 Chen, Xiwen 2015.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741016001533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

China needs a new grand narrative for modernity in the second decade of the 21st century, especially in relation to the rural community. As the class analysis school would like to remind us, scholars such as He Xuefeng and Philip Huang may hold overly romantic views about household farming, and their ideas about the capitalist market may be too idealistic. Huang would like to use the north-east Asian societies, i.e. Japan, Taiwan and South Korea, as a model for developing successful agriculture and modern rural communities.[33] But it is far from clear that the story of their agricultural sectors is one to be celebrated. As Zhang Yuling argues, advances in rural development have not been sustained.[34] By 2010, the average lifespan of farmers in Japan was a shocking 66 years and much of the agricultural land had been left unfarmed. During the 1960s, all three societies were 80 per cent or more self-sufficient in food; by 2000, their reliance on imported food had increased to a staggering 70 per cent. Neither China nor the world can afford for China to be so heavily dependent on imported food.

How is China to reconcile the logic of economic rationalism, which demands productivity, with the socialist public ownership of land, as stipulated in its constitution, which has led to a system of small household farming that is inefficient and low in productivity? The privatizers are gaining strength and are calling for a change in the Chinese constitution. As has been the case since Mao's death, the anti-socialist power holders are most likely to privatize land in China surreptitiously, step by step. Currently, the concept of *liuzhuan* 流转 (the transfer of land-use rights) is being promoted for this purpose. The practice and the concept of *liuzhuan* originated in the 1990s when huge rural to urban migration started, and when there were agricultural taxes and levies on land. Villagers unable to work on their allocated plot of land would transfer it to their relatives or friends to use for nothing, so long as the latter were willing to pay the taxes and levies. Now, the Chinese government encourages the large-scale trading and even commercial trading of land-use rights under the policy of *liuzhuan*. By the end of 2014, about 30 per cent of all the arable land in China had been traded under such contracts.[35] By 2015, almost half of the rice-growing land in Gao Village had been transferred.

Conclusion of Part 2

Whither rural China? The answer hinges on the settlement of land ownership. Chinese state policymakers are impressed with economic rationalist logic and also with Western agricultural efficiency; however, at the same time, they are aware of the reality of a larger population dependent on a smaller percentage of arable land. So, the Chinese state's view remains ambiguous about the ambiguity of land ownership. On the one hand, it encourages larger scale and more

33 Huang 2015.
34 Zhang 2011.
35 Yan and Chen 2015.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741016001533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

efficient farming by promoting farming capitalists and by subsidizing specialized farming households; on the other hand, it does not seem to want to take the plunge towards complete private ownership of land.

The ambiguity of the state can be seen in two events that took place in 2015. On 24 May 2015, the finance minister, Lou Jiwei 楼继伟, declared in a public speech at Tsinghua University that unless his suggestions for reform were followed, there was at least a 50 per cent chance that China would fall into what is called "the middle-income trap." Lou's prescription for rural China is the reduction of agricultural subsidies.[36] However, on 12 December 2015, the Finance Ministry, headed by Lou himself, issued a circular announcing the state's support of an experiment to promote village-level collective economies. Trials began in some provinces in 2012 and now the Finance Ministry backs the idea of rolling the programme out across 11 provinces.[37] So, 2016 is still the year of uncertainty, and the future direction for rural China is still hanging in the balance. China, like the rest of the world, is crying out for a grand narrative.

Biographical note

Mobo Gao teaches Chinese language as well as Asian studies courses at the University of Adelaide. His research interests include studies of rural China, contemporary Chinese politics and culture, Chinese migration to Australia and the mass media. His latest book, *The Battle of China's Past: Mao and the Cultural Revolution*, is a reassessment of the Mao era and the Cultural Revolution.

摘要: 本文是高家村的个案研究。《高家村: 共和国农村生活素描》讲述了高家村从 1949 年到 1999 年的变迁。本文一方面旨在更新高家村从 1999 年以来的状况。这些状况主题包括: 人口, 收入, 民工及城乡差别, 教育, 卫生健康。 农作和环境。本文另一方面在综述高家村实际发展现状和问题的基础上探讨中国农村特别是中南部中国农村的前景和发展方向。为了达到这个目的, 本文讨论了城镇化, 村社前途, 和农村土地所有权问题上的争议和政策后果。特别是在农村土地所有权的问题上, 本文着重分析了自由资本主义, 小农经济家庭农作和马克思主义三家主要思想的争论和政策后果。

关键词: 高家村; 更新《高家村》; 民工; 城镇化; 土地所有权; 中国农村何处去?

36 Lou's suggested recipe is based not only on the logic of economic rationalism and Western model of development but also on the current status quo of geopolitics and Western dominance of global politico-economic organizations. See Chen, Qingqing 2015. The term "middle income trap" itself is a loaded term premised on not only economic rationalism but also the current global structure in which the peripheral South transfers its labour value to the core North. See Wen 2013; Lauesen and Cope 2015.

37 "Guanyu yinfa 'fuchi cunji qiti jingji fazhan shidian de zhidao yijian' de tongzho" (Notice about the publication of the "Guidelines on supporting the village-level collective economy development experiment"), *Zhongguo caijing xinwen wang*, http://www.prcfe.com/web/2016/01-02/87520.html. Accessed 10 January 2016.

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