Introduction
Peasants, history, and politics

If Marx were writing about China today, he might say, "A spectre is haunting the landscape of Chinese capitalism: the spectre of the peasant." China's triumphant emergence as a world economic power has been fueled by the labor of displaced agricultural workers who have powered its factories and runaway construction. At the same time, the peasant as embodiment of rural backwardness, deprivation, and political discontent remains central to Chinese state concern – and to the problem of devising a workable long-term economy strategy.

Over the last decade China's troubled integration into global capitalism has been at the forefront of global economic discussions – and all the more so since the beginning of the 2008 economic crisis. The Chinese state understands that its reliance on exports cannot last forever, and in the United States and Europe the drumbeat for currency revaluation is growing louder every day. Yet it is difficult for China to make a quick shift to an economy more reliant on internal demand, not least because an economic rebalancing would require a change in the distribution of political power which continues to sideline the interests of rural citizens, inland residents, and workers. Central to this issue of global importance is the figure of the Chinese peasant, on whom the growth of internal demand will depend. Can the peasant be integrated into a capitalist market economy? Can China make this shift away from its export-oriented growth model? As Hung Ho-fung argues, this is only possible with a "large-scale redistribution of income to the rural-agricultural sector."[1]

This is the political question for China in the twenty-first century, and, like the political question of the twentieth century, it revolves around the peasant. In the twentieth century, the peasant featured in political

[1] Ho-fung Hung, "America's Head Servant: The PRC's Dilemma in the Global Crisis," *New Left Review*, no. 60 (2009), 6.

discussions both as a symbol of feudal backwardness, and as a revolutionary force. During the years of collectivization in Mao's China, peasant labor underwrote industrialization, but peasants themselves were largely viewed by the state as impediments to socialist modernization. In the early 1980s, an unprecedented infusion of state funding into the rural economy together with institutional changes gave rise to unprecedented rural prosperity, and the problem of the peasant was regarded as resolved once and for all – a view, however, that quickly lost traction. From the late 1990s into the early 2000s, an intense debate on the future of the peasant and rural reform erupted into mainstream discourse. This debate on the peasant helped to push the party to refocus on rural reform after years of neglect. The peasant question continually returns no matter how many times state authorities and intellectuals declare that it has been definitively resolved.

That the peasant has returned to a central place in contemporary narratives of history, politics, and development is undeniable, but how the figure of the peasant fits into history is still hotly contested. This book argues that political stances within China are closely related to the way various intellectuals view the peasant's role in history. Put another way, in Chinese political discussions the peasant stands in for a broad range of political concerns. At the turn of the millennium, it was through the emerging debate on the peasant that the politics of the Chinese intellectual sphere returned to questions concerning the rise of social tensions and class contradictions of China's current social order. Political discussions among intellectuals centered on the peasant because of the material difficulty of integrating the peasant and agriculture into a society increasingly dominated by the market.

From the early 1980s until the late 1990s, the household responsibility system promoted by Deng Xiaoping, which contracted production to the household, was viewed as one of the greatest success stories of the post-Mao reforms. Since the late 1990s, however, the language of public discussion on the peasantry has become one that centers on crisis, expressing the fear that if the situation of the peasants does not improve, then China's contemporary rise – along with any hopes for social equity, justice, and sustainability – could be imperiled. In 2003 and 2004, moreover, the rural situation came to be discussed as the greatest obstacle to China's continued economic and social development. With the shift in Communist Party leadership marked by the rise of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, rural crisis became a crucial issue of concern for the Chinese state. Within the public sphere, *Zhongguo nongmin diaocha*

[China peasant survey],[2] a book of reportage that chronicled rural poverty, local government corruption, and failed modernization projects in rural Anhui Province, became a national best-seller in early 2004, continuing to sell in record numbers even as – or perhaps in part because – the state attempted to censor it. How the figure of the peasant, so central to the understanding of Chinese history, shifted from a figure of success to one of crisis within intellectual discourse is the central subject of this book.

Undoubtedly, the shifting focus and content of the party's reform efforts has shaped material changes in rural society. In the five years from 1982 to 1986, the "number one document" – the key Central Committee and State Council policy statement that indicates the most important issue of the year – concerned agriculture. Through the mid 1980s the party focused on rural reform, but after the initial achievements of decollectivization and limited marketization in the countryside, the party moved to focus on the urban sphere. While there was much endogenous economic growth in the rural economy heading into the mid 1990s, the late 1990s were a time of economic and social stagnation in the rural sphere as the party concentrated on the reform of urban State Owned Enterprises. Additionally, in the mid 1990s the state pushed a policy of privatizing the rural-based Township Village Enterprises, which had stimulated rural development. It was not until 2004, a time when popular and intellectual discourse depicted the rural sphere as in crisis, that agriculture again received sustained attention from the party.

State-initiated material and policy changes, however, only partially explain the shift in the characterization of rural issues within intellectual discourse. To fully understand this shift we must also attend to the way Chinese intellectuals place the peasant in a wider social formation. We must likewise trace their visions of how to reform or modernize rural society within the long-term trajectory of Chinese history and social development.

For Chinese intellectuals throughout the twentieth century, the peasant has played an important role not only in their understanding of politics – what a just or proper society is and how to go about creating it – but also of history. All narratives of historical change or progress entailed either the transformation of the peasant into something new or the understanding of

[2] Chen Guidi and Chun Tao, *Zhongguo nongmin diaocha* [China peasant survey] (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2004), translated as Chen Guidi and Wu Chuntao, *Will the Boat Sink the Water? The Life of China's Peasants*, trans. Hong Zhu (New York: Public Affairs, 2006). Its authors, the husband and wife team Chen Guidi and Wu Chuntao, interviewed peasants, officials, and scholars, to write the book, but after its publication they were subjected to political and legal repression.

the peasant as a revolutionary actor who could take part in the transformation of society. During the first three-quarters of the twentieth century, these two historical visions of the peasant were often combined. As the first chapter of this book explains, an understanding of the peasant as a revolutionary and political actor first developed at the close of the Qing dynasty, in the early twentieth century, in the writings of Liu Shipei, an anti-Manchu revolutionary turned anarchist. Under the leadership of Mao Zedong several decades later, the Chinese Communist Party came to view the peasant as a revolutionary actor central to the Chinese Revolution, and to the historical transformation of China from a feudal to a socialist society.

Yet early in the reform era that began in the late 1970s, the historical narrative of the peasant as a revolutionary actor was attacked and discredited by intellectuals and official ideologues alike. This shift in the understanding of the peasant, an essential component of early reformist ideology, marks an attempted – though never uncontested – depoliticization of society.[3] A supposedly apolitical and technocratic modernization process displaced the revolutionary politics of class struggle of the Maoist era. Modernization in the reform era meant that divisive politics within society was supposed to cease, and the party was now the only legitimate arena for political debate. A central question at stake in the book, therefore, is this: what happens to our understanding of history, politics, and the peasant when the narrative of the peasant as revolutionary actor is no longer persuasive? In the wake of revolution, what is the significance of the peasant in relation to the conception of history? In China, these deeper historical questions are always close to the surface of discussions on the peasant. Furthermore, contemporary discussions on the peasant are highly contentious because they have begun to confront the ideological foundations of the reform movement, which dramatically weakened the political role of the peasant within society.

As intellectuals' assessments of rural reform shifted from lauding its success in the 1980s and 1990s to fathoming the extent of rural crisis at the turn of the millennium, there were three waves of discussion on the rural situation.[4] Appearing early in the reform era, the first wave focused on the

[3] I take this concept of "depoliticization" from Wang Hui, "Depoliticized Politics, Multiple Components of Hegemony, and the Eclipse of the Sixties," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 7, no. 4 (2006).

[4] My periodization here is close to Lin Chun's division of the reform era into three phases. Lin saw the 1980s as the first decade of the reforms, and the period from 1989 to 2003 as the "long second decade" or second phase of the reforms. Lin was hopeful that the leadership that took power in 2003 was

success of the initial reforms that decollectivized rural social life and instituted the household responsibility system in the early 1980s, inaugurating a return to family farming. Yet at the same time that they were celebrating success, 1980s intellectuals tended to blame the peasant for China's problems.

Public and intellectual debates in the 1980s often characterized Chinese peasants as problematic: backward, harboring remnants of feudal thinking, and the root cause of China's slow development as well as of its violent history. Many intellectuals characterized the Cultural Revolution, for instance, as a result of the peasant mentality of dependency that was still dominant in Chinese society. They postulated that peasants were prone to relying upon and giving enormous power to a strong leader, and that this kind of mentality led to the toleration and encouragement of Maoist excess, a cult of personality, and conspiratorial factionalism. It was only by modernizing the peasant, that is ending consideration of the peasant as a revolutionary actor and fostering peasant independence from the state and the commune system, that the peasant could become a citizen and Chinese society truly modern. Participants in these debates by and large assumed that with the early-1980s decollectivization the rural problem was resolving and that the reform process could move on to focus on urban and industrial spheres. In the 1980s, then, the image of the peasant was bifurcated: a figure of stagnation and dependency as well as an embodiment of successful reform in process.

From these discussions grew the second wave of enthusiastic writings on rural China. These focused on Township Village Enterprises (or TVEs), rural enterprises operated by local governments that focused on raising local funds and employing rural surplus labor. By the early 1990s, this sector was growing at a rapid rate, becoming one of the most active in the Chinese economy. In the mid 1990s, however, the privatization and bankruptcy of many TVEs, under the marketization policies dominant in the second phase of the reform era, meant that they no longer contributed to local employment or added to local government finances as they once had. Together with falling agricultural prices and rising costs of agricultural inputs and local taxes, this led in the late 1990s to growing rural dissatisfaction and a huge increase in rural protests, especially anti-tax protests.

shifting its policies in a more socially just direction, and that this marked the beginning of a third decade or phase. Lin Chun, *The Transformation of Chinese Socialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 5. For a discussion of the factional politics of the shift from the second to the third phase of reforms, see Cheng Li, "China's Inner-Party Democracy: Toward a System of 'One Party, Two Factions'?" *China Brief* 6, no. 24 (2006).

These failures led to a third discussion on the peasant, beginning at the end of the 1990s, in which the peasant and rural China were characterized as sources of crisis. As Li Changping, a rural cadre from central China's Hubei Province, said in an open letter to Premier Zhu Rongji in early 2000: "The peasants' lot is really bitter, the countryside is really poor, and agriculture is in crisis."[5] During this third wave of discussion, a critical stance on the rural reforms emerged and shifted the terms of debate, significantly affecting the public conversation as well as government policy.

Across the reform era, then, whenever rural policy and the direction of the reforms were at issue, the long-term history of modern China continued to make its appearance together with the figure of the peasant, a figure uneasily integrated into modernization narratives. Was the peasantry going to disappear, be integrated into a new Chinese capitalism, or form an excluded class, marginalized and continually disruptive? A deep historical anxiety arose from the concern that the peasant might not disappear with historical progress and modernization, but instead persist into the foreseeable future. How do we understand history, Chinese intellectuals asked, if the peasant is not viewed as on the path to disappearance? For all the intellectuals whose thought this book addresses, a political stance towards the peasant and rural policies is always bound up with a rethinking of narratives of China's long-term historical development. Different political stances surfaced at different times in the reform era, and each political stance is marked by the way the rural and the peasant were being discussed at the time of its emergence. The remainder of this Introduction briefly outlines the emergence of different political stances on rural China and introduces the main protagonists of this book and the organization of its chapters.

As the role of the peasant in history and society changed across the reform era, so too did the position of intellectuals within society and politics. Most of the intellectuals active in the 1980s discussion saw themselves as serving the reformist project and largely aligned with the reformist party's ideological and policy line. Their work in policy think tanks and party institutions reinforced the party's new understanding of the peasant. As the reform era progressed, however, Chinese intellectuals increasingly developed varied political stances, often quite different from

[5] The letter, written by Li Changping in early 2000, was sent to Premier Zhu Rongji and later published in *Southern Weekend* in the Aug. 24, 2000 issue. See Li Changping, *Wo xiang zongli shuo shihua* [I spoke the truth to the premier], ed. Li Changping (Beijing: Guangming ribao chubanshe, 2002), p. 20.

that of the party-state. This is particularly true following the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations, when critical intellectuals began to emerge within the universities. These critical intellectuals called into question the limits and faults of the state's rural policy while making reference to long-term Chinese historical development.

This book focuses on writings about the peasant that intervene in discussions about the trajectory and meaning of history, for it is around the issue of the peasant that many intellectuals recently have attempted to rethink China's historical development and political trajectory.[6] The renewed interest in rural problems since the late 1990s has been essential to the growth of a critique of neo-liberalism and developmentalism in China, and in turn to the growth of the Chinese left and leftist activism. A discussion of what "the left" means today in China is central to this book. It is no coincidence that the split between the "liberals" (*ziyoupai*) and the "new left" (*xinzuopai*) reached its crescendo as the debate on rural China began to heat up in the late 1990s. Liberals were those who believed that the problems generated by the reforms could only be solved by pushing market reforms further and giving citizens more rights, while new-left intellectuals argued that the market had become too dominant a force within society and that workers and peasants had lost too much power. Liberals and the new left both attempted to confront the increasing inequalities of late-1990s China, but with very different conceptual understandings of the basis of those inequalities. They defined China's social system in distinct ways, based on different understandings of history, capitalism, and development, which in turn enabled different political stances.

This is true also of a third group, the mainstream economists (*zhuliu jingji xuezhe*), who advised the state's economic reform process and who increasingly came to be called "neo-liberals" (*xin ziyouzhuyizhe*) by those on the left as the 1990s unfolded. Chinese intellectuals on the left began to use "neo-liberal" as a term of criticism in the mid to late 1990s, but its meaning is somewhat looser than in the United States. Viewing the Chinese economy as one in transition, those called "neo-liberals" in China often propose increased government investment and continued interference in the economy, seeing the state as playing an important administrative and stabilizing role in the creation of a market economy. Lin Yifu (Justin Lin), once an economic advisor to the Chinese state and now the

[6] There is an enormous amount of writing on the peasant in China, of course, and this study makes no claim to comprehensiveness – much will necessarily be left out.

Chief Economist of the World Bank, was born in Taiwan but defected to the mainland in 1979. After receiving a PhD in economics from the University of Chicago in 1986, Lin worked for the PRC State Council researching rural development and has since become the object of much left-leaning criticism for his "neo-liberal" policies. In his construction of a historical and institutional comparison between the Great Leap Forward (1958–61) and the return to household farming during the early reform era, he argued that proper market institutions and better technology would make agriculture more efficient. Both Lin and Wen Tiejun, a left-leaning scholar of rural economic development who is critical of the effects of market reforms on the countryside, have influenced the recent state policy framework of "constructing a New Socialist Countryside" (*jianshe shehuizhuyi xin nongcun*), which was announced by the leadership of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao in 2005.[7]

Chinese liberals emerged in the 1980s during the first wave of discussion on rural China, criticizing the excesses of the Maoist era and the Cultural Revolution, which they saw as based on a backward and feudal peasant consciousness. By the 1990s, Chinese liberals developed a more sustained critique of the state, arguing against the interference of power or the state in a proper free market. In order to defend against such interference, liberals posited, the reform process necessitated a strong separation between the state and the market, without which society would become subject to a corrupt marketization of state power. Chinese liberals, therefore, were more critical of the state's role in the economy than most Chinese neo-liberals tended to be. Qin Hui, an agrarian historian at Tsinghua University and the subject of Chapter 2, began to develop his ideas about peasant society in the nine years he spent in a poor mountainous rural county on the border of Guangxi Province following the Cultural Revolution. After Qin re-entered the educational system at the beginning of the reform era, he looked at the peasant class as defined by dependency on the state, whether imperial or socialist, and developed a critique of utopian "agrarian socialism." Qin argued that a just society must be premised on transforming peasants into citizens within a society based

[7] On the "New Socialist Countryside," see Anna L. Ahlers and Gunter Schubert, "'Building a New Socialist Countryside' – Only a Political Slogan?" *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 38, no. 4 (2009); Elizabeth Perry, "From Mass Campaigns to Managed Campaigns: 'Constructing a New Socialist Countryside,'" in Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth Perry, eds., *Mao's Invisible Hand: The Political Foundations of Adaptive Governance in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2011); Stig Thøgersen, "Revisiting a Dramatic Triangle: The State, Villagers, and Social Activists in Chinese Rural Reconstruction Projects," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 38, no. 4 (2009).

on rights, private property, and a market economy. Significantly, Qin's thoughts on the peasant have positioned him as one of the most important liberal critics of the unfolding reform process, largely because of his historical narrative's breadth and universality.

The "new left" emerged as a recognizable intellectual grouping in the mid to late 1990s largely through their conversation and debate with Chinese liberals and during the second wave of discussions on the status of the peasant. In contrast to the liberals, the new left increasingly came to see capitalism and market economics as the primary cause of China's growing social problems and inequality. In general, new-left thinkers are characterized by their critique of capitalism as an anti-market monopoly or hegemony. In their criticism of liberal discourse and its naturalized separation of the economy and state power, they assert that one must not ask how to separate state power from the economy, but rather how to organize power relations so as to make the market as fair and just as possible. For the new left, the question becomes how to organize popular power to counter the power and emergence of capitalist hegemony within society and the market. Chapter 3 examines the work of new-left scholars such as Cui Zhiyuan, Gan Yang, Huang Ping, and others, showing the important role that rural China played in the development of this critical perspective on market reforms. For the early new left, the peasant was a figure of possibility and difference. Rural China provided the left with the basis for arguing that China had the potential to develop in a different way than capitalist development had in the West. The new left initiated a criticism of the deleterious effects of the marketization of society in the 1990s, and by late in the decade, left-leaning scholars of rural China began to have a serious influence upon public and state discourse concerning peasant issues.

No scholar played a bigger role in bringing rural crisis into intellectual discourse than Wen Tiejun, an agrarian economist and now Dean of the School of Agricultural and Rural Development at Renmin University in Beijing. At the end of the 1990s, as peasant incomes began to stagnate and rural protests increased, Wen argued that peasants and surplus rural labor, rather than agricultural production, were key to understanding the long-term development strategy of China, as well as its current problems. Wen constructed a new understanding of rural issues through a renarration of recent Chinese history as a series of attempts at industrialization, in which the peasant played an important and often overlooked role.

Industrialization only succeeded during the Maoist era, according to Wen, because of the accumulation of rural surplus that the commune

system made possible. Wen's foregrounding of the peasant in his discussions of rural issues made it much harder to limit the view of rural issues to one of a problem of rural economic and agricultural development, as most state policy discussion on agriculture in the 1990s had done, or to separate a discussion of the peasant population from one on Chinese social and economic development, as many intellectual discussions on urbanization had done. In his gripping public letter to Premier Zhu Rongji, Li Changping, the rural cadre from Hubei Province mentioned above, brought to public visibility the problems of rural poverty, the burden that local government expenditures placed on peasants, and the stagnation of rural social development. Wen and Li are the subject of Chapter 4.

Also responding to a perceived rural crisis, sociologists turned their attention to a critical examination of rural life. Traveling through rural Henan Province in the mid 1990s, Cao Jinqing, Professor of Sociology at East China University of Science and Technology in Shanghai, was one of the first scholars of peasant China to recognize the growing crisis of rural society. Tellingly, however, he could not get his manuscript published at the time, as the public eye was not on the countryside. Furthermore, it was not until after the book was finally published in the year 2000, when it became a best-seller, that Cao began to develop a deeper historical critique of the unfolding of rural reforms. He Xuefeng and other left-leaning rural sociologists also emerged in this discussion on rural crisis to argue that it was a social and community crisis, in which a fractured rural society was unable to protect peasants from the depredations of the market forces unleashed by the reforms. He Xuefeng argued that in-depth rural research was necessary to understand the growing crisis of rural society, but that Western sociology did not provide the concepts necessary for such a study. Through his writings on village community experiments, He has tried to develop a native social science of rural society. These ethnographies of rural disintegration by Chinese sociologists are the subject of Chapter 5.

These left-leaning rural scholars are not just researchers, but together constitute a new form of activism for Chinese intellectuals, the subject of Chapter 6. After struggling to influence party policy on rural reforms from within the state, Wen left his job working for the Agriculture Ministry in rural reform experimentation. He has since become the foremost promoter of "New Rural Reconstruction" (*xin xiangcun jianshe*), a movement to rebuild rural social and economic relations that includes the construction of peasant cooperatives. Li Changping is also a supporter of a new rural cooperative movement, in which peasants take democratic control over their local land resources and economic development. This chapter places