

Modernizing Rural China

Freiburg, September 27–29, 2019

Report by Daniel R. Kroth

This year's Modernizing Rural China workshop, organized by René Trappel, Elena Meyer-Clement, and Jesper Zeuthen, took place at Studienhaus Wiesneck in the Black Forest near Freiburg. This workshop, the second event organized by the Modernizing Rural China Research Network, sought to further explore the effects of state led rural modernization in a format that would allow for substantive feedback, productive discussion, and future collaboration. To this end, a diverse group of American, Asian, and European academics presented and discussed works relating to agrarian change, urbanization, and changes in state–society relations in a rapidly changing Chinese countryside. Paper presentations ranged from qualitative studies of political economy to thorough historically based investigations and in-progress theorizations based on recent fieldwork. The workshop consisted of eight paper presentations and discussion sessions in four thematically related panels. Each discussion session began with prepared feedback by a designated discussant, followed by an open floor discussion.

The first panel centered on collective land ownership and its legacy. Karita Kan (Hong Kong Polytechnic University) opened the workshop with “Remaking Collective Land Ownership: Property Rights Reform and Social Relations in a Chinese village,” a case study of the effects of the formalization and clarification of land rights in Zuhai. The effects of the clarification of land rights through the distribution of shares, she argues, are not limited to state–village relations, but also impact intra-village and family relations as questions of belonging become financially as well as socially relevant. This was followed by Burak Gürel's (Koç University) “Collectivist Legacy and Agrarian Development in China (1978–2019),” an exploration of the temporal bounds of collectivization in rural China. Gürel suggests that the legacy of the collective era, manifested in early infrastructure investments, village administrative structures, labor mobilization, and similar factors, continued to impact Chinese agricultural development well beyond the collectivist era. This collectivist legacy, he argues, should be seriously considered in studies of Chinese agriculture in the reform era and in comparison with the rest of the Global South.

The second panel began with a presentation by Christopher Heurlin (Bowdoin College). In his presentation “The Political Economy of Land Taking Compensation Arrears in China: Asset Mobility, Land Leasing Strategies and Protests,” Dr. Heurlin discussed land compensation arrears, and explored possible causes for unexpectedly disparate and counterintuitively correlated land compensation standards. He suggests that variances in land use and asset mobility might contribute to this disparity. Jesper Zeuthen (Aalborg University), joined

remotely by co-author Tomas Skov Lauridsen, then presented “Trading China’s Authority: Credit Ratings – Putting a Price Tag on Political Trust in a Chinese Development Zone.” Intrigued by a particularly ambitious proposed megaproject in Tianfu, Zeuthen and Lauridsen discuss the role of political endorsement of investment zones on investor confidence and eventual real value.

The third panel began with John Donaldson’s (Singapore Management University) presentation “Who Gets What in Rural Modernization: The Winners and Losers of Guizhou’s Indebted Investments.” In this presentation, based on a forthcoming paper authored by Zhanping Hu, Michelle Ng and Nabil Bin Jasmani, he notes that Guizhou’s development strategy has shifted from creating opportunities for the poor to a developmentalist approach that favors investment in wealthier areas. These investments do not appear to be effective from poverty alleviation or even development perspectives. In her presentation, “The Costs of Institutional Underdevelopment: China’s Farmers’ Professional Cooperatives in Comparative Perspective,” Kristen Looney of Georgetown University juxtaposes the developmental role of Chinese farmers’ organizations with that of other East Asian farmer’s organizations.

The final panel began with Elena Meyer-Clement and René Trappel’s “Optimizing Rural China: New Peasants, New Villagers and New Cadres?”, which used a Foucaultian framework to analyze attempts to “optimize” segments of rural society in China. They showed how the state tries to promote new identities for peasants, villagers and cadres, pointed to counter conduct of the population and local cadres, and speculated about the effects of this “optimization.” Departing from the contemporary, Kyonghee Lee (University of Heidelberg) concluded this final panel with her presentation “Tracing the Village-Compact of Old onto Self-Governance: Uses of the Past by Interwar-Period Rural Reconstructionists of the Cunzhi Group.” In this presentation, she provided historical perspective based in the conservative rural reform of the 1920s and ‘30s.

The workshop concluded with an open discussion in which participants discussed the workshop’s proceedings, organized future work, and planned upcoming events. The participants’ diverse approaches to the narrow focus of Chinese rural modernization led to productive and active discussion, and yielded actionable feedback and avenues for future collaboration. The Modernizing Rural China Research Network will convene for a similar event in February 2020.

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