

“Modernizing Rural China” workshop and network meeting

Molslaboratry, Ebeltoft (Denmark), September 23–25, 2022

Report by Mads Vesterager Nielsen

This year’s Modernizing Rural China Workshop, organized by Elena Meyer-Clement, Jesper Zeuthen, and René Trappel, was held at the Mols Laboratory in Ebeltoft, north of Aarhus in Denmark. This workshop, the third in a series of events organized by the Modernizing Rural China Research Network, sought to examine state-led rural modernization in the era of the Covid pandemic, in a framework that allows for in-depth discussion, constructive feedback, and opportunities to develop future collaboration in the network. To this end, a highly diverse group of American, Asian and European academics presented works related to rural digitization, agrarian modernization, food & trust, and local governance at the grassroots level. Paper presentations ranged from long-distance fieldwork centering on the application of drone technology in rural areas, as well as other exploratory research methods to circumvent the current limitations on travel, to qualitative studies on local cadre initiatives. The workshop consisted of nine paper presentations and discussion sessions, one monograph presentation, and two grant feedback sessions, arranged in five thematically related panels.

The first session focused on digitization and green governance, with an eye on the impact of disruptive technologies on local areas. John Donaldson (Singapore Management University) kicked off the workshop by presenting his paper “Guizhou’s Big Bet on Big Data: Is the creation of “Big Data Valley” environmentally sustainable?”, wherein a case study of data centers in Guiyang, the provincial capital of Guizhou province, is employed to explore the trade-off facing poorer Chinese provinces, between economic growth on the one hand and environmental sustainability on the other. It was followed by Lena Kaufmann’s (University of Zurich) “The digitalization of agriculture in China: Continuities, changes and research methods”, an exploratory long-distance study of how unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), commonly referred to as “drones,” are revolutionizing private-plot farming in China. She argues that UAVs are disrupting traditional farming practices in rural areas, effectivizing processes, like pesticide distribution and planting of crops, while unintended side-effects of drone use, like dependencies of elderly farmers on drone pilots and farm chemical companies, remain a largely uncovered leaf in the discourse on UAVs in China.

The second session was conducted under the theme of intellectual debates and grassroots implementation, chaired by professor emeritus Jørgen Delman (University of Copenhagen). During this session, Francesco Zaratini (University of Vienna) presented his paper entitled ‘From prospecting visions to selling solutions’ which aims to re-assess the advocacy and local experiments by New Rural Reconstruction (NRR) intellectuals. Zaratini is primarily concerned with the evolution of the NRR from the

early 2000s onwards when the field enjoyed a period of political experimentation in the Hu-Wen era. He concludes that NRR intellectuals and their local experimentation continue to be an active part of China's rural development landscape. Mikkel Bunkenborg (University of Copenhagen) then presented a proposal for a monograph entitled "Hosting and Guesting: An Ethnography of Hospitality in Rural North China", in which he explores the everyday ritual between guest and host in rural China. The volume consists of five chapters that look at immaterial cultural heritage, descriptions of guest-host meetings, the structural logic of the temple fair as essentially that of hosting the deities as guests, individuals and cosmological powers, as well as addressing the state and how its presence impacted local practices in the Chinese countryside in the decades after de-collectivization.

The third session, chaired by Kristen Looney (Georgetown University), centered on the theme of food and trust in rural China. Trust in food sources is of vital concern to farmers, who form alternative ways of inducing trust in local foodstuffs. Anders Sybrandt Hansen (Aarhus University) explores this theme in his paper entitled "Eating with peace of mind: Benefits of distrust and selective system trust in alternative food networks" (co-authored with Mikkel Bunkenborg and Meina Jia Sandal), where one of the main findings, is that alternative systems of trust are employed in an attempt to insulate against the risks of the wider market. In turn, Hansen argues, selective trust is extended to certain exclusive systems, while other more comprehensive society-wide systems are often seen as too risky to rely on. The second panelist of the session, Yue Zhao (University of Melbourne), presented her project "Pushing organic model township: rural politics and policy implementation in China", where she focusses on local model making in China's Henan Province. The study examines the pursuit of township officials around Danjiangkou Reservoir, who are building a model township for organic production. Taking an up-and-down split perspective, this study contributes to the understanding of township politics in China and how these reach the central government's agenda in the context of strict water pollution control, and interactions of central-local governments in the authoritarian system.

The fourth session was chaired by Jesper Zeuthen (Aalborg University), under the theme of "Moralism and Local Governance". Wei Zhu (Aarhus University) presented the impending project "The End of Ethics? High-Tech State Moralism and Popular Surveillance in Contemporary China" (led by Anders Sybrandt Hansen), which is an inside study of everyday ethics in the Chinese context of state surveillance. The research project explores how state-moralist efforts and behavioural engineering shape people's way of being and interpersonal relationships. The second part of the panel was conducted with a presentation by Kristen Looney, about her project entitled "Sending Down and Lifting Up: China's College-Graduate Village Officials (CGVO)," about the modern practices of "rustification" of young officials in the countryside, as a way for young cadres to gain prospects for future promotion. She argues that the college graduate-village officials program serves two main political purposes: To bureaucratize village governance and to incorporate urban intellectuals into the party.

The fifth session was chaired by professor emeritus Stig Thøgersen (Aarhus University) under the umbrella theme of “Bubbles.” During this session, Elena Meyer-Clement (University of Copenhagen) presented a project on “Urbanising and Revitalising. Governing space and people in rural China,” where she examines how the evolving governance of space and people under the new regime functions, and what its consequences are for China’s local political economy. The project explores rural revitalization as a theme with global implications and potential for cross-border comparative case-studies. It builds on previous research conducted by Meyer-Clement since 2012. During the second part of the session, Jesper Zeuthen presented his project on “Automated Decision Making and Exploding Village Banks,” which focuses on the recent loan scandals and utilization of COVID-19 health codes in Henan province and other parts of the Chinese countryside. Zeuthen focusses on the digital infrastructure and classifications that they impose on their users, and whether or not these are ultimately regarded as legitimate. The paper concludes that the case of the village banks and changing health-codes on the one hand illustrate how the logic of an automated decision process, like the health-code, can have a very high degree of authority, because it is trusted that it, unlike other parts of Chinese society, comes without human intervention. On the other hand, even in the authoritarian Chinese state, the top leadership needs to respect the power of the algorithm, and cannot pretend that obvious manipulation is in fact part of it. As the final presenter of the session, René Trappel (University of Freiburg) presented his the cooperative project “Fighting Covid in the Chinese Countryside: Exploratory Research from Afar”, where Pengpeng Guo (Gansu University of Political Science and Law, Lanzhou) and he experiments with long- distance methods of cooperation to leverage the problem of access during the COVID-19 lockdown. Trappel emphasizes local research networks and collaborations with colleagues in China, which allowed them to delve into the pandemic response of a village in Gansu province. Through long distance interviews in August of 2022, he Trappel and Guo finds that the risk of COVID-19 is rather abstract for the villagers, who could not name a single person that contracted the virus. Still, the fight against the virus was an ever present feature that has impacted both the economic and social life of the entire village. Delving further into the aspect of long-distance research, Trappel acknowledges the limitations of the method, and recognizes that his their study would not have been possible without prior succesful international cooperation with research partners.

During the final session entitled “Studying Rural China from afar?” all conference attendants discussed the current situation of limitations on in-person research, and its implications for research on rural China, as well as strategies going forward. The “Modernizing Rural China” Research Network will convene for its next meeting in spring 2024 in Singapore.

Mads Vesterager Nielsen, MA
University of Copenhagen
madvesteragernielsen@gmail.com