

Review: A Collective Path to Rural Revitalisation

Capitalist globalisation has profoundly transformed the global food system since the 19th century. This has pushed much of the world's peasantry into crisis. In most underdeveloped countries, land privatisation and integration into global markets have eroded food sovereignty and trapped rural communities in cycles of dispossession and debt. What some scholars term the 'corporate food regime' has systematically undermined millions of livelihoods while concentrating agricultural power in corporate hands.

Against this backdrop of systemic crisis, China's experience with collective land ownership presents a compelling alternative. Rather than representing a relic of the past, China's collective model has supported rural revitalisation and ensured national food security, offering a viable path forward for rural development.

Rural Chronicles: Why the New Collective Economy Works (乡村纪事：新型集体经济为什么行) by Yan Hairong, Gao Ming, and Ding Ling emerges as a crucial intervention from China into these debates. Based on years of meticulous fieldwork across seven distinct case studies, Tsinghua University professor Yan Hairong and her research team demonstrate a people-centred, collective path to rural development that stands in sharp contrast to the neoliberal model. It serves as a materialist rebuttal to the prevailing narrative of the demise of the small peasant – an ideology that promotes the movement of peasants to cities and the drain of wealth from the countryside, leaving only specialised large households and leading enterprises as agricultural actors.

Confronting the Agrarian Question in Contemporary China

Rural Chronicles addresses a critical challenge born from over four decades of China's Household Responsibility System: the polarisation and atomisation of rural areas that left individual peasants acutely vulnerable to market volatility and the intervention of capital. To understand the significance of the collective path documented in *Rural Chronicles*, one must first grasp the deeper structural contradictions within China's current land system.

China operates a dual land ownership system: urban land is owned by the state and rural land is owned by collectives. The 1978 Household Responsibility System, introduced to address the problems of economic development at the time, established individual contracting rights while maintaining the framework of collective ownership. This system has since evolved into a 'three-rights separation structure' – collective ownership, household contracting rights, and management rights.

The fundamental contradiction lies in how this separation undermines collective agency. According to Lu Xinyu, collective land ownership was originally designed to serve community protective functions, allowing

villages to adjust land distribution according to demographic changes and ensuring that the land belongs to those who work it. When management rights become tradable commodities, village collectives lose control over how external capital invests in and utilises community land. Smallholder agricultural operations yield lower economic returns from land-based production. Meanwhile, as urban-rural income disparities continue to expand, rural populations increasingly move to the cities for employment, resulting in the widespread abandonment of agricultural land.¹

One response to this crisis is transferring land to leading enterprises or external capital for scaled agriculture. This is essentially a market-based solution to agricultural modernisation. Critics argue that this constitutes de facto land privatisation and dispossesses peasants of land-use rights while dismantling collective economies. From this context, the authors of *Rural Chronicles* pose the fundamental question: under marketised conditions, how can new collective economies develop that transcend both the vulnerabilities of atomised peasants and the risks of capital-dominated reorganisation? The alternative path of strengthening smallholder-led village collectives forms the core proposition of *Rural Chronicles*. The authors argue that sustainable rural revitalisation requires reactivating village collectives as the intrinsic force for development, enabling peasants to reclaim their agency in the modernisation process, and building a bulwark against predatory capital.

The political significance of this work is underscored by China's recent legislative developments. *The Law of the People's Republic of China on Rural Collective Economic Organisations* was passed in June 2024, four months before the publication of the book, and came into effect in May 2025.² This legislation legally codifies core principles such as the inalienable collective ownership of rural land and the necessity of democratic management by villagers. The law provides a legal framework to protect collectives from both internal control by a few individuals and external control by capital. This ensures that development is driven from within the communities of over 900 million Chinese peasants.

Pillars of the New Village Collectives

The strength of *Rural Chronicles* lies in its rich, granular detail which moves beyond abstract theory to the living practice of socialist construction. Across its diverse case studies, the book provides an anatomy of how the new collective economy resolves key contradictions in China's rural development.

The book elucidates the indispensable role of the grassroots organisation of the Communist Party of China as a political vanguard. This leadership operates not by coercion but through the original aspiration of 'serving the people' – a practice that mobilises the grassroots communities and builds trust. In Tangyue Village, Party Secretary Zuo Wenxue committed to leading village-wide prosperity rather than individual enrichment despite personal business successes. When facing fundraising challenges, eleven village committee cadres took personal loans from the credit union to obtain funds for the collective. This pattern of 'party members taking the lead' appears consistently across case studies – in Daba Village, Guizhou Province, cadres first trialled risky cash crops to prove viability; in Tugudong Village, Henan Province, the party secretary personally secured a loan of 30,000 yuan and promised to absorb losses if ventures failed.

Crucially, this leadership operates on the principle of the mass line rather than top-down directives. Villages have set up various mechanisms for participation in decision-making. Tangyue Village employs a representative system with one elected villager per fifteen households participating in collective decisions.

Gacuo Collective implements circular supervision where production group leaders supervise the members, village cadres supervise the group leaders, and masses supervise the cadres. Cadres and the institutions are dialectically interrelated. Gacuo Collective's 189 management rules are all formulated and updated through a village-wide People's Congress that is held every one or two years, ensuring the regulations reflect the will of the community.

Rural Chronicles demonstrates how collective ownership serves as the economic foundation for effective rural development. By reintegrating fragmented land and labour, as Tangyue and Daba villages did, collectives achieve economies of scale that enable unified procurement, production, and sales while strengthening their capacity to negotiate with larger market actors. This foundation is crucial not only for market leverage but also for introducing and popularising advanced agricultural technologies – thus fostering the application of 'new quality productive forces'.³ In Tugudong, the collective engages with private capital from a position of strength rooted in land ownership. Even when private enterprises are contracted to operate on village land, the system maintains a collective orientation because the collective has ultimate ownership of the land and is entitled to a portion of the surplus generated by these enterprises via rent and management fees.

These cases demonstrate how village collectives actively navigate relationships with external forces – government, capital, and enterprises – to develop strategic partnerships while maintaining collective autonomy. Rather than passive recipients of external intervention, these collectives exercise agency in structuring collaborations that serve their developmental goals. The income generated from the collectives is used to fund public welfare projects including pensions, social support through wedding and funeral committees, reading societies, and elderly associations. This ensures that the benefits of development are shared and helps build a resilient rural society that is essential to the broader project of Chinese modernisation.

Rural Chronicles also illuminates fundamental contradictions within collective rural development that threaten sustainability: dangerous over-reliance on individual leaders (evident in Xinqi Village's difficulties after the former party secretary's retirement), concentration of decision-making within small collectives of cadres without enough mass participation and unsustainable debt accumulation – with Daba and Xinqi carrying 48 million yuan and 70-80 million yuan in obligations, respectively. While the book identifies these critical problems, its theoretical analysis of systematic solutions is insufficient. Lu Xinyu once argued that socialism's advantage in rural reorganisation was its ability to directly inject party organisational resources to provide non-market support for rural restructuring. To ensure the sustainability of rural development after resources for poverty alleviation are withdrawn, the grassroots party organisations need to function as the primary agents and driving forces for rural social and economic reorganisation.⁴

From Local Practice to Global Resonance

Rural Chronicles offers more than a detailed documentation of Chinese rural development – it provides insights relevant to global agrarian struggles, with examples of rising incomes, improved welfare, and renewed social cohesion in the villages studied. The principles of collective action find a compelling parallel in the agrarian struggles in Global South movements like Brazil's Landless Workers' Movement (MST). The book's co-author, Yan Hairong, personally visited an MST encampment in northern Paraná in 2015. A detailed account of the movement can be found in the April 2024 dossier from Tricontinental: Institute for Social

Research, *The Political Organisation of Brazil's Landless Workers' Movement (MST)*.⁵ For four decades, the MST has organised peasants into cooperatives to build political consciousness and material power as part of their broader struggle for social transformation. Their settlements feature *agrovilas* (agrovillages) that bring households together to coordinate production and socialise domestic labour through collective kitchens and childcare circles.

MST is now drawing on China's agrarian reform experience by establishing a Farming Agriculture Mechanisation Science and Technology Residence together with Chinese universities and enterprises. It is also introducing Chinese-made, small-scale agricultural machinery to serve family farmers in Brazil.⁶ While the political contexts differ, the underlying lesson is resonant – the organisation of the peasantry into collective productive units is an essential strategy for building people's power in the struggle for food sovereignty, agrarian reform, and social transformation. For scholars and activists engaged in agrarian struggles globally, the experiences in *Rural Chronicles*, read alongside the struggles of movements like the MST, provide invaluable political inspiration and strategic insight for the rural masses of the Global South.

Notes

¹ Lu Xinyu, 'Exploring a Path to a Rural Market Economy with Chinese Characteristics Based on the Collective Economy' [依托集体经济探索中国特色农村市场经济之路], *Economic Herald* [经济导刊], no.2 (2018): 67–68.

² 'The Law of the People's Republic of China on Rural Collective Economic Organisations' [中华人民共和国农村集体经济组织法], the State Council of People's Republic of China, 29 June, 2024, https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202406/content_6960131.htm.

³ Cheng Enfu, Wang Junxi, 'On the Mechanisms and Paths through which New Quality Productive Forces Empower the High-Quality Development of the New Rural Collective Economy' [论新质生产力赋能新型农村集体经济高质量发展的机理与路径], *Journal of Hebei University of Economics and Business* [河北经贸大学学报], no. 3 (2025): 1–10.

⁴ Lu Xinyu, *Rural and Revolution: Three Works on the Critique of Chinese Neoliberalism (Revised and Expanded Edition)* [乡村与革命：中国“新自由主义”批判三书（增订版）], (East China Normal University, 2024).

⁵ Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, *The Political Organisation of Brazil's Landless Workers' Movement (MST)*, dossier no. 75, 16 April 2024, <https://dev.thetricontinental.org/dossier-75-landless-workers-movement-brazil/>.

⁶ 'Chinese Machines Arrive at UnB and Brazil-China Center for Family Farming Is Inaugurated' [Máquinas chinesas chegam à UnB e Centro Brasil-China para Agricultura Familiar é inaugurado], *Brasil de Fato*, 30 November 2024, <https://www.brasildefato.com.br/2024/11/30/maquinas-chinesas-chegam-a-unb-e-centro-brasil-china-para-agricultura-familiar-e-inaugurado/>.



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