

# OF CAGES AND HEDGES

**In China, the proportion of people working in agriculture has dropped by two thirds since 1991. CHRIS SMAJE investigates, and asks what this might mean for those advocating localised, land-based economies as part of the solution to global problems.**

The only civilisation to survive more-or-less intact from antiquity to the present, much of China's tumultuous history has been characterised by a relatively stable compact between a property-owning peasantry and an imperial bureaucracy, which was the envy of peasants in other lands.<sup>1</sup>

Nineteenth- and twentieth-century 'modernisation' sharpened the conflict between social classes, culminating in Mao's communist revolution and its enforced 'iron rice bowl' of rigidly-policed peasant equality and sufficiency.

According to political scientist Lynn White, the disasters of Maoist economic policy in the 1950s and 60s created substantial local autonomy. It was this autonomy, rather than than the top-down reforms of the post-Mao regime, which fostered the peasant-led, bottom-up economic dynamism that laid the foundations for China's emergence in recent years as a major global capitalist power.<sup>2</sup>

Land-workers and food sovereignty activists are well aware that given the chance, peasants and rural people can create abundant and thriving local economies. Other aspects of China's rise, though, are more troubling to that narrative. Chen Yun famously described China's post-Mao economy as a 'birdcage', in which the free-flying and prosperity-generating bird of capitalism was kept to its proper bounds by a socialist cage. In modern China, the bird has long since flown the cage. This comes as no surprise to Marxists, who've always suspected that peasants are really either capitalists or landless wage-workers in disguise. But for agrarian thinkers who want to retain a notion of thriving but stable, non-capitalist rural economies, the question arises of how to come up with a better cage.

## How Many Peasants?

Global farming statistics reveal another troubling issue. Worldwide since 1990, there has been a decline of 240 million people reported as employed in farming. But a country-by-country analysis shows an outflow of 448 million people from farming – the majority (311 million) from China, where the proportion of people working in agriculture has declined from 55 percent in 1991 to 18 percent in 2017.<sup>3</sup>

That implies a growth in farm employment elsewhere, and indeed there are 84 countries with a net increase in the number



Mural in the village of Zhongdong, in the southern Chinese province of Guangdong.

of people in farming, totalling 208 million people. The majority of these (161 million) are in sub-Saharan Africa, partly reflecting the strong population growth in that region but also reflecting its poverty. It's hard to preach an enticing vision of the 'peasant way' when the majority of people entering it are among the poorest on earth, and the majority of people exiting it live in a country that's hurtling along a capitalist path of self-enrichment.

But a closer look at that capitalist path reveals a more complex story of 'enrichment', albeit one familiar in its main details from capitalist paths of enrichment in other times and places. After the rural dynamism mentioned above got the ball rolling, China's rise as a global economic power was based on export manufacturing industries, built on the back of cheap labour migrating from the countryside to urbanising-industrialising areas. One reason for this cheapness has been China's household registration system, whereby rural migrants remain classified by their places of origin and are denied access to the superior health, educational, social and fiscal services available to city residents, thereby personally bearing much of the social costs of the industrialisation founded in their labour.<sup>4</sup>

## Urban Villages

More recently, as with other maturing capitalist powers, much Chinese wealth-creation has shifted out of industrialisation and into financialisation – particularly in relation to urban real estate. David Bandurski's fine book *Dragons in Diamond Village* traces how this works, through engaging stories of individual people fighting corrupt webs of city officials, party leaders, village heads and police officers.<sup>5</sup> Bandurski analyses in detail the violent pressure that falls on collectively-held village land as it gets swallowed up by urbanisation. These

'urban villages' have typically become crowded residential city neighbourhoods housing poor rural migrant labourers – slums in other words – with the original villagers acting as petty landlords under predatory pressure to relinquish their rights to village land, and even to their own houses, for the purposes of property development or gentrification, with the proceeds pocketed higher up the political food chain.

The plight of the urban villagers may seem less severe than that of the rural migrant labour force. Indeed in an interview with me Bandurski explained that other urban-dwellers were often dismissive of their resistance to state enclosure, assuming that they were doing nicely out of their property rights. But he emphasised the predatory power of the state forces ranged against them, adding

"I never understood the need to minimise the suffering of urban villagers by pretending they were sultans in comparison to struggling migrants. But you often heard this. I think this arises in part from the political stigmatisation of self-interest, which is confused with greed."<sup>6</sup>

This self-interest/greed nexus is an interesting feature that emerges from the analysis of Chinese capitalism by Bandurski and others. Capitalist development in the west has drawn heavily on the powerful but largely fallacious idea that individual self-interest, or even greed, fosters collective wellbeing. This idea can be traced back at least as far as Adam Smith's discussion of the 'invisible hand' of the market in his 1776 book *The Wealth of Nations*. Western capitalist mythology still celebrates the ideology of the little guy, the individual entrepreneur with the great idea, despite the dominance of the actual economy by vast corporate-monopoly enterprises. By contrast in China, as Bandurski writes:

"the role of the human being is minimised against the backdrop of a larger-than-life vision of the urban. A kind of urban mythology of the city as a place of dynamism and ultimately prosperity. You can see this readily in the propaganda around the city, which emphasises the modern fabric of the city—the skyscrapers, the monuments, the high-speed rail ...

This urban imagery is also prevalent in the countryside:

... in Henan I saw how the mosaic scenes outside rural homes had been changed from scenes of nature to scenes of the megacity, dominated by an expressway in diminishing perspective running through the centre, with luxury cars whooshing past montages of architecture from Shanghai and Beijing. The caption was always "Road to Prosperity." But there were never any people in those scenes, any more than in the government's urban propaganda."<sup>7</sup>

## From Cages to Hedges

Who knows how this will all turn out. At present, the combination of rising (if poorly distributed) incomes and the growing authoritarianism of the Xi Jinping regime is keeping a lid on social unrest in China. Bandurski pronounces himself "not very optimistic about the prospects for land rights activism becoming a real political force in China".

In the longer term though, economist Minqi Li argues that at some point this century, China's prodigious fossil-energy use and dependence on fast export-led economic growth

will become unsustainable. This will prompt a major crisis – political, economic and environmental – that will reverberate across China and the rest of the world, and probably destroy much of what many people now take for granted about the modern world system.<sup>8</sup>

The older pre-revolutionary China has loomed large in the thinking of westerners like me who grew up in the alternative farming movement. Books like F.H. King's *Farmers of Forty Centuries* emphasised the long-term sustainability of China's labour-intensive, horticultural civilisation, influencing western ecological movements like permaculture.<sup>9</sup> In permaculture circles I've often heard the adage repeated that "the Chinese have forgotten more about gardening than the rest of the world ever knew". But sadly it seems that they may now have forgotten so much that their ignorance matches our own. In Bandurski's uncompromising words:

"One of the most basic things to understand about China's so-called rural population is its clear and increasing remoteness from agricultural life. The vast majority are not farmers at all. Even one, two and now even three generations back they are not farmers. They have little or probably in most cases no agricultural knowledge."<sup>10</sup>

It's hard to derive an optimistic message from the familiar stories here of hard-won agricultural knowledge easily lost, enrichment by enclosure, economic maldistribution, short-term money-making at the cost of long-term crisis, and the elusiveness of a gilded rather than an iron cage to contain the spirits of the market. Yet even now, China still has more people in farming than most industrialised countries, and a history of wrenching social transformation that may surprise the world again.

Bandurski mentions that many among China's rural-industrial workforce still consider the family smallholding as a hedge against economic insecurity, while adding that, "This land isn't a hedge in the real sense that any sustainable income could probably be derived from it, but only in the sense that it might enable subsistence at the most basic level."<sup>11</sup>

The challenge as I see it is that the world at large urgently needs to improve its hedges. This may not sound like the right conclusion in view of what we know about the enclosure of the commons. Personally though, I'm convinced that well-hedged (in every sense) private smallholdings, of the kind pioneered long ago in China, can still offer one of the more persuasive roadmaps out of the present morass.

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