

**The Journals *Zhongguo xiangcun yanjiu* and *Rural China*:  
Retrospect and Prospect**

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**《中国乡村研究》和 *Rural China* 学刊：回顾与展望**

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**Abstract:** Rural China has long been a rather sensitive subject within China. For that reason, our Chinese journal *Zhongguo xiangcun yanjiu* on rural China, published inside China, has faced some serious difficulties. By contrast, the bilingual international version of our journal *Rural China: An International Journal of History and Social Science*, published by E. J. Brill in the Netherlands, has long been very stable. In recent years, the Chinese countryside has in fact seen substantial new accomplishments and development. Today, the subject of “rural China” actually needs fundamental rethinking to incorporate the new developments that have occurred. It also requires that we pay attention to the multiple forces and influences that have come from outside the ruralities — we must no longer “simply study rural China qua rural China.”

**Keywords:** the rural problem, political sensitivity, out-of-country publications, informal economy, rural realities and prospects

**摘要：**乡村议题在中国国内带有一定的敏感性，因此我们在国内出版的中文版《中国乡村研究》学刊一直困难重重。但由荷兰 Brill 公司出版十多年的国外版 *Rural China* 一直非常稳定。近年来，中国乡村实际上多有新的建树和发展。如今，乡村议题本身也需要我们

重新思考，纳入新的内容，并更多考虑越来越重要的、来自乡村外部的影响和动力，不再仅仅“就乡村论乡村”。我们期待未来将能顺利稳定出版其国内版。

**关键词：**乡村问题、政治敏感性、境外出版、非正规经济、乡村实际与展望

The Chinese version of *Zhongguo xiangcun yanjiu (Rural China)*, published inside China, was begun in 2003, with one issue per year, and was formally included in the CSSCI (Chinese Social Science Citation Index) in 2014, but because the subject of rural China has been a rather sensitive one in China, it has not been able to be published regularly. By contrast, the bilingual English-Chinese version of the journal *Rural China: An International Journal of History and Social Science*, which we have published with Brill in the Netherlands, with two issues a year, has been very steady and well regarded, and was incorporated into the SCOPUS abstract and citation index database in 2018. The bilingual journal adopted from its inception in 2013 the volume and issue numbers of the Chinese *Zhongguo xiangcun yanjiu*, beginning with Volume 10, Number 1.

When publication of both the Chinese and English versions was regular and steady, we typically encouraged authors of high-quality Chinese articles to write, or arrange for the production of, an English version of their article, and, in the case of younger scholars, to help them to do so as needed, so that they could publish simultaneously their Chinese version in *Zhongguo xiangcun yanjiu* and their English version in *Rural China*. For the most outstanding articles, the English versions were published in *Rural China's* sister journal *Modern China: An International Journal of History and Social Science* (an SSCI abstract and citation index journal).

The first and second volumes of the Chinese edition *Zhongguo xiangcun yanjiu* were published initially by the Commercial Press (Shangwu yinshuguan), but quickly ran into

resistance. We had to switch over to the Social Sciences Academic Press (Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe), but ran into resistance again, and had to switch to the Fujian Education Press (Fujian jiaoyu chubanshe). Thereafter, ten volumes were published steadily. But then we met resistance yet again, and had to seek another outlet. At that time, because we had established relatively close contacts with the Guangxi Normal University Press (Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe) through our monograph series at that press, we thought that the journal series could be maintained with stability there. But after two years (2020 and 2021) and publishing two issues (volumes 15 and 16) there, we met resistance yet again, and were informed by the press that it regretfully had no choice but to halt publication of the journal.

Even so, we continued steadily publishing the out-of-country international edition of *Rural China*. From the point of view of scholarship, the subject of rural China, where so many people still reside, is simply of undeniable importance for understanding the country. We also know, of course, that “rural China” is, relatively speaking, the poorer and more backward area of China, and is therefore, for some people concerned, seen as a “sensitive” subject that affects the “face” of the nation and the people. From a scholarly point of view, though, we know that multiple important strides have been made in recent years. For example, small-scale “new agriculture,” especially the production of high value-added vegetables in plastic-tented farms of 1, 3, or 5 mu, has come to account for more than one-third of the total cultivated area and two-thirds of the total output value of agriculture. To be sure, there still remain areas of relative backwardness and poverty, but those are aspects that we especially need to study and understand, the better to address and resolve them.

Even though we are not able at the moment to continue to publish *Zhongguo xiangcun yanjiu* inside China, we still persist in publishing *Rural China* outside of China. As scholars who are

particularly concerned with rural areas and rural studies, we believe that the weaker aspects of our subject are precisely what need to be studied and understood even more. Rural China and its people need precise and well-intentioned academic studies so that their actual conditions and special difficulties can be better understood and better dealt with.

These are the reasons why we originally focused on rural research and started the publication of *Zhongguo xiangcun yanjiu* in the first place. We of course are not trying either to beautify China against realities or to vilify it. This is the fundamental difference between scholarship and propaganda. To be sure, some people will remain more concerned about “face” and appearances rather than actual substance. But for us, rural China is the foundation of China and a subject we must come to know and understand accurately, and that of course includes the problems of a definite degree of poverty.

Even though the publishing environment in China is for now still rather inhospitable to rural research, that must not become our reason for abandoning such work. Quite the opposite. We need all the more to insist on accurate and grounded research. Otherwise, rural conditions, including both the progress and advancements therein, will be even less well understood and dealt with. We believe that it will not be long before China will come to face more squarely and directly the realities of rural China and its scholarly study. We also believe that the time will come when we can resume the publication of *Zhongguo xiangcun yanjiu* inside China. In the meantime, we will continue to publish the out-of-country bilingual English-Chinese journal *Rural China*, and look forward to the resumption of *Zhongguo xiangcun yanjiu* inside China. To us, rural China, as the basic foundation of China and the Chinese people, is an area of academic research that simply must not be neglected.

Under the present constraints of not being able to publish the journal simultaneously inside China, we can only publish for now high-quality Chinese articles in our out-of-country Scopus journal *Rural China*, while encouraging senior authors of the very best articles to produce or arrange for the production of an English version (and also assisting junior scholars of outstanding articles to produce an English version) for publication in our SSCI journal *Modern China*. Thus, given the cessation of publication of the journal's Chinese edition *Zhongguo xiangcun yanjiu*, in the last few years we have had to place in *Rural China* a higher proportion of Chinese articles and fewer English ones. This is a temporary condition that needs to be corrected. We continue to pursue every possibility of resuming the publication of our Chinese journal *Zhongguo xiangcun yanjiu* inside China, alongside our bilingual English-Chinese journal *Rural China* outside China.

### **The Multiple Meanings of “Rural China”**

We need to consider the fact that the term “rural” has today become one that is constantly changing in meaning, quite different from the realities that we originally focused on. To be sure, as a term used in juxtaposition against “urban,” it still conveys the clear and definite meaning of a focus on agriculture and rural villages. Yet, at the same time, rural people today have become in actuality ever more engaged in not just agriculture, but also simultaneously in industry and in commerce, thereby blurring the lines among those.

In terms of employment, perhaps “informal” as opposed to “formal” is the expression that is better able to capture today's realities. More and more rural people have become engaged in non-agricultural pursuits as “informal” or “semiformal” employees, without the rights required by labor law for “formal” “workers,” and many more as even more informal day or short-term laborers, in addition of course to those working as petty merchants and peddlers.

At the same time, we need to see that “informal work,” not just in the ruralities but also in the towns and cities, has now come to account for the majority of all “workers,” far exceeding the numbers of “formal workers.” In other words, what used to be fairly clear differences between the “rural” and the “urban” no longer serve today to distinguish between those working in agriculture and those in industry. Today, most “peasant” families have become engaged in both agriculture and non-agriculture, with some, mainly the elderly, in agriculture and others of the family in factory work or petty commerce. The lines between “rural” and “urban” and those between industry, agriculture, and commerce have become blurred. The majority of rural families now have members who are engaged in both farming and industry or both farming and commerce.

Under these conditions, perhaps “informal economy” is now a better term to use for the actual realities of work for the majority of urban and rural working families, and not the traditional terms that separated out clearly peasants, workers, and merchants, or the rural and the urban. The present-day reality is that the majority of Chinese laboring families are now in an “informal economy” that crosses the lines between agriculture and industry, no longer simply agricultural peasants as had been the case in the past.

Yet, we must not simply equate cities with the “formal economy” and villages with the informal economy. Today, “informal economy” has become the prevailing condition of employment not only of rural people working in the cities, but also of the majority of urban people working in the cities. The traditional labor laws aimed at only urban “workers” no longer apply to the majority of the people actually working in the cities. The new “informal workers” have in fact come to account for a high proportion of all laboring persons, and “the informal

economy” has become the dominant form of employment of the Chinese working people, whether countryside or city, agriculture or industry.

These objective realities no longer fit the original conception of “rural people” that had been the central concern of our journal. However, highlighting the new content of “rural research” under present conditions might actually be able to capture better the epochal social changes of the past several decades, and thereby bring out even more sharply the new realities of the “ruralities” today. We need to analyze and generalize systematically those new conditions. Even our original conception of the journal needs to be redefined to accord with the new realities.

### **Envisioning the New Journal**

To be sure, we had not anticipated the profound and epochal changes of both the ruralities and China as a whole in the past few decades. This is the weakness of our scholarly research. However, the very fact of those profound and fundamental changes can only bring even greater interest to the topic of “rural China.” Given the new realities that have gone far beyond our expectations, just what kind of a place has “rural China” become and will become in the future? By comparison with the older rural China that we knew, just what are the new realities of the present and future rural China? Just how are we to understand and conceptualize the realities of the new China? What will be the new directions of change in its future?

If the traditional divisions between “rural” and “urban” China no longer accord with new realities, what kinds of new generalizations and modes of thinking do we need to understand the past, present, and future of “rural China”? Needless to say, these are questions and issues that we who have long studied rural China cannot avoid. Only if we face up to the rather surprising and

unexpected new realities can we recognize the inadequacies of our earlier modes of thinking, and envision and create new approaches that can better capture the realities of the new rural China.

Unanticipated new changes should become our opportunity to reconceptualize. Perhaps, we have not in the past given sufficient attention to exogenous forces of change, and wittingly or unwittingly simply continued to study the ruralities qua ruralities. In earlier historical times, “ruralities” indeed approximated a self-perpetuating universe that saw little change. Villages did indeed seem to be something of a self-contained world that, with the exception of natural or human disasters (such as war), was unaffected by external factors. But today, external changes have become crucial forces that can determine the fate of the villages. We can no longer “discuss ruralities qua ruralities.”

Our journals *Zhongguo xiangcun yanjiu* and *Rural China* need thoroughgoing rethinking based on the new conditions. Today’s “rural China” is very different indeed from our earlier conceptions of rural China. We need to place “rural China” into a much broader field of vision, and give greater attention to the exogenous forces and influences of the state, as well as of society and economy as a whole. We need to study “rural China” and the “rural China problem” of our longstanding interest from new angles, including the construction of new concepts and terms that would enable us to better grasp and understand rural China’s present-day realities and prospective futures. Let this be the shared new goal of all of us who have long been concerned about rural China.

Author’s bio:

Philip C. C. Huang’s life-long studies of agriculture-peasants and the “informal economy” in five volumes (of which the “North China” and “Yangzi Delta” books are now in their sixth and seventh

editions, respectively), law and the justice system in four volumes, and the method and theory of “the social science of practice,” also in four volumes, have just been republished by the Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe in a complete set of 13 volumes.

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