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“A new consciousness of the countryside”? Elite ruralism in contemporary China

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses an elite form of ruralism in contemporary China. Using ethnographic material collected at two sustainable farming events, it introduces the intellectuals who organize these events as well as the urban residents who attend. Ruralism—the idea that ‘real’ China is found in the countryside, not the city—legitimates intellectuals’ narrative of Chinese nationhood as modern yet in touch with its cultural heritage and offers the promise of rediscovery and starting afresh to urban attendees, the majority of whom were born in the countryside. While elite ruralism sidesteps engaging rural residents and raises questions of representation, it also illuminates processes of demographic pluralization in the Chinese countryside, a trend observable elsewhere in Asia.

KEYWORDS

Affect; intellectuals; ruralism; urban-to-rural migration; China

Between December 2012 and June 2014, I conducted ethnographic research into an alternative food movement in Shanghai, China and the surrounding countryside. The group of independent organic farmers that were the focus of my research are urban-to-rural migrants who wish to alleviate food safety concerns in the city by providing healthier and safer organic food. They also aim to improve the experience of city living and Chinese modernity by modeling a number of practices derived from rural culture, such as DIY and self-sufficiency, for their urban customers to emulate. While these farmers are very independent and generally avoid engaging with other rural initiatives, many had previously attended at least one sustainable farming event organized by a group of Chinese intellectuals interested in the countryside.

I was curious about these events and decided to find out more. I discovered that Chinese intellectuals organize an extensive range of sustainable farming events throughout the year. These events take place across China’s eastern cities and provinces and include conferences, internships and placements on sustainable farms, training programs, and seminars and workshops. They cover a variety of sustainable farming approaches and topics including biodynamics and Demeter farming from Europe, community-supported agriculture from the US, natural farming from Japan, permaculture from Australia as well as more general sustainable farming topics and themes. As part of my research, I attended two of these events—a three-day conference in...
Shanghai and a week-long training program on the outskirts of Beijing—to understand who these intellectuals are, what their objectives regarding the countryside are, what happens at their events, who the attendees are as well as what kind of interaction takes place between intellectuals and attendees. Finally, I wanted to understand why the independent organic farmers I was researching were so lukewarm toward these events.

The intellectuals I met are affiliated with university departments, research centers and NGOs focused on rural development as well as government-supported model organic farms.1 Along with hundreds of others, I received some training and instruction concerning the practicalities of agriculture. I learned, for example, about plowing, raising seedlings, planting and watering as well as how to make natural fertilizers and pesticides. Intellectuals spent the majority of the time, however, discussing their ‘moral project’ concerning the countryside and what they repeatedly called “creating a new consciousness of the countryside” (kaichuang yige xinde nongcun yishi 开创一个新德农村意识).

In this article, I will examine this ‘moral project’ as well as what intellectuals mean when they say they want to “create a new consciousness of the countryside.” I argue that this is a slippery claim that conceals as much as it reveals. On the one hand, intellectuals seek to foster feeling, empathy and sentiment toward the countryside among event attendees. This is part of a broader goal to promote and nurture a national narrative which represents China as a modern nation that retains core aspects of its cultural essence. This cultural essence, intellectuals claim, is rural in nature and is encapsulated in the term ruralism. Ruralism, as Hans Steinmüller (2011, 223) defines it, is the idea “through which ‘China’ is associated with ‘rural society’ in general and the peasant house and the peasant family in particular.” Ruralism, in short, is the idea that ‘real’ China is found in the countryside, not the city.

This is not the first time Chinese intellectuals have promoted some form of ruralism. In the first half of the twentieth century, for example, intellectuals associated with the Rural Reconstruction movement believed the root cause of social suffering across China was an underdeveloped and underappreciated rural population (Hale 2013). These intellectuals tried to develop precedents and solutions that took into account China’s vast rural population and influence the Nationalist leadership as they mapped out China’s modernization plan. Kate Merkel-Hess (2016) argues that these intellectuals were focused on transforming rural residents into new modern subjects; they developed initiatives to improve literacy in the countryside as well as mobilize rural residents into farming collectives. Margherita Zanasi (2004) traces how the idea of “rural modernity” was conceptualized among some of these intellectuals as they tried to forge alternative paths to progress. Similarly noting that the great majority of Chinese lived in the countryside and engaged in agriculture, these intellectuals wanted to develop light industry in the countryside, a solution that contrasted heavily with top down planning approaches that relied on industrialization and heavy industry. Although many of these earlier efforts were not entirely successful, Chinese intellectuals today remain engaged with questions of rural development and the narrative of ruralism.
The version of ruralism I encountered, however, was elitist. The intellectuals I met were not interested in transforming rural residents. Instead, they want to import cultural capital from the city by encouraging attendees at their events to establish their own small-scale sustainable farms in the countryside. The significance of this becomes clear when I point out that most attendees at intellectuals’ events are urban citizens (i.e. they possess an urban household registration, called *hukou* 户口 and discussed below). These attendees ranged in age from the early 20s through to adults in their 40s and sometimes in their 50s. Most had university education. As this shows, they possess significant cultural—and often economic—capital that rural residents do not have.

There is another reason why intellectuals find these attendees attractive. Equally important is the fact that many were born in the countryside and previously held a rural or county household registration. They attained their urban registration later in life through education, employment or marriage. The older attendees subsequently lived and worked in the city for many years, often more than a decade. Many never forgot their rural roots, however, and retained an appreciation and empathy, even if slight, for their hometowns and for the countryside. In this way, a rural ethos simmered in urban China for many years. Moreover, attendees’ attitude toward the city is of interest. Although there is limited scholarship on urban-to-rural migration in contemporary China (though see Ning 2017; Qian et al. 2013), a key finding is the belief held by migrants that life in the city is spoiled in some way; relationships are calculative and based on personal interest, institutions are immoral and driven by profit, necessities like food and medicine are of dubious quality, the air is polluted, and so on. The urban attendees I met hold similar beliefs. As one pithily put it, “I don’t want to live in the city anymore. People are selfish while the air and food is terrible.” Attendees also feel the city does not provide appropriate spaces for reflection and introspection while the countryside does.

These sustainable farming events can thus be conceptualized as spaces where intellectuals and urban residents with rural backgrounds come together to realize various imaginaries concerning the role the countryside should play in narratives of nationhood in contemporary China. In such an environment, the performance of emotion and affect is important. Here, I follow Sara Ahmed’s (2004) reasoning concerning the relationship between emotions, spaces and communities. Emotions, Ahmed says, can “align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments”; they may “mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective” (119). At the sustainable farming events I attended, I observed both intellectuals and attendees enact a performance infused with emotion and affect concerning what they believe is the right thing to do when it comes to the countryside. Specifically, intellectuals believe their advocacy for the countryside is the right thing to do because it supports a narrative of nationhood that combines modernization and a cultural essence founded on ruralism. Attendees, meanwhile, believe their (re)engagement with the countryside is the right thing to do because they can channel their rural ethos into something meaningful which is difficult to do in the city.
It is through these performances that intellectuals and attendees make their moral obligations, or conscience, to the countryside known to each other. Among English speakers, the term “conscience” usually refers to an internal acknowledgement concerning the moral quality of one’s motives and actions. While people may say things like “my conscience told me to do so-and-so” if pressed, ordinarily one does not habitually express let alone perform one’s conscience. This is not always the case in China. The most appropriate translation of “conscience” into Chinese is liangxin (良心). Liangxin has a complicated and nuanced meaning. Ellen Oxfeld (2010) explains that liang means “good” or “virtuous.” Xin, which is usually translated as “heart”, actually refers to both “heart” and “mind” and is more correctly translated as “heart/mind.” Given this more complex meaning, xin does not distinguish between reason and emotion; actions that are rational and mechanical can be infused with emotion. While liangxin is used in several ways in China today, my interest is when it is used to refer to someone who remembers being helped in the past and repays with gratitude and sentiment in the present. Extending this to intellectuals and attendees, both have a rural ‘past’ that they are ‘grateful’ for today. For intellectuals, the legacy of ruralism provides them with significant legitimacy and they thus have an interest in ensuring the continuity of this narrative. For attendees, quite simply, it is their birthplace. Finally, as I will illustrate below, while sustainable farming events provide the space for intellectuals and attendees to make their conscience known, the linguistic device of “creating a new consciousness of the countryside”—and specifically the word for “consciousness”, or yishi (意识)—frames these performances.

In the remainder of this article, I first provide some important background concerning the political economy of rural development in China since the Mao era (1949–1976) and the role of Chinese intellectuals. I then turn to my ethnographic material and discuss the two sustainable farming events I attended. The first of these is a conference in Shanghai where intellectuals introduced the “new consciousness of the countryside”; the second is a training program on the outskirts of Beijing where attendees internalized the “new consciousness.” In exploring the dynamics at these two events, I pay attention to how each party performs their conscience (liangxin) and expresses the new consciousness (yishi). Two key findings emerge. First, rural residents lack representation. Secondly, these events seek to pluralize the countryside’s demographics. These findings point to a need to further understand the dynamics, interactions and relationships, and structures of power between rural residents and the new group of urban-to-rural migrants in these pluralized rural spaces.

The political economy of rural development and role of Chinese intellectuals

Prior to coming to power in 1949, experiences living in the countryside and working with peasants made Mao Zedong and other Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders sympathetic toward their plight as well as excited by their revolutionary potential. Indeed, many peasants were subsequently recruited into the CCP and the countryside played a central role in CCP ideology during the Mao era. Today, the image of the peasant and the countryside retains ideological power. In this article, however, I wish
to focus on CCP policies that actually favored the city over the countryside. One of the most significant of these was the household registration system, or *hukou*, which classified households and individual citizens by place of residence (urban or rural) and occupation (agricultural or non-agricultural). *Hukou* status is passed from parents to children, first from the mother and after 1998 from either parent. Throughout the Mao era, Chinese in the city held an urban *hukou* and were typically employed in work-units that were subsidized by the state. Work-units provided a complete material and moral existence for members. Rural residents, by contract, were funneled into farming collectives. These collectives did not receive state subsidies and had to sell their crops at low prices to the state, which in turn siphoned them off to urban work-units. A sense of urban superiority emerged.

Over the past several decades, both urban work-units and rural collectives have largely disappeared and mobility throughout China has increased. In the city, reform and the dismantling of work-units has been painful for many. This was especially the case in the 1990s when Premier Zhu Rongji accelerated the downsizing of the state sector and many employees were laid off. Today, while some jobs requiring vocational education are still allocated by the state, the majority of employment in the city is allocated through a competitive labor market. The development of China’s rural economy has also been difficult. In one of his first acts, Deng Xiaoping established the Household Responsibility System in 1978, which involved the decollectivization of land and the granting of land use rights, but not ownership, to individual rural households. Many farmers began to sell surplus crops on the market for the first time to generate additional income.

Since then, national policies concerning rural development have been uneven. Moreover, provincial and county level officials do not always heed the advice of cadres in Beijing nor interpret and implement national policies as intended. Further complicating matters, millions of rural residents have migrated to the city for employment, leaving agricultural work in the hands of fewer farmers. Today, significant inequality exists between urban and rural China. Education and employment options are considerably greater in the city where incomes are at least double those in rural areas (Sicular et al. 2010). Access to quality healthcare is much harder for rural residents and their life expectancy, according to one study, is at least five years shorter than that of urbanites (Li and Dorsten 2010).

Where do Chinese intellectuals fit into the political economy of rural development? First, let me clarify that I follow Baogang He’s (2004, 263) definition of an intellectual: “An intellectual commands knowledge and cultural symbols, uses reason, and is not limited in his [or her] thinking by family, class, or locality.” Thus, Chinese intellectuals may be academics and scholars, writers, poets, journalists and artists, though they may also be leaders of think-tanks, NGOs and other similar institutions. Moreover, while many Chinese intellectuals entered business and commerce throughout the reform era, some considerably so (Fu 1993), many believe they have an important role to play in shaping social life through the power of their intellectual labor (Davies 2001). Similar to other nations, many intellectuals in China are motivated by patriotic concerns and the future of the Chinese nation. Timothy Cheek (2015, 357) locates the origin of this sentiment at the beginning of the twentieth century; just when modern
China was emerging, a concern to “identify, preserve, and perfect this new thing—China: nation-state, society, and personal identity” developed from the rubble of the fallen Qing dynasty. Exactly how and what roles the countryside and the city were to play in these imaginaries became central to subsequent debates.

In the 2000s, a powerful rural development discourse emerged. The “Three Rural Problems” discourse, or San Nong Wenti (三农问题, usually shortened to San Nong), as it is called, entered intellectual and political debates following a letter written by Li Changping, a government official from Hubei province, to then-Premier Zhu Rongji. Li wanted to capture Beijing’s attention by highlighting what he saw as the plight of rural China and Chinese peasants in powerful and impressionable language. According to Li, “the peasants’ lot is really bitter, the countryside is really poor, and agriculture is in crisis” (Day 2013, 6). A key factor was agriculture’s declining contribution to national and local income. The impact of Li’s letter should not be underestimated; it provided a narrative to frame numerous topics and debates concerning rural development and rural residents. Lei Guang (2010) points out that the San Nong discourse subsequently found its way into numerous official documents, including several No. 1 Directive Documents (the CCP’s first document each year that outlines key policy priorities), as well as official newspapers, such as the People’s Daily, which published over 1000 articles about San Nong in 2004 alone.

It is worthwhile to briefly contextualize San Nong within the political and intellectual climate that existed at the time and still does to some extent today. While I am simplifying a more complex reality, it suffices to note two broad camps: the liberal camp (ziyoupai 自由派) and the new-left camp (xinzuopai 新左派). Liberals are generally positive about marketization and believe that China’s current development problems, including inequality and social injustice emerging throughout four decades of reform, can be solved by letting the market play a significant role (Hu et al. 2011). New-left intellectuals, on the other hand, critique such an unfettered relationship between the market and society, and argue that excessive and speedy reforms are the cause of China’s contemporary problems (Davies 2001). They believe significant segments of the population—specifically peasants, rural migrants and laid-off urban workers—are subject to institutional and social discrimination and lack the means to improve their livelihoods.

While many intellectuals sit between these two poles and seek to balance market and state initiatives regarding rural policy, those who organized the sustainable farming events I attended—who are only one group of intellectuals involved in rural development among many others—are slightly skewed toward the new-left camp. They do, however, identify with the New Rural Reconstruction movement (NRR), a large network of pro-rural and pro-peasant activists that emerged in the early 2000s who are sympathetic to the Rural Reconstruction movement of the early twentieth century, described above. Matthew Hale (2013) describes the NRR as follows:

What I call “NRR” is a diverse network involving thousands of people and hundreds of organizations (NGOs, peasant organizations, academic institutions, student groups, ‘social enterprises’, and a few state agencies), loosely united by the goals of reversing the rural-to-urban flow of resources and (re)constructing sustainable, self-sufficient communities based on cooperation among peasant households, supported by agroecological skill-sharing and alternative marketing (53).
As Hale points out, NRR activists originally sought rural self-sufficiency; they wanted to shield peasant communities from the urban market through comprehensive rural cooperatives that included both agricultural and industrial production along with social and cultural activities. Yet this has been difficult to achieve. Hale highlights this difficulty by showing how some rural cooperatives integrated themselves into capitalist processes to survive. In other words, they serve the urban market. Moreover, Alexander Day and Mindi Schneider (2017; see also Zhang and Donaldson 2008) show that while the government was willing to experiment with rural initiatives in the 2000s and early 2010s, policies today favor urbanization and agricultural industrialization. The latter is achieved via large agricultural organizations called Dragon Head enterprises (长头企业) that facilitate vertical integration of rural agricultural households into the urban market through various types of contractual arrangements.

In order to remain engaged with rural development initiatives while accommodating the political environment, some projects initiated by the intellectuals I met mobilize rural residents in the countryside into sustainable farming communities that serve the urban market. Their logic appears to be as follows: if rural farmers are going to be vertically integrated into urban markets, it is better to be integrated through sustainable forms of agriculture because this is (hopefully) more sympathetic to the farmer and their community.

However, intellectuals also have other plans. One intellectual I met, from Beijing’s prestigious Tsinghua University, explained as follows:

Our organic food network goes beyond basic farmers’ markets and rustic hotels and restaurants. We want to create a new consciousness of the countryside by building a strong platform that connects urbanites with the countryside.

In these remarks, the professor differentiates his organic farming network from rustic hotels and restaurants, known in Chinese as nongjiale (农家乐). Nongjiale were originally rural homesteads on the fringes of China’s larger metropolitan centers that provided home-cooked country-style meals to visiting urbanites as a way to generate extra income. As Choong-Hwan Park (2014) argues, the courtyard design of many nongjiale offers a nostalgic retreat for urbanites as most traditional courtyards in the city (called siheyuan 四合院) have been demolished.

On the other hand, however, nongjiale owners have departed from their original format over time and now embrace urban consumerism. Xu Wu (2014; see also Chio 2013) discovered that hosts deliberately adopt and exaggerate stereotypical rural traits and avoid offering traditional foods that urbanites consider off-putting. Today, rustic hotels and restaurants have proliferated and stage their authenticity to urbanites. They may provide facilities for parking, comfortable accommodation, and games and recreation as well as the chance to pick fruit and vegetables or even catch fish in ponds. Many cater to increasingly large numbers of guests who arrive by the busload. In short, they are large and successful commercial businesses selling rurality. The Tsinghua University professor, by contrast, is advocating something different. But what exactly is he advocating? What does he mean when he says “a strong platform that connects urbanites with the countryside”? What roles are given to rural and urban residents in these arrangements? Let us turn to this topic.
**Yishi: a new consciousness of the countryside?**

I stated above that intellectuals employ the term “consciousness” to frame and guide the performance of conscience at their sustainable farming events. I repeatedly heard intellectuals say they want to “create a new consciousness of the countryside.” Sometimes, this was simply articulated as “a new consciousness”; at other times they just used the word “consciousness.” The Chinese word they used is *yishi* (意识). As a verb, *yishi* means “be conscious or aware of; awake to; realize” and is often followed by the characters *daole* (到了) to indicate a state of becoming or actualization, such as “she realized” or “she became conscious of” (*ta yishi daole* 她意识到了).

Intellectuals’ “new consciousness of the countryside” first and foremost celebrates the romantic narrative of ruralism and the idea that ‘real’ China is found in the countryside. One intellectual made this point using a strange analogy, perhaps chosen for its urban-centric and consumerist logic:

> Caffeine is the essence of coffee, yes? So, decaffeinated coffee is not ‘real’ coffee, right? Likewise, agriculture is the essence of China’s cultural, economic, environmental and social wellbeing. A China without agriculture is a China that has lost its essence and lost its way. We can’t let that happen, it would be a disaster.

The idea that ‘real’ China is found in the countryside and not in the city is a discursive construct formed in the first half of the twentieth century. Xin Liu (2002) points out that while earlier writings about China did not necessarily distinguish between the city and the countryside (and if they did, the city was often the focus, as is the case in Marco Polo’s *The Travels*), the village household was identified as the prime unit of analysis when scholars sought to understand exactly ‘where’ modern China was emerging from.

Anthropologists were among the chief architects of this discursive construct, including one of China’s most prominent, Fei Xiaotong (1910–2005). Fei (1992 [1948]) maintained that farming connects the Chinese farmer to the soil, leading to a certain level of immobility. This immobility, however, is not a sign of parochialism or backwardness. It is, rather, the bedrock of many of Chinese culture’s most distinguishing features, including, as Fei termed it, the “differential mode of association” (*chaxu geju* 差序格局). This concept explains how Chinese individuals form relationships based on relational ethics and a sense of obligation and reciprocity. Fei used the metaphor of how ripples emanating from many points on the water’s surface interact to bind individuals together. Fei argues that the differential mode of association is distinct from how relationships form in the West which, he says, are bound by group membership and codes of conduct. He called this the “organizational mode of association” (*tuanti geju* 团体格局) and used the analogy of bundles of straw. Intellectuals I met frequently drew upon Fei’s work and ideas. One intellectual, for example, shared her view that peasants are defined by their ability to “work hard [qinlao 勤劳], be kind-hearted [shanliang 善良] and be simple [pusu 朴素].”

One might expect that intellectuals’ “new consciousness of the countryside,” advocacy of ruralism and interest in Fei’s ideas would encourage them to focus on peasant livelihoods. At the sustainable farming events I attended, this was not the case. Instead, intellectuals advocated for an elite form of ruralism and encouraged urban
attendees with rural backgrounds to move back to the countryside, establish sustainable farming initiatives and presumably hire rural residents to work for them.

*Introducing the “new consciousness of the countryside” and three new rural ‘problems’*

I attended the Fifth National Community-Supported Agriculture & Organic Agriculture Experience Sharing Conference (hereafter ‘the conference’) in November 2013 at Tongji University in Shanghai. We spent the first two days inside the campus attending a series of lectures, seminars and workshops. On the third day, we took a road trip to Chongming Island, east of Shanghai city and part of the municipality, to visit a number of sustainable farms. In what follows, I focus on intellectuals, examining how they pay homage to the narrative of ruralism and make their moral obligations known.

An annual event since 2009, up until the year I attended the conference had represented the broad views and objectives of both the NRR movement and new-left intellectuals. It had heavily promoted the “Three Rural Problems” (*San Nong*) narrative and political discourse and its key objective was to educate attendees with facts concerning the bleak plight of rural communities. Conference organizers took a different approach in 2013 by adjusting their tonality and incorporating a call to action. While the *San Nong* narrative remained important, intellectuals organizing the 2013 conference decided that its conceptualization of the countryside as bitter, poor and in crisis was not appealing to attendees.

Intellectuals came up with a new motto: The “New Three Rural Problems” (*Xin San Nong* 新三农 for short). It took me some time to appreciate what this meant. At first, I thought it referred to three *more, or additional*, problems in rural China, on top of the existing ones. *Xin San Nong*, however, aims to offer a more positive and attractive conceptualization of the countryside and of rural farmers for urban attendees. Rather than evoke the language of cadre Li, the conference handbook describes *Xin San Nong* as “Safe agriculture, cooperative peasants and stable villages.” Safe (*anquan* 安全), cooperative (*hezuo* 合作) and stable (*wending* 稳定) are interesting words to include in a conceptualization of the countryside. I interrogated as many intellectuals as I could to learn why these words were selected. I discovered that “safe” was selected as the adjective for “agriculture” to counter food safety concerns that were extremely topical at the time (*Si* et al. 2017; *Yan* 2012; *Yang* 2013). “Cooperative” and “stable” were selected because they suggest that rural residents are consistent and reliable. In short, while “safe agriculture” counters food safety concerns, “cooperative peasants and stable villages” counters the view that rural residents are trouble-makers.

Why would urbanites think rural residents are trouble-makers? Self-governance has been promoted throughout China’s rural areas for several decades. Elected village officials attend to local affairs and disputes while a Party member oversees everything. However, despite their rural background, many urban attendees were shielded from farm work and other aspects of rural culture when growing up so they could focus on their studies. Today, therefore, they are more familiar with life in the city where a different perspective toward rural residents and their ability to self-govern exists. As Luigi Tomba (2014) discusses in his study of urban neighborhood politics, the topic of
Self-governance is highly visible throughout urban China at the level of neighborhood dynamics and the hierarchical segmentation of residential communities (xiaoqu 小区) and homeowner associations (yeyu weiyuanhui 业主委员会). At one end of the spectrum are residential complexes comprising the upper echelons of the middle-classes who are capable of governing themselves. They independently form homeowner associations to manage various aspects of community life and local governments view them as responsible, of little threat to social order and see little need to intervene. At the other end of the spectrum are residential arrangements where rural migrants and laid-off state workers reside. Local authorities deem these residents as lacking the ability to govern themselves. As a consequence, their residential areas are managed much more closely.

With a stroke of the pen, intellectuals at the 2013 conference paired the romantic narrative of Chinese ruralism with an image of the rural population as obedient and reliable. I interpret this as an intentional act to change how attendees view the countryside and rural residents. The original “Three Rural Problems” depicted the countryside as somewhere in need of help; bitterness, poverty and crisis are problems that demand attention and action. Intellectuals’ “New Three Rural Problems,” by contrast, does not suggest there are any problems at all. In fact, “safe,” “cooperative,” and “stable” are benefits. But benefits for whom? The conference handbook clarifies with a call to action:

The “Three Rural Problems” (San Nong) was regarded as the paramount social issue to be tackled by the Central Government a decade ago. Now we are at a new starting point. With the Central Government’s continued financial support for agriculture, rural facilities and infrastructure, rural communities are greatly improved. Furthermore, there is an increasing trend of middle-class urban citizens opting for a greener life and moving to the countryside to establish sustainable agriculture farms. Rather than relying solely on the government, the contribution of the middle-classes has witnessed a more diversified source of investment into agriculture and rural communities.

Intellectuals are clearly enticing urban attendees to establish their own sustainable farms in the countryside. In this process, they render rural residents as docile bodies willing and able to work for urban-to-rural migrants new to agriculture. Professor Lou Yongqi, the Dean of Tongji University’s College of Design, discussed how scattered experimental and small-scale sustainable farms can benefit the countryside. He explained: “Design is no longer concerned with merely creating products. Instead, it is concerned with influencing behavior.” Drawing on the etymology of the characters that make up the Chinese word for design (sheji 设计), Lou stressed their literal meaning: “to set up” (she) a “strategy” (ji). Lou explained how attendees can “redesign the relationship between two different groups of people”—into what arguably amounts to urban superiority and rural inferiority—with experimental sustainable farms.

Lou spent much time outlining the qualities individuals setting up sustainable farms in the countryside require. Despite an improvement in rural facilities, infrastructure and communities outlined in the conference handbook, Lou made it clear that rural residents still lack an appropriate consciousness of the countryside. He explained that the emptying out of villages as migrants move to the cities in search of work means uncouth locals remain. Even returning rural residents, he said, do not have the right consciousness; they only like things that are “big” (da 大) but do not understand what
“quality” (pinzhi 品质) is. In a remarkable presentation, Lou looked back in time and celebrated the relationship between intellectuals, the countryside and the cultivation of character. In doing so, he explicitly drew on the imperial era practice whereby elite urban Chinese invested their money in agricultural land and visited the countryside for contemplative reflection. A popular saying at the time, for example, was as follows: “Get rich with the incidental [that is, commerce], but keep your wealth with the fundamental [that is, farmland]” (Lu 2010, 36). Lou is implying that only educated urbanites who have the requisite education and taste—i.e. the ‘correct’ consciousness of the countryside—can nurture a Chinese modernity in touch with its cultural heritage. Rural residents cannot; they are relegated to working on these new farms.

**Internalizing the “new consciousness of the countryside”**

In March 2014, I attended the Third National Community-Supported Agriculture & Family Farm Training Program (hereafter, ‘the training’), with approximately 40 other students. At the training were several familiar faces I met at the conference in Shanghai. Held on the outskirts of Beijing—between the northwest Fifth and Sixth Ring Roads, not quite the countryside but close—the training was a week-long program organized by Rural Reconstruction Centers from Renmin University in Beijing and Southwest University in Chongqing. In what follows, I focus on how conditions at the training mimicked rural culture and how this facilitated attendees to pay homage to their rural heritage and make their moral obligations known.

Arriving on Sunday evening, I sensed it would be a tough week, physically and mentally. No sooner had we located our dormitories and bunks—six to a dirty room, males and females separated—than we were summoned to the common area. Teacher Pan from Southwest University began by letting us know, “Conditions at this training and in this venue will be tough. It is a very good preparation for you for the countryside and farm life.” We were split into five work-teams, which rotated on a daily basis throughout the week. Four of these teams were the labor team (laodong dui 劳动队), discipline team (jilu duì 纪律队), study team (xuexi dui 学习队) and culture team (wenhua dui 文化队). The labor team prepared the daily meals and cleaned the bathrooms and toilets; the discipline team ensured students rose on time each morning, were punctual for lectures and classes and generally well behaved; while the study team summarized the previous day’s learnings each morning. Attendees attended to their duties with enthusiasm and gusto.

The culture team led sing-alongs each day, both in the morning before classes began and after lunch before they resumed. Songs were selected from a thick pocket-sized book full of rural Chinese folksongs that was passed around throughout the training. These songs celebrate both the romantic and idyllic pleasures of the countryside as well as the hard and bitter reality of farm work. One day we sang *The Twenty-Four Solar Seasons Song* (Ershisi Jieqi Ge 二四节气歌), which celebrates the 24 lunar seasons in the agriculture cycle. Another song we sang was *The Farmer’s Song* (Nongfu Ge 农夫歌). There are many versions of this song and the lyrics of the version we sang are as follows:
Wearing ragged cotton clothes  
Eating country-style food  
A pipe and tobacco bag hanging on my hip  
A grass hat on my head  
With my farming tools, I toil all day in the fields  
Enduring the bitter cold and chilling wind, my achievements are higher than the sky  
When the day is over, I submit my quota of grain  
After I hand this over  
I can relax  
Officials, workers, businesspeople, soldiers; they all look down upon us, all look down upon us  
But without peasants, how could they survive?  
But without peasants, how could they survive?

Attendees took pleasure singing and emphasizing the contrasts between the idyllic and the bitter in rural life. Everyone employed different singing intensities to juxtapose lines such as “Eating country-style food” and “A pipe and tobacco bag hanging on my hip” with “Enduring the bitter cold and chilling wind.” The repetition of the last line was especially significant and it received additional vocal intensity.

Members of the fifth work-team undertook public self-assessments each day, sharing their background as well as motivations for pursuing sustainable farming projects and engagement with rural China. While self-assessments are a common pedagogical practice found in political, educational and commercial environments throughout China (Bakken 2000), at the training they were key opportunities for attendees to make their moral obligations toward the countryside known. Let me share one example. Guyao, a university graduate in his mid-20s, delivered a self-assessment one morning. He told the story about a recent visit he took to his home village in rural Yunnan province after years away at university. Once back in his village, he was unable to find any of the original corn varieties he remembers from his childhood. This made him “extremely sad” because the quality of corn his hometown grew was popular and well known. Nowadays, Guyao lamented, farmers plant genetically-modified corn. This troubled Guyao, though he was originally unsure how to articulate and contextualize this feeling and, more importantly, what to do about it. Guyao said that when he arrived at the training and spoke with others, he fully realized (he used the words “yishi daole”) that what villagers in his hometown did is “completely wrong” (wanquan budui 完全不对) and he will return home to (re)teach the villagers how to farm organic corn. It is interesting to see that Guyao similarly feels rural residents do not possess the ‘correct’ consciousness of the countryside.

Pluralizing the countryside and the politics of representation

In this article, I have examined a space and linguistic code that enables different segments of Chinese society to demonstrate gratitude toward various kinds of rural ‘pasts’ in order to remake the present and imagine the future. I explored how intellectuals and urban residents with rural backgrounds come together at sustainable farming events to give their conscience (liangxin) toward the countryside performative features. Moreover, the language of “creating a new consciousness of the countryside” provides these performances with a sense of novelty, exclusivity and elitism that distinguishes intellectuals and attendees from rural residents. Specifically, narratives of ruralism
provide intellectuals legitimacy while enabling them to remain engaged with the idea that something essential to Chinese identity is located in the countryside. Meanwhile, urban residents with rural backgrounds and cultural capital find intellectuals’ events an appropriate forum to re-engage with the countryside because they feel alienated in the city.

The elitism attached to this version of ruralism is puzzling. Intellectuals’ “new consciousness of the countryside” is also somewhat problematic. Viewed in isolation, not only are rural residents not represented at these events, intellectuals and attendees overtly voice significant reservations as to whether they are even capable of representing the countryside at all. This was most clearly illustrated in Lou Yongqi’s presentation but also evident in Gu Yao’s self-assessment. Tellingly, this elitism is not the reason the independent organic farmers I was researching dismissed intellectuals’ events. They were unhappy because intellectuals promoted government-supported model organic farms rather than, in their opinion, simpler and more easily replicable farms. In fact, independent organic farmers can also be contemptuous of rural residents at times.

However, things are not so black and white. Many intellectuals I met also engage in other initiatives in the countryside that focus on community development. These initiatives may or may not link rural communities with the urban market. Moreover, Wen Tiejun, an agrarian economist and Dean of the School of Agricultural and Rural Development at Renmin University, visited the training and spent three hours talking with attendees. Recognized as one of the key individuals who helped bring the “rural crisis” into intellectual and political discourse (Day 2013), Wen argues that policymakers need a far more comprehensive understanding of peasant culture. Wen’s visit shows that attendees were exposed to rural residents’ concerns, even if only rudimentarily.

Nonetheless, these sustainable farming events are indicative of efforts to pluralize the Chinese countryside’s demographics. The conference handbook, quoted above, makes the point explicitly:

...there is an increasing trend of middle-class urban citizens opting for a greener life and moving to the countryside to establish sustainable agriculture farms. Rather than relying solely on the government, the contribution of the middle-classes has witnessed a more diversified source of investment into agriculture and rural communities (my emphasis).

Similar trends exist elsewhere across East Asia. In South Korea, for example, over 32,000 households moved from the city back to the countryside in 2013, up from 880 households in 2001 (Park and Choi 2014). These urban-to-rural migrants include retirees as well as younger people seeking greener lifestyles. Korean scholars conclude that pull factors from the countryside drive this trend. My research, however, shows that push factors from the city—both intellectuals’ efforts and attendees’ sense of alienation—are important.

Scholarship on urban-to-rural migration among urban residents, as opposed to returning rural residents, in China is still in its infancy and it is difficult to say what the future will hold. Monitoring this trend is therefore important. Specifically, more research is needed to understand the dynamics of a ‘pluralized’ countryside. Extant research illustrates that clear boundaries and tensions exist between rural residents and new migrants—and also visitors—from the city (Park 2014; Qian et al. 2013;
Si et al. 2015). Moreover, this article suggests that unequal relationships favoring migrants from the city are likely. Nonetheless, my broader research project about independent organic farmers—urban residents now in the countryside and new to agriculture—shows a more complex situation (Cody forthcoming). Here, interactions, relationships and power dynamics are multifaceted as independent organic farmers adopt, change or reinvent rural culture depending on the role rural residents have on their farms. By continuing to examine the contested and evolving nature of rural space and its populations in China, not only can we generate a deeper understanding of ruralism—in all its varieties—and its place in contemporary narratives, we can also identify exactly what it is that makes the Chinese countryside an attractive place to live for whoever wishes to while explicating underlying power dynamics.

Endnotes
1. Government-supported model organic farms (mofan youji nongchang 模范有机农场) are functional farms, although they are heavily used as sites for instruction and showcasing sustainable farming techniques and related business models to visitors (especially officials from other jurisdictions). They are pet projects of local government officials keen to promote sustainability and green-living concepts.
2. In adopting affect as an analytical concept in this article, I follow other scholars in that rather than define affect—a notoriously difficult task—I focus on what it does and how it works, an approach that lends itself to ethnographic inquiry (see Yang (2014) for a good summary of the scholarship on affect).
4. The English version of the conference handbook translated “stable” (wending 稳定) as “harmonious,” which I have corrected in this article.
5. My thanks to Yonjae Park at Australian National University for help in understanding the situation in South Korea.

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