

Translocal family reproduction and agrarian change in China:

A new analytical framework

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Abstract

This paper advances a new framework for analysing agrarian change in rural China and elsewhere in developing Asia, which centres on translocal family reproduction. The framework highlights the crucial connections between rural families' translocal strategies for meeting reproductive, especially care needs, their changing aspirations for reproduction, and other aspects of agrarian change, including de-peasantization, de-agrarianization and social differentiation. In developing this framework, the paper refers to a village case study in central China, and draws on a critique of the 'livelihoods perspective' on agrarian change, and approaches focusing on 'global householding,' and the cultural reproduction of class and gender.

Key words: rural China; labour migration; family reproduction; agrarian change; care work

Introduction

In the early 1980s, most Chinese villagers belonged to a ‘peasant’ class, characterized by limited market participation and reliance on small landholdings and unwaged family farming labour for subsistence and reproduction (Sargeson 2016, 385). Since then, however, the rural population has experienced tremendous agrarian change, including partial de-agrarianization and proletarianization; increased class differentiation and a near-disappearance of the peasant class; and shifts in intra-family gender and intergenerational relationships, divisions of labour and inequalities. This paper advances a new framework for analysing this agrarian change, which centres on social reproduction, specifically, translocal family reproduction.

As elsewhere in developing Asia, much of the agrarian change that has occurred in contemporary China has resulted from a rural response to the challenges and opportunities of capitalism that entails splitting the family, with some members migrating out in search of waged employment, while others continue to farm and care for dependants.¹ According to official statistics, the total rural population numbered 619 million in 2014 (NBS 2015a, 16). Of these, 44 percent (274 million) were ‘rural migrant labourers’ (*nongmingong*), defined as those engaged in local non-agricultural employment or in employment outside their registered home township for at least six months in the year. About 65 percent of rural migrant labourers were male, and 79 percent were aged 21-50 years. One hundred and sixty eight million rural migrant labourers (61 percent of the total) worked outside their home township, including 79 million who moved to another province. However, most of those

¹ In China today, agrarian change is being driven primarily by either rural outmigration or dispossession resulting from the expropriation of land (or both at once). This paper draws on a case study from central China, where rates of rural outmigration are particularly high, and in most villages, outmigration is the key driver of agrarian change. For a study of agrarian change driven by the expropriation of land, which is more common in peri-urban areas and the highly urbanized east, see Sargeson (2013).

moving outside their home township did so alone. Only 21 percent were accompanied by family members (NBS 2015b).

Scholars have noted that the practice of keeping one foot on the family farm, while also engaging in migrant waged labour, has advantages for the reproduction of both rural families and capital. For rural families, continued maintenance of a small landholding provides food security, care for dependants, and a fallback position for those who can no longer earn an income in the city due, for example, to economic downturn or their own injury, illness or old age. Meanwhile, the small family farm subsidizes capitalist profits by guaranteeing the cheap reproduction of a ‘reserve army of labour’ for the industrial and service sectors of China’s developing urban economy (Wen 2012; Chuang 2015, 2-4). However, beyond brief mentions of this point, there has been strikingly little attention to social reproduction in the literature on rural political economies and agrarian change in China, or indeed elsewhere in Asia.² This paper seeks to address this lacuna.

For Marxist political economists, ‘social reproduction’ traditionally refers to the perpetuation of a capitalist mode of production, especially the reproduction of industrial workers’ labour power and of class inequalities between capitalists and the proletariat. In comparison, in early feminist debates about social reproduction between the 1960s and 1980s, the term referred to the maintenance of existing life and reproduction of the next generation, achieved primarily through women’s unpaid care work and associated ‘domestic’ tasks, the chief concern being with institutions that maintain patriarchy and gender inequalities, as well as capitalism and class inequalities (Bakker and Silvey 2008, 2).

² Two partial exceptions, Zhang and Locke (2010) and Chuang (2015), discuss the relationship between gender, migration and household strategies for reproduction. However, neither explicitly addresses agrarian change.

In the last two decades, there has been renewed interest in ‘social reproduction’ among feminist theorists, who broaden earlier Marxist and feminist understandings of the term, characterizing it as ‘the fleshy, messy, and indeterminate stuff of everyday life’ (Katz 2001, 711); the material social practices through which people reproduce themselves on a daily and generational basis and through which the social relations and material bases of capitalism are renewed (Katz 2001, 709). These scholars draw attention to the emergence of new, translocal social relations and modes of reproductive work as being crucial for understanding contemporary developments in global capitalism (Katz 2001; Bakker and Silvey 2008).

Building on these recent feminist theorizations, I understand social reproduction as encompassing four, interrelated aspects of modern, everyday life: biological reproduction through childbirth and child rearing; the reproduction of humans, through socialization and education as well as the provision of food, shelter and other goods; the maintenance of human wellbeing through the provision of welfare, health care and other services, and through social and cultural activities; and the reproduction of social relations and social institutions (Bakker and Silvey 2008, 2-3; Kofman 2012, 144; Peterson 2010, 272-73).

Within these broad parameters, my particular interest in this paper is in ‘family reproduction,’ including the reproduction and maintenance of family members, and the reproduction of the family as a social institution and set of relationships. At the heart of the analytical framework I propose is the relationship between rural labour migration, rural family reproduction, and agrarian change, defined as transformation in ‘the social relations and dynamics of production and reproduction, property and power in agrarian formations’ (Bernstein 2010, 1). Shifts in rural family reproduction accompanying labour outmigration are, I argue, core components of agrarian change, which also contribute to other aspects of agrarian change in various, significant ways.

I argue that there are two interconnected sets of issues relating to family reproduction of particular importance for a rigorous understanding of the dynamics of agrarian change, which largely have been ignored by political economists to date. The first relates to the unpaid 'reproductive work' that family members undertake in order to achieve family reproduction. This includes subsistence farming; the work of maintaining social connections with kin and others, through mutual aid, gift-giving, loans, visits, and rituals, such as funerals and weddings; and 'care work.' The last, on which this paper focuses, includes domestic tasks, such as buying and preparing food, cleaning house, doing laundry, and fetching firewood and water; child rearing and socialization; and the work of caring for young children, the sick and handicapped, and the frail elderly.

In existing discussions of agrarian change in China, as elsewhere, there is a serious neglect of reproductive work, especially care work. As a corollary, this literature tends to be blind to the agency and experiences of those responsible for such work, and blind to families' concerns to accomplish reproductive tasks. In contrast, in this paper I argue that reproductive work, especially care work, is a crucial component in the strategies that rural families employ to achieve family reproduction. And I demonstrate that changes in the ways in which reproductive work is accomplished and by whom, and changes in divisions between 'productive' and 'reproductive' work, are core elements of agrarian change.

The second set of issues relates to aspirations for family reproduction as being drivers of agrarian change. Across rural China since the 1980s, rural ambitions to get off the farm, or more particularly, to get one's children out of farming into stable, urban employment, have spurred desires for children to receive a longer period of education in better-quality schools. Meanwhile, villagers have sought to 'keep up with the Joneses' also by building or buying increasingly expensive housing.

To date, such issues have rarely received detailed investigation in the literature on agrarian change in China or elsewhere in Asia. In this paper, I seek to redress this neglect. New aspirations, I argue, are driving changes in rural strategies for family reproduction, contributing to various changes in agrarian political economy and society. These include new patterns of work; new forms of intra-family as well as class differentiation,³ and a high degree of change, fluidity and flux in expectations and practices relating to gender and generational roles within the family.

The remainder of the paper is divided into three parts. In the first, the aim is to highlight the empirical significance of these two sets of issues pertaining to rural family reproduction through a case study of one village. Gingko village (a pseudonym) is located in the central Chinese province of Henan. In the contemporary Chinese context, it is unusual in that significant numbers of its residents have migrated overseas as well as within China. Nevertheless, key trends apparent in Gingko village, in the relationship between migration, shifts in family reproductive work, changing aspirations and strategies for family reproduction, and other aspects of agrarian change are common to rural communities across China and other parts of developing Asia.

In the second and third parts of the paper, I develop an analytical framework for understanding these trends. I begin with a brief critical review of the ‘livelihoods perspective’ on agrarian change, and two other approaches to social and political-economic change, focusing on ‘global householding’ and the cultural reproduction of class and gender. I then build on this review to propose a new analytical framework for understanding the nexus

³ I understand the term ‘social differentiation’ to refer to the creation of differences in peoples’ positioning in relations of production and reproduction, and consequent inequalities in control and access to resources, and wellbeing and social status. In this perspective, ‘differentiation’ refers to patterns of gender and intergenerational inequalities, as well as to class stratification.

between shifts in translocal family reproduction and other aspects of agrarian change in rural China and, by extension, elsewhere in developing Asia.

Gingko village⁴

Gingko village, with a population of about 1,750 people, is located in New County (*Xin Xian*),⁵ in the historically poor, mountainous border region of southern Henan. In the 1930s and 40s, New County belonged to a key base area for the Communist Party, and consequently, has since been accorded unusual privileges, including the right, granted its Labour Bureau in the 1980s, to recruit labourers for short-term overseas employment. For more than three decades, Gingko families have combined agricultural production, especially rice-farming on small plots of land,⁶ with both domestic and overseas migrant employment.⁷

Migration

In the 1980s, a small number of men began to trickle out of Gingko village in search of waged work, primarily in the construction industry. Then, from the 1990s, with migrant incomes increasingly higher than farming incomes, the number of people migrating out grew rapidly, so that by the 2000s, most of the labour force was engaged in non-agricultural employment and lived outside New County most of the time. In 2015, about 700 people, or 40 percent of Gingko's total population, were working long-term as migrant labourers – 500

⁴ This account is based on 2.5 months' ethnographic fieldwork in the village in 2015- 2016. Figures provided are for 2015.

⁵ In order to protect identities, pseudonyms are used for all individuals as well as the village. New County, however, is not a pseudonym.

⁶ In 2015, Gingko villagers had access to about 1,326 mu of arable land, or an average of 0.8 mu per person. One mu is the equivalent of 0.16 acres.

⁷ There are very few local, non-agricultural employment opportunities in the village or its vicinity.

in other counties and provinces in China and 200 overseas. Almost everyone aged 18-40 years had spent many years working away from home, including at least one year overseas.

Through the 1980s and early 1990s, many more men migrated out of Gingko village than women, but with increases in employment opportunities for migrant women, this changed. Already by the late 1990s, most adults of both sexes under the age of 50 were spending most of the year in non-agricultural waged employment away from home. The majority, however, left their small children and ageing parents behind. With rural, non-local household registration (*hukou*), their citizenship rights in urban areas, including the right to social welfare and education for their children, were curtailed, and living costs were prohibitively high. This was particularly the case in the largest metropolises and between the 1980s and early 2000s. Since then, *hukou* restrictions have eased, making it much easier and cheaper for rural migrant families to live in small towns and cities. However, in the larger metropolises, where employment opportunities are more plentiful and lucrative, it remains prohibitively expensive for migrants to settle (Jacka, Kipnis and Sargeson 2013, 65-81).

With the advent of large-scale labour outmigration, understandings about ‘productive’ and ‘reproductive’ work shifted, and among those remaining in the village, new patterns of work and divisions of labour emerged. In the 1980s, there was a ‘feminization’ of agriculture, with women becoming an increasingly large proportion of the agricultural labour force (cf. Jacka 1997, 128-40). Then, from the 1990s, with more and more young and middle-aged women as well as men leaving the village, there was an ‘ageing’ of agriculture, with responsibility for farm work being devolved onto men and women of increasingly advanced age. Meanwhile, care work was undertaken primarily by older women.

Reproductive work

For the last twenty to thirty years, most small children have been raised almost entirely by their grandparents, especially grandmothers, who have taken over childcare responsibilities so young women can undertake migrant waged work. As a consequence, many of today's elderly women have devoted a very large part of their lives to raising children. Sixty-two-year-old Mrs Li, for example, has raised ten children; three sons of her own, and all of her sons' seven children.⁸ She raised each grandchild from the age of just a couple of months until they were 5-10 years old. Of course, many grandmothers have both multiple grandchildren, and frail parents and parents-in-law in need of care. These women are the backbone of the family economy, shouldering the greatest responsibility for care work as well as engaging in agriculture.

Over the years, the declining profitability of agriculture relative to non-agricultural employment, the consequent loss of labour power to migrant waged work, and the burden of care work shouldered by the depleted population left behind have led to major changes in agriculture, including shifts in the type of crops grown, a sharp reduction in the number of livestock raised, and a shrinkage in the amount of land farmed by most families. For the majority, agriculture has shifted from being mostly 'productive' to primarily 'reproductive' work. The changes have been particularly noticeable since the mid-2000s. Finding it too difficult to grow rice for the market, and faced with a growing scarcity of hired labour, an increasingly large proportion of the left-behind have stopped irrigating their paddy land. Some of the non-irrigated land they plant with less labour-intensive crops of peanuts and canola, primarily for family consumption, and the rest they leave uncultivated.

⁸ Gingko villagers in Mrs Li's generation mostly have between three and seven children. Younger villagers, who began their families after the introduction of the one-child policy at the end of the 1970s, mostly have two children. Single-child families are rare.

However, this retreat from market-oriented farming among the majority has eased the way for an alternative response to the declining profitability of agriculture among a minority. Thus, a few villagers have expanded their farming, cultivating paddy land no longer farmed by those to whom it was contracted, as well as their own, in most cases without remuneration. Most have farmed no more than an additional couple of mu, but one household has added 100 mu to the land they cultivate. In addition, in 2013-2014, an external entrepreneur leased 200 mu, or 19 percent of the village's paddy land, consolidating it into large fields. He signed 20-year leases with village households, paying them an annual pittance of 300 yuan⁹ per mu. Some elderly farmers refused to lease out their land, but most, unable to farm it themselves, did so willingly (cf. Trappel 2016, 81-99).¹⁰

Changing aspirations

The older generation's reproductive work has enabled youth engagement in migrant employment, which in turn has increased family incomes. As a result, while it continues to be officially labelled a 'poor village,' many villagers are anything but poor.¹¹ Improvements in incomes have been further bolstered by redistributive policies introduced nationally from the mid-2000s. These include the removal of agricultural taxes and of tuition fees for nine years' compulsory education; the introduction of a new cooperative medical insurance scheme and a

⁹ In 2013-2015, 1 yuan was equivalent to about US \$0.16.

¹⁰ Across China, 'land transfers' (*liuzhuan*), such as these, have been spurred by recent state initiatives, especially the provision of subsidies, aimed at promoting large-scale, mechanized agricultural production, and shoring up national food security in the wake of rural labour outmigration (Ye 2015; Trappel 2016, 119-69).

¹¹ In 2015, village officials reported the average income per person in Gingko village to be 4,400 yuan, or about 42 percent of the national rural average, but admitted that figure was probably out of date. At that time, domestic migrant labourers earned an average annual per capita net income of 20-30,000 yuan, while overseas labourers earned about 80-100,000 yuan.

minimum livelihood guarantee system of welfare payments; and the rolling-out of a basic pension scheme for all rural residents over the age of 60 (Leung and Xu 2015, 98-124).

The resultant increases in villager incomes have fuelled new social expectations and aspirations for family reproduction, and consequently, shifts in patterns of consumption, investment, divisions of labour and patterns of work. Most families have invested little in agriculture. Instead, some have set up family businesses, and the majority have poured their savings into building or buying a new apartment or house. This is because a family's housing indicates their wealth and social status, and consequently, a substantial new house or apartment is a must for any young man seeking to marry (cf. Murphy 2009, 57-58). Investment in housing, in other words, is a key strategy for the reproduction of the patrilineal family. Over the last several years, the new housing has been getting more lavish, and often has been bought in New County city, about 40 minutes' drive from the village.¹² However, most of the new buildings' interiors are unfinished, and at least a third are empty, with migrant labourers continuing to live and work elsewhere for several years before being able to afford interior work and furnishings.

In addition, families' concerns about reproduction of the next generation have led them to invest more in children's education, with consequences also for women's work. Until recently, most children stayed with their grandparents and undertook their first few years of education in the Gingko village primary school (which included pre-school and grades 1-3), and the neighbouring village primary school (pre-school to grade 5). Those who continued went to boarding school in the local township or in New County city. In the mid-2010s, however, a new trend emerged, with mothers, who left their babies with grandparents to

¹² In 2015, the village head estimated that in the preceding few years, 10-20 Gingko households had bought apartments in New County city each year.

become long-distance migrant waged labourers, returning when it came time for the children to go to school. They rented or bought an apartment in New County city, and during the week, they and their children lived there, so the children could attend a better-quality urban school. Scholars have termed these women *peidu mama*, literally ‘mums who accompany [their children] to school’ (Ye, Pan and He 2014, 40).¹³

The *peidu mama* phenomenon, which is increasingly widespread across China, is partially a response to state educational policy and to anxieties about educational, health, safety and emotional problems among left-behind children. In recent years, the state has sought to rationalize educational funding by removing resources from small village primary schools and centralizing them in larger village and township schools, many of which have boarding facilities. The primary school in the village neighbouring Gingko is one such centralized school. Policy makers view centralized boarding schools as an answer to concerns about ageing grandparents’ difficulties keeping lively young children from drowning in local fish ponds, for example, and their inability to discipline them and help them complete homework (Murphy 2014, 35). However, Gingko parents complain that the quality of education in the neighbouring village and the township schools, while better than in Gingko village, cannot compare with that offered in city schools. They also worry about the high costs of boarding, and about the wellbeing of children, both in boarding school and while they are at home on weekends in the village.

Between 2013 and 2015, the number of children attending the Gingko village school declined from 100 to ten. In 2015, there were 190 *peidu mama* from Gingko village living in New County city with their children. Many took their children back to the village once or twice a fortnight to check in with their parents-in-law and help with farming. However, some

¹³ According to Shirlena Huang and Brenda Yeoh, the term *peidu mama* was first coined in the early 2000s by the Chinese media in Singapore to refer to urban middle-class mothers from China accompanying their children to Singapore for the children’s education (Huang and Yeoh 2011, 395).

grandparents, especially grandmothers, also spent part of their time in New County city, helping out with care work. This helped some young mothers find income-generating work, though very few found jobs that made them as much as they previously earned as migrant labourers.

Changes in the family

Changes in the divisions of labour and forms of cooperation that Ginko family members adopt in their efforts to meet reproductive needs have been accompanied by shifts in the relationship between the household and the family, and renegotiations of the roles and status of women, and the relationship between generations (cf. Fan 2015, 198-200). Previously, families with two or more sons divided (*fenjia*) after the sons married, with all but one son moving into a new house and establishing new households with their wives, separate from their parents, and contract land also being divided. With large-scale outmigration, though, family division has lost its meaning and often does not occur in a formal way. In part this is because the division and inheritance of land, once so central to rural Chinese culture and economy, is losing its significance for young people, as farming becomes less important to their livelihoods. All the same, sons who migrate out long-term, almost by definition, divide the family by moving house and establishing a separate budget, although most provide at least some financial support to their parents. Meanwhile, as noted above, the older generation plays a crucial role in raising their grandchildren, regardless of whether they belong to the same household or not.

In tandem with these shifts, has been a change in intergenerational relations, especially between women. Previously, older women advised and helped their daughters-in-law with childcare to a greater or lesser extent, but today, it is taken for granted that they care for small children by themselves. Much of this care work is provided without financial

support: not only are grandmothers not remunerated for their care work, they and their husbands commonly also bear most if not all their grandchildren's everyday living costs, as well as their own. Relieving their adult children of the financial and labour costs of care work does not appear to garner the elderly respect or appreciation within the family. Instead, a failure to provide childcare is quite often used by sons and daughters-in-law to justify a refusal to provide financial support for the older generation as they age. At the same time, some parents criticise grandparents, for example, for being 'dirty' or for not disciplining children. For their part, grandparents often express shame at the 'inadequacy' of their contribution to the younger generation, and try to minimise the 'burden' they impose on them, for example, by not seeking medical treatment, for which they would need their adult children to pay (cf. Santos, 2016).

One reason for the shift in the mother- daughter-in-law relationship is the fact that women becoming adults in the last few decades are more educated and worldly, and earn higher incomes than the older generation. But women still earn less than men. This gender differential has been a key consideration underpinning the feminization of agriculture, women's rather than men's dominance in care work, and most recently, the *peidu mama* phenomenon. In turn, women's relative lack of income increases their dependence on husbands, sons and others, and reduces their autonomy and bargaining power relative to men in the family.

In addition to these broad historical shifts, over their life-course, villagers are now moving physically and experiencing shifts in their work-roles and responsibilities far more often than in previous decades. This flux is enabled and accompanied by change in the institution of the family, and a high degree of variation between dominant family values and actual behaviour and relationships. Again, this is particularly obvious in regards to care work and the relationship between women in the family. In line with the dominant institution of the

patrilineal family, the ideal is for older people, especially women, to care for their sons' grandchildren, but not their daughters.' And in turn, as they become too old to manage on their own, the elderly are expected to live with and be taken care of by sons and their wives, not daughters. In reality though, many older women are continually on the move, providing care and being cared for by a range of different family members, in ways not always in accordance with patrilineal ideals.

Take, for example, 78 year-old widow Mrs Hu, who has two sons and four daughters, all married with children. In the year 2000, she went to live with her youngest son and his family in the faraway city of Urumqi. After a year, she returned, and since then has rotated every few weeks between her home in the village and the homes of her four daughters, two of whom live in a neighbouring village and two in the county city. She spends the longest periods of time living with and helping her third daughter, who suffers from chronic liver disease. Her oldest son lives and works in Beijing, but his wife and young son live in Gingko village, in a new house down the hill from Mrs Hu. Mrs Hu does not get on with this daughter-in-law, and neither receives support from her nor provides care for her grandson. The daughter-in-law is much closer to her own mother, who lives in another part of the village, visiting her several times a week. She gives her mother more financial support and help with farm work than either of her two brothers, or her sister.

Social differentiation

Young people's outmigration, and consequent improvements in their incomes and changes in their aspirations, have also fed into processes of social differentiation, exacerbating inequalities both between Gingko families and within them. To illustrate, I compare 86 year-old Mrs Chen and her two sons, with their neighbour, 85-year-old widower, Mr Zhou. Mrs Chen bore five sons and three daughters. Her husband died thirty years ago, and both her

oldest and youngest sons have also died. The two sons living with her have been mentally handicapped since birth. Both are unmarried. A lack of labour power and of financial and social capital has meant that Mrs Chen and her unmarried sons have been unable to climb out of poverty. They live in squalid conditions in an old house in the village, surviving on modest state welfare payments and subsistence agriculture. However, Mrs Chen's other son and her daughters are better off. Access to domestic, non-agricultural migrant employment opportunities has improved their incomes and enabled them to rent or buy higher-quality urban housing. None of these family members provide any financial assistance to Mrs Chen's household.

Mrs Chen's neighbour, Mr Zhou, has four sons, who are among the wealthiest of Gingko villagers. Mr Zhou previously served as a low-level village official; a position likely to have helped him accrue the social and financial capital necessary for his sons to obtain migrant employment overseas. This employment then further enriched the sons, enabling all of them to buy apartments in New County city. However, only one son and his family actually live in New County – the others live in Beijing and overseas. Mr Zhou considers himself fortunate because his sons have prospered, and they give him more money than most. But his living conditions are only slightly better than Mrs Chen's, and according to Mrs Chen's son, Mr Zhou's circumstances are more 'pitiful' (*kelian*) because he is alone most of the time. Apart from Chinese New Year, the only time he sees any family is when the oldest son and his wife visit briefly once a fortnight.¹⁴

Elderly Mr Zhou's aloneness, and the gap between his and Mrs Chen's living conditions on the one hand, and those of their absent children on the other, are common in

¹⁴ There are a number of very old residents of Gingko village like Mr Zhou, whom other villagers describe as 'pitiful' because they live alone and their adult children rarely visit. They rarely describe *themselves* as such. In some cases, this appears to be because they feel ashamed of their children's lack of filiality. In others, it seems to relate to 'descending familism,' whereby the elderly themselves accept a family prioritisation of younger generations' needs and wellbeing over their own. Descending familism is further discussed below.

Gingko and point to a new form of differentiation between generations. Up-and-coming young and middle-aged villagers are investing in themselves and the next generation far more than they are giving back to the previous generation.

Summary

This case study illustrates trends in translocal family reproduction that are central to the dynamics of agrarian change in villages across China. First, reproductive work, especially the work of older family members in subsistence agriculture and in meeting care needs, is crucial to the rural economy, for it enables large-scale labour outmigration among the young and middle-aged. In addition, reproductive needs and aspirations, particularly the need to care for dependants, especially children, and to provide for the family's future, are a major driver of rural families' economic behaviour.

This is commonly not fully appreciated by scholars of agrarian change. Jan Douwe van der Ploeg and colleagues, for example, describe the 'split family' approach to migration as shaped by efforts to balance the short-term financial gains of migrant waged employment against a longer-term cultural commitment to the land and farming and a desire for the security they provide. 'The, oft-articulated, thesis that migrant work represents a definitive adieu to [small family] farming,' they suggest, 'is a fallacy,' for rural families continue to invest in the land, and young migrant labourers remain attached, and consequently return, to farming in middle and old age (Van der Ploeg et al. 2014,172). Gingko village suggests a different story. Rather than attempting to balance the financial gains of migrant labour against a need to maintain farming, Gingko families are balancing migrant wage incomes against the fulfilment of care needs. In the resultant strategies, very small-scale subsistence farming is important as a source of food security for left-behind carers, most of whom have low cash incomes. However, little investment is made in paddy land and rice farming for the market is

deprioritized, because it is unsustainably labour-intensive and much less profitable than migrant work, and it is not the future young migrant workers imagine for themselves and their children. Most Ginkgo villagers are, in fact, saying goodbye to farming as a livelihood and way of life. In turn, as René Trappel suggests is happening across China, this withdrawal of the majority of villagers out of market-oriented farming is lending impetus to, and easing the way for, a further agrarian development – the commodification of farmland, and the scaling-up and mechanization of commercial agricultural production (Trappel 2016, 81-99; 119-69).

Second, shifts in rural aspirations and needs for family reproduction, and in the strategies families employ to meet those needs, are linked with various important social changes. Scholars most commonly associate aspirations for high-class housing and improved education for one's children, such as are observed in Ginkgo village, with a rising 'middle-class' in China and other Asian cities. Nevertheless, studies undertaken elsewhere in rural China by Rachel Murphy (2014), Wei Chunlin (2015) and others suggest that Ginkgo village is by no means unusual; such aspirations are as widespread in well-off (and even not so well-off) villages as in middle-class urban communities.

These aspirations both result from and contribute to important shifts in family relations, and differentiation within families and between them. Of particular significance is the emergence of what anthropologist, Yan Yunxiang, aptly calls 'descending familism,' whereby

the trinity of the three generations adapts to a new and flexible form of family structure, family resources of all sorts flow downward, and, most important, the focus of the existential meanings of life has shifted from the ancestors to the grandchildren (Yan 2016, 245).

Yan describes this trend in largely positive terms, highlighting the new forms of intergenerational intimacy with which it is associated. In contrast, while not denying intergenerational intimacy, I would highlight new forms of intergenerational and gender differentiation associated with descending familism in Gingko village. As shown above, in their drive to meet social expectations for family reproduction, villagers have been adopting measures to improve children's life chances and social status, some of which feed into overwork, poverty and lack of care for elderly grandparents, and others, which contribute to declines in the autonomy and bargaining power of young mothers (cf. Murphy 2014, 62-64; Chuang 2015).

Elsewhere in Asia, roles within the family have undergone different transformations. For example, in the Philippines and Vietnam, where there are more migrant women than men, men have taken on a greater role in reproductive work, and new identities – of 'caring men' and 'empowered women' – have been created (Nguyen and Locke 2014, 865-66. See also, Nguyen 2014, 1396-99). In all cases, though, changing strategies for family reproduction have been associated with shifts in intra-family gender and intergenerational divisions of labour, and the emergence of new identities and forms of intra-family differentiation.

These trends have been neglected by mainstream scholars of agrarian change, who understand 'social differentiation' solely in terms of class. And yet, aside from being important aspects of agrarian change in their own right, such changes also contribute to class differentiation. Thus, the social mobility of wealthy Gingko households, and the physical and social distance they create between themselves and the peasant class remaining in the village, are imbricated with and enabled by a re-configuration of intra-family divisions of labour, and new gender and intergenerational power relations and patterns of inequality.

Third, the above account illustrates how recent changes in rural family reproduction are associated with tremendous fluidity and flux in intra-family relations. This observation resonates with findings from other research into migration and social transformation, conducted elsewhere in China and other parts of Asia, and, indeed, all over the world (e.g. Mummert 2010; Kipnis 2016; Nguyen 2014; Deneva 2012; Baldassar and Merla 2014). These studies all find that highly dynamic intra-family gender and intergenerational relations are a corollary of the shifts that occur in families' strategies for accomplishing reproductive work in the wake of capitalist development, especially increases in labour mobility.

Finally, the Gingko case study shows that transformations in rural family reproduction are intimately connected with changes in a range of policies, structures, and social institutions at local, national and global levels. In existing studies of migration in Asia, the translocal split family strategy commonly is viewed as shaped by policies and structures, such as China's household registration system, which compound socio-economic inequalities between places of migrant origin and destination, and make migrant family settlement away from the place of origin untenable (Fan 2015, 194-95). The above case study shows, though, that in rural China, in addition to the household registration system, various other state policies have an important impact on translocal family reproduction. For example, the *peidu mama* phenomenon and village children's education in urban schools are, on the one hand, partially enabled by the removal of tuition fees for compulsory education, as well as other improvements in rural income resulting from the removal of agricultural taxes and the introduction of welfare schemes. In addition, the state's implementation of family planning policies from the late 1970s reduced the number of children born, thus increasing the resources available for investment in each child's education. On the other hand, the enrolment of village children in urban schools is also partially a response to problems caused

by the state's closure of small village schools and concentration of educational resources in larger population centres.

Furthermore, global social and political-economic trends must be taken into account, because, for one thing, opportunities and demand for rural migrant labour (overseas and within China) are highly dependent on the vicissitudes of the global economy. For another, increased exposure to transnational consumer cultures via migration, television and, most recently, the internet has an important role in shaping aspirations for family reproduction in villages such as Gingko.

To date, scholarship on agrarian change in Asia has been dominated by two analytical approaches: a Marxist structuralist approach, and a 'livelihoods perspective,' focusing on rural households' livelihood strategies. Concentrating on the micro-level, the latter approach has more potential for understanding shifts in family reproduction of the kind found in Gingko village, but is nevertheless seriously limited. The next part of the paper outlines its main limitations before reviewing two other approaches to social and political-economic change, relating to 'global householding' and the cultural reproduction of class and gender. Neither of these approaches has previously been adopted in the mainstream literature on agrarian change in Asia. Each has advantages over the livelihoods perspective, but nevertheless requires modification for understanding the nexus between shifts in translocal family reproduction and other aspects of agrarian change.

Livelihoods, global householding, and the cultural reproduction of class and gender

For our purposes, the most obvious limitation of studies taking the livelihoods perspective is that they understand 'livelihood strategies' very narrowly, in terms of households' efforts to generate an income. Household members' concerns about and efforts to meet reproductive

needs, especially the need to care for dependants, are usually neglected in analyses of livelihood strategies (Zhang and Locke 2010, 54-55).

Less obviously, perhaps, these studies tend to be limited by the assumption that rural households' aims for family reproduction are essentially universal and static, relating only to the fulfilment of basic needs. They generally fail to appreciate that with economic and social development, come various new, increased aspirations for family reproduction, which drive further changes in families' economic behaviour.

A final set of limitations of the livelihoods perspective relates to its focus on the household. First of all, in the context of rural China, it makes more sense to focus on 'the family' rather than the 'household.' Historically, the Chinese term 'household' (*hu*) refers to a group of kin, usually a nuclear or stem family, who live together and share a budget, and for administrative purposes, are registered as belonging to the same place of residence. The term 'the family' (*jia*) refers to a group of close kin, whose members may or may not belong to the same household. For centuries, the majority of rural Chinese families have been patrilocal and patrilineal, and practices aimed at reproducing the patriline have been at the heart of rural Chinese society and culture. As illustrated in the Ginkgo village case study, today, most villagers' household strategies continue to be at least partially motivated by concern for the reproduction of the broader, patrilineal family as well as the household, and are characterized by forms of cooperation and divisions of labour that span multiple households. As discussed, however, there also have been significant changes in the meanings associated with both 'the household' and 'the family', in the relationships between members of the two, and in the practices through which they are formed and reproduced. These shifts are an important, constitutive element in agrarian change, which cannot be captured with the household livelihoods perspective.

A further problem with the focus on the household is that it is simultaneously too ‘micro’ and not micro enough. On the one hand, studies with a livelihoods perspective often neglect the connections between livelihoods and macro-level (i.e., global, national and local) state policies and structures, and social institutions (Scoones 2009, 180). On the other hand, beyond noting gender constraints on women’s productive activities, they commonly pay insufficient attention to the intra-family gender and intergenerational politics shaping family members’ involvement in and determination of livelihood strategies (Zhang and Locke 2010, 54).

We turn next to studies of ‘global householding’ as an answer to at least some of the limitations of the livelihoods perspective.

Global householding

Studies of migration, global households and global householding, many of them undertaken in Asia, especially Southeast Asia, have played a key part in the recent renaissance in feminist interest in social reproduction under global capitalism (Kofman 2012).

To take one example, Maliha Safri and Julie Graham define the global household as comprising geographically dispersed kin and non-kin, who are linked and may be described as a single entity because of ties of economic and emotional interdependence and structures of decision-making or governance (Safri and Graham 2010, 107). They argue for a focus on ‘household production,’ especially non-market oriented production of domestic and caring services by household members, as a cornerstone in a feminist, postcapitalist international political economy, which understands contemporary economies around the world as being constituted by the interrelations between a heterogenous and shifting array of capitalist and noncapitalist transactions and modes of production (Safri and Graham 2010, 103).

Somewhat similarly, for Mike Douglass, the household – which ‘may consist of fictive as well as actual kin, of distant as well as under-the-roof members, and of hired domestic helpers and nannies who become household members’ – is ‘the foundation of the world economy’ (Douglass 2006, 421). He uses the term ‘householding’ to highlight the fact that creating and sustaining a household is an ongoing, dynamic process of social reproduction. The typical elements of householding, Douglass suggests, include marriage or other partnering; bearing, raising and educating children; maintaining the household on a daily basis; dividing labour and pooling income from livelihood activities; and caring for elderly and other non-working household members. With his focus on *global* householding, he emphasizes that, with globalization, these activities are increasingly reliant on the movement of people, and transactions among household members originating from or residing in more than one nation (Douglass 2006, 423).

For the purposes of analysing the relationship between migration (whether transnational or translocal), shifts in family reproduction and other aspects of agrarian change, the global householding approach has obvious advantages over the livelihoods perspective. In particular, as the outline above of Safri and Graham’s, and Douglass’s approaches makes clear, recognition of the significance to political economies of reproductive work, especially care work, and of families’ concerns with social reproduction, lie at the heart of conceptualizations of global households and householding. As a result, furthermore, studies of global householding tend to display a greater awareness of the need to link different scales of analysis than do most studies written from a livelihoods perspective. They are simultaneously more sensitive to gender and intergenerational politics within households, and more attentive to the ways in which these are shaped by and contribute to shifts in the global political economy.

Recently, some scholars have adapted the global householding approach for studies of translocal, as opposed to transnational, migration in rural China and Vietnam (Jacka 2012; Liu 2014; Nguyen 2014). However, while generating insights into the nature of shifts in householding strategies and their implications for the wellbeing of family members left-behind in the village, these studies have not yet realised the potential of the global householding approach for bridging the gap between micro and macro scales of analysis. We need to pay more attention to the links between shifting householding strategies, intra-family politics, and institutions, structures and processes in the local and national political economy. Furthermore, while it might once have been possible to consider China's rural political economy as different from capitalist states' and divorced from global capitalism, that is no longer feasible: As indicated above, rural aspirations and strategies for family reproduction are heavily influenced by developments in global capitalism.

There are some limitations to the global householding approach, similar to those of the livelihoods perspective. Thus, while Safri and Graham's and Douglass's conceptualizations of global households and householding are valuable for their appreciation of translocality, they do not accord with Chinese understandings of the term 'household,' but come closer to Chinese conceptualizations of the 'family' and shifting connections between households and families. In addition, the global householding approach is similar to the livelihoods perspective in neglecting the significance of aspirations for family reproduction in driving economic and social change.

The cultural reproduction of class and gender

For inspiration on how to analyse this issue, we turn now to a recent body of scholarship tracing links between consumer capitalism, changing aspirations for family reproduction, new gender and class identities, and the rise of a 'middle class' and middle-class culture in

modernizing Asia (e.g., Waters 2005; Zhang 2010; Nguyen 2015; Nguyen-Marshall et al. 2012). Much of this work draws on concepts utilized by the social theorist, Pierre Bourdieu, in his work, *Distinction...* (1984), a study of the symbolic aspects of class and the reproduction over time of class-based power and privilege in France.

For example, in their book about the urban middle class in Vietnam, Van Nguyen-Marshall and colleagues draw on Bourdieusian concepts to portray a class – specifically the Vietnamese middle class – as a social group marked out by their possession of certain types of symbolic capital and a particular type of ‘habitus;’ a ‘socially situated set of dispositions individuals display through their lifestyle’ (Nguyen-Marshall et al. 2012, 10). However, in contrast to Bourdieu’s emphasis on early socialization in the acquisition of ‘habitus,’ they, like other scholars of the middle class in Asia, emphasize individuals’ purposive adoption of lifestyles and forms of consumption as a way of asserting their class position and ‘distinction.’ Further to this, they highlight the fact that in Vietnam’s recent history, as in China’s, there have been several instances when the value of symbolic capital is radically redefined by market and state actors, and citizens must employ new strategies in order to attain and maintain social status and ‘distinction’ (Nguyen-Marshall 2012, 10-11).

Scholars of the middle class in Asia also commonly draw on the work of feminist scholars, who argue for the intimate connections between the production and reproduction of gender identities and the formation of class cultures and patterns of distinction and differentiation. In analysing gender and power in ‘affluent’ East and Southeast Asia, for example, Krishna Sen and colleagues (1998) draw on work by the historians, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall (1987), which highlights the centrality of ideologies and practices linking femininity and domesticity in the creation of the middle class in nineteenth century England.

The majority of studies examining the cultural reproduction of gender and class in Asia are focused on the rise of an *urban* middle class; very few examine rural societies.¹⁵ Most, furthermore, seek to chart the contours of new gender and class identities that are emerging, especially among the young, and say little about differences between generations or the broader dynamics of change through which new identities emerge and to which they contribute. Nevertheless, studies such as this provide leads on how feminist and Bourdieusian social theory could make a contribution to understandings of the relationship between shifts in rural family reproduction and other aspects of agrarian change, specifically social differentiation in the rural population. Beyond illustrating the value of particular concepts, especially ‘habitus’ and ‘distinction,’ these studies are valuable for their focus on culture, and their attention to the ways in which class, gender and other power relations and forms of differentiation are shaped by social actors’ socially constructed, ‘subjective’ desires and aspirations, as well as by ‘objective’ economic factors.

A new analytical framework

We can now sketch out a new framework for studying agrarian change in contexts, such as in contemporary rural China, characterized by high levels of mobility, which both adjusts for limitations in the approaches outlined above, and further develops their strengths. This framework centres around shifts in translocal family reproduction. Within the framework, four interlocking issues are identified as key to analysis of the relationship between shifts in

¹⁵ See, however, works by Wei (2015) and Yin (2015), which draw on Bourdieu to examine class reproduction and distinction in rural Zhejiang, China’s wealthiest province. Also relevant to this paper are studies by Ye (2014) and Nguyen (2015), both of which draw on feminist as well as Bourdieusian theory. Ye (2014) analyses the reproduction of class and gender in Bangladeshi men’s labour migration to Singapore. Nguyen examines the significance of rural women’s work as domestic servants in urban Vietnam for the production and reproduction of class and gender identities in both poor, rural families and the urban middle class.

translocal family reproduction and other aspects of agrarian change: changes in the organisation of *reproductive work*, especially rural family members' unpaid care work; an increase in the *translocality* of rural strategies for family reproduction, involving linkages between productive and reproductive work performed by family members in a variety of geographically dispersed locations; shifts in *rural family relations*, and expectations and behaviour relating to gender and inter-generational difference; and changes in rural family *aspirations for reproduction* and social mobility.

With this framework, I take an actor-oriented approach to agrarian change, with the understanding that

although it may be true that important structural changes result from the impact of outside forces (due to encroachment by the market, state or international bodies), it is theoretically unsatisfactory to base one's analysis on the concept of external determinations. All forms of external intervention necessarily enter the existing lifeworlds of the individuals and social groups affected, and in this way they are mediated and transformed by these same actors and structures (Long 2001, 13).

The proposed framework builds on understandings of social reproduction derived from recent feminist scholarship on global householding and social reproduction under capitalism, and feminist and Bourdieusian theory relating to the cultural reproduction of gender and class. In so doing, it brings several important innovations to the study of rural political economy and agrarian change in China. First, it foregrounds issues relating to change in reproductive work, especially care work. To date, most studies of rural political economy in China, as elsewhere, have focused on 'production' and productive labour, and have neglected reproductive work. And yet, as illustrated in the Gingko village case study,

reproductive work and the importance that rural families attach to it, have underpinned major changes in the agrarian Chinese economy.

Second, it broadens the focus on class differentiation in Marxist analyses of agrarian change, to include also the production and reproduction of gender and intergenerational power relations and inequalities within rural families, and to examine the critical intersections between class and intra-family differentiation.

Third, the proposed framework highlights the need for a multi-scalar analysis. Such analysis has been missing in most studies of agrarian change in China, which tend either to focus on broad structural changes in the political economy, or take the ‘household’ as the unit of analysis. In contrast, while beginning with the family, the proposed approach both delves into changing power relations, divisions of labour and patterns of cooperation within families and households, and connects those with shifts in institutions, structures and policies at local, national and global levels.

A fourth, important innovation in the proposed framework is its attention to the socio-cultural dimensions of agrarian change. There are two main aspects to this, relating to the social factors shaping rural strategies for reproduction, and to the significance of changing aspirations for family reproduction as drivers of agrarian change. Studies of agrarian change most commonly view households and individuals as ‘rational’ actors, concerned above all with livelihoods. In contrast, like the householding approach, the proposed framework recognizes that family members’ economic decisions and the patterns of work and divisions of labour they adopt are motivated by concerns relating to care, wellbeing, and the reproduction of the family; concerns that go well beyond the need to earn money. It also foregrounds the fact that economic behaviour is shaped by intra-family power relations, and social institutions guiding understandings of what is socially appropriate for those of different

genders and ages. However, as illustrated in the Gingko case study, neither social institutions nor the relationship between social institutions and actual behaviour are static. The proposed framework incorporates appreciation of fluidity and flux in rural family relations as being a central constituent element of agrarian change in the contemporary world.

Finally, central to the new framework is the recognition that, with political-economic change come shifts in aspirations for family reproduction, social mobility and ‘distinction.’ In rural China, as in a range of other contexts, these shifts have been fuelled by commodification, increased interaction with global consumer culture, and changes in the opportunities and demands facing families as a result of the rise of a highly competitive, capitalist economy. In turn, as shown in the Gingko village case study, shifting aspirations have both drawn on and contributed to other important aspects of agrarian change, including new patterns of work and mobility, new family relations, and new forms of gender, intergenerational and class differentiation.

Conclusion

In developing this new analytical framework, I have sought to broaden our understanding of rural political economy and agrarian change, opening up the field of investigation to new issues and perspectives, relating to the significance of translocal reproductive work and changing aspirations for family reproduction in shaping rural families’ strategies for meeting the challenges and opportunities presented by global capitalism.

This paper focuses on rural China, but at several points also notes similarities in key characteristics of family reproduction and the political economy between rural China and other postsocialist and capitalist contexts in Asia and elsewhere. Much can be learned about rural China, about other political economies, and about global capitalism by undertaking more systematic comparative studies. It is hoped that, building as it does on theoretical

approaches adopted by scholars in a range of contexts, the analytical framework developed in this paper provides a basis for such comparative studies.

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