

Social boundaries and transactions in Chinese villages

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Abstract

The process of 'converting villages to neighbourhoods' and reform of establishing shareholding cooperative system in rural regions never fails to attract scholars' attention. Under the condition that collective property right is specifically defined, one of the most critical issues is how to define the increasingly diverse social boundaries between 'the whole people' and 'collective', 'intra-collectives', 'local' and 'non-local', 'history' and 'present'. These boundaries are the basis of recognising collective membership and distributing collective property or collective interests to every individual or family within the collective. In this essay, through reviewing case studies in regards to 'converting villages to neighbourhoods' and rural shareholding cooperative system reform in Shanghai, Ningbo, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Jinan, we thoroughly display the logic of defining social boundaries in these regions and comprehensively demonstrate the new characteristics of conventional rural communities in the process of reducing collectiveness.

Keywords

Rural community; Shareholding Cooperative System; Converting Villages to Neighbourhoods; collective membership recognition.

Glossary of Chinese Terms

Cungaiju (converting villages to neighbourhoods, “村改居”)

Gaige kaifang (the reform and opening-up policy, “改革开放”)

jiti zichan (collective assets, “集体资产”)

xiangzhen qiye (town or village enterprises, “乡镇企业”)

chengxiang eryuan tizhi (urban-rural dualism, “城乡二元体制”)

quanmin suoyouzhi (ownership of the whole people, “全民所有制”)

jiti suoyouzhi (collective ownership, “集体所有制”)

shuiku yimin (the migrants who moved in the village because of reservoir construction, “水库移民”)

Nongzhuanfei (change from ‘rural to non-rural’ status; agricultural people to be given non-agricultural status, “农转非”)

zhengdigong (workers who were allocated to a job in city as part of the compensation to land acquisition, “征地工”)

waijianv (women who married non-agricultural household registration holders, “外嫁女”)

gaishehu (urban residents who were sent to villages and provided with food by rural collectives but did not participate in collective working during 1950s and 1960s due to the lack of food supply, “戩社户”)

danwei (work unit, “单位”)

maiduan (buy-out compensation, “买断”)

tiefanwan (iron rice bowl; a secure job, “铁饭碗”)

guakaohu (an adjunct family, “挂靠户”)

Introduction

Ever since implementation of the reform and opening-up policy (*Gaige kaifang*), with massive and rapid urbanisation, a growing number of villages in China initiated reforms of shareholding cooperative system or converting villages to neighbourhoods (*cungaiju*), of which the basic practice is to distribute villages' original collective assets to individuals, directly or in the form of shares. Through this process, legitimately recognising who the individuals are, in other words, defining collective membership is argued to be critical. Before *Gaige kaifang*, villages in China were relatively closed communities. The social boundaries of village were fairly clear. As a result, it is not difficult to identify its membership. However, after *Gaige kaifang*, a large scale of urbanisation and vastly increasing population mobility have both contributed to diversify the population structure of villages. This social change has greatly blurred the boundaries, making it increasingly difficult to recognise collective membership. To be specific, firstly, a great number of villagers are urbanised through entering college, joining the army or as a trailing spouse. Among them, some villagers migrate to city by arrangements of the government, namely land requisition and resettlement. Secondly, in villages, 'semi-urbanised villagers' started emerging. Some who used to farm became workers in local town or village enterprises (*xiangzhen qiye*); some became migrant workers; some who was resettled in city became unemployed and went back to their original village. Thirdly, numerous immigrants started emerging and living in villages of eastern coastal area or city suburbs, in the long term.

Approximately before 2000, appreciation of land in villages was relatively slow; the size of collective assets was not large; villagers also took considerable burden. Thus, the value of collective membership could be little. However, with the process of rapid urbanisation, there is huge growing potential in land appreciation in villages, especially in city suburbs. There is an increasing number of villages whose collective assets are valued to be more than 10 million or even 100 million Yuan. More and more people become interested in obtaining a village collective membership. Therefore, researching on the mechanism of how village boundaries are defined and how village membership could be reasonably recognised have become a rather tough yet profound social issue.

Raising the Research Question

When it comes to 'recognising the villager membership' through reform of shareholding cooperative system and *cungaiju*, except villagers who have been living in the same village on a long-term basis without moving, the biggest difference lies in people whose membership has changed, including both immigrants and emigrants. With considerable efforts put on 'bi-dimensional construction logic',

geographical boundary and ownership boundary, in defining village boundaries (Zhang, 2006), academics highlight a diverse range of characteristics of village boundaries (Zhe, 1996), provide greatly thorough and comprehensive case studies in regards to how the boundaries are discussed and legalised among villagers and how collective assets are distributed (Lan, 2005; Shen & Wang, 2005; Pan, 2007; Yan, 2005; Jiao, 2012).

Through these studies, it is found that in the process of constructing shareholding cooperative system and *cungaiju*, how the boundaries are set is highly correlated with how the stakeholders perceive them. Despite interference of the state and local government as well as village politics, ultimately the distribution plan, the plan that most of the stakeholders agree on, is more or less based on the perception of collective membership that has formed among them.

To some extent, a series of socialism practices since the establishment of People's Republic of China is a gradual collectivism-constructing process under the ideology of 'anti-tradition' and 'anti-capitalism'. With the national institution of urban-rural dualism (*chengxiang eryuan tizhi*), these practices endow every individual with two explicitly different types of social identity: ownership of the whole people and collective ownership. A series of social practices after *Gaige kaifang*, such as massive demographic migration, enterprise reforms and large numbers of laid-off workers, land acquisition, demolition and resettlement, etc., have contributed to driving villagers who enjoyed collective ownership to leave collectives and join the system of ownership of the whole people. To most of villagers among them, however, this process of identity transformation has not always worked through. Many of them, after shortly entering the system of ownership of the whole people, were 'thrown out' through enterprise reforms and occupational shunt. They have become 'the third group' of people who were excluded by both 'the whole people' and 'collective'.

As for the reforms of village shareholding cooperative system, the most difficult thing is to define different types of collective membership. Most villagers through the reforms have formed multi-dimensional perceptions towards 'collective assets' (Liu & Jin, 2013), therefore these perceptions could possibly be overlapped and conflicted with each other, leading to an extremely complex system of identity types.

Village NM in Ningbo, Zhejiang Province, through reforms of village shareholding cooperative system in 2015, distinguished 27 social identity types; County JC in Zhenhai District sorted out 36 social identity types, one village of which covers 35 types (except for the migrants who moved in the village because of reservoir construction <*shuiku yimin*>). Comparing and analysing these identity types, we could conclude that through the reforms of village shareholding cooperative system, it is

required to define several relatively important social boundaries, such as ‘the whole people’ and ‘collective’, intra-collectives, ‘local’ and ‘non-local’, ‘the present’ and ‘the past’, etc.

In the following analysis, through researching on a series of practices of village shareholding cooperative system reforms and *Cunganju* in Shanghai, Ningbo, Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Jinan, we explore in the process of collective ownership gradually disintegrating, how stakeholders define the social boundaries when they re-recognising its collective membership.

Between ‘the Whole People’ and ‘Collective’

Through the reforms of village shareholding cooperative system, one of the most problematic and controversial process is to define the boundaries between ‘the whole people’ and ‘collective’. Under the circumstances of conventional planned economy, it was the differences between ‘the whole people’ and ‘collective’ among urban and rural regions that distinguished two typical Chinese citizenship types. Because of the huge gap in terms of social treatment between these two types, the boundaries were rather explicit. Say, citizens with a rural household registration were allowed to transform it to an urban one through only a limited number of ways, such as entering college, joining or retiring from the army, recruiting labour workers, etc. The population it involves was very rare. After *Gaige kaifang*, even though the gap remains sizable, a series of social changes such as the growing number of rural-urban migrant workers, the unemployment of urban workers, massive demolition and resettlement, the boundaries between them are becoming more and more blurry.

A growing scale of rural-urban migration. Whether it is the expansion of university enrolment, or general arrangement for demolition and resettlement, or a large scale of floating population, for rural residents, the paths to city are becoming broader; the size is growing rapidly as well. In less than three decades, the urbanisation rate of China has grown from less than 20% to more than 50%.

One-way migration to two-way migration. In the past, urban residents under ‘ownership of the whole people’ enjoy a much better treatment than rural residents with the identity of ‘collective’. As a result, it is not surprising that most rural residents devoted themselves to achieving changing rural residents to non-rural residents (*Nongzhuanfei*). However, as the ‘devaluation’ of urban household registration and ‘appreciation’ of rural land, population migration between rural and urban regions gradually become mutual. A growing number of people urge to change their household registration back to villages.

The emergence of inbetweeners. Because of incomplete urbanisation, a number of inbetweeners are emerging. Some of them have been employed in cities, however, they are not able to change their household registration to ‘urban residents’ due to policy arrangements, neither could they enjoy the public service of urban residents. Besides, there are also people who have been through demolition and resettlement. Due to some delay of resettlement, they are still distant from being an urban resident completely.

The outsiders. Outside of the institutions of ‘the whole people’ and ‘collective’, there are also people who don’t belong to either of them. Not because of incomplete urbanisation, they have already been divided from the collective ownership through entering college, join the army or demolition and resettlement. But with the reforms of state-sponsored enterprises and massive unemployment and occupational reallocation, many among them are forced to be completely divided from the local government, the state, the whole people ownership. They could neither go back to villages nor stay in city, becoming ‘the outsiders’.

This process involves groups such as workers who were allocated to a job in city as compensation to land acquisition (*zhengdigong*), college graduates, workers who retired from military and changed their career, women who married non-agricultural household registration holders (*waijian*), urban residents who were sent to villages and provided with food by rural collectives but did not participate in collective working during 1950s and 1960s due to the lack of food supply (*gaishehu*). Among them, the biggest and the most complex group is *zhengdigong*.

In the early 1980s, *zhengdigong* was much of an admiring status. Normally only rural residents from certain villages in urban suburbs could enjoy such precious opportunities. In the beginning, not only could *zhengdigongs*’ household registration status be changed to ‘urban household’, but they could be allocated to get a job, enjoying parallel living standards as urban residents do. Physical conflicts even occurred in the process of fighting for more opportunities of becoming *zhengdigong*. After a while, the treatment for *zhengdigong* went down, some places stopped changing household registration status anymore; later, job allocation was gradually cancelled as well; only resettlement compensation fee was offered, which was called ‘the currency compensation’. Among them, some people went through ‘special paths’, spending an amount of money changing their household registration status from ‘rural’ to ‘urban’, since there is a huge income gap between rural and urban regions. They actively gave up their land ownership in villages.

The destiny of these *zhengdigongs* varies from person to person. A few of them went to a decent work unit (*danwei*) in city. They have been nothing but rather hardworking, still occupying a position in today’s urban labour market. However, most of *zhengdigongs* were not as fortunate, especially those who were allocated to work in state-sponsored enterprises. The majority of them were laid off during the enterprise reform in 1990s. Some people among them were offered a huge amount of money called

'buy-out compensation' (*maiduan*) by their *danwei*. They became entrepreneurs by utilising it as initial capital, starting up their own business. Besides, there were also some people who used to work in state-sponsored enterprises or county-level big collective enterprises. After getting laid off, the enterprises bought pension for them and promised that after they reached their retirement age, they could also be provided with a considerable amount of pension. However, it was not surprising that the majority of people were not as fortunate as them, being compensated with nothing. They could not even get the basic compensation fee.

In this process, with land acquisition and emigration of *zhengdigongs*, many villages gradually disappeared. However, some villages took a chance and boomed their collective economy. The treatment for villagers who stayed was gradually getting better. Later, when those *zhengdigongs* who emigrated came back to their old villages (some could possibly live in their village all the time), they were surprised to realise that the collective membership they abandoned actively has become more and more valuable, way more valuable than the title of *zhengdigong* they fought for so hard but has been gradually devaluated. For example, in some villages, the earnings of one villager has massively exceeded a formal worker's in an urban enterprise. Under such circumstances, many *zhengdigongs* requested to change their household registration back to their original village or regain the treatment of rural collective membership, to participate in the allocation of collective income or shareholdings.

For *zhengdigongs*, through 'land acquisition and resettlement' and 'laid off and resettlement', two division process, their social identity has actually become 'the third group', besides 'the whole people' and 'collective'. However, when collective income was re-distributed, they raised their interest pursuit as well.

Besides *zhengdigongs*, through the process of rural shareholding cooperative system reforms, there are also several groups which are involved with 'the whole people' and 'collective' when it comes to membership identification:

College graduates. Before 1996, rural residents who were enrolled by colleges were considered to have a fairly promising future, having earned an 'iron rice bowl' (*tiefanwan*). With *tiefanwan*, they were not only sponsored during their study time in college, but also could be allocated to a job after their graduation. Therefore, college students who were graduated before 1996 are argued to have left their original 'collective' and become a member of 'the whole people'. However, after 1996, the policy was modified: the state no longer allocated job for graduates. After a growing number of people left their rural collective, it was likely that they could not find a job after graduation. In other words, they could possibly not be joining 'the whole people' system. Where should they go? Especially in 2005, it was not compulsory for rural residents to change their agricultural household registration. Should they be distributed with collective shareholdings through *cungaiju*?

Military retirees who transferred to do civilian work. Similar to college graduates, for military retirees who received proper resettlement arrangement, there was basically few issues. However, for those who did not, their situation was same to *zhengdigongs* who came back to collectives. Due to revisions on policies, since mid-1990s, the number of proper resettled military retirees was not big. Whether they could be distributed with collective shareholdings matters much to them.

***Waijianv*, women who married non-agricultural household registration holders.** Per rural traditions, once a female gets married, her household registration and collective membership should be transferred. However, if a female with rural household registration gets married with a male who has an urban household registration, according to national rules, her household status could not be transferred. As a result, her household registration should remain at her village collective. For some villages, since they could not change their household registration status, normally their membership rights in rural collective were reserved, including land and working. However, some villages have a different solution. Since she has already married, her original rights in collective should be deprived, both the right to farm by contract and the right to participate in collective working.

***Gaishehu*.** It is a unique title widely used in Zhejiang and Jiangsu Province. There are also similar groups with different names. It refers to urban residents who were sent to villages and provided with food by rural collectives but did not participate in collective working during 1950s and 1960s due to the lack of food supply. When land contracting commences, most of them could not be distributed with land.

The Inter-collectives

Through the process of rural shareholding cooperative system reforms, besides clearly definition of the boundaries between ‘the whole people’ and ‘collective’ and confirm if they are entitled to participate in collective asset distribution, it is equally important to make the boundaries between different collectives clear. It is argued to be a critical procedure to identify which collective certain stakeholders could participate in collective shareholding distribution.

There are two groups of people who are involved with identifying the boundaries between different collectives: married women and adjunct families (*guakaohu*).

For married women, the issues involve those ones whose husband is a collective member from a different village, but their household registration remains at their original collective. They mostly still live and work at the village with their parents. Besides, there are also married women who divorced

but did not marry again. Their household registration remains at the village or they still live at the village. Could they enjoy the same shareholding right through the reforms?

There are two aspects in terms of the conflicts with married women:

Firstly, rural traditions versus national laws. According to village traditions, a female should move in with her husband after getting married; her household registration and membership rights should be changed accordingly. Meanwhile, those who divorced, per the traditions, should marry again or move back to live with her parents. However, the national laws regulate that males and females are born equal; after they are married, they could decide where to live; females have every right to choose if she move in with her husband. For females who divorced their husband, they could choose to live in their original village. Therefore, there occurs direct controversies and conflicts.

Secondly, the balance between rural/urban division and migration was broken. Under traditional agricultural economy, although villages vary from land size, the division was not that severe. So, it kept a balance between the number of 'marry-ins' and 'marry-outs'. With the development of rural collective economy, the division between villages started to grow. More and more females married in those developed villages while there are few married to people who are out of the collective. The migration balance between villages was broken.

Under such circumstances, some rich villages gradually formed a series of regulations to confirm the collective membership of their villagers. Taking Nanmen Village for an example, there are many *waijianms* in this village. After they got married, they were not willing to change their household registration to other places. The collective decided through negotiation:

1. Single-daughter family. The daughter is allowed to remain her collective membership; the husband could also change his household registration to the village and enjoy the same treatment as its villagers.

2. All-daughter family. If the family has only daughters with no sons, only one daughter could remain her collective membership and only her husband could change his household registration to the village and enjoy the same treatment as its villagers.

3. Females, who are not from either single-daughter family or all-daughter family, if any daughters remain her collective membership after getting married, their benefits as a villager would get a discount: 100 Yuan less every month; her husband could not change his household to the village, neither do her children if any.

For females who divorced, as long as she hasn't married again, remains her collective membership in the village and live and work in the village, she could keep enjoying her collective treatment.

For them, is it possible to continue doing what they did in the past? Many villagers hold strong opinions against it. The benefits allocation plan in the past could be considered as temporary solution after all. They could be modified or revised along with any changes. However, once the reforms of shareholding cooperative system enacted, the shareholding is argued to be lifelong. In this case, it was considered 'not fair' for many to distribute much fortune to females who are married or widows. In this village, there was an extreme case:

There was a bludger in the village. After he got married and had his first child, he was put into jail due to gambling. Then he divorced his wife. When he was released from the prison, he married to his second wife and had his second child. Later he was put in prison again and divorced his second wife. He was released from the prison, met his third wife and had his third child. But after a couple of years, he divorced again and married his fourth wife. All of his ex-spouses are still living in the village and single. This case frustrates all the villagers during the reforms of shareholding cooperative system. According to the agreements, the three exes, his current wife and his three children could participate in shareholding distribution. But what is unacceptable to villagers is: this bludger who did not contribute much to the collective could enjoy four times shareholdings. What if they marry again and leave the village after the distribution?

As for *guakaohus*, based on their original understanding, they do have their household registration in the village, but it was because of the villagers' compassion and sympathy. They do not deserve any right to enjoy all the collective benefits, let alone participating in the distribution. However, during *cungaiju*, the *guakaohus* raised their interest pursuit. They believe that their household registration has changed to the village long time ago. They were not distributed with anything from the old village. They should enjoy at least some part of the benefits in the village.

Between the Past and Present

The reform process to the shareholding cooperative system creates not only the geographical boundaries due to the mobility of population, but also historical boundaries due to the passage of time. As naturally formed rural communities, renewal of generations happens over time. It is crucial to set the boundaries of power among the generation who passed away, the current generation and

the future generation.

Between the past and the present, there are two main types of boundary. One is the boundary set to living and death dates, and the other is the boundary set to employment time.

Generally, when applying the shareholding cooperative system, a cut-off date-of-birth and/or a date-of-death is set. The system will only apply to the people who are born or die after the cut-off date. Therefore, there has been examples of people inducing birth or using modern medical equipment to delay death in order to make their family members/friends fit into certain cut-off dates.

Due to the duality of the historical boundaries, the distribution of power happens between four types of community members: the people who died before the cut-off death date, the people who were born after the cut-off birth date, the people who have passed their retirement age, and the people who are underage (younger than 18-year-old). The birth/death types occur in almost every rural community while the employment related types occur only in more modernised communities where community members are well-aware of the existence of pension systems and/or where there are well-established pension systems.

People who died before the cut-off death date. For the people who died before the cut-off death date, the data collected by our research team has shown that most shareholding cooperative systems do not give the empowerment to this category. This is especially obvious in the rural communities in Guangdong province. In Shanghai, the shareholding cooperative systems use the duration of a person has been doing agricultural activities in a community to calculate how much share a person gets. Therefore there are more presence of considerations and rules of this category. According to the shareholding cooperative systems in Shanghai region, regardless of living or dead, all people who have been doing collective communal agricultural labour since the establishment of collectivization is distributed the share that they deserve. Additionally, these shares can be redistributed to their offspring in the form of heritage.

Jin (2016) provided an example of Yang Village in the Jinshan district of Shanghai. The system in Yang Village collected data of every community member who had been doing more than three years of agricultural work from 1956 to 2010, and distributed shares accordingly, no matter living or dead.

In contrast, for community members of NM Village in Ningbo City of Zhejiang, when people

die, so does the right of having share. In the past ten years, seven elderly members died along with their share with 40 elderly members still alive. Among the seven who died, Mr Zhang died relatively early, therefore according to Mrs Zhang, they had the biggest share lost amongst all seven deceased members. Mrs Zhang's family hardly got any benefits from the Village, although Mr Zhang established major businesses for the Village with the Village Secretary. None of the two children were married when Mr Zhang died. Mrs Zhang had to start from "ground zero" to rebuild their fortune. Currently she works in the senior centre of the Village as a kitchen hand. Hard work and prolonged exposure to harsh cleaning chemicals threatens Mrs Zhang's physical health. The members of our data collection group found during the interview that all the fingernails of Mrs Zhang's left hand had fallen off. In 2014, the Secretary of NM Village decided to give 2000 Yuan annually to the family in which the elderly members had passed away. The plan gained support from all the previous members of now abandoned People's Commune and was initially implied. However, the plan was opposed later on by community members who did not take part in the People's Commune (since they were either too young or were not born back then). These members believe that since these elder members have passed away, they are not entitled to any benefits, and if they decided to give these elderly members any benefits, they should give all members who passed away the same benefits. Due to the opposition of these members, the benefit was eventually cancelled. These younger members also reported the issue to the local district council, but no solution was given. This incident, to some extent, has been the enlightenment event that made the whole community aware of the current issue of the share distribution of community members who passed away.

People who were born after the cut-off birth date. For people who were born after the cut-off birth date, there are vast differences between how different communities treat the situation. Some shareholding cooperative systems adapt a closed-style reform that only deals with the living people within the cut-off birth and death dates, with no consideration given to either people who died before or were born after. These kinds of closed-style reform processes take away the entitlement rights of people who were born after the cut-off date, therefore the only way for these people the only way to gain shares is by inheriting shares from their family members. The second type of systems uses a semi-closed reform process which draws some shares from the collective benefits and distributes the shares to the people born after the cut-off date of birth. The third type of systems uses a fully-open reform process which does not have a fixed number of shares and therefore automatically gives share to all new born babies. Currently, the numbers of the three different systems are close to equal.

The difference in how shares are distributed to people who died before the cut-off death date and people who were born after the cut-off date projects the different understandings towards collective

ownership and the shareholding cooperative system.

People who have passed their retirement age, and people who are underage (younger than 18-years-old). Major differences also occur in different systems for people who have passed their retirement age, and people who are underage. Some modernised rural communities with established business systems have pension systems while others do not.

For example, all the reform process to the shareholding cooperative system in Shanghai are multi-tier, that is, all females over 55 years old and males over 60 years old will be directly added to the existing pension system and thus gets all benefits from the pension system. On the other hand, for people under 18 years old, the system follows collective benefit rules from the original collective rural community.

Conclusion

The experiments of land ownership socialisation since the establishment of China has helped the people from rural communities find directions in the areas of land property, household registration management, residence distribution, administration management boundaries, as well as collective property right boundaries. While they strengthened the rural community as a whole, the experiments, as a series of trial and error, in a way disconnected people from their land and properties, as well as their willingness to work. Under these circumstances, to overcome the shortcomings of land ownership socialisation, the process of constructing shareholding cooperative system and *cungaiju* are employed with the mission of redefining the boundaries of “the whole people” and “the collective”, the different “the collectives”, “local” and “nonlocal”, as well as “past” and “present”.

This article has provided an in-depth discussion on transformation from collectivisation to shareholding cooperative system and “cungaiju” that recognises the individual villager’s membership, and redefined geographical boundary and ownership boundary.

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