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Recasting the Rural: State, Society and Environment in Contemporary China

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Is rural China dying? To many observers, the recent redoubling of the Chinese state's efforts to move people from the countryside into towns and cities confirms their sense that at the head of a worldwide urbanizing surge, China is leaving its agrarian legacy behind (Chan 2014). With China's swift urban transformation, rural communities seem fated to waste away. The flurry of reports when China's urban population surpassed 50 percent in 2011 was merely a statistical marker in an ongoing process. In 2014, the State Council approved a plan to have 60 percent of the population in urban areas by 2020 (State Council 2014).¹ By 2025, China will have 221 cities with over one million inhabitants (Woetzel 2009).

Watchers are understandably spellbound by China's urbanizing shift, which appears to exemplify the arrival of planetary urbanization: a world condition marked by "the demise of rural autonomy and the unprecedented permeation of the world by urban society" (Madden 2012: 772). Those who theorize this urbanization of "the Earth's entire surface" do not of course posit that every inch of earth will be paved over and built upon with dense agglomerations of concrete, but rather that we have entered an era of the intensification of urban-centered capitalist relations across even the remotest of landscapes (Soja and Kanai 2007:62). Planetary urbanization is less about the networks of global cities than a name for the uneven spread of capitalism's creative destruction across the entire planet (Brenner 2013).

The insistence that there is no longer a clear divide between the city and the country, the rural and the urban, has much analytical purchase. Nevertheless, using China as our lens, we caution that this framing risks a slide into teleology and tunnel vision, within which apparent gaps and exceptions to urban-centered capitalist relations are treated as irrelevant. When we downplay the rural, we elide the lived experiences of millions of people and massive investments of money, time, and regulatory effort by states, political parties, and non-state actors in governing rural landscapes and inhabitants. Around the world, states engage in vigorous efforts to administer rural populations and to manage rural spaces for food production, carbon sequestration, and ecological security (Lambin and Meyfroidt 2011). Corporations locate

¹ In the National Plan for a New Model of Urbanization (State Council 2014), the approximate 60 percent figure refers to permanent residence in towns and cities. The urban household registration rate is projected at 45 percent.

farmland as a new frontier of investment (Fairbairn 2014; Peluso and Lund 2011). Urban and suburban citizens in search of wholesome food and restorative leisure revive rural connections (Hinrichs 2000). Rural residents provoke and respond to these processes as individuals, communities, and social movements (Hecht 2014; Wiebe et al. 2010). The rural persists, vigorous and refractory (Bell et al. 2010; Woods 2012).

Even as its “National Plan on New Urbanization,” calls for intensified urbanization, the Chinese central government’s annual “Document No.1,” a barometer of policy priorities, has regularly featured rural concerns for over a decade (Xinhua 2014). Official pronouncements picture rural areas as being suffused with crises, ranging from food safety hazards to farmland loss to soil pollution to menacing sandstorms. Numerous state agencies seek in varied ways to shape the behavior of rural populations, striving to steer livelihoods and quell contestation. Authorities appear concerned as much with providing services and infrastructure within rural areas as with moving people out. The attention paid to China’s cities in recent years by scholars and journalists alike has somewhat obscured these intensified efforts at managing rural spaces. Yet they are highly consequential, not only for the six hundred million people who continue to reside in these places, but also for the people and places that they are connected to by markets, migration, hydrological and atmospheric flows, and state efforts to craft a governable citizenry.

Mindful of these connections, we focus in this special issue on *recasting* the rural. Contributors examine both how various agents in the party-state seek to cast rural people and landscapes in new *roles* and how the rural landscape consequently takes on new *forms*. These state agents, placed throughout the administrative hierarchy, with different bureaucratic mandates, constituencies, and social networks, are by no means uniform, yet their efforts jointly exert a “state effect” through developmental and disciplinary practices (Yeh 2013). Thus, in referring to the party-state, we index both the “dynamic, complex, heterogeneous and self-conflictual institutional ensemble” of the state (Lin and Ho 2005, 411) and the effect of singularity that it projects through territorial-administrative and cultural hierarchies (Cartier 2015).

Party-state projects for manipulating rural spaces and populations have grown in number and complexity with changing political-economic and environmental conditions. New projects have arisen alongside longstanding ventures that are being undertaken in new ways, transforming countless landscapes and communities. These projects include the demarcation of zones for commodity production and environmental protection, building of transportation and energy infrastructure, intensification of agricultural production, cultivation of forests and modifications of forest tenure, reorganization of rural living spaces, and the restructuring of regions around focal economic activities such as tourism and mineral extraction. Undertaken with dual goals of intensifying economic production and enhancing environmental protection, these projects are revealing sites for understanding tensions that arise from diverse efforts to redefine and manipulate rural spaces.

As high-level agencies of the party-state turn their attention to a diverse array of social and biophysical landscapes in new projects, the residents of these places, including local officials, exert agency by struggling against, negotiating, and accommodating interventions. The contributors to this special issue examine a number of state projects aimed at reconfiguring rural communities and landscapes—their roots, their unfolding, and the responses these interventions into rural lifeworlds elicit. Recognizing these processes is vital to understanding the current historical moment in China and offers insights into rural transformations around the world. In an era that appears to be dominated by urban-centric capitalist relations, the rural is a crucial site for

understanding social and environmental changes and the broader political economies in which they are enmeshed. As Krause pointedly argues, “If the whole world is urbanizing, it *must* also be ruralizing” (2013: 234, emphasis original).

Locating the Rural in China

What is “the rural” that is being recast? As contributors to this issue venture to speak about the rural in China, we must address the relationality of the rural and the urban. In contemporary China, the dyad is anchored in the urban, where economic, cultural, and political powers concentrate, and from which projects propelled by these powers issue. However, by calling attention to how rural laborers, resources, landscapes, and images shape urban worlds just as urban aspirations and resource flows shape them, we present a rural that is more than the urban’s abject other (Williams 1975; Walker 1981; Cronon 1991; Walker and Lewis 2001). This provides a corrective to prevalent discourses of global urbanism by highlighting the constant remaking of urban and rural as relational and dynamic categories. In China as elsewhere, globalizing practices recast relationships to and within rural areas (McCarthy 2005). The agency of rural people and the refractory materiality of rural sociocultures in turn condition processes and possibilities in the metropole (Bell et al. 2010; Bunker and Ciccantell 2005).

We find Bell’s (2007: 413) presentation of a “rural plural,” in which material and ideal moments are seen as epistemologically and ontologically equal and always in a “plural dialogue,” to be a useful conceptual springboard. The material moment, which Bell calls “the first rural,” is based on demographic, spatial, and occupational markers: low population density, expanses between settlements, and engagement in primary production. The ideal moment, “the second rural,” is “a rural of associations,” the conceptions people deploy when referring to a neighborhood as “like a village” or when attributing authenticity or wholesomeness to foods and lifeways associated with rural places (*ibid.*; see also Halfacree 1993; Williams 1973). The ideal rural transcends spaces and populations, reverberating as people invoke the rural in downtowns or deserts, and is less liable to be marked as ontologically secondary. Both are incomplete. Both are constituted through practice (Halfacree 2006), constantly remade in negotiations, struggles, and impositions: efforts to define and measure rural units, to establish or expropriate property rights, to stake ownership in places, and to influence commodity flows.

Public discussions in China commonly identify the rural with the materiality of the “three rural problems” (*san nong wenti*): farmers or peasants (*nongmin*), rural society or villages (*nongcun*), and rural production or agriculture (*nongye*). The phrase “three rural problems” encapsulates the crisis of peasant welfare and the rural economy in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the result of decades of surplus extraction from the rural to subsidize industry both during high socialism and, in a different manner, after economic reform. The strict household registration (*hukou*) system and restrictions on mobility starting in the 1950s enabled a material separation of rural and urban. These policies loosened in the 1980s, and migrants began to flow from countryside to cities. The movement of what is today some 200 million migrant workers has led to what observers have called the “spectralization” of the countryside, which is now often home to only the young and the old (Yan 2003). Meanwhile, shifting state taxation policy and decentralizing reforms in the 1990s squeezed revenue from rural populations, exacerbating “peasant burdens” (*nongmin fudan*).

Central state authorities have responded to the rural crisis by abolishing the agricultural tax, which lessened the burden on farmers but also shrank the fiscal base from which rural

governments provide services, and by implementing a suite of policies collectively called the Construction of the New Socialist Countryside. This program aims to promote rural welfare through provisions such as the extension of electric power and water infrastructure, direct grain subsidies to farmers, subsidized rural health insurance, and the abolition of school fees for compulsory education. In practice, however, the Construction of the New Socialist Countryside has increasingly become a project of literal construction (Yeh 2013). As Wilczak (this issue) shows, it has become in many places a form of managed rural urbanization or “townization”, and has set the stage for the entrance of rural planning as a profession and technical practice in the countryside. Planning is, of course, both ideological and material practice. The intertwining of the two can be clearly seen in the shifting aesthetics that have come through rural planning efforts (Wilczak, this issue; Zhang and Wu, this issue; Chen 2012; Bray 2013).

In contemporary China, approaches to service provision and planning draw on multiple ideologies of the rural. The discourse of low *suzhi*, or quality, denigrates the rural (along with ethnic minorities and the western part of the country overall) as backward and uncivilized, in contrast to the high *suzhi* of developed, advanced, and civilized urban spaces and peoples. Such depictions both draw on and justify material deprivations rural people face (Yan 2003, 2008; Anagnost 2004). As *suzhi* discourse has buttressed efforts to improve rural people and landscapes, affirmative ideologies of the rural have also emerged. In these ideological recastings, long-standing associations of the rural with drudgery and backwardness now stand alongside advanced production, environmental protection, and beauty and refuge. For example, the New Rural Reconstruction Movement emerged as left intellectuals’ attempt to re-envision a future for the Chinese countryside that builds on Chinese culture and alternative models of organization such as cooperatives, peasant associations, and democratic self-governance (Day 2008, 2013; Day and Hale 2007). At the same time, urban elites are now nostalgically reimagining the rural as a site of environmental purity and moral worth.

These ideologies of the rural and material processes constitute each other in complex ways. “Townization” draws on *suzhi* discourse, with its drive to civilize rural populations. Its planners draw on a range of aesthetics, from modernistic concentration to nostalgia for an imagined traditional Chinese countryside to fantasies of Tudor-style settlements (Wilczak, this issue). The layout and aesthetics of these new developments often do not match the practices of rural residents (Zhang and Wu, this issue). Nor is “townization” the only process shaping new rural landscape. Local and provincial officials, together with private capital, have worked together to produce other landscapes to be produced and consumed as tourism attractions (Chio, 2014; Neumann, 2002; Walker and Fortmann, 2003; Williams, 1973; Zinda, this issue), where visitors go to enjoy scenic surroundings, see exotic ethnic minorities, and escape the health scares and industrial pollution of cities (Yeh and Lama, 2013). Pursuing the bucolic rural, “new urban farmers” are also going “back to the land,” leasing land from migrants who have left the land and subsidizing the production of organic vegetables with urban savings and income (Sun and Thompson 2014; cf. Zhang and Donaldson 2013). Meanwhile, recent national policies materially recast larger swathes of rural China for extractive and agricultural production and environmental protection (MEP, 2007; State Council, 2010).

Productivist and Environmental Logics

Two regimes of value, which we call productivist logics and environmental logics, permeate Chinese state discourses around rural projects. These two logics are not exhaustive, but

they do provide especially useful lenses for understanding rural change in contemporary China. We start from an understanding of the party-state as an institutional ensemble with overriding goals of sustaining accumulation and maintaining domination by cultivating legitimacy and control. Fostering accumulation, state agents exercise productivist logics, managing land use and access to encourage the generation of surplus value through commodity production and rent extraction. However, wholesale extraction of surplus from land and from people living upon it degrades the capacity of landscapes to produce commodities and to reproduce life-sustaining functions (Polanyi 2001 [1944]). Environmental logics flow out of the role of the state in containing the tendency of capital to destroy the biophysical underpinnings of accumulation (O'Connor 1991; Schnaiberg and Gould 1994). Interventions to restore or enhance environmental functions often highlight the rural as the site of state-institutional environmental processes and practices (Buttel 1992). The current historical moment finds these two sorts of logics in vigorous dialogue as the central authorities in China simultaneously promote intensification of commodity production while restricting and redirecting some productive activities, usually in rural areas, in the name of “ecological security” (e.g., NPC 2006; MEP 2007).

Productivist logics dominated state engagement with the rural through the early history of the People's Republic. Under Mao, party members, government officials, and many Chinese citizens alike saw rural lands as battlefields against nature. In an effort to build military and geopolitical power through economic expansion, the party-state pushed resource extraction and industrial production with scant consideration of environmental costs (Shapiro 2001). Extraction of surplus from rural areas facilitated industrial growth through an administrative “scissors gap” (Chan 1992). Even as policies shifted under Deng, rural policy continued to stress enhancing production in farms, forests, and mines.

Since the late 1990s, however, environmental logics that both complement and compete with productivist logics have emerged. Manifest, for example, in “ecological construction” programs intended to conserve and rehabilitate forests, grasslands, and wetlands (Yeh 2009), this set of logics is revealed when state authorities invoke environmental values to justify measures that constrain productivist uses of landscapes. Forest and rangeland conservation programs, agricultural land management, and protected area consolidation manage land to enhance or restore environmental processes. Such actions may not actually achieve the environmental aims for which they are intended (see, e.g., Schmidt et al. 2011; Jiang 2006); our concern here is that state agents justify these designations and practices with reference to environmental values. Central state pronouncements articulate these values in terms of *ecological security*, which depends on preventing disasters and long-term damage not only to property and economic activity but also human life and state legitimacy (e.g., NPC 2006; MEP 2007). China's 12th Five Year Plan, released in 2011, put forward an ecological security strategy, calling for the designation of green buffer zones to “shield vulnerable land” in “areas where development is limited or banned” (Hu and Liang 2011). These efforts arise from the Chinese state's continued—but changing—modernist orientation toward the environment, founded in the notion that environmental services and ecological integrity can and should be planned and managed “scientifically.” They manifest China's ongoing environmentalization, which in Buttel's (1992: 2) words denotes “concrete processes by which green concerns and environmental considerations are brought to bear in political and economic decisions... [and] in institutional practices.”

Embracing the environmental logic of ecological security does not entail abandoning productivist logics. On the contrary, productivist projects spread apace (Coggins and Yeh 2014).

Major policy directives have promoted the scaling-up of crop and livestock production, extractive resource development, energy generation, and tourism to extract greater surplus from units of rural land. The productivist logics that propel these projects are often in tension with environmental logics. Indeed, state officials are continuously occupied with trying to reconcile the two. They often attempt to do so through efforts at separation and concentration. For example, agricultural intensification in fertile areas may free marginal land for landscape restoration to provide environmental services.² Plans for rebuilding rural communities reserve “ecological service areas” and spaces for nature recreation (Wilczak, this issue). These efforts achieve functional intensification, with separate spaces reserved for intensified production and intensified protection. The supporting narrative holds that concentrated production frees up land and generates surplus to underwrite environmental protection, while restored environments maintain favorable conditions for production. As our case studies show, however, attempts to keep functions apart often do not succeed. Alternatively, state agents may seek ways to generate economic value while obtaining actual or purported environmental benefits within the same spaces, pursuing complementarity rather than separation. In the Returning Farmland to Forest Project, officials in the State Forestry Administration broadened the category of “ecological forests” designated for restoration to include commercial tree crops with potential for stabilizing soil (Zinda, Trac and Harrell, this issue). In protected areas, mass tourism yields massive revenues that legitimate the prohibition of commercial uses of surrounding land (Zinda, this issue). The papers in this issue explore how state agents and rural residents deal with complementarities and tensions that arise from efforts to reconcile environmental and productivist logics.

Rationalizing Spaces

State agents apply environmental and productivist logics through expansive efforts to rationalize the use of rural land. These rationalizing practices, which articulate with accumulation processes, take various forms, such as moving water from the moist south to the overdrawn north; amalgamating farmland and concentrating construction land for scaled-up agricultural production and real estate development; and designating zones of land for restricted economic activity. In other cases, planned sustainable development zones purport to integrate rural land optimization with the construction of green industries such as solar photovoltaics (Chen 2013). All of these projects have in common a drive to convert complex and heterogeneous patterns of land use and land cover into simpler, more homogeneous patterns through planning practices.

These planning processes work through establishing quotas, called “redlines,” for different land uses and distributing these quotas across space in zones. The State Council introduced the first formal redline in 2006, with the announcement that cropland area nationwide must not fall below 120 Mha. The State Council issued corresponding redlines for forestry land and forest cover two years later and for water resources management in 2012, and it is now considering a redline for biodiversity (Lü et al. 2013, State Council 2012). These redlines serve as a basis for linking quantified national goals to provincial and municipal implementation quotas and as benchmarks for assessing the performance of government officials (Li et al. 2012). Agencies at several levels parcel redline quotas into zones by overlaying GIS layers and applying

² This is often characterized as a “land-sparing” approach to land use. See e.g., Dressler and Roth, 2011; Phalan et al., 2011.

heuristic criteria. Particular land uses—agriculture, conservation, housing, and so on—are concentrated in designated zones. National Ecological Function Zoning and Major Function-Oriented Zoning programs have created prohibited development zones, restricted development zones, and key ecological function zones that together cover over two-fifths of China's land mass (Lü et al. 2013). The National Climate Change Adaptation Strategy parcels the country's territory into zones for urbanization, agricultural development, and ecological security (NDRC 2013). At smaller scales, an industry of planning professionals translates local leaders' visions and achieves compliance with national regulations in redesigned rural settlements (Wilczak, this issue) and tourism attractions (Zinda 2014). These mapped idealizations propel efforts to reallocate rural land use and access to meet national-level goals of optimizing economic production and environmental protection.

Spatial concentration and functional intensification are at the center of rationalization practices, which aim to scale up both production and environmental protection. Consolidating farmland by aggregating household plots into large blocks and moving residents from interspersed housing sites to “new rural communities,” state agencies pursue economies of scale in both agriculture and housing (Zhang and Wu, this issue). Amalgamation of farmland often brings concentration of access into the hands of agribusiness elites (Zhang and Donaldson 2008). The emerging industrial meat regime favors concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) over small-scale livestock husbandry integrated with crop farming. As one of Schneider's (this issue) informants sums up, “people come together, and pigs come together.” In accordance with Chinese middle class consumer anxieties about food safety (Yan 2012), state discourse represents the large livestock operations that result as safer and cleaner, in spite of massive pollution releases. Indeed, as Schneider shows, CAFOs are symptomatic of another role in which the rural is being recast: as a sink for waste and a place to offload and resolve contradictions of capitalist growth. Unlike discourses that recast rural spaces as sites of either commodity production or environmental value, this set of practices is not officially acknowledged, though it is manifest not only in CAFOs but also in China's notorious ‘cancer villages.’

Like concentrated livestock operations, local and national government and enterprise leaders present large-scale mining operations as more economically efficient and more environmentally sound than smaller ones. In Ordos, Inner Mongolia, this results in efforts (not always successful) to shut down small-scale firms and mines in favor of large champion firms, while villagers are moved from their agricultural land, which is emptied of coal, people, and wealth, to concentrated settlements (Woodworth, this issue). Likewise, mass tourism operations displace activities run by communities and households (Zinda, this issue). In this new rural, pigs come together in CAFOs, crops in monocrop expanses, and trees in designated forests, while people come together in multi-story housing and single-use zoning areas. At the same time, people are separated from pigs, from crops, and from forests: from the means of production and subsistence.

All of these forms of spatial concentration—of livestock production, crop production, mineral production, housing, and conservation—take place only through tremendous investments of effort and money. Far from arising “naturally” through the action of the market's invisible hand, state action is required to achieve concentrations that are subsequently linked to economic and resource efficiencies. Moreover, the consolidation and optimization of rural land constitutes a tremendous amount of economic activity. These plans for rationalization and spatial concentration evoke James C. Scott's (1998) “high modernist authoritarian” planning, in which the intricate weave of field, forests, creeks and settlements is divided into singly designated

zones that are more amenable to control and taxation. In the development paradigm articulated by the most recent five-year plans and the National Plan for Urbanization, these large-scale spatial projects are largely buttressed by a drive to create urban consumers rather than a universalist ethos intended to equalize and democratize (State Council 2014). Such projects of rural and urban spatial optimization are underpinned by governmental techniques in which the simplifying logics and calculative techniques of the market are extended to land and ecosystems (cf. Robertson 2006). Stripped of their multiplicities, units of land defined by a few valued attributes become countable and fungible (Chen 2013). Redlines for agricultural and forest land abstract from qualities of soil, topography, climate, biotic composition, and cultural value, making each unit exchangeable with any other, so that all that matters is “no net loss” (cf. Robertson 2000). This renders other social and ecological considerations irrelevant, so that any generic unit lost can be “offset” with any other. However, these processes of scientific purification may produce unintended rifts between the objects of policy and their enumerated representations. For example, residential plots become generic farmland that can be traded for an equal area of generic farmland converted for periurban construction. This enables further spatial concentration and accumulation, but also produces an abstract figure in a spreadsheet as the political equivalent to actually farmed land (Chen 2013; Zhang and Wu, this issue).

Like high modernist authoritarian regimes, political elites in China see rural landscapes as ones to be planned and optimized. But as Tania Li has observed in other contexts, “the effects of planned interventions have to be examined empirically, in the various sites where they unfold” (2005: 391). In the party-state calculus of legitimacy and control, the rural landscape is a terrain where social instability might erupt. Thus, official discourse emphasizes “reconciling” or “coordinating” (*tongchou*) goals that are in tension: jointly addressing urban and rural development, interregional development, economic and social development, relationships between humans and nature, and internal development and external openness (Central Committee 2003). While they readily attempt to manipulate land use at great scales, central authorities do so at a remove, through the constrained agency of local officials and give-and-take with residents. Surprising compromises can result (Zinda, Trac and Harrell, this issue).

As state and nonstate actors vie to generate cash flows from rural spaces, their efforts at accumulation encounter and reshape efforts to rationalize space. Zoning and amalgamation create sites for rent extraction. Scaling up production in farms, forests, tourist attractions, and mines benefits state-affiliated champion firms. Bureaucratic incentive structures and the lure of private profit lead local officials to promote commodity production (Smith 2013). Efforts to commodify periurban land for eco-cities are signal examples of how such spatial planning efforts intersect with environmentalization (Chen 2012; Chien 2013). Tourism development around scenic heritage sites is likewise difficult to trammel (Wang et al. 2011). Rather than collapsing under the weight of hubris, rationalizing projects melding productivist and environmental logics unfold in webs of contention and the ongoing politics of dispossession (cf. Levien 2012).

Conclusion

Rural China is living, vital and variegated, even as its meanings and relationships, landscapes and people transform. In this process, the central government recasts rural space as national space, renewing productivist engagements and introducing logics of resource optimization. The following articles illustrate the sociospatial transformations afoot as the Chinese state re-engages the rural with a conception of the national welfare that pursues both

productivist and environmental values. Aiming to foster surplus accumulation and state legitimation, state agents work to corral rural people and spaces to intensify commodity production and environmental protection. The mix of outcomes, some unanticipated, with state actors struggling with one another or backtracking and reformulating rural projects, challenge the prevailing narrative of urbanizing relations obliterating rural China. We do not deny the transformative projects issuing from China's urban centers of power, but we show how rural populations, institutions, and socionatures take a hand in their own recasting.

By illuminating efforts to recast the rural in China—to mold it to suit disparate projects, to bring new actors into the drama—we aim also to recast discussions of rural change more broadly. Just as tensions between goals of production and environmental protection in rural spaces are not unique to China, the processes discussed in this issue are relevant beyond China through their global connections and analogues. First, China's experience—and those in many other places, from the tar sands of Alberta to the land grabs in Mozambique—shows that movement from “a productivist to a post-productivist to a multifunctional countryside” (McDonagh 2013) is anything but universal. Productivist and environmental logics are central to expanding efforts to extract resources from countrysides, as well as efforts to consolidate amenity landscapes. Second, the forceful role of the party-state raises connections and counterpoints to narratives of rural change that start from the dominance of neoliberalism (e.g., Wolf and Bonanno 2014), bringing into focus the role of the state in processes of dispossession and value struggles that are foundational to the creation of new markets and fictitious commodities of land and cultural landscapes. Many states are making broad interventions to intensify rural production as well as conservation (Levien 2012; Rudel 2013). In China this role is heightened, allowing for an especially clear view of the imperatives state agents see and the practices they undertake in response (cf. Robertson and Wainwright 2013).

The global environmental turn has raised the profile of the rural worldwide. In China as elsewhere, concerns over resources, food safety, water supply and climate change mitigation and adaptation are drawing attention to the rural with an intensity not seen since the green revolution. The thesis of planetary urbanization would encompass these concerns as part and parcel of capitalism's uneven creative destruction across the surface of the earth, but we suggest that this obscures the human and nonhuman lives at stake. Instead, China's current engagement with the rural, even amid its frenzied rush to move its population to urban agglomerations, points to the new questions emerging alongside the long-standing agrarian questions of capitalism and farming (Hecht 2014; Rauch 2014). As states and corporations grasp at rural resources, urbanites rediscover the rural sources of their food and goods, and rural constituencies accommodate and contest efforts to reshape their livelihoods. In China's political economic context, environmental and productivist logics articulate in specific ways. their convergence raises questions that are relevant everywhere.

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