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Forestry, Farms, Family, and Small Towns in the Hill Country of Central China

By

Kan Liu

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Geography

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor You-tien Hsing, Chair
Professor Gillian Hart
Professor Xin Liu

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Abstract

Forestry, Farms, Family, and Small Towns in the Hill Country of Central China

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Doctor of Philosophy in Geography

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Professor You-tien Hsing, Chair

This dissertation explores the *multiple processes* integral to rural transformation in western Jiangxi Province, China. It examines the spatio-historical characteristics underlying the rise of small-scale private forestry, the partial mechanization of wet-rice farming, gendered translocal family reproduction, and small-town revival in this part of rural China in the early 21st century. It emphasizes the *roots* of and *routes* towards producing the hill community and small towns in the context of wider global processes. The dissertation contends that an open and relational conceptualization of space and place entails an alternative understanding of the countryside and its place within China at large. In this sense, the hill country in western Jiangxi Province is not to be understood as a 'case' study of a more general phenomenon. Rather, this dissertation explains the specificity of this hill region as arising not because of its 'local' characteristics and isolation from the outside world, but rather due to the simultaneous interconnectedness of multiple processes.

Centering on the lived experiences and everyday life of children and mothers, this dissertation recognizes alternative possibilities for the rural population of China, which maintains a remarkable degree of agency, as reflected in villagers' aspirations and identity. Socially constructed gender relations are critical forces that affect and reflect the complexity of the countryside and the varied regional economy in today's China.

Theoretically, the term "multiple processes" draws interconnections through the lens of "a global conjunctural frame." This particular frame differs from the conventional approach of studying agrarian transition as a transition from peasant society to a "modern" capitalist one. Three global conjunctural moments were important in this part of rural China: the end of the Cold War; the beginning of neoliberal forms of capitalism since the late 1980s; and the post-2008 global financial crisis. One key theoretical insight of the global conjunctural frame is to denaturalize pre-given bounded units and overcome a set of dichotomies, such as global/local, agriculture/forestry, and work/everyday life. The central threads linking the four processes are history, gender, and geography.

Acknowledgments

My sincerest gratitude goes to the people of Xialongkou. I cannot mention each one of them here by name, as I have used fictional county- and sub-county names and personal names in this dissertation to protect anonymity. The names I devised for them are a combination of words from the local dialect and Putonghua (Mandarin). Needless to say, my fellow villagers are ordinary people yet proud of their life and resilient in difficult times. They inspired me to see that changes are always possible.

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The process of researching and writing this dissertation has had a profound impact on both my personal and professional development. Throughout my challenging eight-year Ph.D. journey, I often encountered moments of doubt. During those times, Liu Xin *laoshi* and Gill offered warm words of encouragement and kindness, helping me navigate through the difficulties. Drinks with Nancy Peluso and coffee with Seth Lunine and Sharad Chari also provided solace and eased my anxieties. With their empathy, support, and strategic guidance, I was able to overcome the challenges of writing the dissertation while fulfilling my responsibilities as a graduate student instructor (GSI).

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Introduction

The present dissertation has been both a scholarly inquiry and, to some extent, a personal journey. In early October 2018, I landed at Hong Kong International Airport after a 15-hour flight from San Francisco. One hour later, along with six passengers in a minivan, I arrived in Shenzhen. The air was warm with the autumn breeze. Many shops were still open and people were eating and talking outside restaurants. Taxis were running for midnight customers. I got into one.

Shenzhen was one of the Special Economic Zones (SEZs) that my sisters and I had migrated to in the late 1990s. It remains to this day a migrant city. "Your *jiuma* is in Shenzhen. You should stop by and pay a visit," my mother urged me over the phone the day before my flight. *Jiuma* was in her late 60s. The wife of my mother's brother, she was there as a "floating parent" to look after her daughter's two kids. My cousin, who goes by Danny, is two years younger than me. She came to the subway station to pick me up. Danny and her husband both come from the rural county of Aipin in western Jiangxi Province. The couple has been working in Shenzhen for ten years at Tencent, one of the giant IT corporations in China. They were both college graduates and, with the help of both parents, had bought a flat in Shenzhen, one of the most expensive real estate markets in China. Their two kids go to public schools near their apartment complex. The grandmothers from both sides take half-year turns to help the couple to look after the kids. When the dinnertime came, I was surprised to taste two dishes from our hometown, smoked ham and smoked dry bamboo shoots. Danny and *jiuma* asked me to be seated, and said the usual, "Nothing special, *sui bian chi* (help yourself)." Far away from the hill country, here in Shenzhen, Danny's family/household continues to munch a hometown specialty. Sensing my surprise, Danny explained that they had gotten a load of local specialties, even eggs, because they had just driven back one week ago after a funeral at their hometown. The next day, I myself took a high-speed train to Aipin County via Yichun station.

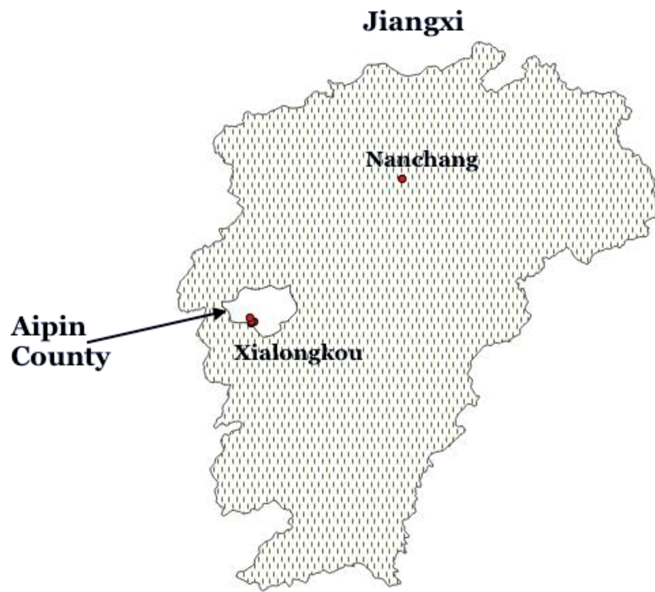
Arriving at Yichun high-speed train station, "black taxi" drivers were hovering around and stopped in front of me, asking: "Aipin?" I nodded my head and asked the price. "30, leaving now," he said. Inside the car, two strange passengers were in the back seats. I took the front seat. One hour later, I was at Aipin county seat. I paid a brief visit to my brother. Like many migrant returnees, my brother and his wife had returned from Zhejiang Province around 2009, and bought a flat in Aipin town. There, my sister-in-law worked at a clothing store in a new shopping mall. My brother and I went to the wet market to buy green leafy vegetables and meat. After lunch, I took a one and a half-hour bus ride to Xialongkou, my final destination. The experience of traveling from San Francisco via Shenzhen city to Aipin County and finally to Xialongkou in Jiangxi Province seemed insignificant to me at the time (see Map 3). Yet it is precisely the ways in which insignificant elements of everyday life nevertheless entail connections between Xialongkou and the wider world that is at the heart of this dissertation.

Xialongkou is a small village of 41 households with only two major surnames: Liu and Zhou. It is under the administration of Shanli Township and Aipin County in the southwest of Jiangxi Province (see Maps 1 and 2). There were 224 residents in 2018. All households specialize in rice and tree farming. Because Xialongkou is surrounded by hills, all households plant trees and rely on resources from the hills. The community is named after a river that flows to the east and eventually merges into the Gan River (Map

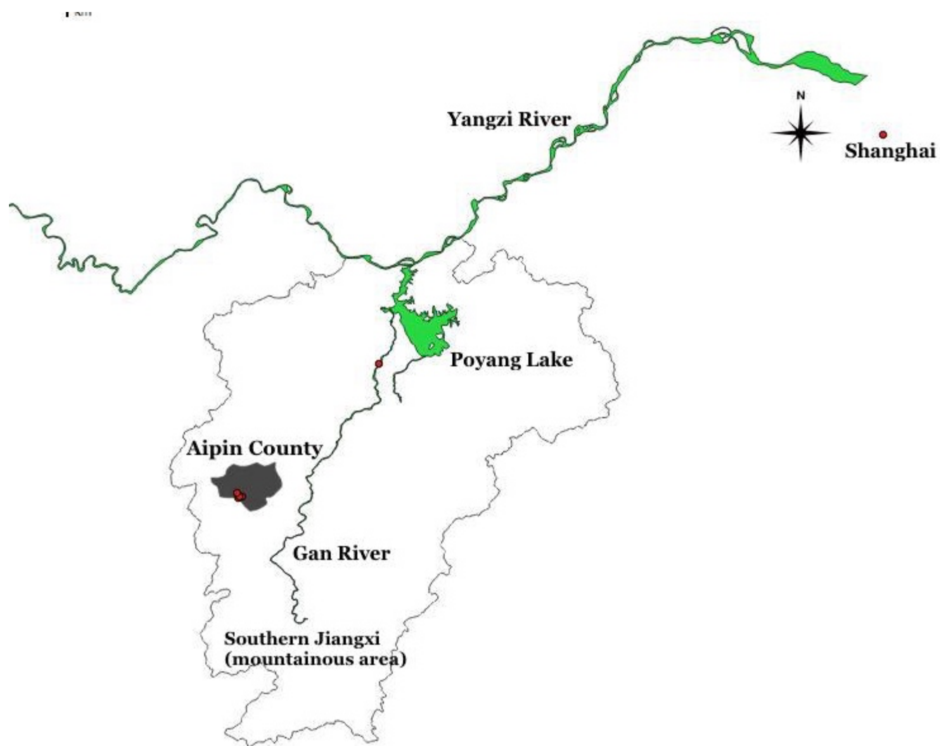
4). The name Xialongkou literally means “lower dragon mouth.” In addition to agnatic ties, the topography of the hill country defines the residential communities. Each of these communities is closely linked to one another, most of them situated amid the bends and turns of the river.

Map 1. Location of Xialongkou.

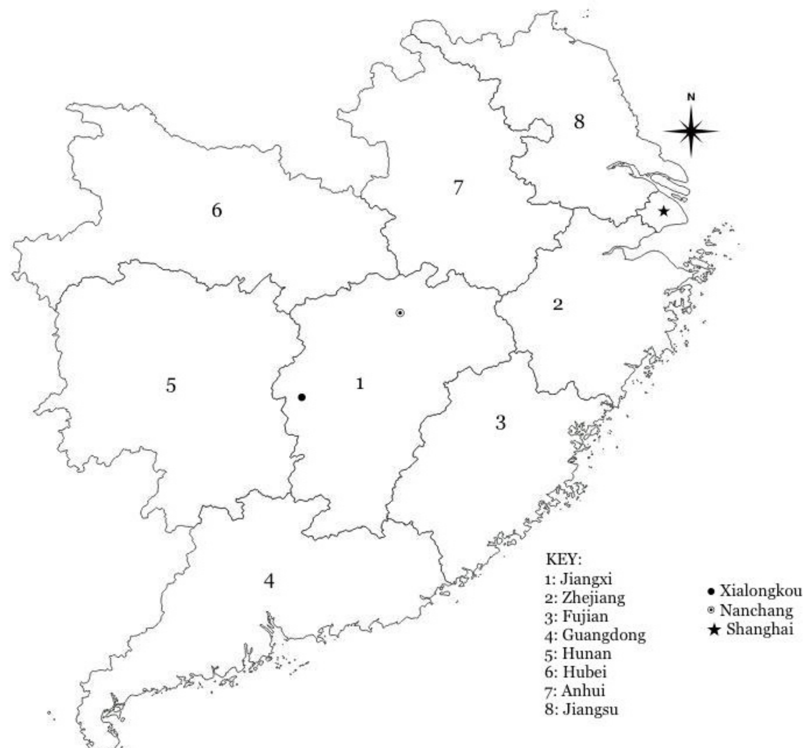
Map 2. Traveling route from SFO to Xialongkou.



Map 3. Jiangxi Province, Aipin County, and Xialongkou community.



Map 4. Major geographic feature of Jiangxi Province in relation to Aipin County.



Map 5. Jiangxi Province and its neighboring provinces.

This dissertation is not an argument about Chinese village exceptionalism. Instead, I conceptualize Xialongkou and its small towns as nodal points of larger on-going processes within China and beyond. Among such larger processes, two phenomena in particular have captured the world's attention. One is associated with the rapid economic growth in terms of GDP that by 2010 put the Chinese economy in second place in the world, right behind the United States. The second is the large-scale rural-to-urban migration of over 287 million people (as of 2019) who have 'cheaply' sustained China's export-oriented industrial development. But along with these two related phenomena, the Chinese countryside has itself been undergoing tremendous change. This transformation is largely perceived and commonly portrayed as a rural crisis, associated with three sets of developments.

The first is variously described as the "hollowed heart village" (*kong xin cun*), the "empty nest village" (*kong cao cun*), or the village with "left-behind children, women, and elders" (*liu shou er tong, fu nu, he lao ren*). The second set of developments concerns the rise of "large farms" and "agribusiness companies"—that is, agrarian capitalism. The rural social-cultural decay is thought to be conveniently exploited to promote modern scaled-up agriculture. Such agricultural modernization has long been perceived as a necessary step for increasing productivity, a singular form of *progress* that unites the ideologies of both Marxist Chinese and market-oriented neoliberals. The third set of perceived developments concerns the explosive rates of farmland dispossession and rural displacement in peri-urban areas, where another key process of land-centered urbanization has taken hold since the 2000s. The combined images of empty nest villages, the rise of agrarian capitalism, and the growth of landless villagers due to urbanization, all seemingly imply the destruction of rural smallholders in the countryside. This has led some commentators to argue that, unless the three sets of developments were

actively corrected, China would inevitably end up joining the global slums of the twenty-first century (Zhan 2019).

The present study offers a different image of the countryside and small towns, especially in the context of the post-2008 global financial crisis. It is a story that underlines four key processes: the resurgence of small-scale private forestry, the partial mechanization of wet-rice terrace farming, gendered translocal family reproduction, and the revival of small-town China. My arguments focusing on small-town revival and spatially extended family reproduction are shaped on the one hand by the specific field sites I have examined. On the other hand, it is seen through the lived experiences of families/households in this part of rural China. Indeed, the rural population was never "left behind" but rather continued to exercise agency in their lives. In turn, locals enable and are enabled by the changing conditions in rural and small towns and are interconnected with wider national and global processes. For the people in the interior hill region of southwest Jiangxi examined here, the most commonly practiced strategy for family/household reproduction is to hold on to both rural and urban resources and social relations.

In general, my findings differ from the mainstream analysis of Chinese agrarian transition that seeks to confirm China's continuous 'deviation' from the classic theory of agrarian transition. The transition theory is commonly understood as a move from pre-capitalist to capitalist production, where subsistence farming is replaced by profit driven capitalist agribusiness. This theory of agrarian transition was based on the eighteenth century English experience, which was taken to be a universal model to be applied outside its original context. In fact, many scholars have argued that China's industrial development was enabled without land dispossession and with incomplete proletarianization. My study builds on this insight, but goes a step further to argue that *multiple processes* are at play to produce new forms of agrarian change and rural and small towns urbanization in today's China.

In addition, I argue for the theoretical importance of spatio-historical interconnections by centering on gendered translocal family reproduction in order to underscore the interconnected multiple processes of rural transformation. Although certain scholars have advanced our understanding by linking urban processes with agrarian change, the great majorities have focused on farmland dispossession and rural displacement. My view of agrarian change is shaped rather by the spatio-historical conditions in this region of rural China. Local specificities are produced in the context of wider processes. They do not constitute a 'local' variant of a more general phenomenon. In this sense, the four processes of on-going changing conditions in forestry, wet-rice cultivation, migration routes, and small-town development are specific yet interconnected with wider processes. On the one hand, I argue that each process has its distinctive spatio-historical dynamics. Yet, along with many critical human geographers, who conceptualize space and place as relational products of an ongoing process, I see the limitations of analyzing each of the four processes separately as bounded spheres. Instead, my argument and theoretical orientation seeks to go beyond various dichotomies and 'occidentalisms,' in Fernando Coronil's (2019) sense, by pivoting the method of relational comparison through the axis of historical geographies. Thus, I examine how the four distinctive processes are historically and geographically articulated and in turn change the conditions for family/household reproduction.

Another related difference in my approach is to emphasize the theoretical and methodological significance of the lived experiences and agencies of women and

children. Government officials and local cadres, as well as developers and capitalists, are often portrayed as the driving forces behind China's current modernization and development. This dissertation balances this mainstream view by centering subjectivities and aspirations of the research subjects, not by treating the research subjects as objects to be transformed with little or no agency. As Karl Marx wrote in his *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* in 1852: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past." In other words, changing conditions and subjectivities are both important and help constitute one another.

The principal methodology for my examination of the hill country of southwest Jiangxi involves an ethnographic study of the lived experience of everyday life, and secondarily a reading of primary source materials found in county libraries, the office of the gazetteer, and the Jiangxi provincial archives. My ethnographic study has involved a total of eleven months of fieldwork, including two months in 2017 and nine months from October 2018 to July 2019. My research was greatly facilitated by the fact that I was born and grew up in this particular hill country and possess life-long lived experience and local knowledge of the society and culture—including fluency in the particular dialect spoken there. However, invariably, my native identity also presented certain problems and ambiguities.

It is thus important to present here the conditions of my fieldwork. I had initially planned to do research on land conversion. In the research process, however, I soon discovered that land conversion was of little relevance to the local family's actual experience. The tension between thematic preparation and the ethnographer's actual observations became a critical point of self-reflection. This tension was amplified by my ambiguous identity as more than an ethnographer. A native scholar studying his/her own society is not as easy and straightforward as one might think. A similar difficulty has been described by the anthropologist Liu Xin (2000). My problem was slightly different, however. I had no difficulty choosing field sites. My problem was to avoid my 'bias', as an insider. As such, I was determined to follow my own scholarly preparation by incorporating perspectives from the official language of development and modernization.

I needed no introduction to the Xialongkou community. People did not question my presence, nor that of my American husband and four-year old daughter. It was considered altogether proper for a married daughter to visit her maternal family. As an insider, I was expected to observe all the unspoken rules within the communities while we lived in Xialongkou. As a "married-out" daughter and a researcher, I was an outsider. As a mother with a kid, my presence and social interactions with women and children were more natural and intense than other interactions. This shaped how I engaged with mothers and children, which in turn transformed my research direction to include gendered family reproduction and migration routes.

Unlike a social science researcher whose life is separated from the researched community, this community was and is part of my life. I have a stake in everything I did and said that would affect the Liu family and the Xialongkou community. As both an insider and an outsider, my approach was reflexive and entailed "relational comparisons" (Hart 2018). Relational comparisons focus on the interconnections that underline the production of space, instead of the conventional orange and apple comparison. As such, I approached the hill country in and through the making of interconnections regarding four *simultaneous* processes, namely forestry, farming, family reproduction, and small town revival. During the period of residence, I lived with my own family in Xialongkou;

and with another rural family who had bought an apartment in the urban center and county seat of Aipin. At the county seat, I purchased a ten-year-old Jili sedan (a domestic brand) in the county's burgeoning used-car market. Equipped with the Jili, like the locals, I was able to make regular trips between Xialongkou village, rural market towns, and the county seat. I also made multiple trips to interview county/township officials in two bordering counties, where the heart of the Jiangxi Soviet was based in the late 1920s, in order to crosscheck local practices of forestry, rice farming, migration, and small town urbanization. The specific field site was chosen, first, in order to explore the importance of forest resources in addition to rice paddy fields; and second, because of the site's rural peripheral location far from any large metropolitan regions, as well as its high migration rate, and the historical and political significance of its local revolutions during the Jiangxi Soviet era in the late 1920s and the 1930s. For even broader points of reference, I also traveled to several other regions, both rural and urban, to observe the overall changing conditions and local specificities. Thus, I took brief trips to Wanxian County in Sichuan (in southwest China), Nanlin County in Anhui (central China), Helong County in Jilin Province (northeast China), and Xinjian County near Poyang Lake in northeastern Jiangxi.

In the following section, I will first discuss the scholarly debates on China's recent rural transformation. I will then develop the concept of production of space and the method of relational comparisons, with the goal of overcoming the mainstream dichotomies used to explaining the current change. I will conclude with a brief summary of the contents and structure of the dissertation.

Multiple processes producing a "new countryside"

In contrast to the oft-told story of China's great urban transformation (Hsing 2010), the narrative of Chinese contemporary countryside is laced with phrases like "village disappearance" or the "demise of China's peasantry," phrases found both in media reports[1] and in scholarly publications (for e.g., Sargeson 2016). Nevertheless, issues related to China's agrarian transformation have increasingly attracted scholars' attention, as indicated in two journal issues dedicated to the topic.[2] Among the contributions to these two journal issues, one of the major debates pivots around the dramatic rise of agricultural capitalism and its subsequent impact in today's Chinese countryside and its rural population. Recognizing the importance of the above-mentioned debate, however, I claim that the rise of agricultural capitalism is only a small part of a larger social, economic, cultural, and political transformation that is underway in rural China. Taking a relational approach (Hart 2018), in this literature review, I will here highlight the *multiple* forces coming together that produce a "new countryside" in some regions of rural China, by engaging with literatures on 1) the rise of agricultural capitalism; on 2) rural-urban migration; on 3) urbanization; on 4) the "New Socialist Countryside" campaign; and on 5) the rise of the politics of preservation. I will

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[1] Ian Johnson, "In China, 'Once the Villages Are Gone, the Culture is Gone,'" *New York Times*, February 1, 2014; in June 2013, Johnson also published four articles in the *New York Times* under the series title "Leaving the Land." The four articles were: "China's Great Uprooting: Moving 250 Million into Cities," "Pitfalls Abound in China's Push From Farm to City," "Picking Death over Eviction," and "New China's Cities: Shoddy Homes, Broken Hope."

[2] *The Journal of Peasant Studies* published a special series focusing on China's agrarian transformation in 2013, and *The Journal of Agrarian Change* published another special series on China's rural transformation in 2015.

concentrate with a discussion of how China's new countryside, in turn, is produced in and through global interconnections in the age of a resurgence of nationalization since the 2008 global financial crisis.

1. The rise of agrarian capitalism in rural China

Recent English literature on China's agrarian change is on the rise. Besides the two special issues previously alluded to in *The Journal of Peasant Studies* (2013) and *The Journal of Agrarian Change* (2015), other individual studies have been published by Trappel (2016); Van der Ploeg and Ye (2016); and Zhan (2019). So far, all of these studies focus on the period since market reforms (and especially on changes effected since the early 2000s), and their consensus is that agricultural capitalism is indeed present in China's vast countryside. However, these scholars diverge about the varied impacts on rural populations and, also, about the origins of capital (internal vs. external). For example, taking demography and diet change as the contexts for China's recent "hidden agriculture revolution" towards high-valued fruits and meat consumption-led agricultural production, counter to the narrative of small peasant economy demise, Huang (2021) and Huang et al. (2012) argue that small-peasant family farms actually outcompete big agricultural capitalists and demonstrate much greater resilience in this new agricultural age. In other words, the small peasant household is better suited to produce the new agriculture that is both capital- and labor-intensive. Beyond the homogeneous portrayal of the small peasantry, others scholars have argued that the impact of agricultural capitalism is manifested in class differentiation into five agrarian classes: the capitalist employer, the petty-bourgeois class of commercial farmers, two laboring classes of dual-employment households and wageworkers, and subsistence peasants (Zhang 2015). Still others interested in locating the source of capital have more or less come to acknowledge that both transnational capital from above and indigenous capital from below are present and contribute to the rise of agricultural capitalism in the countryside (Scheneider and Sharma 2014; Scheneider 2017; Zhang 2008). My research differs from abovementioned authors. I contend that agrarian capitalism is a specific form of accumulation and is not a *natural* process. In other words, agrarian capitalism is produced in specific history and interconnected geography. As such, my research denaturalizes the assumed *universal* agrarian capitalism by showing the interconnected and constitutive processes of forestry, family reproductions and small town development that (re) produces China's agrarian change.

2. Rural-urban migration: gender, age, and reproductive work

However, the rise of agricultural capitalism is only a small part of a larger transformation in the countryside. Feminist critiques of agrarian change and literature on rural-to-urban migration have revealed the importance of gendered reproductive work (Jacka 2018; Fan et al. 2008; Chuang 2016). Since China's economic reforms in the 1980s, rural-to-urban migrants have fundamentally and continually contributed to the rapid economic development in coastal and urban regions and to rural development through remittances (Murphy 2002). With internal migrants reaching over 287 million in 2019, split households are believed to have become the de facto "way of life" for many rural populations. This geographically dispersed situation recasts gender, age, and reproductive care work in the context of the "split household" strategy (Fan et al. 2011). As a result of this strategy, Chuang (2016) argues that rural women are expected to exit factory jobs to maintain the migration system. Chuang suggests that the phenomenon of "left-behind women" is not caused by the traditional patriarchal system but rather by the gendered calculations of elderly rural women faced with no social security. In particular

many elderly rural women urge their daughters to stay home and secure remittances from their sons-in-law by stigmatizing further female migration as licentious behavior. Thus, young women after having married and given birth, are expected to exit factory work and take responsibility for elderly care and child rearing so that husbands can continue to migrate, especially since men earn higher wages than women in general. Beyond stressing rural women's own agency, Jacka (2018) sharply criticizes the narrowly focused political-economy aspect of China's current agrarian change and offers an analysis of agrarian transformation focused on gender, intergenerational ties, and family reproductive work. Jacka shows that translocal families encompass strategies that are more than "livelihood" driven. Translocal families' strategies are simultaneously geared towards reproductive care work and "new social expectations and aspirations for family reproduction" (2018, 6). As many villagers' income has increased, most families have invested little in agriculture, but rather poured their savings into building a modern house or buying a new apartment in county seats. Modern housing is not only seen as materialized wealth and evidence of upward social status but also a must for any young man seeking to marry. Investment in housing is a key strategy for family reproduction. In addition, sending children to better urban schools in county seats or provincial capitals is another key strategy for family reproduction. My studies build on these insights and emphasize the variability and diverse lived experiences of the mothers and children in both rural and urban settings, as families have extended themselves to multiple spaces.

3. Urbanization

The "urban question of China's agrarian transformation" is explicitly probed in an unpublished manuscript by Hsing and Li (2017). In particular, they suggest that the important role of urban ideology or *tendency* towards urbanism animates rural residents even in peripheral of rural peripheral regions. This urban ideology is an indispensable aspect of the process of urbanization that is tightly interconnected between three typological places: urban core, urban fringe, and rural fringe (Hsing 2010). Arguing against the mainstream thesis of "state-led urbanization," Hsing proposes the opposite, namely the force of urbanization commands local governments' development agenda and politics. This thesis of the "local state urbanized" also puts a final end to China's once vital rural industry—the "Sunan model"— as local governments have shifted to a much more lucrative land-based revenue regime driven by rapid urban expansion in Jiangsu Province (Zhan 2015). As rural industry became like yesterday's flowers, migration routes to TVEs ended. Meanwhile, the rural construction sector had risen up thanks to the force of urbanization (Chuang 2020). Chuang argues that China's construction boom is based on two main ingredients: cheap rural migrant labor and cheap rural land. She reveals that China's current economic development is based on a double accumulation: accumulation without dispossession (Arrighi 2007) and accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2002). Following Arrighi's argument, Chuang states that all of the industrial and service sector in general, and the construction sector in particular, need rural migrant labor that tolerates low wages because family reproduction cost is born through the possession of farmland and the gendered care work at the migrants' place of origin. On the other hand, following Harvey's thesis, urbanization is also supported by the expropriation of rural land for high profits. My contribution to this literature is to underline the agency of the rural population, not as mere victims of the process, but rather as a constitutive part of China's regional development, and of the current small-town construction boom in particular.

4. The "New Socialist Countryside" campaign

In addition to the force of urbanization, rural China has been influenced since 2005 by the central government's campaign to build a "New Socialist Countryside." The campaign entails a series of initiatives—"productive development, comfortable livelihood, civilized villager morale, clean and tidy villages, and democratic management"—that the Chinese government set as its policy priority for the 11th and 12th five-year plans. In its initial phase, Chinese scholars have complained of the top-down policies and implementation that focused on superficial village "beautification" projects, advocating instead for peasants' participation in more meaningful rural change (Ye 2006). In contrast to this depiction of a "superficial" political campaign, Perry (2011) studied what she saw as the central government leaders' adaptive and pragmatic approaches to formulating "New Countryside" policies. In addition to central leaders, the active role of county and township government officials as key actors in the implementation of these policies leads to a "win-win" scenario for the state, the local government, and the villagers (Ahler and Shubert 2013). Still others have pointed to the role of social activists (scholars, lineage leaders, NGOs, local entrepreneurs/elites) who functioned as key actors in bridging the gap between the state and the villagers in successfully implementing sound policies for the "New Socialist Countryside" (Thogersen 2009). At the village level, Looney (2015) traces the rise and decline of the role of peasant councils in projects of the "New Countryside," and points to shifting central policy priorities towards rural housing and the demolishing of old houses and "hollow villages" created by rural-urban migration. This shift of central policy priorities reflects a leadership transition to President Xi. Focusing on housing, other scholars point to the increasing role of rural planning for "new villages" or, as Bray (2013) puts it, "urban planning goes to rural." According to Bray, rural planning is a political technology of governance. To govern better is to provide social welfare and services to rural populations in an efficient manner through the creation of concentrated "New Style Rural Communities" (Rosenberg 2013). Notwithstanding the contradictions and conflicts among the actors involved, it is no exaggeration to conclude that the Chinese state (at all levels) is actively involved in shaping and simultaneously being shaped in the process of producing China's "New Socialist Countryside".

5. The rise of politics of preservation: nature and cultural heritage

At the same time, the scholarship on the politics of conservation (of both nature and cultural heritage) points to another important force in the production of China's new countryside. Rural land dispossession is not always converted into real estate for housing projects as special economic zones, but can also involve the creation of cultural and nature conservation projects. Issues of environmental and ecological degradation, such as deforestation, soil erosion, and desertification, have been keenly appreciated in China since the late 1990s, by both the state and environmental activists (international and domestic NGOs). The Chinese government's efforts to become "an environmental state" are demonstrated in the state's two large-scale conservation programs: the Natural Forest Protection Program (NFPP, or the "logging ban") and the Sloping Land Conversion Program (SLCP, or "grain to green") in the early 2000s (Yeh 2013). Yeh places conservation within a broader framework of agrarian transformation and environmental politics. In particular, she argues that nature reserves across China's rural regions (both ethnic minority areas and Han majority areas) "are fundamentally about access to and control over resources" (1179). Following the global trend toward neoliberal schemes of "selling nature to save it" through the Payment for Ecosystem Services, thousands of national parks and nature reserves have been created since the 2000s, creations that not

only affect local people's livelihood by placing "logging bans", "grazing bans", and "replacing grain for green" on steep slopes, but also by uprooting local communities through the imposed process of "ecological migration" to newly created resettlement villages (Yeh 2009; Hathaway 2013). Equally important, cultural heritage projects have been utilized as powerful strategies for modernization and development in rural China by both local governments and rural residents themselves (Oakes 2013; Wu and Zhou 2013). Both nature conservation and heritage preservation schemes have been implemented in the part of rural China examined in this dissertation. Chapter Four will explore how both natural and cultural heritage projects are entangled with the township governments' agendas of increasing revenue through rural tourism and at the same time alleviating poverty.

By considering the multiple processes involved, the production of China's new countryside can be understood as a complex process of competition, contradiction, and accommodation between the state, the market, and the family/community on the one hand, and the spatio-historical conjuncture of increased globalized interconnections on the other.

Theoretical framework

Most scholars tend to emphasize a distinctive driving force behind specific elements of China's rural change, whether it be the rise of agricultural capitalism, migration, urbanization, the "New Socialist Countryside" campaign, or the rise of natural and cultural preservation. Yet to some extent each unilateral interpretation appears limited when confronted with the other explanations. My theoretical and methodological approach is different in that it centers on the interconnected, *multiple* processes at play that have changed the material and social conditions producing new forms of everyday life in the rural countryside and small towns. In the region considered here, the changing material and social conditions include private forestry, semi-mechanized rice cultivation, translocal family reproduction, and small town development, particularly in the context of the post-2008 global financial crisis in southwest Jiangxi. Following the steps taken by many critical human geographers, my argument is enabled by a conceptualization of space and place as a relational product within an on-going process of power struggles that are both material and meaningful (Lefebvre 1991; Massey 1994, 2006; Hart 2002, 2018, 2020). In addition, I follow Lefebvre's (1991) "regressive-progressive" spatio-temporal method and Hart's method of relational comparison and interconnected historical geographies. Both methods provide key analytical frames to understand the research sites not as separate 'cases' or as passive recipients of global impacts but rather as historical specific nodes in the production of global processes (Hart 2002; 2018). Specifically, Lefebvre's (1991) "regressive-progressive" methodology and his concept of *production of space* are critical to my understanding of the hill country and China at large. The method of engaging deeper spatio-historical understandings is not just to explain the multiple processes/forces driving China's agrarian change, but more importantly to suggest a different analytical and political frame that "shed[s] light on the slippages, openings, and contradictions where pressure might be applied, as well as connections and alliances from which new possibilities might emerge"(Hart 2020, 241). In other words, my research marks a distinct approach by 'denaturalizing' social science bounded fields that operate in a bounded concept of space, place, and identity. The major difference between my theoretical and methodological approach and that of the authors just mentioned involves my open, non-teleological understanding of rural transformation in China, and the spatial dimension of possibilities within a globalizing world.

Structure of the dissertation

Chapter 1 examines the recent history of forestry within the hill country, from the disappearance of a family tradition of lumbering, to the formation of political forests in the 1960s during the socialist era, to the resurgence in small-scale private forestry and management since 2008. This most recent phase entails the rise of new forms of identity as local hill families aspire to become 'lumber bosses' instead of 'forest peasants'. Agrarian change seen from the hill country and the forest sector reveals the centrality of rural families in shaping this process. Moreover, by including forestland and forestry in the analysis of the rural world, it is easier to see how the idea of grain farming as a timeless and *natural* 'way of life' was fabricated. It is critical to recognize the interconnection between forestland and forestry on the one hand, and the changing systems of agricultural production and farmland tenure on the other. The chapter follows the local aspirations of becoming a 'lumber boss' that has roots in both the much older tree farming tradition and the production of global lumber markets.

Chapter 2 describes agricultural de-intensification as it applies to rice cultivation, torn between mechanization and gendered labor-intensive practices. The work of 'subsistence agriculture' has changed, above all, with the disappearance of oxen and the rise of the partial mechanization. Yet, the mechanization process has reinforced women's intensive labor skills and their role in community formation. Specifically, with the help of machines, small-scale rice farming continues, even as women's labor-intensive practice of rice transplanting is maintained. These specific practices suggest a hybrid mix of a labor-intensive tradition with modern forms of agricultural production, a condition that goes well beyond the logic of agrarian capitalism. Along with mechanization, land and labor de-intensification have largely reduced "bitter labor" (*ku li*) for both women and men and it has led to complex new fallowing patterns.

Chapter 3 examines how a highly variable and gendered process of translocal family reproduction is at the heart of rural transformation in contemporary China. In turn, the variability of gendered family reproductive care work feeds into the construction of local specificity and regional variation. As Chapters 1 and 2 demonstrate, the changed conditions in the countryside and in the agricultural production systems, allowed returning migrants to build new houses and form communities in both their native village and in nearby small towns. The overall improvement of rural infrastructures in the context of the post-2008 global financial crisis has fundamentally changed the *potentiality* of the countryside and small towns. Rural areas and small towns are not merely sites for 'reproductive work,' but also an important source of aspiration for better air, better food, and generally better life conditions with less stress as compared to metropolitan regions. To illustrate this trend and its variability, I examine how complex, gendered translocal family reproduction affects and reflects three migration routes: 1) to TVEs in Zhejiang province, 2) to SEZs, and 3) to small towns.

Chapter 4 takes a closer look at the revival of small-town China in the early 21st century. I argue that the current small-town revival is a product of two traditions: the rural market town tradition and Mao's revolutionary tradition. In addition, small town revival is reproduced in and through the system of market towns and the resurgence of

nationalisation in the post-2008 era. In a way, small town revival is a product of both history and relational geography. As such, retracing the processes underlying the evolution of small towns is critical for grasping the *multiplicity of space* and thereby destabilizing the dualisms of rural/urban and local/global. I suggest that the resurgence of small-town China is linked to the overall structural changes associated with the Chinese central government' effort to shift from the economic overreliance on the export-oriented industry to a growth of the domestic market—in the context of the post-2008 global financial crisis and the nationalist tension between China and the United States.

The conclusion in chapter 5 comprises three sections. The first will summarize my general findings focused on interconnections among the four processes analyzed. The second will then discuss the importance of these findings for the debate on China's agrarian transformation and rural urbanization within a "global conjunctural framework". The final section ends with self-reflection on the writing process and suggestions for future directions of research.

Chapter 2
Mechanization and Agricultural De-Intensification

In chapter one, we delved into China's recent forest tenure reform and rise of small-scale private forestry around Xialongkou in the interior hill country in the west of Jiangxi Province. I argued that forestry and agricultural systems in this part of rural China are co-produced and not separate spheres, and that we must pay attention to both history and geography to understand the situation. Building on this argument, in this chapter, I examine the interconnected changing conditions in wet-rice terrace cultivation since the late 2000s, focusing on the process agricultural de-intensification in particular. It is common to link the rise of mechanized agriculture to a productivity increase. In this chapter, I shall point to a surprising outcome in this part of rural China, namely agricultural de-intensification. Agricultural de-intensification understood as diminishing "bitter labor" (*ku li*) and selective land fallow.

Central to my inquiry in this chapter is a relational understanding of agricultural de-intensification in the context of a generational shift, of gendered work, and of the multiple competing state discourses that circulate in rural China. Scholarly debates about rural China and agrarian change since the 1980s have mostly centered on the political economy of agricultural systems, the role of rural cadres and state officials, authoritarian state regimes, the penetration of market and capitalist relations. China's agrarian changes have further argued for the depth and breadth of capitalist penetration, as shown in the alarming rate of land and labor commodification and class differentiation in rural China (Zhang 2015; Zhan 2019). New capitalist relations certainly have occurred in some parts of the country, as in the rest of the world. In Xialongkou, however, changes brought about by machinery are integrated into small household agriculture. Rather than taking advantage of machinery to expand cultivation, the net effect has been agricultural de-intensification—a decrease in annual agricultural work per person, especially men's work. With the advent of large-scale rural-urban migration, new patterns of work and divisions of labour have emerged in the hill country. Tamara Jacka (2018) and others describe two common transformations. The first was a 'feminisation' of agriculture in the 1980s, with women occupying an increasingly large proportion of the agricultural labor force. The second shift was an 'ageing' of agriculture, which occurred in the 1990s, as more young women and men left rural villages, leaving the responsibility from farm work falling onto men and women of increasingly advanced age. In line with Jacka's observation in her field sites in southern Henan Province, a set of change has taken place in Xialongkou as well, such as changes in the type of crops grown, reductions in the number of livestock raised, and a shrinkage in the amount of land farmed by most families/households. However, there is a key difference in Xialongkou. The so-called 'feminisation' of agriculture was not new in this hill region. For several decades, women have constituted the major labor force in rice cultivation, while men were employed in forestry and the lumber industry (see Chapter 1).

By putting the rural family/household at the center, Jacka's feminist critique of mainstream political economic analysis of agrarian change is crucial. For Jacka, agrarian change is driven not directly by "external forces," but is rather mediated and transformed by actors within the family institution that rationally strategize two concerns: *economic production* and *social reproduction*. My approach differs from Jacka in terms of explaining local specificity of agrarian change in and through historical and geographical interconnections, meaning Xialongkou should not be seen as a 'case' representing a more general phenomenon. With this theoretical orientation, my intervention is the spatio-historical specificity that has created the conditions for both material and

meaningful change in this part of rural China. As such, this chapter examines the conditions under which the de-intensification of agriculture has unfolded, and what this process has meant for the generational shift and the gendered agricultural work within the Xialongkou community. The current chapter comprises three parts. In part one, I define the notion of agricultural de-intensification and describe how it unfolded in Xialongkou in the context of forest reform and wider processes in the late 2000s. In particular, I focus on the process of mechanization, as well as on land fallowing strategies. Part two examines reasons that have contributed to de-intensification, including a generational shift and gendered agricultural work systems within Xialongkou community. Part three focuses on two state discourses—1) environmental restoration and 2) economic growth—and the role of the local states in shaping the conditions underlying grain de-intensification. The following section describes a specific shift in agricultural practice in Xialongkou community—the disappearance of oxen since the 2008 forest tenure reform.

The disappearance of oxen

"Oxen? All are gone. We have smashing field machines (*datian ji*) now," Yutou cheerfully informed me, while sitting on a wooden stool and looking at a small fishpond. It was a cold and wet day in January 2019. Over the winter, Yutou, a native Xialongkou resident in his late 60s, had manually constructed a fishpond by digging out a quarter of a two-*mu* rice near his house. As he spent part of his days watching small fish nibbling green grass on the surface of the fishpond, Yutou could be seen smiling with satisfaction. Converting rice paddy to fishponds can be understood in the context of the disappearance of oxen in this part of rural China. Oxen ploughing was an integral part of the rural landscape in Xialongkou Hamlet and surrounding villages from the 1600s into the 1990s. But since the late 2000s, this key element of the rural landscape has silently faded away.

At first, nothing seems noteworthy about parting with one's family/household ox. Nobody remembered the exact year; the story was not sufficiently dramatic. A few years before, against the will of his wife Qilian, Yutou cashed out the family ox. He took advantage of the moment when Qilian was away to visit their elder son in Zhejiang Province, to where a half of Xialongkou's able-bodied young men had migrated since the late 1990s, for varied TVE manufacturing and service jobs (more details in Chapter 3). When Qilian returned, the family ox was long gone. There was nothing Qilian could do but curse Yutou. Though the sale of a single ox may not seem that dramatic, the disappearance of all village oxen has been revolutionary. Without oxen during the sowing season of May and June, the engine noise of *datian ji* has now become part of the soundscape. And during autumn harvesting season, the sound of "grain cutting machinery" (A. *sawo ji*, P. *gedao ji*)[1] has replaced the quiet slicing of hand-held sickles.

It is common to associate mechanization and productivity increase in agriculture. In this part of rural China, I shall point to a surprising outcome, namely agricultural de-intensification. The next section defines what I mean by agricultural 'de-intensification', looking in turn at the rise of machines for small-scale rice cultivation and at new land fallowing strategies.

Part I: Agricultural "de-intensification" in the west Jiangxi hill country

Agricultural "de-intensification", as I observed it in Xialongkou village, involves diminishing "bitter labor" (*ku li*) in two ways by mechanizing farming and by fallowing land. The mechanizing process is akin to what Philip Huang has termed agricultural "de-involution" (Huang

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[1] Words in the dialect of southern Aipin County that have different pronunciations from standard Mandarin Chinese are marked with an 'A'. All other Chinese words in italics are in standard Mandarin, and are only marked with a 'P' (for putonghua) to distinguish them from the Aipin dialect. For example, the 'rice plant' is 'A. *wo*' and 'P. *he*'.

2020). Three decades ago, Huang (1990) had defined agricultural "involution" (modifying Clifford Geertz's original definition), as the situation "in which the total output expands, but at the cost of diminished marginal returns per workday" (Huang 1990,11). This concept of "involutionary growth" was used by Huang to comprehend "the persistent poverty and underdevelopment of the Chinese countryside" from the 1350s to the 1980s (Huang 1990,13). In a much more recent publication, however, Huang (2020) proposes a reverse trend—"de-involution"—to describe China's agricultural modernization from the 1980s to the 2010s. While the small sized farming continues, household farms now produce for the market, not subsistence anymore. The increases in labor productivity and income through the market is, in Huang's view, largely made possible by means of "new agriculture"—i.e., the cultivation of higher-grade vegetables, fruits, meat, and dairy products (in lieu of conventional cereals). This has also meant more capital and modern inputs, including machines, chemical fertilizers, and improved seeds. I find the term "de-involution" to be useful. However, rather than focus on labor's productivity (and marginal returns on labor) as does Huang, I emphasize the diminished "bitter labor" (*ku li*) that results from "de-intensification"—that is to say the reduction in hard physical labor per head.[2] Besides mechanization, the process of de-intensification also includes the reduced intensive use of land in both frequency and spatial types.

Here, it is useful to consider how Ester Boserup has analyzed land use in her dynamic model of land utilization (Boserup 1966). Boserup differentiates between five types of land use, representing different "degrees of intensity" (Boserup 1966:15). Beginning with the least intense, they are: 1) forest-fallow cultivation; 2) bush-fallow cultivation; 3) short-fallow cultivation; 4) annual cropping; and 5) multi-cropping. Forest-fallow cultivation makes use of the longest fallow period—twenty-five years or more—in order to permit the forest to regrow. Due to the length of time for forest regeneration, this land use pattern requires extensive access to land. In Boserup's model, when populations expand and such extensive land use becomes impossible, bush-fallow cultivation is employed, whereby a piece of land is used after six to ten years of no cultivation. Next in line, following further population growth, is the short-fallow system, which utilizes a piece of land after a fallow period of one or two years. Then comes what Boserup calls annual cropping, which refers to annual harvests with seasonal fallowing during the remaining half of the year. Last comes multi-cropping, the most intensive strategy of land use, which entails cultivating two to three crops per year on a single plot of land. Compellingly, we find all five types of land use in the region of rural China surround Xialongkou. According to Boserup, "Even if we cannot be sure that systems of extensive land use have preceded the intensive ones in every part of the world, there seems to be little reason to doubt that the typical sequence of development of agriculture has entailed a gradual change—more rapid in some regions than in others—from extensive to intensive types of land use" (Boserup 1966: 17-18). In other words, Boserup envisions a sequence of agricultural development entailing progressive evolution from extensive to intensive cultivation.[3] Yet, the process could go in the opposite direction under certain conditions. Boserup's analysis remains useful to me, in terms of how she defines forms of land fallowing, as degrees of agricultural intensification.

Based on my empirical study of a hill region in rural Jiangxi, I extend and stretch Boserup's

[2] In essence, though Clifford Geertz (1963) never used the term "de-involution," my use of this term emphasizes the opposite effect of Geertz's "involution," rather than of Huang's "involution" (1990).
[3] The novelty of Boserup's argument, at the time of her book's publication, was as a critique of the Malthusian perspective. Boserup argued that population growth was the engine that pushed for greater food production, and that it did so via new technology and the intensification of land use.

model of land use and Huang's notion of "de-involution" to understand the labor and land de-intensification in agriculture since the late 2000s. The timing of this process was crucial, given that it coincide with two wider processes affecting local circumstances: the 2008 forest tenure reform and national/global ecological discourses. In Xialongkou, two common forms of agricultural de-intensification are: 1) hiring fossil-fueled-powered tractors and harvesting machines to diminish "bitter labor", and 2) new land fallowing strategies involving boh temporal and spatial tactics.

The Rise of Machines for Small-Scale Rice Cultivation

Let me begin with the first form—the introduction of machinery to rice production. Just a few years ago, in Xialongkou and the surrounding hill counties, oxen constituted an indispensable animal power in small-scale household agricultural production. Its' significance was not only in the ancient past, but also during the Maoist collectivization period, and continued after agricultural de-collectivization in 1978. This use of animal traction was of course not confined to western Jiangxi province. In Shanxi Province in the northwest, oxen were important in both traditional times and under the socialist era, as made clear in Liu Qing's novel *Epic of Creating Enterprise* (*Chuang ye shi*) (Liu 1960). Published at the height of the socialist collectivization movement, Liu describes how, for the first time, privately-owned oxen and other draft animals were leashed and placed under the roofs of collectivized pens, a key step towards collective agriculture. Liu Qing illustrates how dramatic and revolutionary an event it was. When the collective agriculture system was dismantled in the late 1970s, the important role of oxen was unaffected. In the case of Xialongkou and surrounding counties, oxen continued to be used in agricultural work until 2011 (the year of tobacco cultivation, discussed in more detail in part III).

What has been the impact of applying agricultural machines in Xialongkou? In the past, each family took from seven to fourteen days to plough rice paddies by oxen. Plouging was mostly men's work. Now, villagers can hire a tractor (and its operator) to plough the entire village's land in two to three days.[4] The mechanizing process was also noted in rural Taiwan in the 1990s (Cohen 2005). In Xialongkou, villagers generally agree that there has been no impact on output per unit of rice paddy. Experienced rice cultivators estimate that about one *mu* yields around five hundred kilograms of unhusked rice, whether using oxen or machines. However, for the same output per unit of land, each household, and especially its men, clearly now invests fewer workdays in the task of ploughing. In terms of harvesting, machines have also replaced hand-held sickles, by means of which it normally took seven to ten days for all family/household members (including children, women, and the elderly) working together to deal with this "agricultural busy work" (*nong mang*). With a hired harvesting machine (and its hired operator), the entire village's "agricultural busy work" can now be finished in one or two days. Of course, hiring machines cost money. As of 2019, one *mu* cost 80 RMB for ploughing and 100 RMB for harvesting, though prices for hiring machines have been increasing over the past few years and will presumably continue to do so in the near future.

The application of agricultural machinery is commonly associated with increasing economies of scale and efficiency, a sign of modern progress and science. The phenomenon of agribusiness companies, a new trend in China's agrarian capitalism, has attracted considerable attention in scholarship (see Zhang and Donaldson 2008, Trappel 2016). But large-scale

[4] Back in the 1930s, according to Fei Xiaotong, peasants in Kaixuangong did not use plough and oxen. Instead, "all the work is done by human labour. One characteristic of the agricultural work in this region is the absence of animal labour…ploughs are not used in the village…it takes about four days for the preliminary preparation of each mow of land by one man" (Fei 1939:159-60).

agribusiness is rare in the hill country. What one encounters most commonly are small household farms that remain small and fragmented due to the socialist legacy and topographical conditions. Small tractors (*datian ji*) are capable of working around fragmented and terraced rice paddies. On the surface, agricultural machines seem to accelerate agricultural capitalism in China. Ever since China's economic reforms of the 1980s, concerns have grown about the rise of capitalist relations and its destruction of agriculture and land commodification in rural China (Webber 2012; Zhang 2015; Zhan 2019). In Xialongkou, however, changes brought about by machinery like *datian ji* and *gedao ji* are integrated into small household agriculture. In the hill country, machines have merely replaced two tasks of rice production: ploughing and harvesting. Rather than expand cultivation, the net effect has been agricultural de-intensification—a decrease in annual agricultural work per person, especially men's work. As a result, men (women too) now have the time to engage in diverse odd jobs in villages and small towns since the late 2000s. The next section discusses the second form of agricultural de-intensification, land fallowing.

A Range of Fallowing Strategies: Temporal and Spatial Choices

Unlike the effect of agricultural machinery, de-intensification through land fallowing requires taking into consideration both temporal and spatial dimensions. One thing to note is that in Xialongkou, all rice fields are irrigated by hill streams flowing down from higher ground via natural gravity, not by the river that runs in front of the village yearlong. As will become clearer later, this water source is crucial to understanding both temporal and spatial aspects of land fallowing. Seen from a temporal perspective, de-intensification comes in three types: 1) shifting from multi-cropping to single cropping (or what Boserup calls annual cropping); 2) shifting from multi-cropping to short fallowing; and 3) shifting from single cropping to short fallowing, bush fallowing, or forest fallowing. The first form is really a seasonal fallowing within an annual cycle, whereas the latter two involve a much longer fallow time extending beyond the yearly cycle. All three of these forms involve, fundamentally, the reduction in agricultural intensity per unit of land.

As Table 3 shows, in Xialongkou and its surrounding villages, at least from the 1980s to 2008, there were four major crops cultivated in paddy fields in a traditional lunar calendar year cycle. They were "early rice" (A. *zaowo*, P. *zaodao*), "big rice" (A. *haiwo*), "second rice" (A. *nidao*, P. *wandao*), and "rape" (*youcai*). The "early rice" was transplanted from a seedling bed in early March and harvested in June. The "big rice" was transplanted from a seedling bed in early May (around the time of the Dragon Boat Festival) and harvested around the time of the Mid-Autumn Festival (mid-August). The "second rice" was transplanted from a seedling bed in June and harvested in October. It is called "second rice" because the rice is grown on a paddy where "early rice" has just been reaped; the paddy is immediately re-tilled and covered with a layer of animal manure and night soil (some chemical fertilizers also began to be used in the1990s). Thus, rice crops were formerly transplanted and harvested three times per year in this hill country, though not all of the three harvests made use of the same rice plots. From the perspective of rice cultivation, land use involved a mixture of single-cropping and double-cropping. It was labor-intensive agricultural production that is not unusual in rural China. After the third harvest, some of the rice paddies were tilled again and fertilized once more with animal manure, with rapeseed then broadcasted on top as a winter crop. The agricultural calendar cycle came to an end when the rape crop was harvested in late February.

The current practice of temporal land fallowing involves the wholesale elimination of certain crops. As shown in Table 3,"early rice" and "second rice" have been largely eliminated since 2008. The three distinct rice crops have been reduced to just one—"big rice"—which is now

grown after a winter rape crop. The fact that "second rice" is referred to in the local language using the Mandarin word *dao* (rather than *wo*) reminds us that this crop may not in fact have been cultivated before the state promoted doubled-cropping in the 1950s. The local language for rice plant is *wo* (禾) not *dao* (稻). It is also worth noting that "big rice" has always been favored for human consumption due to its higher glutinous texture. "Early rice" was typically fed to chickens and pigs. Pigs are now rarely raised by individual households in Xialongkou since the 2000s. It is also interesting that the sowing and harvesting of "big rice" aligns with two traditional festivals: the dragon boat festival and the mid-autumn festival for family reunions. The choice to keep "big rice" is both rational and socio-culturally appropriate in this part of rural China.

Timing of agricultural activity	**Crop**	**1980-2008**	**Post 2008**
Sowing:March Harvest:June	Early rice (早禾)	Yes	No
Sowing:May Harvest:August	Big rice (大禾)	Yes	Yes
Sowing:June Harvest:September	Second rice (二稻)	Yes	No
Sowing:November Harvest:February	Rape (油菜)	Yes	Yes

Table 3. Sowing and harvest timing before and after the shift from multi-cropping to single cropping.

Spatial strategies of fallowing are employed as well. In order to understand the spatial aspect of rice cultivation, I have labeled a Google satellite image of Xialongkou Hamlet and its lands, distinguishing between three rice zones: hill valley (1), core (2), and flood zone (3) (see Figure 3). From the satellite image, we can see that the flood zone is a little less extensive than the other two types, while the hill valley zone and core zone have similar sizes. Geographically, the flood zone is marginal land located in the flood plain of the meandering local river. The flood zone is difficult to irrigate during the hot and dry months of July and August, and it also suffers from the yearly threat of river flooding. In early June 2019, two heavy rains in sequence caused the river even to breach into some houses of Xialongkou village (see Photo 4).

Figure 3. Xialongkou Hamlet and land types: 1=hill valley, 2=core cropland, 3=flood zone.

At least in the period from the 1980s to 2008, Xialongkou residents cultivated "early rice" in both the flood zone and the core zone; "big rice" in hill valleys; and "second rice" in the core zone (see Table 3). Starting in 2009, Xialongkou residents began to diminish the cultivation of "early rice" in the flood zone, to diminish the risk of a lost crop due to flooding. Indeed, Xialongkou receives abundant and heavy rains in spring and summer, with an average precipitation of around 1600 mm per year, causing locals often to curse the wet weather and overabundance of rainy days. With abundant water, the fallowed flood zone has been taken over by a variety of bushes, vines, and other weeds.

The next spatial strategy of de-intensification has been to eliminate cultivation in the hill valley zone (shifting "big rice" to the core zone). When Xialongkou residents were asked why they chose to fallow hill valley paddies, they offer three major reasons. First, these hill valley paddies are physically located furthest from the village. Second, they receive less sun and the water temperature of the streams is colder, impacting yield. Third and perhaps most critically, fallowing of hill valleys is connected to the forest tenure reform of 2008. The irrigation system in the hill valleys was severely damaged during the four years of lumber felling after dividing up the hills among individual households (see Chapter 1). To transport lumber from hill slopes to the paved road, the lumber boss opened up truck accessible roads with a big excavator that buried irrigation channels running along the bottom couture of the hills, while also destroying some of the terraced rice paddies. As a result, much of the hill valley land is now forest fallowed. The last category is the rice core zone, located near the village site and close to the main asphalt road. Most of the core zone remains cultivated. Yet some core rice paddies that relied on stream irrigation are now dry land. In addition, as of 2019, rice core zone paddies have been reduced to single crop of rice. Some have been left fallow (see Table 4). These fallow paddies are now sometimes fire-cleared for vegetable gardens (see Photo 3).

Photo 3. Two Xialongkou villagers use fire to clear fallowed core zone paddies for a vegetable garden in February 2019.

Photo 4. Flooding of Xialongkou Hamlet in June 2019. After 48 hours of non-stop rain, the local river flooded into village courtyards, many residents stand on higher ground to watch the flooding.

Type of paddy	Early rice (早禾)	Big rice (大禾)	Second rice (二稻)	Rape (油菜)
Flood zone	Yes	No	No	Some
Core	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Hill valley	No	Yes	No	No

Table 4. Three types of paddy and crops from 1980 to 2008.

Type of paddy	De-intensification		
	Multi-cropping	Single cropping	Short fallow/ Bush fallow
Flood zone	No	No	Yes
Core	Yes	Yes	Some
Hill valley	No	Some	Yes

Table 5. Agricultural de-intensification in three types of paddy after 2008.

While villagers in Xialongkou have turned to a set of temporal and spatial fallowing tactics, the "hill people" (*shan shang ren*) of Shanli Township—defined as people living above 855 meters above sea level have benefited from taking over some farmland from Xialongkou (see the locations, Figure 4). Recently, to supplement their grain production, some "hill people" have made arrangements with Xialongkou villagers to cultivate a crop of rice in core zone paddies.

Figure 4. Xialongkou Village and Above Cloud Village (where hill people live).

In return, hill villagers from Above Cloud have been given 15 kilograms of fresh ginger per household as a token gift (for being allowed to cultivate one or two *mu* of rice paddies for free). No formal contract is involved. It is an oral arrangement between the two parties involved. The reason to bring hill people into the story is to point out that forest-fallow cultivation is not a historical relic, but a living system among communities such as Above Cloud in this rural township of Jiangxi Province. Moreover, the relation between valley people and hill people is not a contrast between modernity and backwardness, but rather one of symbiosis and sustainability. Boserup long ago recognized that "it is often found that one part of a country is under highly intensive cultivation, another part under annual cropping and a third part under various more or less extensive fallow systems" (Boserup 1966,15). As it turns out, in the early twenty-first century, a mixture of intensive and extensive cultivation systems coexisted even on the much smaller scale of a single township in west Jiangxi. It is crucial to recognize the *simultaneous diversity* in agricultural systems. The next sections examine a generational shift and gendered agricultural work as a specific condition being shaped by de-intensification in this region.

Part II: Generational shift and gendered agricultural work

What drives agricultural de-intensification? This section aims to answer this question by emphasizing the generational shift and gendered agricultural work. At the macro level, favorable socio-economic conditions are crucial. These conditions include the abolishment of agricultural taxes since 2005, state subsidies on agriculture, new urban diets, eased population pressure due to the one-child policy, and continuous rural-to-urban migration since the late 1980s (cf. Huang 2020). These macro conditions are clearly embedded in the socioeconomic everyday life of Xialongkou residents. Yet, these wider processes play out differently at the local level. Here, the local should be understood not as a bounded place but rather always as something produced in and through interconnections near and far. As such, the specific forms of agricultural de-intensification in this hill region are a product of interconnections between history and geography, manifest in a generational shift of values and gendered agricultural work.

Let me begin with the story of the Daniu family to illustrate the impact of the generational shift on the value of agricultural work. To the minds of the younger generation (the son and the daughter-in-law), the Daniu couple is "backward." Two different values are articulated. On the one hand, the son and young daughter-in-law think that the Daniu couple constitutes just "old antiques" (*lao gudong*). Neither the son nor the daughter-in-law engages in agricultural production anymore, although they live in the same village. The son and the daughter-in-law both were in their late 30s. The son went to Zhejiang as a migrant for a few years. The daughter-in-law went to Shenzhen special economic zone before her marriage. Now they have two small kids. The son returned from Zhejiang with a tractor and now is a construction contractor who works on "New Countryside" projects in Shanli Township. The daughter-in-law works at the Township post office, which was sub-contacted to her father (who is the village party secretary) one year ago. Regarding the family ox, the young couple believes using machinery is the way to go. It is the modernization process. The Daniu couple kept the family ox to save on the unnecessary expense of hiring "smashing field" machines. Many older villagers who praise the Daniu family for their industriousness and thrifty ethic share their views. At the heart of the generational divide lies the difference between waged labor and agricultural work as life styles. Although the Daniu couple lives at a level of semi-subsistence, making few purchases from the market, they are by no means resisting the market and consumption. The couple seeks market opportunities to sell their labor by doing varied odd jobs, just like the rest of Xialongkou residents. The difference is that the Daniu

couple keeps agricultural work as their core way of life and other odd jobs as sidelines, while the younger generation like the son and daughter-in-law reverses the relationship between the family farm and outside waged labor. It is not uncommon to observe young adults remaining idle at their village home while their older parents work hard in the rice fields. One common reason is that they are uninterested in non-monetary returns as an alternative to waged jobs.[5]

But the generational tension is more complicated than simply the divide between different values and attitudes towards agricultural work. An interesting twist involves how both young and old integrate the traditional value of filial piety into agricultural work. Let me illustrate this point with the story of Shaogang. In brief, not all young villagers could avoid the "soil" (*tu*)—a pun in both vernacular and official discourse that refers both to agriculture and to family responsibility. Shaogang, an ex-migrant, in his late 30s, has had a middle school education. For many years, he worked and lived in Zhejiang province. He came back to Xialongkou Hamlet to till the family land with a small tractor in 2012. He is the youngest son and now has the duty to look after his elderly parents, the result of a collective decision made with his two older brothers. Although his peers have a low opinion of agricultural work, tilling the family land has become a moral duty linked to filial piety and family responsibility. Shaogang believes that village elders should "enjoy life" (*xiang fu*) by not working in the rice fields. He came back to farm with the help of machines.

Van de Ploge et al. (2014) have rightly pointed out the importance of family land that glued three generations of rural family/households. Yet their analysis falls short on rural population's attachment to the land, especially the elderly generation that tirelessly reinvests and works on the family land for their adult children. They overlook the impact of the existing generational divide on work and lifestyles. The generational divide is real. Unlike Shaogang, most young people do not choose to return to till the land, even if they have the option now to use tractors. Instead, migrants can fulfill their filial duties and family responsibility through remittances, and by persuading their elderly parents to take a rest from hard physical work (*ku li*). One often overhears elderly villagers speaking highly of elderly who do not need to work under the sun: "Look at yourself. Having raised a good son and daughter, now you have no more *ku li* to do." The price for husked rice is low in China. In Xialongkou, the daily rice consumption of two people over the course of one year amounts to 420 *jin* (35 *jin* of rice per month). Taking an average rice price of between 2 RMB and 3 RMB, that amounts to around 1000 RMB per year. As of 2018, the average monthly salary for a Xialongkou migrant was between 3000 RMB and 6000 RMB. Thus, it is relatively affordable now for migrants to pay a stipend to their elderly parents to cover the rice crop, allowing the parents to quit rice farming and avoid hard physical labor, though the elderly would typically still maintain vegetable gardens. Vegetable dishes are a major part of diet in this region. Crucially, vegetable gardens are tended by women, who have never considered this to be *ku li*. For many Xialongkou women, vegetable gardens are spaces of both toil and pride that provide reliable sources of nutrition for family/household members. One recognizes here the gendered divide between men's bitter labor and women's care work—care both for children and grandchildren, and for vegetable gardens.

Along with inter-generational dynamics, gendered work within the family/household also contributes to agricultural de-intensification. As we have just seen, the older generation is more committed to preserving the rhythm of agricultural work than the younger generation. In particular,

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[5] Hans Steinmüller (2013), an anthropologist, depicts this generational difference in the value of work in a hilly village in Hubei province. Steinüller has observed that young people consider agricultural work to be unworthy. In his ethnographic account of Bashan in Hubei province, young people avoid tilling the land because "it will never get you anywhere."

women's manual work of transplanting rice has been preserved even as men's work of ploughing has been replaced by machinery. Rice transplanting refers to the process of transplanting young rice plants from the nursery bed to the main paddy fields. In this part of rural China, this task is performed almost exclusively by women. This gendered agricultural work should not be conflated with "feminization of agriculture" occurring in the 1980s. Scholars have linked this trend to the rural-to-urban migration of able-bodied men (Brauw et al. 2013). In Xialongkou, women have long been the major work force in rice cultivation as most men worked in lumber and forest-related work. This locality-specific traditional gendered work only came to an end during the socialist era when agriculture and forestry was collectivized (see Chapter 1). Since the economic reforms, however, labor became gendered once more. Men were employed in TVE lumber mills, mile women worked once more became the major work force for rice cultivation. As of spring 2018, the technique rice transplantation in Xialongkou remains as it had been in the 1930s. Once can compare the situation as described by the Chinese socioanthropologist Fei Xiaotong:

> Transplantation of the young shoots from the nursery farm to the main field is a major part of rice cultivation. The people describe this period as "busy in farm." The farmers start in the early morning for the nursery, which sometimes is far from the main field; they must transport the young shoots by boat. Children are brought to help in the work, but not women. The young shoots are planted in the main field in bunches of six or seven stalks. Children make themselves useful by handing the young shoots to the leaders while they are planting. One person will plant six or seven bunches in one row within his reach without stepping sideways. Finishing one row he will take one step backwards and start another row. Finishing one strip he will start another from the beginning. If there are several persons at work on the same farm, they will form a row and move backwards at the same time. The rhythmatic movement of the workers is very impressive. To maintain the rhythm, which is helpful in this monotonous work, they often sing rhythmic songs. Special songs have grown up under the name of *yengo*—"Young shoot song." But since in this region women do not participate in the work, the development of such songs is less than in the neighboring areas. Each person can plant about half a *mow* a day. To plant seven *mow* well thus takes about two weeks. (Fei 1939:163)

Fei vividly describes the intensity of the workload. Although Fei portrays the situation in the Lower Yangzi River region in the 1930s, the technique of transplanting rice is almost identical in today's Xialongkou village. There are three key differences. First, the rice transplanting work was until recently repeated three times per year in Xialongkou village.[6] Second, no boats are involved in Xialongkou. Lastly of relevance here, unlike Fei's account where women did not participate in rice transplanting, Xialongkou women have entirely taken over this task, which they perform in addition to other domestic responsibilities (cooking, washing clothes, gardening, feeding pigs, etc.). In Fei's account, women of course worked hard, but their work lay in handicrafts and silkworm raising at home, work that was connected to Shanghai and the global raw silk market. This regional difference reminds us that gendered work was/is socially constructed with specific historical and spatial interconnections.

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[6] One of the reasons might have to do with geographical difference and the scarcity of arable land in the rugged hills and narrow valleys around Xialongkou, in contrast to the fertile and relatively abundant land around the canals of the Lower Yangzi valley. But of course it might just have to do with the intensification process beginning in the 1950s.

One curious aspect of rice transplantation is that Xialongkou has not embraced the new, labor-saving technique of "throwing the seedlings" (*paoyang*). They continue to use the age-old technique of "inserting the seedlings" (*chayang*). In recent years, *paoyang* has replaced *cha yang* in many areas. I have observed this new method in southern Anhui province as early as 2013 while doing my master thesis research. *Paoyang* provides great efficiency per workday in terms of throwing rice seedlings. I have been told that one person can easily complete three to five *mu* in a single day. In other words, if Xialongkou villagers were to adopt this new method, each household could complete rice-transplanting work in one day. More significantly, the physical hard work of rice transplanting requires bending one's knees and back, while *pao yang* is as easy as walking on the rice field with one's back straight.

Yet, *chayang* continues. Why are women villagers attached to this old *chayang* method? Needless to say, women recognize the backbreaking labor of the *cha yang* work, as described to me by the Xialongkou resident Fulan. Fulan, in her late-40s, now spends more time in Aipin county seat caring for her toddler grandson. She exclaims that her idleness at the county seat has made the strenuous task of rice planting even more painful. At the end of the first day of rice transplantation, it was as if someone had beaten her all over her body with firewood. Yet, as Fulan proclaimed to me, "I do not foresee *pao yang* being adapted here in the near future." Why? Three reasons at least. First, household rice fields have gotten smaller as a consequence of forest tenure reform, which has eliminated hill valley paddies. Consequently, physically demanding labor is now relatively shorter, lasting only one to seven days in duration.

Second, unlike the hiring of "smash field machines," in which households simply pay 100 RMB per *mu* to the machine operator, *pao yang* requires the acquisition of new technical knowledge. Seedlings are grown in plastic molds; it is these molds that are then broadcast. It makes sense to adopt the new technique when one is engaging in relatively large-scale farming (at least above 10 *mu*), and when one sells one's rice grain to the market. In other words, it is a technique suitable when villagers choose to expand and intensify agricultural production. The new method is not economic for rice cultivation intended for a household's own consumption.

The third reason concerns village women's sociability related to gendered work in this hilly region. Working shoulder-to-shoulder, with waist bent, and at an arm's length distance from one another in the rice paddies, *chayang* is a 'thick' social activity. In Fei's account of rice transplanting, peasants sing while working. Xialongkou women do not sing, but they chat, gossip, laugh about a wide range of topics while working in the paddies. With *paoyang* by contrast, extensive space is required between individuals to broadcast rice seedlings effectively. Spatial distance is a key distinction between the old and new method. The old method also involves socialization and community building through exchange of labor among village women (sometimes for pay). Each day during the week of rice transplanting, the host woman prepares a feast for lunch and dinner to compensate the hard labor in the paddy fields. After meals, the host woman prepares traditional tea with pickled ginger and salty carrots. While I was participating in the tea drinkings, women were asking each other which type of rice they preferred for personal consumption. They all disliked the taste of "hybrid rice" (*za jiao dao*), preferring non-hybrid rice, because it tastes better. Even though "hybrid rice" (*za jiao dao*) has been widely cultivated for its higher yields since the 1980s, now local women prioritize quality over quantity. The non-hybrid rice tastes better with sticky and chewy texture. As one woman explained, "The glutinous rice tastes so good; I can eat three bowls with no need of *cai* [accompanying dishes]. The drawback of this glutinous rice is its lower yield, a mere half of the yield of hybrid rice (e.g., one *mu* yields around 250 kg of glutinous rice instead of 500 kg of hybrid rice). In addition to preferring its taste,

and unlike hybrid rice seeds that need to be purchased every year, the woman remarked, "We keep some glutinous rice seeds for next year, so no need to buy seeds from the market." In Xialongkou, some families cultivate only the glutinous rice, while others cultivate both the glutinous rice and the hybrid rice to guarantee some higher yields, while also enjoying rice they prefer to eat. Women's preference to *chayang* means that local rice cultivation remains small in scale. To reprise my main argument, both the generational shift and gendered agricultural work affect the rise of machinery and land fallowing in this hill region. The next part discusses the role of local states in the process of agricultural de-intensification.

Part III: The Role of the Local States

Thus far, I have focused on the role played by Xialongkou villagers and in particular the generational shift and gendered work in the process of agricultural de-intensification. This section examines the conditions for de-intensification in and through two national state discourses: ecological restoration and economic growth. Ecological restoration is part of a the broader discourse of creating an ecological state. First, I explore a particular policy: "Retire Farmland to Forest" (*tui geng huan lin*) (hereafter Farmland-to-Forest) through its implementation and actual experience in Aipin County. Second, I explore a recent township initiative to replace rice crops with tobacco to boost the local economy and farmers' income. These state programs are nation-wide processes that affect local conditions through the implementation of policy and through the introduction of new discourses affecting agricultural practices.

Farmland-to-Forest: County Directives

Let me begin with the context of the "Farmland-to-Forest" state program. This program was a land policy initiated in 1999 at a few pilot sites (elsewhere in the country), then later propagated nationally in 2002. This land policy signified a turning point in the Chinese government's ecological awakening, from its previous emphasis on fast economic development and material advancement at any cost. The general goal of this environmental restoration program was to plant trees to slow down the process of desertification in Northwest China, and to diminish the soil erosion due to deforestation of the past few decades. In addition, it was intended to prevent large-scale flooding problems threatening cities and people living in downstream regions of the Yangzi River and Yellow River. People often see the terrible flooding of the Yangzi River in summer 1998 as the trigger of the "Farmland-to-Forest" program.

After more than a decade, evaluations of this environmental restoration program by both Chinese officials and social scientists have been mixed, largely falling into two camps. On the one hand, some praise the remarkable achievement produced in the greening of China's arid and semi-arid regions, creating a "green wall" and reducing the desertification process. On the other hand, some criticize the ineffectiveness and even negative effects of this state program on local people's livelihood, as many planted trees died, and the program's implementation was often entangled with official corruption. The program also unveiled the contradictory goals of local people vs. the central state, of the economy vs. ecology, and of existing practice vs. theory. Both sides of the argument have merit, yet given China's vast size and its spatial variation one must resist the desire for a unified story. In fact, one notices that previous studies are largely focused on China's northwestern arid region and the Yun-Gui Plateau. The ethnographic account below examines the state "Farmland-to-Forest" program by focusing instead on a local study in China's mid-south region. Unlike previous studies, my inquiry is different in two senses. First, method-wise, I take an ethnographical approach that seeks to uncover the existing practice and lived experience from the ground level. Second, I am interested in the relationship between state environmental ideology and agricultural de-intensification. As such, I analyze this environmental program within a broader

context of agrarian change. My contribution is not about the surviving rate of trees, but rather how the national environmental discourse is articulated with local practices of agricultural de-intensification.

I begin with the role of the county-level state apparatus in shaping and (re) interpreting the "Farmland-to-Forest" program. A decade had passed since the initiation of the program locally, when county clerks in Aipin—and neighboring county—spoke to me about it. I was surprised to find that they considered this program to be mere political propaganda. The problem was that, environmental protection and restoration was not considered essential in this hilly region, because its forest coverage remained extensive. As we have learned in Chapter One, tree farming was/is a tradition in this region. The following ethnographic account summarizes current attitudes among bureaucrats about this program.

The Bureau of Forestry in Aipin County occupies the top five floors of a ten-floor modern high-rise building. This brand new building was constructed using the Bureau of Forestry funds. After asking around from door to door, there seemed to be no dedicated office for the "Farmland-to-Forest" program. Later I learned that, at least in Aipin County, the program has been assigned to one clerk who works in the Office of Bamboo Industry (*zhu ye ban*) in the Bureau of Forestry. The one official in question was Li Zhuren (Director Li), who shares an office with two other county clerks. He efficiently consulted a handy notebook from his first desk drawer, and responded to me that Aipin County had converted a total of 32.5 thousand *mu* of farmland to forest. What did this number mean in relation to the county's total cultivated area? Was it insignificant or substantial? Li Zhuren felt no need to clarify. Moreover, this aggregated data was accumulated over three consecutive years, in 2002, 2003, and 2004. Li Zhuren had prepared the data long before my visits. He has written the numbers very neatly in a palm-sized leather-covered notebook, probably to report to his superiors. In brief, all this was old news. Since 2004, the program in Aipin County had almost been forgotten. Li Zhuren was polite and answered my questions with caution and brevity. At times, he seemed to suggest it was a waste of time to discuss this decade-old program, while many current tasks were waiting for him on his desk.

When asked why the program was stopped after 2004, Li Zhuren thought for a moment. "It might have been due to the abolition of agricultural taxation in 2005," he responded. Since 2006, not only was there no more agricultural tax, villagers also received direct agricultural subsidies from the central government. This was a historic moment in Chinese history. As a result, Li Zhuren reasoned, small farmers might have become less interested in converting farmland to trees after 2005. Li Zhuren continued, back in 2002, villagers had to pay agricultural taxes (in kind or in cash) according to the size of their allocated rice fields. Hence, the program of "Farmland-to-Forest" was attractive to villagers. It meant paying fewer taxes. Once the rice paddy was converted to forestland, not only were the fields exempted from mandatory agricultural taxation, villagers also received an eight-year subsidy for the lost portion of farmland. Nation-wide, the subsidy per *mu* was 300 *jin* of rice grain, which is quite low. In terms of cash equivalent, villagers received 210 RMB per *mu* (e.g., the state price for rice grain was 0.70 RMB/*jin* in 2002).

In addition, there are two types of subsidies: "ecological trees" (*shengtai lin*) and "economic trees" (*jingji lin*). If planting "ecological trees," the duration of the subsidy was eight years. If planting "economic trees" (e.g., cash-crops, such as camellia, tea, tong trees, and fruit trees), the subsidy period was five years. The assumption was that returns from "economic trees" came faster than from "ecological trees" (the latter of which were felled for lumber every few decades). When the period of the subsidy reached its end, the central government in fact announced a prolongation of the subsidy for another round of eight years or five years, respectively. For

example, the subsidy of a program started in 2002 should have ended in 2010, but with the extension was set to end in 2018 (for ecological trees). Likewise, a program started in 2004 would distribute its last subsidy in 2020 (for ecological trees).

According to Li Zhuren, although the "Farmland-to-Forest" program in Aipin County was officially ended in 2005, two supporting measures continue to the present: 1) subsidy distributions; and 2) other "supporting measures" (*peitao cuoshi*). This reflects the specific nature of tree farming. It takes decades to harvest instead of just one yearly. Moreover, the second eight-year subsidy included two additional elements:1) a basic living expense of 105 RMB per *mu* for participating villagers; and 2) 20 RMB per *mu* for tree "management and protection" (*guan hu*). The prolonged subsidy was designed to consolidate the positive result of the program, so that trees were not cut down at the end of the first subsidy period. As for the "supporting measures," Li Zhuren was vague about it. He handed me a state document that described six supporting projects, which included "delimiting basic agricultural fields, building energy sources for the countryside, ecological migration, follow-up industrial development, training peasants for employment and occupational skills, and replanting and re-afforestation." In Aipin County, Li Zhuren explained, two supporting measures are taken: hill enclosure and afforestation. Neither hill enclosure nor afforestation is included in the supporting measures guide. There was a noticeable deviation between official discourse and actual implementation.

The task of hill enclosure and afforestation was entrusted not to individual households, but rather to five local "state forest-farms" (*guo yin lin chang*) in Aipin County. It is much easier to accomplish this task by this means, reasoned the General Engineer (*zong gong cheng shi*) of the Aipin Bureau of Forestry. The General Engineer happened to be at the office of Bamboo Industry when I was chatting with Li Zhuren. The General Engineer is the brain behind the Bureau of Forestry at Aipin County, Li Zhuren explained. Although there has been a second round of the "Farmland-to-Forest" program starting in 2017, there is a critical difference from the first round that began in 2002, the General Engineer confidently explained. According to the General Engineer's interpretation, the 2002 program was limited to agricultural land on the book. Individual households reclaiming wasteland that did not pay state taxes did not qualify for the program. In a sense, agricultural land (*geng di*) as a category was defined based on taxes not based on environmental concerns. But the new 2017 "Farmland-to-Forest" program explicitly targeted environmental problems related to *geng di*: 1) sloped land at more than 25 degree or situated at the water source of major rivers, and 2) heavily polluted agricultural land. The General Engineer claimed that Aipin County simply has no such types of land. Instead, the county has taken "Revitalizing the Countryside" (*xiang cun zheng xin*) as the strategy and priority of the Bureau of Forestry. In particular, beside the normal tasks of managing the "birth" and "death" of trees, the Bureau has shifted towards developing a livestock industry in the forest. He called it "the economy under the forest" (*lin xia jing ji*). As the General Engineer explained, now that cutting trees was strictly regulated, the Bureau had to find a way to supplement workers' wages at state forest-farm stations. In brief, from the perspective of forest officials, the "Farmland-to-Forest" program has lost its momentum in this hill region, even as the subsidy was still on the books. For them, economic growth is the true local concern.

Farmland-to-Forest: Implementation in Villages

Up to now, I have not discussed the existing practices on the ground. It is time to learn some details and insight from local participating villagers. The following account aims not only to describe the actual experience, but also to highlight diverse perspectives of individual households on environmental restoration.

Situated 60 kilometer southwest of the Aipin County seat, Stone Head village is the first village one encounters upon entering Shanli Township. Stone Head village is one of nine administrative villages that dot the winding local river. It consists of a cluster of a hundred or more households located on the south side of the river. In 2002, this village retired a total of 30 *mu* of wet rice paddies to grow trees—in other words, a relatively small amount of land. On average, each household had about a half *mu* subtracted from its allocated rice land. There was no official explanation why Stone Head Village was chosen as the site for the Farmland-to-Forest program since there were many terraced rice fields among the more than 47 natural villages in Shanli Township. Apparently, *in situ* surveys were conducted to find potential sites for this program. Residents in Xialongkou natural village remember that village cadres led the way with surveyors to check the fields along the hill ravines and also fields in front of the village. However, Xialongkou was not chosen. When asked why, the reason given was that some Xialongkou households were unwilling to participate. Instead of convincing those who disagreed, the head of the local forest station, Boss Hu, chose Stone Head Village, where there were no objections. It was the township "forest station" (*lin ye zhan*), not the township government that made this decision. Apparently, the distinction between the vertical ministerial power and the horizontal local government power was important. Moreover, Stone Head Village is classified as one of two "poverty" (*pin kun*) villages in Shanli Township. This "poverty" status figured prominently in the process of decision-making. As such, the "Farmland-to-Forest" program would conveniently fulfill two state discourses: poverty alleviation and ecological restoration.

The retired terraced rice paddies are spread along two hill ravines; both stretches of land were classified as "big-rice" paddy of a hill valley (see Figure 5). A stone bridge straddling the local river provides the only vehicle access to the village. After crossing the bridge, on the right side along the riverbank is a paved plaza featuring a set of outdoor exercise machines. It was a chilly winter of 2018 when I visited. A group of six male villagers in their 50s and 60s, some standing, others sitting on a concrete bench, chatted while smoking and sunning themselves. When asked, if they knew the "Farmland-to-Forest" program, one man in the crowd told me, "Never heard about it." Apparently, the program had been sufficiently small that it did not make a mark on all villagers. But another elderly man disagreed with his fellow villager: "Yes. There was [the program]." He reminded the rest of the crowd that red papers were posted on the wall of the village committee office pertaining to the distribution of "Farmland-to-Forest" subsidies. The conversation then drifted to the names of the trees planted. One man said, "Water willows, was it not?" Others replied that no, they were "upright trees." One thing they all agreed was that the trees planted were not native. As a result, local villagers simply did not recognize the tree. The trees grew well in water. Their roots were submerged under stream water almost yearlong. Another man commented that the trees had now grown big and tall.

Figure 5. One of the hill ravines that was selected as the site for the "Farmland-to-Forest" program in Stone Head Village.

All of a sudden, someone pointed at an elderly man who wore a green Zhongshan-style jacket, while sweeping the ground in front of his house with a bamboo broom. "He might know something," I was told. "He was once a village head. The problem is that he cannot stop talking once he gets started." "It is best to avoid him." It turns out the elderly man in his 70s had been the village head in 2002, and had been the one to handle the "Farmland-to-Forest" program. He was truly excited to hear that someone was interested in consulting his cadre experience and opinions. He put aside the bamboo broom immediately, and took up my questions with enthusiasm. He brought me to the door of a villager who had participated in the program, and knocked, but no one was home. He did not give up. He pulled out his cell phone from his pocket and called. It turned out that the head of the household was in an adjacent house, where two whole families were busy harvesting the larvae of "tiger-headed wasps" (*hu tou feng*).

In front of a three-story newly built house, with a concrete paved courtyard edged with dwarf citrus trees on two sides, a total of eight women and men sat on wooden stools in a circle, in the center of which lay a small pile of wasp honeycombs. In the midst of the merriment and excitement of picking wasp larvae, the two households recounted their experiences participating in the Farmland-to-Forest program. In 2002, families were asked to sign individual contracts with

the head of the local forest station, Boss Hu. The deal was that Boss Hu would cut down the trees in 50 years, and the profit would be divided between villagers and him, 20% for villagers and 80% for himself. Villagers involved do not feel there was anything unjust with this arrangement, since it was Boss Hu who has invested his capital. Hu provided the tree seedling, then hired local villagers to dig holes and plant the trees. At that time, he paid 10 RMB for a day of labor, with laborers supplying their own lunch boxes. Fifteen years later, the trees are already big and tall. However, neither Boss Hu nor the villagers have looked after the trees once they were planted. There is evidence of some fallen trees in the two ravines, but overall, the survival rate is high, close to 90%. Based on conversations with the two village households, they had never been told the exact state subsidy, claiming to have only received 70 RMB per *mu*. But they seemed only a little upset when they learned that Boss Hu had gotten the lion's share of the subsidy. When asked about whether they still get subsidies, they acknowledged they did. However, they did not themselves know about the extension of the subsidy. They did not even realize they were still receiving subsidies until they saw their bank statement listing the "Farmland-to-Forest" subsidy. Only then, the participating villagers noticed that the yearly subsidy has risen to 125 RMB per *mu* beginning around the year 2011 or so. The exact year was a little fuzzy. After all, the farmland converted to trees was very small in proportion to their total cultivated acreage. Each participating household converted no more than one *mu* of farmland. Many only converted a few fractions of one *mu*. Upon further inquiry, the two heads of households searched around their houses to find the original contract signed with Boss Hu, but failed to find them. To be sure, the new discourse concerning ecological protection and forest restoration remains important, and can be appropriated by local state and villagers when the need arises. It is compelling to note that neither officials nor participating villagers consider this program to have been a pure waste of agricultural land. In other words, agricultural de-intensification can be justified using discourse of ecological protection and restoration. Ecological problem is not the only discourse guiding officials; I now turn to another discourse—economic development.

From Rice to Tobacco: A Township Project

It is important to realize that the evaluation and assessment of officials' political performance continues to weigh heavily on local economic growth. The case of tobacco plantation in Shanli Township illustrates how a local political economic project can facilitate agricultural de-intensification in the hill country. Hans Steinmüller (2013) has studied Zhongba Village in Hubei Province, where rice terrace fields have been converted into a tea plantation, the success of which has been transformative on the local economy and the livelihood of the people. In Xialongkou, around 2011, a similar project was attempted, in this case involving tobacco plants. The project was initiated by the new township leader. In July 2012, I participated in harvesting tobacco leaves, then helped tie the fresh tobacco leaves (in bunches of two or three) on to a bamboo rod 1.5 meter long (see Photo 5). The leaves were then transported to the "tobacco kilns" (*kao yan fang*) for curing. Before that, households had never planted tobacco on their rice fields. Yet when I returned the next year in 2013, most of the villagers had stopped farming tobacco. When I inquired about this, most villagers explained that tobacco farming was harder work, and even more labor intensive than rice cultivation. Only Yutou continued for the second year, because he is a smoker and keeps some cured tobacco leaves for his own consumption. By and large, the real issue was that, the tobacco farming payoff was meager in relation to the intensity of the labor involved.[7] Villagers are

[7] One elderly woman listed all the tedium associated with tobacco cultivation, starting with the special preparation of the field by making straight ridges and trenches, putting black plastic film on the ridges, planting tobacco plants by poking a hole through the black plastic film, picking leaves from the bottom one or two at a time as they matured

more attuned to the value of their labor now that small odd jobs are available locally, such as working as day laborers at construction sites in the context of the current housing boom in villages and small towns.

Photo 5. Tobacco leaves neatly tied to bamboo rods are ready for curing.

The tobacco plantation project was a political project initiated by a newly appointed township leader to distinguish his tenure from previous political leaders. He and his team mobilized village cadres and then villagers to cultivate the new cash crop by constructing many tobacco kilns (*kao yan fang* "roasting tobacco rooms") along the main road. Every two to three natural villages were given one tobacco kiln within ten-minutes walking distance. All villages of the township participated in constructing the curing facilities, built of red bricks with a tin roof. In addition, the township government had agricultural experts come to give training classes to villagers on how to cultivate tobacco plants and how to use and control the temperature of the kilns to maximize the quality of the tobacco. After the infrastructure was set up, in order to encourage locals to cultivate the tobacco plant, the township government provided a one-time special subsidy. Villagers told me that the special subsidy was the decisive reason for agreeing to shift to the new cash crop. "There is nothing to lose," most villagers felt. The subsidies were enough to pay the necessary initial investment to start the tobacco plantation (e.g., tobacco plants, plastic film, fertilizers, and herbicide).

In contrast to Steinmüller's description of market competition among small tea traders in Bashan, the failure of tobacco cultivation lay in large part in the state monopoly, the China Tobacco Company. The tobacco industry is unique in the sense that both distribution and production are

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(the process can last more than a month), then tying the leaves on to poles to hang in the kilns, and, finally, sorting the cured leaves according to their different qualities and sizes (using illustrated pictures of curing standards provided by China Tobacco Company). The whole process could last 8 months.

controlled by the state enterprise. In Xialongkou, tobacco plant production was contracted out to individual households. There was zero space for negotiation and market competition. Villagers were paid at the end of the year at a fixed piece-wage, the most characteristic trait of the capitalist mode of exploitation. An associated problem was that the cultivation of tobacco has no social or cultural significance in contributing to sociability. People felt the dullness of an intense, year-long investment of labor, but found no enjoyment to ease the tedium. After harvesting and curing the tobacco leaves, it was then necessary to sort each tobacco leaf based on categories assigned by the China Tobacco Company. Village women did most of the sorting work and told me that it was not fun. Throughout the winter months, they were busy sorting roasted tobacco leaves one by one. "What happens if one does not separate the leaves into the correct categories?" "If the leaves are not sorted according to their size and color, all leaves will end up getting the lowest price, even for the higher quality ones." So, the village women did their best to sort the leaves with the hope to get higher pay. Finally, at the end of the year, after one full year of hard labor, the villagers finally received their payment. Most felt it was simply "not worth" (*bu hua suan*) the hard work, and did not want to repeat the process. Thus, the second year, only Yutou chose to continue, while the rest of the villagers either returned to cultivating rice or simply fallowed their land temporarily. As of 2019, only the tobacco kilns are still standing along the asphalt road, with no tobacco plants anywhere to be seen.

The failed tobacco project had unintended consequences. It facilitated agricultural de-intensification in Xialongkou. The rumor had it that where tobacco plants had once grown, the accumulated chemical toxins would be harmful against growing grain and other crops. The fear was that grain or food grown on ex-tobacco land would be harmful if consumed. The believed solution was to fallow the land one to two years to allow it to recover. In fact, however, even seven years later, in 2019, some of the land no longer farmed after the tobacco experiment remained unused.

An interesting follow-up to this story concerns the next township-led development project. When the next party secretary of Shanli Township took his official post for a five-year tenure, he too sought to leave his mark with a distinct project, in this case involving natural and cultural heritage tourism. This project will be discussed in more detail in Chapter four. In brief, the new leader assigned from above, like his predecessor who had advocated tobacco cash crop, recognized that traditional intensive rice agriculture was not the future for his political career or for the local residents. To reprise my argument, agricultural de-intensification is produced in and through the generational shift, gendered agricultural work, and local state officials' (re) interpretation of national discourses on ecological restoration and economic growth.

Conclusion

This chapter began with an account of oxen disappearance and the rise of agricultural machinery in the hill country of western Jiangxi Province. The introduction of mechanized rice cultivation is certainly a sign of modern progress and material advancement. It certainly has reduced "bitter labor" (*ku li*) associated with some aspects of agricultural work in this part of rural China. I described two forms of agricultural de-intensification: mechanization and land fallowing. Yet that is not the whole story. The adoption of small tractors combined with land fallowing is at odds with the continuation of gendered rice transplanting in Xialongkou. As a result, this new gendered agricultural work reinforces agricultural de-intensification, standing in sharp contrast with the much discussed "dragon head" (*long tou*) agribusiness companies. *Long tou* is a particular model promoted by the Chinese government, focused on vertical integration in agriculture as the key to achieving agricultural modernization, as Zhang and Donaldson (2008) argue. However,

Xialongkou and the hill country provide a different model of agricultural modernization—one that involves semi-mechanization and de-intensification in both land and labor. The changed agricultural practices are closely connected to the generational shift in work values and gendered agricultural work specific to this hill region. But probably a more meaningful perspective from Xialongkou villagers' lived experience is the great benefit of mechanization to save men's labor, allowing them to engage in diverse odd jobs in small towns. Women contribute to de-intensification by continuing old methods of rice transplanting that revolve around skilled labor and sociability. In addition, the local states have played a role in fostering de-intensification through initiatives like the "Farmland-to-Forest" program and tobacco plantation, albeit both "failed" programs. The state ideologies of ecological civilization and local economic growth are (re) interpreted in relation to local conditions. Yutou's fishpond is an illustration of a new sensitivity to new rural values beyond grain production. When the weather permits, one often finds Yutou sitting on a bank of his fishpond, listening to his favorite Huangmei opera (*huang mei xi*) from a palm-sized radio, and gazing at fish nibbling fresh grass that he had harvested from the banks of the river or of a nearby creek using a hand-held sickle. For Yutou, agricultural work and life have never been better as a result of machinery and the development in the countryside. The toil of converting rice paddy to fishpond offers him now the everyday leisure of calculating the end of year big sale of his grass-fed fishes. The next chapter will explore further the gendered translocal family, which connects the hill country to diverse regional economies in the context of the post-2008 global financial crisis.

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Chapter 4
Small Town Revival in the Era of Global Re-nationalisation, Post-2008

In the previous chapter, we explored the gendered translocal family reproduction in relation to three different migration routes in this part of rural China. To understand the changing conditions intertwined with the variability of translocal family, the present chapter takes on Doreen Massey's (1994; 2006) conceptualization of space as "simultaneity of difference" to chart the rise of small towns in early 21st century China. In other words, changes in family reproductive work are integral part of small town revival in both material and social relations. Newspapers and the media have surprised readers by revealing China's new growth engines to be found in the form of smaller- and lower-tier cities and towns in interior regions (Chinadaily 2021; 21Jingji 2022). However, that is not to say that megametropolises such as Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Beijing are not important anymore. Instead, I believe what the new "discovery" does is to shed light on the latent functions of small cities and towns in China's on-going economic growth. Most critically, it offers a glimpse of possibilities for alternative work and life. The evidence used by the newspapers are giant online wholesale companies like Pinduoduo, online streaming app Kuaishou, and burgeoning secondhand car markets in rural counties (Tsinghua 2020; Chinathinktanks 2022). These emerging businesses and in particular the platform economy (Peck and Phillips 2021) share a common ground, which is to target users and consumers in lower-tier cities and below county-level towns and rural communities. Some call it *xiachen shichang* (submerged market, i.e. excluding first- and second-tier cities). The news reports challenge our assumptions about small towns and rural communities, which are usually associated with stagnation, technological backwardness, and conservative mindsets.

The present chapter addresses the above phenomenon of small town revival in early 21st century China. It raises the question, what is the historical significance of this round of small town China development? Grounded in eleven months of ethnographic fieldwork in the hill country of Aipin County in western Jiangxi Province, I argue that the current small-town revival is a product of two traditions: the rural market town tradition and Mao's revolutionary tradition. In addition, I stress the articulation of historical specificity and resurgence of nationalisation in the context of the period following the 2008 global financial crisis. In a way, small town revival is a product of both history and relational geography. As such, retracing the processes underlying small towns is critical for grasping the *multiplicity of space* and thereby destabilizing the dualisms of rural/urban and local/global.

To make the argument, this chapter is organized into four sections. The first section defines what I mean by small towns. The second section traces the non-linear trajectory of small-town development by following two historical traditions. One is the traditional rural market system that I shall build from G. William Skinner's (1964) classic study of standard market towns before 1949. The other tradition refers to the political nature of small towns in the Mao era, particularly in the case of *san xian* (third front) industrial towns. The third section deals with the small-town revival in the early economic reform era (particularly in the 1980s). I complicate the by now familiar story of how Township and Village Enterprises (TVEs) created a renaissance of small towns in south Jiangsu and the coastal provinces. The story of *san xian* (third front) industrial towns in this period is less known. This section highlights the parallel and complementary effects between the planned economy in *san xian* towns and the opening of the market economy in the 1980s. However, it was a short moment of prosperity as *san xian* towns finally fell into demise when defense industries and workers were relocated to larger cities after the Cold War ended in 1989.

Roughly from 1989 to the early 2000s, small towns of both a market and an administrative nature came to be dwarfed by the tremendous growth and resource

concentration in mega cities and metropolises. This was/is accompanied with large-scale rural-to-urban migration to China's burgeoning export-oriented economy in coastal cities and large metropolises. More than twenty years later, as the Chinese economy has become the second largest in the world, what explains the recent resurgence of small towns? And what is the theoretical significance? The fourth section addresses these questions through ethnographic accounts of returned migrants and local officials who shape and are being shaped in this process. Most critically, individual practices are contextualized in the post-2008 global financial crisis era and amid a resurgence of nationalisation in both China and the United States. The chapter concludes by bringing up Raymond Williams' "undefined present" to suggest that small towns are a dimension of *possibility* and *undefined multiple spaces.*

Part I: Defining small towns and their theoretical significance

The expression, for "small towns" in Chinese is *xiao cheng zhen* (literally, "small city town"). It is a popular term that first emerged in the 1980s. According to Shen Guanbao (2007), "small towns" refer to communities larger than rural villages within a county; its residents by definition should mostly engage in non-agricultural economic activities. This definition is inherited from Shen's mentor, the prominent sociologist Fei Xiaotong (more details in section two). Shen further differentiates three types/scales of small towns within a county: the county town (I), the designated town (II), and the rural market town (III). The first comes the county town (*xian cheng*) (equivalent to G. William Skinner's (1975) 'central market town' and/or 'local cities'), which is the political and economic center of the entire county. Take the example of Aipin county. Like many other county seats that are located in a central market town, the county seat of Aipin (I) is centered on the commercial streets of Gongnan *zhen* (town). Since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, it has been the site of the county government and an economic and cultural center for the surrounding rural communities. As of 2018, China had a total of 2851 county towns (China Statistical Yearbook 2019). The number of counties has been pretty stable throughout the history of the PRC.

By contrast, the number of designated towns (II) has fluctuated based on political needs. In the urban hierarchy of the People's Republic of China, towns below the county level are called *jian zhi zhen* (designated town II) (equivalent to Skinner's 'intermediary market town'). The designated town serves as an economic and political center for a sub-county region. The term means that the town is officially recognized in Chinese as a 'town' (here, *zhen*), unlike other agglomerations that are not officially counted as 'towns', such as many rural market towns. Historically, the formation of *zhen* goes back to the seventh century, when *zhen* were garrisons for troops in charge of local security (Lu 2010). According to Shiba Yosinobu, *zhen* were commercial (non-administrative) centers in the Song. Most critically, a *zhen* has the characteristics of being both rural and urban. Lu Hanchao has noted the dual nature of *zhen*, evident when the word is compounded as *cheng zhen* (city town), and also as *xiang zhen* (rural town). In 1978, there were 2,173 designated towns. As of 2018, China had 21,297 designated towns (II), indicating a ten-fold increase over forty years (China Yearly Statistics 2019).

The third (and smallest) type town is the rural market town (equivalent to Skinner's 'standard market town'), which consists of a local economic center. The local periodical market is called *xu* in Aipin County. For example, Songsen *xu* is held on days of 1, 4, and 7 of every ten-day period of the lunar calendar. This particular local market already existed in the Late Qing period (more details in the following section). Skinner estimated that there were 27,712 standard market towns in the year 1893 (Skinner 1985, 340). Similar to the designated town, the huge number of towns of this level deserves our attention.

Throughout the chapter, I refer to small towns by including all above three types. Most critically, based on Aipin county data and locals' lived experience, I modify Shen Guanbao's small towns by complicating the second level (II). That is to say, in addition to the designated town (II) that is huge in number now, the township-level market town and the *san xian* third front town have become prominent (see Table 7). For example, Jinlian *gai* is not a *zhen* but a township seat. Yet from the locals' perspective, Jinlian *gai* is equivalent to *Douwu gai* (the designated town II). The local reference of *gai* is distinctively commercial and town feature. Another example is Shanli *gai* where *san xian* (third front) town is located.

In terms of occupations, the residents of the three types of town described above are increasingly difficult to classify. Most families with 'rural' hukou are involved in a hybrid mix of both agricultural and non-agricultural economic activities. Consequently, the divide between townspeople—known locally as *gai shang ren* (street people)—and country people (*xiong xia ren*) has been blurred as locals move back and forth between village and town for work and life (Chapter 3). For instance, taking *xiao gong* (small jobs) in towns while simultaneously continuing one's farming responsibilities is a common practice for Xialongkou community members.[1] In addition, this hybrid work and lifestyle is amplified as more and more family members buy flats in Aipin county town (I) and/or build new houses in nearby lower-level towns. This hybrid work and lifestyle is also true for family members relocating to large metropolises.

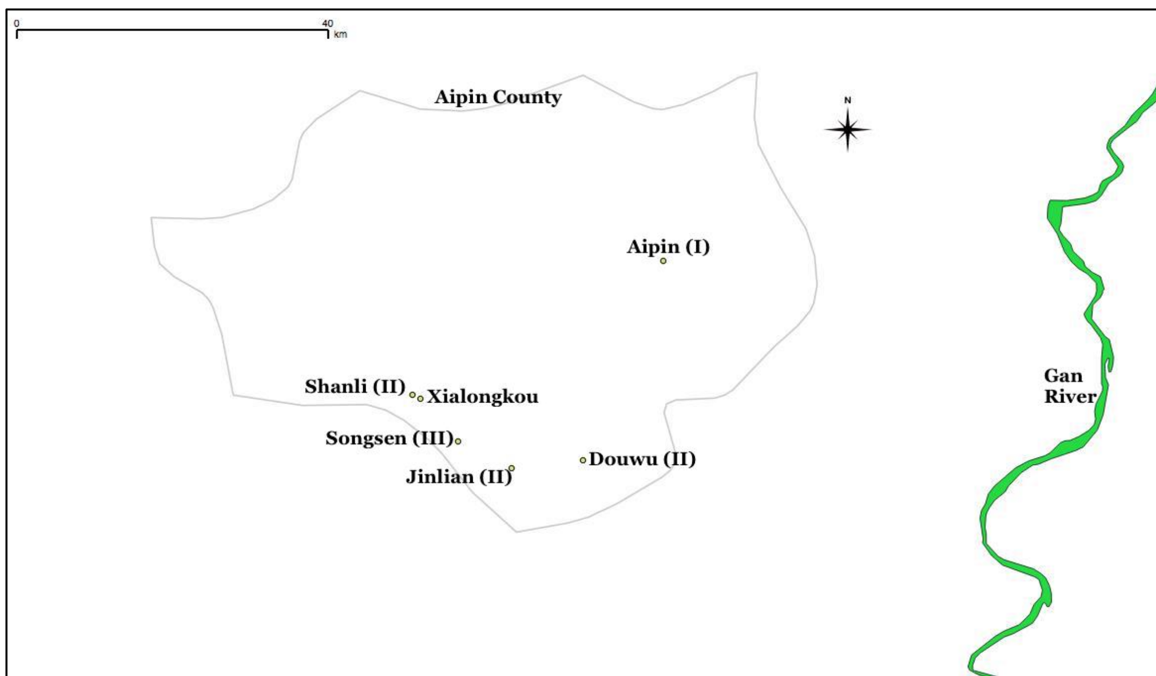
Urban hierarchy system

Metropolis (*zhixia shi*)
- Provincial capital (*sheng hui*)
  - Municipalities (shi)
    - County (*xian*)
      - Designated towns (*jianzhi zhen*)
      - Townships (*xiang zhen*)
        - Rural market towns (*jizhen/xu*)

Small towns: levels	**Names**
County town (I)	Aipin county
Designated town (II)	Douwu *gai* (street)
Intermediary market town/township seat (II)	Jinlian *gai* (street)
San xian (third front) town/township seat (II)	Shanli *gai* (street)
Rural market town (III)	Songsen *xu*

Table 7: Names of small towns.

[1] There is a long history of this. Myron Cohen talks about it. Even Max Weber talks about it.



Map 7. Three levels of small towns: County seat (I): Aipin; designated towns (II): Douwu, *San xian* Shanli, Jinlian; and rural market town (III): Songsen.

Having established an analytical framework for classifying towns of different levels (Map 7), I shall now turn to the preliminary theoretical significance of small towns. Following Doreen Massey (2006), I conceptualise space as "a dimension of contemporaneous multiplicity." As such, I understand small towns as "a spatial simultaneity of difference" of *now* instead of sequential stages of development in a rural-town-urban spectrum. I believe that this spatial concept goes one step further than Fei Xiaogong's understanding of small towns as a transitional node between the city and the countryside (Fei [1983] 2000). As early as 1983, Fei Xiaotong popularized this term *xiao cheng zhen* (small town) when he delivered an influential talk in Nanjing, later published as "Small Towns, Big Issues" (Fei 2000). Fei did not define *xiao cheng zhen* in a precise way. Instead, he prioritized small towns' function in relation to rural communities:

> There exists a kind of social entity that is higher than rural communities. These social entities mostly have a nonagricultural population. In terms of geography, population, economy, and environment, they were characteristically different from rural communities. At the same time, they maintain an indispensable relation with surrounding rural communities. We use a common name to describe such social communities: small town (Fei 2000, 86).

However, given this ambiguous definition, Fei cautioned us to confront the individual characteristics and specific history of each small town, at the same time recognizing small town's commonality as the center of economic, cultural, and political activity for the surrounding rural communities. In addition, there is no one-to-one fixed relationship between a rural community and its immediate town nearby. Instead, rural communities differentiate small towns based on everyday necessities and/or special needs. For instance, Xialongkou residents purchase small items for everyday use at Songsen periodical market town (III). When time comes for oil-seed pressing, they go to Jinlian town (II). When they need to buy durable goods (e.g., a rice cooker), even though both Songsen and Jinlian have one or two shops selling such durable goods, most locals opt to take a one and half hour long bus ride to Aipin county town (I), where there are many more brands and sizes—not to mention prices—to choose from. In other words, rural communities have a flexible and multiplicitous

relationship with small towns. Before we jump too quickly to our conclusion, the next section examines two historical traditions in small town (re)formation.

Part II: Small towns in Mao's era

The fall of market towns and the birth of *san xian* (third front) industrial towns

The previous section has defined what small towns are and their preliminary theoretical implication. This section traces two historical traditions that were significant in shaping the trajectory of small-town development during Mao's socialist era. One tradition involved the central place of rural market towns (Skinner 1965). The second tradition involved Mao's revolutionary effort in the geopolitical context of the Cold War to relocate heavy industries into remote regions, giving birth to *san xian* (third front) industrial towns. This section shall stress the bifurcated outcomes during Mao's era: the decline of rural market towns and the rise of *san xian* industrial towns.

I begin with a brief history of rural market towns in Aipin County. In this part of rural China during the late Qing Dynasty and the Republican Era (1911-1949), hill inhabitants were largely integrated into the local economy through the periodic market towns. For Xialongkou residents and the neighboring communities, there were two market towns that locals went to: Jinlian and Songsen. According to the
Tongzhi era Aipin county gazetteer, the two rural market towns already existed in 1800 (Yao et al. 1989). The market at Jinlian took place on days 3, 6, and 9 of every ten-day period (*xun*) of the lunar calendar. And the market at Songsen took place on days 1, 4, and 7 of every ten-day period. G.W. Skinner has developed a central-place theory to describe the economic hierarchy of market towns and their sociocultural importance for rural communities (1964). Skinner pointed to the essential function of the 'standard market town,' 'intermediary market town', and 'central market town' in rural China before 1949. According to Skinner, each ideal-type standard market town covers a radius of eighteen villages. And the distribution of the periodic markets takes the shape of hexagons. In the area of Shanli and neighboring townships, the spatial distribution of the periodic markets seems to correspond well to Skinner's theory, though the radius is much larger, probably due to sparse village settlements. However, these traditional rural market towns went into decline in the Mao era. For instance, the Songsen periodic market ceased to exist in the late 1950s.

In other parts of the rural China, the decline of the rural market towns and *zhen* came as early as 1956. It was then that peasants' private commerce and profit-driven sidelines began to be considered "capitalist's tails" that needed to be forcefully cut off. To eliminate capitalists, the key function of traditional market towns—commercial exchange and profit making—was strictly limited and replaced by the centralized state's exclusive right to procure and distribute goods (*tong gou tong xiao*). This led to the decline of many rural market towns nationwide. For instance, in 1956, when Fei returned to Kaixiangong village where his first English book *Peasant Life in China* (1939) was based, he found peasant life was still very poor even with the increased grain production. When Fei questioned the neglect of commercial activities in market towns and in the rural handicraft industry and sideline production, he was immediately condemned as a 'bourgeois rightist' and put in isolation for two decades.

The number of designated towns (*jian zhi zhen*) was also reduced, from 4,429 to 2,200 over the period 1961-1977. The reduction of *zhen* number was designed to reduce the state's burden in supplying grain to urban populations. In 1961, the population of *zhen* was around 44 million, while two decades later it merely reaches to 50 million (Kirkby, Bradbury and Shen 2000, 4). This was because urban populations enjoyed many entitlements: secure jobs, food and other suppliers, as well as housing and social welfare provision. By contrast, for the over 80 percent of the population who were rural dwellers, they were effectively confined to collectivized agricultural production in the villages.

However, there were exceptions to the general demise of rural market towns and *zhen*. The exceptions were those towns that were selected as the sites of political and administrative seats for county towns and headquarters for the people's communes. Those towns had relative growth and modest expansion and are noted by scholars studying small town development (Kirkby, Bradbury and Shen 2000; Fei 2000). For example, while the Songsen market ceased, the Jinlian market town became the site of Jinlian Commune headquarters, and many administrative organs were set up on Jinlian streets.

In addition to administrative towns, a new kind of town emerged, namely *san xian* (third front) industrial towns. These *san xian* industrial bases were created in the geopolitical context of the Cold War era. When Chairman Mao anticipated the seemingly inevitable wars between China and the USSR and/or the US, the tactical strategy was to relocate heavy industry—especially the defense industry—from coastal cities to remote areas. In the early 1960s, the CCP leaders under Mao launched a national military strategy to "build third front" (*san xian jian she*).[2] The relocation sites were selected on the basis of the tripartite principle that they all are: "near mountains, covert, and dispersed" (*kaoshan, yinbi, fensan*). The centralized CCP state selected sites for heavy industrial bases with huge capital investment, by relocating medium-to-large enterprises to frontiers in the northwest, southwest, and interiors of each province. With the establishment of heavy industrial bases, came the establishment of entirely new towns.

Why was Shanli selected as the site for *san xian* defense industry? It did fit the bill in terms of its geography, as it is both very remote and entirely surrounded by hills. History also played a role. It should be noted that Shanli and its neighboring county together constituted the first major revolutionary base of the Chinese Communist Party. Young Mao Zedong and his followers retreated to Jinggangshan, a bordering region between Huanan and Jiangxi Province, after the failed Autumn Harvest Uprising in Changsha in September 1927. Because of that, the regional economy declined in the late 1920s and the 1930s as skirmishes between the Nationalist Guomingdang and the Communists became commonplace in the hills of western Jiangxi. Local county gazetteers record many deserted villages and burned forested hills caused by the Nationalists' effort to encircle and suppress the activities of the Communists. Thus, Shanli as the site for *san xian* defense industry was not a pure accident, but rather historically significant for the new state, as part of the original red revolutionary base.

The majority of scholarship evaluating *san xian* projects has tended to see it in a negative light. For instance:

> Mao's repeated injunctions on the dispersal of China's industrial infrastructure under the *san xian* (Three Fronts) implanted a vast complex of industrial and research enterprises in the remotest regions of the central southwest, far away from the great urban centers of coastal China. But Mao's grand regional strategy, though it discriminated against already urbanized seaboard China, did not amount to a harnessing of China's rural settlements in any coherent national plan. The lack of any renaissance and positive reformulation of the small town economy for the new era was a clear outcome of the orthodoxies of centralized economic planning which began to take shape from the mid-1950s on (Kirkby, Bradbury and Shen 2000, 2).

[2] In 1965, as an important part of the "third front" economic planning, "small third front" (*xiao sanxian*) was established in hinterlands of major regional cities. Local governments (mainly provincial) were responsible for building *xiao san xian*. In retrospect, both programs were top secrets and were not called by such. Instead, it was referred as *neidi jianshe* (build hinterland). In this paper I use *san xian* as a general term to capture the overall efforts and significance of this centralized economic plan in marginal areas.

The authors acknowledge that Mao's regional war strategy accorded with an anti-big city approach, but they go on to claim that *san xian* did not bring a "renaissance" to small town economies because everything was centralized under the planned economy.

Another line of criticism exists. Fei Xiaotong, one of the pioneers advocating and supporting a small town urbanization strategy, also gave a negative evaluation. Fei believed that these *san xian* industrial towns were like "desert islands" (*gu dao*) (Fei 2000, 285-6). Fei did acknowledge the importance of creating many state-owned enterprises and industries with huge fixed capital in remote areas, as part of China's overall industrialization process. But this centralized method, created dispersed and isolated industrial bases, each like 'a desert island,' that was separated from and kept from integrating with the local economy. Consequently, and most critically, Fei claimed that the 'island' form of industrialization did not spur on the rise of rural industrialization; but rather deepened the gaps between the city and the countryside. In addition, this 'island' type of industrialization was entirely distinct from China's rural handicraft tradition.

In contrast to the above views, there is a revisionist evaluation of *san xian* since the middle of 2000s. The revisionist view considers *san xian* as having played a key role in development by laying down the infrastructural foundation for industrializing and urbanizing processes in marginal regions (Zhou 2016; Xu and Zhou 2018). A surge of *san xian* studies has emerged since 2012. For example, *san xian* conferences were held in Shanghai and Beijing in 2015. So far, *san xian* research has focused on three themes: *san xian* leaders, *san xian* people (based on participants' oral history and memoirs), and the impact of *san xian* on urban development (Xu and Zhou 2018). For our purpose, we examine the last theme in more detail. According to Zhou Minchang (2016), the urbanization and industrialization of China's remote regions had their origins in Mao's *san xian* programs. Zhou takes Guizhou Province as his example, since Guizhou was one of the key *san xian* places on the southwestern front. He discovered that the net effect was to increase the number of cities and small towns in Guizhou. Small towns alone doubled from 46 to 93 in Guizhou, which contrasted with a general reduction of small towns in China elsewhere in the same time period (1961-1983). In addition to the urbanizing effects that accompanied *san xian* construction, Zhou points out that network of railway and communication lines were laid out in the southwest region as a consequence. In other words, *san xian* constituted of a large assortment of investments and planning that was a far cry from being a mere "desert island."

I build on this revisionist reevaluation of *san xian*. In addition, I go one step further to ask to what extent *san xian* and local communities are co-constituted, instead of pre-conceptualizing either one as a naturally bounded unit. This bounded conceptualization is evident in the 'desert island' interpretation of *san xian* and is less overt (see for example Peng 2022) in the revisionist assessment.

To make my argument, I turn now to the *san xian* development in Shanli town. With the arrival of *san xian* factories, Shanli was transformed by the arrival of state capital and city people from Shanghai and Nanchang. Starting in 1965, five defense-related factories and a rear hospital (locally called 104 hospital) were gradually relocated to Shanli from the provincial capital of Nanchang and the metropolis of Shanghai. To be sure, the new factory workers were kept segregated from the rural farming population; moreover, partly because of a language barrier and the secrecy of defense industry, there was only limited social interaction between the two populations. But that is not to say the factories constitute a mere "desert island." The huge influx of urban factory workers and family members did transform Shanli hill country spurring the development of a robust rural town with a permanent T-shaped commercial street in the 1970s. In Aipin gazetteer, it is recorded that with the influx of *san xian* factories, two streets were constructed, streets that included including trade enterprises, bank branches, a granary, a post office, a police station, a bus station, not to

mention state-/collective-/and individual-run businesses, restaurants, food stands, and more. A robust rural market town had emerged creating both new selling and new buying opportunities (Aipin 1995, 90).

To supply labor, land, construction materials, and everyday provisions for the five factories, specialized services emerged. For instance, three kilns were built near Xialongkou to make fired bricks for construction. Local communities did the whole process of brick production, including molding, chopping wood from the hills for fuels, and transporting materials and provisions. To supply food, one of the villages neighboring Xialongkou converted its rice paddies to specialize in growing vegetables to supply the five factories and also to sell on Shanli's commercial streets. It was also at this time that some of the village's land was taken for constructing the factories and workers' dormitories.

Transportation was also largely improved in Shanli. The chapter in the local gazetteer on forestry explaines that the first major road (made of gravel and sand) connecting Aipin county seat to the township seat of Xialongkou was built in the 1950s to facilitate timber transport with trucks. With the *san xian* construction effort in the 1960s, the factory areas and the Shanli commercial streets were paved with cement. With the improved roads, bicycles were introduced into Shanli in the 1970s and became very popular by the 1980s, at which point almost every local family possessed on or two bicycles. This situation was very advanced comparing to other remote regions where bicycles were luxury items. This last development was by the fact the defense factories adjusted to produce *fei yu* (flying fish) brand bicycles. The *san xian* factories also recruited young men and women in their early 20s to become workers to compensate land taken from local villages. It was hard to say whether local families penetrated into the factories or the other way around. I believe it was some of both. This co-constitutive relationship seems to have changed during the early period of economic reforms, a subject we will now turn to.

Part III: TVE town and *san xian* town, in the early reforms era

Much scholarly attention has been given to the Township and Village Enterprises (TVEs) of China's early reform period. How did the brief economic prosperity of the Shanli town in the 1980s contrast with the renaissance of small TVE towns in southern Jiangsu? As early as 1981, after twenty years of being politically silenced, Fei Xiaotong began to advocate a small town urbanization strategy. This urbanization strategy was based on the "south Jiangsu model" (*su nan mo shi*), as Fei called it. Fei not only saw a positive connection between rapid rural industrialization in the form of TVEs and small town urbanization, but also anticipated big issues and challenges that China was going to face, namely the problem of resolving China's 120 to 140 million surplus rural people (at the time). Fei considered small towns as critical, serving as an effective "water reservoir" (*xu shui chi*) that eliminated the flood of migrants to the cities.

Fei's advocacy of small towns accorded with state policy at the time. The assumption was that Chinese cities were not prepared and lacked the capacity to absorb the huge rural surplus population. The fear was that shantytowns and human misery would follow. A small town policy was formally announced in 1978 at the National Conference on Urban Work. The objectives were: strictly control the development of the large cities; rationally develop medium-sized cities; and vigorously promote the development of small cities and towns.

Constructing and developing small towns seemed to resolve the real or imagined problem by absorbing the surplus rural labor through the phenomena of "leaving the soil but not leaving the countryside" (*li tu bu li xiang*). It meant that an individual could both serve as a worker in a nearby small town during the day and, continue to work the land under the Household Responsibility System. The rapid rural industrialization in the form of TVEs that spurred the renaissance of small towns in southern Jiangsu was empirically significant to Fei's conceptualization of *yi nong yi gong* (being both workers and farmers at the same time).

Fei understood *li tu bu li xiang* as merely a transitional phase in the dynamic process of transforming China from an agrarian society to a modernizing one. However, Fei also noted the uneven regional development of TVEs and its associated small town revival, with a gradual descending ladder from a high density of TVEs in east coastal China, to low density in the middle interior, to very low density in western China.

The *san xian* town is different yet connected with TVE small towns. For instance, in Shanli, small-town development benefited from the geopolitical strategy of relocating defense-related industries from coastal cities to the hinterland, in the larger contexts of the Cold War. Subsequently, the transitioning from a planned economy to market-led economy in the late 1970s through early 1980s, or the global "neoliberal turn" in the early 1980s, was the decisive condition that enabled rapid rural industrialization in southern Jiangsu and the Yangzi River Delta. In turn, TVEs spurred on small town development. Shanli town had a brief period of economic prosperity because of the continued central planning of state-owned enterprises on the one hand, and the opening of a market-led economy on the other hand. In this hill region, the TVEs that were established were concerned mainly with the local timber industry. Specifically, in the 1980s, several timber mills were opened and managed by village administrations. For instance, Xialongkou timber mill employed 10 to 20 local carpenters who refined and polished coarsely cut timber wood before shipping it out. Benefiting from timber mill-related economic activity on the one hand, and *san xian* defense investment from the central planned economy on the other, Shanli town of this era was remembered fondly as "little Hong Kong" by many locals. The good times ended, however, after 1989.

Shanli *san xian* town met its nadir when all five military factories and the rear hospital relocated back to Nanchang and other big cities after 1989, at the end of the Cold War. The sudden decline of *san xian* small town marked a new era in China's economic reforms, a shift in focus towards the mega metropolises and export-oriented economy instead of rural industry. Subsequent decades witnessed large-scale rural-to-urban migration, around 250 million as of 2018. This transition can be described as a shift from the era of *li tu bu li xiang* to the era of *li tu you li xiang* (leaving the soil and also leaving the countryside).

Looking beyond rural areas, the huge growth of private enterprises in China's major cities and the opening of special economic zones since the mid-1990s, along with the relaxation of governmental control on population movement (*hu kou* system), have led to a huge internal labor migration from the countryside to the cities, and from western and central China to the coastal provinces. Like the rest of China, Xialongkou's able-bodied men and women went in large numbers to work and live in large cities and coastal provinces for extended periods. The Shanli township government moved into one of the factory's grand hall (*da li tang*) and converted one dormitory complex to house township officials. Some *san xian* workers sold their family housing units to locals, but many were abandoned and left empty. The T-shaped market street became quiet and declined over the two decades. Yet, *san xian* history and its material ruins continue to shape and are shaped by local communities and the changing geopolitical tension beyond China. For instance, in 2020, Shanli was listed as one of the ten industrial heritage towns for tourism in Jiangxi Province (Aipin county government website 2021). The next section explains the significance of this turn in the context of "a global sense of the local" (Massey 1994).

Part IV: Small-town revival in the era of resurgence of nationalism, post 2008

This section addresses the question why small towns in this part of rural China have revitalized since 2008. And what is so significant about this round of small town development in the early 21st century? Taking two rural market towns (Songsen and Jinlian) and Shanli *san xian* town as examples, this section focuses on the spatial aspect of small town revival in the context of the post-2008 global financial crisis. Literature on China's

urbanization puts emphasis on land dispossession and land commodification as the major driver for rural transformation and land-based urban growth, thus aligning well with David Harvey's concept of "accumulation through dispossession" (Zhou and Wang 2015; Chuang 2020). Another important theme often explored concerns the contentious politics and protest/resistance over land dispossession, insufficient compensation, and/or unacceptable relocation packages, a phenomenon affecting both urban and rural settings. The confrontational and compromised relations between the "urbanized local states" and "civil territoriality" (Hsing 2010) are insightful for understanding China's "great urban transformation" within a metropolitan region. However, so far it is unclear to what extent the small town revival outside metropolitan regions in post 2008, such as Aipin County, is explainable using the notions of urban dispossession regime and contentious politics. To highlight geographical interconnections, this section takes a relational approach by linking small town revival to a resurgence of nationalism in the post-2008 global context. First, I shall describe the revival of Songsen rural market town in the early 2000s.

G. William Skinner (1985) remarked that the historical role of the rural marketing system would end as modern rail and transportation permitted the movement of goods, people, and capital easily alongside regular bus service between villages and higher-order markets. Indeed, goods and people move ever faster with high-speed railways and planes. Yet, the empirical evidence seems to contradict Skinner's expectation. In the hill country around Shanli, with improved communication (hard and soft), instead of winding down, some rural markets remain important and have even been strengthened. For instance, we have learned in a previous section that Songsen ceased to exist as a rural market town in the Mao era and also during the early reform era. However, it was reopened in the middle 2000s. It now has a new market hall that is covered with a roof and with a cement floor, which shelters sellers and buyers from rain and sun. The majority of the vendors are itinerant merchants who purchase their produce from wholesale markets in Aipin county town. These itinerant vendors sell fruits and vegetables that locals do not cultivate (such as tomatoes, onions, lychees, mangos, etc.) and circulate between two to three rural markets following the scheduled market days. In other words, they sell their goods according to the same logic described in Skinner's pioneer studies on the rural marketing system in the Chengdu Basin of the 1940s.

For our purpose, the most striking visual impression of rural market towns is the ubiquity of shop fronts. These permanent shops (as distinguished from the stands in the periodic market) occupy the first floor of three-to-four storey privately-owned houses on the main commercial streets. The first floor is typically rented out or used by the family as commercial space. As of 2018, half of these permanent shops sold building materials or construction-related services. Typical shop fronts appeared (based on the business's name and materials displayed) to sell building materials (*jian cai*) and services related to household appliances (*jiadia*), furnishing (*jiaju*), hardware (*wujin*), interior finishing (*zhuangxiu*), water and electricity (*shuidian*), kitchen and toilets (*chuwei*), alumininium windows and doors (*luhejin men chuang*), ceramic tiles (*chizhuan*), oil paint (*youqi*), curtains and bedding (*chuanglian buyi chuangshang yongpin*), etc. Some shops claim to sell more than one building-related materials, and some specialized in such one product, such as oil paint. As of 2018, there were 23 such shops, representing 50% of all permanent shops on Songsen streets. In a sense, we can say that the rural building boom (detailed in Chapter Three) has revitalized the Songsen economy. At the same time, the specialized shops on Songsen market have amplified and reshaped the housing boom in surrounding rural communities.

Besides Songsen, Jinlian market town, a higher-level of small town (II), also grew as a result of further specialized services. In addition to the large number of shops selling building materials (56 such shops), what distinguished Jinlian from the lower-level town

Songsen were four types of new businesses. These businesses concerned 1) express delivery (e.g. Tiantian & Zhongtong *kuai di*); 2) car wash and beautification (*xi che mei rong*); 3) agricultural machinery and auto repair (*nong ji qi che xiu li*); and 4) construction machinery rental (*wa ji chan che chu zu*). Jinlian market town is conveniently situated in a fan valley that is half way between Aipin county seat and Shanli Township. It takes thirty minutes to get to Aipin county town and forty-five minutes to get to Shanli by public buses. Since 2006, as rural infrastructure has improved, aided by motorized transport, communication between rural communities and market towns have been shortened with frequent buses (runing five to six times a day). In addition to public buses, motorcycles and automobiles are commonly seen on paved roads (*gong lu*), explaining the increase in car-related special services. With the greater availability of transportation, the question remains why Songsen rural market towns revived, when communication between Aipin county town and Xialongkou has been shortened.

Indeed, Xialongkou residents are well aware of the wide range of shops selling building materials and other related services. Locals often compare prices between shops in Songsen, Jinlian, and Aipin county town, and are also aware of the possibility of online marketplaces that ship directly from factories in coastal cities. There seems to have been a decline in fixed relationships between two places, in contrast to what Skinner described in pre-1949 rural China. In other words, the rural community does not identify so strongly with *one* market town as their own anymore. Instead, a flexible and multipartite relationship is at play, facilitated by the common language, the motorized transport, and the spatial extent of the family network. In the case of language, the efficacy of mandatory education since Mao's revolution in 1949 has had an impact. Even though local dialects vary significantly in different parts of Aipin County, Putonghua (Mandarin Chinese) is understood and spoken by all young generations. Even in the case of the older generation (born in the late 1940s and early 1950s), with widespread TV reception, even certain old village women, who are often illiterate, have managed to teach themselves to speak everyday Mandarin. Media exposure is not the only explanation. Most critically, almost all of the older generation has traveled and lived outside their villages for a long period of time, for work or very often to take care of grandchildren. Once outside the county, they have no choice but to speak Putonghua to get by. Another important factor is the spatially extended family network. For example, I have often noticed that building materials are sometimes shipped out from Aipin county town, even when similar items are sold in Songsen rural market town, at a similar price. This begs the question why? A typical explanation by locals includes that, "his son/daughter owns a window and door shop at Aipin," or "so-and-so's niece sells oil paints in Jinlian streets." In fact, there are always good financial reasons behind such particular choices. We recall that economic transactions within the translocal family are an integral part of the financing strategy for building houses (see Chapter 3). In other words, the current construction boom in rural communities such as Xialongkou is mutually reinforced with the revival of small towns, and the spatially extended family networks linking these together.

But since building a house requires various materials and services, there is always something in need that is outside of the spatially extended family circle. Then the lower-level market towns come in handy to fill the gap. Still, even with the motorized transport, time matters. For Xialongkou residents, it takes forty-five minutes to reach Jinlian town and more than one hour to get to Aipin county town. Songsen is less than thirty minutes away, which is a shorter ride for a scooter or motorcycle, now the most common motorized conveyance in this part of rural China.

Three conditions are vital to small town revival. First, the rural-urban gap has been narrowed if one examines the standard of living in rural communities and small towns. The second condition is the unprecedented rural infrastructure improvement since the early

2000s. For instance, paved roads have been extended to every natural village under the government program of *cun cun tong* (connecting every village), and numerous hard infrastructure improvements have largely materialized in and through the "Constructing New Socialist Countryside" campaign, initiated in 2006. Both local government and private investment in infrastructure means employment opportunities in the construction sector at county-level towns and in rural communities. The third condition is the return of migrants and the central government's "rural revitalization" discourse in the context of the post-2008 global financial crisis. Many factories were forced to close after the global economic meltdown. As a result, many Xialongkou long-term migrants have returned from cities to work and live in the county seat and/or small towns close to their natal village. Most critically, migrants did not return to farm. Instead, they sense new possibilities and an alternative lifestyle in small towns that did not exist before. Migrants were first attracted by improved rural infrastructure. In order to return, they subsequently invested savings to construct new houses and/or purchase flats in small towns (see for example, Zhan 2015), which in turn has fed into the building boom and created related employment opportunities and space for self-employed small businesses.

Rural-to-urban migration literature rightly points to socioeconomic inequalities and gaps associated with the *hukou* system and discrimination towards rural migrant workers. The instituted inequality and urban hostility have pushed rural migrants out. This push factor exists alongside two more factors that need our attention: 1) small towns as attractive or at least acceptable alternatives; and 2) trade wars between China and the U.S. We need to recognize the revived small towns how attracting returned migrants, as spaces of rural/urban simultaneity. As infrastructure and modern services extend to small towns, including broadband, wifi, and express delivery services, the potentiality and possibilities have been explored by local elites and returned migrants. The second factor situates small town revival in a global context. Let me illustrate it with Dagui's story, which offers an account of an ordinary returned migrant that helps us to see the linkage between the local and multiple geographies/forces that have contributed to the revival of small towns.

This is the story of Dagui who returned from Guangzhou city to open a hand-made leather shoe shop at Jinlian market town in 2019. It was the day of the *yuan xiao* festival (Lantern Festival, to celebrate the first full moon) that marked the end of the traditional two-week long Chinese New Year celebration. And it also marked the annual beginning of the work year. The day was February 19, 2019 in the solar calendar. Dagui did not go back to Guangzhou. I greeted him and asked about his departing day for Guangzhou. As it has been a custom since the middle 1990s, young and able-bodied men and women traveled on trains and long-distance buses to reach their migration destinations to begin another year of work. "I am not going back," Dagui replied while snacking on a handful of toasted sunflower seeds. "Besides," he added, "There is no work waiting for me. Business orders have stopped coming in from the U.S. since Trump's trade war." Then I saw a sparkle in Dagui's eye, followed by a question, "You live in the U.S., right? Tell me, how could Trump become president? Why did he start a trade war with China?" Before I could properly address his question, he had already moved on by saying, "Doing business is hard nowadays, ever since the 2008 global financial crisis and now the trade war between China and the US. I've had enough of *da gong* (doing work for others) and I am thinking of opening my own shoe shop in Jinlin market town." And that is precisely what Dagui and his wife Xiaolan did.

In Xialongkou, when migrants return, they do not return to farm, but rather to take on non-agricultural employment. Possible employment includes but is not limited to opening up one's own business by applying learned skills to a trade in a small town. For Dagui, his special skill is making leather shoes. Dagui is a long-time migrant. He first left in summer 1995 right after the busy agricultural period (*nong mang*). Unlike many migrated to Luqiao,

Zhejiang province (see Chapter 3), Dagui followed his relative to Zhuhai Special Economic Zone (SEZ). However, he could not get into Zhuhai SEZ because he did not have a special frontier pass (*bian fang zhen*). Instead, Dagui settled just outside of the Zhuhai SEZ in a town called Zhongshan, where all sorts of small factories flourished. Back then, jobs were easy to find, Dagui explained. Almost all factories posted hiring signs outside its gates. Dagui jumped around between different factory jobs and eventually settled in a large shoe-making factory. With his honesty and hardworking ethic, he had labored two decades to become a shoe-making master. He knows about shoes from the inside out. If one gives him a pair of shoes, and asks the cost of producing the particular shoe, he knows exactly how many steps to make it and the process for making it on an assembly line, given the right starting materials. With the skills of a shoe master, he once collaborated with an ambitious coworker to establish a separate small factory of their own in Guangzhou. However, even with their skills and knowledge about shoes, their factory did not make a profit and was forced to close down in a few years. Dagui lost his savings. Being a boss was hard is the advice Dagui now gives to young migrants, who all want to become their own bosses. As a result, Dagui went back to the big shoe factory as an employee. Yet, Dagui believed that "Trump's" trade war against China has idled many factories. He was laid off following a long vacation for the 2018 Chinese New Year.

Contrast to Songsen's and Jinlian's market town revival, the remaking Shanli town entails Mao's revolutionary tradition, a re-nationalist project. The current township government is keen to make the *san xian* factory complex into a special tourist attraction with an exhibition hall of *san xian* history (*sanxian lishi zhanlan guan*) and a nationalist educational base (*aiguo jiaoyu jidi*). As such, Shanli is re-inscribed as "defense industrial heritage town" (*jungong xiao zhen*). The following pages are the re-making process of Shanli defense heritage town.

Making a *san xian* industrial heritage town

The historical significance of *san xian* has re-surfaced and become a major focus of patriotic development for both governmental funding and private investors. This convergence (the state and the market) signifies a new era of re-nationalisation. Some scholars have framed this interest in patriotic development as a New Cold War (Tsui, Wong, Lau, and Wen 2020). My understanding of China's re-nationalisation is built on Gillian Hart's critical examination of "resurgent nationalisms and populist politics in the Neoliberal age" (2020). The purpose of this section is to examine the local practice of place (re)making in this global nationalisation and neoliberal context. It is a story of reviving Shanli through Mao's *san xian* heritage. Beginning in 2016, a series of projects were planned to remodel *san xian* factory ruins, workers' dormitories, and old housing complexes for the purpose of establishing "red revolutionary" heritage towns.

I claim that the *san xian* theme is not an obvious or inevitable one. On the one hand, the *san xian* theme is merely one of the many on-going projects and developmental discourses. On the other hand, both China and the U.S. have awakened from the 2008 global financial crisis to revitalize their national economies. In the US, the former president Donald Trump's slogan was to "make American great again." In China, this can be understood in the emphasis on "double circulation" (*shuang xun huan*) by President Xi Jinpin. According to this guiding concept, the Chinese national circulation shall be given equal investment if not more than the overseas market. Even in this context, the general discourse of "revitalizing the countryside" (*xiang cun zhen xing*) is very broad in scope and could go in many different directions. Indeed, the following paragraphs illustrate this point with an eye on the specific practice at Shanli.

The *san xian* reinvention has become Shanli Township's new direction after many attempted projects. Rural township leaders have always competed with resources and

entitlements from superior governments, especially from immediate superior with the county level. Party Secretary Huang, in his late 30s, was the number one in command of Shanli Township. He comes from the eastern part of Aipin county. Party Secretary Huang went to Jingangshan College, where he majored in English Language. Serving Shanli township was his first grass-roots (*ji chen*) post after working three years at Aipin County's Department of Party Organization. "Going down to the grass roots" (*xia ji chen*) was a necessary training step for his future political career, Huang knew. However, he was frustrated with how little funding was available to Shanli township. As Huang put it,

> Let me tell you. Ideas, I have many, but I lack funds. Last year, we were lucky to get one million *yuan* from the county to launch the first Torch Fire Festival (*huo ba jie*). That was very difficult. To get the County's funds for any programs, it meant to compete with nineteen other townships. At the beginning, I proposed a training program for party member solidarity at Shanli. At the end, the County leaders gave the program to Taisan Township. It was argued that Taisan has better transportation and concentrated scenic spots for tourism. Another program I had in mind, again, was given to Litang Township. Still, I proposed to make a "forest exhibition hall" (*shen lin zhan lan guan*) because my township is covered by forest. The forest exhibition hall might well be the first of its kind in Jiangxi Province. To tell you the truth, I really have no clue what a forest exhibition hall shall look like. I need to figure it out by touring other provinces. When I expressed this idea to the County leaders, they once again considered Taisan Township a better site for this type of project. [Sighs.] What can I say? I really hope the Torch Fire Festival (*hua ba jie*) can continue every year. After funding the first year, the County provides none. So, we need local bosses (*ben di lao ban*) to fund the Torch Fire Festival. We, as the local government, can then provide help and assistance.

The above conversation was carried out in Party Secretary Huang's reception office. There were stacks of propaganda brochures on the bookshelves that promote Shanli Township. Huang gave two to me and explained that these two brochures summarized his achievement from last year in Shanli Township. At the end of his first year posting, he distributed these brochures to his superiors as well as to local bosses (entrepreneurs) whenever he encountered them.

In addition to getting funding from the state, rural township leaders were actively seeking private funds to build local projects. Party Secretary Huang had pitched six tourist projects to investors. The six projects are: 1) Xu Xia Ke village (a Ming dynasty travel writer named Xu Xia De spent one night at this village on his way to Mount Wu) with its ammunition factory for the early communist bastion, and 'a thousand year old' ginkgo tree); 2) cliff carvings at Ji village; 3) the Torch Fire Festival; 4) *san xian* defense industry exhibition hall; 5) rose plantation and wood cabins at Deep Ravine village; and 6) tong tree blossom biking trail. For Huang, all six projects represented something special and unique to Shanli's local history and natural environment. During the period of my research, his days were largely spent persuading county leaders and private investors to invest in one of these six projects.

So of 2019, the most mature of the projects was the *san xian* defense industry exhibition hall and the Torch Fire Festival. The exhibition hall was renovated and reopened to the public at the end of February 2019, just in time for when many migrants came back for the Chinese New Year. An adjacent factory dormitory is planned to serve as a "homestay" (*min su*) for potential tourists. The sites of the exhibition hall and factory dormitory were abandoned buildings from *san xian* factories (1965-1989). These buildings were then handed down to Shanli Township government when factories moved out of the hill region after the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s. Most of the factory ruins are in reasonable shape,

preserving the original architectural style and political slogans of the 1960s. For example, brick walls painted with still visible slogans of the era like "sea navigating relies on helmsman, revolution making relies on Mao Zedong thought" (*dahai hangxing kao tuo shou, gan geming kao Mao Zedong sixiang*). This particular slogan is now the highlight of the *san xian* exhibition hall and serves as the background of group photos and selfies (see Photo 10). The two-level factory dormitory has been remodeled to sell souvenirs and local specialty products on the ground floor, such as smoked ham, honey, and pickled ginger. And the second floor is to be renovated for a "homestay". This renovation project has been funded and designed by a private investor from Douwu town (II).

Douwu, recall, is a designated town (*jian zhi zhen*) and takes one-hour bus commune from Shanli. The Douwu boss has built a homestay (*min su*) called Wang Camp near Douwu town from where his family is originated. Nobody seems to remember his surname. Instead, Shanli locals prefer to call him, *the* Douwu boss. The Douwu boss envisions a new era of domestic tourism and believes that Shanli could be a good place for 'homestay' (*min su*) business.

Upon knowing my American husband was also living in Shanli, township Party Secretary Huang organized a special conference that evening. The next morning, the village head came in-person to invite me and informed me that I should bring my American husband along to attend an 11am conference at the township government center. Meanwhile, I also got an invitation in my WeChat account from the head of Shanli township, Ma *xiangzhang* (Head of township). Around 10:30 am, Ma *xiangzhang* drove a glassy black Nissan SUV to pick us up. At the beginning, I was rather nervous about this conference. Yet I did not know how to refuse it. My worry was that the township leaders might wrongly think my American husband and I were potential investors. That used to be a common myth regarding overseas American Chinese. At the same time, as a researcher doing dissertation fieldwork, I knew that this kind of occasions were precious for a first-hand experience to understand local administrative practice. So, we sat in Ma *xiangzhang*'s spacious and comfortable car on our way to the township center. Ma *xiangzhang* is slim and young, in his early 40s. He himself grew up in Aipin County, but his parents had come in the 1950s as refugees from the Xinanjian dam project in Zhejiang Province. They had come as part of state-led relocation package. Ma *xiangzhang*, like Party Secretary Huang, had a family (wife and two children) who lived in Aipin county town. The Nissan SUV is his personal property that facilitates the commute between his post and his family members in Aipin town.

The conference's theme was to discuss Shanli's development strategies while bearing in mind "overseas wisdom" (*hui qiao zhi*). I did not fully understand my American husband and my role until the middle of the conference. I slowly realized that my American husband and I constituted the "overseas" presence that was meant to push the Douwu boss to delivery his promises in a tangible way. In other words, it was a tactic to urge the Douwu boss to 'save his face' in front of 'foreigners'. We were there to witness and were not asked to speak. As such, it was a conference to urge the Douwu boss to invest with "real gold and white silver" (*zhen jin bai yin*) to be realized in this year's Torch Fire Festival and the 'homestay' project. Party Secretary Huang anxiously remarked that he could not take his county superiors to see the old projects without any improvement. In order to beget more support from his superiors, he had to show promising local projects. Huang believed that if he combined the Torch Fire Festival with the *san xian* "homestay" projects, the county leaders might provide an additional one million *yuan* each year.

The Douwu boss has a big belly, wore a dark green t-shirt with a pair of black sport's pants, a pair of black fabric shoes, wearing no socks. Big and dark framed glasses covered half of his face, which was strikingly dotted with pink acne on brownish skin. His appearance contradicted common assumption and images of business bosses, at least in the eyes of Shanli

community members. The Douwu boss was born and grew up in Nanchang, the capital city of Jiangxi Province. He went to Beijing Fine Arts for college. His ancestral home was Douwu Wang Village, where he invested in a "homestay" airbnb called Wang Camp. The boss usually lives in Nanchang City. Until the past few years, his company was confined to arts related projects, but was now expanding to the business of tourism. According to the Douwu boss's own vision, the expansion to the tourist business was a necessary move to keep up with the current trend of socioeconomic changes. For example, he remarked that Aipin County primarily relied on mines and forestry, but now it has transitioned to develop "regional tourism" (*di yu lü you*). This shift meant that both natural scenic landscapes such as Wu Mountain and human/cultural/historical landscapes are local assets to be 'excavated' (*wa jue*).

In his early 50s, the Douwu boss was a good public speaker. After hearing Party Secretary Huang's demands of "real gold and silver," the Douwu boss delivered a persuasive speech to assure Huang that he would invest, stressing that his investment plan was not a capricious decision, but rather a reflection of national and global conditions. He gave three reasons to justify his contention. First, there was nostalgic feeling for Mao era in general, and the *san xian* defense industry in particular. The history of the *san xian* (third front) industry was uniquely local in Shanli Township but also within a larger network of *san xian* heritage sites across China. So far, many retired *san xian* workers and their family members had revisited these sites, where they had spent their youths and maintained nostalgic feelings. Yet this particular history was not quite enough to attract mass tourists, the Douwu boss stated. Second, what the Douwu boss and the township government could do was to amplify Shanli as a heritage site of "red DNA" (*hong se ji yin*). In addition to tourism, Shanli would become a "patriotic educational base," (*ai guo jiao yu ji di*) for various national defense exercises, such as, college freshmen military training (*da xue xin sheng jun xun*), shooting (*she ji*), party member training (*dang yuan pei xun*), etc. Most critically, the Douwu boss emphasized that all of these activities conform to the central government's policies and discourse of national patriotism.

Third, the Douwu boss argued that here in Shanli, we have hills, water, and vernacular peasant architectures, which is an ideal setting for students of the fine arts to sketch from real life. He believes that the local conditions are comparable to Wuyuan (a famous place for art students to do sketches from real life in northeast of Jiangxi Province, bordering with Anhui Province). The Douwu boss was confident of this after communicating with a dozen deans of fine arts institutions. He learned from them that the demand side was already there. In fact, it would be necessary to expand the accommodation scale at Shanli from 200 to 500 beds, because the deans requested to host 500 students at one time. The advantage of "producing blood within oneself" (*zi ji zao xue*) was also emphasized by the Douwu boss. As he put it,

> The tourist spots of Shanli township cannot continuously rely on government funds. We need to find our own channels to 'produce blood'. If we strike the deal with the fine arts institutions, the common problem of lack of funds will be resolved.

Right after the Douwu boss's speech, Party Secretary Huang pressed on, "Could you deliver the general planning as soon as possible? What you just said was still only in words. You see, when county superiors come to inspect next time, I cannot take them to see the same sites, with no changes."

"We too, are very anxious," responded the Douwu boss who turned around and looked at his assistant, expecting updated information. At this point, Ma *xiangzhang* made his first intervention, explaining: "I got a phone call yesterday that claims the draft of a business plan was submitted but needs further approval from the Bureau of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, which would then forward it to the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC). Once approved and revised by NDRC, the plan would be

distributed back to the Bureau of Housing and Urban-Rural development. Still, it requires final approval from the county government." This forward and downward bureaucratic process required time. Ma *xiangzhang* further commented that once this plan was approved and kicked in, many absentee local bosses had already revealed their eagerness to invest. He named a few that were well known to the township leaders in the conference room. Ma *xiangzhang*'s last remark implied a general trend of capital inflow from outside.

Following the conference was a banquet hosted by Party Secretary Huang and Ma *xiangzhang*. The conversation moved to bank loans and real-estate investment. The Douwu boss proudly claimed that he invested millions of RMB into the real estate sector in Poyang County, a county on the east side of Poyang Lake. Because he was the president of the Aipin Chamber of Commerce (ACC), he managed the accumulated funds from the ACC. He claimed that his investment has already earned him in one year a 20% return. He would channel some of the ACC funds to the remodeling "homestay" project at Shanli. However, he pointed out that the high return rate of 20% was only possible for the first round of investment. The later round of investments had reaped a lower rate of return. Party Secretary Huang hinted to the Douwu boss that they got bank loans around six million RMB and did not know what to do with them. However, he added that these were poverty loans that were borrowed from banks on behalf of poverty households in his township. Thus, it was important to guarantee its safety and not to place them in risky investments.

Party Secretary Huang's goal was modest. While he is stationed at Shanli Township for a nominal term of five years, he hoped to keep Shanli Township from falling to the end of the evaluation queue. The county evaluates each township with a system of points. The total points are 150 with many categories, for example, party member consolidation, attracting investment, poverty alleviation, public health, sanitation, new countryside, medical insurance, etc. The top three townships get rewards and the losers get punished. Huang lamented that the local condition of Shanli Township is less comparable with townships in the river plain. Overall, Shanli Township ranks just below the average. Like most of local officials who competes to increase its post ranking, he resolves to keep Shanli not from falling behind.

Conclusion

> The common image of the country is now an image of the past, and the common image of the city an image of the future. That leaves, if we isolate them, an undefined present.
>
> Raymond Williams, *The Country and The City* (1973)

"An undefined present" was how Raymond Williams in the 1970s regarded England. Is today's China experiencing a similar "undefined present"? The answer is yes and no. In *The Country and the City*, Williams critically examined why certain images attached to the country and the city persist in English literature, despite the fact that the actual human settlements in England were far more diverse in his time. Williams questioned the discrepancy between lived experience and representation, by reflecting on his own personal experience as a boy growing up in the countryside and later as an intellectual working in London. Williams coined the term 'structures of feeling' to explain the puzzle over different perspectives. However, this chapter is not a literary critique of representation of the city and the countryside. Instead, I explored a relational historical geography in and through the rise, the fall, and the rise of small towns in contemporary China. Central to my inquiry in this chapter is the on-going process of small town production and the (re) production of "the nation state" in and through two historical traditions and global interconnection. Theoretically, I claim that small towns are simultaneous space of difference and possibilities.

And small towns are not an isolated and bounded unit/community. Three distinct theses are summarized below.

First, instead of seeing everything about the planned economy in the Mao era as negative and everything about the market economy in the Deng era as magical, my argument of small town revival recognizes both traditions: the historical and Mao's revolution, as the power house of possibilities. My example was the *san xian* (third front) industrial town, which underwent three stages of development: its birth in the Mao era; its market-adaptation in the early reform era before the end of Cold War; and the 'red DNA' (red is coded for revolutionary) heritage theme in Shanli town's revival in the context of a resurgence of nationalisation in the post 2008 era.

Second, I examined "small people's" (*xiao ren wu*) lived experience, noting that returned migrants, small town officials, the private investor, and even the researcher (and her husband), are all agents who are shaping and being shaped by the structures of small town revival. I claim that the revival of small towns is the product of double shifts. One shift is the re-nationalizing dynamic in the Chinese central government's economic strategy, which depends on huge stimulus poured into hinterland infrastructure and construction. The other related shift is the return migrants (labor) and inflow of capital into the hinterland.

Third, as a geographer, I explored the "global conjunctural frame" (Hart 2020, more detail in conclusion Chapter) to understand three key global moments (the1960s, the 1989, and post-2008) in the (re) production of small town and 'the nation state' in contemporary China. The resurgence of small towns in Aipin County is a product of historical and geographical conjunctural moment in the context of the post-2008 global financial crisis, as re-nationalisation has become economic and political strategies in China, the United States, and Europe.

What are the limits of small town revival? The political and administrative nature of small towns continues. On the other hand, the market-based small towns go tandem with the spatial restructuring of the translocal multigenerational family/household, as demonstrated in Chapter 3. The significance of small towns in this part of rural China suggests the importance of spatio-historical specificity and possibility, where difference is produced through multiple-scaled global/local interconnections.

Photo 10: Group picture with the Shanli *san xian* Mao's slogan in the background.

Conclusion

On a steaming hot summer day in July 2019, my American family and I left Xialongkou and China. I was certain that I would come back soon to do a follow-up. I was wrong. Covid-19 erupted. For over three years, traveling restrictions and quarantines had put an end to my plans to return. Nobody knew when China's zero-Covid policy would end. Yet, like so many unpredictable events, China suddenly lifted the zero-Covid policy on January 8, 2023, a consequence of protests and complaints in small and large cities across China. Among the protests, the November 24th fire in the city of Urumqi was significant. The tragic fire happened when the city was under Covid lockdown and caused at least ten deaths, including a three-year-old girl (Che and Chien 2022). The subsequent outrage and protests in Urumqi along with accumulated criticisms finally pushed the Chinese government to abandon zero-Covid.

As I was drawing this dissertation to a close, the small rural county-town Aipin, too, was locked down for a month in December 2022. The global implications of Covid-19 are far-reaching and do not end with China's lifted change in policy. In this concluding chapter, I first will summarize my general findings, focused on interconnections among four processes. The second section will then discuss the importance of these interconnections for the debates about China's rural transformation and development. The Conclusion ends with my self-reflection and suggests future research directions.

In a nutshell, this dissertation has investigated the *multiple processes* of rural transformation in the hill country in Jiangxi Province, China. It examines the spatio-historical characteristics of the rise of small-scale private forestry, of the partial mechanization of wet-rice farming, of gendered translocal family reproduction, and of small-town revival in this part of rural China in the early 21st century. It stresses both the *roots* of and *routes* towards producing the hill community and small towns, taking into account interconnected relations to wider processes. In particular, it contextualizes place making in the wider context of the Cold-War era, of the neoliberal forms of capitalism since 1980s, and of the post-2008 global financial crisis. The dissertation contends that an open and relational conceptualization of space and place offers an alternative understanding of the countryside and of China at large. In this sense, the hill country in western Jiangxi Province is not to be understood as a 'case' study of a general phenomenon of Chinese villages and small towns. Instead, this dissertation explains the specificity of this hill region, a specificity arising not from the place's 'local' character and isolation from the outside world, but rather from its interconnectedness and multiple processes. In other words, Xialongkou community and Aipin town were (re) produced in and through relations with national and global processes. This dissertation also shows how the four *simultaneous* processes are drawn together by the gendered family. In particular, private forestry, rice-paddy cultivation, gendered translocal family reproduction, and small-town revival are constituted in relation to one another through the family's new aspirations and the interconnected care work of everyday life.

Let me now briefly reprise the arguments of each chapter. Chapter One focused on the interconnection between forestland and forestry and the changing systems of agricultural production and farmland tenure. In addition, Chapter One revealed the interconnection between the historical tree farming tradition and the global lumber market. I showed the linkage between the "three-rural problems" (*san nong wen ti*) and the rise of private small-scale forestry in the early 2000s. It is critical to delink the dominant 'land

question' from grain-based agriculture, understanding it instead in relation to other important forces, such as community solidarity, and new aspirations for family reproduction in the context of global neoliberal capitalism. Chapter Two explored the rise of the partial mechanization of small-scale wet-rice cultivation, which has reinforced rural smallholders and gendered agricultural systems. This incomplete mechanization is contradicted by local women's skilled work in transplanting rice. While oxen have disappeared in the countryside, Xialongkou women have upheld the labor-intensive practice of rice transplanting, finding it to be both a toil and a pride. Chapter Three drew interconnections between gendered migration routes and multiple forms of family reproductive care work. It argued that migration and family reproduction have contributed to and are shaped by variations in regional economy, including TVEs, SEZs, and small town development. Chapter Four explored the revival of small town China. In particular, I argued that it was the product of two traditions—the rural market town tradition and the socialist revolutionary tradition (in this case the *san xian* (third front) industrial town)—in the context of global (re) nationalization in the post-2008 period.

What is theoretical significance of the interconnectedness of *multiple processes* in the debates on China's rural transformation and development? My findings contribute to the existing body of literature on migration, place, and agrarian change. Some scholars have employed Karl Polanyi's classic theories—of "dis-embedding" and "re-embedding"—to explain China's (rural) transformation (Wu 2014). It is common in migration literature to focus on the 'left behind population' problem and on the issues faced by migrants settling down in cities, priority concerns of some scholars, intellectuals, and state officials. My argument differs from these scholars, who understand the countryside and the rural population as victims of global capitalist accumulation, as merely sources of cheap land, cheap labor, and capital (see, for example, Chuang 2020). Nor do I argue that the countryside is the site of something akin to Polanyi's "counter-movement" to global capitalist accumulation (Wu 2014). Instead, my analysis recognizes both forces, and tries to draw interconnections and to provide an alternative understanding of China on the basis of the lived experiences and everyday life in a small community in the post-2008 era. The agency and lived experiences of children and mothers suggest alternative possibilities for them and alternative forms of place making. In addition, I emphasize the spatial aspect of *simultaneity* and *multiplicity* in the "dis-embedding" and "re-embedding" processes. I argue that gendered translocal family reproduction is interconnected with China's uneven regional economy in the context of globalizing capitalism. In other words, the gender relations are critical forces affecting and reflected in the complexity of the countryside and the varied regional economies in today's China.

Theoretically, I employ the term *multiple processes* to draw interconnections through the lens of "a global conjunctural frame"—a method used by Hart (2020). Specifically, the global conjunctural frame is a set of "major turning points when interconnected forces at play at multiple levels and spatial scales in different regions of the world have come together to create new conditions with worldwide implications and reverberations" (Hart 2020, 242). In this sense, Xialongkou community and Shanli Township are understood as specific nodes in globally interconnected historical geographies. This understanding differs from the conventional argument about agrarian transition from peasant society to 'modern' capitalist society (see, for example, Trappel 2016). In contextualizing the specificity of place making, three global conjunctural

moments were important in this part of rural China: the end of the Cold War; the beginning of neoliberal forms of capitalism since the late 1980s; and the post-2008 global financial crisis. One key theoretical insight of the global conjunctural frame is to denaturalize pre-given bounded units and overcome a sets of dichotomies, such as global/local, agriculture/industry, and work/everyday life. The central thread linking the four chapters is the idea that global processes shape and are shaped by local processes and social relations. This global conjunctural frame also implies a method of relational forms of comparison. As Hart (2014) put it forcefully, a relational form of comparison is "a strategy that differs fundamentally from one that deploys ideal types, or that posits different 'cases' as local variants of a more general phenomenon. Instead of comparing pre-existing objects, events, places or identities, the focus is on how they are constituted in relation to one another through power-laden practices in the multiple, interconnected arenas of everyday life" (230). While Hart's relational comparison involves complex links between South Africa, India, East Asia, and the U.S., as well as multiple processes, I use the method explicitly focusing on linking multiple processes, and less explicit linkage between the U.S., China, and Chinese overseas adventure (lumber business in Congo in Chapter 1).

Another theoretical focus developed here involves the intricacy and profundity of the connection of space and history with gender. One important component of social relations ties together history, gender, and geography. Both history and geography matter to the construction of gender relations and vice versa. Geographical variation in gender relations is a significant element in the production and reproduction of uneven regional development. Following Massey (1994), my aim is to unearth the connections between space, place, and the social constructions of gender relations. As Massey put it, "the implication is that challenging certain of the ways in which space and place are currently conceptualized implies also, challenging the currently dominant form of gender definitions and gender relations" (2). Some influential feminist theories derived from Euro-American experiences are largely limited to the bounded conceptualization of space and place. To overcome the conceptual limits, central to the dissertation is the argument that gender and generational relations are active constituent forces and on-going (re) construction. My emphasis on historical and geographical inter-relations is of course an analytical and theoretical approach influenced by Lefebvre (1991)—specifically, his "regressive-progressive" methodology and the concept of *production of space*. According Lefebvre, one should start in the present, and then go back to the past by drawing relations between history and geography. Lefebvre's "regressive-progressive" method and the whole concept of production of space are to refuse the separation and dualism between time and space. It is compelling to note that Lefebvre developed the "regressive-progressive" methodology when he retreated to a village in the mountains in the Pyrenees during the War and discovered local archives (Elden 2004). His concept of production of space was developed to understand the issue of the town and the country at the time. According to Elden and Morton (2022), Lefebvre's work on the rural, particularly his work on the Pyrenees, contributes to the methodological innovation and concept of production of space/time. I have tried to put this particular method and theory into practice. For instance, as discussed in Chapter 1, the rise of private small-scale forestry is tied to the historical tree farming tradition before 1949, the socialist political forestry, and as well as to the Cold War and global neoliberal capitalism.

Lastly, let me reflect on my motivation for writing this dissertation. The dissertation has strayed from the original research topic. I began my dissertation research topic on *land conversion*. In particular, I sought to examine land conversions from agricultural usage to industrial purposes, to urban construction purposes, to forestry, and vice versa. Such land conversion sometimes involved land dispossession, depending on how one defines dispossession. The focus point was on the politics of land conversion/dispossession. At the time, I was influenced by the political economic argument that land-based urban financial regimes and accumulation have replaced the *old* mode of industrial accumulation in today's China. With this theoretical orientation, I went into the hill country to understand land-based urban accumulation and the regional economic growth. To that end, I prioritized the role of the state, and so arranged meetings with county and township officials who were willing to talk to me. The county and township officials also provided some data on land conversion and their perspectives on land conversion (any types). Subsequently, I went to individual families whose *zhaijidi* (residential land) had been converted to agricultural land and to families whose agricultural land was converted to forestland. I collected some relevant data. But what really surprised me was the local families' 'indifference' towards land conversion. They did not complain nor protest. I inquired about that, and found that the reason was simple. As they would explain, "Land, we have; we don't have enough people to work on it." Indeed, even after land conversion beginning in the 2000s, families in this part of rural China still have access to three types of land: forestland, agricultural land, and *zhai ji di* (residential land). The converted portion was of negligible impact to each family, especially given the scattered and fragmented nature of land allotments, a situation inherited from socialist land reforms. Meanwhile, almost all families had members who had migrated out (*da gong*), whether near or far, whether for employments or a business adventure. Hence, translocal families' everyday life simply cannot be reduced to that of a land-based form of livelihood. Families are concerned with (re) production and take diverse strategies to achieve it. Most critically, families are *translocal*, extending across multiple spaces/places, from villages, to small towns, to county seats, to big cities, or even to overseas.

The dissertation research process made me confront my own place in the story. As a native of Xialongkou, a married-out-daughter, and a female university researcher in the U.S., I have been living in four worlds: Berkeley in California, Guangdong, Beijing, and the hill country in Jiangxi. Ever since my first departure from Xialongkou to Guangdong on a hot summer day in 1995, as one of hundreds of millions of rural-to-urban migrants, seeking factory and other employment. In my several worlds, I have thus lived through the massive transformation of China since the economic reforms. Once I put myself into the story, the artificial dichotomy between the researcher and the researched became a new twist on the story. I represent one more way in which, many Chinese families in this part of rural China are increasingly extended spatially to multiple places. As such, the historical specificity and yet interconnected spatiality of the story motivated me to pursue the *roots* of and *routes* towards rural transformation reflected in an everyday life that is often taken for granted. I began to reconsider my original theoretical framework, conceptualized based on the dichotomy between economic production and social reproduction (everyday life). By shifting my entire focus to the question of everyday life, I began to realize how family members were concerned not just with how to sustain themselves, but also with (re) defining themselves with their new aspirations. I then began to interconnect the variability

and complexity of family reproduction care work and gendered migration routes, as discussed in Chapter 3.

Reflecting on my learning during the research process, what surprised me was how the prevalent understanding of the agricultural way of life is in fact a fabrication. The pure form of the agricultural way of life is not 'natural.' Rather, agriculture and forestry have always been interconnected; they were only forcefully separated during the socialist era in this part of rural China. I was blind to local habits and multiple production systems in the hill community until the 2008 forestry reform, when disputes mounted between villages, as discussed in Chapter 1. Another surprise pushed me to question my assumption about community solidarity. In fact, there was no such thing. Rather, community solidarity was made and un-made through a dialectical process of disputes and agreements, a second concern of Chapter 1. In other words, it was the interconnection in and through disputes, agreements, and/or both, between multiple groups/places, that produced community solidarity.

Still, I was surprised by Xialongkou villagers' new aspirations of "becoming lumber boss" after the 2008 Forest Tenure Reform. As I argued in Chapter 1, the new aspirations and self-identification as "lumber bosses," in contrast to the official government labeled identity of "forest peasants" (*lin nong*), is produced in and through a local historical tree farming tradition, the socialist political forestry, and more specialized labor in the wood industry or in overseas investments (in this case in the Republic of Congo) in the context of a globalizing lumber market.

The broader implications of my research concerns the ongoing processes of place making and the varied gender relations affecting the production of space, all of which affects and is affected by the lived experience of ordinary people. I believe that it is essential in future research—not to mention in policy making decisions—to take seriously the interconnectedness of place, space, and gender within a global conjunctural framework. Covid-19 was a moment of global interconnection that coincided with the resurgence of nationalisation in Europe, the U.S. and China. On March 8, 2023, a hearing on "Investigating the Origins of Covid-19" rejected the theory of natural transmission in favor of "a lab leak" in Wuhan, China (United States House Committee 2023). The political stakes are high when "the conspiracy theory" operating under a bounded concept of nation states structures how we interpret the world. The researcher in my view has to be situated within an understanding of the spatially uneven dynamics of global capitalism, attentive to specificities as well as to interconnections. The contrast between global interconnection and effort to enforce national particularism serves as a useful illustration of the problem at the heart of my dissertation.

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Appendix
Arable land and forestland ownership and usage rights in Xialongkou, 2018

The following is a description of land ownership and land usage rights in Xialongkou Hamlet. Based on official data gathered in December 2007, Xialongkou Hamlet has 41 households, 222 people, with only 247.41 *mu* of agricultural land. Each household has an average of six *mu* of cropland, divided into two categories: "private fields" (*zi liu tian*) held by the households in perpetuity, and "responsible fields" (*ze ren tian*) given to the household in the form of a renewable fifteen-years lease. In the mid-1990s, "responsible fields" were giving to villagers on 30-years leases; in recent years they have been deemed to be "fixed in perpetuity" (*yong jiu bu bian*) by the central government in terms of the Household Responsibility System (HRS). But it should be noted that Xialongkou villagers in reality do not differentiate nowadays between the two categories of cropland as designated by the state. Both types of land are farmed in the same way. More critically, after more than two decades of cultivation, especially since the abolishment of the agricultural tax in 2005, peasants consider the cropland under their cultivation to be *de facto* inheritable property, which has now become a local custom.

Compared to the total amount of cropland (247.41 *mu*), the size of the forestland of the hamlet (2230.5 *mu*), is substantial, representing around ten times the amount of cropland. In Xialongkou, each person has 8.4 *mu* of forestland (neighboring villages have more, with 13 *mu* of forestland per person). Like the cropland, forestland is further divided into two categories: 1) "private hills" (3 *mu* per person); and 2) "responsible hills" (5.4 *mu* per person). In the hamlet as a whole, there are 666 *mu* of private hills, 1198 *mu* of responsible hills. In addition, 150 *mu* are still held in reserve as collectively-owned hills. As with cropland, "private hills" are held by the village household in perpetuity; "responsible hills"—generally located further away from the villages—have been granted to villagers in the form of seventy years of use rights.