Global to Village:
Grounding Communication Research in Rural China

Introduction

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At a time when the academic spotlight focuses on "China's rising" in the metaphorical "global village," this article draws attention to China's real villages. It sets the context for a research agenda foregrounding the relevance of an urban–rural relationship perspective for a political economy of communication that has systematically prioritized the labor–capital relationship in the development of global capitalism. Starting with a personal biographical account and a reexamination of the place of the rural in scholarship on communication, modernization, and global capitalism, the article proceeds to foreground urban–rural relations in understanding the historical trajectory of China's engagement with global capitalism and the role of communication and culture within such a trajectory. It then focuses on Heyang as a digitally networked, globalized, and globalizing Chinese village and introduces Global to Village: Grounding Communication Research in Rural China as both a transnational research project and a pedagogical praxis in global citizenship.

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> It is the political task of the social scientist—as of any liberal educator—continually to translate personal troubles into public issues, and public issues into the terms of their human meaning for a variety of individuals. It is his task to display in his work—and as an educator, in his life as well—this kind of sociological imagination.
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> —C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (1959, p. 187)

Inspired by these well-known words by C. Wright Mills, I begin my introductory article to this "Global to Village" Special Section with one of my personal troubles, or a moment when I was deeply troubled. In fact, this provoked such a change in my research that it propelled me to set up the Heyang Institute for Rural Studies, a village-based research and education NGO in China, and organize an inaugural project as a test bed for a potential research agenda around agriculture, peasantry, and rural communities in contemporary China from the perspective of communication and culture. Specifically, I asked a group of young scholars to relate their theoretical concepts and ground their respective research interests in a Chinese village as part of their explorations in communication, culture, and globalization. This Special Section reports the results of this collective intellectual journey, undertaken first and foremost as a communicative praxis and a pedagogical exercise in global citizenship and radical cosmopolitanism. At a time when the academic spotlight focuses heavily on "China's rising" and its power projection into the metaphorical "global village" (McLuhan, 1962), I opt to draw attention to its real villages in the midst of profound global transformations—a process that I and other authors have tried to explore on the pages of this journal in terms of communication, crisis, and global power shifts (Zhao, 2014a, 2014b).

I was born in a small village of about 460 people called Yanshanxia, in Jinyun County, Zhejiang Province, on the eastern coast of China. Across a stream is a larger village of about 3,210 people called Heyang, where I have extensive family connections and attended secondary school between 1975 and 1979. Driven by China's world historical reform and the open-up process that encompasses rapid urbanization and intensified global integration, I went to Beijing for undergraduate studies in 1980 and left for Canada for graduate studies in 1986.

I have returned to rural China many times. I have also written about the uneven distribution of communicative power between urban and rural China. However, taking mostly a political economy approach, my past writing emphasized typically abstract processes, not concrete, lived reality. My sensibility of the village as a lived reality returned with a vengeance one day in early 2010, when, in a true McLuhan "global village" fashion, I picked up a Chinese-language newspaper in Vancouver and read a front-page story about how Zhu Xiaohui, a 24-year-old man in Heyang, had committed Internet-arranged suicide in a nearby township hotel. Another 24-year-old man from the remote Yunnan Province in southwestern China, who had made the special trip to meet Zhu, died with him, completing a suicide pact they had made online. According to the report, which I was able to trace to a domestic Chinese source online (D. Li, 2010), these young men had met each other virtually through an Internet chat group composed of suicidal individuals.

That story troubled me profoundly, both as a fellow human being from the same rural area and as a "global" communication scholar. Access to modern means of communication remains a pivotal issue in much of communication and development literature, and rural Internet access has replaced previous

technologies as a paramount concern. Yet this story compelled me to think beyond access, which not only was not the solution but also apparently had become part of the problem. Instead of following the predictable path of using higher education as a one-way ticket out of rural life in the processes of modernization and urbanization, we have a case of a university-educated young man who had ended up returning to the village, only to become fatally obsessed with the Internet. Apparently, Zhu neither could find desirable urban office work nor had the desire to become an industrial wage laborer, let alone becoming a farmer (D. Li, 2010).

Emile Durheim (1964) was well known for having noted that a suicide is a social fact, and this suicide case compelled me to rethink my own scholarship. There are two sets of questions. First, is the fate of Zhu yet another symptomatic manifestation of the limits of the urbanization path to modernization in China? As China strives to readjust its export-oriented, information-technology-driven, and rural-migrant-labor-dependent developmental path in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, is there a future for educated youth in its networked and globalized villages? Second, with reference to scholarship on communication and culture, what explains the absence of a consistent rural focus in my own work, even though I have regularly visited rural China throughout the years? Furthermore, in deepening my own attempt in thinking beyond access in the pages of this journal (Zhao, 2007a) and with reference to Dallas Smythe's profound developmental question for the Chinese at the onset of China's reform process, "After bicycles, what?" (Smythe, 1994), I ask, how do we reconceptualize and reintegrate the urban–rural divide, and along with it, the "metabolic rift" that Karl Marx had also concerned himself with in his work, as a relevant analytical category for a political economy of communication perspective that has, to this point, systematically prioritized the labor–capital relationship in the development of global capitalism?

It is beyond the scope of any single research project to address these questions. Nevertheless, I hope to pose these questions and use the remaining portions of this Introduction as a starting point to explore them and set the contexts for this Special Section's modest experiment of asking graduate student researchers to ground their research in rural China. First, I review the place of the rural in scholarly discourses concerning the relationship between communication, modernization, and capitalism. Second, I deepen this discussion by foregrounding the urban–rural relationship in understanding China's historical trajectory of engaging with global capitalism and the role of communication and culture within such a trajectory. Third, I localize my analysis with an account of Heyang's historical evolution into a digitally networked and globalized Chinese village, thereby providing a contextual preview to this Special Section. Then, I describe the methodological approach and topical focus of each article in this collective project in two sections. Finally, I conclude this Introduction with a brief account of follow-ups to this project in Heyang in particular, and ongoing communicative struggles over the future of rural China in general.

Capitalism, the Urban–Rural Relationship, and Communication Research

Although McLuhan's global village concept invokes the village in a metaphorical sense without paying any attention to the real countryside, the fields of communication and cultural studies were not urban centric to begin with. After all, mass media and rural development was a primary concern in communication as a nascent post-WWII American social science discipline, just as the "village" had long

been the focal point of anthropology and the future of peasant society a preoccupation of post-WWII American sociology. Citing Barrington Moore's (1966) influential book *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* as an example, Sorge and Padwe (2015) wrote that "within the context of Cold War geopolitics, the problem of the peasantry in the 'Third World' came to be perceived of as a critical element in global contestations" (p. 238). It was precisely with this paramount geopolitical and ideological concern that pioneers of American communication research such as Daniel Lerner (1958) and Wilbur Schramm (1964) began to study peasants and offered prescriptions on the positive role of communication technology in bringing about rural development in the then "Third World." Lurking behind this "dominant paradigm," of course, was the reality of peasant-based Communist revolution in countries such as China and Vietnam, a fate these American scholars were determined to avert in the rest of the postcolonial world.

As Pendakur (1993) pointed out with reference to India, the dominant paradigm posited a "static and tradition-bound" (p. 82) rural in the developing world waiting to be stimulated and woken up by the application of the latest communication technology. In doing so, it presented "an ideologically constructed world where the childlike 'natives' are mesmerized by another gadget that Westerners already have" (Pendakur, 1993, p. 83). Implied in the paradigm's linear logic of modernization, of course, is a temporal gap between the urban and rural, and between the world's developed metropolitan centers and its developing hinterlands, and the transformation of peasant-based "traditional societies" into modern societies modeled after the urban-based consumer societies of North America and Western Europe. Pendakur, however, was perhaps too polite to point out that the critical political economists who "developed a powerful Left critique" (p. 83) of the dominant paradigm had also largely failed to engage with the rural problematic and the larger issue of urban–rural relations. Pendakur's (1993) own article, "Political Economy and Ethnography: Transformations in an Indian Village," written in honor of Dallas Smythe as a pioneering critical political economist, is an exception that proves the rule. As another sign, even though Raymond Williams had published *The Country and The City* as early as 1973, few critical communication scholars shared his deep concern with the urban–rural divide.

As a matter of fact, it seems that critical communication scholars have thrown the baby (a concern with rural society) out with the bathwater (their neo-Marxian critique of the dominant paradigm). To begin with, Marx's controversial trope of the "Asiatic mode of production" and his remarks about the progressive role of colonialism in India cast a long shadow in critical scholarship on anything concerning rural Asia, and Marx and Engels' famous condemnation of the "idiocy of rural life" has "long served as a foil for modernist projects" (Sorge & Padwe, 2015, p. 236). To the extent that both dominant paradigm scholars and neo-Marxists shared what Canadian indigenous scholar Glen Coulthard (2014) called "normative developmentalism" (p. 9), they internalized the same teleological vision about the inevitability of capitalist modernization, urbanization, and industrialization, even though they may disagree whether liberal democratic capitalism constitutes the "end of history." Furthermore, because radical political economy has paradigmatically tended to "reduce the usable past to the colonial period" (Mamdani, 2007, p. 95), sets the rise of industrial capitalism as historical "ground zero," and frames the urban proletariat as the universal subject of social revolution, there is little room for a critical research agenda that concerns itself with the peasantry, which appears at most only as a "residual" category. After all, in his authoritative account of the 20th century, Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm (1996) has argued with

considerable authority that "the most dramatic and far-reaching change of the second half of this century, and *the one which cuts us off for ever from the world of the past*, is the death of the peasantry" (p. 289, emphasis added). Finally, and for post–Cold War communication studies in particular, because the modern commercial communication industry everywhere is more interested in the profitable urban audience, and the field, after having successfully consigned the communication and ("Third World") development issue to niche scholarship during the period of neoliberal globalization, has turned to focus on studies of the processes of media globalization, digitalization, and political democratization. Within the prevalent "global versus local" dichotomy in media globalization studies, the "local" often means "national," which in turn is implicitly equated with the urban. The result is a bifurcated field in which residual elements or rearticulated variants of the dominant communication and development paradigm are applied to studies of access and connectivity concerning the rural population in the developing world or the inner-city poor in the West, while "(new) media and democracy" paradigms—where democracy assumes either liberal or more radical forms—are applied to the (urban) middle class and netizens.

This bifurcated urban–rural dichotomy and the Western-centric urban bias is so ingrained in contemporary global communication scholarship that even volumes that have explicitly championed *De-Westernizing Media Studies* (Park & Curran, 2000, title), *Internationalizing Media Studies* (Thussu, 2009, title), *Reorienting Global Communication* (Curtin & Shah, 2010, title), or, more recently, *Mapping BRICS Media* (Nordenstreng & Thussu, 2015, title), are no exception. None of the four volumes bearing these titles—and I am a contributor to the last three—devotes a chapter to the analysis of communication and urban–rural relations. In fact, the indexes of these books do not register any rural- or peasantry-related entries. Add to this list my own co-edited volume, *Global Communication: Toward a Transcultural Political Economy* (Chakravartty & Zhao, 2008). Here again, and even with chapters written predominantly by scholars specializing in the non-Western world, urban–rural relations do not register as a significant theme let alone an analytical framework. In retrospect, as an editor and an author, I did not consciously choose to ignore urban–rural relations as a vector of analysis. Rather, this omission had happened "naturally," as a result of the frame of reference, or a function of the "spiral of silence" in scholarship. The other side of this intellectual hegemony is that as soon as I decided to focus on communication and urban–rural relations, I felt a need to explain myself: Was I abandoning the Marxist paradigm? Even worse, and putting my own intellectual judgment to the test, is my scholarship becoming nostalgic, emotion driven, and even backward looking, thus heading down the road of self-marginalization?

The stakes are high for the politics of communication and culture scholarship. Even though the United Nations announced in the middle of the last decade that the proportion of the world's population that lives in urban areas had surpassed that of the rural population, as Sorge and Padwe (2015) argued, the absolute size of the rural population today is bigger than ever, and "this fact lends added urgency to efforts to understand why the promise of modernization has not been realized for rural populations today" (p. 236). Furthermore, not only has the uneven nature of global capitalism produced uneven geographies of urbanization so that, for example, Latin America as a whole is more urbanized than Asia and Africa, but the history of global capitalism has also developed in such a way that urban–rural relations have assumed different guises and have manifested in different ways in different parts of the urbanized world. In North America, for example, an exploitative urban–rural relationship, as a defining feature of capitalism, has historically intersected with settler colonialism, slavery, and neoliberal globalization to create the problems

of First Nations' dispossession and marginalization, African Americans' racial oppression, and, today, the plights of largely Hispanic migrant agricultural workers in the Unites States. Thus, what Mike Davis described as the problem of the "planet of slums" can be traced back to urban–rural relations (Lu, 2010). To the extent that these forms of economic exploitation, racial oppression, and cultural displacement are deeply intertwined with the material processes of global capitalism, communication and cultural studies approaches that only engage with identity politics, or the politics of recognition, without offering a fundamental critique of capitalism's continuing process of subordinating the rural and periphery to the urban and the metropolitan center, will remain profoundly idealist and partial.

Moreover, despite the Marxist preoccupation with the working class as the subject of revolution, and despite post–Cold War communication scholarship's preoccupation with the Internet-enabled urban middle class as agents of social change, from the Chinese peasants in the first half of the 20th century to the Zapatistas in rural Mexico, the Naxalite–Maoist insurgency in rural India, and the Trump supporters in the U.S. rural hinterland, rural populations all over the world continue to prove themselves to be important social forces and formidable political agents to be reckoned with. Indeed, there was even an element of resistance in the refusal of Zhu Xiaohui, the son of a well-off Heyang small-business family, to be an industrial wage laborer. That the Internet-dated suicides of Zhu and his netizen fellow from Yunnan happened in the same spring of 2010, when their migrant-worker cousins at Foxconn committed mass suicides to protest their life of being superexploited on the transnational industrial assembly line, was perhaps no coincidence. For good or bad, the proletarianization of China's massive 280 million "peasant-workers" remains "incomplete." This massive population is still caught "in-between" the rural and the urban.

This leads me to ponder: To the extent that the continuation of capitalistic relations of production depends on the uprooting and dispossession of the peasantry as a source of wage laborer on a global scale, and to the extent that China's role in future transformation of the global capitalist system remains indeterminate, will the (re)making of a Chinese countryside that can sustain meaningful modern life for the likes of Zhu Xiaohui and returned migrant workers, drain global capitalism of its wellspring of "cheap" Chinese labor supply and thus play a part in transforming the capitalist system? In making a postcolonial critique of Marx's analysis of capitalist exploitation, which was made from the primary position of the waged urban industrial proletariat while the "undignified" and "stagnant" life of the Indians or the specific character of colonial domination were of "largely incidental" concern, Canadian indigenous scholar Glen Coulthard (2014) has argued for the reestablishment of the "colonial relation of dispossession as a co-foundational feature of our understanding of and critical engagement with capitalism" (p. 14). Even though rural dispossessions and colonial dispossessions have overlapped in the history of global capitalism, I am not making any equivalence between the status of indigenous populations in settler colonial states and the peasant populations in China in their respective relationships to capitalism. However, I believe Coulthard's call for addressing the "residual" features in Marx's critique of capitalism vis-à-vis the conditions of the "colonies" by "contextually shifting our investigation from an emphasis on *capital relation* to the *colonial relation*" (p. 10; emphasis in original) can be extended to the urban–rural relationship.

Furthermore, mounting ecological crisis in the era of planetary capitalism, coupled with the problem of food security, has added a new urgency to repair the "ecological rift" between the urban and

the rural. This is not to merely invoke rural romanticism, or to switch back and forth between the two sets of dichotomous myths that Williams (1973) so adeptly described in terms of the approach to the urban–rural relationship: "On the one hand are myths of rural idiocy and the civilizing potential of the urban, on the other, myths of pastoral innocence and the corrupting influence of the city" (Sorge & Padwe, 2015, p. 236). More often than not, the rural is even more ruinous than the urban in ecological terms. For example, just as China's countryside has been highly polluted by industrial developments and overuse of chemicals in farming, it has also served as the dumping and disassembling fields of electronic wastes produced by the West and transported illegally into China in the current era of digital capitalism.

Nevertheless, the countryside is not simply a land of misery or waste. Instead, it may contain the "resources of hope" (Williams, 1989) for overcoming the crises of global capitalism. One group of Chinese scholars, for example, has recently argued that "learning from rural society," especially the strength of its relation to nature and its emphasis on the community, rather than individual peasant or family, as the basic unit in the distribution and sharing of social resources, is the way forward for China. In making such an argument, these scholars are also trying to steer the Chinese state's "infrastructure-based developmentalism" of the "One Belt, One Road" initiative toward a potentially more just and sustainable alternative to U.S. led neoliberal capitalist globalization (Tsui, Wong, Chi, & Wen, 2017, pp. 44–45). By calling for a thorough reengagement with the rural in the study of communication and culture, I hope to join these authors in discussing the possibilities for the recovery of traditional knowledge systems and other means of sustainable living and community sustenance for overcoming the multiple crises of planetary capitalist modernity. Such knowledge systems, cultural practices, and belief systems include organic farming practices, herbal medicine, and more profoundly, belief systems and ways of the good life that are nonexploitive in the relationships between human beings and between human and nature. What needs to be emphasized, however, is that I am not speaking of timeless or static "traditions" but of historically and geographically specific forms of knowledge, practices, and social struggles. In China, these include not only centuries-old notions of human–land relations but also the legacies of the Communist land revolution and socialist transformation; in North America, these certainly include the theories and practices of indigenous anticolonialism and anticapitalism. As Coulthard (2014) writes, such a position of "grounded normativity" is primarily

> inspired by and oriented around *the question of land*—a struggle not only *for* land in the material sense, but also deeply *informed* by what the land as *system of reciprocal relations and obligations* can teach us about living our lives in relation to one another and the natural world in non-dominating—and non-exploitative terms and less around our emergent status as "right-less proletariat." (p. 13, emphasis in original)

And it is precisely at this point—where I see a resonance between such a notion of land in Canadian indigenous thinking and that of Chinese peasants—that I am turning to China and Heyang in the next few sections, not just in their particularities but also in their commonalities with other localities; not just as a place of despair and connectivity as the means to a fatalistic suicidal path but also as a place of hope, or at least a site of an unfinished struggle, as far as the challenge of overcoming the multiple crises of capitalist modernity is concerned.

China's Historical Engagement With Global Capitalism:
Communication and Urban–Rural Relations

China, with its long agrarian history and a peasant-based Communist revolution, offers an important vantage point to engage an urban–rural relationship perspective vis-à-vis global capitalism, and position communication and culture as pivotal sites of integration with and resistance against capitalism. Observations have been made that, contrary to the Western industrial capitalist developmental path, which has been predicated upon exploitative urban–rural and colonial relationships, China, up to its forced encounter with capitalism in the early 19th century, sustained a nonantagonistic urban–rural relationship (Yan, 2009, p. 21). Such a relationship, I must emphasize, was not a derivative of some static Asiatic mode of production or Chinese cultural essence but was the result of the cyclical struggles of the Chinese peasantry: When absent land owners who lived in cities accumulated too much land, or when taxation for the sustenance of state power and ruling-class privileges became too heavy, peasants would rebel and overthrow the ruling regime, leading to a new dynasty under a new "Mandate of the Heaven." Cultural and social norms that sustain human connectivity between the city and countryside also played important roles in sustaining the rural foundation of Chinese society. For example, rural men who had passed the exam to become officials in the imperial court would spend their postretirement life in the countryside; in classical Chinese poetry, there is an endless flow of lyrics depicting the idyllic rural life as the ultimate good life.

This is not the place to review the vast literature on the internal and external reasons for China's fateful encounter with capitalism and its subsequent accommodations with and struggles against the system. Lin Chun's (Lin, 2013) *China and Global Capitalism* offers insightful reading for any scholar who wishes to move beyond superficial de-westernization and reckon with China in thinking about the future of the world; it also served as one of the pedagogical entries for the authors in this Special Section. In broad strokes, let me highlight the two fundamental and historically interconnected differences in the Chinese path to modernity and then the Chinese engagement with neoliberal capitalist globalization.

To begin with, it is worthwhile to recall that the pivotal role of Chinese peasantry in historical change, not to mention the limited size of China's urban working class, compelled the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to sinify Marxism and develop its revolutionary strategy of encircling the city from the countryside. Driven to China's agrarian hinterland in the northwest by the Nationalist Army and then being confined there by the Japanese invasion, the CCP founded the PRC by leading a successful land revolution and developing, among other revolutionary theories and practices, the mass line ("from the masses, to the masses") mode of political communication and cultural governance. Representing a conceptualization of state–society relations different from liberal democracy, but acknowledging the initiatives of the "masses" as agents of social change, the mass line embodied the CCP's effort of indigenizing Leninist principles with the reality of working with a largely peasant population and relating itself with Chinese society (Lin, 2013; Selden, 1971). In making the observation that "the surviving Communist countries today—China, North Korea, Cuba, Vietnam, Laos"—all "came to power through nationalistic rural revolutions," Elizabeth Perry has suggested that "maybe countries that come to power through nationalistic peasant mobilizations learn certain valuable lessons about how to relate to their societies" (Perry & Lu, 2015, p. 166).

Urban–Rural Divide in the Political Economy of Chinese Nation Building
From the Mao Era to the Jiang Era

China's post-1949 modernization process first faced an economic embargo from the West and then a split-up with the USSR. This resulted in a reliance on the ruthless extraction of domestic agricultural surplus (the domestic equivalent of colonial extraction or uneven trade in international markets) for the country's initial industrialization and rapid modernization, leading to the entrenchment of the urban and rural household registration system, and a "widening rural–urban divide" as "one of the unintended consequences of this revolutionary modernization project" (Brown, 2012, p. 2). After the disaster of the Great Leap Forward in 1958, Chinese peasants, after having served as a powerhouse for the Communist revolution, became the primary victims of a massive famine. However, as Brown (2012) also argued, the legacies of the Maoist period with regard to the urban–rural gap were complex and fraught with the tensions among "the overlapping themes of inequality, interaction, and development" (p. 230). In fact, Mao-era developmental policy did not abandon Chinese peasants and rural society altogether. Arrighi (2007), for example, even argued that "in Mao's China, in sharp contrast to Stalin's USSR, modernization was pursued, not through the destruction, but the economic and educational uplifting of the peasantry" (p. 374). Although such a generalization must be supplemented with more complex and on-the-ground accounts of the urban–rural relations that actually existed during the Mao period (Brown, 2012), in rural developmental terms, it was widely accepted that Chinese achievements in the areas of adult literacy, basic education, and health care were the envy of the developing world at the time.

In communication and cultural politics, the mass media's socialist rhetoric glorified the workers and peasants as the protagonists of Chinese history. Urban educated youth and intellectuals were encouraged, and even compelled, to go to the countryside to be "reeducated" by the peasants. Indeed, sociologist Yan Hairong (Yan, 2005) has even argued that during the Mao era, the countryside was the "ideological high ground" where the enthusiasm and agency of the peasants were celebrated. In contrast, cities, especially coastal cities, were the target of socialist transformation, so as to get rid of their exploitative, colonial legacies and turn them from "parasitical" consumption sites into productive sites. Within this context, Dazhai, a poor mountain village in Shanxi that made a Herculean collective effort in its own development, became a household name and the exemplar of a self-reliant, industrious, and socialist Chinese countryside. As Brown put it well, "Cultural Revolution-era paeans to the gloriousness of rural China were rarely more than lip service, but for some people, lip service may have been preferable to no service" (2012, p. 228). For sure, the schools, the post offices, newspapers, wired radio, commune film projection teams, and local theater performance troupes were all important rural communication and cultural institutions of the era.

In turn, the above revolutionary and socialist legacies made China's post-Mao path of reintegration with global capitalism rather different from the more urbanized and industrialized Soviet and East European countries on the one hand, and postcolonial capitalist countries such as India and Brazil on the other. Just as land reform was the centerpiece of the CCP-led revolution, the dismantling of collective rural economy in favor of the family-contract system—initiated in reform-era official discourse by 18 peasants in Xiaogang Village in Anhui Province in 1978, and described by William Hinton (1990) in his

book *The Great Reversal,* as the beginning of China's privatization process—jump-started China's post-Mao reform and open-up process. On the one hand, a collective land ownership system that ensured the egalitarian distribution of contracted lands to individual households, an urban–rural duality solidified by the household registration system, together with Mao-era achievements in rural literacy, education, and healthcare, had served as the Mao-era socialist "dividends" that provided reform-era China with the "comparative advantage" of "cheap land" and "cheap" peasant migrant workers. That this work force has been able to endure the terms of superexploitation in China's globally integrated coastal industrial zones was largely because rural land ownership and rural households have served as a social security system and as the site of social and cultural reproduction—a place called home that the migrant workers can return to both physically and emotionally. If native land and African bodies had historically been the "source of U.S. capitalism" (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2015, p. 47; see also, Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014), then the Chinese peasantry's land and bodies have been the wellsprings of accumulation for neoliberal global capitalism during China's rise to the second largest global economy. This is the true "secret" of China's success in the era of neoliberal capitalist globalization.

On the other hand, as post-Mao China cashed in the "dividends" of its land-reform-centered revolution and Mao-era socialist nation building, and as a rapidly urbanizing and globalizing China reintegrating with global capitalism by not only neglecting the countryside in the national political economy but also discursively denigrating the peasantry as a symbol of China's backwardness, it had also accumulated a huge debt to the countryside by the turn of the new century. The problems have included political decay, including the "blackening" of rural governance due to the retreat of party and state power at the village level, on the one hand, and abuse of village elections on the other; economic decline due to farmers' lack of organization and Chinese agricultural products' general lack of competitiveness in the increasingly open global market; land grabs; the hollowing out of rural society due to the massive outward flow of prime-age labor; the running down of the agricultural infrastructure due to the dismantling of the collective rural economy and systematic state negligence; and drastically decreased capital investment. In the communication and cultural realm, in addition to the education system's brain-drain effect on the countryside, the massive onslaught of commercialized and urban-centric media, starting in the mid-1980s and intensified throughout the 1990s, led to the disorientation of social values and the denigration of rural identity. Again, as Yan Hairong (Yan, 2005) noted, in a reversal of Mao-era urban–rural cultural politics and a revival of early 20th-century Chinese colonial modernity, "the city regained its superiority as the center of modern civilization," and as "poor" and "backwardness" came to characterize China as a large agrarian country in comparison with the West in the eyes of the elite, "poor" and "traditional" also became the synonyms of the countryside. As the presumed "civilizational" and "modern" essence of the city became constructed as an antithesis of the "closed" and "backward" countryside, the countryside has been ideologically "hollowed out"—paralleling its economic and social hollowing out (Yan, 2005, p. 82). As Yan went on to summarize, although the economic and cultural "hollowing out" processes plundered the countryside of much of its "economic and cultural values," it was precisely because of these processes that rural youth saw no future in the countryside (p. 83).

In short, after the initial celebration of the success of the household contract system in the early 1980s, rural China was in such economic, social, and cultural deficits after two decades of increasingly urban-centric reform and Western-centric capitalist reintegration that by March 2000, Li Changping, a

rural official from Hubei Province, had been compelled to cry out to then premier Zhu Rongji his famous "three-agrarian problems" (*sannong wenti*)—peasants were so miserable, villages were so poor, and agriculture was so precarious. Li's cries on behalf of rural China finally caught the Jiang Zemin leadership's and national media's attention. In January 2002, the publication of his book *I Told Truth to the Premier* (C. P. Li, 2002) caused a national sensation, making *sannong wenti* a household word.

Building a New Socialist Countryside in a Reformed China?

Since the end of the Jiang Zemin era in late 2002, the CCP, both in rhetoric and in actual developmental policy, has significantly increased its emphasis on the countryside, so much so that the agrarian problem has been considered a priority among its working priorities: In 2005, the CCP revived the Mao-era slogan of "building a new socialist countryside"; in 2006, the Chinese state abolished the agricultural tax and significantly increased its investment in the countryside. In fact, as Chinese economist Wen Tiejun (Wen, 2013) argued, by making the countryside the site of investment and a source of domestic demand since 2003 and especially since 2006, the Chinese state was able to successfully defend itself from the rippling effects of the 2008 global financial crisis. Translated into communication and cultural terms, this has included sustained "village to village" telephone and, more recently, broadband connectivity campaigns and various rural cultural enfranchisement projects (Y. Hong, 2017; Zhao, 2007b).

As part of its effort to redefine China's developmental model by rebalancing the economy to make it less export driven in the post-2008 period, the CCP has also come to realize that it was time for industry to support agriculture and urban China to nurture rural China. In short, China could not rise without the rise of the countryside. Furthermore, the CCP, out of both an ideological concern to reclaim the rural roots of Chinese civilization in the face of a growing national identity crisis after three decades of breakneck modernization and globalization, and an economic imperative to make the cultural industry, including rural tourism, a new site of post-2008 economic growth, has developed an expansionary regime of rural cultural heritage protection, with a growing inventory of "traditional villages" and cultural heritages to be preserved and developed as quintessential embodiments of China's agrarian civilization (Wu, 2015). Concomitantly, a growing environmental crisis in China's overly crowded large urban centers—epitomized by the notorious Beijing Smog—has provided a further impetus for urban China to return a more favorable and even romanticizing gaze to the countryside and small towns.

Are these recent developments mounting to any significant shift in the balance of power in China's urban–rural relations? It is too early to tell. China had an urbanization rate of 57.35% by the end of 2016 (National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China, 2017). However, as many as 292 million people, representing more than 20% of China's population, were categorized as a "population with separated residential and household registration locations" (mostly, rural migrant workers who live in urban areas with no urban household registration status who therefore are excluded from urban citizenship entitlements). Thus, the percentage of the population with urban household registration is actually below 40%. Although the current state plan is to increase those with urban household registration status to 45% by 2020 (Chen, 2016), this is understood as a difficult target, given the high cost of urban living and its increasingly unattractive nature for migrant workers. From an economic perspective, although a Western and urban-centric perspective typically assumes a normative value in higher levels of

urbanization, Wen Tiejun (Wen, 2013) has cautioned otherwise: To the extent that rural China has served as the safety valve and, more specifically, the internal "outsider" for an increasingly urban-centric Chinese economy to export its cyclical economic crises, a tilt in the balance of the urban–rural population in favor of urban China may not be good news as far as urban China's ability to overcome its future economic crises is concerned. Nor should increased state investment or growing private capital flow into the rural economy be considered an automatic boon for everybody. Considering increasing social stratification, class division, unequal power relations in the countryside, and, above all, a lack in the organizational power of Chinese farmers on the one hand, and the growing integration of Chinese agriculture with global capitalism on the other, this new wave of state, capital, and urban middle-class interest in the countryside can be easily turned into yet another process of "accumulation by dispossession." Similarly, although increased Internet connectivity, the state's rural cultural enfranchisement projects, and cultural heritage protection plans all seem to benefit the countryside, the devil is in the details—especially in the ways new forms of connectivity and cultural patronage hit the ground and in the complex frictions among different social forces and competing cultural traditions and value systems. To return to the theme of the first section, it is within this context that the title of Pendakur's (1993) article "Political Economy and Ethnography: Transformations in an Indian Village" assumes new relevance for communication studies— this time, with reference to transformations in Heyang, it is the Chinese village that serves as the "grounding" site of this Special Section.

Locating Heyang: Globalized Chinese Village, Postreform State

Although the past decades have witnessed a drastic reduction in the number of Chinese villages (Johnson, 2014), in 2016, China still had 2.617 million "natural villages"—the smallest unit of human settlement in rural China—organized into 526, 000 larger units of "administrative villages" with locally elected village councils (Zhongguo jianshe bao, 2017). Moreover, Chinese villages are extremely diverse in their historical, socioeconomic, and cultural makeup, with huge regional and local differences. Most importantly, rather than being isolated and static, villages have always been the sites of human flows and important vectors in the continuous transformation of Chinese state and society relations. Heyang is located in Jinyun, a relatively poor interior mountainous county, in Lishui City, in the prosperous coastal Zhejiang province (see Figure 1). The area claims a rich cultural heritage dating back to the Tang Dynasty in the seventh century. Stories of the founding and growth of both the county and the village embody population flows from the northern to the southern parts of China, symbiotic state–village relations, and complex connections between the countryside and the city.

Since its founding nearly 1,100 years ago by a northern China-originated mandarin official and his brother, who were escaping an impending regime collapse in a regional kingdom, Heyang, as an ancestral village of the Zhu clan, has sustained 42 generations of descendants, many of whom are now scattered all over the world. The village cultivated a strong educational tradition and boasts an impressive history of producing mandarin officials through the imperial exam system during the Song and Yuan dynasties. Heyang-originated mandarin officials, in turn, contributed to building Heyang into a materially and culturally rich rural community. Starting in the mid-Qing dynasty, a whole generation of Zhu lineage members took advantage of China's forced encounter with global capitalism and Zhejiang's coastal location by plunging themselves into industrial and commercial activities, such as papermaking and grain

trade. Instead of turning themselves into urban-based industrial capitalists, however, affluent Heyang businessmen invested their wealth in land acquisition as well as Heyang's construction, community sustenance, and cultural enrichment. From stately and exquisitely decorated courtyard-style residential houses and ancestral halls to a unique style of paper-cutting art, Heyang embodies a rich agrarian heritage. Furthermore, partly owing to the size of the clan's collectively owned land, the village was able to survive the devastating attacks of the Taiping Rebellion Army at its most destructive phase (1861–62) to sustain its reputation as an affluent rural community well into the 21st century.
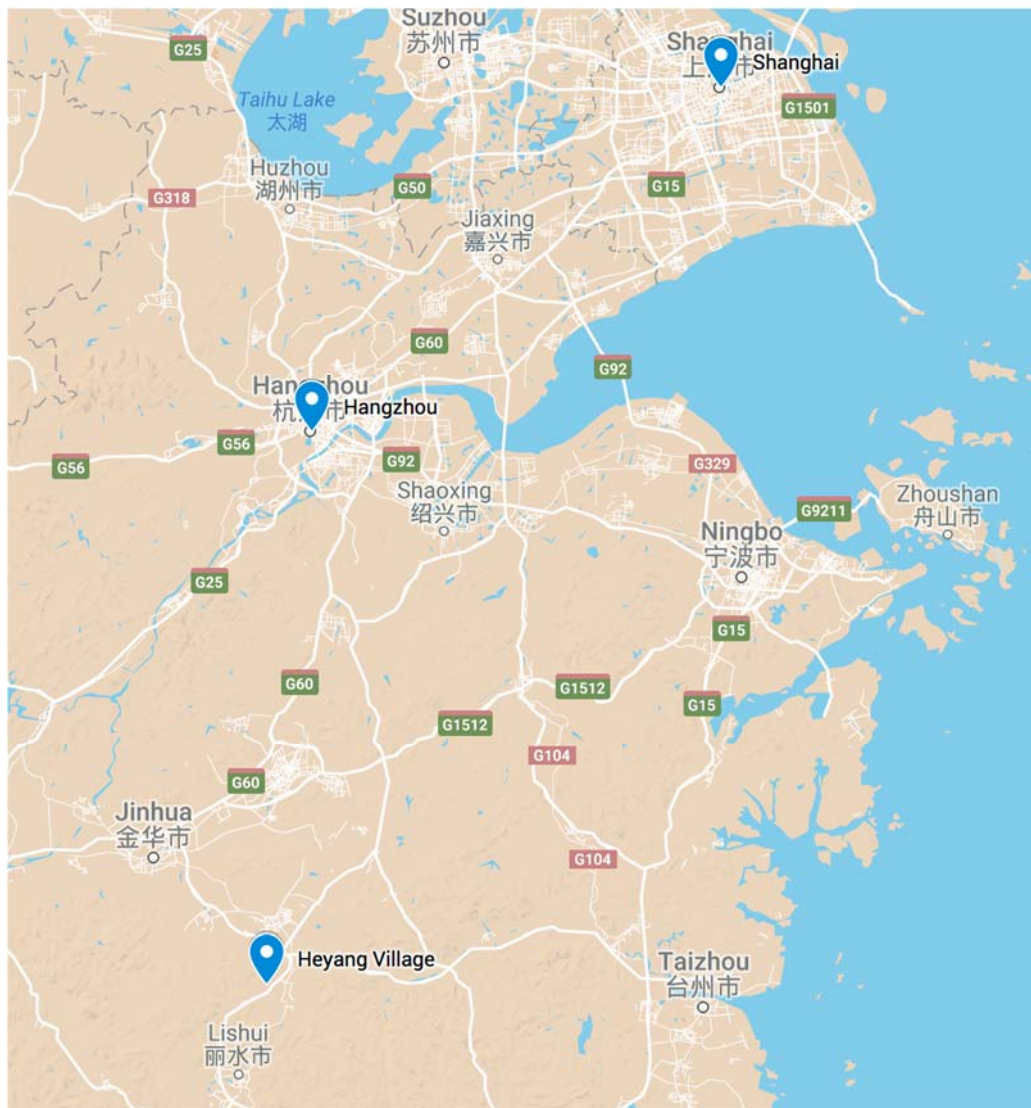

Figure 1. Heyang Village in relation to Shanghai and Hangzhou. Source: Google Maps (2017).

During land reform in the early Mao era of the 1950s, Heyang as the "village of landlords" went through a drastic transformation: Externally, its landholdings were divested and redistributed to peasants in nearby villages; internally, there was land redistribution, and some of the village's 15 ancestral halls were allocated to poor peasants as residential quarters; a number of them were used as public buildings—commune offices, schools, medical clinics, grinding mills, and even an agricultural machinery factory. While some of Heyang's cultural relics were destroyed as symbols of feudalism during the Cultural Revolution, others were preserved under ad hoc arrangements. Most significantly, new modern communication and culture infrastructures such as a "Great Meeting Hall," a middle school, a postal office with regular delivery of national and local newspapers such as the *People's Daily* and *Zhejiang Daily*, wired radio, the commune film-projection team, and various reservoirs and bridges near the village were built under the auspice of a collective agricultural economy and the commune system during Mao-era rural modernization.

The reform-era accelerated Heyang's transformation as a globalized Chinese village. On the one hand, the forces of globalization accelerated the integration of Heyang. The penetration of television, telecommunication, and, later, Internet services are some of the most visible and consequential signs of these changes. Most significantly, Heyang, with its proximity to Yiwu City, China's capital of small commodities, has been directly incorporated into China's global production chain and export-driven economy. Some of the hallways and living rooms of Heyang's houses were literally turned into the most remote extensions of China's assembly lines and the makeshift workshops of China's global factory: The old, the young, and housewives—in short, the most unemployable labor forces in the factory system—are doing the lowest skilled and most labor-intensive assembling jobs on a piecemeal basis, producing the small commodities to be exported through Yiwu in China to places such as Industry, California, in the United States (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. A village woman's one-person assembly line. Source: Photo by author.

On the other hand, the reform era also unleashed Heyang's population and labor force for outward movement regionally, nationally, and globally, mostly through education, businesses, and industrial and service job employment. As of October 2013, of Heyang's 2,363 rural labor force (out of a total population of appoximatley 3,600—by then, Heyang had amalgamated its neighboring Yashanxia village to form a single administrative village bearing its name), 1,348 were engaged in economic activities outside the village, with the majority travelling to places such as Guangdong, Guangxi, and Hainan, engaging in highly risky shrimp farming businesses. Rather than being migrant workers, these are migrant small-farming business operators. Like Chinese society as a whole, the hypermobility reform period saw a drastic process of social stratification and class polarization in Heyang: Families with educated sons and daughters working in government offices outside villages, and especially those who had gotten rich through outside businesses, built more than 300 houses either inside or nearby the old

village proper, while poor families continued to live in traditional houses, some of them in dilapidated conditions (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Heyang with old and new houses. Source: Photo by Peng Qian. Used with permission.

In the early 2000s, just when Hubei's Li Changping cried out for the state to pay attention to the three-fold agrarian problem, Heyang, with its unique Ming–Qing and early Republican-era rural architecture, officially reentered the state's purview by becoming a Zhejiang "provincial level historical-cultural protection zone." Modern tourism had arrived in Heyang. This marked the ironic change in Heyang's identity from a modernized and modernizing postsocialist village back into a "traditional village," to be preserved as an embodiment of a dying agrarian civilization and developed as a cultural tourist site. In 2011, Heyang's rural architecture was officially recognized as a provincial-level heritage protection site; the Jinyun county government, accordingly, took the occasion to set up the Jinyun County Heyang Ancient-Dwellings Protection and Development Management Committee (hereafter, the Heyang MC) to administer Heyang's preservation and development. In December 2012, Heyang earned a spot in the first list of 646 nationally significant "traditional villages." In the same month, the Heyang Village Council signed an agreement with the Heyang MC whereby the village collective contracted to the Heyang MC and its affiliated tourist development corporation—a local state-owned enterprise—the village's protection and tourist development rights and responsibilities. In May 2013, Heyang reached the pinnacle of China's

heritage protection ladder by becoming a Chinese State Council sanctioned national cultural heritage protection site. In short, the former landlord village, after having been transformed into a "socialist village" during the Mao era, and left to scramble for itself in the market economy during much of the reform era, has been reclaimed by the Chinese state as a "national treasure" and a quintessential symbol of Chinese rural civilization. Furthermore, as captured by the words *protection* and *development* in the name of the Heyang MC, Heyang is not just to be preserved as a mere historical relic but developed into a tourist site as part of a "green, rich and beautiful" Jinyun, as the local official slogan, or the Jinyun version of Xi Jinping's "China Dream" has it. Thus marked the postreform Chinese state's full reengagement with the village and its ambitious plan to bridge tradition and modernity, and close the gap between the country and the city. Will the Chinese state succeed in this endeavor? What are the implications of the Chinese state's reengagement with rural China for its developmental path and its engagement with a crisis-laden global capitalist order? Mao had restricted the mobility of the rural population through the household registration system. Deng had unleashed rural China's labor force for neoliberal global capitalist production as semiproletariats. What will be the political, economic, and cultural role of rural China in a post-2008 global order? For a country that boasts a rich agrarian heritage and a state that is steeled in a Communist land revolution and still claims the "worker–peasant alliance" as its constitutional power base, can the Chinese countryside be reconstructed as the site of the good life, and even reemerge as a source of ecological and cultural inspiration for imagining a postcapitalist alternative? Or, on the contrary, is it as Xiafei Hong (2017), echoing Hobsbawm's "death of peasantry" thesis, has posited, that China's peasant class is preordained to disappear as a result of capitalistic land enclosure in the 21st century? What insights, or perhaps even transformative experiences, can I facilitate to engender in exploring the questions provoked by Zhu Xiaohui's Internet-assisted suicide news, in my mind, by taking a group of his global peers from Canada to relate their research to his village?

Grounding Communication Research in Heyang: A Project Overview

With "global to village" as our paradigmatic mantra, and inspired by Burawoy's (2000) "global ethnography" methodology that foregrounds forces, connections, and imaginations as core concepts, this project brings an urban–rural relationship perspective to enrich the "transcultural political economy" framework in analyzing communication and globalization. First proposed in the above-mentioned *Global Communications* volume (Chakravartty & Zhao, 2008) and subsequently developed in more detail with specific reference to China (Zhao, 2011), this framework forges a theoretical and methodological synthesis from critical political economy and postcolonial studies of political and cultural transformation. Espousing an expansive and integrative notion of communication and culture, it not only encompasses old and new media and the related issues of political participation, meaning making, and identity formation but also engages with local knowledge systems, everyday practices, and forms of material culture that are deeply integrated into the process of economic production, social development, and community formation. In this way, this framework underscores the inseparability between the economic and cultural, or the material and symbolic (Chakravartty & Zhao, 2008, p. 10). Furthermore, it operates with a "conception of globalization as not only multifaceted and extremely uneven, but equally importantly, lived and experienced through new modes of both citizenship and exclusion" (Chakravartty & Zhao, 2008, p. 4).

Moving beyond the empirical focuses of *Global Communications*, which analyzes "the global" primarily in relation to race, gender, and national differences, this project expands and complements it with an overriding urban–rural relationship analytical vector and supplements political economic and documentary or textual analyses with field-based research in Heyang. In doing so, we hope to not only follow Pendakur's (1993) proposal in combining political economy and ethnographic research in the village but also turn McLuhan's global village concept inside out. On the one hand, Heyang serves as the "last mile" of each young scholar's intellectual journey—regardless of their conceptual tools and specific research topics, those who already had their own topics or even completed projects were asked to find ways to "ground" their work in Heyang—to relate, extend, or even reconceptualize their work from an urban–rural relationship perspective. On the other hand, the complexities of Heyang and its residents' multifaceted lived realities also serve as a vantage point from which global systems and systemic issues are reassessed and reexamined.

In addition to a broad literature introduction to Heyang, a two-week immersion in village life (between June 26 and July 13, 2015), a series of background briefings by various local administrative and cultural authorities, and two extended interview sessions with village officials, focus-group interviewing was chosen as the project's main data-gathering method for its capacity to uncover issues and processes that the local residents are highly concerned about in a concentrated period of time. The focus-group discussions involved 94 registered participants (58 male and 36 female), selected through a combination of purposive sampling and snowball methods. The discussions were conducted for the project's following four broad topical teams: ICTs and society; media and the politics of representation; mediated urban–rural relations: farmers, workers, and intellectuals; and culture, heritage, and everyday life. All registered participants were randomly organized into groups of four or five, and we switched these groups from one project research team to another until all four teams had a chance to interview these groups. Also, villagers who were not selected but were interested in our research were free to join one of the four concurrent focus-group discussions, held between July 4 and July 7 at the village's Zhu Great Ancestral Hall (see Figure 4). A separate group discussion session with 15 Heyang-originated county and township officials and educators, who no longer have resident status but frequently visit Heyang for family reasons, was conducted to gain additional insights on village affairs. In total, project members—including four scholars who are not contributors to this Special Section—conducted 32 (eight for each of the four research teams) focus-group interviews, each between two and three hours in length. Beyond these collectively scheduled focus-group sessions, individual researchers also engaged in participation observation of village life and used the snowball method to conduct in-depth individual interviews with selected villagers for supplementary findings. Three of the authors have made subsequent visits in 2016 and 2017 to Heyang to deepen their research.

Figure 4. A focus group discussion in Heyang. Source: Photo by project members.

As this project was conceived to be a collective whole with interrelated yet individually driven research projects, collective discussions, sharing of data, cross-fertilization of ideas, and the sharpening of research focus through discussions before, during, and after the fieldwork has played an important role in the research and writing of the articles. In the same way that I, as the initiator and primary organizer of the project, have been explicit about my own positionality, especially my pedagogical objective of using the project to sensitize everybody to the perspective of urban–rural relations, I encouraged participants to be self-reflective and bring their own personal biography to bear on the research project.

Making Sense of Heyang in the Global Context: Introducing the Articles

The seven conceptually driven, methodologically multifaceted articles in this Special Section, all written by graduate student researchers, cover various topics that engage with the whole spectrum of communication and cultural issues: from communication technologies to the politics of media representation; from cultural heritage to everyday life; and from villagers as local communicators and stakeholders in Heyang's evolving heritage culture-preservation and development regime, to the ways they imagine and relate themselves, as Chinese national citizens and social subjects, in relation to national media representations and other places and peoples.

Extending my previous discussion of the role of the rural in China's developmental path and the multifaceted crises such a path has engendered, Linda Qian's article conceptualizes rural nostalgia as a "structure of feeling" in postreform China and analyzes its elevation as a developmental trope to address the economic and cultural contradictions of capitalistic reintegration in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis. Using a combination of policy analysis, multimodal discourse analysis, and field research methods, the article examines how this discourse was articulated by Xi Jinping, performed by state media outlets such as CCTV, appropriated by Jinyun county officials, and finally deployed at the village level in Heyang in a highly conflicted and contested way. Methodologically, the article epitomizes the project's aspirations at integrating political economy with cultural analysis and field-based research.

Focusing on ICTs and their role in village life and how rural voices are faring in Heyang in the context of China's digital revolution, Byron Hauck studies the village communication ecology and examines how villagers relate to communication technologies, from wired radio to digital cable, and what has become of Mao's mass line as a mode of political communication. That Hauck, who started in Vancouver with an interest in mobile phone usage in rural China, ended up being fascinated with the legacies of wired radio and the theories and practices of Mao's mass line, is testimony to the importance of social organization over technology and the salience of local knowledge, community coherence, and popular desire for participation in village politics. His conclusion, "in the technological closeness of the global village, China's peasants are agitated by social distance to political processes," is a sober assessment of the current state of the state–peasant relationship in China.

Xiaoxing Zhang's article builds on and deepens the analyses by Qian and Hauck by taking the issue to the fundamental plane of what constitutes a "good life" and what constitutes a cosmopolitan view. Taking a ritual view of communication as meaning making, sharing, and community sustenance, Zhang critiques the urban middle-class hegemonic construction of the rural idyll to unveil the class dimensions of Heyang's good life mythology within the history of China's uneven capitalistic integration. He listens attentively to the suppressed and marginalized voices of Heyang residents and documents the emergence, coexistence, and interplays of four distinctive conceptions of the good life in Heyang. By situating these juxtaposed conceptions within the transforming social relations of rural China, Zhang reveals the hidden power struggles in the past and present countryside, underscoring the complexities of contemporary Chinese rural issues, especially the manifestations of intravillage inequality and the ways in which the post-Mao decollectivized path of development has reinforced the possessive individualistic vision of Heyang residents as small-property owners. However, Zhang was also able to uncover a communitarian vision of the good life based on the notion of "the common good is the true good"; furthermore, he posits it as a true cosmopolitan vision, a "form of social imagination with global scope that comes from localities and networks of localities under the same suppressed situation."

Moving from social relations to the relationship between humans and nature, Sibo Chen, who specializes in discourse analysis and environmental communication, starts with a critique of the dominant Western ecocultural conceptions of the human–nature dichotomy, the concomitant notion of nature as a scenic and resourceful spectacle that is alienated from humanity, and a discussion of how such a notion fails to account for the diversified conceptions of nature held by traditional knowledge systems across the world. He then grounds his critique of the spectacular nature frame in Heyang by uncovering what he calls

Heyang residents' "intuitive frame" of human–nature unity and their consistent pattern of making no distinction between humanized and nonhumanized environments. In discovering the practical and affective dimensions of Heyang residents' relationship with their surroundings and drawing on secondary literature unveiling the indigenous ecological consciousness of maintaining a reciprocal, harmonious, and nonexploitive relationship with nature as embodied in Heyang's ancient village design and cultural texts and mores, Chen's study uncovers the "resources of hope" in Heyang and reminds us why it has "cultural" value and thus is worthy of protection as a heritage village to begin with. By pointing out that the desire for a reciprocal human–nature relation expressed by Heyang residents is by no means unique, and making a linkage with such similar notions held by Canada's indigenous populations, one is also reminded of Glen Coulthard's notion of "grounded normativity," discussed earlier in this Introduction.

With her article on *guangchangwu,* or "public square dancing," Maggie Chao, a second-generation Chinese Canadian who grew up in Vancouver, takes us from Zhang's and Chen's respective engagements with Heyang residents' conceptions of a good life and ecology to the realm of leisure and more mundane level of everyday living in the digitized and globalized village. By critically engaging with contemporary theories of spatiality, power, place making, and gender relations to make sense of *guangchangwu*—a form of everyday cultural practice mostly performed by middle-aged women that has become highly popular and even contentious in postreform China across the urban–rural divide—Chao provides a vivid, rich, and extensively contextualized analysis of what she calls the "geographies of everyday life" in Heyang and the ways in which Heyang women, through their *guangchangwu* practices, engage in novel and potentially transgressive forms of place making, community building, and "scale jumping." Chao's analysis not only challenges the profound urban bias in contemporary conceptual visions of globalization and their effective exclusion of the nonurban but also sheds lights onto both gender politics and the politics of scale jumping in contemporary China.

Expanding the urban–rural problematic relationship beyond mainland China, and from the domain of cultural citizenship to political agency, Vanessa Kong, who originally hails from Hong Kong and had written a research article analyzing the *People's Daily*'s coverage of Hong Kong's Occupy Central movement in fall 2014, probed into Heyang residents' informational sources and interpretations of the Hong Kong protest, their understanding of Hong Kong's position within the Chinese nation, as well as her own agency and transformative role as an engaged researcher in making the Heyang residents think about and even relate to Hong Kong's protesters. In this way, Kong not only positioned our focus-group participants as both Heyang villagers and Chinese national citizens but also engages these villagers in a mutually transformative process of citizenship formation in the global village. Her approach to research as a self-reflective, empowering, and action-oriented communicative praxis is exactly what I had envisioned to develop in setting up the Heyang Institute for Rural Research and inaugurating it with this project.

Finally, Joseph Nicolai, a French Canadian from the Mediterranean Island of Corsica, complicates our "global to village" mantra by offering a radical transcultural analysis of the politics of rural cultural-heritage making across continents. Nicolai exercised his own "sociological imagination" by making a horizontal "chain of equivalence" among the heritage cultural regimes of his native French town and Heyang. In highlighting Corsica as the rural periphery and colonized "other" within the "West" and underscoring how it was precisely the structured poverty of the largely peasant Corsican population under

France's crypto-colonialism that made the place "pristine" and culturally valuable to the French nation, and then applying the same frame of analysis to Heyang, Nicolai destabilized any simplistic "West versus Rest" dichotomy and challenged the dominant nation-centric and depoliticized frame of reference in the making and communication of cultural heritage. Intersecting with this "horizontal" line of flight, Nicolai also makes a "global to village" critique of the neoliberal nature of a world heritage protection regime that radiates from UNESCO's World Heritage Center all the way to the cultural politics of China's reinsertion into the global heritage industry, and the twisted intersections of nationalistic and class politics surrounding the making of places such as Heyang into rural cultural heritage sites.

Moving Forward? Communicating the Struggles for the Future of Rural China

Zhu Xiaohui was no "typical" Heyang individual. Heyang is no "typical" Chinese village. Nor is China a "typical" country in the world history and within today's structure of global capitalism. Nevertheless, by foregrounding the perspective of urban–rural relations and "grounding" communication study in Heyang in a globalized and globalizing China, this Special Section hopes to take the recent trend of de-westernizing and reorienting communication studies to a new theoretical and methodological plane. In particular, I hope our combined transcultural political economy and field-based research will be of relevance for other countries and regions—even for countries and regions where the "death of the peasantry" appears not to be in dispute.

At this point, and as far as China is concerned, considering its huge rural population, complex rural heritage, and its growing global ambitions, any potential for the country to achieve its stated goal of narrowing the urban–rural gap and pursuing a more balanced domestic developmental path will not only have profound domestic political implications, but it will also have huge impacts on the rest of the world. The realm of Chinese communication and culture, and for that matter, Chinese scholarship, constitutes an important site of struggle and transformative politics.

In the more than two years since this project's fieldwork, the Heyang Institute for Rural Studies (HIRS) has launched a Heyang peasant oral-history project and sponsored three interdisciplinary and cross-sectorial Heyang Forums and two international summer schools, focusing on communication, culture, and urban–rural relations, with field research components and involving several hundred scholars, local officials, village council members, rural cultural experts, and agrarian activists. More significantly, informed by our research projects, HIRS has served as a communicative nodal point in empowering grassroots agrarian activists to participate in an increasingly intensified debate over the future of rural China.

Although multifaceted and sometimes opaque, the debate, in a nutshell, pits neoliberal reformers who push for the de facto privatization of China's agricultural land and urban capitalist takeover of Chinese agriculture against those who advocate for the rejuvenation of rural China through the revitalization of a collective or cooperative village economy. In November 2016, as a result of the Heyang Forum-enabled interaction of urban scholars and grassroots agrarian activists, 18 current and retired Jinyun rural officials issued an online open letter to their peers throughout the country, decrying the hollowing out of the collective rural economy, opposing the further privatization of collectively owned farming land, and calling

for the revitalization of a village-based collective economy. Because of the letter's explicit reference to the action of the 18 Xiaogang villagers in 1978, the online letter dropped a bombshell on certain quarters of China's cyberspace. Although both the official online discussion forums of Xinhua News Agency and *People's Daily* initially transmitted the letter, and Shanghai's *Liberation Daily* eventually sent a journalist to report on Heyang and another Jinyun village in response to the letter, the letter was soon censored by China's cyberpolice.

In a development that resonates with the tenor of the Jinyun letter, many left-leaning intellectuals and scholars since December 2016 have been fascinated by the story of Tangyue village in Guizhou province. Depicted in vivid detail by writer Wang Hongjia (Wang, 2016) in his reportage, *The Tangyue Path*, Tangyue, a flood-inflicted village in China's poor Guizhou province, redeveloped a collective village economy under the leadership of the village's CCP secretary, a returned migrant businessman who had tried to get rich through the market by himself and regained an appreciation of the need for collective peasant self-organization to fend off the risks of the market economy. Furthermore, echoing the Heyang woman's notion that the "common good is the true good" as discussed in Xiaoxing Zhang's article, the village went through a political, social, and cultural rejuvenation by developing democratic procedures that subordinate village officials to popular control and new cultural norms that restrict conspicuous consumption and possessive individualism.

Furthermore, and most relevant to the fate of rural youth such as Zhu Xiaohui and China's massive migrant worker population, who are still caught between the urban and rural, Tangyue village has managed to attract migrant workers and small business operators back to the village to engage in various cooperative economic activities in the making of a desirable rural life. Characterizing the economists' notion of more than 200 million "surplus laborers" as a "false problem," Wang used Tangyue as an example to make a case for village CCP committees to "lead the masses of peasants to construct their own home towns and build their own lives" (Wang, 2016, p. 104).

The promotional efforts of Wang's book has been high-profile, intensive, and even unprecedented for a book of this kind. These have included a book launch held at the Great Hall of the People in December 2016, CCP Politburo Standing Committee Member Yu Zhengsheng's praises of Tangyue Village, and many media reports of organized study sessions of the book by various local governments. Most notably, the Organizational Department of Anhui Province, home province of Xiaogang Village, which remained poor despite being glorified in reform-era ideology for its leading role in agricultural decollectivization, ordered 20,000 copies of *The Tangyue Path* for local officials to study and emulate (H. Li, Liu, Huang, & Chen, 2017). One wonders, can this be the beginning of the reversal of the Great Reversal that the Jinyun letter writers had called for? If so, what are the implications for the future of rural China and prospects for the formation of China's new urban working class, which is inextricably linked to the destiny of China's 280 million migrant workers? Or, is *The Tangyue Path* an inspirational reportage aimed at boosting the CCP's rural poverty reduction achievements, and perhaps even appeasing those who have not given up the struggle for socialism in China in a year leading up to the 19th National Congress of the CCP in October 2017?

To be sure, Xi Jinping's much anticipated report at the opening session of the CCP's 19th National Congress on October 18, 2017 reaffirms the Party's commitment to rejuvenate rural China and strengthen collective village economy (Xinhua Net, 2017). But how are such objectives to be realized on the ground? What role will the "Tangyue Path" and other related local experiments play in the coming years? More importantly, what role will rural China play in the political economy and cultural politics of China's ongoing transformation as the CCP's 19th National Congress heralds a "new era" in the "great struggles" for building "socialism with Chinese characteristics" (Xinhua Net, 2017)? And, considering that the "dominant paradigm" on communication and rural development was inextricably linked to the global contestations of 20th century Cold War, what kind of communication and cultural scholarship will emerge in the "great struggles" of the 21st century?

These questions, along with the broader ones I posited at the beginning of this Introduction, of course, are beyond the scope of this Special Section.

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