To the Soil
The Labour of Rural Transformation in China

In December 2018, the Chinese authorities commemorated the 40th anniversary of China's reform and opening up, an event generally hailed as the beginning of the country's rise as a global economic and political power. These four decades of unprecedented economic growth and transformation have been rooted in a fundamental socioeconomic restructuring. Contemporary China has changed from a largely agrarian society predominantly inhabited by peasants, to a rapidly urbanising one, characterised by a floating populace moving back and forth between rural and urban spaces, which are in a continuous state of flux. Going hand in hand with China's ascent into modernity is the subordination of rural areas and people. While rural China has historically been a site of extraction and exploitation, in the post-reform period this has intensified, and rurality itself has become a problem, best typified through the ubiquitous propaganda about the need to revitalise the countryside, and ongoing attempts to reconstruct rural areas in a new image.

This issue of Made in China focuses on the labour that these attempts to restructure and reformulate rural China have entailed, and the ways in which they have transformed rural lives and communities. In the special section, Tamara Jacka shows how the development trajectory of modern China has been underpinned and enabled by the exploitation of the ‘inside work’ of rural women. Jane Hayward examines how rural land reforms in China are being driven by the imperative of capital accumulation. Thomas Sætre Jakobsen bemoans the fact that China labour studies’ bias towards urban contexts is neglecting the reality of hundreds of millions of workers who live between the farmlands in the countryside and the workplaces of the city.

Sarah Rogers reflects on poverty resettlement projects to try to make sense of the intent and impact of such large-scale interventions on both the lives of individuals and the transformation of the Chinese countryside as a whole. Marina Svensson describes her experience at the Third Ningbo International Photography Week, which this year focussed on documenting rural transformations and processes of urbanisation. John Aloysius Zinda highlights how scholars and journalists alike tend to place environment and labour in separate boxes and seldom consider the labour of environmental protection or the people who perform it. Daniele Dainelli presents ‘Domestic Archeology’, a photographic project on the Chinese countryside that took him seven years to accomplish. Finally, Nicholas Loubere interviews Brian DeMare about Land Wars, his latest book on land reform in Maoist China.

The issue includes op-eds on the Jasic crackdown by Au Loong Yu; the perplexities regarding investing in China among German policymakers by Lucrezia Poggetti; and the latest controversies surrounding the self-censoring behaviour of some international academic publishers by Nicholas Loubere and Ivan Franceschini. In the China Columns section, Ulrike Reisach examines the variegated landscape of Chinese investment in Europe, while Wolfgang Mueller presents the results of a survey he conducted in Chinese-invested companies in Germany. The Window on Asia section offers two essays by Johan Lindquist and Elisa Oreglia, which respectively look into the ‘like economy’ of click farms in Indonesia and the spread of WeChat among Internet users in Myanmar. In the cultural section, Yvan Schulz reviews Wang Jiuliang’s documentary Plastic China.

We wrap up the issue with a conversation with Gianluigi Negro about The Internet in China, his latest book on the development of the digital sphere in the Chinese context.

The Editors