More Than "Peasants Without Land": Individualisation and Identity Formation of Landless Peasants in the Process of China's State-Led Rural Urbanisation

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Abstract

In the course of state-led rural urbanisation over the past few decades, millions of Chinese peasants have been expropriated and relocated. After establishing a definition of these "landless peasants" as a heterogeneous social group connected mainly by the fact that its members had to give up their land-use rights, this article sets out to examine subsequent processes of identity formation – a topic that has been largely neglected in existing research. Drawing on Beck's individualisation thesis, I suggest that structural and institutional changes in the process of rural modernisation have initiated a further thrust of individualisation in people's lives which manifests not only in the objective domain of life situations but also in the subjective domain of identity. This hypothesis is substantiated through an ethnographic case study based on seven months of fieldwork (2016–2018) in Huaming Model Town in the Dongli District of Tianjin. As a first step towards conceptualising what landless peasants are becoming, I will propose to start focusing on recombinant identities and class differentiations evolving among the people.

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Introduction

In recent decades, rural–urban transformation has fundamentally changed China's countryside as well as the lives of its rural population. Due to state-led urbanisation and the strategy of accumulation through land requisition (Ho, 2001; Hsing, 2010; Ong, 2014; Zhan, 2019), "landless peasants" (失地农民, *shidi nongmin*) have emerged as a fairly new, often marginalised and ever-growing social group in reform-era China (Sargeson, 2012). According to official estimates, their number is expected to rise to 110 million until 2030 (China Association of Mayors, 2012: 123).

Generally, the term "landless peasants" refers to all rural residents whose land has been expropriated in the course of China's rural modernisation, that is, who had to give up their contracted land-use rights. However, a distinction can be drawn between those who did not have to leave their rural homesteads (as a result often becoming "urban villagers" whose village is gradually encircled by urban construction) and those who were relocated to "resettlement neighbourhoods" after their rural homesteads had been demolished, mostly to be re-registered as urban residents (see also Zhao and Zou, 2017: 79). The landless peasants studied and discussed in this article belong to the second category.

The issue of landless peasants has become especially pressing since the national programme of "building a new socialist countryside" (hereafter BNSC; 社会主义新农村建设, *shehui zhuyi xin nongcun jianshe*) was introduced in 2005 (State Council of the PRC, 2005). BNSC was devised in response to the "three rural problems" (三农问题, *sannong wenti*) of farmland/agriculture, countryside/villages, and peasants, a crisis which resulted from the heavy neglect of China's rural areas in the first decades of the economic reforms. On the one hand, these problems refer to a rapid decrease of farmland due to increasing urbanisation, industrialisation, and environmental issues, causing concerns over food security. On the other hand, they refer to "dirty, chaotic, and poor" (脏乱差, *zang luan cha*) villages hollowed-out by rural surplus labour leaving for the cities as well as a left-behind, supposedly backward rural population (Bray, 2013; Hsing, 2010; Rosenberg, 2013). According to Ahlers and Schubert (2009: 57), BNSC can be understood as an "intentionally vague but holistic policy framework initiated by the central government to be adapted to local conditions." A preferred means to the overall aim of closing the urban-rural development gap is called the "three concentrations" (三个集中, *san ge jizhong*): amalgamating scattered village lands by expropriating peasants and relocating them to new-style urban communities, consolidating farmland for scaled-up and more efficient agriculture, and concentrating industry in industrial parks (Bray, 2013; Ong, 2014).

In the official Chinese discourse on rural development (Day, 2013; Rosenberg, 2013; Sargeson, 2013; Schneider, 2015), such measures of urban-rural integration are framed not only as necessary for China becoming a modern and competitive nation but also as

benefitting the rural population. However, as Hayward (2018: 51; see also Zhan, 2017) points out, "while many of these changes appear to be geared towards the modernisation of the countryside and the improvement of peasant livelihoods, the overriding logic governing these processes, all too often, is that of capital accumulation."

For the peasants subject to transformation, losing their land potentially entails far-reaching consequences: Not only have rural lives and livelihoods for centuries been inextricably tied to the land (Fei, 1992). Also, under the household registration (户口, *hukou*) system of the People's Republic of China (henceforth PRC), farmland has provided a form of basic social insurance for people with an agricultural/rural *hukou* and collective land-use rights in much the same way social welfare has provided security for citizens born with a non-agricultural (colloquially "urban") *hukou*. Even as more and more "migrant workers" (lit. "peasant workers"; 农民工, *nongmin gong*) have left their villages for the cities, the importance of the land has not decreased. Seeing that rural migrants remain insufficiently integrated into urban social welfare systems, the countryside continues to be the site of social reproduction for them, and returning to subsistence farming a fallback option in times of need (Chan, 2019; Chuang, 2015; Fan and Wang, 2008; Kaufmann, 2018; Ye et al., 2013). While the "safe haven" of rural life might be an illusion (Pun and Lu, 2010), rural *hukou* and the related land-use rights have nevertheless gained new value in the light of growing socioeconomic insecurities (Chen and Fan, 2016; Thünken, 2018; Zhan, 2017).

In contrast to migrant workers, landless peasants do not have the option to retain their land-use rights and return to an allegedly secure life in the countryside. This can become problematic if they are inadequately compensated for their losses and insufficiently included into the urban employment market and urban social welfare systems. Thus, dissatisfied landless peasants bear potential for social unrest and instability (Hui et al., 2013; Ong, 2014; Sargeson, 2013).

Although landless peasants are a widely discussed subject both within China and beyond, we still have a rather superficial understanding of this emerging social group. This is due to the fact that contemporary discourse on China's state-led urbanisation, while framing landless peasants in different ways (see below), rarely reflects upon the concept itself. The starting point for this study was therefore to build upon Schneider's (2015) question "What, then, is a Chinese peasant?," and ask: What, then, is a landless peasant? However, the aim of this article is not merely to deconstruct common conceptions of landless peasants. Moreover, I endeavour to reconstruct landless peasants' process of identity formation connected with the major institutional changes initiated by state-led rural urbanisation. Following the analytical framework of Beck (1992), I suggest that expropriation and relocation have initiated a further thrust of individualisation (characterised by disembedding, loss of traditional security, and re-embedding) in peasants' lives which not only becomes apparent in the objective domain of life situations but also in the subjective domain of identity. The ensuing transformation in identity among former peasants, I argue, cannot adequately be conceptualised by adding the attribute "landless" to the noun "peasant," especially if the latter term is used in an undifferentiated way.

I will elaborate and support this argument in several steps. The first section of the article is concerned with conceptualising what actually constitutes a "landless peasant," giving due consideration to the use of the underlying term "peasant." Subsequently, I will describe China's rural–urban transformation through the analytical lens provided by modernisation and individualisation theory and introduce my fieldwork site, Huaming Model Town (华明示范镇, *Huaming Shifan Zhen*), as an ideal example for studying the effects of China's "compressed modernisation" on the population of landless peasants. In the main part of this article, an ethnographic case study centring around twenty-nine-year-old "Longying" reconstructs processes of individualisation and identity formation set in motion by state-led urbanisation. The insights gained from this study are discussed in the conclusion. Individualisation and identity formation of landless peasants are important yet understudied topics in the large and always evolving research area of China's rural–urban transformation. This is where this article wants to make a contribution.

What, Then, Is a Landless Peasant?

The most commonly used Chinese term for people affected by expropriation and relocation is "*shidi nongmin*," literally "peasants who lost their land" or "landless peasants." Despite disagreements among scholars as to the adequate English terminology, I consciously employ this term instead of similar expressions such as "landless villagers." Not only is "landless peasants" the direct translation of the Chinese designation, but more importantly, people of rural origin still largely think of themselves and similar others as "peasants" in the broadest sense (see below; see also Sargeson, 2016: 14).

The Chinese "peasant" is a historically grown concept which has never been independent from certain valuations conducive to the state's development agenda (see Cohen, 1993; Day, 2013, 2019; Hayford, 1998; Sargeson, 2016; Schneider, 2015). In fact, the term "peasant," designating a pre-modern rural subject like those found in feudal Europe (essentially an inferior class of people), only entered the Chinese discourse as a loanword from Japanese in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in line with a specific ideological and political agenda. According to Cohen (1993), the "peasant" was a "cultural and political invention in modern China," co-occurring with the elite aim to create a "new" society, which, in order to be legitimate, first required the definition of an "old" society that could be thoroughly rejected. With few exceptions, both communist and non-communist intellectual elites participated in the effort of constructing the image of a culturally and economically backward China populated by "peasants" in dire need to be transformed by a modern leadership. Thus, in the spirit of societal revolution, a new cultural category was created which had little to do with the rural population's actual occupations. Since the establishment of the PRC, this ideology has been reinforced and instrumentalised time and again by the Chinese Communist Party (hereafter CCP) for their respective purposes (Cohen, 1993; Hayford, 1998).

Today's perceptions of the Chinese peasantry continue to be heavily shaped by the discursive power of the CCP. As Schneider (2015: 333) illustrates, besides its

occupational meaning of "farmer" and its straightforward use as an administrative category denoting a rural *hukou*, the "peasant" in contemporary China is a political, developmental, social, cultural, and identity category, discursively characterised by unfitness for politics, low social rank or quality, and backwardness. As in the past, this conception legitimises the party-state's efforts of transforming the peasantry and its moral claim to power.

Hence, Chinese "peasants" in the broadest sense are not defined by occupation or actual place of residence, but through a discursively constructed notion of "otherness." Most people who refer to themselves or others as "peasants" have unconsciously internalised these ideologically charged valuations, mistaking "'peasant' for a primary category of nature rather than a contingent intellectual tool" (Hayford, 1998: 3). In contrast, I employ the term "as a choice conscious of its trade-offs and limitations" (Hayford, 1998: 3), in no way intending to convey any value judgements. Rather, I argue that as long as being "peasants" is the lived reality for the about-to-be-transformed rural population, it makes sense to depart from this exact terminology, not least in order to analyse how people position themselves towards everything this term implies in their ongoing identity work.

After this important digression on the underlying concept of the "peasant," let me proceed to deconstruct common conceptions of the "landless peasant." This term, although neutral on its own, normally implies a predicament. Thus, publications under the aegis of the Chinese government – which intend to highlight the positive effects of urbanisation for the people – never speak of "landless peasants" and more likely refer to the same people as (relocated) "villagers" (村民, *cunmin*), "new urban residents" (新市民, *xin shimin*), "transformed agricultural population" (农业转移人口, *nongye zhuanyi renkou*), or simply "peasants" (see, e.g., Survey Organization of the Development and Reform Commission of the City of Tianjin, 2011; Zheng and Zhu, 2011; State Council of the PRC, 2014). In contrast to the official construction of "transformed" peasants as the benefactors of urbanisation, Chinese academics can be cautiously critical as long as they do not fundamentally question the necessity and inevitability of land expropriations for the development of China's rural areas. Usually, their findings are topped off with suggestions for policy improvement which justify their criticism (see, e.g., Chen, 2013; Liu, 2018; Zhang, 2010). Finally, in Chinese media debates, landless peasants are framed either as villains (greedy and scheming to gain profits), victims (exploited and deprived of their land-use rights by governments and developers), or aspiring proprietors engaged in rightful resistance (see Sargeson, 2012 for an in-depth analysis).

In Western academia – generally critical of China's path towards rural modernisation – there is a strong focus on the coercive nature of state-led urbanisation and the predicament of landless peasants (see, e.g., Hsing, 2010; Huang, 2017; Ong, 2014). However, some scholars have also noted peasants' agency despite their structurally weaker position (see, e.g., Lora-Wainwright, 2014; Wang and Christiansen, 2019), that the impact of urbanisation on the people is dependent on individual as well as regional factors (see, e.g., Chen, 2020; Rosenberg, 2013), and that individuals' evaluations of the experienced changes can considerably differ (see, e.g., Bray, 2013; Heger, 2018). Western media

tends to be very critical as well, mostly depicting landless peasants as the victims of China's urbanisation frenzy (see, e.g., Jin, 2017; Johnson, 2013a).

As we can see, depending on the source and intentions of a publication, there are observable differences in how landless peasants are framed. Despite diverging framings, however, mainstream discourse overall implicitly conveys the image that landless peasants were predominantly smallholder farmers prior to being urbanised (for some – by no means exhaustive – examples, see Chen, 2013; Landesa Rural Development Institute, 2012; Liu, 2018; Ong, 2014; Zhang, 2010; Zhao and Zou, 2017). On the one hand, this notion might arise because the population in question is rarely properly defined (sometimes even simply referred to as "farmers"), which fosters a skewed understanding. On the other hand, what strongly contributes to the image of landless peasants as "farmers" is the literature's general focus on the impact of land requisition on the people. Interestingly, this framing works both ways: The Chinese government, by portraying rural people as poor smallholder farmers relying on their land, can support its argument that urbanisation will release them from their hardships (see also Sargeson, 2013: 1077). In contrast, authors critical of the government's policies employ this notion to underline people's victimisation.

Thus, with few exceptions (see, e.g., Chen, 2020; Sargeson, 2013; Heger, 2018), contemporary discourse unreflectingly bases depictions of "landless peasants" on the understanding of "peasant" as "farmer." While the broader connotations of the underlying political-ideological category of the "peasant" (see above) are still implied, this conception completely ignores the heterogeneity of the expropriated population, which is as diverse as the Chinese peasantry in general. In contemporary China, due to the differentiation of the rural population through urbanisation and capitalist agrarian transition (Zhang and Donaldson, 2010; Yan and Chen, 2015), only a small number of rural-born people still count as a "peasant class" of subsistence farmers in the narrow sense (Sargeson, 2016). Owing to these developments, scholars have already discarded the idea of peasants as a unified social class and started to examine what peasants are becoming, focusing on social stratification and class formation *within* the social group of the "peasantry" (Day, 2013, 2019).

Considering academia's consciousness of the heterogeneity of the peasantry in contemporary China, it is surprising that most scholars so far do not grant the same differentiation to the growing group of landless peasants. As a matter of fact, landless peasants are not a homogeneous group of former smallholder farmers but a heterogeneous group of people of rural origin with little more in common than having lost their land-use rights (and sometimes their rural homestead land) in a process of primitive accumulation. This simple, though comprehensive working definition will serve as my point of departure for reconstructing landless peasants' further identity formation – the largely unexplored key concern of this study.

In this article, identity or self-identity is understood in the sense of Giddens (1991: 53) as "not a distinctive trait, or even a collection of traits, possessed by the individual [, but as] the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography." At first glance, Chinese research on landless peasants' self-identity (e.g. Han, 2012;

Chen et al., 2010; Wang and Zhu, 2014) seems promising in this regard. However, a concept-sensitive reading reveals that the focus of these studies is not actually self-identity (自我认同, *ziwo rentong*), but landless peasants' identification with and adaptation to their new status under the *hukou* system (身份认同, *shenfen rentong*; literally "status/identity recognition"). This understanding of the concept and its operationalisation do not offer viable insights into landless peasants' identity formation which, as I argue, goes deeper than the identification with an external status change.

China's Rural–Urban Transformation Through the Lens of Modernisation Theory

The vast transformations we are currently witnessing in China, especially its rural areas, can best be described as state-sponsored "compressed modernisation" – a rush-to development by bureaucratic-authoritarian states to achieve in just a few decades what other nations haven taken centuries for (Beck and Grande, 2010; Han and Shim, 2010). Due to its late and rushed modernisation, China is currently undergoing the transition from premodernity to first modernity (from traditional to industrial-age institutions and forms of life) as well as from first to second modernity (a global risk society where the previous categories and securities become dissolved) all at the same time instead of one after the other (Beck, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Beck and Lau, 2005). Contemporary Chinese society, in which principles and institutions of pre-, first, and second modernity simultaneously co-exist (Alpermann, 2011; Kipnis, 2016), thus corresponds to the ambiguous "both/and" logic of second modernity that stands in contrast to the "either/or" logic of previous times (Beck and Lau, 2005).

In the course of modernisation, the individual is gradually set free from most patterns and institutions that used to structure life, a process Beck (1992: 128, emphasis in original) calls "individualisation":

> disembedding, *removal* from historically prescribed social forms and commitments in the sense of traditional contexts of dominance and support (the 'liberating dimension'); the *loss of traditional security* with respect to practical knowledge, faith and guiding norms (the 'disenchantment dimension'); and […] re-embedding, *a new type of social commitment* (the 'control' or 'reintegration dimension').

Furthermore, Beck argues to conceptually differentiate these three stages of individualisation according to two dimensions: "(*objective) life situations* and (*subjective) consciousness* (identity, personalisation)."

Importantly, individualisation should not be mistaken for individualism or individual choice – rather, it means "precarious freedom" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 1ff). When the old frames of reference are replaced by new demands and constraints, the standard biography becomes a do-it-yourself biography. Likewise, premade identity options given by the physical and social embedding of previous times cease to exist and people have to reflexively (re-)construct their identities in order to cope with the tensions

in their lives. In the sense of Sartre, the individual is condemned to be free, which can be both opportunity or threat (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1993, 2002; Giddens, 1991; Howard, 2007).

With his research on the Chinese path to individualisation, Yan (2009, 2010a) has shown that, decoupled from the premises associated with Western modernisation, the basic principles of Beck's thesis also apply to China. According to Yan, the individualisation of Chinese society first started under Mao, in the sense that the individual was disembedded from traditional institutions and re-embedded into new, socialist institutions. A second thrust of individualisation was initiated by the market-oriented reforms of 1978, in the course of which the individual has gradually been disembedded from the institutions of socialism and re-embedded into a competitive market economy, albeit under the name of "socialism with Chinese characteristics." These insights have spawned a number of case studies demonstrating the relevance of the individualisation thesis for an analysis of Chinese society (see, e.g., the volume edited by Hansen and Svarverud, 2010).

With the present study, I want to advance our understanding of the individualisation of peasants in the PRC. I suggest that in addition to the process of individualisation that has gradually been happening among China's rural population since 1978, a further thrust of individualisation has been initiated by state-sponsored rural urbanisation, meaning that land loss and relocation constitute a further step of untying the individual from encompassing categories that had still persisted throughout the reform era – for example rural *hukou* and the related land-use rights, the land as a means of basic subsistence and social security, and the village community. To be sure, as Beck (1992) points out, thrusts of individualisation constantly occur in the lives of individuals under the unstable conditions of second modernity. But in contrast to thrusts of individualisation that happen in the lives of different people for different reasons, I argue that state-led urbanisation has initiated something like a collective thrust of individualisation affecting everyone who can now be subsumed under the term "landless peasants," similar in impact to collectivisation under socialism or decollectivisation and the nationwide implementation of the household responsibility system in the early 1980s. Whether urbanisation presents itself as an opportunity or a threat, in each case it forces people to reflexively integrate the experienced transformations into the ongoing story of the self, which is subject to change in the process.

Compressed Modernisation in Huaming Model Town

Huaming Model Town, where I conducted fieldwork for this study, is located in the Dongli District of Tianjin. In 2005, it was approved as the first national demonstration site for the land consolidation method "exchanging homestead for apartment" (宅基地换房, *zhai jidi huan fang*), the city of Tianjin's approach to BNSC (Tianjin People's Government, 2009). The project was launched in 2006. In the process, peasants from twelve natural villages (自然村, *zirancun*), about 50,000 people, were expropriated and relocated to the newly built Huaming town, while the scattered village lands were

consolidated for more efficient agriculture, industrial parks, and Tianjin's urban expansion. As compensation for their collective farmland, the peasants received a lump sum of CNY 100,000 per capita. The rural homesteads were compensated with apartments in town, with a baseline of thirty square metres per capita. Also, in the process of "exchanging land for security" (土地换保障, *tudi huan baozhang*), people were converted to urban *hukou* status with access to Tianjin's basic urban social welfare, including pensions for the elderly, basic health insurance, and minimum subsistence allowance (see, e.g., Mahadevia, 2011; Meng et al., 2012; Ye and Zhang, 2010).

In 2008, Huaming Model Town was selected to be presented in the "urban best practices area" of the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai (Qin, 2008), where it was portrayed as a model for innovative and successful practices of urbanisation in the twenty-first century. This attracted attention worldwide. The narratives surrounding the model town carry to extremes the discursive constructions of landless peasants as either the victims of urbanisation (Western or overseas Chinese investigative journalism, see Duan, 2013; Johnson, 2013b) or the beneficiaries of urbanisation (government-sponsored publications, propaganda, and media, see, e.g., Gong, 2010; Ye and Zhang, 2010; Zheng and Zhu, 2011). Compared to both of these narratives, however, the reality and individuals' own evaluations thereof are much more complex (Heger, 2018).

Although Huaming is a model town – or maybe precisely because of its model status (see Han and Shim, 2010; Scott, 1998 for the unintended consequences of too rapid modernisation) – it has not been spared from the problems commonly associated with state-led urbanisation in China. These include rights violations, coercion, corruption, mismanagement of expropriated land, low building quality of the resettlement units, and high unemployment. Promised retraining programs to qualify peasants for the urban employment market have not been implemented, and there are no unemployment benefits. In fact, the region's compressed urbanisation in some cases might have caused more harm than good, considering that Tianjin's countryside had not been an impoverished region (贫困地区, *pinkun diqu*) beforehand and many of the former peasants did not need to be "lifted out of poverty" (脱贫, *tuopin*), an argument sometimes used to justify expropriation and relocation (see Rogers, 2018). Still, despite everything, it can be argued that in contrast to landless peasants elsewhere (compare Hsing, 2010; Landesa Rural Development Institute, 2012; Ong, 2014; Zhan, 2017), Huaming's residents have fared comparatively well: As promised, people have received compensations for their land and rural homesteads, their change in residency status was actually accompanied by inclusion into the basic social welfare system for urban citizens, and urban planning has given some thought to preserving original village communities.

Evidently, models are different from many other implementation sites in terms of funding and performance, which is a limitation that often discourages researchers from focusing attention on them (see Ahlers and Schubert, 2013). However, for the purpose of examining the proposed further thrust of individualisation in the lives of landless peasants, Huaming Model Town is a very suitable research location: For one thing, whether for better or for worse, a rather drastic rupture happened in the lives of Huaming's residents. In contrast to many projects that have been realised in the course of BNSC – even

some other models that were chosen from among natural villages (see, e.g., Ahlers and Schubert, 2013; Thøgersen, 2011) – Huaming was built from scratch, making it a prime example of China's compressed modernisation. For another thing, by the time of my fieldwork, sufficient time had passed since land loss and relocation to allow for processes of identity formation to unfold.

More than ten years after relocation, a new normal has settled in. Whether or not people are satisfied with their current situation, Huaming's landless peasants have adapted to their changed circumstances. The resettlement neighbourhoods' gated communities have undergone a process of "un-gating" (Zhao and Zou, 2017) and a kind of "reterritorialisation" has taken place (see also Cheng, 2014). Daily life in the small town nowadays can best be described as a hybrid form of urbanisation where tradition and modernity, continuity and change intermingle, or what Kipnis (2016) calls "recombinant urbanisation." Inspired by the notion of "recombinant" DNA, the adjective is used to metaphorically describe processes of transformation as "involving the recombination of preexisting elements (whether present at the site or absorbed from outside) into a new mixture or pattern" (Kipnis, 2016: 16). Akin to the "both/and" logic of second modernity (Beck and Lau, 2005), the new has not simply replaced the old in places that have witnessed a recombinant urbanisation, but both continue to shape people's lived experiences. This provides the socio-cultural context for my analysis.

Methodology

The following ethnographic study is based on data from fieldwork collected in two research stays in Huaming, from October to November 2016 and September 2017 to February 2018. My research followed a Grounded Theory design (Breuer, 2010; Corbin and Strauss, 2015) within which I used a triangulation of participant observation (Breidenstein et al., 2015) and semi-narrative autobiographic interviews. As the only foreigner in the small-town environment, it was easy for me to get to know people. Thus, during my two fieldwork stays, I gained insights into the lived experiences and thoughts of approximately a couple of hundred people of different original villages, age groups, professions, as well as socio-economic, educational, and family backgrounds. About two dozen of these acquaintances (both men and women from their mid-twenties to late seventies, among them people who had still been farmers before relocation as well as people who had never actually engaged in farming) over time became what I would call my main informants.

For reasons of depth, this article will mainly focus on one single case that is particularly intriguing in the context of this study: The case of Longying (a pseudonym), a young man born in 1991 who is among Huaming's landless peasants without ever having been a "peasant" in the occupational sense. I encountered him outside of the restaurant where he works on my very first evening in Huaming in October 2016. Longying clearly does not correspond to the common image of a landless peasant who had been a smallholder farmer throughout his life (see discursive construction above). However, I chose this seemingly atypical case on purpose for it sheds light on an aspect that has so

far been neglected in the study of landless peasants: that even if someone never relied on their land-use rights to make a living, losing the land and everything it embodies may still have a deep and transformative impact on their life and identity. To compensate for the shortcomings of a single-case study and in order to provide a better sense of the range of individual trajectories of individualisation, I will discuss several other, contrasting cases alongside of Longying which were chosen through theoretical sampling (Corbin and Strauss, 2015: 134ff).

Following the principle that "all is data" (Breuer, 2010; Corbin and Strauss, 2015), the primary data for this study is of diverse origins, including field notes and protocols from participant observation as well as ethnographic and semi-narrative interviews. Importantly, my analysis of identity construction through narrative was not limited to the "big stories" gathered through formal interviews, but included "small stories" as well – "a gamut of underrepresented narrative activities" (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008: 381) often left out of a narrative analysis. Furthermore, owing to the central role of social media for the expression of aspirations and identities in contemporary China (see McDonald, 2016; Wang, 2016) and the omnipresence of WeChat in the lives of my informants, I treated WeChat as a virtual extension of my physical fieldwork site.

As already mentioned, the data was interpreted within the framework of Beck's (1992) individualisation thesis. In particular, I attempted to examine how changes in the objective dimension of life circumstances were perceived by the individual and how they were integrated into the subjective dimension of consciousness or identity.

Individualisation and Identity Formation Among Huaming's Landless Peasants: The Case of Longying

Now twenty-nine-year-old Longying was born in one of the villages that were chosen for relocation to Huaming Model Town. He is a primary school dropout who works night shifts as a busboy and cashier in one of Huaming's many restaurants, all week long without a day off. Longying's case is especially interesting because it illustrates the effects of the *further* thrust of individualisation that I suggest happened in the lives of landless peasants under China's urbanisation agenda.

In fact, Longying's disembedding from his rural environment had started earlier than with the urbanisation of his village. In the current economy, young peasants frequently leave behind their native villages, not only driven by the need to earn a living in the cities but also by the pursuit of a freer and more self-fulfilling life (Chang, 2009; Griffiths, 2010; Pun and Lu, 2010; Yan, 2010b). In a similar desire to escape rural life and experience the outside world, Longying, who used to help out on the family farm after quitting school, joined the circus as a ticket seller for several years in a row, starting when he was just fifteen years old. Accordingly, when his village's relocation was first announced, he told me that he had looked forward to it. In retrospect, however, it seems that Longying perceives the permanent disembedding from his peasant life not as liberating, but rather as abandoning. The following analysis will reconstruct this further thrust of individualisation in Longying's life and attempt to analyse the impact it has had on his sense of self.

Disembedding and Loss of Traditional Security

When his village was relocated to Huaming, in the objective domain of life situations, Longying was disembedded from the land, the family's rural homestead, the village environment, as well as his agricultural *hukou* with the related land-use rights. Set free from these previous structures, Longying somehow feels a kind of "phantom pain": Although he had never lived the life of an adult peasant and had not aspired to do so in the near future, having the option to hypothetically return to farming as a livelihood and to the village life he held dear still gave him a feeling of security, which he has now been deprived of. In the domain of consciousness, Longying lost what Giddens (1991) would call the "ontological security" given by the continuity of life as it was, including the possibility, if needed, to adopt the "premade" peasant identity bestowed upon him by rural *hukou*. At the same time, in what Beck (1992) calls the "disenchantment dimension," Longying lost his optimism related to the idea of a better life through urban living, growing increasingly conscious of his own dispositions and disadvantages under the new circumstances.

Longying's experiences resonate with a lot of younger, working-age people from the former countryside. They initially longed to come to Huaming and become urban, but upon settling in, many were disenchanted by the harsh reality. While Longying's "phantom pain" cannot be disavowed, people who were still engaged in smallholder farming before relocation experienced this loss of security not just symbolically. A good example is thirty-six-year-old Ai Xi, married mother of two. Like many people in Huaming, Ai Xi thinks of herself as having "no culture" (没文化, *mei wenhua*) and "no quality" (没素质, *mei suzhi*). Given that she wasn't qualified for much else after relocation, she opened a small snack cart at the entrance of her neighbourhood compound to contribute to the family income. Her husband drives a car for a living. Although she is glad that urbanisation allowed her to escape the burdensome work on the fields, she concedes that she and her husband face many troubles providing for their family of four in the urban environment where living expenses have risen more than their income. According to Ai Xi, life and work as farmers might have been hard at times, but at least it was stable.

In contrast to people in working age for whom land requisition potentially presents a threat to their material security, Huaming's elderly receive modest pensions as new urbanites. Payments start at CNY 800 a month and with age gradually rise to over CNY 2000 a month. Women retire at fifty, men at sixty. Thus, while their livelihood is secured, many old people perceive the loss of land as a loss of purpose. Among them, some – most often elderly men such as seventy-three-year-old Laoda – have managed to find a new purpose by taking up simple jobs in fields such as neighbourhood security, hygiene, or maintenance. This generates additional income for expenses and pastimes that are not covered by the small pension, but more than anything, as Laoda explained to me, it gives them something to do. Others fill the void the loss of land and rural community has left in their lives by embracing the many communal and cultural activities Huaming has to offer. However, there are also many old people for whom nothing in the new environment could replace life in the countryside. They have retreated to a life of idleness within the four walls of their apartment.

Re-Embedding and New Realities

In the final step of his individualisation process, Longying was re-embedded into the institutions and structures of an urban environment. Although his agricultural *hukou* was converted to a non-agricultural *hukou*, he has never really felt the benefits of this status change, seeing that basic urban social welfare does not cover much, least of all unemployment benefits. Without rural life as a secure fallback option, he has been fully immersed into the urban employment and marriage markets as well as a second-modern risk biography where he faces new challenges.

Generally, my informants agree that the one-time compensation for the land – much less than its actual value, and much less than the profit corrupt officials reaped in the process of land transfers – was not enough to ensure a sustainable livelihood. Thus, for people like Longying, who have neither received sufficient formal education nor any further job training after relocation, persisting in the urban economy has become a constant struggle. He and his best friend told me from personal experience that Huaming's former peasants are discriminated against on the employment market: Urban businesses in the region do not want to hire them, the reason being that they would "present a lot of issues and were not easy to manage." There seems to be a common prejudice that Huamingers are uneducated and, on top of that, lazy – the latter is probably due to rumours that, owing to the generous compensations propagated in the media, the former villagers got rich overnight (成了暴发户, *cheng le baofahu*) and believed they would not have to work hard anymore. Like many of my informants, Longying and his friend also deplored the high living expenses in town. For people with a meagre income, even the free compensation apartments have become an additional burden due to the high utility costs they did not face in the countryside (see also Hsing, 2010: 190; Ong, 2014: 170). The friends agree that the only benefit urbanisation in Huaming has brought with it are the pensions for the elderly. For working-age people, there have not been any positive changes since the benefits they are entitled to are insignificant.

Longying, as an approachable person, is well-integrated into the small-town community which extends far beyond his former village community. Still, he stated that he overall preferred living in the countryside where life was much more convenient, and people and buildings were less closed off. If he does not have to work, he embraces urban pastimes common among young Chinese men such as drinking and smoking, watching TV shows on his smartphone, meeting with friends, singing Karaoke, or playing Billiard. However, he often has too little time, energy or money to engage in the more expensive and time-consuming hobbies of his. When he feels the need to break free of his monotonous work life once in a while, he sometimes still travels with the circus during the summer months. His boss grants him the freedom to take an unpaid leave, knowing that Longying has been a loyal employee for many years and that he will always come back to his position, probably for a lack of other options.

In terms of private life and marriage prospects, conditions have changed for Longying as well. In Tianjin's countryside, as my informants have told me, getting married was easy – CNY 30,000 on the part of the husband's family would suffice to be eligible for marriage, and you could always extend the family home or build a house for the

newlywed couple. Now, expectations have risen: The husband's family has to prepare at least CNY 300,000 as well as an apartment in order to enable their son to get married. Longying is an only child. His family received two apartments as compensation upon relocation. His parents live in one of them and rent out the other one – still a "naked," unfurnished apartment – for the time being since they need the extra income. That apartment will be Longying's when he gets married. However, with his family's low income and social status, without an apartment furnished according to middle-class standards, and considering the surplus of unmarried men in China, Longying does not count as an eligible bachelor. For the time being, he prefers not to stay with his parents but to sleep in the "dormitory," a couple of run-down, shared apartments provided for free to all of the restaurant's workers, many of them migrants from other parts of China. He told me that although it is crowded, he feels more independent this way. Thus, even though on paper Longying is an urban homeowner, for the time being his life rather resembles that of a migrant worker – being perceived as and perceiving himself as the "lowest level" in urban society without any real prospect of upward mobility (see Griffiths, 2010).

At this point, it is again worth making a comparison to two contrasting cases illustrating strikingly different trajectories of re-embedding in the urban environment. First, let me introduce sixty-year-old Auntie He. Through her village's relocation and the allocation of apartments on a household basis, she told me during our semi-narrative interview, she finally no longer has to live under one roof with her mother-in-law, where she had to manage the extended family home she married into practically all by herself. After having been disembedded from the social environment of her husband's village, auntie He has gained a lot of personal freedom. She still dutifully cares for her mother-in-law and helps raise her own grandchildren, but she now has her own household and enjoys a modest form of leisure for the first time in her life. In Huaming, she has been re-embedded into a community of likeminded old people, some of them from her former village, who meet almost daily to sing "red songs" (红歌, *hongge*) – an urban pastime they would not have enjoyed in the countryside. Due to her village's urbanisation, Auntie He was thus disembedded from the constraining norms and obligations of social life in rural China and re-embedded into a more autonomous kind of private life.

Second, I want to contrast Longying's experiences with that of thirty-three-year-old Xiang Meng, married mother of two. In terms of educational and family background, Xiang Meng has a lot in common with Longying. Growing up in a peasant household with three sisters, the family did not have much money and she only finished primary school. Like Longying, Xiang Meng also worked temporary jobs in the past. However, after her husband's village got relocated to Huaming – a move she excitedly welcomed – the sisters and a close friend took the initiative to turn their interest in beauty into a business, opening a small beauty salon which eventually turned into the opportunity to run a franchised branch under a brand's name which provides its employees with further training. Through her career advancement in a promising industry as well as her constant pursuit of self-cultivation, Xiang Meng has managed to raise her economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1992, 2013). Nowadays, judging from her appearance, consumption, habitus, and "cultivated lifestyle concept" (Griffiths, 2010: 26),

Xiang Meng has become a member of the new urban "middle-classes" (see Zhang, 2010).

Recombinant Identities

Against the backdrop of his personal trajectory of urbanisation and his current situation compared to others in the small town, the way Longying integrates different experiences into his life narrative speaks volumes. In contrast to most of my main informants, Longying never agreed to a formal interview. When I asked if I could interview him, actually expecting he would gladly share his life story with me, he said that he didn't like thinking about the past because his life was just sad, that there was no story to tell, that he didn't remember anything about coming to Huaming (his village was relocated in 2007, when he must have been around sixteen), and that, having "no culture," he would not know what to say. Longying's reaction to my interview request surprised me, as it stood in stark contrast to his confident demeanour in our everyday conversations. However, as noted by Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008), a refusal to tell a story may be equally significant for analysing the kind of identity that is under construction as any story actually told. Usually, Longying does not present himself as a victim but as an agent of his own life – as he told me more than once, you have to pass the twenty-four hours in a day anyways, so best pass them happily and don't worry about too many things. He loves to boast about all the places he has been to in China and frequently talks about his interests, his views on different matters, as well as his opinions on the region's transformation. However, his personal past, especially in relation to his experiences of being urbanised, appears to be a sore spot he would rather not talk about, indicating an awareness of his predicament.

Mirroring these ambiguities, in his reflections about life and society Longying is often torn between a desperate and an optimistic or humoristic tone. In addition to many telling postings on WeChat (which have to be left out due to space constraints), a perfect example of this stems from a voice call we had on 19 September 2018, after I had already returned to Germany. It was about nine p.m. local Huaming time and business at the restaurant was slow, so Longying had time to make a quick call. Sometime during our conversation, I asked when he would get off work – five a.m. I then asked when he had started work – three p.m. When I exclaimed, "More than 12 hours, that's tough/how exhausting!" (12个多小时，辛苦你！ *Shi'er ge duo xiaoshi, xinku ni!*), he replied, "More than 13 hours – aiya, it's not exhausting, that's just my bitter fate." (13个多小时——哎呀，辛不苦，命苦…… *Shisan ge duo xiaoshi—aiya, xin bu ku, ming ku…*). Then, jokingly, he added the second part of the couplet, which rhymes in Chinese: "If your fate is bitter, you cannot blame the government!" (命苦不能怪政府！ *Ming ku bu neng guai zhengfu!*). He asked me if I knew the saying – I didn't, so he explained it to me (I also looked it up after our call): People use this rhyme to humorously refer to the hardships of their life or work as a condition given by fate: It's not just that things are tough – Longying generally says that he is used to his long work hours, so it's no big deal – it's almost as if one was born under an ill star. In logical consequence, if your misery is determined by fate, you cannot blame the government. Fate, here, is of course an

attribution: Longying is aware that his current situation is determined by a number of conditions and decisions, some of which he had no control over (such as having been born a "peasant"), some of which could be attributed to himself (such as having dropped out of primary school and not having found better employment) and for some of which he could even hold the government responsible (such as having been completely let down after relocation with neither adequate job training nor comprehensive social welfare). However, since there is no way out at this point in time, it is probably best to neither blame himself nor the government, but rather take it with a little humour and blame it on his ill fate.

All of these examples point to the complexity of Longying's self-conception as a "landless peasant" and the multi-dimensionality of his identity. In theory, Longying has been re-embedded into the identity of an "urban citizen" as defined by his new *hukou* status. Also, his lifestyle and occupation have become fully urbanised. In practice, however, his self-conception as well as his standing in and perception by society contain many traces of a "peasant" identity as propagated in the Chinese discourse on rural China (see Schneider, 2015 above). For example, he uses attributes such as "low *suzhi*" and "no culture" to describe himself, an image which is also imposed upon him through the harsh reality of the urban employment and marriage markets. However, Longying is not always self-conscious of his education and background – depending on the situation and his audience, he sometimes even brags about his knowledge *despite* his lack of a formal education, for example when he assumes the role of an expert on Huaming (or Chinese culture more generally) towards me and others. Furthermore, Longying has rather fond memories of his rural past, and positive characteristics attributed to peasants such as "simple and honest" (淳朴, *chunpu*) and "kind-hearted" (善良, *shanliang*) are part of his identity just like the negative ones (see also Griffiths, 2010).

All things considered, Longying's complex identity could be called "recombinant" (borrowing Kipnis', 2016 term): Congruent with the both/and logic of second modernity (Beck and Lau, 2005), it is made up of fragments of old and new social positionings and the related self-conceptions that together form something entirely new, which is continuing to change and evolve.

Different manifestations of such recombinant identities can be observed among all the "landless peasants" I have encountered during my fieldwork. Even those who have seemingly become fully urban still carry traces of their rural past (which they often hold dear) in their self-identity. For instance, Xiang Meng, despite having achieved her dream of urban middle-class living, still feels very connected to her rural roots and values. She enjoys spending time at her parents' simple countryside home (her native village has not been urbanised yet), she has high esteem for smallholder farmers and only buys from them instead of big producers, and for her retirement, she dreams of living in a middle-class countryside villa with a garden to grow her own vegetables and enough space to accommodate her extended family. Similarly, even the identities of those that still literally refer to themselves as "peasants" have not remained static. They, too, have been transformed by adapting to their new, urban environment – an environment which in and

of itself has made them more conscious of their own dispositions and (new) positions in society.

Conclusion

State-led urbanisation has made Longying one of China's landless peasants, a heterogeneous group of people of rural origin connected mainly by the fact that they had to give up their land-use rights. Like many others among my informants, Longying defies one-sided discursive constructions of this social category – for example, even though he never earned a livelihood through agriculture and initially welcomed the state's policies, he has effectively been marginalised by urbanisation. Before, both leaving the countryside and returning to the village were a choice, the former being an exciting opportunity to escape boredom and strive for a better life, the latter being a safety net and a viable option for when the time was ready to start a family. Now, this choice no longer exists. Without the certainties of rural life and the symbolic security of the land to return to, the freedom to temporarily leave the countryside has been replaced by the "precarious freedoms" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 1ff) of urban living.

Longying's case serves to explore the impact of expropriation and relocation – which I propose initiated a further thrust of individualisation in people's lives – on the identity formation of landless peasants. His individual experiences might be unique, but in many ways his life trajectory and predicament reflect that of many "similar peers." At the same time, by comparing Longying's case with that of "distinctly different others" (terminology used by Griffiths, 2010), more general patterns have come to the fore. It will be the task of future research to extend the following preliminary insights through more comprehensive analyses.

First and foremost, the results show that state-led urbanisation can present itself as either an opportunity or a threat for the individual, depending on a range of factors like educational background, previous lifestyle, age or generation, gender, as well as personal agency or access to social welfare benefits in the local context. Someone who has somewhat been emancipated by the further thrust of individualisation in her life is Auntie He – thanks to her village's relocation, she has been liberated from traditional kinship structures physically binding her under one roof with her mother-in-law. Urbanisation has clearly also benefitted Xiang Meng, whose venture into the beauty industry has been successful, her agency now paying off through beneficial working conditions which provide her with both enough time and money to further pursue her aspirations. However, these are conditions not shared by all landless peasants – many rather seem stuck in a vicious cycle of precarity without a way out. For Longying, the new thrust of individualisation has had a rather disenchanting effect, disembedding him from the hypothetical securities of peasant life and re-embedding him into an individual risk biography as a second-class urban citizen. His "phantom pain" over the loss of a rural livelihood is felt by a lot of landless peasants who, like him, had never actually worked as farmers. In contrast, many people who previously still pursued smallholder farming really feel the loss of material security caused by land expropriation, whereas Huaming's elderly

– taken care of by the basic urban pension system – sometimes equate losing the land with a loss of purpose.

A second crucial observation is that none of my informants talks about themselves in terms of *hukou*. In fact, having an urban *hukou* means little to nothing to their identity, seeing that this still does not entitle them to the same benefits as Tianjin's "real" urban-ites. In many cases, the rather negligible benefits that come with the new (sub-)urban *hukou* status cannot make up for the role of the land for livelihood security. Quite para-doxically, this situation has been caused by the government's efforts of urban–rural inte-gration: For decades, *hukou* had instituted a dichotomy between urban and rural citizens. But in recent years, *hukou* reforms have blurred social inequalities in the sense that the divide between urban and rural *hukou* holders is slowly substituted by a subtler divide between different hierarchies of urban *hukou* holders (see Chan, 2019; Zeuthen and Griffiths, 2011). A good example to illustrate this new hierarchy is schooling: Although people like Ai Xi think that their children will receive a better education in the small town than they would have in the countryside, it is common knowledge that Huaming's schools are inferior compared to schools in Tianjin's city centre, which is why parents who can afford it (unlike Ai Xi and her husband) find ways to send their children there.

Third, concomitant with the dwindling importance of *hukou* status for people's actual standing in society, we can observe the formation of new social "classes" within China's landless peasantry. For example, compared to Longying, who can be considered part of a new "precariat class" of landless peasants (Zhan, 2017: 49), Xiang Meng has "made it" to a higher social standing, distinguishing herself from others not only through her rep-utable job and higher level of income, but also her deliberate performance of "middle-classness" through her appearance, her way of expressing and conducting herself, and her narrative of self-cultivation. Moreover, in order to make sense of their individual circumstances and standing in society, landless peasants across the new spectrum of identities and classes seem to have internalised the *suzhi* ideology (see Murphy, 2004): As the Chinese state has retreated from providing for (urban) citizens' well-being since the beginning of the reform period, the individual has become responsible for his or her own fate, which, as conveyed by official discourse, hinges inextricably upon his or her own *suzhi*. While this ideology has led Longying to accept his ill fate as inevitable due to his perceived low *suzhi*, it has empowered Xiang Meng to raise her *suzhi* as well as her competitiveness in society. In both instances, adherence to the *suzhi* ideology not only impacts their self-perception, but also "serves to maintain state legitimacy because it deflects attention away from inequalities arising from policy biases by explaining the socio-economic position of individuals in terms of their *suzhi*" (Murphy, 2004: 5).

Finally, this study illustrates the impact of the theorised further thrust of individuali-sation on rural people's identity formation. Rather than presuming a straightforward link between land requisition, relocation, and the formation of a new identity, I have shown how the need to integrate one's experiences of urbanisation into the ongoing story of the self leads people to gain a reflexive consciousness of their own dispositions, resources, chances, and social standing in the new environment. The resulting "recombinant iden-tities," ranging somewhere between rural and urban, manifest in daily practice and

lifestyles, fears and desires, as well as the use of respective attributes to refer to oneself or position oneself towards others.

These insights further corroborate my argument that it is not very meaningful to equate landless peasants' self-identity with whether or not they recognise their new citizenship status (see, e.g., Chen et al., 2010; Han, 2012; Wang and Zhu, 2014; Zhang and Tong, 2006). Given that my informants have all become urban *hukou* holders and are all, in some way or another, still connected to their rural roots, we can observe that diverging identities have little do with rural background or urban *hukou* and a lot with embodiments and narratives that are, again, congruent with emerging conceptions of "class." This resonates with other researchers' findings: For example, Pun and Lu (2010) reflect upon the "quasi identity" of migrant workers who, due to China's unfinished process of proletarianisation, are caught somewhere in-between rural citizens and urban workers, conscious of their second-class status. Similarly, Griffiths (2010) contemplates rural migrants' ambiguous identities between their countryside origins and increasing integration into the urban sphere which change at different points during their migration trajectory or rather at different stages of urban success.

As the cases presented in this study show, the term "landless peasants" in the sense of "peasants without land" – often implicitly understood as former smallholder farmers – falls way short of encompassing the different development trajectories and identities among this heterogeneous group of people. Still, as long as losing their land-use rights presents a predicament for a large proportion of the people affected by expropriation and relocation, I argue that "landless peasants" (if used in a reflective way) continues to be a relevant umbrella term for this new social group, not least because it provides an analytical point of departure for exploring what landless peasants are becoming. As a first step in this direction, I propose to stop thinking of landless peasants as just "peasants without land" and instead start paying attention to the recombinant identities and class differentiations evolving among the people.

In conclusion, the hypothesis that state-led urbanisation has initiated a further thrust of individualisation in the lives of Chinese peasants provides a valuable framework for the analysis of landless peasants' identity formation. It not only allows us to regard the impacts of expropriation and relocation on rural people through the dialectics of opportunity and threat. Also, it brings us one step further towards deconstructing the idea of a rural–urban dichotomy in identities that is still perpetuated by the *hukou* system, pointing to new, recombinant identities and new class differentiations in China's social make-up as well as new forms of social inclusion and exclusion.

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