

## FAMILY CUSTOMS AND FARMLAND REALLOCATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE VILLAGES\*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper discusses why currently, in much of the Chinese countryside, the division of the paternal household takes place at the point of each son's marriage, why elderly parents tend to live with their youngest married son, and why popular rural attitudes toward private property today are, in unexpected ways, dramatically different from both traditional times and the revolutionary period. The paper shows why, to resolve the financial difficulties posed by the family life cycle, most farming communities in China secretly participate in periodic free redistributions of farmland between households.

### INTRODUCTION

Today, a rural Chinese household's property, including its landholdings, is almost always divided up at the time when each of the older sons marries. Frequently it is the youngest son who stays on in the parents' home and inherits what remains of the parents' personal portion of the property. Is this a traditional phenomenon, or is it a new practice?

Related to this question is the farmers' attitude towards property rights. Before 1949 farmers had a strong sense of property rights and a firm attachment to their own plots of land. In contrast, today farmers in many parts of China prefer agricultural land *not* to be privately owned. In fact, they prefer it to be periodically reallocated between neighbouring families, giving land free of charge to households that have grown in membership and taking land from families that

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have shrunk. Why is there such a preference for land reallocations among China's farmers?

This paper will examine how these two issues are connected, and how problems have been posed by inheritance patterns and by the government's policy toward reallocations of land.

#### THE DIVISION OF HOUSEHOLDS

Let us examine the first of these sets of practices. Is the division of a farm family's property at the time of each son's marriage a "new-born" custom? And traditionally, did rural parents most often live together with the youngest son after his marriage, not with the eldest son?

When I asked interviewees in villages in a number of Chinese provinces about this, most insisted that in traditional times it had been the eldest son who, after his marriage, had normally stayed on with the parents until they passed away: that this had been in accord with Confucian teachings of giving precedence to the eldest son. And when I examined books that provide an overall view of pre-revolution family life, a similar generalization cropped up. Lloyd Eastman, for instance, in his book *Family, Field and Ancestors*, wrote that "It was customary . . . for just the eldest son to continue to reside in the family home and look after the aging parents: younger sons had to move out soon after they took a wife" (Eastman 1988: 17).

But if we look instead at studies of specific pre-revolution Chinese villages, it becomes evident that, in fact, village households most frequently followed the opposite course. In Fei Xiaotong's home village in Jiangsu province, it was most often the younger son who stayed on in the family home and who inherited what his parents had retained of the family estate (Fei 1947: 66-7). Similarly, in Martin Yang's well-known study of his own ancestral village in Shandong province, parents most often chose the youngest son to live with and, when so, normally specified that their remaining property should go to him after their deaths. Alternatively, some parents preferred to live independently or, in their old age, resided or ate with each of the sons in turn for periods of a month or more (Yang 1945: 83; Hsu 1948: 114-5; Fei 1947: 74). In a village in Guangdong province, research in the late 1970s by Sulamith Potter and Jack Potter on pre-revolutionary family life found, similarly, that the prop-

ertied families “gave each son in turn a house and a share of the land” after the son and his bride had shared the paternal home for some years, and that “The parents remained in their own house with the youngest son or lived alone, being cared for by the sons jointly” (Potter and Potter 1990: 20). In Taiwan, village studies also reveal that the most common forms were either to live with the youngest son or, as an alternative, to rotate residence or meals among the sons’ households (Gallin 1966: 144; Chen 1972: 70; Pasternak 1972: 70). None of the available village studies from either pre-revolution China or from Taiwan refer to parents most commonly residing with the eldest son. Nevertheless, there is a tendency in China studies to assume otherwise and, like Lloyd Eastman, to fall back on the Confucian notions of what *ought* to have been: which is, of course, parental prioritization of the eldest son.<sup>1</sup>

The practices today are the *same* as the range of preferences that are found in the studies about pre-revolution villages and Taiwanese villages. My visits to villages in a number of provinces in China revealed that parents who live in stem families with one of their sons most frequently live with the younger son, or alternatively live entirely independently, or live or eat with each married son in turn. Other recent researchers in Chinese villages have found similar living arrangements (e.g., Wang 2004; Jing 2004; Zhang 2004).

What is different today is that the division of the paternal household, including its land and other property, most often takes place at the point of marriage. In pre-revolution times, most rural households apparently did not split into separate families by dividing their assets at the first point of a son’s marriage. Rather, the household often held together as a single economic and social unit for some years after the eldest son’s wedding (see, e.g., Harrell 1982: 159–170; Cohen 1970, 1976).<sup>2</sup> Households sometimes remained intact until the younger sons themselves married and the separate conjugal

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<sup>1</sup> In some parts of China, this prioritization was indeed seen in a symbolic way: a small extra share of the inheritance was given to the eldest, though usually a relatively small amount, often on the grounds that the eldest son would have special duties in the ancestral ceremonies (Fei: 66; Hsu: 114–5).

<sup>2</sup> Harrell (1982: 170) notes that “brothers tend to stay together longer, despite the inevitable tensions between fang within a *jia*, as long as it remains economically advantageous for them to do so.”

interests of the brothers and their wives began eroding the household's unity.

Why, then, today do the elder sons most frequently split off from their paternal family at the point of their wedding? Certainly, the shift arose within the collective period, as is evident from a number of studies of Chinese villages (e.g., Chan, Madsen and Unger 1992: 194; Parish and Whyte 1978: 220; Selden 1993: 145). Before the revolution, when the family had productive assets including land, the drawbacks of cutting the family property into smaller portions had provided a disincentive to split up the household immediately. But under the collectives there was no longer land or a household economy to hold a family together. Instead, the main source of income was in work points, earned by each individual, and thus the economic deterrent to dividing the household had disappeared.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the bride-to-be often began to have a say during the wedding negotiations, and a young woman frequently insisted that she and her groom should have a separate house as a precondition for the marriage. If at all possible, she did not want to live cheek-by-jowl with her mother-in-law in the same small home, especially when there also were unmarried siblings crowding it. As a result, weddings often needed to be delayed until the groom's parents could afford to build a new dwelling for the young couple.

When de-collectivization occurred in the early 1980s, this remained the precondition of most brides before they would consent to marry. My own interviewing, as well as several published village studies, suggest, though, that households today sometimes delay division when they are engaged in non-farm enterprises that would suffer from a division (Harrell 1993: 100–1; Selden 1993: 150; Judd 1994: 188). But among families that are engaged entirely in farming, there almost invariably occurs a progressive division of the household and its assets at the point of each of the elder sons' marriages.

Notably, the sons and daughters who have married during recent years were born before the state's efforts to reduce the birth rate became rigorous, and thus the families tended to have several children. My interviews in villages suggest that when these children were young, the parents tended to make a greater emotional investment in their youngest son compared to their other children, in the supposition that they might well be spending the rest of their lives in the same household as the youngest. A few interviewees recited what they said were traditional sayings to the effect that the eldest son

gets the parents' respect, or the parents' trust, but that the youngest gets the affection. (It should be noted, though, that I have too few examples from interviews to make any firm generalizations about the extent to which this feeling prevails today or whether it was generally true in the past.)<sup>3</sup>

When fields were distributed to households at the time of de-collectivization in the early 1980s, the former production teams retained legal ownership of the land and each of the households was given the right to use the fields apportioned to it over the long term. In most of China's villages this land was parcelled out on a *per capita* basis (Unger 1985), so that a family with, say, 7 members, comprising two parents, three sons and two daughters, was allocated seven portions of land. As the two daughters subsequently married out into another village, they took with them a dowry, and this was their sole share of family property. Their allocated land remained with the family. The heads of families were advised that they could pass on the household's land to their sons. In doing so, families quickly began to resume pre-revolutionary practices.

Just as in pre-revolution times, when the family's assets are divided, the property is normally divided equally among the sons. But the parents also often decide to retain a portion of land for themselves, and if so the son with whom they live in old age is to inherit this extra portion. Or the youngest son may directly receive a small extra portion of land from the outset on the grounds that he will have to support his parents more than the other sons will. In such a case this may be considered an equitable arrangement by all concerned.

But in my visits to villages during the late 1980s and 1990s, it also became apparent that in a minority of villages and indeed whole counties a different version of property division was occurring. In these particular villages, as each of the elder sons married and moved out, each took with him only the portion that had been allocated to the family in his name at the time of de-collectivization. Let us look again at that family of seven, comprising two parents, three sons and two daughters. In such villages, the elder brothers took

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<sup>3</sup> Researchers rarely appear to have broached the topic, and the only reference that I could discover refers to Taiwan. Discussing a household she lived in as a guest, Margery Wolf (1968: 43) includes a phrase whose import is contrary to what informants in rural China told me: she refers to "the eldest and therefore the favored son".

with them only their own individual parcel of one-seventh of the family land. This left five-sevenths of the land with the parents and youngest son. The youngest son was in line to inherit all of this when the parents pass away: that is, he would end up with five times as much land as one of his elder brothers. Giving only a sliver of land to the elder sons in this fashion does not seem to be a common practice across China, but in my fieldwork interviewing I did discover it to prevail in villages as far-flung as Yunnan, Hunan and Qinghai provinces. In villages that depend entirely upon agriculture, such an inheritance pattern spells poverty for the elder brothers' families—unless the former production team takes moves to reallocate land.

Even in the majority of villages, where the elder brothers received a relatively equal portion of land, severe problems of maldistribution soon arose for another reason. This was clear in a visit to a relatively poor village in Yunnan province in 1988. There, the families that contained several teenagers at the time of de-collectivization in 1982 initially did well. They often had enough hands available not only to work their allotted fields but also to handle various economic activities outside agriculture. But in the half decade since then, shifts in the life cycle of families had altered their economic circumstances. One villager whom I interviewed related that in 1982 he had received five portions of land for himself, his wife, and his three teenage sons (he had no daughters), but these fields now had to support, in addition, the son's wives and children: eleven people in all. They were barely scraping by. He was anxious for the village to enact a re-adjustment of fields.

Compare this case with that of a middle-aged couple from the same village with three recently grown children—one son and two daughters—who similarly received five portions of land at the time of de-collectivization. As the daughters married and moved away, the single son and his parents were now left with a large five-portion block of property which, if land readjustments were not carried out by the village, the son would alone inherit. Yet the son fretted that his future prospects were shaky, since he himself now had two sons, and when they grew up the fields allotted to him would not be enough to support their wives and children. Almost all families that rely strictly on farming have had to face the problem that, whatever their current circumstances, their prosperity would rise and fall as they moved over time from one phase of their family's demographic cycle to the next.

## REALLOCATING FARM LAND

Under pressure from farming families, thus, across China the former production teams quietly began readjusting landholdings to compensate for changes in family size. In fact, in *most* of them during the 1980s and 1990s, despite the central government's opposition, the agricultural land was reallocated between households periodically—in some villages every year or two, and in some once every five or six or seven years. A 1997 sample survey by the Ministry of Agriculture of 271 villages reported that 80 percent had readjusted landholdings, and 66 percent of the villages had done so more than once (Wang 1998).<sup>4</sup> The periodic land reallocations have, each time, recreated a near-equal *per capita* land distribution.

Such land reallocations did not occur in pre-revolution times. How then, across China, have most farmers developed such a set of preferences? The experiences of the collective period obviously accustomed farmers to a new set of premises. Under the collectives, households had been assigned small plots (*ziliudi*) on which to grow vegetables for their own consumption, and the size of these plots expanded and contracted as families added and lost members. In addition, families under the collectives had obtained grain “on loan” while their children were young, and then, years later, the cost of the grain was deducted from the family's work-point wages as the children became teenagers who could begin to augment the family's earnings. Villagers who had become accustomed to their production teams making these economic adjustments in order to balance out the family cycle were favourable to continuing such readjustments after de-collectivization, albeit in a different form, as being in their family's long-term interests.

The above survey finding—that 89 percent of China's farmers have participated in land reallocations—is an extraordinary figure.

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<sup>4</sup> A survey in 1995 showed 72 percent of 215 sampled villages had redistributed the land, and a majority had done so two or more times (Brandt et al. 2002). Another survey of one hundred villages in 2003 found 86 percent of the surveyed households have participated in such land reallocations (personal communication from Prof. James Kung, of the Hong Kong University of Science & Technology). I am indebted to Prof. Kung for sharing this information with me and for permitting me to publish the figure in this paper.

The government, as will be seen, is opposed to these land transfers, and China's news media have never publicized the practice. Yet across rural China, in the vast majority of the villages, farmers independently have arrived at the same solution to a major pressing economic problem facing their families, and have insisted on carrying it out.

Surveys have confirmed that most farmers want this. In fact, in a 1994 questionnaire survey of 800 farm families in eight counties, only 14 percent of the respondents declared that they preferred permanent land ownership rights to be held by each household. Fully 65 percent favoured taking land away from households that lost a member through death or through a daughter marrying out, and redistributing the plots to families that had grown in size through new births and incoming brides. Notably, only 19 percent of the respondents were opposed to such periodic land redistributions. Even 43 percent of the wealthiest households, looking forward in time, preferred periodic land readjustments, compared to only 24 percent who were opposed. It is similarly notable that village households with a high share of off-farm income preferred such readjustments, by a margin of 55 percent to 18 percent, perhaps in recognition of the possibility that some day they too might need to return to full-time farming (Kung and Liu 1997: 45–48).<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly, this logic is not unique to post-socialist China. It independently developed in large parts of Tsarist Russia, and by custom, farming families there similarly were periodically allocated larger or smaller shares in their village's land as the size of their household increased and decreased over time. This was done by village-wide custom, without Tsarist government involvement (Chayanov 1966).

At one time or another in the quarter century since de-collectivization and China's return to individual household farming, in a clear majority of China's villages *all* of the plots of land held by families have been completely redistributed. In a 2003 survey (Kung,

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<sup>5</sup> This was especially the case among households with high levels of non-farm income who resided in districts that were still largely agricultural. In districts which had largely turned to non-agricultural pursuits, a majority of the farmers felt secure enough of their future prospects to answer in the negative to the question about taking back land from families that had lost members (Kung and Liu 1997: 59).

unpublished), it was found that 60 percent of the sampled rural households had experienced full land redistributions. In most of the villages that I know about through my own fieldwork, to ensure equity and a lack of corruption during such redistributions the households have picked lots out of a box to determine who received which fields. But such complete redistributions of land normally occur when land has not been reallocated for a number of years. When a village redistributes land more frequently, as in some of the villages that I have visited, the readjustments of fields among households usually only involve plots of land at the edges of a family's holdings, and have only affected those households who had experienced a gain or loss of a family member since the last land transfer. All of the rest of each family's fields remained untouched.

In these land transfers, since families know what particular plots are likely to be taken away, a problem arises concerning how to retain the long-term fertility of this land. In several of the villages where I enquired, a system has been put in place to discourage households from running down the plots' quality. On the eve of such a reallocation, which normally occurred during the depth of winter when the land lies fallow between crop seasons, the team head and a chosen few of the most respected farmers would go to inspect the fertility of each plot, and the lower its fertility, the larger the amount of land that is taken in compensation.<sup>6</sup>

The periodic land adjustments have caused families to strategize in other ways, though. Among other things, it has influenced the timing of weddings. An interviewee told me that his village had decided to reallocate land soon, and his son was trying to quicken the date of his wedding so that his in-coming bride would receive a share of land. The parents of marriageable daughters take an opposite strategy. In a study of a village in Sichuan, when land reallocations are imminent the families with daughters who are engaged to be married try to postpone the wedding, so that her parents will

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<sup>6</sup> Two researchers elsewhere in China similarly have found pressures exerted against households who fail to adequately fertilize their contracted plots. They observe: "We heard of an incident in which a few households refused to include one family in the reallocation exercise on grounds that its plots were sloppily farmed during its tenure. In a small community such as a hamlet, this kind of information is not difficult to acquire, as villagers can easily tell how well their neighbors have worked their land" (Kung and Cai 2000: 288).

remain entitled to a land portion for their as-yet-unmarried daughter (Ruf 1998: 129).

#### STATE INTERVENTION TO THWART THE FARMERS' PREFERENCE

In light of the solid preference for periodic reallocations of land-holdings among Chinese farmers today, it is ironic that the government in Beijing, which still touts itself as socialist, instituted regulations starting in 1993–94 to put a stop to the reallocations.<sup>7</sup> Beijing decreed that land tenure should be frozen for a period of at least 30 years without any further readjustments. The government was following the advice of economists in the government's think-tanks, who had been strongly influenced, in turn, by Western economists. The Chinese economists and their Western mentors were enamoured of the notion of "property rights" and "security of tenure" and did not deign to notice or care about what the farmers themselves wanted.<sup>8</sup>

Even earlier, in 1987, the central government had begun to experiment with a local program to put a halt to land redistributions. It selected a hilly county in Guizhou province to carry out a ban on reallocations for a period of 20 years. Generally, it is more difficult in mountainous countryside to achieve agreement among farmers on how to reallocate fields, since each parcel of hill land differs in complex ways from every other, unlike, say, the north China plains. The government could therefore expect reduced support for land redistribution at the Guizhou experimental site. A subsequent survey

<sup>7</sup> The first of these decrees (*zhongfa*), titled "Zhonggong zhongyang, guowuyuan guanyu dangqian nongye he nongcun jingji fazhan de ruogan zhengce cuoshi" (Certain Policy Measures taken by the Party Centre and State Council regarding Contemporary Agriculture and the Development of Village Economies), was issued on 5 November 1993.

<sup>8</sup> As one observer notes, "It is not entirely coincidental that Chinese policy advisors' support for stronger individual property rights reflected the agendas for the major multilateral lending and development agencies. After all, for more than a decade advisors from the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and Washington-based Rural Development Institute (RDI) had been providing Chinese research institutes . . . with training on land and natural resource legislation, consultancy partnerships, and research contracts. . . . The desire to demonstrate farmers' preference for secure long-term contracts has patently influenced RDI's research agenda in China, even to the extent that when survey results failed to verify that point, the organization's spokespeople continued to assert that Chinese farmers want 'ownership-like rights'" (Sargeson 2004: 642).

revealed that fully 60 percent of farmers recalled they had initially favoured the ban, and only 16 percent had been opposed. But over the following decade, many of their families came under demographic pressures, and some had to resort to renting land from neighbours even though they could ill-afford to do so. Attitudes in this Guizhou county changed considerably. By 1999, 49 percent of the farmers reported in a survey that they now preferred a system of periodic land reallocations, and only 32 percent still preferred the freeze on land reallocations (Kung 2002: 798).

Elsewhere in China, where there had been less reason than in hilly Guizhou for farmers to countenance a freeze, there was quiet resistance from below to the 1993 decree banning reallocations. The grassroots team heads, who were attuned to the farmers' needs, normally ignored the 30-year directive, and continued periodically to readjust landholdings in line with changes in the size of households. But in the late 1990s, the central government began to enforce its 30-year decree more rigorously,<sup>9</sup> with penalties against village officials who were caught permitting reallocations. The early results of this bore out the worries of farmers about the consequences of being at the wrong point in the family cycle. In a village in Qinghai province in 2000, I visited a young family that was barely subsisting on gruel and neighbours' charity. The husband had lived with his widowed mother and brother on three portions of land until his marriage in 1997, when he took his one portion with him. This was not enough land to support himself, his wife and their two babies, and with land reallocations blocked through the intervention of local officials, the family members were visibly malnourished and inadequately clothed.

This type of suffering must have been particularly widespread in the minority of villages where the elder sons, at their weddings, inherit only their own single sliver of the family's landholdings. In such villages, the readjustments of land are truly vital to the elder sons and their families.

In March 2003, a new Village Land Contract Law solidified in concrete the central government line: it stipulated that all of the former teams' contracts for cultivable land [i.e., distributions of

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<sup>9</sup> This was in keeping with a new decree issued by the Party Central Committee at the 3rd plenum of the Party's 15th congress (Zhongguo gongchandang di 15 jie zhongyang weiyuanhui di san ci quanti huiyi tongguo), on 14 October 1998.

agricultural land to households] must be for 30 years and could not be violated (Articles 22 and 26). Despite this law, pressures were growing within villages for land readjustments, as the numbers of young families who suffer from inadequate landholdings annually mounted. As of the mid-2000s, there is evidence that substantial numbers of villages are disobeying Beijing. But this requires strict community consensus and cohesion. If even a single one of the households that loses land in a periodic readjustment complains to higher authorities, the team's violation of the new law is exposed.

This current situation can be observed in a county in Anhui province, where Graeme Smith has been conducting a year's fieldwork on the political economy of China's agricultural extension services. In December 2004, he investigated land reallocations there in behalf of this paper.<sup>10</sup> He discovered that many teams had been readjusting land allocations every two or three years (and some teams every year) during the 1980s and early 1990s, but after the central government began clamping down they reduced the frequency. One of the teams he is studying has now adopted a 7-year periodic readjustment. It would be holding a meeting of all of the team's adults during the 2005 Spring Festival (Chinese New Year), when all of the team members who had been working away from the village would be returning home. Inasmuch as seven years have passed since the last adjustment, major changes in families' composition had occurred, and villagers therefore expected that the meeting would decide secretly to redistribute *all* of the landholdings.

Other villages in the same county have adopted different strategies. In a nearby village with few local off-farm opportunities, there was a strong sentiment to readjust land much more frequently to account for changes in household population, despite the dangers of being caught. In yet another village in the same rural township, with only half as much land per capita, most income today derives from off-farm work, and agriculture has become far less important to families. There, households were content to let the land remain permanently in the same families' hands.

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<sup>10</sup> I am indebted to Graeme Smith, a Doctoral student at the Australian National University, for enquiring about the land readjustments during his daily visits to villages.

In those villages where some of the households have felt a need for readjustments, farmers who will neither gain nor lose materially from land redistribution have told Smith that they favour it, citing fairness as their main reason. It is this type of sentiment that presumably helps to build the level of community cohesion necessary for the secret land swaps. In the decades since de-collectivization in the early 1980s and the return to family farming, there have been relatively few ways in which farmers still continue to cooperate closely as a group: these secret land readjustments are among the most significant.

In my visits to villages during the 1980s and early 1990s, I discovered that the village heads often took the lead in organizing the periodic land adjustments, and that all of the teams in a village therefore simultaneously carried out the land readjustments. As the central government began to crack down, though, many village heads felt caught between the farmers' desires to redistribute fields and the prohibition decreed from above. The village heads began to take a neutral non-active stance, neither taking a lead nor interfering with what the teams decided to do. Possibly as a result, Smith has found that in some of the villages he is currently studying, different teams are following different courses and independently decide to readjust landholdings in different years.

Overall, to the extent that the central government's pressures have induced many teams to space out the frequency of their land reallocations to a half a decade or more each time, pressures have built to carry out more intense, full-scale redistributions when the teams finally do so. This affects security of tenure more severely than do more frequent reallocations, which tend to affect only small plots at the edges of family landholdings. The consequences of the government's pressures contradict the government's intended policy objectives.

#### POTENTIAL FUTURE SCENARIOS FOR LANDHOLDINGS AND FAMILY RESIDENCE PATTERNS

The impetus to redistribute land reflects a particular type of agricultural economy faced by Chinese farmers. Most are faced by a shortage of land, and realize that they will suffer because of this when they are at the wrong stage of their family cycle. The system of land readjustments, based on a precedent from the collective era,

is an ingenious solution. It is remarkable that, without any central directives or publicized suggestions, the vast bulk of the farmers across China have arrived at this same solution to their problem—and have persisted in carrying it out despite prohibitions from above.

But this impetus to redistribute land periodically is likely to decline in areas where the importance of agriculture to the household economy diminishes. We have observed this already in one of the villages in Anhui province that Smith has examined. Elsewhere, in villages in China's coastal provinces and villages located close to cities, where farming is no longer the core enterprise of most village households, there is evidence that most households no longer wish to go through the bother of carrying out land reallocations.<sup>11</sup> In such villages, many families have moved entirely out of agriculture and only want to retain a small plot on which to grow their own vegetables. In some villages, so few today want to remain in agriculture that their teams have leased out large stretches of land to farmers from other parts of China (e.g., Unger and Chan 1999: 61).

Even in some of the villages in the poorer hinterlands, a new phenomenon has emerged in which some people no longer want land. The reason is that urban restrictions on migrant workers have eased up in very recent years, and as a consequence an increasing number of young villagers who have urban jobs have made plans to stay in the cities permanently. They include not just young unmarried people, but also newly married couples and their children.<sup>12</sup> As they stop returning to live in the countryside, fields get freed up. It can be expected that in some villages the shortage of land that underlies the land reallocations will disappear. This new trend of migration, with one or more sons permanently absent from the village, also has an obvious effect on the question of which son stays on in the parent's home after marriage.

The question is also being resolved by the government's program, starting in the late 1970s/early 1980s, to curtail the numbers of chil-

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<sup>11</sup> A recent study, based on analysing land reallocation behaviour in 10 provinces in China for the period 1986–1999, confirms that the overall level of land reallocation has dropped sharply over time in those districts where an increasing share of villagers are employed in off-farm work (Kung, Lin and Shen, forthcoming).

<sup>12</sup> This became clear in my own fieldwork experience when interviewing migrant workers at a large factory in Fuzhou. Some were married, were with their spouses, and did not plan to return from the city to farming. (Also see Zhang 2005.)

dren in each family. Whereas a one-child family prevails in the cities, much of the countryside effectively has had a somewhat more lenient policy. In some rural districts, the local policy has restricted families to one son, with permission to have an extra child when a baby girl is born. In other parts of the countryside, a family was officially restricted to two children regardless of gender. In such villages, to the extent that government policies are adhered to, only a quarter of all families give birth to two sons. In reality, across rural China the limitations on birth numbers have been violated; but nonetheless, as the babies born in the early 1980s have come of marriage age in the early 2000s, they generally were raised in relatively small families and, more likely than not, are the only son in their family (Zhang 2005). So long as China officially adheres to a strict family-planning policy, most couples as of today do not face the issue of which son will reside in the family home, nor the issue of how to divide the family's property among sons when they marry.

Another social phenomenon is also at work. As studies of prosperous villages have begun to reveal, there has been a growing tendency there for *all* the sons to move out of the parents' home. This reflects a growing ability among the young to determine the shape of their own lives, and they are prioritizing their own relationship as a couple over their obligations to the older generation (Yan 2000; Yan 2003; Yan 1996: 197; Murphy 2002: 63; Pang, de Brauw and Rozelle 2005). As Ellen Judd notes in her village study *Gender and Power in Rural North China* (1994), "Household division facilitates the enhanced personal autonomy that is now a legitimate goal to pursue in China, and that is notably pursued by younger people" (179). It is normally only among the poorer households and in poorer villages, which cannot afford the high construction costs of this extra house-building, that the stem-family system still heavily prevails, with the younger (or only) son and his wife staying on with his parents.

If larger parts of rural China become progressively more prosperous, then the custom of continuing to live with the younger/only son after his marriage is probably slowly on its way out. If parents have indeed emotionally favoured the younger son, will this fade away as young rural parents today realize that, even when they have more than one son, all of them will leave the household after their weddings? In such villages, in future, will it become the custom among the families with more than one son that when the parents become elderly and frail and can no longer fend for themselves, they

will move residence periodically to live in each of their sons' households in turn? Will future inheritance patterns reflect this? Does the decline in the numbers of children in families, brought about by China's rural family-planning requirements of the past two decades, mean that increasing numbers of married *daughters* in future will need to take their elderly parents into their homes? Will inheritance patterns also begin to reflect this? Will different patterns prevail in different parts of the country? Especially in non-prosperous villages, when a couple has two or more sons will more traditional mores continue to be observed? In such villages, will the younger son and his wife normally still stay with his elderly parents in the same household (and in the process gain what remains of their inheritance)? Will we find that, disproportionately, it is the elder son who leaves both home and village and emigrates permanently to a city? Only time will tell.

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