

China Perspectives

THE MANY ROADS TO BECOMING MODERN

A HISTORY OF COLLECTIVISM IN RURAL JIANGSU
PROVINCE

Chen Jiajian



The Many Roads to Becoming Modern

The Many Roads to Becoming Modern explores “collectivism” in the context of contemporary rural Chinese history. Following the history of a southern village from 1949 to the present, the author attempts to understand the origin and current state of “collectivity” in rural China.

Along with other unique Chinese institutions, such as the Danwei (work-unit) system, rural collectivism is the basis of New China’s economic development. Previous academic research on rural collectivism in general is limited to scattered historical fragments, this book, however, is an empirical study of the actual historical process of rural collectivism. Focusing on presenting a mechanism for universal interpretation, the author illustrates the development of rural collectivism in southern Jiangsu using the historical research method, revealing the characteristics of the Chinese society as it is. Within seven chapters, the author explains in detail the core features and evolution mechanism of the collective model throughout different periods since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China.

This book will be of interest to all levels of students and scholars who study contemporary China, modern Chinese history and collectivism, especially those who are concerned with rural area development and the land systems.

Chen Jiajian earned his Ph.D. in sociology from Peking University. Chen is currently the doctoral student supervisor and professor at the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Nanjing University. His research interests include grassroots governance, organizational research and rural development.

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A History of Collectivism in Rural
Jiangsu Province

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Foreword

Collectivism is a concept that contemporary Chinese are very familiar with and so is the collective system. In current rural China, land is still collectively owned, and farmers only have the contracting right to farm the land. Most villages also have assets and business entities that are collectively owned. A village is not only a place where people live and work together but also an economic entity, which is very powerful in some areas. At present, the most crucial policy issue in China's rural areas is the reform of the rural land system, and this issue is closely related to collectivism.

The basic structure of the current rural land system is the “household contract responsibility practice” established in the early 1980s, simply referred to as “household output contracting”. This mechanism follows the collective landownership model of the cooperative movement of the 1950s, but the right to farm the land and benefit from its income is contracted to a farmer's household, which the farmers call “contracting right”. Contracting right on the surface seems like a form of individual ownership, yet the term itself reflects that, in essence, it has a strong sense of “collectivism”. “Contracting right” actually implies there is a qualification or identity required for the right, which requires the contracting party to be a member of the village collective. Landownership belongs to the collective, and after contracting, the right to farm belongs to the farmer's household. Thus, this system is also called a “two-tier operation system” in which ownership and operation rights are separated. The purpose of the household contract reform is to provide an incentive to farmers for optimal production results without changing the nature of the collective ownership of the land. This household contract policy achieved great success and became the vanguard of China's “Reform and Opening-Up” efforts. However, in the 40 years since “Reform and Opening-Up”, success and friction between “collective ownership” and “household contract” have coexisted, and this is the key thread to our understanding of the process of China's rural land system reform.

The first wave of friction between the two occurred in land adjustment problems caused by the change of village populations and the many debates that these changes brought. Village population is constantly changing due to births, deaths, marriages (into or out of the village) and other factors.

Newcomer villagers would automatically have the right to contract land use because they had become members of the village collective. However, since the collectively owned land of the village had been contracted out before their arrival, it was, therefore, necessary to redistribute the village land at regular intervals or at a nonfixed period of time when needed. In the redistribution process, land that had been contracted by village members who had left or were deceased would be reclaimed by the village and then allocated to those new members. Farmers call this spontaneous process “land adjustment”. Frequent and erratic changes of contracted lots caused by land adjustment would reduce farmers’ enthusiasm for long-term investment in the land and thereby affect production efficiency. At the same time, since land could be obtained through redistribution, the rural farmland transfer market was greatly stimulated. Since the late 1990s, the government has implemented the policy of “no land increase or decrease due to change of population” and abolished land adjustment to make the cultivated lots relatively stable and also to promote the development of the land transfer market. In this way, if new villagers want to obtain land, they can only do so by transferring from or leasing other villagers’ lots, which to a large extent would no longer reflect the farmers’ identity and status as “members of the collective”.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the government launched a large-scale reform of rural taxes and fees. The withholding funds paid by farmers to the village collective were merged into the agricultural tax. After 2005, agricultural taxes were abolished. This means that farmers do not need to pay a leasing fee for farmland contracted from the collective. Since land no longer needs to be redistributed due to village population change and existing farmers do not need to pay leasing fees to the collective, the farmers are only one step away from having full land property rights – i.e., the right to transfer the land.

Collective land property rights are only full and complete if and when the collective has the right of land acquisition. Currently in China, the rural collective can transfer the farmland to the state; then it becomes state-owned land for urban construction. The superficial agent for the transaction appears to be the village collective, but because the administrative relationship of the village collective is subordinated to and closely intertwined with county and township governments, the actual driving force of this transfer is state and local governments. Numerous studies have shown that the current urbanization model in China is mainly driven by land acquisition income. In other words, local economic growth is based on land acquisition, development and transfer. Over the past two decades, the speed of China’s urbanization has been remarkably rapid; towns and cities are changing with each passing day, and construction of the urban infrastructure is advancing by leaps and bounds. All these developments are closely related to the fact that rural land transfer rights lie in the hands of the village collective.

However, the collective ownership of rural land has another effect on urbanization. Since farmers do not have the right to sell land, but only rights as long-term land contractors, this to a certain extent hinders the process of

the farmers' acquiring the rights and benefits as city dwellers when they become migrant workers in cities. When city dwellers' rights and benefits are not given to migrant workers, their contract right of rural land becomes the "route of retreat" or a de facto way of survival. In other words, if and when the economic situation is not good and urban employment becomes difficult, at least they can go back to their hometown to live and work on the land.

Based on the previous discussion, we can see that the collective ownership right of rural land is not only a focal point of the reform but also a dilemma. On the one hand, the country's development model hinges on this key issue, yet on the other hand, it affects the welfare of China's largest disadvantaged group, the migrant workers. The stability of life and social security of the floating migrant worker population is not guaranteed or protected. Specifically, if the collective landownership is abolished, the speed of farmers entering cities and becoming city dwellers will certainly accelerate greatly, yet at the same time, this acceleration is at the cost of farmers selling and losing land, greatly reducing their ability to bear risks. At present, China's floating population is close to 300 million and most of them still have contracted land in rural areas, so they are not "landless people". In addition, due to the outflow of a large amount of rural labor, the current model of the "two-tier operation system" of rural land (i.e., owned collectively and farmed individually) is undergoing transformation, and there are doubts and debates regarding how this "two-tier" model can sustain or adapt.

Compared with reforms in other areas, such as the shareholding reform of state-owned enterprises, the rural collective landownership system has been retained to this day, and there are deep underlying reasons for this. We can easily see that the relations between the village collective and the farmers' households are entwined in terms of land use, agricultural production, daily life, village governance, etc., and the knots cannot be cut with one stroke. To better understand these complicated issues, more in-depth study on the village system and collectivism is needed, but such research has been relatively rare since the reform. Hence, this book by Chen Jiajian, *The Many Roads to Becoming Modern: A History of Collectivism in Rural Jiangsu Province* is filling some gaps in this regard.

This book is a typical sociological case study. Based on his solid fieldwork, the author presents a thorough explanation of his study object – the history of the Hecun Village (River Village) in southern Jiangsu province from 1949 to the present. The author's perspective is clear and unique, focusing on the changes in ideas about "collectivism" in the context of the contemporary history of the village. With in-depth analysis, he provides refreshing insights for us to better understand the origin and current state of collectivism in Chinese villages today.

One outstanding feature of the book is that it has a strong flavor of sociology. Most other studies on village collectives tend to focus on property rights from the angle of economic system analysis, which can be profound but has some fundamental problems, such as treating the village collective as a

“cooperative organization”. In this regard, the author makes a clear distinction in the book: “The so-called cooperative, in essence, is a bond of individuals, with a clear precondition of individual rights. Individuals release part of their rights to the collective to form an entity. Therefore, a cooperative is not a collective but an entity established on the basis of Western property rights theory”. Then what is a collective? The author continues, “While doing my field study in the southern Jiangsu region, I came to realize that a collective, in this context, is a collective entity where no specific power is granted to its individual members in any form, so it is fundamentally different from the joint-stock cooperative system”.

What this author is concerned about is not the form or economic function of the collective organization but what such a collective existence means to its individual members in the economic, political and psychological sense or, in the author’s own words, the “issue of collectivity”. More precisely, if an organization is formed by several individuals for the most efficient operation for optimum specific individual gains, then, in essence, it is a “cooperative” rather than a “collective” because this organization is only a tool in the hands of its members, and it can be dissolved anytime when it no longer maximizes the benefits for the individuals who formed it. Yet, the “collectivity” that the author addresses here is completely different. It is based on a force that is generated by an ethos of caring for others. In Chinese society, this force is not reliant on religious or charitable organizations but is inherent in primary groups, such as families, clans, neighborhoods and villages. The sustaining forms of such “collectivity” since the founding of New China in 1949, have been production teams, communes and village collectives.

A valuable contribution of this book is the clarification by the author that “collectivity” (sometimes inaccurately called “collectivism”) does not simply appear or disappear with the establishment or dismantling of the collective economy. In China today, the collective nature of the economy and collective organizations has been greatly weakened in both rural and urban settings and in all regions, eastern, central and western. Yet “collectivity” still plays an important role in China’s social governance, and the author outlines its general trajectory for us in the book.

If we want to have a full and deeper understanding of “collectivity”, we need to go back to ancient Chinese tradition, and this book offers some clear clues, such as the “collectivity” in traditional clan behavior. “The dual-track political governance of traditional society is based on the collective nature of the local community, in that family clans and the village as the organizational core form an effective interaction mechanism with common interests, which in turn interacts with the official governance system. If the collective nature of the local community is impaired, then there will no longer be an effective dual-track political interaction mechanism and the traditional Chinese political operation apparatus will be lost”. If we recognize “collectivity” as the inexhaustible spiritual disposition that constitutes the very foundation of Chinese society, then the era of collectivism practiced after the founding of

the People's Republic of China can be seen as an effort to reconstruct "collectivity", and its success or failure will deepen our understanding of this innate spiritual disposition of Chinese culture.

Zhou Feizhou¹
March 2019

Note

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1 Introduction

Why Study Collectivism?

“Collective” is an important as well as familiar concept to the Chinese. In academic circles, there are diverse analyses and views on the differences between Chinese and Western societies, but the general consensus is that compared to Western societies, Chinese society values the collective more, whereas in the West, the emphasis is on individual and individual rights. The affirmation of the value of the collective gives rise to the concept of “collectivism”, which advocates that individuals should be subordinate to society and that individual interests should be subordinate to those of the local community, the ethnic populace and the nation-state. To the Chinese, putting the collective first is generally considered commendable, and centering on the individual is usually regarded negatively, and is often labeled as being selfish and self-centered. Because of being given such importance, understanding the collective is a key to understanding the logic of the operation of Chinese society.

1.1 What Does Collectivism Mean to Chinese Society?

As a core value, collectivism in China is expressed in various forms and through various institutional configurations, and it continues to change as history unfolds. In traditional Chinese society, the organizational structure of society tended to perpetuate this value. In it, individuality was constantly being trumped and subsumed under the collective. This “primacy of the collective” plays a significant role in economic life, political operation and national defense in the traditional society.

In terms of social life, the collective based on the family clan is vitally important. In traditional agricultural society, the level of agricultural productivity is very low because of frequent droughts and floods, and farmers face great survival risks. It is written in the *Book of Rites Kingdom System*,

A country with grain storage for less than nine years is deficient, for less than six years is urgently scarce, and when less than three years, the country cannot be called a country anymore. Three years of farming must provide one year of grain stock, and nine years farming three years of grain reserves. In this way, within 30 years of cultivation, even if there were severe droughts and floods, the people would not suffer from hunger.

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In an ideal situation, three years of good weather and good harvest with sufficient food supply and surplus could result in one year's reserve against famine and secure a safe normal life. But in reality, such an ideal agricultural production model could not be fully realized, and farmers often face crises of mere survival. Mencius once signed, "In the bad years of famine the ruler and the people were all starved and weak".¹ In the Chengping era of the Han Dynasty, a tragic scene of "hungry people eating each other" occurred.² In more recent times, an extreme natural disaster struck during the Guangxu period of the Qing Dynasty, and tens of millions of people starved to death.³ A historical sociologist Huang Zongzhi once described the living condition of small farmers in Northern China as "the people's noses almost submerged in the flood water".⁴ Therefore, the high-risk level in agricultural production is the biggest economic problem in traditional society, and this is also reflected in high population fluctuations found in China's demographic statistics from different periods. Sometimes the population was reduced by half in a short period of time.⁵ And behind this historical data of population changes, one can only imagine the countless tragic stories in people's lives.

Of course, many tragedies have political and military causes, but the volatility of the agricultural economy itself is undoubtedly a key factor. To improve risk response capabilities, collectivization of economic life is essential. The ability of individuals or a single-family unit to cope with risks is definitely weaker than a larger collective's response to battle these risks of the agricultural economy. This similar logic is also seen in the era of village and township enterprises after the Reform and Opening-Up, where enterprises were established with the full backing of a village or an entire town to deal with market risks. Although in ancient times the country had to provide disaster relief,⁶ the efficiency was low and the impact limited, so more disaster response relied on local communities. Hence as an agricultural country, China's economic life has always placed great importance on the collective. As an example, the *Lü Family Village Covenant* emphasizes "to be compassionate in adversity"⁷; "those who are poor and cannot make the ends meet shall be helped by the group for money or a loan to buy properties, which will be paid back in time". When facing risks, the members of the collective must help each other out. Various organizations and institutional arrangements also ensured the collective nature of the economy. For instance, back in those ancient times, the clan collective had considerable power in the land system, where part of the clan's land was shared and collectively owned, to "assist relatives and friends at the time of hunger and to stock grain reserves".⁸ Even with individually owned land, the clan had the right to intervene. When a piece of land was sold, the clan members had the first right to buy so that the clan's land would not be easily occupied by outsiders.⁹ The clan would also run charity granaries and benevolence warehouses that provided community relief in hard times. In an agricultural economy, an individual's basic survival could only be guaranteed in the clan collective.

In terms of political governance, Fei Xiaotong¹⁰ coined the terms "gerontocracy" and "dual-track political governance" to explain the political

operation of China's traditional society. Fei depicts the "rule of the elders" in the 1930s and 1940s in his book *From the Soil*. There the elder presents a collective image, not playing an individualized role, nor acting as an individual elite, but as the governing body of a local community, managing public affairs and coordinating group interests. "Gerontocracy" is not only a political governance in the modern sense but also has a strong moral essence that strengthens the collective identity.

In the *Reconstruction of Rural Land*, Fei Xiaotong discussed the "dual-track political mechanism". In his analysis, the governance of traditional Chinese society was carried out through two parallel tracks: one was the track of a top-down centralized authoritarian bureaucratic system completely centered around the emperor and implemented by officials and intellectuals at various levels finally reaching the county level. The other track was autonomous grassroots organizations governed by rural gentries who are the actual "ruling class" of the rural community, and the clan was the gentry's organizational base for rural governance. Scholar Qin Hui summed up this model as

[t]he power of the state does not go below the county. Below the county level are only the clans. The clans are all autonomous. Their autonomy is based on ethics. The gentry, who are the elites of the clan, rule by ethics.¹¹

The so-called dual-track political mechanism gave play to the autonomy of the community while providing an effective avenue for the community to interact with the official national government. This way, on the one hand, the core task of the administrative system to keep the country running was implemented; at the same time, it guarded against exploitation by the bureaucracy and allowed local interests to be expressed and fulfilled.

However, it should be noted that the traditional Chinese local autonomy is not the autonomy we talk about today. The former is accomplished in the form of effective local collective organizations, whereas today's autonomy, mostly influenced by Western governance theories, encourages public dialogue on the basis of individual expression and social contract. The dual-track political governance of traditional society is that at the grassroots level, the local collective centered around the family clan forms an effective mechanism representing its common interest and then interacts with the formal government administration. If the local collective is damaged, there will be no effective dual-track political interaction, and the traditional Chinese political operating mechanism will vanish.

Scholar Prasenjit Duara used the term "grassroots governance involution" to describe the situation during the period of the Republic of China, where the collective nature of local communities was lost, the dual-track political governance disintegrated and the state relied on "profit-making agents" to draw social resources, thus resulting in a high degree of tension between the state and the local community.¹² Thus we see how in China's traditional political operation, the collective nature of the local community plays a critical role

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in effective national governance as a whole. When the local collective base of the dual-track is lost, the state becomes a monorail, and governance costs increase sharply, the relationship between officials and the people is highly strained, and this ultimately leads to the collapse of the governance system.

In terms of security and defense, the modern state provides guarantees for citizens' safety, as well as for social stability through the military and the police. Security is a public service provided by the state; however, in traditional societies, the security and order that the state can provide are very limited. Aside from major social turbulence, where the national army takes responsibility for defense, the general maintenance of security and order largely depends on the local society itself, for which local collectives play an important role. The *Lü Family Village Covenant* states that in a situation of theft, "those who live nearby shall try to catch the thief together and if unable to do so, those who are in the Covenant should help; or to sue in court but try our best to prevent this from happening". This shows that the provision of security and order is a hierarchical structure: petty thefts are dealt with at the neighborhood level and bigger thefts at the village level. Although a theft can be reported to the authorities, the primary responsibility for security and defense lies in the mutual assistance of the villagers.

Collectives as the basis of community security and defense are more essential in times of social turbulence or in areas that are not safe. For example, during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, due to a perilous geographical environment and long-term social turmoil, rural residents in the southern Jiangxi region took the initiative to construct fortified enclosures for military defense on a large scale, which became a continuous and extensive regional movement of building enclosures. With the construction of rural enclosures and the rise of a rural armed forces, the clans developed increasingly powerful, militarized and segregated control, gradually growing into a mature dominant force in rural society. The village clans' building of fortifications for self-defense naturally led to the formation of "living together" settlements, which in turn strengthened the clans' power.¹³ Similar phenomena are common in many areas. The hakka earth building complex in Fujian is a typical example. In some areas prone to turbulence, such as in Macheng of Hubei, the local collective defense force lasted for hundreds of years, greatly affecting the course of local history.¹⁴

In short, in traditional societies, grassroots entities often faced great survival risks coming from poor harvests, exploitation of officials or robbery by bandits. This is why the primary goal of social organizations was to reduce risks. Such risks in today's social and economic entities are greatly reduced, and the priority of social organizations now focuses more on improving efficiency, which is very different from in traditional society where grassroots collectives were formed to improve their ability to respond to threats to their survival.

The core principle of governance in modern society is to delegate the responsibility of supply of public services to the state, which can be more fair and effective because of its scale. Whereas the traditional society's dependence on the state was only in an abstract and even symbolic sense, the state

could only provide baseline services in large undertakings, such as the Yellow River water conservancy project and the elimination of local rebellions.¹⁵ Most public affairs services relied mainly on local communities because the state's functioning was not only inefficient but could also be destructive. Due to the imperative economic, political and security demands for survival, the Chinese people's way of living has had to be collective. As a result, a whole set of collectivist values and lifestyles has been derived, and the collective way of thinking blends with collective survival practices. In this way, communities such as family clans and villages have always played an extremely important role in the history of the country and the life and philosophy of the Chinese people.

Traditional Chinese collectivism is natural and original, and it nurtures individuality. Without endurance mechanisms provided by the collective, an individual has no chance for survival, and thus he/she loses his/her sense of the worth of existence. On the contrary, a collective in the West is secondary, formed by individuals who choose to transfer part of their existing inherent power to the collective. The existence of a collective depends on the individual, and the scope and power of the collective can be adjusted through individual contracts. Such a concept has become the basic principle of modern state governance, shaping the relationship between the state and its citizens. The predominance of this Western concept hinders the understanding of Chinese traditional collectivism and its significance.

As the times and the world have changed, some aspects of the nature of the traditional collective have been lost, but many aspects are tenaciously retained. The traditional collective logic is constantly being transformed and applied by new governance mechanisms.¹⁶ In the course of the Communist Party's revolution and nation-building, the collective was reactivated and given a more modern connotation. During the period of the new democratic revolution,¹⁷ people were divided and disorganized and collectives were destroyed. This was considered the root cause of the country's poverty and weakness, and so it became necessary to strengthen the collectives through reorganization.¹⁸ Thus, collectivization became the core of organizational reconfiguration. But the new collective during the revolution and nation-building period diverged from that of the traditional Chinese society. Traditional collectives are based on primary relationships and are naturally formed through blood and geography, where external constraints and internal social ethics complement each other. The collectivization that began in the revolutionary years was a social reconstruction based on the will of the state, where the natural primary relationships were weakened, and a new type of collective was constructed centering around one's employment unit (aka work unit) arranged by the state in urban areas. The employment units of the planned economy, or the new collective, created a new sense of belonging.

Sun Liping in his research on "the Work Unit Society" mentioned that

the formation of an aggregate society is achieved through the organizational intermediary of the work unit system, which renders the state

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tremendous mobilization ability for the nation's human and material resources to reach a certain economic and national development goal. The aggregate society promoted by the unit system overcomes the amassed crisis of the old China's "pan of scattered sand".¹⁹

The work-unit system fulfilled functions of both production management and social governance. Under this system, the Chinese Communist Party and the government assign work tasks to lower-level units through higher-level units and allocate human, material and financial resources. At the same time, a high degree of organization of the population's entire social life is achieved through the work unit, providing labor insurance benefits, housing allocation and children's schooling. Individuals are totally dependent on the unit collective for all living needs, such as food, housing and health care. If one is outside the collective, there is not even a place to eat. It can be said that the power of collectivism has been exploited to its utmost limit.

Since the Reform and Opening-Up, although the work unit as an overall governance system has weakened, the concept of the unit collective has not disappeared. The research of Liu Ping, Wang Hansheng and other scholars found that in the context of the market economy, a "new unit system" has appeared.²⁰ While the state has relaxed the management of the planned economy, the position and role of both large-scale enterprises and social institutions have been elevated in the social economy. The autonomy of the units and the impact of the unit collective on them have increased. For example, some state-owned enterprises enjoy higher profits and employee benefits, while other companies may have far fewer profits and thus provide fewer employee benefits. In the face of market risks, many workers demand to return to the work unit and to strengthen the collective. For instance, high housing prices in big cities make work-unit members more dependent on the collective because only the work unit has the power to fight for benefits through the collective for housing, children's education and medical benefits. The status of a work unit determines the living conditions of all members of a collective. After the Reform and Opening-Up, scholars of the "market transition theory" predicted that the development of the market economy would weaken the power of redistribution, allowing individuals to gradually separate from the work unit and cause the impact of the collective to diminish.²¹ It now appears that once the market has developed to a certain level, most individuals prefer to return to the collective and strengthen the rights and responsibilities of the collective. In short, from ancient history to the present, although the organizational forms and values of the collective are changing, the collective continues to be essential to the Chinese. The collective has played a key role from individual life to national governance, and it is a natural integral part of the living situation of the Chinese people.

Although collectivism studied in this book mainly focuses on rural society after the founding of New China, it can be seen that the basic characteristics of the collective have had a long history and continue to have an extremely powerful impact on Chinese society.

1.2 What Does Collectivism Mean to Academic Theories?

Since modern social sciences were introduced to China, there have been various discussions, and one key question arising is as to whether social sciences, which originated in the West, are applicable to the study of Chinese society. Certain concepts and theories that offer very instructive explanations of Western society are inadequate when analyzing Chinese society. For example, the concept of civil society based on pluralism in political thought advocates separation of state and society. Pluralism believes that society and state must remain separate and independent of each other, and that civil society is a field of autonomous activities. Powers in society should be diverse and decentralized, and different social groups should be able to express competitive interests and demands, for example, by forming organizations to participate in elections to influence the country's political decision-making. Pluralism maintains that the rights and freedoms of citizens are of the utmost importance. In order to avoid interference from the state, citizens should have formal and institutionalized guarantees of freedom and thereby maintain a distance between state and society.²² The idea "social centralism", a form of pluralism, is the mainstream of Western political thought with a dominant influence on actual political operations, especially in the United States. However, when studying Chinese society in terms of the dichotomy of state and society, this concept is very limited in both empirical validity and theoretical deduction. China's civil society has many characteristics distinctive from Western civil society. The most obvious difference is that the independence of Chinese civil society is noninstitutionalized. In addition to this obvious difference of non-institutionalization, many studies have also established that China's civil organizations cannot be completely separated from the government system. These organizations, which often rely on the government for survival and growth, cannot exist as separate and independent entities as defined by pluralism. In other words, there is no clear distinction between public and private domains in China, and thus civil society seems to be in an ambiguous state.

In response to this ineffective interpretation of the concept of civil society in China's situation, academia has made many attempts to improve on it. For example, some hold that the theoretical temperament of corporatism, which originated in Europe, is more suitable for studying Chinese society, and corporatism has become an important perspective for the analysis of the relationship between state and society in China. According to corporatism, the emerging civil society in China does not simply embark on a road to pluralism but leads to a new power structure: under the inertia of the existing framework, social atoms are being integrated into part of the national system in a novel way. As a result, state and society do not appear to be separate as a macrostructure but emerge as a developing form of multilateral cooperation with mixed roles, and interdependence corporatism²³ believes that state and society are not antagonistic but embedded in each other. In some domains, state and society cooperate closely to form a community of shared

interests. For example, in the relationship between government and business, certain government departments cooperate with enterprises to form interest groups, and in the relationship between government and society, some social groups rely on the government for resources, and the government uses social organizations as a governance tool. Therefore, state, market and society are all intertwined rather than being clearly demarcated.

Such important theoretical adjustments from pluralism to corporatism illustrate that social science concepts and theories originated in the West are challenged when attempting to effectively interpret China's situation, and therefore adjustments of academic concepts must be made according to China's particular situations. There is an ongoing process of constant dynamic tension between the interaction of the characteristics of Chinese society and the theories of Western social sciences. For example, although corporatism seems an effective powerful tool for explaining Chinese society, it is still based on abstract concepts of Western society and is insufficient in addressing China's problems. Therefore, scholars continue to critique the approach and try to improve on the concept for an explanation. Some scholars suggest being more specific and calling it "state-led corporatism" to describe Chinese society more appropriately, while others propose to widen the ambiguity of the concept and name it "the third field" or "intermediate field", etc., as an attempt to overcome the limitations of the concept of corporatism.²⁴

There are other academic concepts that are not particularly important to Western society and its academic theories but are crucial to understanding the analysis of Chinese society. "Collectivism" is the prime example. As mentioned earlier, collectivism is extremely important to Chinese society and permeates the daily life and ideology of the Chinese people, constituting the key to understanding Chinese society. But for social sciences in general, it is difficult to find a noteworthy logical place for collectivism beyond the Chinese context.

The primary foundation of collectivism is collective ownership of property rights. There are three main forms of ownership in the West: private ownership, state ownership and joint ownership.²⁵ Private ownership, which represents private property rights, occupies a dominant position in the modern market economy system because of its significance for resource allocation. State ownership represents public property rights, and a large number of problems that cannot be solved by private property rights make public property rights a factor that cannot be ignored. Joint ownership can correspond to collective property rights, though the two are not completely identical. Compared with private property rights and state property rights, collective property rights present an awkward problem to mainstream academic theories. They are generally regarded as a historical legacy that will inevitably be replaced by private or state property rights, which are more in line with the modern Western social governance model. Demsetz's analysis of collective property rights is representative of mainstream theories in the school of property rights. He believes that collective property rights are shared internally by the collective members and are exclusive of interference from anyone

outside of the collective. In Demsetz's view, the transaction cost of collective property rights is extremely high. Because the rights are shared by all members, it is difficult to effectively implement agreements among individual members, and this results in ineffective use of resources. Also, collective property rights are not stable and can often change, either by individuals purchasing other members' property rights to achieve concentration of their own property rights or, due to considerations of economic scale, collective property rights may be split and converted into private ownership in transition to a modern shareholding system.

In short, collective property rights do not provide a stable property rights system in themselves but usually are a transitional stage to private ownership, as a legacy of history transitioning to the current Western economic system. Therefore, in the Western analysis of property rights, case studies of collective property rights have mostly been pertaining to land use and distribution of American Indians or nomadic tribes as symbols of backwardness not worthy of special research in social sciences. Yet, collective property rights continue to be very important to the study of Chinese society because they not only affect rural areas but all areas of the modernization process of China. Major issues such as township and village enterprises, land acquisition and demolition, urbanization and large-scale agriculture all have a close relationship to collective property rights. Consequently, the Chinese social science community has conducted many empirical studies to describe rural collective property rights, such as "cooperative property rights", "harmonious property rights" and "ambiguous property rights". Although these academic concepts describe some of the characteristics of collective property rights in the context of Chinese society, due to the lack of any clear logic similitude between East and West, it is difficult to equate Chinese with Western property rights theories in social science. Taking the term "cooperative property rights" as an example, it does convey a certain empirical explanation, for a collective is indeed a form of cooperative, which can integrate its members, coordinating internally and together competing externally. However, the term "cooperative property rights" does not accurately define the characteristics of collective property rights. The so-called cooperative, in essence, is an association of individuals with a clear precondition of individual rights. Individuals release part of their rights to the collective to form an entity. Therefore, a cooperative is not a collective but an entity based on Western property rights theory. As for the collective property rights in China, the principal holder of these rights is the collective, which is not an association of individuals, nor is it derived from the concept of individual rights. A collective runs at a parallel level above individuals and below the state. Collective property rights are neither a component of state-owned property rights nor are they a form of cooperative with private property rights. While conducting the field study in the southern Jiangsu region, I came to realize that a collective, in this context, is an entity where no specific power is granted to its individual members in any form, so it is fundamentally different from the joint-stock cooperative system. Therefore, it is difficult to fit this kind of

collective into any mainstream theory of the social sciences. The concept of “cooperative property rights” may provide some insight, but it is still essentially different from the empirical reality of rural China.

The term “ambiguous property rights” has similar problems. The ambiguity lies in that, while the rights and responsibilities of private property rights are clear, the rights and responsibilities of collective property rights are unclear. Obviously, this is still from the perspective of Western property rights theory. My field study in the rural area reveals that the ambiguity of collective property rights is only unclear to outsiders. There is no ambiguity for the members of the collective, who are very clear about their rights and responsibilities. For example, in the collective, everyone knows that landownership belongs to the collective, and individual members only have the right to use it. The boundaries of the collective are also clear. The land in the village belongs to the village collective, and people outside the village have no rights over it. Of course, arguments may arise as to who is a member of the collective, but the collective’s perception itself is quite clear. Therefore, ambiguous property rights are essentially a modern social science perspective based on Western cognition in which there exist major deficiencies when analyzing collectivism.

The comments on the aforementioned two concepts do not mean to say that Western social science theories are not important for the study of Chinese society, nor that they are arbitrary statements indicating that Chinese traditional society cannot be studied by Western social sciences. These two examples only illustrate the fact that China’s social reality such as collectivism is natural at the empirical level, but it is difficult to be analyzed by Western-based theories of social sciences. This contrast reminds us that many phenomena in Chinese society require more meticulous studies and cannot be simply categorized based on existing theoretical abstractions. At the same time, it makes us realize that while it is necessary to learn from Western theories when analyzing Chinese society, we cannot truly understand Chinese society by relying only on reference to Western theories without the painstaking efforts of the Chinese academic community itself.

Much of current Chinese social studies, especially sociological studies, are more empirical and lack academic and theoretical depth. Many scholars consider this situation a shortcoming of China’s sociological studies. On the other hand, this also indicates our insufficient efforts to study and appreciate Western theories in the context of constructing our own theoretical and logical thinking. On the positive side, this situation can also be an incentive for us Chinese sociology scholars – i.e. instead of lazily copying existing social science theories – to practically explore our own experiences and better understand the reality of China. Perhaps a more important issue behind the contrast between empirical study and theoretical conceptualization lies in the tension between the Western theoretical system of social sciences and the understanding of native Chinese society. If theorization and logical abstraction are not possible at present, then it is wiser to put aside theoretical considerations for the time being and first respect reality and focus on revealing the characteristics of the Chinese society as it is.

1.3 How Is Collectivism Understood in This Book?

My research into collectivism²⁶ originated from my personal interest in the rural areas of southern Jiangsu.

The process of modernization in rural China has followed many paths. On the one hand, different rural development models prevailed in different historical periods. For example, agricultural cooperatives, people's communes, household contracting and integrated urban and rural development have all been the "mainstream" approaches to rural development but at different stages. Meanwhile, there have also been geographical variations. Since the start of Reform and Opening-Up, different regions in China have taken different paths of development. Small-scale production based on individual households prevails in most of the midwest, while in the eastern region, it is industry and commerce that drive rural development. And within the eastern region, industrial and commercial developments have taken very different forms. The Pearl River Delta has mostly an export-oriented economy, Wenzhou consists mostly of self-employed small businesses, and southern Jiangsu tends to have more collective enterprises. Therefore, China's rural development manifests diverse approaches to modernization, which cannot be summarized or predicted by a simple theoretical model. Among these, the collectivism model is the one that deviates the most from existing social science theories.

The development of a collective economy is the principal feature of southern Jiangsu's rural areas, and Fei Xiaotong calls it the Southern Jiangsu Model.²⁷ The collectivism of rural southern Jiangsu has had a great influence. It has not only promoted the economic development of southern Jiangsu on a practical level but also on the theoretical level, it has challenged the Western economic development doctrines and inspired many new research viewpoints. This book does not intend to clearly define, at the theoretical level, what collectivism is nor what is its academic implication in social science but rather focuses on the phenomenon itself, combing through collectivism at the empirical level, especially its foothold in the rural areas of southern Jiangsu, which reveal its internal structure and interaction process with the external environment. I adopted the historical process research method by diving into the evolutionary course of collective development in southern Jiangsu. From the 1950s to the present, the rural areas of southern Jiangsu have undergone tremendous ups and downs, and the collective has always been the main influence on its evolution.

The trajectory of the historical development of rural collectivism in southern Jiangsu displays the following main characteristics. First, judging from practical experience in rural southern Jiangsu, collectivism has a strong historical "resilience". The challenges brought about by household contracting and township enterprise transformation did not end collectivism but rather caused it to adapt to particular practical forms of collectivism, and new response models were born. For example, after household contracting was implemented, villages in southern Jiangsu collectively developed rural industries, which enhanced the collective economy.

Second, the vitality of Chinese rural collectivism lies in its adaptability. In different historical periods, rural collectivism has formed an institutional system that has been constructed step by step with different practical forms.

Third, collectivism has three core elements: collective property rights, collective organization and collective identity. In China's rural areas, collective property rights and collective organizations have continued to exist for a long time and remain the basis of rural governance. A strong sense of identity renders the collective a remarkable influence in the rural areas.

Fourth, China has many unique institutions, and rural collectivism is just one of them; together with the Danwei (work-unit) system in urban areas, they form the basis of New China's governance system. The evolution of collectivism in China's rural areas in itself represents the path to modern national governance: from scattered small household farming to tightly integrated communes, to market-oriented industrial and commercial enterprises. The history of collectivism parallels the history of the evolution of China's national governance mechanisms.

This book illustrates the development of rural collectivism in southern Jiangsu in seven chapters.

Chapter 1 is an introduction that discusses the importance of collectivism to Chinese society and the challenges that it poses to academic research. The collective is the foundation of Chinese social life, and it has shaped the Chinese concept of collectivism. Yet in the academic study of the social sciences, it is difficult to find appropriate corresponding concepts and theories for the analysis of the collective. Therefore, the research done in this book focuses on the empirical studies of the actual historical process of rural collectivism in the southern Jiangsu region.

Chapter 2 discusses the importance of focusing on the Southern Jiangsu Model in studying collectivism. The rural areas of southern Jiangsu have continued the collective-led development path in their practice with great influence. The analysis of the southern Jiangsu collective uses different research theories to explain the different aspects of collectivism from two perspectives: organizational foundation and property rights structure.

Chapter 3 analyzes the establishment of rural collectives after the founding of New China. In the cooperative movement, the small household farming established by the land reform was reorganized, property rights were collectivized and farmers were integrated into the top-down governance system.

Chapter 4 discusses collectivism in the people's commune period, where collectivism is the priority in all aspects of governance in economic, political and social life. At the same time, various political campaigns were launched to strengthen the collective's power and to suppress tendencies toward weakening and dissolving the collective.

Chapter 5 focuses on the changes of rural collectives in southern Jiangsu after Reform and Opening-Up. The household contracting arrangement eliminated the collective model in agricultural production and returned to the small family farming mode. However, industries in rural collectives soon were