CHAPTER 1

Small Farming in the Market Economy: A Study of a Village in Shandong, and Its Theoretical Significance*

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1 Classic Theory and a Different Reality

Max Weber, as one of the great pioneers of the social sciences, pondered long and hard over the future prospects of the countryside within the context of capitalist economic expansion. Firstly, Weber came to realize that the traditional countryside and modern capitalism form two entirely different development trends. This is because each adheres to its own very different economic logic: the economic order of the traditional countryside is concerned with how, on a given piece of land, to support the greatest possible number of people, whilst the capitalist economic order is concerned with how, with this given piece of land, to use the smallest amount of labor power to provide the greatest volume of agricultural produce for the market (Weber, 1997 [1906]). In this respect, Weber’s thinking is similar to that of contemporary economists. Weber goes further to locate the future prospects of the traditional countryside within his overall understanding of “modern Western civilization.” The basis of this type of modernity is in rational ethics, rational economic operation, rational bureaucratic administration, and rational legal authority (Weber, 2004a; 2004b: 448–460; 2007: 212–217). Weber argued that the village collective is built upon and held together by “traditional factors” like kinship ties, clans,
or historically formed neighbourhood ties. In terms of ethics, economic orientation, the style of rule (herrschaft) and the order of social groupings, the “traditional” nature of the countryside is completely at odds with the rationality of the “modern” (Weber, 2004b: 131–136, 151–153; 2004c: 262–265; 2007). As we see the full emergence of rationalized society’s intense need for expansion and competitive advantage, the basis of rural society—the main objective of which is to satisfy the needs of the collective with household agricultural business, run by its own members as the labor subjects—will be supplanted. In its place, the agricultural enterprise emerges, the aim of which is to seek constant profit, hire free labor power, and firmly orient itself towards the market. With the decline of the household agricultural business, the village, as a collective in the traditional sense, also gradually crumbles and withers away (Weber, 1997 [1906]; 1997 [1895]).

On the fate of the countryside, Marx’s thinking was similar to that of Weber. However, the thought process by which Marx arrived at his verdict was somewhat different. Whilst Weber saw capitalism as a concentrated manifestation of rationalization, Marx saw capitalism as a manifestation of the alienation of humanity (Löwith, 1993). This alienation was reflected in humanity’s separation from the tools of its own labor, and man (or woman) himself/herself becomes the tool (Marx, 2000, [1844]: 50–64). As such, Marx views capitalism as the following kind of utterly alienated social state: society is split into two antithetical classes, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat; the former owns the means of production, whilst the latter does not. Instead, the proletariat becomes instrumental hired laborer, serving capitalist production. During the process of the changes in society predicted in Marx’s history of philosophy, as small-scale proprietors, the peasantry were destined to become separated, either by rising up to become part of the bourgeoisie or sinking down to become part of the proletariat stripped of the means of production. Marx left no place for any form of small-scale proprietor at the destination of these historical social transformations. Be it the peasant, the urban small-scale merchant, or the craftsman working with his hands, Marx saw the decline of all of these classes as a historical inevitability (Marx, 1983: 771–791).

The historical, sociological observations of Marx and Weber on the transformation of the countryside have provided us with rich food for thought in developing our own understanding of the changes taking place in rural China. However, it cannot remain unsaid that their verdicts on the fate of the countryside are deeply reliant upon the history of Western social transformation. Thus the significance of the theories of Marx and Weber is not in whatever standard beliefs they conjured up about the prospects for modernity or social