EDITORIAL
China at the crossroads: social economy as the new way of development

In contrast with the market economy, the principles of social economy should be people-centred, community-based, cooperative, democratic, as well as upholding a vision of a pluralistic society in which production is not for consumption but for servicing the needs of the people.

Currently, China is at the crossroads of its second revolution. Confronted by the social issues and ingrained social contradictions engendered by the development of the market economy in the past 30 years, the 12th five-year plan proposes to maintain the rapid development of the economy, while strengthening social development. Emphasizing the needs of the people, focusing on the co-ordination of sustainable development, and protecting and improving people’s livelihood are thus proposed as measures to promote social equality and justice. However, in China for a long time, the chasm engendered by rapid industrialization and urbanization through large-scale migration has made more than two billion nongmingong (农民工), rural to urban migrant workers with ‘quasi-’, incomplete statuses and identities. Consequently, these migrant workers are left with precarious working and living rights, as their well-being and dignity become a distant dream. Hence, how to resolve the nongmingong and sannong (三农) problem1 is now a focal point in the process of social development.

The 12th five-year plan proposes to remedy the chasm created by urbanization and industrialization through rapid urbanization. The principal goal of urbanization is to gradually transform the rural migrant population into urban citizens, and thoroughly transfer the right to and management of land to the market. In other words, urbanization will soon be brought into full throttle to complement the process of industrialization. The curse which has been cast on to the migrant population will disappear in a blink of an eye, as they are granted the liberating urban citizen status through urbanization. With the willing participation of capital, transforming a village into a city is an effortless feat.

How can farmers live fulfilling, dignified and self-subsisting lives when land is rapidly encroached on by capital? As reality reminds us, the identity and spatial transformation accompanying changes brought about by industrial and real estate capital cannot solve the sannong problem. On the contrary, the means of production for farmers’ livelihoods may even be lost and the basic protection of farmers further denigrated into a woeful state.

On 14 March 2011, we were in Xi Wing village in Chong Qing doing field research on the process of urbanization and industrialization. We learnt that since May 2010, several thousand acres of land in Xi Wing village had been reclaimed, and more than ten villages relocated to make room for a transnational corporation, Foxconn Technology Corporation, to construct an enormous industrial park. Many residents in Xi Wing village were waiting to be relocated. We were interested to find out about the villagers’ living conditions during this period. To our surprise, after striking up a casual conversation about relocation with a villager sitting on the street, more than 30 people quickly gathered around us, all of them eager to tell us about their misfortunes.