'We have a goat!', Kalinka told me in a recent phone call. She was visiting her parents who live in a medium-sized town in north-central Bulgaria. Just completing her fourth year at university in Plovdiv, Kalinka had come home for the Easter break to find the goat grazing behind the flowerbed in the back garden. We joked over the idea of Kalinka’s mother trying to milk the goat; she added in a tone indicating both amusement and distaste, ‘It’s becoming like a village here.’

Yang Zhengui made it clear to me that he never engages in any agricultural work. He felt it was beneath him. The son of a village landlord, he was at the bottom of the social heap – a class enemy – during the Maoist period. This meant that he had to haul more manure buckets to the agricultural fields than his fellow villagers. Not surprisingly, he was one of the first in the village to seize the new economic opportunities that came with Deng’s reforms, and with the help of his able wife and sons who now do the farm work, he has freed himself of the necessity of doing any agricultural labour. Nevertheless, he still lives in the same old wooden house and dresses in the same blue clothes as his most conservative neighbours. No one in China, meeting him on the street, would hesitate to call him a peasant.

In the decade since the collapse of state socialism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, and market-oriented reforms in China and Vietnam, changes in lifestyle such as those described above are frequently noted; the old boundaries that marked rural from urban have radically altered. This book explores of the concept ‘peasantry’ in the
context of changing post-socialist rural–urban relations. We begin with an initial assumption that the term ‘peasant’ expresses relations of power between rural and urban identities. While there are many dimensions to the rural–urban relationships that underpin the concept, we focus on three groups: rural inhabitants, intellectuals and representatives of the state. It is the relationships among these three groups, and the implications they have for the concept ‘peasantry’, with which we are concerned. Our fundamental orientation is the rural – from this vantage point we look ‘out’ to the urban periphery.  

The setting

The three regions from which the papers are drawn – East Asia (China and Vietnam), the former USSR and Eastern Europe – provide the spatial context of the work. While the areas display considerable diversity, they also present significant commonality – in terms of the main theme – justifying their placement within the same work. In these regions agriculture has played and continues to play a significant role in the lives of the people. Indeed the majority of the population in post-socialist states maintains connections to the land, a situation quite different from that in ‘the west’. These regions have also been the geographical source of much of the literature on ‘peasantry’ published from early this century to the present – and more recently, the subject of important social, economic and political reforms.

If we consider the post-socialist changes in their widest framework, they are an attempt to dismantle the centralised state system founded on Marxism–Leninism, replacing socialist ideologies – in their divergent manifestations – with principles of the free market. The now symbolically important date of 1989, or 1991 for the Soviet Union, signifies the point at which a critical upheaval of the political and economic landscape occurred. In many cases, however, the reforms were initiated several years earlier. Gorbachev’s perestroika was begun in the mid-1980s, while in China 1982 marked the beginning of widespread agricultural and market reforms (which were significantly extended in the early 1990s). In the same period, capitalist countries have also taken steps towards dismantling the welfare state and privatising once nationally owned services, but these policies have not involved such massive shifts in the state’s aims and its ideology. Post-socialist governments are now adopting principles once associated exclusively with capitalism – that is, large-scale privatisation of property and the free-market economy. In these states people are reassessing models of progress and