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Land to the Tiller: The Sustainability of Family Farms

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Abstract: This paper on family farms is in the form of an historical review complemented by current and future perspectives from North America, China, Brazil and Europe. The literature review demonstrates the multiple discourses, concepts and methodologies which underpin contemporary understandings of the family farm. The authors argue that family-based farming units are ubiquitous in most agricultural systems and take on many different forms and functions, conditioned by the structure of agriculture in different locations and political systems. Our review accepts this diversity and seeks to identify some key elements that inform our understanding of the sustainability of family farming, now and in the future. The term ‘family’ is the differentiating variable and behooves a sociological approach. However, economists can view the family farm as an economic unit, a business and even a firm. Geographers see family farms consigned to the margins of good land areas, and political scientists have seen family farms as a class. What emerges is a semantic enigma. As an imaginary term, ‘family farming’ is useful as a positive, universally valued ideal; as a definable entity on the ground, however, it is difficult to classify and measure for comparative policy and research purposes. This ambiguity is utilized by governments to manage the increasing capitalization of farm units while projecting the image of wholesome production of food. The case studies demonstrate the diversity of ways in which family farming ideologies are being mobilized in contemporary agrarian change processes. The notion of ‘land to the tiller’ is resonant with historic injustices in Scotland and Brazil, where family-based agriculture is understood as the ‘natural’ order of agricultural production and actively supported as an historic ideal. In contrast, in the Chinese context, ‘land to the tiller’ is a political means of increasing capital penetration and economic sustainability. Evidence from China, Brazil and Scotland demonstrates the active role of governments, coupled with symbolic ideologies of farming, which suggest that the longevity (i.e., sustainability) of family farming will continue.

Keywords: family labour; new peasantry; agricultural policy; rural development; pluriactivity; imaginaries



Citation: Fuller, A.M.; Xu, S.; Sutherland, L.-A.; Escher, F. Land to the Tiller: The Sustainability of Family Farms. *Sustainability* **2021**, *13*, 11452. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su132011452>

Academic Editors: Bazyli Czyżewski, Sebastian Stępień and Łukasz Kryszak

Received: 4 September 2021

Accepted: 4 October 2021

Published: 16 October 2021

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1. Introduction: The Agrarian Question

Family farming is widely touted as the most ‘sustainable’ form of agricultural production. The United Nations championed 2014 as the ‘International Year of Family Farming’, an initiative apparently so successful that it was followed by a UN resolution which recognised 2019–2028 as the International Decade of Family Farming. The resolutions highlight the perceived social, economic and environmental contribution of family farming, most notably efficient food production, sensitive environmental management and family labour, which contributes to rural economic development:

“Introducing the UN Decade of Family Farming: The UN Decade of Family Farming 2019–2028 aims to shed new light on what it means to be a family farmer

in a rapidly changing world and highlights more than ever before the important role they play in eradicating hunger and shaping our future of food. Family farming offers a unique opportunity to ensure food security, improve livelihoods, better manage natural resources, protect the environment and achieve sustainable development, particularly in rural areas. Thanks to their wisdom and care for the earth, family farmers are the agents of change we need to achieve Zero Hunger, a more balanced and resilient planet, and the Sustainable Development Goals.” (<http://www.fao.org/family-farming-decade/home/en/> (accessed on 12 October 2021))

These contentions are clearly idealised—in positing that family farming produces 80% of the food in the world and occupies 70–80% of farmland (same webpage as above), the statistics utilised conflate ‘peasant’ style small-scale production/semi-subsistence production on farms of less than a hectare utilising primarily family labour with highly capitalized units of hundreds of hectares similarly operated by a family. The UN defines a ‘family farm’ as: “all types of family-based production models in agriculture, fishery, forestry, pastoral and aquaculture, and include peasants, indigenous peoples, traditional communities, fisher folks, mountain farmers, forest users and pastoralists” [1]. The definition of ‘agriculture’ is similarly broad: agriculture refers to crops and livestock production, fisheries (capture and aquaculture) and forestry [1]. Any type of agricultural, fishery or forest production where a family is central comprises a ‘family farm’. Family control over production is thus primary in the UN definition.

Academics have been more circumspect in their treatment of family farming. This was a particularly popular topic in the 1990s, when concerns about the intensification and the extent to which farms that were run by families and involved family labour but also employed non-farm labour could be considered ‘family farms’. Criteria also included family ownership or control over the farm business, family provision of capital, transference of the farm between generations and family residence on the farm [2]. The reproduction of the farm and family unit appears to have been of particular importance. Land rights are typically heritable, at least in the West—the reproduction of the family unit in relation to the land assumes that control over the land can also be passed between generations. The criteria around family labour appears oriented to limiting the size of the business enterprise which can be considered a family farm, although technical innovations have enabled families to successfully operate increasingly large-scale farm businesses. In this paper, we conceptualize family farms, after Buttel and LaRamee [3], as those for which the household owns the bulk of the assets, provides the bulk of the labour and derives most of its livelihood from farm income. Despite the question of measuring ‘bulk’, we can take this to be the central concept upon which we can build an assessment of family farm sustainability.

In examining the issue of family farm sustainability, we take longevity to be basic evidence of their survival, indeed their endurance both theoretically and empirically, over time. The survival—and continued prevalence—of family farming creates the foundation of what is known as ‘the Agrarian Question’—the political economy analysis of the transition from feudal to capitalist forms of agricultural production. Classical theorists Marx and Weber had predicted the demise of family-based production under market capitalism [4]. Their theories thus supported the standard economic contention that family farms would disappear in the face of such economic principles as the ‘the cost price squeeze’ and the ‘economies of scale’. Family farms have not disappeared, however; in fact, over time, they have proliferated in various forms in some places and are still in evidence today in many regions of the world. The peasant form of agrarian farm structure, for example, with its associated features of subsistence and family labour, is still common globally and has been revisited by van der Ploeg and others in the form of ‘re-peasantization’ [5,6] in the European and Chinese contexts. The capitalist form of family-run production remains dominant in Europe and North America, and newly created state-backed family farms are on the rise in China. In Brazil, ‘peasant movements’ are promoting land reform and ‘land

to the tiller' as a basic human right. Coming to terms with the family farm sustainability question is thus an important, if fractious, contemporary issue.

In this endeavour we first look at how the standard Western model of 'the family farm' came about, focussing mainly on the past 400 years. An analysis of how family farming has been theorized follows to provide an academic basis for assessing the evolution, strengths and weaknesses and sustainability of family farming in regions from four different continents: North America, South America, Europe and East Asia. The cases were selected to represent the diversity of approaches to family farming in the 21st century. The Scottish case represents the evolution of the classical Western approach to family farming in a very specific geohistorical context, where social injustices involved in the management of estates in the 18th and 19th centuries have led to substantial legislative supports for smallholding, alongside the development of family farming as it is known throughout Europe and North America. The Brazilian and Chinese cases represent direct efforts to apply lessons learned from family farming in Europe and North America, but from opposing positions. In Brazil, family farming was pursued through the mobilisation of social actors who started to recognize and identify themselves as family farmers, and a process of institutional innovation and elaboration of differentiated policies ensued on the part of the State. Furthermore, the Brazilian government, especially Lula's, was able to "export" the family farming narrative (policy transfer), particularly to African countries, gaining significant international recognition almost as a "model" for developing countries. Importantly, in this narrative, Brazil's departure from "FAO Hunger Map" was largely attributed (among other factors, such as the general improvement in income and employment conditions and the constitution of an embryonic welfare state) to the success of its family farming policy. In contrast, the Chinese cases demonstrate the mobilization of family farming as a market form by the state, in pursuit of agricultural capitalism and modernization. Family farming is a policy term imported by the state of China to guide the changes in agricultural policy from the promotion of village farming to that of capitalist agriculture. The term creates an illusion of continuity that family farms are an upgraded version of household farms, but in fact, they are commercial farms emerging from agricultural capitalism that can potentially differentiate into capitalist farms.

As a set, the cases demonstrate the highly variable role of the state, and cultural imaginaries of family farming. They are not representative in a systematic way but demonstrate important contrasts in how notions of family farming are being mobilised. In this way, we can review the highlights from the case studies, including Europe and North America, to illustrate the variability in ideology and practices of family farming, especially those that demonstrate the important role of the state and how the image of family farms has been created and upheld over time.

2. The Standard Western Version of Family Farming

In this section, we trace some of the steps taken to elucidate the basic concept of the family farm. This requires careful reference to what may be considered the significant literature on family farming, which is therefore selective and particular to those doing the selecting. The seminal literature in this field (e.g., Chayanov, Friedmann, Buttel, Newby, Gasson and Marsden) forms a foundation for an analysis of the cases presented from Scotland, Brazil and China. This enables us to identify a shared framework for considering the sustainability of family farming and its role in the structure of most agricultural systems. In this section attention will be focused on the European and North American experience in formulating what might be referred to as the basic Western model of family farming. For a summary of terms, see Appendix A.

In Europe, the formation of family farms is traceable to the 18th century when feudal estates were broken up to form tenant farms. In preceding centuries, the feudal system had either created large estates with village-based agricultural laborers or field systems in which villagers held loyalty rights to strips of land, most often a furlong (approximately 200 m) in length (Figure 1). It was not until these feudal lands were re-divided into

separate land holdings by various forms of enclosure or by dividing the landed estates into tenant holdings, sometimes by land reform, that the notion of family farms took shape. Such actions created rents and sharecropping practices which involved whole families in the singular pursuit of farming. Over time, this led to the distinction between village-based farming systems involving mostly landless laborers, many of whom later migrated into cities to take up industrial employment, and tenant farm households, some of whom ('yeomen farmers') became well established by engaging in the latest agricultural improvements and by responding to the increasing demands of agricultural markets, especially in industrial areas and in periods of European conflicts.

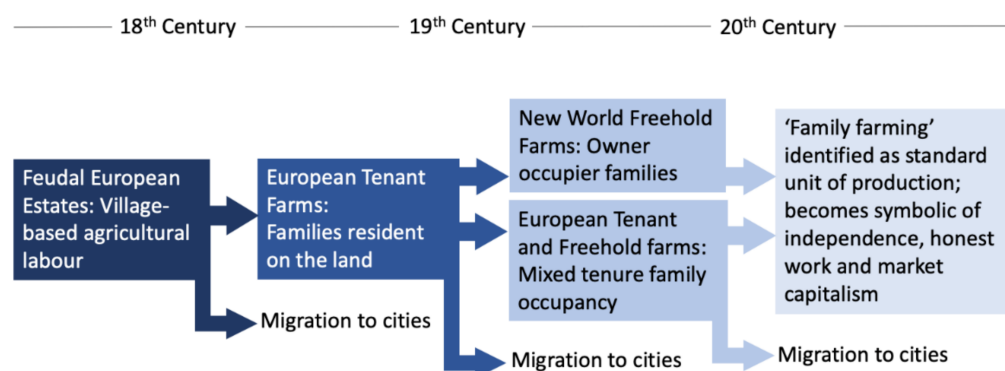


Figure 1. Simplified overview of family farm genesis in the global West.

Arguably the most important outcome of family-run tenant or freehold farms was the transfer of the freehold model with the great human migrations from Europe to North America and Australasia in the mid to late 19th century and in the first 10 years of the new millennium. Disaffected farm families in rural Europe, mostly exploited tenants, were recruited to form a settler society in the vast areas of relatively free land in the forests and grasslands of the New World, and the model they used to occupy land was that of the freehold family farm.

New World settlement took many forms, but the common denominators were that the farm, ranch or homestead was family run and that farm households lived on their farms. The first generations of settlers had large families and undertook to establish a family farm, most commonly of 100 acres of land:

“Cutting and clearing forest land, the logging connected with this land improvement, making pails or tubs for the house, repairing tools or making new ones, dressing the flax for spinning, making linen for bags as well as for the house, making boots, mittens and harnesses from the hides that they had tanned on shares, splitting and making shingles for the roof, making cane furniture, melting pewter and making spoons, with moulds, shoeing horses, leaching ashes and boiling lye to make potash for sale, labouring on public roads as required by statute, slaughtering meat for the household, transporting products to market and hauling in all building supplies, splitting rails for fences, and digging the well”.

[7]

Such descriptions of pioneer farming are myriad, and in this case, it throws light on the origins of family farming in forested lands in central Canada. It is onto this settler environment that a wheat economy was developed to supply a market economy driven by dramatic increases in urban industrial populations. The wheat export market was also boosted by a series of corn laws that enabled settler agriculture to thrive and to turn to dairying and apples when wheat crops declined due to soil exhaustion and competition from other wheat growing areas such as Argentina and India [8].

It was the US Land Grant college system and extension services based on experimental farms that consolidated family farms as the backbone of agriculture by the end of the

19th century in the USA. Almost all the bulletins from the land grant system in the 20th century, designed to promote science and best practices, refer to the family farm as the standard unit of production. Thus, the primary form of modernization in agriculture was established for the first 70 years of the 20th century. USDA extension services, and to some extent those in Canada [9], formulated such notions as the ‘diffusion of innovations’ [10], which introduced differentiating terms such as ‘innovators’ and ‘laggards’. Incentives (e.g., not to be considered a laggard) became one of the main inducements for improving the economic efficiency of family farms.

It is in this process that the term ‘family farm’ became enshrined in the hearts and minds of the North American agricultural community and to a lesser extent in Europe [11]. Thomas Jefferson in particular wrote about farming as the basic profession upon which all others depend. Farming was seen as an inherently moral activity, providing food, the basis for economic development and indeed democracy. The notion of full-time farming was particularly embraced, following a tenet that agriculture is “not an occupation so much as an all-encompassing lifestyle whose purpose was sustaining families and communities in addition to fields and pastures” [12] (p. 209). Farming was understood as ‘natural’ and inherently moral, grounded in the virtue of hard work [13].

3. Theorizing the Family Farm

Theoretical and conceptual views of family farming vary according to the disciplinary background of the scholar. Economists have seen family farms as units of production; firms and business theories have been applied most often based on economies of scale [14] and management models. Sociologists have exercised a wider scope and have expounded on gender relations, particularly the division of labour [15] (p. 336) and issues such as leadership, decision making, succession and entrepreneurship within the farming family [3,16]. Distance decay (cost of covering distance) and spatial relations (farm and markets) theories have been put forward by geographers, while political scientists have developed a number of hypotheses around agricultural policy [17]. Historians have theorised on past events such as agricultural revolutions, peasant revolts and land reforms [18–20]. All the efforts to examine family farms start with a disciplinary perspective which adds insight and questions but seldom comes to grips with the unique circumstance of a family living and working on their own land and being vulnerable to the vagaries of weather and changing political and social conditions. Only a few scholars have developed cross-cutting analyses of farm family life, the most prominent of which is the concept and study of farm family livelihoods [21–23]. This approach looks at the farm family from within as opposed to examining the effects of external forces to which farm families have to respond to as in the ‘task-oriented society’ [24].

After Marx and Engels predicted the demise of the individual farm, the first important attempt to ground the family farm in a theoretical framework was made by Chayanov in the 1920s [25]. The Russian thinker articulated a theory of peasant family farming, the central concept of which was that of the ‘agricultural labour farm.’ This comprised three elements: the family labour farm, the single-labour income and the labour–consumer balance. The basic notion was that the labour of the family is equated with the farm products made available for family consumption over a year. With such concepts of labour–consumer balance, farm family effects on demographic and social differentiation and his theory of rent, we are provided with a discussion on peasant farm organizational conditions. The emphasis on labour is explicit and establishes that family labour is the central tenet of the peasant family farm. Both Chayanov [25] and later Kautsky [26] argued for the inherent resilience of family-based production: families tend to be more flexible in terms of labour allocation than employees and are better able to navigate the low and fluctuating returns of agricultural commodity production. Although flawed in theoretical detail [27], Chayanov outlined some of the central characteristics of the peasant family farm and established a line of thinking that has produced reactions and elaborations from subsequent scholars on the fundamental family farm concept based on family labour.

One of the subsequent scholars who contributed substantially to the discourse on family farming was Harriet Friedmann who published her work on this topic in two seminal papers (1978 to 1982). Her basic notion is that of ‘simple commodity production’, which posits that a farm family produces a commercial product only with their own labour and resources. This means that no hired labour is involved in farm production and therefore only one class of people is present in the enterprise; class differentiation is minimized at this level. The overwhelming reason for this development from 1873 to 1936 is the preference for the cultivation of wheat and the growth of a world market for grains and later oilseeds [28,29]. Although counter-intuitive at the time, Friedmann establishes that such simple commodity farms have either shed labour or resisted the need for hired labour, even as such farms became bigger and more complex in terms of internal organization. This then leads to the common presence in North America, Australia and Europe of family labour farms as opposed to capitalistic operations run with hired labour. Mann and Dickinson [29] offer further reasons why capitalistic farming had not developed as the dominant mode of production as labour tends to be substituted by capital as farms get bigger. In this configuration, family farms are mostly kinship based.

Another contribution to the family farm conceptual debate was made by Buttel and LaRemee [3] in their somewhat ambiguous paper on the ‘disappearing middle’. Most researchers at the time considered the ‘middle’ in the agricultural structures of North America to be largely made up of family farms. Thus, to argue that the ‘middle’ was disappearing was to argue that family farms were in decline. Smallholders and corporate farms formed the lower and upper echelons of this simple scale, whether measured by farmland size or farm income. Although the proposition of the disappearing middle was not fully supported by available statistics [30], the paper provided another attempt to examine the prediction that family farms would disappear. Other opposing attempts to assert the ‘mythology’ of the family farm and ‘the moral obligation to save the family farm’ were made by Vogler [31] and Comstock [32], respectively.

Over time, the notion of family farming became more about imagery than a real entity as farms in the global West adopted the logics of the scale economy and became larger, more mechanized and capital-intensive. For example, in the post-World War Two period, the advertising industry was fond of employing the image of the good and healthy life of a farm family, which would reflect well on the products that they promoted, despite the fact that many such products were processed in large factories located in cities. Books on family farming such as the one by the Marty Strange [33] helped to sustain the agrarian image of farm families being ‘salt of the earth’. In this period, however, large-scale farms inevitably required hired labour, which has tended to dissolve the concept of the farm as run by a family only and has led to the many debates on what is a family farm.

The modernization of ‘family farming’ and agricultural production in general led to a more critical agrarian stance in the mid-20th century. Authors such as Wendell Berry and Rachel Carson raised social and environmental justice issues associated with the modernisation of agriculture, a ‘critical agrarianism’. A cohort of idealists went ‘back to the land’ in both Europe and North America in the 1960s and 1970s, pursuing family-based agricultural production that sought to counter the economic power and environmental impacts of intensification in agriculture, played out against broader social influences such as the Vietnam War [34]. These movements dissipated in the 1980s and 1990s but have seen a resurgence in the 2000s [35] with a new counterculture of family farming grounded in short food supply chains and low-input (often organic) production. There are thus parallel, conflicting discourses espousing the value of family-based agricultural production, with very different conceptions of family farming [36].

4. Contemporary Issues

The structure of the agricultural sector within late capitalism is thus peculiar, reflecting specific land and household-held capital relations. Farm households are typically resident on the land holdings on which they make their living; farms thus combine both residential

and agrarian capitals. The determination of farm families to retain control over their land—and indeed to continue to be farmers (i.e., to actively engage in the production of agricultural commodities)—has been consistently demonstrated in farming surveys [37–39]. Operating a successful farm business is an important source of identity and prestige [40,41]. Some farmers resist selling their farms, even in retirement, in order to retain the status of being a farmer [42]. A growing literature on recreational approaches to agriculture has identified substantial cohorts of non-commercial farmers or farmers who operate their farms solely for lifestyle reasons [43,44], and indeed, an idealised cultural portrayal of family farming, evident in television programs [45] and computer games [46,47]. The result is a wide variability in contemporary agrarian forms, which are well documented in numerous UK and US farming typologies [48–51], as well a strongly embedded cultural affiliation for the notion of family farming.

Academic discussion of the Agrarian Question per se was largely abandoned in the mid-1980s (a result of the delegitimising effect on Marxist concepts after the collapse of Soviet communism [52]). The academic focus shifted to the differentiated development of the countryside [53], resulting from changes to the agri-food sector, the demise of production-focused agricultural policy in Europe and competing demands on rural space for the production of public goods, reflecting in part the development of a large, white collar service class in rural areas [54]. During this period, the notion inherent in agrarianism that family farms would derive most of their income from farming was largely dispelled, when it was demonstrated that two thirds of farm households in North America and Europe were pluriactive, that is, they engaged in multiple activities and had many income streams such as transfers and wages from off-farm work [55]. When the term pluriactivity replaced multiple job-holding, it widened the understanding of what farm household strategies had been devised to sustain their livelihoods [56–58]. In addition, Gasson and Errington's [2] seminal study on the 'Farm Family Business' effectively argued that family farming did not necessarily need to rely solely on family labour.

The term 'post-productivism' is used to describe the shift away from agricultural production as the primary function of the countryside. It encompasses the transitions from quantity to quality in food production, the growth of on-farm diversification and off-farm employment, extensification and the promotion of sustainable farming through agri-environmental measures and regulations and the restructuring of state supports [59]. The term implies a linear transition from a hegemonic productivism—a criticism strongly developed in the literature, owing to the multiple trajectories of farms and rural areas that it describes, and the resilient 'productivist' orientations maintained through 'path dependency' by many farmers [60–62]. The notion of a 'differentiated countryside' [54], whereby it is recognized that agricultural production has intensified in some areas, declined in others and is only one of a number of sectors in rural locales, is more widely accepted.

In a highly cited article, Marsden and Sonnino [63] argue that post-productivism represents a subtype of multifunctionality, the term used in European agricultural policies. This definition of multifunctionality focuses on the landscape (rather than farm) level, recognizing the different functions of rural land within the countryside. Marsden and Sonnino [63] also identify two other conceptualisations of multifunctionality: farm-based approaches focused on pluriactivity (the integration of non-agricultural income into farming households) and multifunctionality as a rural development paradigm which supports the development of symbiotic relationships between farms and rural communities to benefit rural economic development (e.g., rural employment). These latter two types (respectively) emphasize the adaptive capacity of farm households. Farm households have always been pluriactive to a large degree; the new literature and policy terms changed the characterisation of pluriactivity from one of failure (i.e., that unsuccessful farms needed to pursue external sources of income until they could achieve 'full time' status) to a recognition of the resilience and creativity inherent in farm families through pluriactivity [64].

The contemporary adage is that owner-occupier family farmers 'live poor and die rich': although commercially viable farms require substantial capital investment, the return on

investment is typically quite low. Symes [65] argued that UK farming is a closed profession: only those inheriting the resources of a family farm have the capital necessary to operate commercially viable farming operations. Both the UK and the US currently invest hundreds of millions of pounds/dollars in ‘new entrant’ support programmes [66–68] in order to enable young people to overcome this economic barrier. Thus, while the image of farmers typically presented to the public is one of working class, the economic reality of many of these households in the UK and the US is that they are of at least middle-class standing by most measures. Indeed, Bell et al. [69] demonstrate that the image of contemporary farming presented to US farmers is increasingly one of professionalism: farm management as a white-collar profession.

5. Introducing the Case Studies

In accounting for the main trends in the evolution of family farming in both Europe and North America, we can begin to discern several recurring features that distinguish family farming from other styles of agricultural production. We can utilize these themes to pose questions for the three case studies such that a more systematic review of the agrarian question can be made in Scotland, China and Brazil. In particular, we consider the historical development of family-based forms of production, the role of the state and the associated popular imagery of family farming.

In reviewing the general trajectory of the basic literature on family farming, we formulate a set of characteristics that inform our examination of family farming in the case study countries. This enquiry is inductive and is purposely broad to allow surprise elements to emerge, while covering the basic descriptors of incidence, definition, and history as well as the potentially explanatory factors of State intervention, media manipulation of the family farm images and the indicators of sustainability. Although not fully consistent with contemporary scientific approaches to research, it was felt that this approach was more suitable for the subject at hand. For example, it is considered fruitless to compare family farms in different jurisdictions given the variability of family farm definitions and contexts and the lack of any consistent statistics across nations.

Selecting three very different regions of the world as case studies, together with the Western standard case, is intended to provide evidence of the ubiquitous nature of the term ‘family farm’, while allowing different observations and insights on their sustainability to emerge according to different authors. A summary of the key features of each case study is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Key features of the case studies.

	Scotland	Brazil	China
Historical development of ‘family farming’	Crofting legally protected in 1886; new owner operator farms post-1918. ‘Family farming’ on tenanted and owner-occupied land informally recognised as the common form of agricultural land management.	Diverse social groups with colonial origins, new European immigrants at the end of the 19th century, social and institutional recognition at the end of the 20th century.	Since the foundation of the PRC, there are individual household farming, collective farming and then gradual agricultural capitalization that emerged as family farming.
Major types of agricultural holdings in 2021	All agricultural holdings are considered ‘farms’. Land on estates, farms, crofts and small holdings may be owner or tenant occupied.	Employer agriculture (capitalist enterprises and unproductive latifundia) and family farms (entrepreneurial, commercial and peasant).	Small household farms, family farms, farmers’ cooperatives, large-scale capitalist farms.

Table 1. Cont.

	Scotland	Brazil	China
Recent role of the state	Legal protections on crofting increased in 1976 (Crofting Reform Act), 2003 (Land Reform Scotland Act), 2007 (Crofting Reform Act), 2010 (Crofting Reform Act) and 2013 (Amendment to the 2010 Crofting Reform Act). Subsidies to agricultural holdings were provided through Europe's Common Agricultural Policy (1973–2020) and have continued in Scotland post-Brexit with limited change.	National Program for Strengthening Family Farming (1996), Ministry of Agrarian Development (created in 1999, extinct in 2016), National Policy on Family Farming and Rural Family Enterprises (law created in 2006, modified in 2017), ongoing process of policy dismantling.	The term family farming was imported and officially defined by the state of China in 2013 in support for agricultural industrialization and capitalization. The state provides family farms with subsidies and infrastructure projects.
Imaginary of family farming	Family farming is recognised as the basic unit of agricultural production and important for rural economic development. Crofts in particular are recognised as important for 'keeping the lights on' in rural areas.	Recognition and promotion of family farming as a central social and normative category for rural development in Brazil. Fierce narrative disputes, marked by systematic conservative attacks over the meaning of family farming and the public policies targeted at the segment.	Family farms are an upgraded version of household farms. In fact, they are commercial farms emerging from agricultural capitalism that can potentially differentiate into capitalist farms.
Sustainability	Recent EU subsidies have emphasised increasing the environmental sustainability of farming. Upland farms and crofts are considered to be more environmentally and socially sustainable because the land is not suited to intensive production. Most farms and crofts in Scotland would not be profitable without subsidies.	It is assumed that family farming is inherently sustainable and more respectful of nature than the agribusiness model. However, only a minority practice 'agro-ecology' and a substantial portion continues to pursue intensification (the 'green revolution' model). Significant economic relevance.	The officially defined family farm in China largely conforms to agribusiness. They contribute to rural–urban migration of agricultural labourers, environmental and ecological costs and require community re-construction.

5.1. Family Farming in Scotland

In much of Europe and North America, the classical image of 20th-century farmers is one of 'family farming' [70], typically involving farm household occupancy of the land base, family labour and intergenerational succession [2,71,72]. In the United Kingdom, the heritage of large-scale land ownership (estates) led to the development of a family farming culture that has a strong foundation in tenancy; that is, land owned by large estates and rented to tenants on a long-term basis. A major distinction between North American and British 'family farms' is that, in the UK, farmland is frequently tenanted on a long-term basis to farmers (and crofters) who have legally protected rights, including longevity of tenure. Prior to reforms in the 1980s, these tenancies were typically heritable, that is, passed between generations, with heritable croft tenancies continuing to this day in Scotland. In North America, the common form of tenure of family farms is that of freehold.

There are three major land holding structures in the UK: estates, farms and crofts, although crofts are solely located in Scotland. In practice, these categories are often blurred, as large estates frequently tenant land to farmers. Farms may be owner occupied or tenanted—or, in some cases, both. Crofts—legally protected smallholdings—are often amalgamated to a size commensurate to a farm and can similarly be owned by crofters

or tenanted from an estate or another land holding body (e.g., private companies, public bodies). There are also smallholdings which are not legally recognised as crofts, both within and outside of the legally designated ‘crofting counties’ (Argyll, Caithness, Inverness, Ross & Cromarty, Sutherland, Orkney and Shetland). Contemporary Scottish agricultural statistics typically refer to all agricultural land as ‘farms’, with the exception of specific measures addressed towards crofts. The existence of estates is recognised, but they do not have a distinctive legal status (i.e., separate from farms or crofts). In legal terms, crofts are a subset of farms which have specific legal protections and requirements of their owners and tenants. The notion of family farming is embedded within UK thinking about all of these agrarian forms—family operation remains by far the most common means of managing land, whether on estates, farms or crofts.

The development of estates, farms and crofts is intertwined. In the 17th and 18th centuries, there was a series of improvements in agricultural activities, as agriculture transitioned from subsistence activities by tenant smallholders or cottars into units which produced agricultural products commercially. The ‘Scottish Agricultural Revolution’ refers to agricultural changes in the 18th and 19th centuries [73]. New legislation enabled the enclosure of formerly common land and the consolidation of rental units. Coinciding improvements to technology and the development of a global wool trade enabled agricultural production to become profitable; landlords charged rents, rather than allocating land to tenants who provided labour on their estates. This pattern of development in combination with a number of political events—most notably rebellions against rule by English monarchs—precipitated the ‘Highland Clearances’. Wealthy families, particularly from southern Scotland, found it more profitable to keep sheep than tenants on their land. The ‘Heritable Jurisdictions Act’ of 1747 also made anyone who did not submit to English rule forfeit their land [74], which was redistributed to wealthy families who supported the crown. At least 170,000 people in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland were evicted or ‘cleared’ from their homes between 1763 and 1775 [75], often quite brutally (e.g., burning cottages so they could not return). Many of these dispossessed cottars were displaced from northern Scotland to the coastal areas, eventually relocating to North America and Australia.

It was out of the Highland Clearances that the legal definition and protections for crofting were born. Legislation in 1886 defined the legal status of crofters, security of tenure, the right to a fair rent, the value of their own improvements and the right to pass the tenancy on to a family successor [76]. As such, state designation and protection directly sought to counter the effects of the Clearances, with the creation of further crofts and return of land to some families in the 20th century. Estates continued to exist: the protected crofts were located on estate land, where the estate owners retained sporting and development rights.

It is important to note that many Scottish estates—past and present—fall within the UN definition of ‘family farms’, as they have historically been owned by families and engage in the production of agricultural commodities. They are also typically transferred between generations. Although most agricultural land on estates has traditionally been managed by tenants, estates often manage ‘in-by’ land directly. These estates can encompass thousands of hectares of land. Newby’s [76] analysis of 18th and 19th century rural England identified the ubiquity of land ownership as an essential component of gentry status. Land ownership was a necessary prerequisite for standing for parliament [77]. The gentry were responsible for a range of activities within rural areas, including state representation, military protection and various charitable acts. The status of gentry was thus both linked to land ownership and perceived as entailing specific obligations to the other occupants of that land.

The British landed gentry class has been subject to periods of disinvestment and reinvestment [78]. Perhaps most notably, following the First World War, owing in part to the premature death of successors (and associated death taxes/duties) during the war, it was estimated that up to one quarter of the land in England was sold between 1918 and 1922. A new class of owner-occupier farmer emerged [76], although the remaining estates continued to own land and still to do so today.

Modernisation, particularly post-World War II, has led to the intensification and increases in farm size, common across the global West. During that period, government policies supported by a newly formed Crofting Commission, which similarly addressed crofts primarily as agricultural units, and amalgamation was encouraged to yield units of viable commercial scale [79]. This approach was resisted by crofters, particularly the Federation of Crofters Unions in the early 1960s, which proposed a counter vision for crofts as pluriactive and diversified businesses, rather than commercial agricultural units [80]. The Crofting Reform Act 1976 gave crofters the right to buy their crofts from their landlords; this was justified on the basis that ownership would enable the diversification of crofting enterprises and hence their economic sustainability; the counter argument, which still continues, is that ownership would lead to a free market in crofts which would undermine the economic viability of crofting as an agrarian form. Crofts, located in often scenic but remotely located locations, are at risk of gentrification and second home ownership.

For the purposes of this paper, we draw particular attention to crofting as an agrarian form. There are over 17,700 crofts in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, occupied by over 12,000 crofting households, totalling some 30,000 family members [80]. Although Scottish ‘farms’ continue to involve both tenancy and owner-occupation, their trajectory is otherwise much as described for North American family farms: increasing scale, intensification and pluriactivity, with a small number of alternative cultural holdings (e.g., engaged in organic food production and short food supply chains). Crofting is unique to the Scottish context. Crofting acts and reforms throughout the 20th century have increased the protection on crofts to the extent to which they are colloquially described as “small pieces of land entirely surrounded by legislation” [81]. Contemporary crofts are legally defined as:

“a small agricultural unit, most of which are situated in the crofting counties in the north of Scotland being the former counties of Argyll, Caithness, Inverness, Ross & Cromarty, Sutherland, Orkney and Shetland, and held subject to the provisions of the Crofting Acts”.

[81]

Crofting is thus foremost a distinctive legal type of agricultural holding, actively supported by the State. The injustice of the Highland Clearances continues to weigh heavily on the Scottish psyche and underpins the rationale for an active contemporary land reform agenda by the Scottish government. Crofting is subject to specific legal protections and requirements, such as occupancy by the owner or tenant and maintenance of the land in good condition; permission is required by the Crofting Commission for any change in tenancy [80]. The descriptor ‘small’ is not formally enforced; there are crofts of over 100 hectares, particularly in the Orkney Islands. Crofting has received considerable policy attention in the 2000s, with new legislation in 2003, 2007 and 2010, and small amendments to the 2003 act with regard to crofting in the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2016. These reforms have aimed to ensure that crofts are actively farmed: occupied by their owners or tenants, that land is not neglected, crofts are used for useful purposes and to curb speculation. The implicit policy concern embedded in these reforms is recreational (second homes) or absentee occupation of crofting land.

The geographical location of crofts is particularly significant. The Highlands and Islands of Scotland—where crofts are located—are regions of high environmental value but low agricultural productivity. Land quality is typically poor; crofts historically have produced primarily cattle and sheep. Lambs are sent to market at 6 to 9 months of age, and calves are sent to lowland Scotland to fatten. Crofts include access to communal grazing—often hundreds and sometimes thousands of acres of poor-quality land are shared between crofters in a specific geographical area for the purpose of livestock grazing. As such, crofts are typically located on ‘less favoured areas’, as designated by the European Commission. Crofting ideologies thus typically include a strong communal element, where the local community works together several times a year to ‘gather’ and manage the sheep and cattle grazed on these common grazings. The low profitability of crofting in recent

decades, in combination with a change in subsidy structures from incentivising production based to area-based payments, has seen a decline in this traditional form of production, with greater absentee ownership, diversification into more lucrative activities (e.g., tourist accommodation), and intensive use of the land individually held by the crofters. Crofting incomes are low, and in 2018, a survey of crofters found that one quarter of respondents reported no income from crofting at all; 95% reported that crofting was not sustainable without outside income [82]. The small scale and often remote location of crofts has led to competitive disadvantages within their primary markets of lamb and yearling cattle. In economic terms, they are more valuable as second homes for wealthy and/or urban employed individuals seeking an attractive rural residence and life than for agricultural production.

Crofting is recognised by the Scottish government as important for the social sustainability of rural areas [83], specifically ‘keeping the lights on’ through occupancy of land in less favoured areas [81]. Crofting’s role as a food producer is negligible in comparison to other agrarian forms—crofters typically produce little of what they eat, reflecting a Western diet that extends beyond beef, lamb or mutton and the root vegetables that can be grown in these remote areas (i.e., although self-provisioning is part of the heritage of crofting, the contemporary diet includes grain products and a wide variety of fruits, vegetables and processed foods). Crofting’s economic contribution in terms of the value of the agricultural produce raised is minimal, but important in rural areas where there are few other businesses. In environmental terms, the small scale of crofts and remote locations discourages intensive production. Crofting areas also include substantial carbon stocks, stored in peatlands.

The term ‘family’ does not appear in the definition of crofting but is implicit—crofts have historically been operated and inherited by families. The image of crofting promoted by both the Scottish Crofting Federation and government policies relating to crofting make it clear that crofting is intended to be family based. In Black et al.’s [82] study, 65% of crofters surveyed indicated they became crofters because they grew up in a crofter family and 38% because a croft became available in the family (more than one response was allowed). Although crofts and associated tenancies are held by individuals (i.e., a single named person), they are typically heritable. Occupancy of agricultural land is an explicit requirement of the crofting acts; that is, to continue to manage a croft, legally, the crofters must live there, although this is not always enforced. The region has seen a number of successful bids for community ownership of land, whereby the community has taken ownership from former estate owners, through mutual negotiation.

In summary, crofting is notable for its longevity as a form of family-based agricultural production. There is a strong cultural heritage associated with crofting, and it is strongly linked to the identity and characteristic landscapes of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. However, it is clear that this longevity reflects in large part the direct state intervention oriented towards protecting this agrarian form. Crofts are perceived as highly vulnerable, owing to their often remote locations and lack of financial viability. Crofts are more likely to be occupied by older, less commercially oriented farmers, as is characteristic of small holdings across Europe more broadly [84,85]. Recent research into crofting [82,86] has evidenced increasing levels of diversification and reduction in agricultural commodity production. In Black et al.’s survey [82], only 36% of respondents agreed with the statement ‘I believe crofting in its present form has a sustainable future’. However, the Scottish Crofting Federation identifies a rosier picture, indicating the high demand for crofts and increasing numbers of newcomers keen to establish new crofting enterprises.

5.2. Family Farming in Brazil

Latifundium, slavery and the monoculture of tropical products destined for the European market are the most characteristic institutions of the Brazilian economy and society throughout its Colonial (1500–1822) and Imperial (1822–1889) history, even though social subjects analogous to an incipient free ‘peasantry’ were already present. However,

it was the Land Law (1850), establishing private property, and the Abolition of Slavery (1898), allowing free labour to flourish during the Old Republic (1899–1930), that laid the foundations for the formation of a diversity of rural social groups—‘*caboclos*’ (mestizos—miscegenated people from colonial and local origin), ‘*caipiras*’ (bumpkins), ‘*quilombolas*’ (runaway slaves), ‘*colonos*’ (settlers of European origin), among others—who share among themselves a kind of ‘peasant condition’ [87].

The ‘1930 Revolution’ opened the doors for the construction of capitalism and the modern State and shifted hegemony into the hands of the ascendant industrial bourgeoisie and the State bureaucracy, but it had to compromise with the old rural oligarchies to govern, refraining from expanding the labour rights recently gained by the urban working class to the countryside. From the late 1950s to the 1960s, the agrarian question came to the centre of political disputes, especially in the Northeast, the cradle of colonization and Brazil’s poorest region. Among the many local emic categories, the most common political referents at the time were ‘tillers’, ‘partners’ or ‘tenants’. The terms ‘peasant’ and ‘peasantry’ were only used by intellectuals or members of the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB). The Peasant Leagues, organizations created with the support of the PCB, acquired a prominent role in the struggles for agrarian reform—an agenda shared by all on the left. These struggles were cracked down upon after the 1964 coup d’état and the establishment of the military-business dictatorship, which came to foster the so-called ‘conservative modernization’ of agriculture, boosting land concentration and the assembly of agro-industrial complexes—the origins of contemporary agribusiness in Brazil. At that time, the National Confederation of Rural Workers (CONTAG) was the only union organization allowed to operate, under strict corporatist tutelage, and ‘smallholding farmers’ or ‘low-income producers’ became the official terms used to address the subaltern rural classes with access to land [88].

With the end of the dictatorship, the re-democratization process and the rise of social movements and civil society organizations, the struggles for land were resumed. Nonetheless, proposals for agrarian reform brought to the National Constituent Assembly (1987–1988) were resoundingly defeated by rural elites whose vested interests prevailed in parliament. Despite this failure, during the 1990s onwards, progressive forces managed to realign themselves, with three sets of actors actively involved in the process of construction of ‘family farming’ as both a social and normative category in Brazil [89,90].

First, new interpretations advanced by intellectuals played an important role in the social legitimization of the family farm category. Veiga [91] defended the historical thesis that the strengthening of family farming, based on agrarian reforms and specific policies, was strategic to all countries that reached a ‘socially articulated’ pattern of development. Abramovay [92] established a theoretical critique of the category of ‘small production’ and a conceptual distinction between peasantry and family farming, highlighting that the latter is a product of State intervention and market integration. The research coordinated by Lamarche [93] also contributed to show the heterogeneity and diversity of family farming worldwide but emphasizing its continuities with the peasant condition. In addition, the FAO/INCRA [94] report created a typology that divided Brazilian rural establishments into employer and family categories and classified family farming into three types (‘consolidated’, ‘transitional’ and ‘peripheral’), anticipating the formulation of subsequent methodologies and policies.

Second, rural social movements and farmers’ unions started to mobilise family farming as a binding political identity around which a new project for rural development could be built. While CONTAG lost its capacity to mobilize the grassroots by failing to respond to its growing demands, the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST) became the main voice in the struggles for land, attracting public attention with its repertoire of ‘occupations’ and ‘encampments’, pressing the State to expropriate unproductive latifundia to form ‘rural settlements’, and organizing the production of the new ‘settled farmers’. The period from the 1990s to the 2000s sets the stage for complex union disputes that culminate in the formation of the National Confederation of Family Farming Workers (CONTRAF) and the renewal of CONTAG, both committing to a ‘sustainable and solidary rural development

project based on family farming’ and proposing ‘differentiated policies’ to the State. ‘Settled farmers’ discontented with the union predicament created the Small Farmers’ Movement (MPA) and, together with other movements (women, youth, agro-ecology) led by the MST, formed the Brazilian section of La Via Campesina (LVC), which defends the ‘peasant project’ and proposes ‘food sovereignty’.

Third, the engagement of policymakers sympathetic to this project was decisive in consolidating the institutional recognition of family farming within the State. In 1996, the National Program for Strengthening Family Farming (PRONAF) was instituted. In 1999, the Ministry of Agrarian Development (MDA) was created to deal with family farming and agrarian reform, while the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Supply (MAPA) was responsible for the agribusiness sector. The National Councils for Sustainable Rural Development (CONDRAF) and for Food and Nutritional Security (CONSEA) were established in 2003. At the same time, the Bolsa Família and Brazil Without Misery programs were created, the Rural Social Security system was normalized and the Programs of Rural Housing (PHR), Sustainable Development of Rural Territories (PRONAT) and Territories of Citizenship (PTC) were launched. Law 11.326 of 2006 enacted the National Policy on Family Farming and Rural Family Enterprises. It was followed by the acclaimed Food Acquisition Program (PAA) and the National School Feeding Program (PNAE), which connects food and nutrition security strategies to the construction of new public markets for the products of family farming.

Brazil has carried out Agricultural Censuses (AC) since 1920. However, it was only after the 2006 AC that family farming was recognized and officially represented in statistics as a specific category, in accordance with criteria defined by Law 11.326:

- I. land area of up to four fiscal modules (which measure in hectares varies from region to region);
- II. predominant use of family labour;
- III. a minimum percentage of family income originating from on-farm activities;
- IV. management of the establishment by the family.

In 2006, family farming accounted for 84% of all rural establishments in Brazil (4366.267 out of 5175.636), with 24% of the land area, 33% of the production value and 74% of the employment. In 2017, according to the new AC, family farming establishments would have decreased to 77% of the total (3897.408 out of 5073.324), with 23% of the land area, 23% of the production value and 67% of the employment [95]. For those aligned with agribusiness, this drop in the number of establishments and other indicators would be proof of the inefficiency and lack of competitiveness of family farms. However, through rigorous statistical analysis, Del Grossi et al. [96] showed that 660,992 establishments were removed from the family farming classification for presenting a predominance of income obtained outside the establishments—that is, because of their ‘pluriactivity’. Such a drastic and controversial interpretation is a result of Decree No. 9.064 of 2017, which changed criterion III of Law 11.326, defining that farm establishments must earn at least half of their income from on-farm agricultural activities to be classified as family farming.

In reality, this is another manipulative episode in recent Brazilian political affairs. Critical assessments of the current Brazilian agrarian debate—marked by systematic conservative attacks and restricted progressive counter-movements—reflects the fierce narrative disputes over the meaning of the family farming category and the public policies aimed at this segment [97,98]. Throughout the governments of both the centre-right Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB, 1994–2002) and the centre-left Workers’ Party (PT, 2003–2016), despite the enormous power of capitalist agriculture, agribusiness corporations and commodity export complexes, represented by the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Supply (MAPA), family farming, predominantly focused on the domestic market and food security, managed to gain representation for rural development and agrarian reform through the Ministry of Agrarian Development (MDA). It was up to the State to mediate conflicts of interest and disputes in the process of institutionalizing policymaking in order to maintain a kind of ‘peaceful coexistence’ between the two projects, following

‘the line of least resistance’ in the name of ‘coalition governance’. However, this ‘unstable equilibrium of compromises’ [99] proved incapable of ensuring hegemony in the State apparatus in a context marked by growing contestations. This risky pragmatism vis-à-vis extremely intransigent dominant classes, particularly in the agrarian sector, showed its limits with the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff without ‘responsibility crime’, the extinction of the MDA and the dismantling of public policies for family farming, food security and environmental sustainability, all brought about by the government installed with the ‘coup of 2016’. This process has been deepened and expanded at exacerbated levels by Bolsonaro’s far-right government (2019 to date).

The political affirmation of rural social movements and farmers’ union organizations, the new historical interpretations and theoretical-methodological contributions proposed by intellectuals and academic scholars and the permeability of the State, especially from the mid-2000s onwards, to the institutionalization of differentiated public policies put forward a process construction and recognition of family farming as a central social and normative category for rural development in Brazil. At the symbolic level, negative imagery previously attributed to ‘smallholding farmers’, such as backward, inefficient and uncompetitive, were replaced by positive attributes such as sustainable, solidary and food producers for the population, providing the subjective basis for overcoming a historical condition of social inferiority and subalternization. According to [90] (p. 65), ‘family farmers and their representative organizations did not play a supporting role in this process but were present in the historical experience as protagonists of their own “making”—in E.P. Thompson’s sense—as political actors in contemporary Brazil.’ All this shows that the Brazilian countryside goes far beyond the strictly agricultural and that family farming is a legitimate political force of unmistakable economic and social relevance. Therefore, the statistical manipulations and theoretical and political setbacks attempted by agribusiness’ intellectuals and representatives are completely untimely and inadequate. For this reason, contemporary scientific efforts today are devoted to understanding the mechanisms that generate the heterogeneity and diversity of family farming. This involves an extensive research agenda on the internal segmentations and inequalities of family farming and their different reproduction strategies and forms of market integration. It also entails the proposition of a new generation of rural development policies aimed at promoting the production of income, wealth and jobs, social and distributive justice, food and nutrition security and sovereignty and environmental sustainability.

5.3. Family Farming in China

Before the Communist Party of China (CPC) achieved revolutionary victory and founded new China, feudal land systems had existed for over 1000 years. Farmland was owned by various kinds of landlords and most rural households were tenant peasants. Peasant households worked on small plots of farmland and suffered from heavy land rents and other feudal obligations [100]. The revolution promise was to realize ‘land to the tiller’ through land reforms that continued from the old liberated rural areas in the revolution era to the rest of rural areas in new China. Farmland was distributed to all Chinese peasants on an egalitarian basis, and women were entitled to an equal share of farmland as men. Thus, between 1949 and 1956, the peasant farming that operated on household-owned land, employed household labour (with occasional reciprocal labour exchanges) and produced mainly for household consumption was the predominant agrarian form of production in rural China. However, peasant farming encountered many difficulties during this period, including the lack of labour, farm machinery and animal power [101,102]. Yet, what drove the state to eventually re-organize agricultural production by replacing peasant farming with collective farming was the re-emergence of rural differentiation that would result in some peasant farms going under and others prospering on their ruins [103].

The decision to collectivize rural China was made through heated discussion among China’s central government leadership. Between 1956 and 1978, Chinese peasants were organized into a three-tiered collective farming system that consisted of production teams,

brigades and communes. Production teams were the basic production and accounting units, in which farmland was collectively owned, agricultural labour was collectively organized and the output was collectively managed, with part of it being distributed to production team members.

After Mao, rural reform between 1978 and 1982 dismantled the collective farming system with the important exception of village committees (equivalent to production brigades) retaining the collective ownership over village natural resources (farmland, forest, grassland, etc.). This created a unique land system that separates land ownership and use rights—land is contracted to rural households and therefore cannot be sold [104,105]. In comparison to land privatization, collective ownership has to some extent protected Chinese peasants from losing their land and being proletarianized [106]. Despite the protective land system, rural differentiation once again emerged in rural China, and this time it was assisted by the state and the increasing penetration of capitalism in agriculture [107–109]. In this process, family farms, farmers' cooperatives and agribusinesses have become the new agricultural entities of production (zhuti).

Research has shown that agricultural capitalism in China can be realized from above and below [107,108]. The former refers to the state's preference for large-scale agricultural production, which comes from the conversion to the mainstream pathway of agricultural modernization that believes "bigger is better". The latter refers to the bottom-up pathway through the penetration of capitalism in agriculture and the differentiation among agricultural producers. To facilitate the development of large-scale agricultural producers, the state created policy concepts with terms such as 'family farms', 'cooperatives' and 'agribusinesses' in order for them to become entities that could receive state supports such as subsidies, farmland infrastructure projects (farmland consolidation, farm roads, irrigation systems, etc.) and favourable conditions for obtaining loans from banks. In addition, the state accelerated the commodification of land without establishing private property rights by strengthening the contract rights of peasants and extending the tenure of land contracting.

The official concept of 'family farm' first appeared in the No.1 Policy Document (yihao wenjian) in 2013. By the end of 2018, 600,000 family farms were registered by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs (MARA), which is quadruple the number in 2013 [110]. In 2020, the MARA drafted a two-year development plan for the new agricultural entities that included the aim of increasing the number of family farms to one million by 2022 [111]. According to the MARA, family farms should use family members as the main labour force, and their main source of income should come from agricultural activities. Agricultural production of such farms can be conducted on land contracted to them or rented elsewhere. Agricultural activities that are undertaken should be large-scale, intensive and market-orientated. In addition, all the registered family farms should meet locally specific criteria for certification.

In the government discourse, despite China having developed a market economy, agriculture still remains socialist in name. This official stance may be responsible for enabling the MARA to argue that family farms are the upgraded version of peasant farms, re-established after the rural reform [112]. The policy definition of family farms stresses that these farms are family-worked, which has created the misleading "mom-and-pop-store" images of family farms in the popular media. However, the social character of family farms suggests that they are essentially different from peasant farms which were subsistence peasants in feudal times and prior to and following the collectivization era. Statistics provided by the MARA show that each family farm on average requires 1.9 full-time equivalent hired labour and that 71.7% of the farmland worked by farm families is rented through market-mediated channels [112]. The development of agri-input capital since the market reform has initially attracted and gradually forced family farms to rely on the market for almost every aspect of agricultural production. Moreover, agricultural produce is to be sold on the market to generate cash incomes rather than to be directly consumed by the family. Therefore, the commodification of subsistence production has led the once

self-reliant peasant farms to be increasingly dependent on the markets for their production and reproduction. They are commercial farms emerging from agricultural capitalism in China that have a tendency to differentiate [108]. Some of them will increase accumulation and become capitalist farms; others might be outcompeted and reduce their accumulation or go under.

Changes in peasant farms and family farms reflect the pathways of agrarian transformation that the state chooses for Chinese peasants under different political, economic and social conditions. How the state perceives rural differentiation and allows for the functioning of the market have largely affected the specific forms of family farms. Rural China is currently witnessing the rapid rise of agricultural capitalism and the deepening of rural differentiation. Family farms in the policy use of the term have increasingly stood for the winning rural households in capitalist agricultural competition.

Compared with farmers' cooperatives and agribusinesses, family farms are smaller in size and less capital-intensive. Years of development have enabled the exploration of optimal sizes and forms of production in different regions of China based on what crops family farms grow (e.g., staple food, grain or cash crops). The recent development has made family farms seem a rather stable form of production. Family farms in the general sense often refers to their use of family labour and their social connections with the local community. This imaginary praises family farms on economic, social, environmental and other grounds: they are the backbones of national food supply, the stewardship of traditional agricultural knowledge; they maintain the natural environment and the social ties that keep rural communities sound and alive. This can be seen as a form of sustainability. However, in many ways, the officially defined family farm in China is more commensurate to an agribusiness. First, family farms drive small-scale farming households out of agricultural production. Although these households still retain use right over the land transferred to family farms, farmers' cooperatives and agribusiness, they in turn become hired laborers on these capitalist farms or migrate to cities and join the semi-proletarian army. Second, family farms also contribute to ecological and environmental costs associated with large-scale intensive agricultural production that are heavily dependent on fossil fuels and agro-chemicals. Third, family farms promoted by the state are also changing rural communities in China by accelerating rural differentiation and widening the income gaps among rural households.

6. Discussion

It is evident in examining family farming in several different continental locations that family farming is a concept that has a huge diversity of applications, which remain difficult to define and measure. For those obsessed with objectivity, it is a frustrating subject to study. For those interested in the sociology of agriculture (including geography, sociology, economics and political science) it remains a core component, and challenge, of the Agrarian Question. This, we believe, is because it is the family which is the common denominator, and although families are dynamic in the sense of the family cycle, they are much less variable than the systems of production they are engaged in, the environments in which they are found, the scales and levels of technology which they employ and the contexts in which they operate, including varied socio-political and policy milieus. Even the second common denominator of land can vary far more widely (texture, quality and topography) than families. From the evidence above, family farms can even transcend ideologies.

Family farming is not a particular set of practices or way of doing things; the term simply implies that families—including single occupiers—are engaged in the enterprise of producing food and fibre by whatever means. It is with this clarification that we looked at family farms in different locations and can confirm that although farm family composition and structures also vary, it is their strategies, means of production and adaptation to contexts (environmental, economic and social) that make them ubiquitous and enduring. Farm families are showing longevity and political flexibility (Brazil and China), are able

to delegate human resources to different tasks and work opportunities (Scotland) and can remain ‘under the radar’ at various times in anti-smallholder contexts (Brazil, North America and Europe) while lobbying hard for attention and support in permissive regimes and in periods of agrarian reform. Family farms have been around since before industrial times but have not conformed to the capitalist modes of production to the extent that the concentration of productive means would eliminate small producers in favour of large corporate, industrial-scale enterprises. While there have been experiments with large state farms run with wage labour and collective forms of production, it is the family farm that has endured. Why governments would allow and then support such small, fragmented units of food production is at the heart of the Agrarian Question.

We found the presence and varied roles of governments in forming (Scotland, China) and supporting (North America) family farms to be surprisingly constant and vigorous. Governments directly support a range of farming types through subsidies. In fact, small, remote and marginal farms in Europe are supported directly through targeted subsidies and have been indirectly supported through other measures such as the Less-Favoured Areas provision and LEADER programs that often encourage forms of pluriactivity such as agri-tourism. In North America, governments, through their Departments of Agriculture, placed family farming symbolically at the centre of many programs throughout the 20th century. Agricultural education and training, extension services and support for Junior Farmers, 4H, Fall fairs and horticultural societies were all embedded in the language of the family farm and its virtues. We conclude that governments found it favourable to use the positive image of the family farm to consolidate and promote the purposes of agricultural development. As noted, the public were for many decades enamoured by the images promoted in the media of hard-working, farm families. Periodically, over time, these images were tied to faith, health and wellbeing but are now contested in relation to contemporary issues of food safety, farm worker conditions and animal welfare.

It is in this light that the question of why so much government engagement has been devoted to the support of family farming can we consider theories such as the ‘task orientated society’ developed by Benvenuti in the 1960s. This notion suggests that governments faced with the task of motivating a multitude of production units and herding them (farm families) in one direction requires a unifying and coherent framework. Farmers are told they are the ‘salt of the earth’ and the last family proprietors to have independent decision-making powers in eras of consolidation of non-agricultural business units in the name of rationalization. Farm families are lauded for undertaking the task of feeding the nation. They believe that they are free agents, but in reality, they are managed very carefully by the state through education, training, support programs and imagery. Although draconian in its full form, the task-orientated society theory resonates strongly with why the state adopts images of the family farm to help promote its agenda.

In the Europe, China and Brazil case studies, the question of the peasantry arises. Some scholars feel that the peasantry is the purest form of family farming in that there is most often one family, one land base and one source of livelihood. Friedmann’s model of simple commodity production advances the thesis of how self-sufficient farms in the New World came into early contact with the market for wheat and forever left the ways of the peasantry behind. In many old agrarian economies, peasant traditions have lingered and appear to infuse some agricultural systems today. This is especially the case in China where peasant attachment to land is less potent but community cultures remain strong, especially among ethnic minority groups. Since the Second World War, European peasantries have declined as Franklin [113] observes in his book with the same name, the sub-title of which is *The Final Phase*. Yet peasantries remain in many other places, occupying spaces and niches that form labour pools and as occupiers of marginal lands and remote borders. Importantly, the use of the term peasantry, which has long been negative and degraded, is in use again as many rural areas experience a growth in alternative forms of small-scale agricultural production with new uses of modern technologies, creative marketing and claims of healthy products. We owe this semantic revival to observations made by van der Ploeg [5] first

in the Netherlands and then, surprisingly, in China. The new peasantries are formed of young, broadly educated, environmentally conscious people who are seeking many of the social attributes of the peasantry: community, cooperation, use of old knowledge and self-reliance. A high proportion of the new peasants are women.

The resilience of this peasant ideology is part of broader cultural affiliations with the notion of family farming. Farming practices have cross-cultural appeal in terms of the 'simple' and 'good' life ideologies, which is similarly useful for underpinning political supports. Farming is perceived as inherently wholesome and beneficial both for the farmers and the societies in which they are enrolled [46]. The popularization of agricultural practices into books [114], television programs [45,115] and computer games [47] demonstrates that the idealized images of farming life are both sanitized and enduring. In this paper, it has been particularly notable to see how these imaginaries have been enacted outside of the Western context. In Brazil, the ideologies of farming are linked strongly to social justice issues, associated with access to land and the inherent rights of citizens to access land and produce food. In China, there is a tradition of 'household based' production, but family farming has been actively introduced by the state, in an attempt to mimic Western forms of agricultural production; that is, to increase the capitalization of farming. In both cases, family-based production is understood as more economically efficient. In Scotland, support for crofting is part of an agenda of social sustainability and restorative justice for remote and rural areas.

7. Conclusions

In terms of sustainability, we have argued that the longevity of family farming demonstrates its sustainability. The concept of family farming is sufficiently culturally resonant but ambiguous in that it lends itself to both political movements and ongoing policy supports. This flexibility in definition also underpins understanding of the social, economic and environmental sustainability of family farming practices. In the Brazilian and Scottish cases, family farming is promoted as enabling social sustainability—access to land is considered a social justice issue. 'Land to the tiller' is resonant with historic Scottish and Brazilian injustices; family-based agriculture is understood as the 'natural' order of agricultural production. In the contemporary Chinese context, 'land to the tiller' is a political means of increasing capital penetration and economic sustainability. The apparent success of Western family farming has been translated into a political option that is distinctive from the household-based forms. The ideals of family farming in China and Brazil are thus clearly opposing—in Brazil, the promotion of family farming by grassroots movements argues for the breakup of large-scale farms into units which can be managed by individual farm families, whereas in China, the promotion of family farming is led by the government to encourage the consolidation of small-scale units into economically viable farming enterprises.

In the Scottish case, crofting is not seen as an economically efficient means of cultivating agricultural land. Instead, it is promoted by the government as a means of 'keeping the lights on in rural areas'—that is, maintaining populations in remote areas. This is believed to be important for rural economic development broadly but not specifically the agricultural sector. In Scotland, crofting is also promoted as a source of environmental sustainability—crofts are small-scale but extensive, typically low input and important for maintaining traditional crops, conditions for wildlife and carbon sequestration. Small-scale units in general tend to use fewer inputs and therefore, at a superficial level, appear more environmentally sustainable. Family farming is thus sufficiently malleable as a term that it can claim sustainability on many levels.

The UN declaration of the International Year of Family farming (2014) and subsequent decade of family farming (2019–2028) promoted family farming as a source of efficient food production, sensitive environmental management and family labour, all of which contribute to rural economic development. In this paper we have demonstrated that family farming has these capacities but is highly variable in the extent to which they are

achieved. The particular power of the family farming concept appears to be in its appeal to popular imaginaries and its utility as a justification for political intervention in the agricultural sector. As long as it is politically useful both for grass roots movements or for government policy optics, the term ‘family farming’ will remain in use. Perhaps the FAO will continue its commitment to family farming by enabling a global examination of the phenomenon using statistics where possible. As a category for research, however, it remains ambiguous and lacking in formal analytical potential. Our comparison of cases is necessarily partial, intended to illustrate the breadth of applications of the family farming concept. It remains for the research community to find ways to examine this global phenomenon with non-quantitative methods such as social-psychological techniques in order to assess the fundamental attraction of the term and its reality.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, A.M.F.; methodology, A.M.F.; formal analysis and writing—original draft preparation, review and editing: A.M.F., S.X., L.-A.S., F.E.; project administration S.X. and L.-A.S., funding acquisition S.X. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was supported in part by the Department of Humanities and Social Development, Northwest Agriculture and Forestry University, (Project No: 01600/Z109022024).

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable. This article is based on secondary data.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors have no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

Key Terms

‘The Agrarian Question’: a political economy analysis of the transition from feudal to capitalist forms of agricultural production.

Family farm: those for which the household owns most of the assets, provides the bulk of the labour and derives most of its livelihood from farm income [2]. Broader definitions mentioned in the paper include any type of agricultural, fishery or forest production where a family is central [1]; family provision of capital, transference of the farm between generations, and family residence on the farm [2].

Agricultural labour farm: the family labour farm, the single-labour income and the labour–consumer balance. The basic notion was that the labour of the family is equated with the farm products made available for family consumption over a year. Family farms are inherently resilient because families tend to be more flexible in terms of labour allocation than employees and are better able to navigate the low and fluctuating returns of agricultural commodity production [25].

Critical Agrarianism: The practice of linking people and land, past and present, to question and reshape the category of agrarian towards a more just and sustainable future [34].

The ‘disappearing middle’: Farms exist on a spectrum from smallholders to family farms to corporate farms. The ‘disappearing middle’ indicated that family farms were disappearing, while smallholders and corporate farms remained [3].

Jeffersonian Agrarianism: the notion that the practice of farming is inherently moral and just and farming the economic foundation of society.

Pluriactivity: engagement of farming households in multiple income streams, on and off-farm [64].

Post-productivism: the term used to describe the shift away from agricultural production as the primary function of the countryside. It encompasses the transitions from quantity to quality in food production, the growth of on-farm diversification and off-

farm employment, extensification and the promotion of sustainable farming through agri-environmental measures and regulations and the re-structuring of state supports [59].

‘Differentiated countryside’: recognition that agricultural production has intensified in some areas, declined in others and is only one of a number of sectors in rural locales [54].

Multifunctionality: a term used primarily in European policies which recognises the different functions of rural land within the countryside (e.g., economic, environmental, social) [63].

‘Simple commodity production’: a farm family produces a commercial product only with their own labour and resources. Such simple commodity farms have either shed labour or resisted the need for hired labour even as such farms became bigger and more complex in terms of internal organization. This then leads to the common presence in North America, Australia and Europe of family labour farms as opposed to capitalistic operations run with hired labour [8,116].

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