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Shaohua Zhan and Ben Scully

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Land and Migrant Labor in South Africa and China in Comparative Perspective

Shaohua Zhan
Ben Scully[1]

Abstract

In the 1970s Marxist scholars working on political economy and labor migration in Southern Africa formulated a theory of semi-proletarianization. The theory posits that semi-proletarian conditions, in which rural households get income from both farming and from labour migration, is in the best interests of capital because the non-wage agricultural income subsidizes part of the costs of labor reproduction. This thesis has been applied to China, with some arguing that the Household Registration (hukou) System in China played a role similar to the Apartheid system by separating migrant workers and their families. In light of the new developments over the past two decades, this paper revisits the theory and draws attention to the significance of agrarian conditions. By comparing similarities and differences between South Africa and China, we will argue that the key issue of semi-proletarianization is no longer how rural production subsidizes capital but whether peasant and migrant families can hold onto land rights in an era of heightened precarity, widespread land grabbing and rampant capitalist expansion. As such, we propose to reorient the focus of the semi-proletarianization theory from capital and capitalist accumulation to labor and livelihood security.

[1] Shaohua Zhan is an assistant professor of sociology at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore (shzhan@ntu.edu.sg); Ben Scully is a lecturer of sociology at University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa (Ben.Scully@wits.ac.za).

1 Introduction

In classical Marxist theory of capitalism, the separation of producers from the means of production and the emergence of a class of wage labor are the hallmarks of capitalist development. This change, called proletarianization, was first achieved in Western Europe in the 19th century (Thompson 1966; Tilly 1981, 179-188), and it was predicted that it would be replicated in the rest of the world (Marx, 1976: 91). In the 1960s-70s, a group of Marxist scholars who studied political economy and labor migration in South Africa (and Southern Africa at large) found that this thesis of proletarianization was a far cry from the reality. With the expansion of industrial and extractive capitalism (e.g. mining), the majority of peasants were not turned into full proletarians but "semi-proletarianized peasants" who derived only a portion of their income from wage labor and lived off both land and wage jobs (Arrighi 1970).

Harold Wople argued that, in South Africa, by relying on the rural subsistence economy in the Apartheid-era Reserves "capital is able to pay the (migrant) worker below the cost of his reproduction" (1972, 343). Claude Meillassoux contended that "the agricultural self-sustaining communities… fulfill functions that capitalism prefers not to assume in the underdeveloped countries: the functions of social security." Thus, capital is able to exploit not only the wage-earner himself but also his kin-group (1972, 102). Michael Burawoy (1976) put forward a similar thesis by dividing the reproduction of labor into the processes of maintenance and renewal, and argued that the costs of renewal were transferred to the economy of the sending area in a migrant labor system. In the case of South Africa, it was the economy of the Reserve that absorbed the costs of labor renewal including the rearing of children and caring for the elderly. Immanuel Wallerstein made a general argument on semi-proletarianization in *Historical Capitalism* (1983). He asserted,

> …non-wage work (of household members) permitted some producers to remunerate their work-force at lower rates, thereby reducing their cost of production and increasing their profit margins. …any employer of wage-labour would prefer to have his wage-workers located in semi-proletarian rather than in proletarian households. If we now look at global empirical reality throughout the time-space of historical capitalism, we suddenly discover that the location of wage-workers in semi-proletarian rather than in proletarian households has been the statistical norm. (p.27)

Wolpe (1972) and Burawoy (1976) further argued that the semi-proletarian situation is unstable and to maintain it requires the active intervention of the state. The production and reproduction of the semi-proletarian migrant labor force in South Africa depended on the rural subsistence economy and the separation of migrant laborers from their families. Thus the South African state put in place the stricter Pass Laws under the Apartheid system to control residence and movement of black migrant laborers.

The theory made a significant contribution to the Marxist literature by challenging the notion of the inevitability of proletarianization and explaining the widespread phenomenon of incomplete proletarianization. In addition, it advanced a powerful explanation for the motive of the state to control migration and residence. This led scholars to use it to explain the *hukou* system in China (Alexander and Chan 2004; Chan 2003; Harrison and Todes 2015). The system was established in socialist China in 1958 and divided the population into rural and urban categories, which received very different treatments from the state. The system restricted migration from rural to urban areas. In the first two decades of the post-reform period (1980s and 1990s), the Chinese state relaxed the system to allow rural to urban migration, but retained many restrictions on movement and residence (Cheng and Selden 1994; Chan and Zhang 1999; Solinger 1999; Wang 2005). Millions of migrant workers were employed in the city on a temporary basis while their families remained in the countryside. Some scholars argued that this was an intentional effort by the Chinese state to maintain a semi-proletarian migrant labor system so that the wage rates could be kept very low (Alexander and Chan 2004).

Over the past two decades, there have been substantial changes in both South Africa and China. South Africa no longer imposes legal restrictions on freedom of movement or urbanization after the removal of influx control in 1986 and the end of Apartheid in 1994. In China, not only can migrant workers bring families to the city but also local governments in many cases encourage or even force rural residents and migrants to take up urban residence. Yet, neither country has seen rural dwellers rushing to settle down in the city. In South Africa, the post-1994 period has seen a continuation, and in some sectors, even an expansion of the semi-proletarian migrant labor system (Scully and Webster *forthcoming*; Hendricks, Ntsebtza and Helliker2013). In China, rural residents and migrants refuse to take up urban residence and fight against land concentration and expropriation that would turn them into full proletarians (Andreas and Zhan 2016; Chuang 2015; Zhan 2017a; Zhang 2015).

This paper will revisit the semi-proletarianization theory in light of these new developments. The theory views the rural economy as serving the interest of capital and hints at its complicit role in the super-exploitation of labor. Thus it follows that laborers in a full proletarian status would be better off. This might be true in the era of state-regulated capitalism, but it has become a myth in the recent decades, when neoliberal measures such as informalization and precariatization have deprived workers of employment security and welfare entitlements. In this environment, proletarian households that hold a full-time wage job and live in the city do not necessarily receive wage rates sufficient for a livelihood. This has occurred in both South Africa and China. Against this background, migrant workers see land rights in the countryside as a vital source of livelihood security, and use land and other rural resources to lower the cost of living and sustain social reproduction.

This paper highlights the significance of agrarian conditions in the countryside. The theory of semi-proletarianization that views the rural economy as a function of capitalist accumulation, though insightful, omits its importance in peasants and migrant workers' livelihood security. Access to land is a crucial condition for migrant families to mitigate the impact of employment precariousness in the city. Our research in both South Africa and China finds that migrant workers view land rights as a safety net to fall back on in the event of unemployment, work injury and other "mishaps." The comparison also reveals that the two countries differ substantially in agrarian conditions. In the 20th century, China implemented a sweeping land reform while in South Africa, the black majority of the population were dispossessed of land rights and concentrated in only 13 percent of the land (Arrighi, Aschoff and Scully 2010). In addition, the Chinese state has intervened much more deeply than its South African counterpart in rural development, both through the extraction of rural surplus for industrialization in the socialist era and by implementing comprehensive rural development programs. These differences have a direct bearing on the livelihoods of semi-proletarian households.

We contend that the key issue of semi-proletarianization today is no longer how rural production subsidizes capitalist production but whether peasant and migrant families can hold onto land rights in an era of heightened precarity, widespread land grabbing and rampant capitalist expansion. Bernstein (2007) argues that the classical agrarian question of capital, which concerns the transition to capitalism and industrialization, has been solved or made obsolete by the neoliberal globalization and the "massive development of the productive forces of (advanced) capitalist agriculture" (p.40). We would argue in parallel that the importance of rural production in subsidizing and creating cheap labor for capitalist accumulation has markedly declined because of informalization and precariatization. As such, we propose a shift of scholarly attention from capital and capitalist accumulation to labor and livelihood security/strategy in studies of semi-proletarianization.

Data in this paper derive from multiple sources. In addition to historical accounts and national data, we will use our interviews and ethnographic data collected over the past few years. In South Africa, one of the authors conducted more than 100 interviews with rural households in the Eastern Cape, Mpumalanga, and KwaZulu-Natal. In China, the other author and his research team have conducted hundreds of in-depth interviews with local officials, rural households and migrant workers in Jiangsu, Hunan, Sichuan, Inner Mongolia and Heilongjiang. The rest of the paper will be organized as follows. The next two sections examine in comparative perspective the history of land and migrant labor in

South Africa and China. Section 4 discusses how land has been at the center of the livelihood strategy of semi-proletarian households. Section 5 examines the political behavior of semi-proletarian labor and shows how they have to launch struggles to defend both land and work rights.

2 Semi-proletarianization from above and below in South Africa

The recent history of labor and migration in South Africa illustrates the transformation in the semi-proletarian livelihoods of workers. In the middle of the twentieth century, the lives of black workers in South Africa were governed by Apartheid laws that placed severe restrictions on urbanization. With some exceptions, black workers were legally barred from permanently settling in cities. As a result, workers engaged in circular migration between their rural homes and urban workplaces, and relied on both wage and non-wage income sources. This was a semi-proletarian livelihood strategy imposed from above.

In the contemporary period workers themselves have become the main actors driving semi-proletarian livelihoods. Unlike the Apartheid period, the state no longer aims to prevent urbanization. In fact, the state has put significant resources into formalizing the urban status of many new migrants, by building enormous amounts of free public housing where recent rural to urban migrants have established informal settlements (Tissington 2011). The scale of the state's housing delivery programme demonstrates its comfort with an increasingly urbanized population. However, for many of the recipients of state-provided urban housing, the new homes are just one node in a complex livelihood strategy which remains connected to both rural and urban spaces, as well as wage and non-wage forms of income. In short, semi-proletarian livelihoods remain, but now driven from below. This section draws on our field work in rural South Africa to trace the history of this transformation.

Semi-proletarianization from above: 1948-1986

Legal restrictions on rural to urban mobility were in place in South Africa until 1986. So many older people in contemporary South Africa began their work careers in a situation where full urbanization was not possible. In our interviews with these workers in the contemporary Eastern Cape we saw a clear pattern that could be described as the 'ideal' career for a migrant worker. Young men would work on their fathers' farms in their teens and early twenties. They would eventually travel to urban areas, usually Cape Town or Johannesburg, to find wage work. Often these first jobs were short term, with frequent moves among various employers. Eventually 'successful' migrants would find steady work at a single employer which would last for the majority of their wage earning career. Wives of male migrants might also join them in the urban areas for some portion of their careers, usually finding their own wage work while in the city.

The most successful migrants would usually invest any surplus income into increasing opportunities for non-wage production in the rural areas. For example, migrants may buy cattle, improve fencing for cattle or crops, buy a truck or mini-bus taxi that may be used for business income, or they might set up a small shop or some other small business. Upon "retirement", these successful migrants would return to the rural area to dedicate their time to these agricultural or non-farm economic activities.

This 'ideal' career epitomizes the kind of rural subsidy that the semi-proletarianization theory assumes, since a part of workers' reproduction is provided by non-wage income sources in the rural areas. However, a few features must be noted which differ from the somewhat simplistic conception of subsidy which is often invoked. Rural success was heavily dependent on urban wage income. In other words, rural income was not a vestige of pre-capitalist modes of production, but was intimately intertwined with urban wage earning. More importantly, the level of 'success' outlined above was rarely realized fully. What we describe here as the 'ideal' is a sort of composite ideal type.

In practice a range of barriers stood in the way of this livelihood strategy. Black South Africans were restricted from owning land outside of the reserves; and, land in the reserves was under 'communal' tenure and controlled by chiefs, rather than being available for purchase. These facts restricted the possibility to expand rural agriculture incomes. In addition, state support for white commercial enterprises in agriculture, retail, and other industries crowded out potential small-scale rural activities by black people. As a result, while many rural households strove to realize a rural income to subsidize urban wages, in practice this was not always available.

However, the limited possibilities for rural incomes did not mean that rural residents were simply a 'rural proletariat', kept in the reserves only by the force of Apartheid laws. If that had been the case, then we would have expected that they would leave the rural areas for the much improved job prospects in the cities were it not for Apartheid influx control laws that restricted their mobility. Yet after influx control was repealed in 1986, this is not what happened.

Semi-proletarianization from below (1986-present)

There has been, in the years since the removal of influx control, a growth in levels of urbanization among black South Africans. However, this has not meant an abandonment of rural areas. Instead, many urban residents maintain various forms of rural-urban economic ties, including the circular migration which was once assumed to be a construction of colonial and Apartheid laws. Yet the form and function of these ties has changed. Below we will discuss these changes in light of three significant features of the post-Apartheid landscape: the persistence of Chief's authority over land, the expansion of social grants, and the informalization of wage labor.

One important factor in the maintenance of migratory semi-proletarian livelihood strategies is the continued power of Chiefs over land in the former reserves. Most analysis of Chiefs and land in post-Apartheid South Africa has focused on the undemocratic nature of chief's authority (Ntsebeza 2013). In a number of cases Chiefs have cut deals with investors to hand over 'communal' land to private capital, especially for mining (Capps and Mnwana 2015; Bennie 2017). However, there is another side to the authority of Chiefs over land. One of the reasons that the Apartheid state enforced communal land tenure was to prevent the consolidation of land through market transactions and the emergence of a landless population that this would entail. In most parts of the former reserves, this curb on dispossession has been maintained as even the poorest rural families have a relatively secure claim on access to land on which their families have traditionally lived.

Yet claims on communal land come with a condition that the land must be inhabited. In other words, while Chiefs are unlikely to use their power of land to dispossess residents, they do have the ability to reallocate unused plots. The result is that in order to maintain the secure claim provided by communal land tenure, families must leave at least one member resident in the rural areas. This occupation of rural land can be thought of as a type of 'labor' which is an essential component of many families overall livelihoods. This labor is normally done by elderly family members, but it is not uncommon for a working age family member, or even a young person to be 'sent' by family members to stay in a rural area, often with the financial support of urban kin who stand to benefit from the families continued claim on rural land.

A second major factor that influences the persistence of rural-urban ties is the massive increase and expansion of the state social grant system. Old Age grants were already in place for all South African residents by the 1940s, however the value of payments for black people was as little as one-tenth that enjoyed by whites.[2] Beginning in the 1980s the inequality of grant payments by race began to be reduced, and by the eve of democracy, in 1993, the Old Age grant was paid equally to all recipients regardless of race (van der Berg 1997). In the years after 1994 the democratic state also introduced,

[2] Even with these low levels, grants were an important source of rural income even at the height of Apartheid.

and later expanded a child support grant, paid to the caretakers of children who live in low-income households (Lund 2008; Scully *forthcoming*).

These grants have become an essential component of income for poorer households, and they play a significant role in rural-urban connections. As mentioned above, it is usually older family members who reside in rural areas, thereby maintaining access to claims on land in the reserves. The Old Age Grant is the primary source of support for these older rural residents, as well as for those who live with them. Urban-dwelling working-age individuals often send young children to live in rural areas with their grant receiving grandparents. This allows urban residents to enter the wage market without the concerns of child care, housing size and safety, and access to facilities such as schools which come with living with children in urban areas. As such, connections to rural homes, and especially to grant-receiving rural family members, are a major resource for some urban wage earners.

Grants and rural areas are not only a 'passive' subsidy, in many cases grants are used directly to support migrants in their efforts to enter the urban wage market. In our field work we commonly encounter examples of 'reverse' remittances, in which grant recipients or other rural residents who have an independent source of income use a portion of their money to support working age family members in urban areas.

The presence of reverse remittances is evidence of the third major factor shaping rural-urban ties, namely the informalizaiton of wage labor. As in many other parts of the world, the period since the 1980s has seen an expansion of informal work arrangements in South Africa. This development has coincided with the period of increased democracy and freedom of movement for workers. At the height of Apartheid, in the mid-twentieth century, rural to urban mobility was governed by a highly formalized system of recruitment, which included recruitment agents in rural areas. Older respondents in our fieldwork remember wage work as readily available, when and if a rural resident wanted it, by approaching a recruiter.

In the current period the situation for rural to urban migrants is very different. Rural residents have virtually no hope of finding work within a rural area, and even upon traveling to the city it is not unusual to spend months or even years in a job search before landing some relatively stable position. Even for those that do find work, it is often temporary and casualized rather than long term and secure. In this situation, the ability to migrate is dependent on access to resources which can support an individual through the period of job search. Often connections within urban areas are important, for example family who can provide accommodation or connections to existing employers. However, access to rural support also plays a major role. This takes multiple forms, including direct financial support, providing care for children or elders who do not migrate, and ultimately providing a place to 'fall back on' in the event of an unsuccessful job search.

3 Land, migrant labor and the *hukou* system in China

This section examines land and migrant labor in China in light of South African experiences. We divide the history after the communist revolution into three periods, and describe how land rights and migration trends were shaped by political agenda and economic transitions in each period, and how these were similar to or different from South African experiences.

Land reform, collectivization and migration control (1949-1978)

China implemented a sweeping land reform after the communist revolution, redistributing 47 million hectares or 46.5 percent of total farmland to peasants (Bramall 2009, 105-106; CASS 1992, 403-404; Unger 2002: 29-48). The land reform created a small-peasant economy, but this persisted only for a few years. In 1954-1957, the Chinese state collectivized farmland and forced peasant households to join rural cooperatives. The policy of collectivization was inspired by the Soviet model, but it was

also made to serve the strategy for industrialization, which required the control of food supply and the transfer of rural surplus to urban industry (Schurmann 1968: 453-463; Wen 2000: 191-198).

Migration control was put in place after 1958 as the state created the *hukou* system that registered the population into agricultural and non-agricultural *hukou* categories. Without a nonagricultural *hukou*, a peasant could not even find food and lodging in the city, not to speak of a job (Chan and Zhang 1999; Cheng and Selden 1994; Wang 2005). In the 1960s and 1970s, the rural-urban migration nearly stalled and the proportion of urban population remained around 17.5 percent (NBSC 2009, table 1-3). As in South Africa, migration control in socialist China served the goal of industrialization. The difference is that industrialization in South Africa relied on cheap migrant labor from the Reserves. In China, rural-to-urban migration was strictly controlled, and urban industries depended on a small privileged urban labor force. The cost to maintain such a labor force was high because the state and employers (called *danwei* or "work units" in socialist China) provided workers with a range of benefits including but not limited to children's education, medical care, housing, secure employment and retirement. Such a system was premised on the exclusion of rural laborers from access to urban jobs and welfare benefits; otherwise it would not be sustainable (Bray 2005; Wang 2005).

Another crucial difference between the two countries had to do with the role of land in the strategy of industrialization. In South Africa, the Reserves where black peasants lived only accounted for13 percent of the land. Although the Reserves functioned to cover reproduction costs for migrant laborers, it was of little significance in generating surplus for urban industries. Food supply for workers and agricultural surplus mainly came from large commercial farms owned by a small number of white farmers. In the late 1970s, for example, these farms produced more than 90 percent of agricultural gross value and provided nearly all food for urban areas (World Bank 1994, 36). Thus the South African state supported large white farms with generous funds and subsidies while paying much less attention to land in the Reserves (Lipton 1977).

China not only relied on the countryside for food supply for urban workers but also intended to transfer rural surplus to urban industries due to the shortage of industrial capital (Naughton 2007, 55-68; Wen 2000). This motivated the state to support the rural economy. The share of rural areas in public investment on infrastructure and services was substantially higher than that in the post-reform period (Fan, Zhang and Zhang 2004), and China had made great progress in agricultural infrastructure and technologies, such as the expansion of irrigated area and the introduction of high-yield seeds (Bramall 2009, 221-253; MOAC 1999: 32-106; Naughton 2007, 259).

The comparison with South Africa thus shed a new light on the importance of land reform in China. The reform not only created a relatively egalitarian rural society but also motivated the state to invest in rural infrastructure and public services in a period of state-led industrialization. In South Africa, however, the concentration of land ownership in white farms rendered the Reserves, where most of the peasants resided, of little significance in this respect. Rather than investing in and extracting from the Reserves, the South African state allied with large white farms for food supply and capitalist accumulation.

Migration control and surplus extraction exacted a heavy price on the rural economy as well as on the peasantry in China, however. Peasants were prohibited from migrating to cities to seek nonagricultural opportunities. In addition, to meet the purchasing order from the state, they must concentrate efforts on grain crops while sacrificing more profitable cash crops and sideline activities. The mandatory grain purchase based on the "price scissors" transferred more than 600 billion yuan (approximately twice the size of GDP in 1978) from rural areas to urban industry (NBSC 2009, table 1-6; Wen 2000, 177).

Household farming, rural decay and emergence of a migrant labor system (1979-2002)

The market reform replaced collective farming with the Household Responsibility System, under which farmland was parceled out and contracted to individual households. Peasants received the use

rights of farmland and could make farming decisions on their own. In addition, the state eased the restrictions on peasants engaging in commercial farming, sideline activities and labor migration. In 1984, the restriction on mobility was relaxed to the extent that peasants could migrate to cities, but they were not eligible to receive urban welfare benefits (Chan and Zhang 1999; Solinger 2000; Zhan 2011).

The return to household farming and the easing of restrictions sparked enthusiasm among peasants. The rural economy experienced rapid growth in the 1980s, with grain production jumping from 304 million tons in 1978 to 407 million in 1984 (NBSC 2009, table 1-32). It should be noted that the previous progress in agricultural infrastructure and technologies laid the foundation for small household farming to succeed (Bramall 2004; Putterman 1993). Peasants started to migrate to cities in search of work, but the spotlight in rural development was not migration but rural industry as townships, villages and rural households established a large number of factories. By the end of the 1980s, rural enterprises had employed nearly 100 million peasant workers (MOAC 2003; Oi 1999; Zhan 2015).

Although rural industry absorbed millions, it accounted for only a portion of the enormous rural labor force, which totaled 428 million in 1990 (NBSC 1991, 235-238). Therefore, the capitalist sector in China, which started to take shape in the 1990s, did not have to displace peasants to seek labor from the countryside because there was already a large pool of rural surplus labor to exploit. In 1992, China further opened up its coastal areas and large cities. Foreign capital poured in, turning these regions into the "world factory." The number of rural migrant workers jumped from about 20 million in 1990 to 60 million in 1994 and further up to 94 million in 2002 (Solinger 1999; Zhan 2004).

The emergence of a migrant labor system in China should also be attributed to another two factors. An often noted factor was that the *hukou* system restricted the access of rural migrant laborers to urban welfare benefits, thus it was difficult for migrant workers to bring their families to the city (Alexander and Chan 2004; Solinger 1999; Guang 2001). In addition, for fear that the influx of rural migrants would disrupt social order and contribute to crimes, local governments in main receiving areas such as Guangdong province, Shanghai and Beijing meted out harsh punishments to rural migrants who were suspected of illegal activities. Rural migrants were at high risks of being fined, detained and repatriated to places of origin. This was the Chinese version of "Influx control," thought it was not imposed along the racial line but based on the rural-urban division (Alexander and Chan 2004; Wang 2005).

Another factor was rural decay in this period. The Chinese state shifted focus to coastal areas and large cities in the 1990s and offered these localities generous investments, easy bank loans, tax relief and favorable land use policies, whereas rural areas and inland regions were neglected and underinvested (Huang 2008; Li 2008). As a result, the glimmer of hope for rural prosperity that emerged in the 1980s was extinguished and replaced with rural decay and despair. Rural industry stagnated in inland provinces, and rural infrastructure, irrigation infrastructure in particular, started to crumble due to a lack of maintenance and investment. Agricultural taxes, medical expenses and school fees had placed a heavy burden on peasants (Göbel 2010; Muldavin 1997; Wen 2001; Zhao 1999). These "push" effects forced rural laborers to migrate, despite the harsh conditions in factories and cities.

Rural revitalization, hukou reform and precarious migrant livelihoods (2003-present)

The rural decay stirred up resistance. Peasants launched thousands of protests each year against agricultural taxation and other injustices (O'brien and Li 2006; Walker 2008). The rural decay also threatened food security. Although China no longer depended on rural surplus to finance urban industries, it still relied on the peasantry to produce food for urban workers. A 16-percent drop in grain production between 1998 and 2003 thus unsettled the Chinese state, forcing it to take measure to revitalize the countryside (Boland 2000; Brown 1995; Zhan 2017b). The program of rural

revitalization, a.k.a., building a new socialist countryside, comprised a series of policies implemented in 2003-2017, including but not limited to the abolition of agricultural taxes, the provision of agricultural subsidies, the expansion of rural development funds, the building of rural infrastructure, and the establishment of rural medical insurance and old-age allowance (Ahlers 2014; Looney 2009; Zhan and Huang 2013).

Along with rural revitalization was the relaxation of migration control and the reform to the *hukou* system. In 2003, the State Council issued a document outlawing the practice of repatriating rural migrants, which effectively ended the "influx control." It also urged local governments to provide public services for migrant workers. As a result, an increasing number of migrant workers are able to bring along families. The national surveys showed that at least half of migrant workers were living with their families in 2015, and the average size of migrant families was 2.61 people, compared with the family size of urban residents, 3.07 people (NHFPC 2015, 3; 2016). In addition, a series of *hukou* reforms at both central and local levels made it much easier for rural migrants to apply for urban residence, particularly within one's prefecture (Andreas and Zhan 2016; Chan 2014; Fan 2008; Zhan 2011; 2017a).

The population of migrant workers had increased from 145 million in 2009 to 169 million in 2016 (NBSC 2017).[3] Similar to their counterparts in South Africa, many rural migrants in China have been reluctant to sever their ties with the rural economy or change *hukou* status even when they were able to do so (Andreas and Zhan 2016; Chen and Fan 2016; Zhan 2017a). In other words, they want to maintain their semi-proletarian status. This presents a puzzle for the theory of semi-proletarianization. If semi-proletarian migrants were super-exploited, why did not they give up rural residence and settle down in the city?

This has to do with both land rights in the countryside and precariousness of wage employment in the city. We focus on wage employment here while leaving the issue of land to the next section. As noted in the previous section, the informalization in South Africa deprived workers of job security and social protection. A similar process had occurred in urban China (Solinger 2006; Zhou 2013). The State-owned Enterprise Reform in the 1990s laid off millions of urban workers and replaced secure employment with flexible, contract-based jobs. Additionally, the welfare benefits that were once associated with urban *hukou*, such as medical care and retirement, were marketized and replaced with social insurance programs based on personal contributions. Not all urban workers were covered by these programs. For instance, the urban employee retirement insurance program only covered about 50 percent of urban workers in 2006, and it slowly increased to 67 percent in 2016, with many paying their own dues (MOHRSS 2017).

Furthermore, rural migrant workers are in a disadvantaged position in the urban labor market. In China, they are often employed in low-pay, dangerous and unprotected sectors, such as construction, mining and assembly-line factories (Kuruvilla, Lee and Gallagher, eds. 2011; Swider 2015; Zhou 2013). None of these sectors offers stable employment, and many migrant workers have to frequently change jobs or move from one place to another. During the 2008 financial crisis, 25 million of migrant workers lost jobs (Wen 2012, 211-212). In South Africa, a migrant worker might be jobless for a long period of time due to high unemployment rates. In China, the situation is relatively better due to a growing economy, but it is difficult for rural migrants to find a stable job with a relatively better pay while being at high risks of losing jobs during economic downturns.

In short, the proletarian status of workers no longer guarantees a sufficient livelihood due to informalization and precariatization (Fakier and Cock 2009; Martin 2010; Standing 2011; Von Holdt

[3] Migrant workers refer to those who leave their township for at leave six months. Those who work within their township are called local nonfarm workers. Many scholars do not distinguish between the two and call both migrant workers, but this inflates the number because local nonfarm workers do not leave their land and family behind and are very different from those migrating in long distance.

and Webster 2005). With a precarious livelihood in the city, it is thus understandable that many migrant workers do not want to give up land in the countryside.

4 Declining importance of land? Rural land and semi-proletarian livelihood strategy

To redress colonial land dispossession, the post-Apartheid state in South Africa promised to redistribute 30 percent of commercial farmland by 1999. As late as 2016, however, only eight percent of the farmland was redistributed or restituted (Cousins 2016). The land reform and its problems gave rise to the debate on the necessity of land redistribution. Some studies showed that many beneficiaries did not reside on or used the transferred land efficiently, and the effect of land reform on livelihood improvement was limited (Marias 2011, 217-218; Palmer and Sender 2006). In addition, agriculture accounted for a declining share of GDP, only 3.8 percent in 2015 (World Bank indicators n.d.), and 16.9 percent of African households were involved in agricultural production activities (Stats SA 2016, 18). In general, agriculture contributes only a fraction of household income.

There are many constraining factors on small-scale farming in South Africa. The most notable factor might be the absolute dominance of large commercial farms, which crowds out small farms in the market. Other factors include insufficient government support, poor infrastructure (irrigation, for example), inadequate farming skills, lack of capital for agricultural inputs, insecurity of land rights, etc. The land reform has done little to solve these problems (Aliber and Cousins 2013; Cousins 2013, 2016; Greenberg 2015; Hall and Kepe 2017; Hendricks, Ntsebtza and Helliker2013; O'Laughlin et al 2013).

The comparison with China suggests, however, that farming may still constitute a supplementary source of income even if these problems were resolved. China implemented a sweeping land reform and invested much in rural infrastructure. For example, irrigated farmland accounted for 48.8 percent of the total in 2015 whereas it was only 10 percent in South Africa (NBSC 2016b, 44; Cousins 2013, 125). Large commercial farms in China have been emerging, but they are nowhere near the dominance as is seen in South Africa (Yan and Chen 2015; Ye 2015). Nevertheless, agriculture contributes only a small proportion of rural household income in China. In 2015, agriculture only accounted for 27.6 percent of rural household income while the main source was wage and nonfarm business income, making up 52.1 percent (NBSC 2016c, 287). Due to the small share of agriculture in household income, many rural laborers, particularly those who are young and skilled, have left the countryside for the city working as migrant workers. The populations residing in rural areas, often called the "left-behinds," mainly consist of women, children and elder persons (Ye et al 2013).

The commonalities between South Africa and China raise the question whether rural land is still important given the declining shares of agriculture in household income and GDP. As we have shown that migrant workers in both countries are reluctant to give up land rights and rural connections, the answer to this question is undoubtedly positive. However, to understand this apparent contradiction requires a shift of attention away from monetary income to labor conditions and livelihood strategy as well as away from peasants to semi-proletarians. As Henry Bernstein reminded us, "land acquires a new significance in agrarian questions of labor, given the inability of contemporary capitalism to provide adequate and secure employment to the great majority of the working poor in the South (2007, 28-29)." Here labor is broadly defined to include both rural and migrant laborers, most of who are semi-proletarians or living in semi-proletarian households.

Our research shows that farmland plays a crucial role in providing livelihood security and employment flexibility for semi-proletarians and their families. Access to land reduces the cost of living and permits migrant families to tap into social resources in rural communities. In addition, land rights in the countryside offer a safety net when semi-proletarians are unemployed, sick or injured in the city. Moreover, small-scale commercial farming and rural nonfarm businesses in China, and to a much

lesser extent in South Africa, can offer some employment opportunities alternative to urban wage jobs, though they cannot substitute for the latter.

Land for livelihood security: food, housing, retirement and safety net

For semi-proletarians, livelihood security depends on as much as cost saving as income earning. In the neoliberal era, migrant workers, and many urban workers as well, often find wage income or welfare benefits insufficient to pay for daily necessities for the family in the city. A part of the family thus chooses to live in the countryside to save costs. Rural land first provides a source of food for semi-proletarian households. In South Africa, 84.4 percent of the households involved in agriculture in 2015 used land for the main source or an additional source of food (Stats SA 2016, 61-62). It was found that migrant or urban workers living in land occupation sites near the city also cultivated small plots of land for food (Jacobs 2017). In China, most of the households that have members in the countryside farm land for grain and vegetables for self-consumption. This is the case even for peasants whose land is expropriated for city expansion. Our fieldwork in Jiangsu province in 2015, one of the most developed regions in China, showed that many rural residents still grew vegetables around their households even after their farmland was taken.

Housing is a major expense for workers in the city. In South Africa, a common way to cut housing costs is to live in "unlawful" informal settlements on the edge of the city or periurban areas because they cannot afford housing in the formal market (Huchzermeyer 2004; 2010; Hunter Posel 2012). Our interviews with current and previous workers found that rural housing also played a significant role in the strategy of reducing housing costs. Older workers moved into rural houses after they retired while leaving urban houses for younger members of the family who were either working or looking for work in the city. The following description of a household from our field notes provides an example:

> This is a 79 years old man who spent his working career doing factory work in Cape Town. He got an RDP (Reconstruction and Development Programme) house in Cape Town 'after Mandela'. His children now live in the RDP house. They are working but only doing short term jobs. His 50 year old daughter lived in Cape Town but was injured and has returned to live with him and his grandchild. (Fieldwork notes; December 2015; Cofimvaba, Eastern Cape)

To retire in the countryside saves not only the cost of housing but others as well, thus allowing for an efficient use of social grants. Nationally, 21.7 percent of households reported social grants as a main source of income in 2015, and this figure was particularly high in poor areas such as Eastern Cape and Limpopo, 37.6 percent and 33.2 percent respectively (Stats SA 2016, 57-58). However, the amount of social grants is not large. Old Age grant (about 112 US dollars a month) would not be sufficient if one retires in the city without other sources of support. In rural areas, however, this is a substantial income given the low cost of living (Neves et al 2009; O'Laughlin et al 2013). The retirees can stay in their own houses, engage in crop production, raise livestock and spend much less on utilities such as water and electricity. In addition, some of them can take care of grandchildren, and this will further lower the costs of semi-proletarian households. For example, we interviewed an older couple that lived with one child and four grandchildren. The man, 66 years old, worked occasional jobs, but they were all short term. He was primarily a peasant farmer. The couple owned an RDP house in Cape Town that two children and one grandchild lived in, and they sent support to the children who were unemployed.[4]

The situation in China is similar. With rocketing housing prices in the city, the hopes that a rural migrant worker can purchase a flat are dim. To save housing costs, migrant workers crowd into the basements of apartment buildings in large cities or substandard houses in periurban areas, where the rent is low but conditions are poor. To save costs, the elder members of the household choose to stay

[4] The interview was conducted in Cofimvaba, Eastern Cape in December 2015.

in the countryside, often taking care of grandchildren. It is estimated that there are 45 million left-behind elderlies and another 58 million left-behind children in China (Ye et al 2013).

In recent years, the Chinese state tried to move more people to the city in an effort to accelerate urbanization. The newly urbanized residents are offered pension. However, the standard of pension is low, and sometimes it is even below the poverty line in cities. For example, our fieldwork in Chengdu, a large city in western China, found that urbanized peasants would receive less than 405 yuan per month after they retired while the poverty line of the city was 450 yuan a month in 2015. Thus migrant workers do not want to give up land because they would be much be better off if they spend their retirement years in rural areas. In our interviews with hundreds of migrant workers and their families, very few elder persons wanted to retire in the city, particularly those from low-income households. For instance, Mr. Xie, 51 years old at the time of interview in 2013, was a returned migrant worker in Hunan province. Mr. Xie had worked in coal mines as a migrant worker since he was 18. He returned home a few years ago after he was injured and unable to work. He and his wife, who was also ill, cultivated a small plot of vegetables for consumption, and planned to farm rice in the coming year if their health improved. His son worked as a taxi driver in a nearby city while the daughter in law worked for a hotel as a cleaner, both jobs low-income and precarious. Although Mr. Xie and his son bought an apartment (still on mortgages) in the city, he told us that he would not move to the city. "You need to spend money on everything in the city. It is good to live in the countryside. We grow vegetables ourselves and spend much less on water and electricity, and the air is clean."[5]

Another reason that migrant workers retain connections to rural areas is social support. In China, while the exodus of the younger population has weakened village communities, they are still the main sites of social reproduction. Social support based on kinship and common residence is crucial to child rearing, eldercare and crop production. Our fieldwork found that many migrant workers were reluctant to give up rural *hukou* in the village even if the entire family migrated to the city. In South Africa, it is common that urban workers still see themselves as members of rural households. Of more than a hundred interviewees, many were buying funeral plans in the countryside, and this was more so among elder workers. In addition, the networks of social exchange, which weave across rural and urban areas, channel resources such as wage earnings, social grants, agricultural produce and care to others (Neves and Du Toit 2013).

Rural land also functions as a safety net for migrant workers. The significance of this role has been elevated in the era of precarity. As noted above, the 2008 financial crisis led to 25 million migrant workers in China losing jobs and returning to the countryside. Without rural land as a safety net, the situation of these workers would be much worse. Rural land also provides a place to fall back on when migrant workers encounter personal hazards such as work injury, illness and unemployment. As a significant proportion of migrant workers are employed in unprotected sectors such as mines and construction sites, the chances of suffering work injury and occupational diseases are high. In both South Africa and China, we found many cases of returned migrants due to these problems. Some of them would return to the city looking for work after recovery while others would stay permanently due to the lasting conditions of poor health.

Land-based employment

While rural land plays a similar role in livelihood security in South Africa and China, it creates much more employment opportunities in China than in South Africa, and this holds true for both agricultural and nonagricultural sectors. Among the South African households that were engaged in agriculture in 2015, only 1.8 percent of the households reported agriculture as a main source of income while another 5.1 percent reported it as an extra source of income (Statistics SA 2016, 18).

[5] The interview was conducted in Ningxiang County of Hunan Province on May 12, 2013.

In China, land is relatively equally distributed. A large number of rural laborers, 219.2 million or 28.3 percent of the labor force in 2015, were still engaged in agriculture, either part-time or full-time (NBSC 2016a, table 4-3). A national household survey shows that 61.5 percent of laborers who stayed in rural areas participated in agriculture in 2015 (NBSC 2016c, 27). A conservative estimate based on our fieldwork would suggest that at least 10 percent of rural households in China rely on agriculture for the main source of income, and no less than 30 percent cultivate farmland for an extra source of income, both of which are higher than those in South Africa. In some cases, small-scale farming can generate an income comparable to wages in the city. In Hunan and Sichuan province, where per capita land is very small, we found that a number of households specialized in small farms (usually less than one hectare) of medical herbs, tobacco, vegetables, fruit trees and flowers. Many of these households earned an income even higher than the average rate of urban wages. In Inner Mongolia and Heilongjiang province, where per capita land is relatively large, we found households that farmed grain crops such as corn and rice could also earn a decent income, given that the farm is at least two hectares in size and with good irrigation.

Nonfarm sectors including rural industry have employed a large number of laborers in China, but this is much less so in South Africa (Hart 2002, 198-234). As noted, Chinese rural industry had absorbed more than 100 million rural laborers in the 1980s and 1990s. After the peak of rural industry in the 1990s, much of rural industry was absorbed into urban industry or closed down due to urban expansion. However, rural industrial and other nonfarm activities have persisted. In 2016, 112.3 million rural laborers found nonfarm work within their township (NBSC 2017). This only included people who worked outside their village for a period of more than six months in a year. The number would be even larger were those who worked within the village or less than six months included. Access to land plays an important factor in local nonfarm employment: rural households and villages use land to build factories, grow crops and vegetables, and provide housing for workers (Bramall 2007; Oi 1999; Pei 2002).

Taken together, agriculture and local nonfarm sectors in China employed at least 250 million laborers, accounting for about 30 percent of the labor force. If these laborers lost land and were forced to migrate to the city, unemployment rates would soar. Nevertheless, the Chinese state, in alliance with large agrarian and urban capital, has pushed to transfer farmland and housing land from semi-proletarian households to large farms and urban developers in the past two decades, prompting fierce resistance from the former.

5 Fighting for both land and work rights: the politics of semi-proletariats

The housing reform in 1998 signaled a turning point in land use in China. It abolished a welfare housing policy that was inherited from the socialist period, and replaced it with a market policy, under which urban dwellers must purchase flats in the market. The creation of an urban housing market accelerated the expropriation and commercialization of rural land. Local governments take land from peasants, often without consent of the latter, and sell the commercial use rights of the land to developers at high prices (Hsing 2010; Lee and Zhu 2006). Over the past decade and a half, the housing sector was turned into one of the engines of growth in China. It accounted for 23.9 percent of all fixed asset investments in 2015, the highest among all sectors (NBSC 2016a, table 10-6). The revenue that derived from grabbing and selling rural lands accounted for a whopping share of 50 percent of all local revenue since the early 2000s (Zhan 2017a).

The satellite image data shows that the expansion of urban land had increased from 837 square km per year in the 1990s to 1,770 square km per year in the first decade of this century (Kuang et al 2016, 26). It was estimated that 65 million peasants lost their land between 2003 and 2013, accounting for nearly 10 percent of the rural population; and the figure could exceed 100 million if those who lost land in the 1990s were counted (Chuang 2015; Zhang 2015). In the early 2000s, the government compensated rural households with only 10 to 15 years of grain crop output of the land it expropriated, but the land

was priced dozens of times the compensation when it was sold to developers. This blatant exploitation had met fierce resistance. Peasants (most of them are semi-proletarians) launched thousands of protests each year, clashed violently with security forces, and committed suicides (sometimes self-immolation) in public to show their plight (Sargeson 2013; Yu 2005; Zhang 2015). Although the resistance did not stop land expropriation, it forced the government to increase compensation to 20 to 30 years of crop output and incorporate landless peasants into the basic urban welfare system. Nevertheless, our recent fieldwork in Changzhou of Jiangsu province and Chengdu of Sichuan province showed that very few peasants or migrant workers were willing to give up land for urban residence (*hukou*), including those who were earning an income above average in the city.

The Chinese state was also eager to introduce large capital into agriculture. Also in 1998, the central government passed a guideline document promoting the entry of large agribusiness companies, a.k.a. dragonhead companies, into agriculture (Schneider 2017; Ye 2015). In the recent years, the governments at both central and local levels started to force farming households to transfer land to large farms and agribusiness companies (Gong and Zhang 2017; Zhan 2017b). The concentration of farmland deprives semi-proletarian workers of employment flexibility. Previously they could return to farming when they reached their 40s or 50s, but this option is no longer possible. Our field research found that peasants and migrant workers, particularly those in the 40s and 50s, were reluctant to transfer out their land.

South Africa is very different from China as most of its farmland is already concentrated, and the recent land reform has so far done little to redistribute the land. Nevertheless, the struggles for land rights have also been on the rise among rural dwellers and migrant workers in the past two decades. There is widespread popular discontent about the sluggish process of land reform. The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) have emerged as a significant opposition party in the past few election cycles, and are the only entirely new party in the post-1994 democratic era that have been able to sustain significant electoral support. The signature issue of the EFF has been a radical critique of the failures of post-Apartheid land reform. The party's platform calls for a change in the constitution to allow the government to expropriate land for redistribution without compensation (Alexander 2013, 166-167; Greenberg 2015, 959-961).

In addition, conflicts have intensified over the acquisition of land in former reserves for the purpose of mining. Driven by the rising global demand, the sector has seen the influx of industrial and financial capital (Ashman, Fine and Newman 2011). Large mining companies signed deals with chiefs and other local elites under the legally ambiguous nature of ‘communal tenure,’ and removed tens of people from land into townships with substandard housing and poor public services. As were their Chinese counterparts, the villagers were given disproportionally low compensations, in contrast to huge mining profits. This has provoked violent clashes of villagers with the police and sabotages of mining facilities (Hall 2011, 198; Capps and Mnwana 2015).

The intensification of land struggles in both China and South Africa has been triggered by land grabbing by large capital, often in collusion with state authorities, for the purposes of profit and revenue. Nevertheless, it is worth asking why rural people fight over a resource which is decreasingly important as a share of income. The key to understand this paradox is their intention to maintain the semi-proletarian status for livelihood security. In other words, land struggles in the countryside serve to mitigate the precariousness of employment in the city. As such, these struggles should not be simply taken as a sign of “re-peasantization” (Moyo and Yeros 2005). In South Africa, due to a lack of job opportunities in rural areas, the focus of semi-proletarian households is to find urban wage employment. As noted, some households sent a part of social grants to younger members so that the latter could find a job in the city. In China, the situation is more complex because rural sectors have absorbed over 200 million rural laborers. Nevertheless, land struggles have rarely been waged to expand agricultural production but to preserve rural-urban linkages for livelihood security. In addition, millions of rural laborers, particularly those in younger ages, voluntarily leased out land while focusing on wage jobs in the city, though they would not forgo land rights or rural connections.

Semi-proletarian workers also do not hesitate to fight for work rights in the city, which for most of them provide the main source of income. Labor scholars in China were concerned that the semi-proletarian status of migrant workers would reduce their activism and thus call for their full proletarianization (Lee 2007; Pun and Lu 2010). However, the comparison with South Africa shows that such concern is unwarranted. In the 1970s and 1980s, migrant workers in South Africa were one of the most active forces in fighting for equal work and citizenship rights. In the past two decades, the protests by migrant workers have again been surging. By 2007, the number of protests had surpassed the highest mark in Apartheid, and this culminated in a new wave of protests before and after the Marikana massacre in 2012. Migrant workers protested over a range of issues including but not limited to minimum wages, public service delivery, housing, and replacement of local labor by foreign immigrant labor (Alexander 2013; Bond and Mottiar 2013; Schierup 2016).

In China, migrant workers have also emerged as a major force in labor unrest in the past decade. Hundreds of thousands of collective labor disputes were lodged every year. Although it is unclear how many were initiated by migrant workers, there is no doubt that they accounted for a large share. The current economic slowdown has further placed stress on migrant workers, triggering ever more labor disputes. The number of collective disputes jumped from 325,590 in 2007 to 694465 in 2008 due to the financial crisis, and it declined thereafter. But it started to rise again in 2012 and up to 813,859 in 2015 (NBSC and MHRSS 2016, table 8-1). Migrant workers would strike and take to the street when their demand was not met in negotiations with the employer and the government. A good example is migrant workers at Foxconn, the world's largest electronics manufacturer. There have been multiple episodes of large-scale strikes and protests in its factories in China since 2010, in addition to the notorious cases of worker suicides (Butollo and Ten Brink 2012; Chan and Pun 2010; Chan, Pun and Selden 2013). Migrant workers protested over the issues of low pay, poor working conditions, social insurance, and arbitrary layoff (Chan and Selden 2017). Thus it appears that the semi-proletarian status has not lessened migrant labor activism in China. Our fieldwork in Jiangsu province, a major receiving area of migrant workers, found that the rural linkages might have stimulated labor unrest. The migrant workers we interviewed were less deterred by possible dismissal because they had the rural economy to fall back on once their protests failed.

In summary, semi-proletariats tend to fight for both land and work rights in South Africa and China, which has been shaped by their livelihood strategies. Wage jobs in the city account for the major share of household income, but the precarious status of such jobs motivated them to defend the land rights in the countryside. Hence, seeing from the perspective of semi-proletarians, land struggles are an integral part of the broad struggle of labor. It is not as much as the resistance of the peasantry as an active strategy of semi-proletarian households to mitigate precarity in the city.

6 Conclusion

Four decades after the theory of semi-proletarianization was formulated, semi-proletarian workers and households have continued to be a widespread existence worldwide. In South Africa and China, migrant workers continued to hold onto land rights and maintain social and economic connections with the countryside, despite the removal or lessening of restrictions on mobility and residence. Against this background, this paper revisits the theory and proposes to reorient our attention from the earlier focus on how household farming subsidizes urban capitalist production to how semi-proletarian households use farmland and rural connections to mitigate precarity in the city in the neoliberal era. The comparison between South Africa and China, two countries with very different histories of land, migration and development, has shed light on a number of contemporary issues.

First of all, the conventional notion that full proletarian workers must be better off than semi-proletarian workers no longer holds. With informalization and precariatization in the neoliberal era, capital does not have to pay proletarian workers a living wage to cover the costs of reproduction. In

both South Africa and China, there has emerged a swelling class of urban poor without job security or sufficient welfare coverage, who in many cases are worse off than semi-proletarian workers with access to rural land.

Second, a major reason for semi-proletarian households to retain land rights and rural connections is to protect livelihood security because urban employment has become increasingly precarious. Thus they do not hesitate to fight for land rights in the event of land dispossession. Land struggles have been on the rise in both South African and China in recent decades as large urban and agrarian capital intensified land grabbing (including the grabbing of resources on the land such as minerals, water and green space) and intended to turn land into a major source of profits. Such land struggles should be regarded as a part of the broad labor struggle because they are launched, at least partly, to mitigate the precarity in the city.

Third, the significance of agricultural land as a source of direct income for semi-proletarian households has declined in both South Africa and China, but rural land assumes much more importance in income generation and employment in China than in South Africa. This is due to their different agrarian structures and rural conditions. In South Africa, household farming generates little income due to the dominance of large farms and poor farming conditions. In China, agriculture still accounts for more than one quarter of household income because of the relative weakness of large farms and good agricultural infrastructure. Furthermore, rural land created much more local nonfarm jobs (at least 110 million) in China than in South Africa. These differences in rural development can largely explain why unemployment rates in South Africa are so much higher than those in China. In other words, unemployment rates in China would rise to as high as those in South Africa were 250 million rural jobs in China eliminated by land dispossession.

Finally, the structure of land holding not only affects the income distribution of the rural society but also shapes the position and policy of the state, which in turn affects the livelihoods of semi-proletarian households. In South Africa, the concentration of land ownership led the state to support large farms during the Apartheid. In the past two decades, the state was concerned or convinced that the breakup of large farms would undermine food production and agricultural competitiveness. In China, the relatively equal structure of land holding in the past seven decades has forced the state to improve agricultural conditions for rural households because it relied on the latter for rural surplus (in the socialist era) and food supply. As the Chinese state has recently pushed for land concentration and relied increasingly on food imports, it is predictable that it would (further) shift support from farming households to large farms, thereby undermining the livelihood security of semi-proletarian households.

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About the Author(s)

Shaohua Zhan is assistant professor of sociology at the School of Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. His research focuses on rural roots of political economic changes in China, including issues of labor migration, land politics, food security, agrarian change, urbanization and rural-urban relations. His latest research project deals with the interactions between domestic food politics, agrarian transitions and China's agricultural involvement in Southeast Asia. His works have appeared in Journal of Peasant Studies, World Development, Studies in Comparative International Development, Journal of Agrarian Change, The China Journal, and Modern China.

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