BRICS Initiative for Critical Agrarian Studies

RANEPA
THE RUSSIAN PRESIDENTIAL ACADEMY OF NATIONAL ECONOMY AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

The 5th International Conference of
the BRICS Initiative for Critical Agrarian Studies
[New Extractivism, Peasantries and Social Dynamics: Critical Perspectives and Debates]

Conference Paper No. 64

Chinese Companies in north-center Brazil: spatial adjustment, geographical reconfigurations and conflicts in the commodities chain production

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13-16 October 2017
Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANEPA)
Moscow, Russia

Organized jointly by:

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With funding support from:

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March, 2018

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Abstract

The territorial constitution of the Brazilian National State is a contradictory process of reproduction of the relations of production (open to transformation) within the wider process of modernization, which produces, differentiates, and limits (also in a contradictory manner) the territory of capital. The state imposes itself first and foremost as conformer of space, an administrator of territorial policies that reveals manners through which places undergo capitalist appreciation. The advancement of agribusiness in Brazil occupies one of the last agricultural frontiers in the world through monoculture, specialization, and capital concentration. The production of commodities – specially grains (mostly soybean, corn and cotton) and cattle which have already devastated the Brazilian cerrado, now plow ahead into the Amazonian region. Grain production follows the logic of the international food market, where areas for local products give way to the production of commodities, where the diversity of landscape is substituted by monochromatic export grains. However, in spite of an evident nod given by the state towards the further implementation of agribusiness, traditional people have attained not only the recognition of their multiple identities, such as the right to obtain financing for models of traditional agriculture and the creation of extractive reserves. The state's contradictory measures create dichotomist conceptions for territorial use (based on use value or exchange value) and typification (as nature or as resource). We intend to analyze the dichotomic uses of the territory in the Brazilian North-Center – Maranhão, Tocantins, Piauí and Bahia states – known as one of the "last" agricultural frontiers in the world. During the last ten years, this area has been receiving major investments not only by the government but also by national and foreign capital. The main sectors of investments are land, the commodities chain production and logistic and infrastructure (the last sector with more State participation). We also propose to investigate where the Chinese companies are investing on land and on the commodities chain production, and how the State policies materially and immaterially facilitates and promotes this type of territorial development and transformation.

1 The Planning State and the opening for foreign investments in the Brazilian North-Center *Cerrado* agricultural frontier

The 1930's are a turning point in the great social-economical changes of Brazilian territory. It is the moment when the agricultural exports model, which prevailed up to the time, loses ground to a model based on industry. The consolidation of the latter is visible in the early 1950's, still in Getulio Vargas' administration (1951 – 1954), when the national State decides to participate more directly in the Brazilian economical expansion, defining public policies which served more directly the interests of great capital. The strategy of the Planning State was not reduced to financing the implementation of private capital: it also included investments in industrial state enterprises in the capital goods sector, which would support foreign companies to be settled in Brazil, specially mass consumer goods companies, defining some of the bases of the Brazilian pattern of capitalist accumulation.

The increase of the role of the state as a planning agent took place during the Juscelino Kubitschek (JK) administration (1956 – 1961) – more precisely, with the proposal of public policies which aimed at the modernization of the infrastructure regarding national territory; such policies were called *Plano de Metas* [Plan of National Development]. Such measures created conditions which were favorable to guarantee the pattern of capital accumulation. Among these measures, according to Oliveira (1977, p. 84), the following stand out: a) the JK administration benefited from rent accumulation in the private sector during the second Vargas government, which resulted from "practically constant real wages and increases in productivity attained in the so called state productive sector transferred to the private sector, such is the formula for the initial concentration"; b) the partaking of dependent peripheral countries in the international division of labor enabled such countries to produce not only raw material, but also to join the circuit of consumer goods producers; c) there was no popular resistance against the implementation of state policies favoring private accumulation; instead, the support of the popular classes to such policies became a key element of the changes occurred during the JK administration.

If the political and economical scene was somewhat favorable to Brazilian industrialization, the JK government faced other challenges: the problem of domestic and foreign financing to attract capital into the country. When it came to foreign financing, the solution was found in using direct investment of risk capital. For the domestic market, in its turn, a solution was harder to achieve, since the State was yet to incorporate the surplus produced by the mass consumer goods industry and still had to keep investments in basic infrastructure (highway system, electric power, communications, etc.). The situation, to the quoted author, "would lead the State to the limit of its fiscal capacity" (p. 84).

Notwithstanding the difficulties of the Brazilian industrialization process, the policies of the JK government were successful in guaranteeing the entrance of big capital into the country. However, the continuity of such policies by the following governments required tackling new challenges, such as: increasing exports to guarantee a stable commercial balance and to keep on financing industrial capital; supporting the process of national urbanization unleashed by the concentrated urbanization of a small part of the Brazilian territory (the Southeast); and increase the market of machinery and agricultural inputs, sectors which expanded substantially during the 1950's.

Such were the situations which contributed, specially during the military governments (1964 – 1985), to making the agricultural sector a fundamental piece in the state strategy of softening the aforementioned problems. The interests of capital were also in agriculture, for such activities were a safe source of accumulation. They were guaranteed by public policies which were meant to finance capital – either by public policies financing resources through public banks, which conceded subsidized credit; or by the installation of transport, power and communications infrastructure in the regions which interested the said capital, ie., the Brazilian North-Center, where the Brazilian savana [*cerrado*] and the Amazon jungle stood, as yet unexplored by modern agroforestry.

Since then, the Brazilian state has not refrained from producing the necessary conditions to the territorialization of big capital also in the countryside, directing policies capable of dynamizing agriculture, the segment of the economy on which the Brazilian industrial model is based. To insert the country in the logic of world capitalism, the Brazilian governments started facing exports of agricultural products as a way to continue financing the entrance of capital into national economy or to settle its dues to foreign debtors.

In the mid-1960's, the *Sistema Nacional de Crédito Rural* (National System of Rural Credit, SNCR) was established. It consisted on the first instrument used by the Brazilian State in this new stage of its history to guarantee the modernization of the countryside. In this case, the strategy was to promote agricultural modernization while, simultaneously, creating mechanisms – via subsidized credit – to transfer public resources to big capital without the major risk of financial loss; industrial and financial capital were now in league with the Brazilian State.

This impulse to Brazilian economical modernization was to become even more intense during the 1970's, with new situations favorable to a more dynamic agricultural sector. In this context, deserve mention: a) the need to produce food for the Brazilian urban population, which was rapidly increasing and pressing the inflationary stability; b) the oil crisis in the early 1970's, which compromised Brazilian currency in the international context, which resulted in an even more decisive option for the exports of agricultural products. Meanwhile, an option was made for a policy of limited imports, oil products especially, which were replaced by sugarcane alcohol. The result was an even larger participation of government subsidies destined to big capital, which in turn enlarged its accumulation basis even more when it opted for a bigger and faster financial return, ie., those destined to exports or to the agroindustry sector (sugarcane, soy, oranges, wheat, coffee, etc.).[1]

The governmental effort of using the agricultural sector as a strategy to promote Brazilian industrialization, including the seizing of a favorable moment of foreign demand for food, are highlighted in the directives of the *II Plano Nacional de Desenvolvimento* [II Plan of National Development, II PND] (1975 – 1979), elaborated during the military government of General Geisel (1974 – 1979).

The state policies of stimulating the modernization of Brazilian countryside, first institutionalized by the SNCR, privileged certain social-economical sectors, especially those associated to the agricultural and industrial sectors. Mention must be made to the large landowners from Brazilian Southeast and South, who historically benefited from modern techniques in their establishments and were easily granted credit during the advance of capital into the Brazilian countryside[2]. Moreover, such economic groups also had the advantage of acquiring public subsidized resources and land for low prices when settling their capital in the Brazilian agricultural frontier – spaces in Brazilian inland upon which, in the years to come, modernized agriculture was to make its advance, especially export cultures such as soybean, corn, cotton, etc. From that moment on, export culture widely favored from government investments, to the disadvantage of internal market cultures. Agroindustrial complexes, formed by companies located in the sector's upstream (modern agricultural inputs, tractors, machines, fertilizers, etc.) and downstream (processing of agricultural products and trade of processed products), were also favored. These sectors benefited both from subsidies for the installation of factories and from the growing consumer market to raise their profit margin. In this sense, a model of agricultural modernization is implemented, its financial and technological ground unequally appropriated by the different social-economical groups taking part in the modernization of Brazilian countryside. This

1It should be noted that, along with such policies furthering agricultural modernization, concentration of land ownership in the Brazilian countryside remained, becoming one of the main factors contributing to the expulsion of agricultural workers to the cities.

2 Landowners from the South, or those already familiar to some techniques of grain production – including soybean –, were privileged in the advance of the agricultural frontier and in the consolidation of capitalist agriculture in Brazilian North-Center, leading to a "perverse selectivity" in the Brazilian countryside (ALMEIDA, 1984).

moment concurs with the rise of new social movements[3] in the country, struggling for land and intensifying the agrarian conflicts.

The advantages of easily obtained state resources via credit policies, in addition to the interest in guaranteeing land ownership, contributed to Brazilian agriculture becoming, in the late-1970's, a field disputed by social-economical groups not necessarily related to the rural area. In this new stage, Brazilian agriculture incorporated other economical segments, essentially tied to urban economy, which became increasingly active in the Brazilian countryside. Some examples of large groups stemming from different economical activities previously not directly related to agricultural production are, among others: Andrade Gutierrez (construction, etc.), Antunes-Caemi (mining, ferrous metallurgy, etc.), Bamerindus, Sul América, BCN, Bandeirantes, Bradesco, Bozano-Simonsen, Itaú (banking and finances, etc.), Volkswagen (automotive, etc.). The presence of such corporations in the agricultural sector indicates a new direction in the government's agricultural policies.

2 The Expansion of the Agricultural Frontier to the North-center Brazilian Savana (*cerrado*): the States of Maranhão, Tocantins, Piauí and Bahia (Matopiba)

State policies, especially credit-related policies, were important in attracting capital to the agricultural sector and a major factor in its movement out of the Center-South axis, the area in Brazil where wealth is more concentrated.

In the last decades, capital gradually dislocated to areas of agricultural frontier in the country's Center-North. This capital benefits not only from the credit advantages offered by the national government, but also from the infrastructure financed by the public sector (highway systems, storage, power, communications, etc.). Moreover, it appropriates large areas of that territory for exploring agriculture, mining and lumbering. Given the fact that their prices rise shortly after when the national State brings better infrastructure in the region, the land acquired by such large economical groups, national or foreign, is frequently used speculatively as a reserve of value.

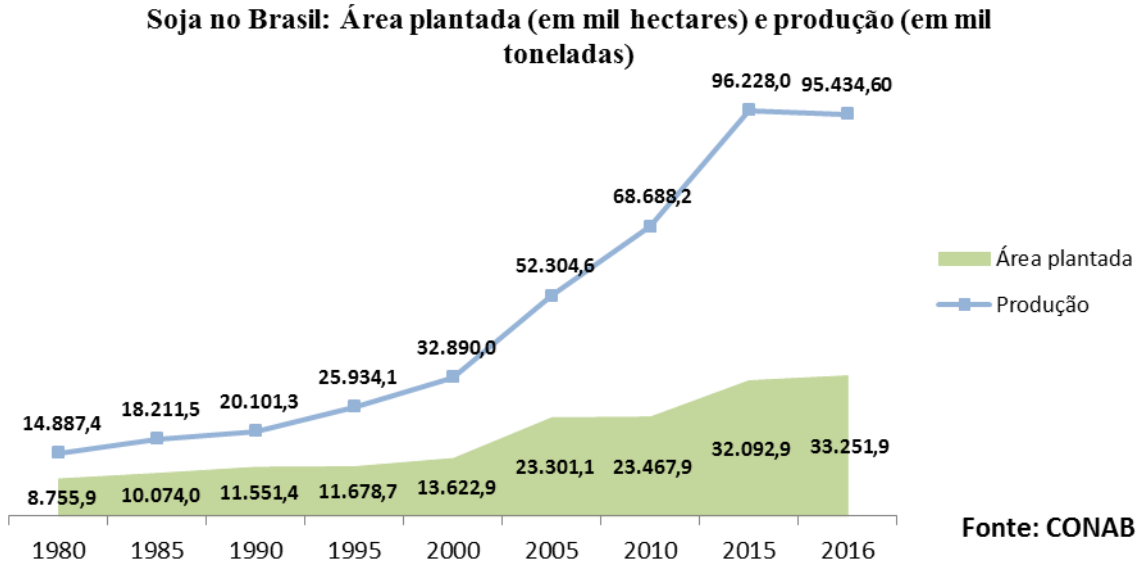
In 1975, in the middle of it's military intervention period (1964 – 1985), the federal government created the *Programa de Desenvolvimento dos Cerrados* (*Cerrados* Development Program, POLOCENTRO) to lead policies directed at the occupation of the North-Center, distinguished by it's *Cerrado* biome. The objective of the program was to make those natural domains attractive to national and foreign capital in the states of Mato Grosso, Mato Grosso do Sul, Goiás, Tocantins and Minas Gerais. For such, the national government kept its policy of subsidized credit and further enlarged the commerce infrastructure, mainly in transportation and storage. Investments were also made to create and enlarge the country's main company for agricultural technical assistance and research, called EMBRAPA (*Empresa Brasileira de Pesquisa Agropecuária*, Brazilian Enterprise for Agricultural Research), a state company in charge of investments in researches for genetic enhancement of agricultural products – especially soybean, a culture widely favored by the Program. Furthermore, the company was also responsible for spreading the use of technologies for good use of the natural spaces in the *Cerrado* biome.

Soybean culture is an illustrative example of the kind of exploration desired in that moment for that biome; its main directives are in the POLOCENTRO program. Soybean was the culture which most received investments from EMBRAPA; the institution even created a specific sector (the *Centro Nacional de Pesquisa da Soja* – National Center for Soybean Research) focused on researches on

3 Among the new rural movements are *quilombolas* (African communities), indigenous peoples, *quebradeiras de coco* (babassu coconut women breakers), fishermen, *caboclos*, *comunidades de fundo e fecho de pasto* (traditional cattle production communities), *geraizenses* and *sertanejos*.

soybean enhancement and adaptation to Brazilian natural environments.[4] As a result, the growth rate of soybean culture areas rose (Graph 1) when compared to other Brazilian agricultural products, and soybean took a considerable part in the country's exports.

Graph 1: Crop area (for 1000ha) and production of soy in Brazil (1000tons)

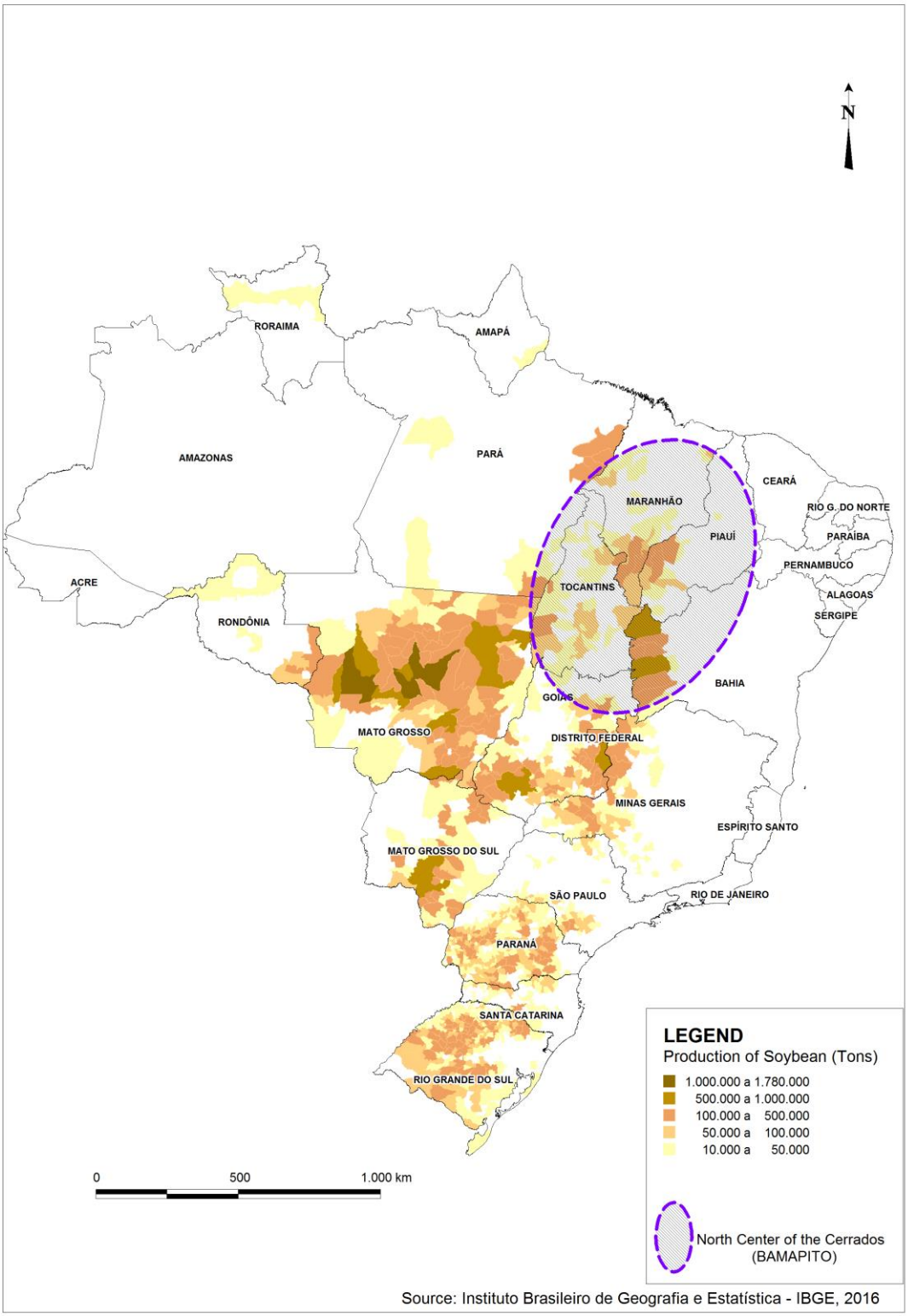


Source: National Suplly and Store Company

Other governmental programs also supported the expansion of modernized agriculture destined to the country's North-Center agricultural frontier. Resources from those programs practically implemented agricultural production of export products such as soybean. Along with POLOCENTRO, other programs were created with similar objectives: POLOAMAZÔNIA (*Programa de Desenvolvimento da Amazônia*, Amazon Development Program), POLONORDESTE (*Programa de Desenvolvimento do Nordeste*, Northeast Development Program) and PRODECER (*Programa de Desenvolvimento dos Cerrados*, *Cerrado* Development Program). Established in 1974 as a partnership between the Brazilian and Japanese governments[5], the aim of PRODECER was to direct capital from large companies in both countries to agricultural modernization in the Brazilian *Cerrado* biome (Oliveira, 2002). The program served as a pillar of the expansion of soybean and other agricultural export products in several Brazilian states, and as financial support for agriculturists interested in the export market. Lastly, PDA MATOPIBA (*Projeto de Desenvolvimento Agropecuário do Matopiba*, Matopiba Agricultural Development Project), established in 2015 to further the production of commodities (soybean, corn, meat, eucalyptus, mineral resources), promotes the advance of soybean culture areas, the development and increase in efficiency of the logistical infrastructure of Northeastern *Cerrado*, located in the Maranhão, Tocantins, Piauí and Bahia states – hence the name of the project –, a total area of 73,173,485 ha, 337 municipalities and 324,326,000 agricultural establishments (BRASIL, 2015).

4 *Embrapa Soja* was established in 1975. It is located in Londrina, PR, and is home to one of the world's three largest banks of soybean seeds germoplasma and to a collection of wild soy plants. The bank holds around 45,000 different kinds of soybeans which are studied, cataloged and used in genetic enhancement programs.
5 Between 1950 and 1980, Japan became one of the major countries investing in Brazil; it represents the second single market for Brazilian exports and the third largest foreign investment in Brazil.

Map 1: Brazil's soybean production in 2016



In the last three decades, the Brazilian North-Center *Cerrado* biome stood out in the country's economic scenario and became one of its most productive and profitable agricultural areas. This new region became a modernized agricultural space *par excellence*, according to the Milton Santos' definition (2003), in which the difference comes not only as a result from innovative agricultural

production techniques, but also as speculative differentiation of space, a phenomenon typical of areas where subsistence agriculture is substituted for commercial agriculture, followed by a process of commercial specialization (SANTOS, 2003). Those events culminated in the expressive increase in productivity, leading to an excess in regional agricultural production that was not absorbed by domestic market, serving the demands of foreign markets consuming mostly Brazilian agricultural commodities. Frederico e Bülher (2015) point to the fact that the 1990's were a privileged moment of national economic opening, reinforcing the advance of Brazilian export policies, especially from 1999 onwards when, according to the authors, the Brazilian economy suffered from a currency crisis which led to the creation of surplus from foreign commerce to suppress State debt (FREDERICO; BÜLHER, 2015).

In this sense, agriculture appeared then as a strategical sector able to solve some difficulties of the Brazilian economy. According to Delgado (2012), to boost agricultural activity, the Brazilian government had to adopt measures which conditioned an extraordinary increase in productivity and production, and in the expansion of agricultural monoculture, creating the necessary conditions for the internationalization of national primary production.

Concurring to the increase in production indexes, the interest of some international markets in national agricultural products was also aroused, as is the case of China. The Asian country, in an attempt to guarantee its domestic food supply, developed direct and indirect commercial partnerships with Brazil to gain access to commodities, being soybean and iron ore the most purchased ones.

Such a scenario favored the production of agricultural commodities in the Brazilian North-Center *Cerrado* biome and allowed, especially after the 2000's, China to become a relevant Brazilian commercial partner and one of the most important buyers of Brazilian primary products, especially soybean, corn, cotton and beef. The establishment of Chinese-Brazilian commercial relations and its implication to the regional productive arrangement of Brazilian North-Center *Cerrado* are the subject of the next items of this text.

3 The Chinese Share in Agricultural Exports from the Brazilian North-Center *Cerrado* Biome

Brazil stands as the second largest consumer of Chinese merchandise and the main Latin-American outlet for Chinese primary products. According to a former Chinese minister of Commerce, approximately 36% of all Latin America exports to China came from Brazil (ELLIS, 2009). Ellis stresses the fact that this situation follows not only the diversity of Brazilian production, but also the technical sophistication of the leading sectors of Chinese-Brazilian international trade, a part of which is made of agriculture from Brazilian North-Center *Cerrado* – an area that excels in the production of commodities such as soybean, cotton and corn. However, the similarities in the exports structure – even when it comes to the products which are exported –, may be the source of commercial tensions between both countries.[6]

The possible tensions pointed by the author have not hindered the advance of trade between Brazil and China. On the contrary: in the last two decades, the trade between the two countries has grown significantly. In 2015, this partnership meant 18,475 million dollars in exports and 16,720 million dollars in imports. That same year, the Brazil-China commercial balance increased its figure in 388%

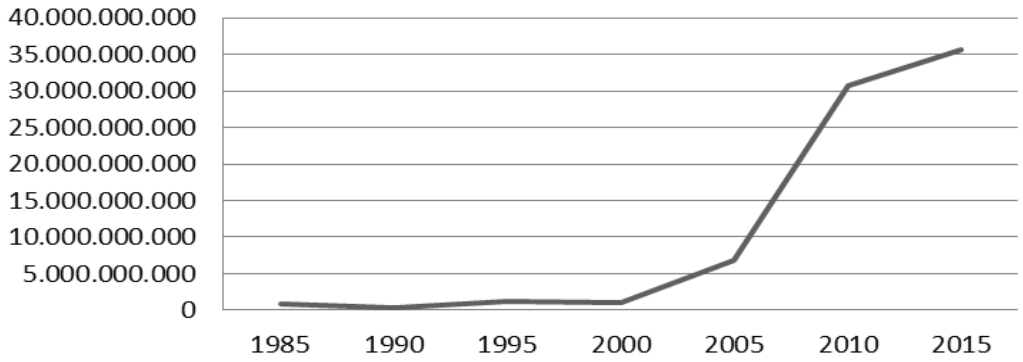
6 "It should be noted that similarities in the structure of exports have also made Brazil and China competitors, producing tension in Brazil as Chinese products replace those of Brazilian manufacturers in such markets as the United States and the European Union." (ELLIS, 2009, p. 45)

when compared to the previous year: exports rose to 19,773 million dollars, while imports fell 33%, a total figure of 11,213 million dollars in 2015[7].

The main pillar of Chinese-Brazilian relations is the trade of commodities, raw material and manufactured products. However, data from 2010 onwards show capital being increasingly directed to the agricultural sector, especially in 2011, when the Chinese share in Brazilian economy reached 179 million dollars in Direct Foreign Investment (IED), 67,5% of which concentrated in the primary sector: 120 million dollars in agriculture and other related services, and 1 million in non-specified agricultural sectors (BACEN, 2017).

The exact same tendency appears when considering commerce between the two countries. Especially from the 2000's onwards, China, as a result of its domestic policy, imported US$ 1,085,223,878 from Brazil, a figure which grew to US$ 6,833,668,267,00 in 2005. The amount of Chinese products entering Brazil reached almost US$ 5.353.261.623,00 that same year. In relative terms, Brazilian exports to China reached 5,78% of the total in 2005 and grew dramatically until its peak in 2011, when it reached 17,31% of all Brazilian exports – nothing less than US$ 44 billion. That same year, Brazilian imports of Chinese products were also significant, although its rising tendency dates from 2011 onwards – Brazilian products sent to China in the years following 2011 declined at around 4,9% per year, reaching a total of US$ 35,607,523,612,00 in 2015 (Graph 2).

Graph 2 – Value (US$ dollars) exported to China from 1985 to 2015



Source: Ministério do Desenvolvimento, Indústria e Comércio Exterior (MDIC).

Directing the analysis to the four states forming the Brazilian North-Center *cerrados* biome region (Table 1), one notices the rising importance of the area's production in the total of products traded with China, of which the products of the soybean complex stand out. For methodological reasons, we shall consider separately three of the main agricultural commodities produced in the studied region: soybean, cotton and corn. The accompanying data represent the total of each of the Brazilian federal units, and is compared with data on Brazilian agricultural exports.

Of the three selected products, soybean is widespread in the region. Although statistical information is lacking for the states studied in this article, in 2000, the state of Maranhão exported US$ 17,931,688,00 worth (100,000 tons) of the product, or 25% of its production in the same year, according to data from the National Supply Company (CONAB, 2017). The soybean exported from Maranhão represents 5,6% of the total amount of Brazilian soybean exports to China. The municipalities of Balsas and Porto Franco had the largest share in the same period (2000 to 2015).

7 The data and numbers were provided by the China Brazil Business Council and by the Brazilian Ministry of Development, Industry and Foreign Trade (MDIC).

The production of soybean in Bahia state grew abruptly from 2010 onwards. From 551,318 tons exported in that year, the state – which is also the most productive both in the Northeast region and in all the Brazilian North-Center *Cerrado* biome region – traded 41,8% of its production in 2015 (US$ 669,848,258,00) with China, the highest export value in the region. Among the main municipalities in Bahia selling soybean to China are Luís Fernando Guimarães and Barreiras. One notes a rising tendency in the total Brazilian exports to China, in spite of a small disturbance between 2015 and 2016 – a situation that may be attributed to, among other factors of macroeconomic order, the relative rise in the prices of soybean in the international market starting in February, 2016 (MAPA, 2017).

Considering soybean alone, among the main exporting companies in the country is *Prio – Agricultura e Extração Ltda*., located in the Balsas, Maranhão.[8]

Table 1 – Amount of soy and cotton exported to China from MATOPIBA states (2000 – 2015)

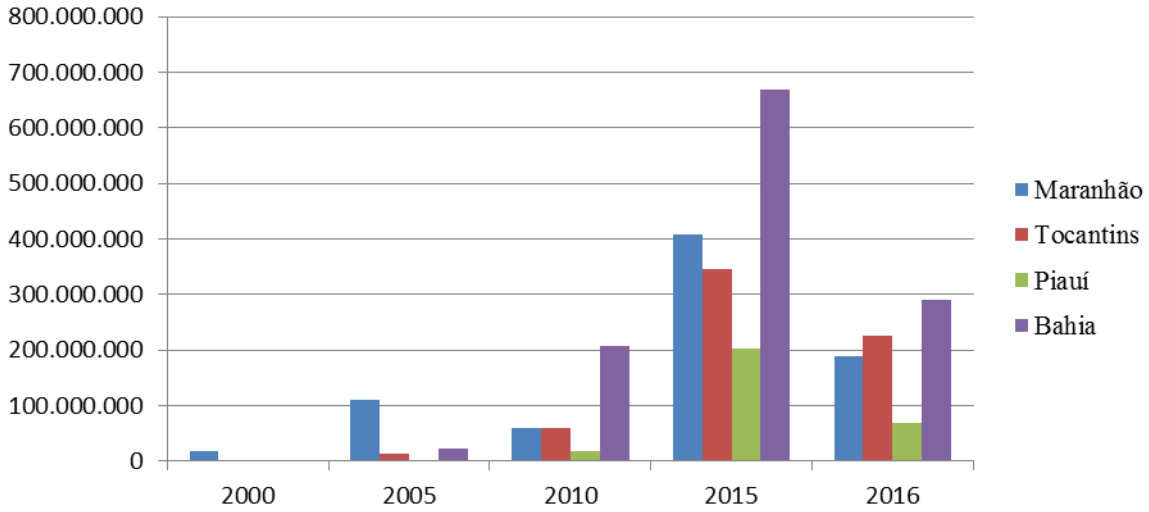
		Amount (tons) of commodities exported				
		2000	**2005**	**2010**	**2015**	**2016**
Soy	**Maranhão**	100.013	431.704	156.189	1.045.909	513.743
	Tocantins	-	47.400	154.059	890.954	617.191
	Piauí	-	0	49.025	518.259	188.827
	Bahia	-	91.247	551.318	1.747.938	772.707
	BRASIL	1.783.631	7.157.549	19.064.473	40.925.523	38.563.916
Cotton	**Maranhão**	-	-	1.367	1.627	963
	Tocantins	-	-	-	-	-
	Piauí	-	-	35	3.194	120
	Bahia	-	22.733	35.406	30.067	9.851
	BRASIL	1	77.843	84.607	103.821	57.763

Source: database available on AliceWeb system, Ministério do Desenvolvimento, Indústria e Comércio Exterior (MDIC).

The share of cotton in Chinese market follows the same pattern as soybean, although smaller in scale. Among the four federal units considered here, Bahia is still the main producer and exporter; in 2015, the state exported 35,406 tons of the product to China, 41,8% of all cotton exports in the Brazil – China axis, a figure that amounts to only 1% of the state's production in that period (CONAB, 2017). In economical terms, such trade means a movement of around US$ 25,979,539,00 from China to Bahia in 2010; in 2015, the figure multiplied 2.5 times before finally decreasing the next year. The main municipalities in Bahia that stand out in this exchange were, respectively, Barreiras – where one of the main exporting companies is located, according to ITC (2017) – and Luís Eduardo Magalhães. In 2015, the share of commodities exported from Piauí to China was even larger than that of Maranhão. Considering the Piauí municipalities in the North Brazilian *Cerrado* biome region, Sebastião Leal was responsible for the largest share of the total of 3,000 tons. Graph 3 shows the performance of each state: agriculture grew drastically in the region between 2010 and 2015, before receding in 2016.

Graph 3 – Total value (US$ dolars) of soy comercialized wtih China (2000 – 2016)

8 The information is from International Trade Centre (2017), available on: http://www.intracen.org/layouts/CountryTemplate.aspx?pageid=47244645034&id=47244645109 .



Source: database available on AliceWeb system, Ministério do Desenvolvimento, Indústria e Comércio Exterior (MDIC).

Brazilian corn exports to China went from a single ton in 2000 to 103,281 tons in 2015 and half of that amount in 2016. In the Brazilian North-Center *Cerrado* region, in the same period, data is available for 2016 only, when the states of Maranhão and Tocantins shipped 11,817 and 10,117 tons respectively to China; together, they amount to US$ 3,741,474,00 or 12,6% of all Brazilian corn exports to China in the same year. The most significant Brazilian exporting companies in MATOPIBA territory are *Adm. Do Brasil*, *Bunge Alimentos* and *Cargill Agrícola S/A* (ITC, 2017).

In spite of uncertainties in China's domestic economical scenario, the country has reassured the expectations of a gradual increase in its demand for food (CEBC, 2012) and other direct derivatives from agriculture, judging by the country's rising imports of agricultural commodities from the whole world, especially from Brazil. The importance of the Brazilian Center-North has been increasingly important when it comes to supply such a demand. However, the data and literature so far available show that, in the considered region, Chinese direct investments are still slow to come, affecting mostly industries related to capital goods forming its main productive chains, notably the soybean complex. Nonetheless, the rise is striking – not so much in farming and cattle-raising activities as in rural land sale, the theme of our next item.

4 Chinese Business Investments in Brazil And in Brazilian North-Center *Cerrados* Biome Region (Matopiba)

In the current decade, the number of Chinese companies interested in locating financial resources in several economic sectors of the Brazilian national State grew, especially in industrial segments, power and transports infrastructure, and agribusiness. Chinese capital, however, acts not only in the installation of companies in Brazilian territory, thus guaranteeing the growing industrial production in the country or the expansion of the exploration of natural resources; it also advances into other kinds of investments, such as the acquisition of economically consolidated Brazilian business groups holding factories or several other national economic assets. Most important among these are investments in shares of business partnerships involving the purchase of both assets managed by Brazilian companies or foreign companies located in the country.

Since the beginning of the 2000's, several investments of Chinese capital were made in Brazil, especially in commodities sectors related to mineral resources, fossil fuel and agroforestry. In the early

2000's, Chinese companies associated mostly to Brazilian and foreign economic groups exploring large mineral fields, offshore oil drilling and agriculture production (soybean, especially). In the early 2010's, other branches of Chinese companies settled in Brazilian territory, such as Chery (automotive), Sany (machinery and equipment) and Huawei and Lenovo (electronics and communications). Thereafter, Chinese capital moved forward into the service sector, most importantly to investments in education, infrastructure and logistics, and banking. In regards to the latter, it meant participating in shares of companies from the Brazilian banking sector, mostly through the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) and the China Construction Bank. Such a strategy guaranteed Chinese international insertion – especially of its currency, the *yuan* – through the Brazilian market. Brazil has become the favorite world destiny for Chinese investment in infrastructure, second only to the USA (BBC-Brasil, 2017).

Table 2 – Chinese investments and construction contracts in Brazil (2005-2016)

Year	Chinese Entity	US$ Millions	Share Size	Transaction Party	Sector	Subsector
2005	CITIC	430		Brazil Power	Energy	Coal
2006	Sinopec	1.290		Petrobras	Energy	Gas
2006	CITIC	340		ThyssenKrupp and CVRD	Metals	Steel
2009	China Communications Construction	100			Transport	Shipping
2009	Wuhan Iron and Steel	400	22%	MMX Mineração	Metals	Steel
2009	CIC	500		CVRD (Vale)	Metals	Steel
2010	Sany Heavy	200			Real estate	Construction
2010	East China Mineral Exploration and Development Bureau (Jiangsu)	1.200		Bernardo de Mello Itaminas	Metals	Steel
2010	Sinochem	3.070	40%	Statoil	Energy	Oil
2010	State Grid	1.720	100%	Plena Transmissoras	Energy	
2010	Chery Auto	400			Transport	Autos
2010	Sinopec	7.100	40%	Repsol	Energy	Oil
2010	CIC	200		BTG Pactual	Finance	Investment
2011	**Chongqing Grain**	**570**			**Agriculture**	
2011	ICBC	100			Finance	Banking
2011	ZTE	200			Technology	Telecom
2011	Taiyuan Iron, CITIC, Baosteel	1.950	15%	CBMM	Metals	
2011	JAC Motors	100	20%	SHC	Transport	Autos
2011	Sinopec	4.800	30%	Galp Energia	Energy	
2012	State Grid	550		Copel	Energy	
2012	State Grid	940		ACS	Energy	
2012	China Construction Bank	200	100%	WestLB	Finance	Banking
2012	Lenovo	150	100%	Digibras and Dual	Technology	
2012	BAIC	300			Transport	Autos
2012	JAC Motors	450			Transport	Autos
2012	CIC	460	33%	Prosperitas	Real estate	Property
2013	**COFCO**	**320**			**Agriculture**	
2013	Xugong Construction Machinery	200			Real estate	Construction

2013	CNOOC and CNPC	1.280	10%, 10%	Petrobras, Shell, and Total	Energy	Oil
2013	China Construction Bank	720	74%	Banco Industrial e Comerical	Finance	Banking
2013	Three Gorges	130			Energy	Hydro
2013	Three Gorges	250	50%	Jari	Energy	Hydro
2014	State Grid	970	51%	Electrobras	Energy	
2014	Three Gorges	390	33%	Terra Novo	Energy	Hydro
2014	**COFCO and Hopu Investment**	**750**		**Noble Agri Limited**	**Agriculture**	
2014	Sany Heavy	300			Real estate	Construction
2014	ZTE	100			Technology	Telecom
2014	China Construction Bank	720	72%	Banko Industrial and Comercial	Finance	Banking
2014	Three Gorges	140	49%	EDP	Energy	Alternative
2015	China Electronics Corporation	100			Real estate	Construction
2015	BYD	100			Energy	Alternative
2015	Bank of Communications	170	80%	Banco BBM AS	Finance	Banking
2015	State Grid	2.200			Energy	
2015	Three Gorges	490		Triunfo Participacoes	Energy	
2015	ICBC	2.000		Petrobras	Energy	Oil
2015	HNA	460	24%	Azul Linhas Aereas Brasileiras	Transport	Aviation
2016	Three Gorges	3.660			Energy	Hydro
2016	State Grid	110			Energy	
2016	State Grid	110		Mato Grosso	Energy	
2016	China Molybdenum	1.500		Anglo American	Chemicals	
2016	**Shanghai Pengxin**	**290**	**57%**	**Fiagril Participações**	**Agriculture**	
2016	XCMG	100			Real estate	Construction
2016	CIC	1.090		Petrobras	Energy	Gas
2016	Three Gorges	1.200		Duke	Energy	
2016	Sinomach	150			Energy	Alternative
2016	State Grid	4.490	55%	CPFL	Energy	

Source: The American Enterprise Institute and The Heritage Foundation.

The current presence of Chinese capital in Brazil has intensified in two different directions to embrace new companies investing in highly profitable economic sectors and concurrently acting with the Brazilian government – which, by its turn, disposes of its State assets and creates normative conditions to attract capital from sectors previously run by the State itself. The deep Brazilian economic crisis and the presence (after the political coup which ousted the elect president Dilma Roussef in 2016) of another political group leading the Brazilian national State according to neo-liberal ideological guidelines allowed further measures to be taken, aiming at the effective concession of public services and the destatization of national companies. Such measures include the concession of airports, railways and ports and the privatization of *Casa da Moeda*, the Brazilian mint, and ELETROBRAS, a large Brazilian state company producing, managing and dealing electric power in the country.

In the energy field, Chinese investments are directed at new business acquisitions or at expanding participation in Brazilian corporations. In this sector, some Chinese companies are currently gaining ground, such as State Grid, the China Southern Power Grid, China Three Gorges, the China Communications Company (CCCC), Shanghai Electric and the State Power Investment Corporation

(SPIC). Some of these companies are purchasing Brazilian companies in the energy sector (as in the case of CPFL Energia), but they are also expanding their participation in the management of large Brazilian hydroelectric dams (as in the case of the Santo Antônio Dam, in the Amazon state of Rondônia). The same pattern is true to other economic sectors and Brazilian regions.

Data gathered by the American Enterprise Institute and by the Heritage Foundation (China Global Investment Tracker, [s.d.]) show that, from 2,344 Chines global investments, 85 are concentrated in Latin America, 12 of which distributed among different sectors of Brazilian economy. Even though most of Chinese capital in Brazil is concentrated in the energy and services sectors, the Chinese Global Investment Tracker identified 4 investments in the agricultural sector between 2011 and 2016 amounting to US$ 1,900 million. Mention must be made of the transactions made by COFCO International in April, 2013 and April, 2014, amounting to US$1,070 million. Those investments, however, were made in the soybean productive chain, excepting land purchased by Chinese companies. In regards to these, the non-governmental organization GRAIN points that 400,000 ha of Brazilian land were in process of acquisition by two Chinese companies in 2010 and 2012, investments made, respectively, by the Chongqing Grain Group (soybean complex, especially in Bahia) and the Pengxin Group (soybean complex and cotton production). (GRAIN, 2012)

5 The presence of Chinese companies in the Brazilian North-Center *Cerrados* biome region (MATOPIBA)

As previously stated, the *Cerrados* biome in Brazilian territory has become, in the last decades, a space upon which agroforestal monoculture, mining and exploration of other natural resources have advanced. That region of the country has received attention from the Brazilian national State through public policies aiming at the economical modernization of the territory, consolidating itself as one of the main areas producing agricultural and mineral commodities. It is also making other natural resources available, such as wind and solar power. Such conditions have in many aspects attracted the interest of foreign economic groups for the region.

When it comes to Chinese capital, the interest for the region is recent, dating from the 2000's, and focused mostly in the acquisition of agricultural commodities, particularly soybean and cotton, as mentioned above. However, Chinese capital has advanced into other sectors of the regional economy, not only through the purchase of primary merchandise for consumption in Chinese territory, but also with the possibility of investing in assets in the region. Such investments have been made possible due to the fact that the region has become a reference of recent expressive territorial valuation resulting from its high potential for economic growth, verified by the spread of agroforestal monoculture, indicating better perspectives in regional economical development. It is, thus, a space in formation for agribusiness, in need of important investments in sectors furthering the new economy, as in the case of the infrastructure sector (power, communications and transports).

In a short period of time, important economic demands are being projected that increase the reproduction of capital in that region. Such a fact has been causing pressure from part of the economic agents for the State to guarantee more and better space conditions for the advance and acceleration of the new merchandise flow. The State itself has, thus, conceded, through state standardization, the possibility of investments in that regional territory being produced by private groups, guaranteeing them expressive profits. Apart from the large appropriation of profit by investments in territorial infrastructure, the companies are also advancing to the appropriation of rural and urban land rent by the private appropriation of land in the region.

Before considering its effect on the region of our interest, it is necessary to consider that such economic phenomenon of land acquisition by foreign groups in areas of national State domain is also one of the dimensions of the advance of capital in the current historical moment. The race for land

appropriation, theoretically considered through the concept of "land grabbing" (SAUER e BORRAS, 2016), refers to the process of recent forms of capital accumulation. Land grabbing consists on a group of actions for appropriation of large extensions of land – considered jointly with its natural resources, such as forests, water and mining resources – by foreign institutions aiming at the extraction of such resources and its accumulation for foreign destinations. Terms such as "land rush" and "farmland grab" are also found in the bibliography (SAUER; BORRAS JR, 2016; BANCO, 2010; GRAIN, 2008) to denote actions by pension funds, sovereign funds, private equity companies, university foundations, banking institutions, insurance companies and other large corporations. The means of land appropriation in their multiple dimensions follow the process of financialization in contemporary economy.

The financialization of agriculture creates many artifices for capturing land; it updates forms of *grilagem*[9] and allows the purchase of land by foreigners and land grabbing – artifices connected both to the process of fictionalization and to accumulation by dispossession. The latter, according to Harvey (2004), becomes an attempt to halt the falling general trend of profits by land rentization. The idea of "appropriation" is the key concept to understand the changes in the real estate market and the growing presence of financial investment funds, since the transference of property rights of a great part of rural estates is illegally appropriated by large economic groups or connected to false titles.[10] Moreover, most of foreign capital is also present in various branches of the agribusiness productive chain, as in the case of seeds, fertilizers or commercial companies, where land leasing contracts are still a strategy of foreign capital's spacial adjustment.

Land grabbing creates and stimulates a vast global land market. The development of services and infrastructure is fundamental to allow sales and acquisitions, to secure possession or "leasing rights, to develop appropriate legal instruments and even to press for the creation of new legislation fit for such purchases" (SASKEN, 2016, p. 100).

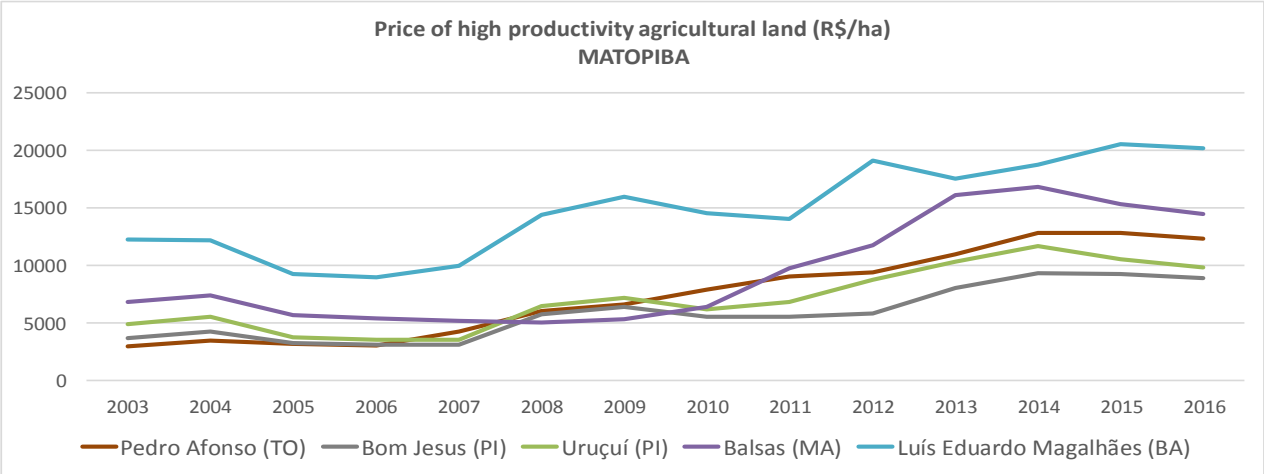
Returning to the Brazilian North-Center *Cerrado* biome region (MATOPIBA): the phenomenon of land grabbing has advanced in the region, and its effects are felt in the economical valorization of the territory and on the negative impacts on natural environments and agro-extractivist regional populations.

In the last years, the price of land in the region has risen significantly when considering a sample of municipalities in the MATOPIBA region (cf. Graph below). This phenomenon is connected to the rising number of investments directed to the formation of regional infrastructure – especially transports, power and communications –, and to the spacial and productive advance of agroforestal monoculture.

9 *Grilagem* is a Brazilian phenomenon of irregular land appropriation, mostly of land belonging to the State that has been transferred to private economical agents. For a discussion on the expansion of the agricultural frontier and the advance of soybean monoculture in Brazil, it is necessary to reflect on questions of *grilagem* of public and vacant land, and of land concentration. The State's share in *grilagem*, executed by the *Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária* (National Institute of Colonization and Land Reform, INCRA) is fundamental for the *grilagem* of new public land and for agribusiness, especially in Mato Grosso and in the North-Center *Cerrado* (OLIVEIRA, 2010).

10 The *Terra Legal* (Legal Land, TL) program is intended to regulate land titles for 300,000 *posseiros* (rural people who occupy and work vacant or unproductive land, although lacking official property titles) in public land in the Brazilian *Amazônia Legal*. The program legalizes *grilagem* and intensifies land concentration by state legitimization. "On the other hand, investments from large scale agribusiness are increasing deforestation and land concentration in the *Cerrado* biome region through well-established State mechanisms. While the imposition of "legibility" may regulate land concentration and deforestation, legible regions also facilitate investments which lead to deforestation and land concentration" (OLIVEIRA, 2016). The *Terra Legal* State Program structures the race for land in a national level – not in the sense that large areas of public land are being *de facto* privatized by such regulation, but in the sense that the program limits the possibility of redistributing land in other regions, consolidating the infrastructure of agribusiness in the area of transition between *Cerrado* and Amazon.

Graph 4 – Price of high productivity agricultural land in MATOPIBA



Source: FNP Agrícola (2003-2017). Values adjusted to the *Índice Geral de Preços de Mercado* (General Market Price Index, IGP-M)[11], which allows a real land valorization curve.

For means of comparison, in the period between 2007 and 2017, high productivity rural land in the region was highly valorized. In the Pedro Afonso municipality (Tocantins state), land prices rose 420%; in Bom Jesus and Urucui (Piauí), the growth rate of such assets were 415% and 519%, respectively; in Balsas (Maranhã), 398%; meanwhile, land prices in Luís Eduardo Magalhães (Bahia) rose 260%.

In Piauí state, in the region of Floriano, are located the most valorized areas of the Brazilian North-Center *Cerrado* biome: 900%. In Maranhão state, therefore, the value of sandy soil and plain terrain has risen 526%. In the same state, the most valorized region is Imperatriz, in the Brazilian pre-Amazon, the transition between the *Cerrado* biome and the equatorial rainforest; land value in the Buriticupu municipality has risen 1150%. The state of Tocantins, however, has presented less concentrated land valorization rates along its administrative limits, varying from 185% to 470%; the exception is Dianópolis, a municipality which has grown only 31,8% between 2007 and 2016 (FNP, 2003-2017).

Such is the context for the advancing interest by entrepreneurial economic groups in land acquisition, either to productively transform it or to appropriate it as a financial asset, transforming it in a reserve of value. In such a context, the following table (Table 3) shows the part played by foreign investors (corporations and individuals) in the purchase of land in the region.

Table 3. Land acquisition by foreigners in Brazilian North-Center Region

State	Legal Form	Number of involved	Number of land proprieties	Area (ha)

11 The General Market Price Index was conceived in 1947 as a comprehensive measure for the movement in prices. "Comprehensive" meant that the index should comprise not only different activities, but also different steps of the productive process. Thus, it could be used to deflate the index of business evolution, indicating on a monthly basis the level of economic activity in the country. At the time, the index's principle was to be an indicative for correction of some titles issued by the National Treasury and of bank deposits with income dated for longer than a year. Afterward, it was used to correct renting contracts and as an index for some taxes in the electric energy sector.

Bahia	Natural person	1144	1438	111.187,40
Bahia	Legal person/entity	17	60	44.796,89
Maranhão	Natural person	68	103	44.466,35
Maranhão	Legal person/entity	4	7	17.685,85
Piauí	Natural person	35	44	36.996,96
Piauí	Legal person/entity	N/d	N/d	
Tocantins	Natural person	127	150	90.214,62
Tocantins	Legal person/entity	5	6	3.662

Source: SNCR (2016).

Although the limit imposed by Brazilian legislation is indicative of a regulation of foreign purchase of land in the country, such legal procedures are disrespected by several entrepreneurial maneuvers involving partnership arrangements between national and foreign corporations aiming at larger land extensions. Brazilian Law no. 5.709/71 states that "*foreigners may hold up to one quarter of the area of the country (article 12), ie., 212,869 million hectares of Brazilian territory*" (OLIVEIRA, 2010, P. 53). However, the National System of Rural Credit (SNCR), the Brazilian State organ regulating access to land, works on underestimated data, given its self-declaratory character, apart from being out of date (its records cover only 50% of national land), since the civil registration records purchases and sales separately; these transactions are informed to the National Institute of Colonization and Land Reform (INCRA) and the information is redirected to the Regional Superintendencies (mostly in paper forms), where it gets stuck and is not recorded in the national land system. This explains, for example, the lack of information concerning the state of Piauí where, coincidentally, land prices have risen significantly in the last 10 years. The state of Bahia, the most consolidated of the agricultural frontiers in this study, is where most land is in the hands of foreigners, followed by the state of Tocantins. In the latter, purchase of land by the Chinese is confirmed, especially in the municipalities of Lajeado, Miracema do Tocantins and Rio Sono – an indicative that Chinese capital is interested in developing land acquisition investments in the country, especially as a financial asset, given the valorization of the region in the last years.

The presence of Chinese entrepreneurial groups in the Brazilian North-Center *Cerrado* biome is also detected in other sectors of the economy of the region. Chinese capital is much interested, as in other regions of the Brazilian territory (Sâo Paulo, especially), in the infrastructure sector. In the case of the region here considered, investments in the transport logistics system call the attention of new Chinese capital migrating to Brazil, given the large works in construction and transports required to guarantee the outlet of agroforestal and mineral merchandise, connecting the productive regions to seaports. One of the logistical systems where Chinese investments in the region are more likely is the construction of a railway system called *Ferrovia de Integração Oeste-Leste* (West-East Integration Railway, FIOL), which involves long distances between areas in west Bahia and north Goiás, integrating other railway branches and the exporting seaports. The China Railway Engineering Group is highly interested in investing in the project. The same company is looking forward to invest in other economical sectors in the region, such as the construction of solar and wind power plants (Governo do estado da Bahia, 2017). The Chinese economic group XGMA is also interested in allocating resources in the construction of water transport structures in the region, and intends to invest in the construction of the Tocantins river waterway (in Tocantins, Maranhão and Pará states), an important waterway leading to the Amazon river, which leads to the Atlantic ocean. Once implemented the investment, the company

will guarantee an output system involving the interconnection of long waterway stretches with inland ports and other transports (highways and railways), besides access to major exporting ports in the regions, such as Itaqui (Maranhão), Vila do Conde (Pará) and Ilhéus (Bahia).

When it comes to the agribusiness sector, Chinese companies are projecting considerable investments for the region. Besides the acquisition of land for productive or speculative sake, Chinese capital develops projects of installation of factories associated to grain processing in the region, especially soybean. In 2009, the Chong Oing Grain group began negotiating with Bahia's state government the installation of an industrial project then quoted in around R$ 4 billion, in the Barreiras municipality, west Bahia. The investments were destined to the storing, processing and output of soybean in the region. The Hunan Dakang company, controlled by the Shanghai Pengxin Group conglomerate, – which is already investing capital in the acquisition of other Brazilian economic groups in the grain agribusiness sector –, obtained shares from Fiagril, a national capital company processing and trading grains and also active in the distribution of modern agricultural inputs and production of biodiesel in several areas of the agricultural frontier in Brazilian territory.

Chinese capital has been advancing rapidly to several sectors of the Brazilian economy. The Brazilian North-Center *Cerrado* biome region has become, in that sense, an area of great interest for Chinese capital, given the economic growth in the last decades, especially in activities connected to agribusiness. Although the interest of that capital in the region projects enhancements in territorial infrastructure and more availability of services for the region's economy and population, its considerable effects are felt in the rising social exclusion, especially among agro-extractivist populations inhabiting the rich local ecosystems. This indicates that the ongoing investments are limited to the interests of a select social stratum existing in the area and of powerful economical conglomerates of great circulation among the global financial system.

7 Concluding Remarks

The *Cerrado* biome areas, which up until the 1960's were considered unfit for agricultural development and unattractive for capital, have recently become an important space for agricultural production – grains especially –, and for rising real state value and intense land speculation.

When it comes to Chinese capital, the interest in the North-Center *Cerrado* region is recent – dating from the 2000's –, and has focused mostly on the acquisition of agricultural commodities, particularly soybean and cotton. Apart from commodities, Chinese capital has been advancing into other sectors of the region's economy, not only purchasing primary merchandise for consumption in Chinese territory, but investing in assets in the North-Center *Cerrado* region. The reason for such is the fact that the region, contemplated by the PDA MATOPIBA project, has become a reference of expressive recent territorial value due to agroforestal monoculture, the use of land as a speculative financial asset, and investments in infrastructure (power, communications and transports).

The rising prices of *Cerrado* and Amazon rainforest land in the region show how the speculative value of land and nature, and not only the production of commodities, are central elements in space valorization. China was the country which most purchased land abroad, a total rising up to 12 million hectares (SASKEN, 2016).

Land acquisition by foreigners in Brazil is estimated in 2,250,000 ha – 3,8% of the country's cultivated land. Although the territorial percentage is still inexpressive (0,26%), the control by foreign companies takes place in other links of the food chain; production (soybean), rent capitalization and land speculation are faced as means of capital valorization; the creation of new farms, with capitalization through differential rent, and the creation of patrimony (purchase of land for investments in

production, machinery), adding work aiming at future sales; and land merely as a speculative form, through fictitious capital.

In the productive sphere of soybean's spacial circuit, the presence of such big companies in *Cerrado* has substantially altered the grain trading relations in the region, since it established forms of monopoly in the purchase of soybean, in the sales of fertilizers to agriculturists and in the financing of harvests.

It is important to emphasize that the areas of interest to Chinese companies in the Brazilian North-Center *Cerrado* biome region are in conflict with areas of peasant occupation and other rural identities. Areas where Chinese infrastructure investments are involved have generated land supervalorization, pressing traditional communities to leave their land, favoring rent and land concentration mechanisms and changing the region's landscape by hydroelectric mega-projects, railways and storing facilities.

One of the strategies of Chinese companies to avoid local conflicts – ranging from threats felt by the subjects in the territories as early as the announcements of investments, through conflicts during viability studies and environmental licensing, to the construction work itself, when the spoliation of the communities is intensified – is to obtain enterprises which are already in operation.

In the last few years, China Three Gorges has purchased hydroelectric dams in operation (Salto, Garibaldi, Jupiá and Ilha Solteira) and shares in hydroelectric dams already in their final stages (São Manoel, under construction in the Teles Pires river, forming the Tapajós river, by the border between Mato Grosso and Pará states; Santo Antônio do Jari, in the Jari river, border between Pará and Amapá; and Cachoeira Caldeirão, under construction in the Araguaria river, Amapá; shares of 33%, 50% and 50%, respectively) (AGUIAR, 2017).

Although some indicatives from soybean farms in the region are connected to financial capital, it is still difficult to trace Chinese presence in the region. As stated by Oliveira (2015)[12] and Diana Aguiar's report (2017) on "Chinese geopolitical infrastructure in Latin America", there are difficulties in collecting primary data and little field work information available on the presence of Chinese companies and investments in the MATOPIBA region, especially on the land market and on the commodities chains.

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12 "Among Brazilian universities, studies on Chinese and other international agribusiness investments in Brazil usually rely on media reports and secondary literature (Eg, Nakatani et al 2014, Wilkinson and Wesz Jr. 2013), and those who attempt to gather primary data and undertake fieldwork usually abandon the project due to great difficulty obtaining access to company executives and adequate information (e.g. Fernandes 2012; Moreira, Bonolo, and Targino 2013)" (OLIVEIRA, 2015, p. 08-09).

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