

Global governance/politics, climate justice & agrarian/social justice: linkages and challenges

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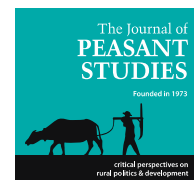
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Neither Romantic Peasants nor Bloody Capitalists: 'Double Cycles' of the Small-scale Chinese Farming in Russia

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Neither Romantic Peasants nor Bloody Capitalists: ‘Double Cycles’ of the Small-scale Chinese Farming in Russia¹

Yunan Xu and Natalia Mamonova

According to the recent estimates, China became the leader among 33 countries, which actively invest in the foreign land. Its land investments are often called “land grabbing” as they are aimed at the extraction or ‘alienation’ of resources for external purposes. However, there are three gaps in the current academic and political debates on Chinese land grabs. First, the majority of literature is focused on the analysis of China’s land grabbing in Africa and Southeast Asia, whereas activities of Chinese land investors in Russia – one of the main host countries for Chinese investments – remain understudied. Second, various Chinese actors are commonly labelled as “China” without disaggregation, even though Chinese state, state-owned companies, private companies, and individual entrepreneurs have different forms, goals, and strategies in the land-based investments. Third, while the Chinese large-scale land investments often appear in the headlines of popular articles and academic publications on land grabbing worldwide, the cross-boundary migrations of farming population slips “under radar”. However, considering the large scale and substantial socio-economic impacts from small-scale transnational land investments, the activities of the Chinese migratory farming population should receive more attention. These Chinese individual land investments constitute to a considerable – if not the largest – share of the total land investments (grabs) by China. They also have significant impacts in a host country.

This research analyses the activities of Chinese migratory farming population in Russia and discusses them within the debates on China’s land grabbing and developmental outsourcing. In the following Table 1 we demonstrate that forms, aims, scale and outputs of Chinese individual farming in Russia deviate from general discourses on land grabbing and Chinese state-dominated foreign land investments as the “rice bowls” for national food security. Thus, while the land grabbing and development outsourcing are focused on profit maximising and driven by the domestic food security programmes, the small-scale individual farming is rather oriented on meeting the farmer’s family needs.

Table 1. The “land grabbing”, the “developmental outsourcing”, and individual farming

	Land grabbing	Developmental outsourcing	Small-scale migratory farming
Form	Corporations with /without state involvement	State-based agricultural partnerships	Individual initiatives with little state intervention
Aim	Profit seeking/ speculation Response to various crises	Food security and political reasons	Subsistent income /wage
Scale	Large-scale	Large-scale	Small-scale (around 15 ha) but large in quantity
Farming output	Within the global food-feed-fibre-fuel complex	Imported to investor countries	Sold on local markets
Capital output	Investment in expansion of production	Investment in (re)production and CSR	Investment in (re)production (in accordance with the amount of human and productive resources); sending a share of income to families in China

Source: authors’ own elaboration

¹ Discussion Note

This study critically assesses the social, economic and environmental impacts of Chinese individual farming in Russia and distinguishes the reality from internationally and Russian-generated discourses about the scale, geography, short-term and long-term goals, and productive techniques of the Chinese migrant farmers. In the Table 2 we demonstrate that the Chinese migratory farming population is rather a hybrid mode, which combines different characteristics of Chinese household farmers, Russian household farmers, commercial farmers, LFEs and foreign investors: they use both family labour and wage labour, what makes them similar to commercial family farmers; they are engaging in time and labour-intensive farming, which makes them closer to peasant households; they use foreign farm inputs and technologies as the foreign investors do; they specialised in vegetable cultivation, which is different from large farm enterprises (LFEs) and foreign investors; their products are for sale, not for home consumption as peasants; but part of their profit is sent back to their left behind families to support their living, which makes them different from capitalist famers and large-scale land investors.

In order to understand these individual farm investments of the Chinese migrant population in Russia and globally, we introduce and develop the concept of ‘double cycles’ of ‘runaway’ Chinese capitalism. The first cycle of this process is not associated with the orthodoxies of land grabbing: migrated Chinese farmers and workers gain the control over the farmland through three main channels: (i) purchasing or leasing the land from Russian landholders (ii) leasing the land through organisations, established by the Chinese local state (iii) sub-leasing the land from Chinese large-scale investors. The agricultural production, however, is organised based on Chinese farm inputs, technologies and traditions (e.g. high dependence on chemical inputs², longer working hours/self-exploitation), which make their produce more economically competitive on Russian food markets³ and often at the expense of environmental degradation. The labour involved in the production are family- and wage-labour from China (often came from the same villages). Furthermore, Chinese farmers eventually employ Russian rural workers during the busy seasons. The agro-products are mainly vegetable crops sold at Russian local markets⁴, at the prices lower than that of local Russian farmers, but higher than that in Chinese market. This small-scale agriculture is commercially oriented in Russia; however, its profit is not invested in the expansion of production, as in capitalist societies, but sent to China to maintain the subsistence or improve the living standard of left-behind families (e.g. purchase/renovating houses), which represents the second cycle of ‘runaway’ capitalism in China. Therefore, Chinese small-scale farmers are neither romantic peasants nor bloody capitalists.

In this paper, we refer to the Chinese migratory farming population as Chinese citizens, who (temporary or permanently) migrated to the host country (in this case, Russia) to conduct farming activities as the main source of living. This includes individual farmers and farm workers.

Our research is primary based on the analysis of secondary literatures with some insights from the fieldwork of Mamonova in the Stavropol Krai of Russia (summer 2014), where she interviewed Chinese farm workers, and the fieldwork of Xu in the Guangxi province (spring 2015), where she studied small-scale farmers and left-behind rural families.

² In China, the average consumed amount of chemical fertilize is 341 kilo/ ha in 2009 (Weiyin Sun and Jiyang Cao, 2011)

While, in Russia (LFEs) the annual chemical fertilizer consumption is 70 kilo/ha and the organic fertilizer consumption is 1 100 kilo/ha (Rosstat 2016)

³ In the Far East, they (the Chinese farmers) have controlled 90% of the vegetable market, decreasing the price of cucumber from 60 Yuan/ jin to 1.6 Yuan/jin (1 jin=1/2 kilo) (Xie Ding,2006)

⁴ This is different from flex crops (e.g. maize and soybean), produced by large-scale land investors, which are primary exported to China or other countries.

Table 2. The comparison of Chinese migratory farming population with Chinese household farmers, Russian household farmers, commercial farmers, LFEs and foreign investors

Types	Chinese households farming	Chinese migratory farming population	Russian households farming	Russian commercial farmers	LFEs	Foreign investors
land access	User right of farmland under HRS(use of private financial resource and different state subsidies for grain production and agricultural inputs purchase)	Acquisition of land based on buying or renting (use of private financial resources from China and previous accumulated financial capital from Russia)	Ownership of household land	Acquisition of land based on buying or renting (use of private financial resources or bank loans)	Succession of former collective lands	Acquisition of land based on buying or renting (use of financial resources from abroad)
scale	Average 0,16 ha of farmland +0,03 ha of forest land per person	Average amount around 15	0.47 ha	60 ha	5400 ha	Up to 600 000ha
labour	using family labour, occasionally employing seasonal labour	using family- and wage-labour (mainly from China and even the same villages)	using family labour	using local waged-labour	using local waged-labour	using local waged-labour
inputs	both traditional and modern technology, both traditional seeds / fertilizes homemade and commercialized seeds /chemical inputs purchased with state's subsidies	technologies and seeds from China , and financial input from both China and Russia	traditional technologies, seeds	technologies, seeds, and financial input	technologies, seeds, and financial input	foreign technologies, seeds
production mode	Mainly labour- and time-intensive farming (with crops geographically differentiated: paddy/wheat, maize, sugarcane, vegetables, cotton, and animal raising, etc.)	Specialised in vegetables relatively labour intensive farming, usually with greenhouses	Labour- and time-intensive farming (vegetables, potatoes, dairy, etc.)	Grain production (and sometimes other, but which do not require significant time and labour resources)	Large-scale time and labour-efficient production. Primary grain	Grain production (large-scale, industrial, labour efficient, flex crop)
product usage	Consumption of farm output, accidental sales on local markets with state's intervention on the price setting	Sales of farm output on local markets (at the prices lower than that of local Russian farmers, but higher than that on Chinese market)	Consumption of farm output, accidental sales on local markets	Sales of farm output on local markets (sometimes on export)	sales on domestic and foreign markets	Export of farm output
profit usage	Profit – for subsistence of families	Profit – investment into production (a part of it) and to maintain/improve the living standard of the left-behind family members (e.g. buying/ building houses) in China.	Profit – for subsistence of families	Profit – investment into production (aimed at expansion, mechanisation, and commercialisation)	Profit – investment into production (aimed at expansion, mechanisation, and commercialisation)	Profit – investment into expansion of production, benefits the foreign entities

profit path	Profit stays in China	Profit stays in Russia and goes back to China	Profit stays in Russia	Profit stays in Russia, and benefits farmer's families	Profit stays in Russia, and benefits business elites	Profit goes abroad
production/reproduction	Either maintaining the reproduction or enlarging the production based on both household demographic condition and social relation around the means of production	Expansion production in Russia or in China	Either maintaining the reproduction or enlarging the production based on both household demographic condition and social relation around the means of production	Aimed at persistence (survival)	Aimed at stable profit, not necessarily at expansion	Expansion of production

Source: authors' own elaboration

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