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Towards a Political Sociology of Land Transfer: The Case of a Chinese Village

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Introduction

Land issues have been a topic of discussion over the years in the international and Chinese literature. Large-scale land deals and massive amounts of foreign investment in farmland in Africa, Latin America and elsewhere have become the focus of land assembly, more colloquially called 'land grabbing', which gradually has formed a grand discourse on agrarian change. Primitive accumulation (Marx, 2010) and accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2005), marked by conflicts and violence in addition to everyday resistance, are the dominant theories in analyzing the ongoing processes of land assembly. Under these two analytical frameworks, land grabbing involves constant and persistent responses from peasants to protect their access to land (Adnan, 2013; Borrass and Franco, 2010).

In China's case, there are two major land processes around land assembly. One is land expropriation. It is lawfully stated that for the purpose of public aims or 'in the public interest', governments can expropriate land from the land users through necessary procedures. The other is land transfer, the topic of this paper. Under the Household Responsibility System rural farmland is divided equally among village households, but householders only have a land use right, as land ownership belongs to the village collective. Land transfer changes the land use right among households or between households and other players with land interests. As land assembly is on-going in China today, it is appropriate to take a look at the two mechanisms commonly employed to assemble farmland (land expropriation and land transfer) and to note that they are different processes with different lines of enquiry in research. It is ultimately a question as to why, in the case of land transfer, that land assembly proceeds without any visible protest or complaint from the peasants being 'un-landed'.

Land expropriation reflects the international discussion around land grabbing. According to Yu (2006), after 1949, social conflicts in China can be divided into two stages. The first stage was led by intellectual elites; their mission was to reconstruct social values and the political system. Since 1989, the image of workers and peasants has dominated the picture of resistance. Contrary to the elites, workers and peasants fight for economic interests and other rightful benefits that are closely related to their everyday lives. Today, with rapid urbanization in China, the demand for more farmland for conversion to highways, industrial zones and other infrastructures has risen dramatically (Dong and Dai, 2010). As a consequence, resistance for land-related benefits

becomes the central issue, and has received considerable attention from researchers in politics and political economy.

Several analytical frameworks that enable researchers to look into this land related resistance issue are widely cited. Li and O' Brien (1996) were the first to come up with the idea of "policy-based resistance," which precisely captures the indirect way that peasants react when their rights are violated by the local government. In this process, peasants, by appealing to a higher level of government, pursue a solution posed within the bureaucratic system to realize greater implementation of the existing policies which favors their interests. This form of resistance publicly opposes the local government but, on the other hand, it seeks support from a higher level of government to protect rights. Yu (2004) promotes the concept of "struggle by law" to describe the new collective action of peasants to defend their rights. By definition, "struggle by law" is a high level of political activism and is well organized. By seeking the support of the law, peasants motivate themselves to confront the offending party that puts their rights in danger.

There are other forms of resistance from the peasants. Dong (2008) discovered that the fact of being the weak can be used as a weapon to prevent their economic benefits or political rights from being appropriated by the stronger. Peasants either organize themselves to demonstrate to the public the deprivation from which they suffer, or individually threaten the authorities with their own lives (Wang, 2010). This can also be grouped into "local resistance" (Dong and Dai, 2010) and, in many cases, results in tragedy.

Land transfer, on the other hand, follows a different line of inquiry. It is a different process. The Chinese land tenure system currently in place is the Household Responsibility System which was introduced in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a major part of the 'reform and opening up' of China. Under this arrangement, Chinese farmers gained access to collectively owned land based on their membership in rural villages. To this day they have no rights to sell their land despite many difficulties in their livelihoods (Zhang and Donaldson, 2013). Nevertheless, the freedom of land assembly is seldom denied and, conversely, has been strengthened over the years. The third plenary session of the 17th China Communist Party congress in October, 2008 dramatically accelerated the land transfer processes. During the decade before 2007, land transfer increased 14% every year, while in 2008 it grew by 70%, followed by 50% in 2009. By the end of 2009, the total amount of land transferred had reached 152 million mu (Huang et al., 2011), which accounted for 13% in the entire farmland base of China. The 18th China Communist Party congress (2012) further opened the land market for capital to be invested in agriculture. According to the latest statistics from the Agricultural Bureau, land transfer reached 0.34 billion mu in 2013, accounting for 26% of the farmland, which increased by 17.1% over that of 2008 (NetEase, 2014).

It is important to note that land transfer is initiated for land concentration and is usually for a particular form of agricultural production, which can be characterized as large-scale, industrial and capital based (Koc, 2012). Large producers, family farms and farmers' cooperatives were highly promoted in the Third Plenary Session of the Seventeenth Central Committee as a means to achieve these modernization goals. The First Document of the Party Central Committee (2013) explicitly expressed its support for large-scale production by creating favorable policy and a legal

environment (Gao, Liu and Kong, 2013). According to the first survey on family farms conducted in 2012 by the Ministry of Agriculture, there were more than 870,000 family farms in 30 provinces in China, which accounted for 13.4% of the farmland, with an average farm size of 200 mu (Irrigation.com.cn, 2013). Other data provided by the National Industrial and Commercial Bureau indicates that by the end of 2012, nearly 690,000 farmers' cooperatives had been established in China; among them 167,000 were formed in a single year (Sina.com.cn, 2013).

Land transfer opens the land market in rural areas. The widely accepted reason derives from the many demands of China's economic development. Some argue that land transfer will optimize land resource allocation and even enhance marginal output in every household (Ye, Jiang and Feng, 2006). Some scholars believe that with the migration of rural labor into the second and third sectors in cities, rural areas are "hollowing out." Largely due to the loss of agricultural labor, the amount of underused farmland has been rapidly increasing, and it makes land transfer a rational choice in terms of resource management (Wang and Li, 2008). Others insist that land reallocation to skilled farmers or economic organizations, for instance, the cooperatives, will help achieve moderate scale management, as well as realize modern industrial agriculture (Bao et.al, 2009; Jiao, 2005).

Under this hypothesis, the main applied research interest becomes how to enable smooth land transfer. At the institutional level, Li and Yang (1993) criticize the Household Responsibility System. They hold the opinion that the ambiguity of collective landownership deprives the peasants of freedom to trade their land because they are only entitled to the land use right. Therefore it causes land insecurity and further increases transaction costs. Some research (Ye, Jiang and Feng, 2006) also supports this point of view and suggest that a clearer property right and simpler institutional arrangement would be good for the development of a land market. Still others such as Wen (2008) are more concerned with the emerging social reality of rural China when talking about land reform. Although land is an economic asset, it is as well a safety net for rural populations. When there is not enough employment to absorb surplus labor in rural areas, land is considered to be the last means of livelihood. Land privatization, therefore, will risk the social welfare of peasants and threaten rural stability.

At the empirical level, there are many factors influencing land transfer. Research in 17 provinces undertaken by China Renmin University and the American Rural Development Institute concludes that the more members a family has, the more members work in non-agricultural sectors and the more the peasants are educated, the better the land market is developed. Different from the findings of this research, a study carried out in Hubei province discovered that land transfer is largely affected by rural policies (Wang and Li, 2008). Other reasons include income from agriculture compared with transfer fees or non-farm employment, as well as government planning. Age is another factor (Zhao et.al, 2011). The elderly tend to be more against land transfer, for they have more attachment to the land. In their belief, land is the essential asset for a farmer, which makes giving up land a very risky choice to make. Considering that land transfer is conducted at the village level, peasant behaviors are adjusted by local customs, a sense of community and other social factors. In this sense, outside capital will find it hard to rent land from peasants compared with local contractors. There are many others on the list of personal factors affecting peasant

attitudes and behaviors to land transfer, for instance health conditions, marital status, gender, etc. (Jiao, 2005).

The current discussion around land issues in China therefore concentrates mainly on two aspects. The resistance discourse, starting from the political point of view, attempts to categorize and analyze the forms of peasant resistance in order to identify the obstacles as well as constraints of peasant collective actions at this stage. Policy-based resistance and struggle by law both take place through formal channels and are openly against land expropriation schemes that cruelly harm the legal rights and threaten the meager livelihoods of the poor and the weak. Having to fight with the identity of being weak tragically reflects the disadvantaged position of peasants, who are pushed to utilize the last means in their possession, their misery and lives, to demonstrate the unfair land deals that they are forced to accept. Land expropriation discourse sketches a painful picture in front of the public with struggles and resistance in order to draw people's attention to protect peasant rights. On the other hand, the second means, land transfer, is exclusively presented with calculation of the economic gain and loss. Land transfer is promoted as a grand project to transform household modes of agricultural production into modern industrial forms of agriculture. The research focus resides in how to facilitate the transfer processes and overcome hindrances along the way so that peasants will soon embrace the advantages of modern farming, but as laborers, not as farmers. It goes without saying that the ideology behind land transfer is the deep belief that industrial agriculture is the best way to improve agricultural productivity as well as peasant incomes which, in the end, supports the policy narrative that it will benefit rural China as a whole.

Land transfer study is unintentionally constrained to economic analysis which, in practice, will overlook peasants' true feelings about losing their land and their concerns about entering the world of modern agriculture. The lack of political analysis will impair the full understanding of Chinese land issues on the one hand, and the resistance analytical framework, on the other. If we agree that land transfer in essence is the Chinese version of primitive accumulation, then we have to ask why the process is seemingly peaceful, whether compared with the "enclosure movements" in British rural history or the ongoing resistance in other developing countries. In the book *Weapons of the Weak*, Scott (2011) draws attention to the everyday resistance of peasants. He points out that it is necessary to distinguish two important phenomena: hidden resistance and positive cooperation. The true reasons for the peasant silence and the deeper political attitudes can be concealed under the obedience of peasants unless they are pushed to a point where their sense of justice is gravely violated. To answer the above question, we see the need to look into the processes of land transfer and detect the interactions among actors involved in the process. Equally important, we believe it is crucial to describe the political and social structures in rural China that are in place in order to understand the environment that peasants are faced with in today's rural China.

Methodology

- **Study Area**

In this paper we provide a descriptive analysis of the interactions in the processes of land transfer in a particular political-social instance in order to present the local reactions from peasants to land transfer and their situation in the current political and social environment of rural China. To do this we employ a general ‘actor’ theory approach (Long, 2001), paying attention to the roles and agency of the participants (old and new, insiders and outsiders) in the process of accomplishing smooth land assembly.

The study area is H Village, located in southern Sichuan. It is under the administration of R County. North of the village is occupied by mountains, while the main farmland stretches along a river valley in the south, offering most of the fertile soils for agriculture. Transportation in the village is very convenient with a highway passing by the village which enables fast communication of people and goods between the village and neighboring cities, including the capital city Chengdu and Leshan City whose rural areas are famous for vegetable production. In recent years, there has developed a large vegetable wholesale market at which the nearby vegetable farmers often choose to sell their produce.

The total population of the study village is 3158, living in some 1200 households and forming 9 production teams. One third of the community members have migrated to Yunnan, Guangzhou and other city areas in China or even overseas, and those remaining are mostly women, the elderly and children. Aging is the apparent feature in the village demographic structure. Like many other villages with heavy out-migration in China, people in their fifties would be considered “young” in H Village. In terms of gender ratio, the majority of the regular residents are women. Most of the children return to the village only on weekends.

There are 4550 mu of farmland in H Village, 1065 mu of which were recently transferred from villagers to local farmers as well as outsiders from Leshan City, accounting for 22.2% of the total farmland. Table 1 shows the contractors, scale of land transfer, land uses and other information about recent land transfer in H Village.

Table 1 Land transfer information of the Study Village, 2000 - 2013

Contractors	Scale (mu)	Land Use	Land Sources (team)	Date
Mr. Wu	15	Tea production	7	2000
Ms. Xiao	30	Vegetable production	3	2009
Mr. Sun	20	Vegetable production	7	2010
Mr. Li	50	Watermelon and mushroom production	8	2012
Mr. Yu	60	Ginger production	8	2012
Mr. Li& Li	80	Vegetable production	7	2012
Mr. L	800	Vegetable and ginkgo tree production	1 and 2	2013

As indicated in the above table, one commercial farm, owned by Mr. L from Leshan, transferred 800 mu of land from over 250 households, which accounts for 17.6% of the total amount of land in the village. Six family farms together own 255 mu, while the remaining 1100 households

occupy approximately 3000 mu, which on average is less than 3 mu for each household. There is a tendency of land concentration in the research village over the past 13 years, particularly in the recent 2012- 2013 period.

• **Research Methods**

In order to observe and understand local reactions to land transfer, we conducted fieldwork on two occasions in the autumn, 2013 and winter, 2013-14. The primary data surveys enabled us to obtain a full picture of the political and social structure in H Village, especially the situation under the influence of out-migration that dates back to the 1980s and has lasted for more than 30 years. During the first period of fieldwork, we chose one land transfer case as an instance and extensively interviewed actors involved in the land transfer processes, which we grouped in table 2. We selected several key informants to fill in the crucial details of Mr. L’s land transfer case. Extra attention was paid to the feelings, understanding and insights of the local peasants during the processes.

Table2 Key actors in land transfer processes in the Study Village

Categories	Specific actors	Features
Political authorities	Village cadres	Business owners, more than 20 years in position
New social authorities	Production team leaders, Mr. L	Newly-elected, wood chip factory owner
Land gainer	Local facilitator, Mr. Z	Pig trader, middleman for Mr. L
Land Providers	Farm workers	Age around 60, even over 70, 5RMB/hour
	Non-farm workers	Majority of the land providers

The second period of in-depth fieldwork was from the 18th of December in 2013 to 5th of January in 2014 and deepened our understanding of land transfer in H Village. Based on the analytical framework derived from the previous survey, we verified our findings with the relevant actors and added their opinions about specific matters to better understand their sources of agency.

We relied on participatory observation to grasp the political and socio-economic landscape constructed by out migration in this rural community. We also conducted semi-structured interviews with various actors in the land transfer processes. During the in-depth interviews with key informants, special attention was paid to record the memories and emotions attached to crucial events. . We tried to detect the peasant views of land transfer that were hidden in their seemingly peaceful actions and feelings.

Social and Political Structures in the Village

Rural China has gone through many dramatic changes over the past 30 years; among them the migratory movements of rural people deservedly attract the most attention. Industrialization and urbanization from the 1980s onwards has turned a majority of Chinese peasants into “peasant

workers” (nong min gong) (Ye et al., 2013). The number of migrants reached 263 million in 2012, 80% of whom were between the ages of 21 and 50 (average 37.3 years old) (people.com.cn, 2013). The main population remaining in the villages is made up of the left-behind people, the elderly, women, and children. Rural communities have gone through several changes due to this shift in the demographic structure. A huge loss of community members of working age and the connection that migratory populations build between “home” and “host” locations (Kelly, 2011) bring unpredictable consequences to rural communities and heavily influences the development of many villages.

Migration in H Village started in the 1980s when free flows of people between rural and urban areas were allowed after the Reform and Opening up Policy. “Going out” then became a priority choice for many rural residents to increase household income. Migration increased dramatically in the 1990s, for peasants were surer to find a job in the cities with the connections that they had with the migrants from their community. They helped each other in the strange environment just as they did back in the village. With the growth of migration, idle uncultivated land began to appear and some of it was used for planting trees. Land transfer as a noticeable phenomenon first occurred around 1996. At that time, land was given by some peasants to others for free, and land gainers were expected to pay only the agricultural taxes and fees attached to the land. One thing to point out is that the agricultural burden was heavy if not totally unaffordable before 2006 when agricultural taxes and fees were officially abolished for the first time in Chinese history. Migration takes away the most qualified laborers in agriculture and, as a result, without the burden of agricultural taxes, relatively large scale land transfer emerged in 2009 and has grown rapidly ever since.

Changing political authority in H Village: political actors

Rural political authorities, namely members of the Village Committee, enjoyed great respect and influence in rural society back in the collectivization era. They were the organizers as well as coordinators of farming activities. The authority that they possessed in political and economic matters left deep impressions on villagers such that they could depend on the political authorities to be responsible for their livelihoods and major decisions in agricultural activities. After the establishment of the Household Responsibility System, political authorities lost their responsibilities in arranging collective farming activities, together with the power that they had over the villagers. However, at this stage, they were still in charge of collecting agricultural taxes and fees which, to some extent, still equipped them with a form of authority because they stood for the State.

The cancellation of agricultural taxes took away the obvious opportunities for the village heads to demonstrate their political authority in front of the villagers, leaving the routinely administrative tasks from the township government to be their main work. With out-migration increasingly bringing back money and improving the living conditions of the peasants, the village heads, as people remaining in the village, also began looking for ways to generate incomes (Table 3).

Table 3 Village leaders and their livelihoods in the Study Village

Village heads	Main income sources	Village resources in use
Secretary of the party	A wood chip factory(co-owned)	Eucalyptus trees (promoted to grow by the government)
Women's director	A wood chip factory(co-owned); radish collecting and primary processing; bamboo plantation and rent	Eucalyptus trees (promoted to grow by the government), land, villagers
Village director	A fish restaurant	Fish from river, villagers
Clerk	A fish farm (under construction)	Water, land, villagers

As indicated from the above table, all of the village heads managed to take over the village resources that the left-behind population would likely be unable to utilize, either because of a lack of money or difficulties in getting permission from the township government without the necessary “guanxi”. Take the women’s director, for instance. She started the earliest case of land transfer. Depending on the “guanxi” that she had built over the years by collaborating with the township government, the women’s director obtained about 200 mu of land from the government at a very low price. Apart from the land used to build a house for her family, part of the land is covered by bamboo trees which can be sold to make paper, while the rest is rented out to nearby villagers for farming. The women’s director also provides radish seeds for free in order to attract local peasants to grow radish for her on their own land. She also hires several laborers to process the radishes, including cleaning and salting, before the radishes are sold to pickle factories.

The base of the political authority that lies in the legitimacy and capacity of organizing collective economic matters has dramatically weakened since the 2006 tax reform, despite the fact that the collectivization era has formed a cultural memory in the minds of the peasants that the village heads are still their “leaders” and that they serve the interests of the community. More importantly, the base has gradually transformed into an economic position. It is difficult to assess accurately the relation between the wealth of the village heads and the respect that they enjoy from the villagers, even though the signs can be picked up from the way that villagers speak of their rich leaders. One important reason is that they are employed by them or expect job offers from them. Peasants leave their community because there are not enough resources and job opportunities to offer them a good livelihood, yet their absence benefits village heads, who make a good living by using the land, forests and other resources left idle. Families of the migrants often end up being employed by the village heads and once again become dependent upon them.

Since the cancellation of the agricultural taxes and fees, state authority has been retreating from rural society. Instead, the self-interest driven market is taking over the arena that once was controlled by the State (Wang, 2013). Political authorities are gradually relying on their economic power, whereas the economic elites are playing more important roles in the development of the community and its economy.

New social authorities arising from rural society: social actors

Rural China is an acquaintance society which is regulated by village rules, social acquaintance and local trust (Fei, 2011; Bao and Zhu, 2009). Members are very well known to each other because they are born and raised in the same community. Trust is built through daily conversations and everyday interactions, consequently, the trust decreases when social circles get wider, Villagers therefore, are suspicious of outsiders coming to the community. Within the community, people's behaviors are constrained by rules and customs, which prevent some members from maximizing self-interests while sacrificing the overall benefits of the community. Social authorities and elites are important actors in the eyes of common villagers as they can form a protection system (Duara, 1988) when the community encounters change from outside forces.

There are two forms of social authority in the study village. One doesn't have a formal position in the political structure of rural society, but automatically becomes a bridge between the outsiders and the community members due to its connection with both parties in the relationship (Duara, 1988), for instance, Mr. Z, who was the promoter of Mr. L's land transfer. Mr. Z is a pig dealer. He has been a middleman for more than 10 years, and has built a wide social circle in this process. However, although he is a registered resident of the village, he doesn't have a close relationship with other peasants as he has already bought a house in the county town. Approximately a decade ago, Mr. L started a pig business back at his hometown, after which Mr. L and Mr. Z became permanent business partners. A couple of years ago, a local villager lost his pig farms and Mr. Z seized the opportunity to inform Mr. L who then initiated his pig business in the village. This intermediary is a type of new actor in the village. The other form of authority is the production team leader.

Production teams in H Village are remnants from the collectivization era. They are the most common collective economic organizations and still form the basic social environment for villages in many parts of China (Yan, 2011; Bao and Zhu, 2009). In addition, they are crucial components in the rural governance structure and play a key role in team activities. Village committee leaders may enjoy certain political authority in people's memory from the collectivization era, while production team leaders, on the other hand, manage their teams mainly relying on traditional authority, or local social capital. He Xuefeng (2006) regards production teams as the real acquaintance society in China.

According to the account of a previous production team leader, in the period of the People's Commune, team leaders made decisions concerning the use of irrigation water. In addition, they motivated the peasants to keep enough buffalos for ploughing for the entire team and organized team members to use them judiciously at seeding time. Back at that time, production team leaders were not elected. There were no economic benefits in fulfilling organizational obligations. Those who could earn the trust of the team members would be recommended to take the responsibility. For a period of time, when agricultural taxes were heavy, few people were willing to have the job, for there were no practical gains. Instead, they would have to risk souring their good relations with the villagers because they had to collect required agricultural taxes by any means.

Today, migration has changed the social relations within production teams. New social authorities have emerged from the community. However, nowadays it is more the economic status than

prestige that becomes the precondition for authority. Mr. Y is the leader of Production Team Two which is actively involved in the land transfer case that we are about to examine in the following part. He was elected as the team leader in 2006 when two villages, H Village and L Village, merged into one. Mr. L migrated to cities for a living in the past. He managed to earn a decent life for his family, but disconnected himself from the community due to years of absence. Even after returning to the village, he still based his livelihood in the township where he opened one restaurant, a mahjong parlor and one wood factory near the township center. Lack of familiarity with the community and its members didn't pose an obstacle for his election to team leader, however. On the one hand, the team members look up to him for his capacity to make money, on the other, he offers possibilities for some villagers to work in his businesses. Nonetheless, the more important reason for his election appears to be the prevailing indifference to politics in rural areas. We will examine this proposition in more detail in the following section.

The changing roles of actors: Indifference to politics among the peasants

In Duara's (1988) book "Culture, Power and the State", he points out that during the transition when the capable people in the community don't care to be leaders, those who seek for personal interests will take over the position and ignore the traditional rules and customs, which will jeopardize the benefits of the community. According to He (2002), there are three points that village people consider when deciding whether to run for election and serve as a community member or not. One is the effectiveness of public opinion and whether it is able to constrain the behaviors of village committees. The second is if it is an honored thing to be a village leader or it is just reckoned as a way of making some money. The last is about the vision of the future and whether it is worthy to sacrifice short-term profits for the benefit of the village in the long run.

Migration takes away many of the so-called 'grass-root elites' (Tang, 2006, Ruan, 2009), who are the relatively well-educated and who have big social circles. The main population left in the community, the elderly, women and children, are not particularly the best candidates for village election or the ideal choices for village leaders. Peasant workers normally stay away from their communities more than 6 months a year, some even years, and they only come back when there are festivals or important events such as a wedding. It is impossible for them to give responsible votes if they have little knowledge of their own communities and the candidates. This indifference to politics contributes to the changes in the relations among political and social authorities.

In H Village, the village heads have all stayed in the same positions for decades, which is partly due to their increasingly better economic condition, and is partly owed to the fact that there are no new competitors to run in the election against them. There are already signs to challenge the stable nature of the village politics. For instance, Mr. L attempted to run for election to be village director by bribing the villagers to vote for him. It didn't work out in the end, but to some extent it confirmed that capable returnees will probably change the political environment. No competition in production team leader elections also allows the new economic elites to seek an entry to the political system. The other social and political influence that migration has on the rural community is the absence of monitoring and supervision, which contributes to the lack of accountability of the village heads as well as the easy access to the production team leadership.

Interactions among actors in the processes of land transfer

In this section, we will present the various forms of interactions among actors that are involved in the processes of land transfer highlighting Mr. L's case, in an attempt to elaborate on the manifestations of political sociology in H Village. The forms of interaction fall into two major categories. One is the tacit support of the village heads for land transfer, that shrewdly shifts the responsibility of land deals to the production team leaders, but de facto assists land transfer by the manifest presence of the State. The other category is characterized by the rise of new social authorities, actors who manipulate traditional values and rules as a strategy to persuade the hesitant peasants to give up their land.

Tacit Support from the Village Committee

In the literature on land transfer, village committees are constantly stressed as being the vital actor. It has been pointed out that the village committee plays the most important role as transaction intermediaries as well as organizing and coordinating peasants to facilitate land transfer (Kong, et al., 2013). The village committee makes decisions on price, term, payment methods and other important issues. In the same research, village committees worked as a double agent; it was both the spokesman of the peasants and the broker for those who want the land. Some village committees charge fees, other don't.

It is common therefore, even necessary, for the village committee to be involved in land transfer. Rural China is an acquaintance society in which peasants inherit natural suspicion about people from outside of their community. High transaction costs and the possibility of peasants demanding high transfer rents push buyers to seek help from the village committees (Kong, et al., 2013). For village committees, gaining working funds and government awards are the top reasons why they participate actively in land transfer deals (Kong, et al., 2010). Moreover, land transfers provide an opportunity for rent-seeking.

In H village, the Village Committee (VC) is seemingly less active than the ones mentioned above. None of the members on the VC were deeply involved in the negotiation process of the land transfer. In general, the VC is in favor of land transfer, for in their understanding, much influenced by higher level government pressure, concentration of farmland is the future trend in rural areas. However, the VC members didn't wish to put too much effort into the process. On one hand, there were no working funds or government awards, as seen in other places, to encourage H Village leaders to put their efforts into land deals. On the other hand though, Mr. L promised to donate a certain amount of money yearly to the VC when the land transfer was accomplished. However, the fund was considered barely enough to support village activities for local women and the elderly. Moreover, none of the village leaders would be able to derive private interests from it. In this sense, leaving the troubles of negotiation to production team leaders would seem to be a shrewd choice. Bearing this in mind, it wouldn't be surprising that when asked about the land transfer situation in the village, neither the secretary of the party, nor the women's director could offer sufficient material to sketch the general storyline of Mr. L's land transfer. On the surface, the

Village Committee is a passive actor.

However, this is not to say that the VC didn't support land transfer in the actual process. Rather, it facilitated the process in a more subtle manner. In the analysis of a land expropriation case, Wang and Ye (2013) revealed the strategies that one village leader utilized to facilitate the construction of a highway—State presence. Being the middleman between the State and the villagers, village leaders, as actors, can draw on cultural symbols, past events and ambience as well as official discourse--government documents and official state policy-- to form a sense of state authority. By using "In the name of the State", village leaders invoke greater authority and manage to persuade villagers to surrender their rights in land. In H Village, the village heads applied similar tacit tactics, which were symbolically demonstrated in the land transfer contract signing ceremony.

On the day of the signing ceremony the production team leader and Mr. L especially invited the Village Committee to attend the meeting, the final step of the land deal, despite the fact that the village heads had never been visibly involved in the process. They were arranged to sit in the most noticeable location of the site, the front of the group and the middle of the front row. With their witness, the land transfer contract was publicly announced, but selectively explained to the villagers. Approximately 300 households saw the village head put the village committee official stamp on the contract. With witness of their village heads, peasants finally signed their names on the contract as well as the additional document with the records of their land holdings. The signing ceremony put the hesitant peasants at ease, as they believed that they had witnessed the essential authority to sanction the land transfer contract. Many of the peasants at the ceremony were among the elderly, whose vivid memory of the VC still remained in the collectivization era when, it was felt, the village heads had their interests in mind. When interviewing the involved peasants, "the Village Committee agreed" consistently appeared as the primary and unquestioned reason for acquiescence. Compared with the land expropriation case mentioned above, the presence of the State in H Village didn't even have to depend on government documents or any material proof to demonstrate the authority of the State, for the presence of the VC accomplished this end as it was.

Unfortunately, as in many instances elsewhere, the VC betrayed the illusory trust. To start with, village leaders didn't think they had any responsibility whatsoever for the land transfer. They refused to admit the authority they stood for merely by presenting themselves in front of the villagers. "We just sat there. Production team leaders were the ones in charge of land transfer within their teams". They insist that ever since HRS in full was implemented, every household makes individual decisions over their land and production, which leaves them in place to force them to accept a deal. To further defend their tacit attitude, they would insist that transferring land is beneficial for local villagers because of their strong belief that large-scale modern agriculture is the future of the village compared with leaving pieces of land in the hands of individual peasant households. They would add that, there are several actual benefits attached to land transfer, for instance, annual rent of 1000 RMB for the household and a job opportunity to work on the big farm, which would be formed with the land transfer, and which would offer the peasants more income than cultivating their own land. By developing a form of 'narrative', the Village Committee justified their actions of tacit support.

The VC denied the authority that they inherited from the collectivization era by stressing that HRS intended to make every household responsible for its own well-being, while the function of the VC is mainly to fulfill the routine tasks assigned by the township government, including one-child policy implementation as well as regular data collection. What they deny by their narrative and which they fail to admit, ironically, is also what the villagers are used to believe in their historical authority that has affected the life of generations of people starting from the period of collectivization. Cultural memory is shared by the members of the same community, but the speed of forgetting about past events varies from person to person. In the case of H Village, the village heads seem to be the first ones to welcome a new era in pursuing personal interests. To achieve this goal, they may have to ignore the benefits of the whole.

Coalition of manipulation in land transfer by new authorities

In the land transfer case initiated by Mr. L in 2013, 800 mu of land was transferred from over 200 households within a month. Besides the silent support and passive action that the VC provided for land transfer, the active participation of the emerging social authorities (economic elite), Mr. Z and Mr. Y, was essential for the success of convincing enough peasants to give up their land.

Mr. L and Mr. Z have been long-time business partners. Having pig farms in H Village makes it convenient for Mr. Z to be a middleman. When land transfer was brought up by Mr. L, Mr. Z was more than happy to help make it work, for it would be another chance for him to deepen their partnership, more importantly, he and his family would get more benefits from it. Mr. Z's wife is essential to the 800 mu vegetable farm as she supervises farm workers every day to keep a record of the working hours of each farm laborer in order to decide the payment every month. The couple eats at the farm cafeteria and they are the most visible of the management staff. They keep the farm running together with the brother-in-law of Mr. L.

Land transfer mainly happened at the village level. Yet, for large-scale land, it is required to obtain permission from the township government and be registered in the land management system. In this regard, Mr. Z accompanied Mr. L to the government offices and assisted him in acquiring approval by engaging in the conversation to cover the shortcoming of Mr. L for being poor in words. Most importantly, Mr. Z put Mr. L in touch with Mr. Y (production team leader) and explained the issue of transferring land from his production team to Mr. L. The intention was favorably understood and Mr. Y expressed his support at the same time. The next thing to do was to get the village representatives on board, which was not too hard considering that the representatives were appointed by the team leader himself after his successful election. Discussion about the transfer contract took place among the actors with authority; the team leader and the village representatives which took place in the house of one representative. A contract was then given to Mr. L and Mr. Z for discussion.

Whether there was cash involved or other forms of favors remains unknown, nonetheless, according to the final version of the contract, Mr. L did not get a good deal for his team members. In the first place, the transfer fee, 1000 RMB/year per mu, is the same amount as that offered by others in the village who also want to obtain land from peasants. Land quality under this

production team varies, for those who own better land; this price would not cover their loss. In the second place, the contract period was settled at 10 years, which enables Mr. L to safely invest his money on the farm without worrying that a peasant will regret the deal and want his/her land back. In addition,, considering the development of the land market, the price of land will predictably go up, and this contract will leave the peasants with no space to renegotiate in the future. Finally, the contract allows peasants to have a job on the vegetable farm. The payment of a farm worker is 5RMB/hour, which means more than 500RMB a month. It is a large amount of money for peasants who used to earn only 1000 RMB a year. However, what should be taken into consideration is that this job is not available to all peasants. Those who are slow in farm work will, in effect, be laid off because they won't be called upon when there is work to do.

Not all the households involved in the land assembly were pleased with the offer. One old couple hesitated to give their land to Mr. L. Their children are working in cities, leaving the two of them at home to farm their land. For them, farming isn't merely labor work; it is a way of life. They wish to tend the crops and orange trees in their spare time and eat the food harvested with their own hands. Another peasant refused to sign on the land transfer contract because, unlike other peasants, he grows fruit trees on his land, which enables him to gain an income greater than others. Other households maybe satisfied with 1000 RMB a year, but he wouldn't agree.

In these particular cases, Mr. Y applied different strategies. For the former, he discussed with Mr. L and let the old couple stay since their land was along the road, and therefore it wouldn't affect the completeness of Mr. L's holding. As to the fruit tree peasant, Mr. Y hired him to work at his wood chip factory which provided him a guaranteed same amount of income every month. For the rest who couldn't make up their minds, Mr. Y and his representatives developed a set of specific tactics.

To start with, Mr. Y and the village representatives formed a discourse to justify land transfer by repeatedly mentioning the rent and job opportunities that the peasants could expect once they agreed with giving up their land. The key point was to compare the annual income from farming that household can get with the yearly rent which could be obtained through land transfer. "You wouldn't get so much money after a whole year's hard work. On the contrary, you can receive guaranteed 1000 RMB without doing anything." To women and the elderly, it is important to downsize the former's value as laborers and take advantage of the latter's worry of being burdensome for their children. "When working on the farm, you can easily get 500 RMB even over 1000 RMB every month, which is more than enough to buy daily supplies." "You can buy more toys for your grandchildren." "You wouldn't need financial support from your children." Repetition of the same rhetoric worked quite well once it reached a certain volume and especially when the proponents grasped the very ways of thinking of the left-behind people.

Importantly, they created a false impression that the majority of team members had agreed to transfer land even when the proposal was just newly made. Persuasion commenced long before the formal signing ceremony was held in order to create a false impression of a peaceful meeting with spontaneous agreement from the peasants. Those leaning towards land transfer didn't need to be convinced, in contrast, they volunteered to talk other peasants into the deal because land

transfer could only be realized when Mr. L could assemble a whole piece of land. Mr. Y and the village representatives took advantage of the situation when persuading hesitant peasants. “Look at others. They’ve all agreed to give their land to Mr. L. But they can’t get any money if you don’t say yes.” “Most of our team members planned to transfer their land. How are you going to do farming when the rest of the land is used to grow vegetables by Mr. L?” The intention of this tactic is to put halting peasants under great pressure of ‘inevitability’, the guilt of holding up an inevitable process and going against other villagers. Mr. Y and the village representatives knew perfectly well that “collectivity” possesses great significance in rural communities. By marginalizing the hesitating peasants and putting them on the opposite side of the majority, Mr. Y and the village representatives would be able to label the reluctant members as “jealous of the rich”, “indifferent to the common good” and “peace breakers” and so forth, as a result, these peasants would be cornered and give in to the traditional values that they respect, abiding by authority and a sense of duty to the village community.

Discussion

Behind the seemingly peaceful land transfer process, back stage performance was far more intriguing. It is easily overlooked in the formal story telling largely due to the lack of cases of dramatic resistance. However, by examining the details during the process and recording peasant memories, this research reveals the current social and political structures of post-migration villages in rural China, as well as the dynamics of these social-political changes.

The success of Mr. L’s land transfer plan lies in the assistance from two kinds of actors with two kinds of power. One is the Village Committee that symbolizes traditional political authority, and the other is the emerging economic elites who act as social authorities during the process of convincing local community members.

The village committee is a passive actor. It stays in the background until the symbolic moment and then relies on ‘old’ authority to convince villagers to go along with the land transfer proposition. Instead of being those who lead the community to prosperity (Xiao, 2006), with the absence of a great number of community members, the village leaders seek the opportunity to take advantage of the remaining resources in the village and focus on enriching themselves. Enabling land transfer wasn’t in their interest for the village leaders already have the political status as well as economic wealth as they are. Assisting land transfer wouldn’t bring them tangible benefits. Therefore, they are perfectly pleased with letting the production team leaders accomplish the deal while they only need to witness the signing ceremony, as well as take credit for promoting large-scale farming in their village. Ironically, they deny their role and responsibility in the land transfer process when questioned.

What can’t be ignored is that village leaders are actors in a play who lend symbolic authoritative weight to the process at the signing ceremony, regardless of how they claim to be neutral and ‘outside’ the process. In peasants’ cultural memory of the past 70 years, the Village Committee stands for political authority that they can depend on for major economic choices, which is understandably a legacy of the collectivization era. Village leaders retreat from the previous

responsibilities, but the influence of their authority is still at work when they present themselves at a meeting. Denying their actual assistance in the land transfer is a failure to recognize their obligations in organizing peasants to defend their rights, not leaving them to struggle on their own when faced with stronger actors in economic affairs.

At the operational level of land transfer, exploring the motives of social authorities engaged in land transfer offers another insight into the rural social and political dynamics of the contemporary Chinese village. Compared to village leaders, the local economic elites involved in the land transfer case were more positive actors. It is apparent that Mr. Z went for a long-term partnership and a management position for his wife on Mr. L's farm. Whereas, Mr. L's purposes are relatively difficult to see into at first sight. Primarily, it was meant to build an alliance between the powerbrokers. As Mr. L is the most powerful economic figure within the community, by offering convenience and assistance in land assembly, Mr. Y would be able to build cooperation with Mr. L for the benefit of future considerations. Moreover, as Yuan (2014) discovered in a land expropriation case, land issues in rural China provide an opportunity for economic elites to transform their financial power into political capital. Mr. Y is striving to earn a position on the village committee, evidence of which is that he used money to buy votes in the last election of village leaders. Sealing the land assembly deal would help him gain support from villagers who are in favor of land transfer. Duara (1988) examined the transition of village leadership during the 1900 to 1942 period and concluded that taking leadership used to be about displaying one's talents and earning respect from the public. With the State power penetrating into the villages, it transformed into an opportunity for chasing personal interests regardless of the welfare of the village community. Land assembly in H Village reflects a similar process in this post-migration community.

Nonetheless, newly emerged social authorities haven't acquired the power embedded in culture nexus (Duara, 1988) because they can't obtain deep trust from other community members due to their absence from the community or inactive participation in community affairs. However, this doesn't prevent them from utilizing elements in the traditional nexus. Egalitarianism has a solid base in rural China. It implies that the rural community has been a united entity, where members share the same benefits and suffer the same losses. Mr. Y and his village representatives applied this ideology when persuading peasants to accept land transfer. By saying that most of the peasants agreed to give their land to Mr. L, they put consensus pressure on the hesitating members. If anyone raised questions about land transfer, he/she would be labelled as a threat to the public good, 'against progress' and damaging the rural community.

Besides the specific strategies that the Village Committee and new social authorities utilized in the process of land transfer, to better answer the question why the land transfer took place in a smooth and peaceful way, we need to stand back and realize the larger discourse environment that the post-migration community is embedded in.

Ever since the Reform and Opening Up, modernization as an ideology has dominated Chinese government policies (Ye, 2010). Migration pushes rural areas further on the road of commercialization, specialization and urbanization. As Zhou and Yang (2004) point out, migration

allows greater differentiation of the means of livelihood to appear among farmers. They have various economic conditions and social experiences, along with distinct values, characteristics and psychology. Migration isn't merely a flow of labor. It becomes a flow of ideas and new values. Communication between the urban and rural areas, through the link of peasant workers, is deeply affecting agricultural communities and reshaping the social, cultural, as well as, the political landscape of rural China.

The entire rural area is affected by modernization, yet, being the beneficiaries of development, the rural committee and economic authorities are more convinced by it than ordinary villagers. The village leaders justified their roles in land assembly by insisting that modern farming is the solution to low incomes in agriculture. Mr. L and Mr. Z labelled the reluctant peasants as "opponents to progress". They are more skilled in using modernization discourse and logic to persuade other villagers. Unfortunately, the other actors in the play, meaning the majority of the peasants, possess few means to protect themselves in front of such modern ideas. For one thing, they largely agree with modernization since they've enjoyed increased incomes and better living conditions that are mainly the results of modernization; for the other, it seems impossible to find any discourse in the era of modernization to defend their genuine feelings of keeping their land and working on a small plot, or to put it in another way, the ideal of "working on the land, not for the men" (Elton, 2011).

Conclusion

Land transfer in rural China isn't as peaceful as it seems in current literature. Bearing a general 'actor' theory approach in mind, this paper reveals the social-political dynamics in the process of land transfer with the assistance of ethnographic interviews and narrative analysis. We observed that peasants become an isolated group with insufficient agency in interactions with the Village Committee and new social authorities to defend their rights in land. They were confused by the traditional political authority that the Village Committee denied to have yet de facto imposed on the peasants at the land transfer signing ceremony. In addition to the absence of the assumed protector, they were also manipulated by the economic elites who shrewdly employed traditional ideology and values to convince peasants that it would be non-compliant not to give up their land.

Migration brings modernization into rural society, which provides a favorable atmosphere for land transfer. The grand discourse that approves land concentration and large scale farming in modernization causes the silence of peasants. Those who don't agree with land transfer lack powerful narratives to defend their instinctive attachment to land. Trapped in modernity, peasants can't find a way out to make their voice heard, which results in the illusion that they are advocates for land transfer as well.

The muting of peasant protest is accomplished by skilled manipulation of the new ideologies of economic development; by the manipulation of peasant confusions over old and new values in the village and by the changing roles that they and other actors play when faced with outside interventions, articulated as 'opportunities'. As very few families expect their sons or daughters to farm, the narrative presented to them is why hang onto land and invite village stigma. The tide of

modernization is overwhelming in this context and provides safe passage for land transfer to be accomplished without protest, but not without pain.

In terms of political sociology, this research shows how massively and rapidly social-political conditions have changed in rural China. By presenting the case of land transfer in H Village, this paper traces a phase of the agrarian transition in rural China, a phase that is characterized by the fading away of the traditional values and customs as well as political structure in the village society, which is gradually replaced by the mainstream ideology that is imposed by governments and brought back by out-migrants. The rural world is transforming from a supportive, interdependent network to a disruptive existence that consists of people mainly looking after their own interests even at the expense of those who are still community members. The base of political authority is leaning towards economic power rather than the true willingness to serve the public while displaying one's talents.

Chinese rural society is undergoing differentiation among its members. Land transfer serves as an opportunity to change the social and political positions of the villagers. New economic elites could take over or at least threaten the status of the previous authoritative actors by forming coalitions with outside economic powers. The majority of the rural society, the elderly, women and children, are at the mercy of the strong actors, because of the shrewd manipulation of the long-respected rules by the latter, on the one hand, and the lack of defensive tactics on the side of the former. In the process, farmers become landless peasants. Slight resistance from the peasants could still be sensed among the elderly group or those who cling to their attachment to land, but what would the future be if modernity overwhelms rural society with its unquestionable authority? Who would act as the protector of the peasants or where does the agency and possibility of peasants to organize themselves lie when faced with such strong powers to take away their land? Land transfer isn't a peaceful event as people would imagine. The political sociology underlying the process reveals issues that need to be further explored.

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