

# Tilling another's land: Migrant farming under rural industrialization and urbanization in China

Karita Kan<sup>1</sup>  | Xi Chen<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Department of Applied Social Sciences, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong

<sup>2</sup>Department of Sociology and Social Work, Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou, China

## Correspondence

Karita Kan, Department of Applied Social Sciences, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, 11 Yuk Choi Rd, Hung Hom, Hong Kong.

Email: karita.kan@polyu.edu.hk

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## Abstract

Studies of labour migration in China usually focus on rural residents seeking wage employment in the urban industrial or service sector. This article provides an account of migrant farmers who have moved from the impoverished countryside to peri-urban villages in more developed areas to engage in substitute agricultural production. They took over fields abandoned by local villagers and lived and worked among them as tenants. This article situates the analysis of migrant farming within the changing regimes of rural accumulation in post-socialist China. It shows how migrant farming subsidized rural industrialization by providing low-cost substitute labour, which facilitated the incorporation of local villagers into the industrial workforce as semi-proletarianized workers. Into the 2000s, the transition towards land-based accumulation incorporated local villagers into proprietorship while dispossessing migrant farmers. The amplification of inequalities reveals how the shifting regimes of accumulation constitute an important source of differentiation in Chinese villages today.

## KEYWORDS

accumulation regime, agriculture, China, land expropriation, migrant farming, rural industrialization, rural migrants

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1987, Li Yang<sup>1</sup> harvested the ripened “early rice” (*zaodao*), packed up his belongings, and departed his hometown in Fengshun county, Meizhou, with his wife and three children. With savings and income from the rice harvest, Li and two other families spent 870 yuan to rent a truck, which would take them on a days-long journey from Meizhou in the eastern part of China's Guangdong Province, through Guangzhou and Zhongshan, to the port of Doumen in Zhuhai City. Their destination was a village whose farms have been abandoned by local villagers who had found more lucrative wage employment in nearby factories. Li and his wife took over 12 mu of rice paddies and 4 mu of sugarcane farms from several local households and began their lives as migrant farmers at the rural periphery of Zhuhai, a city then booming with industry as one of China's first Special Economic Zones.<sup>2</sup> They would live and work in the village for more than three decades until today, returning only occasionally to their native hometown, an experience shared by 300,000 other migrant farmers (*daigengnong*) who have carved out a livelihood in China's Pearl River Delta region.<sup>3</sup>

The livelihoods of migrant farmers offer unique insights into the changing dynamics of rural accumulation and production relations that market reform has unleashed in post-socialist China. A dominant narrative of the reform period is how labour flowed out of China's agricultural sector and rural areas on a large scale. Whether driven by full land dispossession—the Marxist pathway of primitive accumulation—or via mechanisms of accumulation without dispossession as postulated by Arrighi (2007) and others (Chuang, 2015; Hart, 2002; Jakobsen, 2018; Zhan, 2019), agricultural de-collectivization and market transition were said to have prompted a mass exodus of surplus labour from the countryside. This group of fully and semi-proletarianized workers supplied Chinese cities and industries with a large pool of low-cost, highly exploitable labour—a “reserve army” as it were—that supported rapid capitalist accumulation in the urban economy (Marx, 1976).

While most studies on China's rural migrants focus on these workers, who typically take up wage employment in factories, processing plants, and construction sites, less attention has been given to migrants like Li Yang, who left their hometown not for urban jobs but remained in agriculture, travelling long and short distances to till land owned by other farmers. In the first decades of reform, the outflow of labour from rural areas was complemented by significant migratory inflow: Villagers from peripheral rural areas moved to peri-urban villages in large groups to farm land abandoned by locals. The substitute agricultural production carried out by migrant farmers helped local authorities meet compulsory grain quotas under China's national procurement system and enabled local rural residents to pursue non-farm employment. The labour of migrant farmers thus underpinned the “surplus” rural labour that Chinese industries rapidly absorbed in the 1980s and 1990s, though their role has remained underexamined in academic accounts of China's rural industrialization.

The study of migrant farming sheds light on how forces of extraction and differentiation operate not only between rural and urban areas, but within rural areas well. Accumulation from the agricultural sector has long been used to subsidize industrial development and finance urban growth in China (Bernstein, 2010). The Chinese countryside has been described as “an open conduit” that has continuously nourished the cities by supplying them with human and physical resources (Ye, 2015, p. 332). If population transfer could be seen as “a form of human resource extraction from the countryside to the cities” (Ye, 2015, p. 332), then the study of migrant farming reveals how mobilities *within* rural areas in fact underlie and facilitate such “rural–urban interconnections” (Bernstein, 2015). The channelling of resources away from villages towards the urban-industrial sector was supported by the rural-to-rural extraction of natural resources and physical labour. These dynamics both reflect and reproduce difference within rural areas: Uneven development prompted the migration of farmers from poorer regions to industrialized villages to take up farm work; meanwhile, the outmigration of the able-bodied workforce further impeded development in the less economically advanced countryside.

<sup>1</sup>Pseudonyms are used for the names of interviewees and names of places at or below the township level.

<sup>2</sup>One mu is equivalent to 0.0667 ha.

<sup>3</sup>The figure of 300,000 is based on official statistics published by the People's Government of Zhuhai Municipality (2015).

The influx of migrant farmers also draws out dynamics of differentiation within host villages. Migrant farming entails distinct relations of production that are different from the labour regimes that commonly characterize capitalized agriculture. Unlike contract farming in China and other developing countries (Oya, 2012; Pérez Niño, 2016; Zhang, 2012), migrant farmers do not produce for commercial entities such as agri-food companies and supermarkets. They should also be distinguished from the hired labourers who work for China's growing numbers of commercial operators and family farms (Chen, 2020; Trappel, 2015; Zhang & Donaldson, 2008). The migrant farmers studied here are not bound by relations of wage employment with capital; rather, they entered into land transfer agreements with village authorities and rural households. The nature of their farm work is thus more similar to that carried out under intra-village land transfers, except migrant farmers are not tilling fields left behind by their relatives and neighbours, but are instead recruited to help meet grain quotas in a distant village. The latent lines of contradiction here are not so much those of struggles between capital and labour, but social relations within the host village between rural officials, local villagers, and migrant farmers. With local hukou and ownership claims over land, local villagers stand at a privileged position vis-à-vis migrant farmers who lack property rights and membership in local welfare regimes. The present analysis focuses on how changes in the dynamics of rural accumulation affect social relations and deepen class differentiation within the village community.

This paper draws on fieldwork conducted in Zhuhai City, Guangdong Province. As of 2015, there were over 5,200 migrant farmer households residing in Zhuhai. Between 2015 and 2020, we conducted interviews with local officials, migrant farmers, as well as villagers who hired or lived in a village with migrant farmers. At the municipal level, primary sources such as government policies and statistics are consulted to outline the changing livelihoods of migrant farmers. We also present ethnographic data drawn from the in-depth case study of a village located in western Zhuhai, where the majority of migrant farmers can be found.

Two main observations are made. First, the changing value of migrant farm labour directly reflects the shifting dynamics of accumulation in the rural economy. Under rural industrialization, the labour provided by migrant farmers freed up surplus labour among local villagers and enabled the latter to join the urban workforce. The exclusion of migrant farmers from local welfare regimes allowed industrialization to take place on the cheap. As dynamics of accumulation shifted towards land rent extraction in the 2000s, farm labour was rendered obsolete as extensive land expropriations repurposed farmland for non-agricultural development. The land rent regime created a highly disequalizing effect within the village community, as it selectively incorporated local villagers into proprietorship and rentier landlordism while separating migrant farmers from their means of production. The dynamics of land-based accumulation was such that capital became more concentrated in the hands of those with property, while those without were left even further behind.

The second observation concerns the contradictions engendered and the collective agency of migrant farmers. In Zhuhai, many migrant farmers faced double land loss due to farmland expropriations in their host cities and long periods of absence from their native hometowns, and were forced to find wage employment as fully proletarianized workers. Although they had initiated collective action in the early 2010s, the diversification of survival strategies and differential incorporation into the labour market have fragmented the once-unified group and undermined the future possibility of organized action. Today, migrant farmers in Zhuhai are no longer as visible as a social group but have variably become part of the local workforce or members of China's vast floating population.

## **2 | REGIMES OF ACCUMULATION AND RURAL DIFFERENTIATION IN CHINA**

This paper situates the study of migrant farming within the changing regimes of accumulation in rural China. This section reviews the literature and demonstrates that the shifting dynamics of capital accumulation in the Chinese countryside offer an important conceptual lens for examining rural differentiation in the community context.

Zhan (2015, p. 415) defines accumulation regime as “a dominant mode of surplus generation that is often led by local government and serves to increase local revenue, but nonetheless involves and benefits other actors such as rural residents and private investors.” A regime of accumulation is constituted by a distinct logic of revenue generation, which engenders different distributive outcomes for the different groups of actors involved. In regulating property relations and promoting certain modes of development, an accumulation regime “defines and affects small rural producers' livelihoods and property rights” (Zhan, 2015, p. 415).

In China, rural industrialization served as a key driver of growth and revenue generation from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s (Bramall, 2009; Byrd & Lin, 1990; Naughton, 2007). The retention of elements of collectivism and the concomitant introduction of market reform created the context for rapid accumulation in the rural industrial sector. Based on the local ownership of collective assets, the proliferation of township and village enterprises (TVEs) brought dynamic growth to the Chinese countryside. The value-added to GDP from TVEs saw a marked increase from 6% in 1978 to 26% in 1996 (Li & Putterman, 2008). Industrial profits from rural enterprises became an important source of local revenue and provided lucrative benefits to cadres. According to Oi (1999), who coined the term “local state corporatism”, the fiscal arrangement that allowed local governments to retain a proportion of revenues served as an important impetus for officials to promote growth.

Industrial accumulation incorporated segments of the rural population into wage employment. In coastal areas, the growth of collective enterprises created new job opportunities for local villagers, allowing them to leave farm work behind without necessarily being expropriated of their land (Kan, 2016). These areas also became prime destinations for rural migrant workers who left their hometowns for low-wage employment in cities while their families relied on landholdings back home for partial subsistence. The existing literature has examined these processes as a primary consequence of “accumulation without dispossession”: That a surplus labour force was created by marshalling a flexible population that continued to draw subsistence from landholdings (Arrighi, 2007; Hart, 2002). As this paper will show, various forms of labour outsourcing and substitution in fact played a pivotal yet overlooked role in the accumulation regime powered by industrial production. By providing substitute labour, migrant farmers created the condition for the large-scale incorporation of local villagers into the industrial labour regime as semi-proletarianized workers.

Into the late 1990s, the momentum of TVE-led industrialization began to falter. The taking away of large proportion of profits from TVEs for government expenses contributed to low productivity and inefficiency over time, while the rise of private industries also presented rural enterprises with growing competition (Li & Rozelle, 2003; Naughton, 2007). The decline of rural industries compelled local states to search for new sources of fiscal income. This revenue imperative was reinforced by changes in tax policies, prompted in part by growing rural discontent arising from the illegal and excessive levying of taxes and fees (Lu, 1997; Yep, 2004). In 2002, the government introduced the tax-for-fee reform which replaced a series of local taxes by a single agricultural tax, which also became abolished in 2006. The reforms had a severe fiscal impact on township governments and resulted in the “hollowing out” of township budgets (Kennedy, 2007; Smith, 2010).

The decline in local government finance ushered in the transition towards a new regime of accumulation that was based on land fiscalization and rent extraction (Hsing, 2010; Kan, 2019; Rithmire, 2015). The development of rural land for industrial, commercial, and real estate projects evolved into the new means by which revenue was derived. Both urban and rural authorities increasingly generated income by converting rural land to non-agricultural uses to realize capital gains. By 2010, land sales were estimated to account for almost three quarters of local government income (Rabinovitch, 2012).

The existing literature has discussed how the transition to land-based accumulation brought about large-scale dispossession for Chinese villagers. Drawing on fieldwork in Jiangsu province, Zhan (2015) observed how the transition from local state corporatism to “land revenue regime” subjected rural residents to an exclusionary process that separated them from the means of production. Although industrial accumulation in the 1980s and 1990s “involved and benefited the majority of the rural residents under rural institutions that protected their entitlements to village resources”, land-based accumulation took away villagers' land, forced many collective enterprises to close, and

replaced them with large corporations that did not provide employment opportunities to local residents (Zhan, 2015, p. 419). In her study of a township in Sichuan Province, Chuang (2015) further observed how accumulation by dispossession, in the form of rural land expropriations, was undermining the ability of rural communities to maintain subsistence, producing tens of millions of landless rural labourers who were forced to adopt different survival strategies to secure their livelihoods.

This paper builds on these discussions and takes the analysis further by examining how changes in accumulation dynamics create diversified effects for different social groups within a community. Rather than being homogeneous, organic units, village communities are made up of members in possession of different levels of capital and entitlements, who stand in differential property relations with one another. The transition from an accumulation regime centred on industrial profits to one that is based on land rents would affect social groups in different ways, through mechanisms that might mitigate, accentuate, or transform existing patterns of stratification. Although land-based accumulation is often associated with dispossession and full proletarianization, the impact of expropriation across social groups is in reality less uniform. In peri-urban villages, local villagers were compensated with property and other income-generating assets such as stocks, although non-local residents who lacked membership rights in the village collective might be separated from their property with no formal recognition for their loss (Hsing, 2010; Kan, 2019). The dual operation of processes of accumulation by and without dispossession in the same community can thus create a tiered hierarchy and (re)produce rural class structures.

Extant studies on drivers of rural class differentiation in China have mainly focused on the growing commodification of subsistence and the advance of capital in agriculture. In the early reform years, diversification of household income and entrepreneurship engendered new patterns of inequalities between rural households (Zhang et al., 2015). More recently, the modernization of agriculture has created new class relations within rural China and placed peasants in various positions in the political economy, such as capitalist employers, commercial farmers, dual employment households, wage workers, and subsistence farmers (Yan & Chen, 2015; Zhang, 2015; Zhang & Donaldson, 2008). Less attention, in the meantime, has been given to how rural urbanization and the transition to land-based accumulation impact dynamics of differentiation from below. Studies of land expropriation have examined how accumulation by dispossession refracts existing class and social structures (Chuang, 2015; Kan, 2020). By examining how accumulation by and without dispossession co-produce differentiation in a community, this paper offers further insights into how distinct modes of surplus generation variably coopt and marginalize different groups within rural society.

The rest of this paper is divided into four parts. Section 3 provides a broad historical overview of migrant farming in the Pearl River Delta. Section 4 situates migrant farming within the accumulation regime of rural industrialization and observes how migrant farmers were recruited into local production but excluded from local welfare. Section 5 demonstrates how the transition to land-based accumulation magnified rural differences, enriching local villagers while marginalizing migrant farmers. Section 6 considers the impact of land urbanization and the possibility of collective agency for migrant farmers.

### 3 | MIGRANT FARMING IN CHINA'S PEARL RIVER DELTA

Home to two of the four Special Economic Zones designated by the Chinese government in 1980—Shenzhen and Zhuhai—the Pearl River Delta in Guangdong Province experienced rapid growth under market transition. The region was a key beneficiary of the opening-up policy. The extension of preferential treatment to foreign investors such as lower tax rates and conveniences in land use contributed to the influx of overseas capital in the 1980s. In rural areas, native-place ties between diaspora investors and their hometowns provided an important source of initial capital investments for collective enterprises. A significant proportion of the small- and medium-sized investments that helped launch rural industrialization in the Pearl River Delta came from Hong Kong. Investments from the then-British colony commonly took the form of “three supplies and one compensation” (*sanlai yibu*), an arrangement where Hong

Kong investors provided materials, parts, and samples for processing and assembly while the mainland side used finished goods to pay for foreign capital. The influx of investments contributed to the proliferation of industrial enterprises in Guangdong's countryside. In the first 5 years of reform, the number of TVEs in the province increased from 80,000 in 1978 to 120,000 in 1983 (Pan, 1988).

The growth of labour-intensive manufacturing created a surge in demand for low-cost wage labour. That demand was partially met by local rural residents, many of whom were eager to leave farm work and seek wage employment in factories. A conventional understanding of the relationship between agricultural de-collectivization and rural industrialization is that the implementation of the household responsibility system (HRS) freed villagers from collectivized farming and helped create surplus labour by increasing rural productivity, thereby facilitating the incorporation of rural residents into the industrial workforce. The reality was more complex. To begin with, the increase in agricultural productivity was short-lived. Studies found that national grain output grew by only 0.9% annually between 1985 and 1994, with insecure tenure being identified as one cause of slackening growth rates (Brandt et al., 2002). Although the government later extended land use contracts, the actual impact on bolstering productivity was debatable (Kung, 2000).

Furthermore, although the introduction of HRS enabled farmers to participate more directly in market transactions, the socialist legacy of compulsory grain procurement was still very much alive throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. Put in place under Mao, the national unified procurement and marketing system allowed the Chinese government to control the amount of tax (*gongliang*) and surplus grain (*yüliang*) that had to be sold at prices determined by the state. The system rendered peasants residual claimants of the harvest produced and constituted one of the key mechanisms by which accumulation in the agricultural sector was appropriated by the Maoist state and channelled towards urban industries and state-unit workers (Bernstein & Lü, 2003). It is estimated that between 1952 and 1986 the state extracted a total of 30 billion yuan from agriculture on a yearly basis, in addition to 3 billion yuan in the form of taxes (Xu, 1990). Although compulsory procurement was gradually phased out in the reform era, the government's gradualist approach to transition meant that rural producers still had to meet both tax and surplus grain quotas in the 1980s and early 1990s, even as many villagers in the rapidly industrializing parts of rural China sought to leave farming behind.

Formal and informal processes of outsourcing and substitution in fact underlie the emergence of the "surplus" labour force in rural China. Labour was freed up to support rural industrialization not solely because of gains in agricultural productivity, but as a result of substitute production arrangements with paid, unpaid, and underpaid farm labour. Some of these arrangements took place at the intra-village level, where relatives and neighbours took over farms left behind by those who found work in factories. Other villages in rapidly industrializing areas outsourced agricultural production to the less developed countryside (*yidi nongye*). Colloquially known as the strategy of "borrowing another's chickens to lay eggs" (*jieji xiadan*), the contracting process involved purchasing the use rights of rural land in more geographically remote villages and relocating agricultural production there in order to meet procurement quotas.

It was under such context that the practice of *daigeng*—more accurately translated as substitute farming—emerged. In order to take up non-farm employment while still meeting grain quotas, rural residents in the Pearl River Delta began seeking out non-local migrants to provide substitute farm labour. The prohibitions on land transfers were relaxed by the central government in the mid-1980s. The No. 1 Policy Document of 1984 stipulated that peasants unable to carry out farming could "hand their land over to the collective for future arrangement, or by approval of the collective, transfer their land contracts to others" (see Ye, 2015, p. 325). Though the majority of such transfers took place at the intra-village level, villages in the Pearl River Delta region began to recruit migrant workers from other areas to help till abandoned farmland.

By place of origin, migrant farmers in Guangdong comprised of two main groups. The first consisted of rural migrants from other provinces, including Guangxi, Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou. The second group was made up of migrants from less developed areas within Guangdong Province. These intra-provincial migrants usually moved to the Pearl River Delta cities of Jiangmen, Zhongshan, Zhuhai, Huizhou, Dongguan, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen from

outlying counties and cities: Shaoguan and Qingyuan in Guangdong's mountainous north, Maoming and Yunfu in the west, and Heyuan and Meizhou in the east (Huang, 2013). The trends of migration indicated a clear pattern of population movement from the more remote, less economically developed parts of the countryside to coastal rural areas undergoing rapid industrialization.

In her book *Taming Tibet*, Yeh (2013) provided an account of migrant farming where Han migrants from Sichuan Province came to dominate vegetable cultivation in Lhasa, the capital of Tibet Autonomous Region. In her case, Tibetan villagers sublet their land and rented greenhouses to Han migrants and began to drop out of cultivation. Han migrants were lauded by state discourse to be vectors of skill transfer who have moved in from a more developed area to act as “bearers of development and science” (Yeh, 2013, p. 129). These migrant farmers were able to take advantage of state policies and began to take over local agricultural markets as they became major beneficiaries of the large sums of development money being channelled into Tibet.

The political economy and cultural dynamics that underlie the present study of migrant farming are different. Migrants to the Pearl River Delta cities came from less developed provinces and areas within Guangdong to escape poverty in their hometowns, and their marginality was reproduced in the cities as they faced exclusion from local welfare regimes. Local villagers in Guangdong, unlike Tibetan farmers in Yeh's case, were not marginalized from agricultural production but rather leaving it behind voluntarily to capitalize on the more profitable employment opportunities in the expanding industrial sector. The dynamics of migrant farming in Guangdong are thus more illustrative of the layers of extraction that underlie “mechanisms of transfer from agriculture and the countryside to industrial accumulation and urban growth” (Bernstein, 2015, p. 467). The following sections examine these in the context of Zhuhai, to demonstrate how the value of migrant farm labour shifted under two regimes of rural accumulation and engendered distinct distributive politics.

4 | MIGRANT FARMING UNDER RURAL INDUSTRIALIZATION

According to figures published by the Zhuhai government, there were an estimated 5,271 households of migrant farmers living in the city as of 2015. This population of 14,730 included both migrant farmers, their spouses, and children. Zhuhai defined migrant farmers as those who migrated to the city between 1978 and February 2003—when the rural land contracting law was implemented—to take up agricultural production on local villagers' land. The official estimate included only those who had signed formal contracts with township and village authorities and those who had remained in Zhuhai as of 2015. The actual population of migrant farmers is estimated to be even higher. In terms of geographical distribution, migrant farmer households were concentrated in the western part of the city where Jinwan and Doumen districts and Gaolan Port Economic Zone were located (Table 1). These areas were not part of the original Zhuhai Special Economic Zone but constituted the peri-urban fringe where large areas of farmland still exist. We conducted field research in a village called Redwood, interviewing village officials, local residents, as well as migrant farmers.

TABLE 1 Distribution of migrant farmers in Zhuhai (People's Government of Doumen District, 2015)

District	Number of households	Number of residents
Xiangzhou	130	567
Jinwan	548	2,468
Doumen	638	2,683
Zhuhai National Hi-tech Industrial Development Zone	523	2,455
Gaolan Port Economic Zone	3,432	6,557
Total	5,271	14,730



As one of the first Special Economic Zones, Zhuhai experienced rapid industrial development in the early years of reform. The city established its first joint venture with overseas capital in 1978; by 1993, Zhuhai was home to over 3,000 cooperative enterprises operating on the “three supplies and one compensation” model (Sheng & Tang, 2013). The growth of non-farm employment drew many local villagers away from farm labour. This could be observed in Redwood Village. Many villagers interviewed indicated that they gave up farming in the mid to late 1980s. Villager Han Panli recalled: “My wife and I were allocated eight mu of paddies, five mu of sugarcane farm and one mu of peanut farm. We had to meet around 2,200 *jin* of surplus grain quotas every year. It was back-breaking work. [When productivity began to fall] we didn't make enough from farming alone. So we went to search for work” (Interview, 2017).<sup>4</sup> Villager Luo Ruwan recounted a similar experience: “Under collectivization we had to farm regardless of cost calculations, even if we were making a loss. But with land contracting we could do the math – we couldn't make a profit from agriculture. I farmed until 1986, then I hired someone to farm for me” (Interview, 2017).

The local accumulation regime based on rural industrialization incorporated many rural residents into non-farm employment. “There were many factory jobs available after land was divided out in the 1980s: wool manufacturing plants, garment factories, and others,” one villager recounted (Interview, 2017). As more villagers left farming behind, widespread farmland abandonment and the need to meet grain quotas compelled local households and village authorities to bring in substitute labour. Migrant farmers who came to Redwood were mainly intra-provincial migrants from Meizhou, Maoming, and Yunfu. Many of them did not have enough land in their hometowns and were eager to escape poverty. Li Yang, the migrant farmer whose story was introduced at the start of this paper, described his experience in his hometown as such: “They were distributing land in the 1980s, but we didn't have much farmland in the mountain areas. I was only allocated a few *fen* of land. We didn't have enough to eat from farming alone; we had to buy rice. Once I learnt that they had farmland [in Zhuhai], I came with my wife and children.”<sup>5</sup> Thirty-nine other households in Li's hometown also migrated to the same township in Zhuhai (Interview, 2017).

To systematically bring in substitute farm labour and regulate migration flows, the Zhuhai government released a policy document entitled “Temporary Regulations on the Management of Migrant Farmers” in 1989. The regulations created a policy mechanism for the formal recruitment of migrant farmers (*zhaogeng*): Any grassroots organizations could hire migrant farmers after obtaining approval from the township government and the county-level agriculture and fisheries committee. Hiring units are required to register with the labour department and sign contracts with migrant farmers, clearly stating the area of farmland, the crops involved, the duration of contract, and the rights and responsibilities of both parties. Recruited migrant farmers should then obtain a temporary residency permit from the local public security bureau before beginning work. Migrant farmers hired through these formal channels were subjected to restrictive policies that tie them down to agricultural production. They were not allowed to engage in activities other than substitute farming and must return to their native hometown once their contract expired. They also faced immediate repatriation under one of the following four conditions: if they engage in activities other than farming, have a criminal record, exceed birth control quotas, or lose their farmland as a result of expropriation.

In reality, the vast majority of migrant farmers worked without formal contracts on the basis of informal agreements with village authorities or individual households (Shen et al., 2006). In Redwood Village, some migrant farmers signed contracts with the villagers' committee while others entered into unofficial subletting arrangements with local villagers. Usually, migrant farmers took over the remaining periods of a local villager's land contract. For example, if a piece of land was allocated to a local household for 15 years and the household has farmed it for 3 years, the migrant farmer would take over the remaining 12 years of the lease. Migrant farmers were often given land plots of the lowest quality and productivity—fields that local villagers did not wish to farm but whose grain quotas must nevertheless be met. The terms of the lease usually comprised of the migrant farmer fulfilling the compulsory grain procurement quota on behalf of the local household, with no additional charge for land use. At the time, rural households in

<sup>4</sup>One *jin* equals 500 g.

<sup>5</sup>One *fen* equals 0.01 mu, which is approximately 66.67 m<sup>2</sup>.



Zhuhai were required to fulfil a grain quota of 300 *jin* per mu of land twice a year. Upon meeting the quota on behalf of the local household, migrant farmers could retain the remaining output for their own subsistence or sell it in the market. In the 1980s, they could earn around 80 yuan for every 100 *jin* of grain sold. According to migrant farmers interviewed, each mu of land produced around 500–800 *jin* of grain every harvest season. Discounting the 300 *jin* for procurement and the amount reserved for self-consumption, they could sell about 200–400 *jin* per mu of land in the market. On average, their income approximated 100–300 yuan per household per month. Although this was not a high amount, it was much more than the income they would have earned from farming in their native hometown.

By carrying out substitute agricultural work, migrant farmers played a pivotal role in the accumulation regime powered by the generation of industrial profits through labour-intensive production. Their labour facilitated the incorporation of rural residents into local labour regimes as semi-proletarianized workers. With migrant farmers taking over the fields and fulfilling grain tax responsibilities, most local households in Redwood retained only 1–2 mu of land for subsistence farming. The majority of working-age villagers left the village and found work in nearby factories and construction sites. Compared with farming, employment in the industrial sector was considered to be less physically strenuous and more lucrative. According to interviewees, daily wage grew from 3 to 6 yuan in the 1980s to 15 yuan in the 1990s and 45 yuan in the early 2000s. On average, the income of local villagers approximated 100–400 yuan per person per month in the 1980s, and could reach 800 yuan for dual-income families. Although the differences in household income between locals and migrants might not be significant, migrant farmers had to spend substantially more on housing and living expenses due to their lack of local residency. The unequal welfare status between the two groups is examined in further detail below.

#### 4.1 | Social closure and stratification

In the existing literature on labour migration, much has been written on the subordinate class position of rural migrant workers vis-à-vis urban residents. Due to the lack of urban hukou, rural migrant workers have been described as members of an urban “underclass” (Solinger, 2006) and as “second-class citizens” in Chinese cities (Chan, 2010). Migrant farmers in the extant analysis have not so much entered the city but a foreign village community. Between migrant farmers and local villagers, the differentiation does not lie with the rural–urban dichotomy—local villagers also possess agricultural hukous—but whether one has local residency and belongs to the local village collective. In addition to employment, hukou and membership in the village collective constituted the key determinants of stratification between migrant farmers and local villagers. Both institutions distribute resources and regulate access based on membership—representative of the Weberian ideal type of “social closure” in which rights and privileges are granted only to members of the group to the exclusion of non-members (Weber, 1968; Ostrom, 1990; Andreas & Zhan, 2015).

Prior to recent reforms, China's hukou system clearly divided citizens into agricultural and non-agricultural populations. Because each citizen is registered at one place of official residence, the system further differentiates the population in any given locale into locals and non-locals. The place of residence determines the location where citizens are to receive their welfare entitlements—only local residents are eligible for welfare provided by territorial authorities. Unlike the local villagers who hired them, migrant farmers did not enjoy local residency. Although many governments in the Pearl River Delta offered migrant farmers local agricultural hukous as an incentive for immigration, the promise of hukou incorporation materialized for only a few. Of the 14,730 migrant farmers and their family members who resided in Zhuhai as of 2015, only 36% have successfully obtained local hukous (People's Government of Doumen District, 2015).

At the village level, migrant farmers faced an additional institutional barrier due to the lack of membership in the village collective (*cun jiti*). The Chinese village collective is a product of the socialist commune system and merges administrative, economic, and social functions. Most of the administrative villages (*xingzheng cun*) in China today were descendants of former production brigades, whereas village small groups represent former production teams. Under Mao, these organizational units were designated property subjects and exercised collective ownership over

village land and resources. They were also the key units of public goods provision under the state socialist redistributive economy. Following de-collectivization, the administrative and welfare functions of these units were taken over by newly established villagers' committees and rural collective economic organizations, which continued to exercise managerial rights over collectively owned land and use collective income to sponsor healthcare, education, infrastructure, and cultural activities (Kan, 2016). Access to these resources and benefits is restricted to members of the village collective—native villagers who are mostly family members or descendants of Mao-era commune members. Whether one possesses the “right of membership” (*chengyuan quan*) thus constitutes an important source of differentiation in China's rural communities.

In peri-urban villages like Redwood where large populations of non-local migrants had moved in and settled down, the differential status between those with local hukous and village membership and those without is particularly pronounced. The exclusionary impact of dual social closure is most clearly manifested in two aspects of migrant farmers' livelihoods: housing and education.

In terms of housing, the difference in property status is laid bare by the allocation of homestead plots to local villagers on the one hand, and the prohibition on housing construction applied to migrant farmers on the other. Redwood villagers, as members of the collective, are entitled to homestead plots (*zhaijidi*), land on which they could build housing for accommodation. Migrant farmers, meanwhile, were explicitly prohibited from building permanent structures in the village, even if it was for self-accommodation (People's Government of Zhuhai Municipality, 1989, Article 4). As a result, most of them had to rent apartments from local villagers or engage in informal purchase arrangements to buy houses from them. According to migrant farmers interviewed, there were many disused or abandoned houses in Redwood Village back in the 1980s. Although by law villagers were not allowed to sell their houses to non-locals, many were eager to do so as it would give them capital. These informal sales were usually brokered by village leaders who determined the price non-locals had to pay. Migrant farmers who bought houses in Redwood in the 1980s spent around 2,000 yuan for an apartment of 90 m<sup>2</sup> (Interviews, 2020). They had to spend double to triple the amount on housing and renovation as compared with locals, and many had to borrow to foot the bills of their purchase. Housing quality among migrant households varied: Those with less capital could only put up temporary or semi-permanent structures for the accommodation of their families.

The protection of property rights was poor as many of these arrangements were unauthorized and there was no official documentation of the purchase or tenancy. Although “contracts” were usually signed between the two parties, migrant farmers did not hold the official ownership permit of their premises (*fangchanzheng*), which remained registered under the name of the local villager. Disputes between local villagers and migrant farmers over housing were widespread, and the insecure rights of migrant farmers essentially placed them at the mercy of local villagers who were by law the formal owners.

Another area where the disadvantaged position of migrant farmers stood in stark contrast to that of local villagers was education. Because the children of migrant farmers have no local hukou, they are charged much higher fees by local education institutions. These arbitrary charges—dubbed *jiedu fei*, literally “fees for borrowed schooling”—could go up to prohibitive amounts given the absence of official regulations. It has been reported that while locals paid around 350 yuan for junior secondary school and 500 yuan for senior secondary school, migrant farmers were charged 3,000 and 5,000 yuan respectively (Interview, 2017). One family reported paying a surcharge of 1,600 yuan per year for the enrolment of their daughter in lower secondary school (Interview, 2017).

In summary, although migrant farmers were incorporated into local labour regimes through the provision of substitute farm work, they were excluded from local welfare systems due to mechanisms of social closure. While local villagers enjoyed land rights and welfare subsidies, migrant farmers had to obtain provisions through market means and experienced the “commodification of subsistence” (Bernstein, 2015, p. 460). The exclusion of migrant farmers facilitated further accumulation in the industrial sector: That local authorities were not obliged to supply migrant farmers with basic public goods effectively drove the costs of recruiting migrant farmers even lower. By withholding the welfare benefits of local hukou and village membership, therefore, local authorities were able to outsource farm work at low cost and indirectly achieve industrialization on the cheap.

## 5 | MIGRANT FARMING UNDER LAND-BASED ACCUMULATION

From the mid-1990s onwards, peri-urban areas in Zhuhai began to move away from the earlier focus on labour-intensive rural industries. This transition paralleled broader shifts in the political economy, where land finance grew in importance as a source of revenue for local governments. As a result of fiscal recentralization and the shrinking of budgetary income following the 1994 tax-sharing reform, municipalities around China have become increasingly reliant on the conversion of rural land and the sale of land use rights as a means of generating revenue (Wong, 2000).

In Zhuhai, this territorial imperative is manifested in the proliferation of development zones and a turn towards real estate development in rural land use. To begin with, the city has seen a rapid increase in the number of special land use zones and industrial parks (*gongye yuan*), where large areas of rural land are enclosed for the development of functional clusters. As TVEs and rural cooperative enterprises entered a phase of decline, the Zhuhai government began investing heavily in high-tech enterprises specializing in electronics, computer software, biotechnology, and pharmaceutical engineering. The government expanded the existing Zhuhai National Hi-tech Industrial Development Zone in 1999 and developed a cluster of new technology and industrial parks (Sheng & Tang, 2013). Between 1999 and 2006, the number of industrial parks in the city increased from four to 24 (Wu et al., 2009). Unlike the earlier regime of rural industrialization, which was built on the institutional foundations of collective land ownership, the creation of new zones and parks dismantled collective land ownership through processes of state expropriation and generated revenue for local governments through the high levels of conveyance fees derived from the leasing of land to capital investors. The real estate turn in land use followed a similar logic of revenue generation. Rural land was expropriated from village collectives at low costs, and land use rights were then sold to property developers at lucrative rates for high-value commercial and residential developments.

The transition to a land-based accumulation regime in Zhuhai was expedited by policies that enhanced the powers of submunicipal governments in undertaking land use conversions. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the government devolved the authority to approve rural land conversions to submunicipal authorities and the management committees of zones and parks (Wu et al., 2009). This added fuel to the large-scale conversion of farmland to non-agricultural uses. The area of cultivated land in Zhuhai decreased by over 40% in the first 6 years of the 2000s, dropping from 58,267 ha in 2000 to 33,525 ha in 2006 (Wu et al., 2009). Under the municipal government's "go west" developmental approach, extensive land expropriations were carried out in the western part of the city, where many migrant farmers worked and lived.

The reconfiguration of dynamics of capital could be observed in Redwood. The village's transition to a land-based economy began in the mid-1990s when it reached a pre-requisition agreement with the municipal government, where the village would be paid 1% of the estimated value of its land on an annual basis as a deposit for future expropriation. Using these funds, the village authorities upgraded Redwood's infrastructure and built property on the village's collective construction land for leasing out to external businesses. Redwood also leased out its land directly to outside investors for development, the first being a Hong Kong-based pharmaceutical company that began operations in the village in 1996. In 2002, the government ended its decade-long prerequisite agreement and formally expropriated all of the village's farmland. From then on, there was no longer land to farm in Redwood, rendering the substitute labour of migrant farmers obsolete.

### 5.1 | Rentiership and social differentiation

The land rent regime created new dynamics of inclusion and differentiation within the village. While local villagers enjoyed ownership rights and could benefit from land-derived revenues, non-locals are excluded. The selectivity of land-based accumulation thus magnified existing inequalities between local villagers and migrant farmers: It absorbed the former into rentier landlordism while separating the latter from farmland and property.

In classic accounts of primitive accumulation, proletarianization is viewed to be the inevitable outcome of land expropriation where peasants dispossessed of their means of production are forced to sell their labour for a living (Glassman, 2006; Post, 2008; Webber, 2008). Recent studies however have shown that expropriation could also occur without engendering dispossession. As Zhan observed, there is a need to distinguish between expropriation and dispossession as accumulation could take place “without (completely) depriving rural producers of the right to assets and benefits” (2019, p. 447). Land expropriation may entail a process of accumulation without dispossession for some, if residents are sufficiently compensated with income-generating assets such as property. These two dynamics—accumulation by dispossession and without dispossession—could unfold within the same community and indeed characterized the differential impact of land loss for local villagers and migrant farmers in Redwood.

For local villagers, farmland expropriation and the growth of land finance initiated them as petty rentiers and turned them into proprietors.<sup>6</sup> Compensation from state requisition gave villagers their “first bucket of gold” (*díyì tóng jīn*)—a substantial sum of initial capital that allowed them to develop property and upgrade infrastructure, thereby creating the conditions for the further accumulation of rent. Villagers participated in the rental economy at two levels. First, at the collective level, the development of village property to be leased out brought in a new stream of collective revenue. According to Lu Liyong, chairperson of the villagers' committee and deputy Party secretary from 2002 to 2007, Redwood Village received an estimated 3 million yuan annually from property rentals in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Interview, 2019). In 2006, Redwood introduced a shareholding system for distributing collective profits to villagers. Each eligible member was given a fixed number of shares, based on which they would receive yearly dividend pay-outs. Second, at the household level, their share of compensation and land-derived income enabled villagers to build and expand their houses. The first two decades of the 2000s saw a construction boom in the village, when local residents put up new apartment blocks and extended the height of their existing houses to maximize floor space. This allowed villagers to accrue further income through rent and the informal sale of property. Rent levels in Redwood have seen exponential increase in the past decades, growing from a monthly rent of about 18 yuan for a 90-m<sup>2</sup> apartment in the 1980s to 400–800 yuan in the 2010s. Some villagers also capitalized on the rise in property prices and reached informal sale agreements with outside buyers. Fieldwork revealed that a multistorey apartment in Redwood could fetch a price of 200,000–300,000 yuan in the 2010s, which was equivalent to 2–6 years of a local villager's income.

The shift towards a land rent regime thus unfolded by and large as a process of accumulation without dispossession for local villagers, though the degree of incorporation into proprietorship varied according to the possession of political and economic capital, and was permeated with class and gender differences (see Kan & Chen, 2021). Villagers lost their farmland, but they were not dispossessed of their means of living. Rather, they were given a stake in collective property and a share in land rent; their compensation and land-derived income enabled them to develop individual property for lease and sale; and the companies brought in by external investments created job opportunities that absorbed some into relatively secure wage employment. Land loss in this scenario did not create dispossessed farmers, but birthed an emergent class of rural property owners whose livelihoods are increasingly dependent on rental markets and property prices (Kan, 2019).

While co-opting local villagers into proprietorship, however, the new regime of accumulation at the same time excluded those without property rights. When state requisition became a reality in 2002, migrant farmers in Redwood lost their fields and received no compensation for their loss. Zheng Xihua, a migrant farmer, recounted: “When expropriation took place, all of the compensation was directly taken by the village collective. None was given to us. Compensation for land loss and compensation for young crops were all pocketed by villagers; they did not give us a share. I had farmed in this village for a long time and tilled many *mu* of land, but they did not even give us some compensation for lost crops” (Interview, September 2019). According to China's Land Administration Law, compensation for the compulsory acquisition of cultivated land is made up of several components, including compensatory fees for land loss, resettlement subsidies, and compensation for attached buildings and young crops. While land

<sup>6</sup>For a detailed account of how land commodification and speculation affected local villagers, see Kan and Chen (2021).

compensation and resettlement fees are often retained by the village collective, fees for lost crops and buildings are usually distributed to households. Migrant farmers in Redwood felt that although they were not village members, the collective should at least distribute crop compensation to them given that they are the direct producers suffering economic loss.

Aside from the loss of farmland, the advance of real estate capital into peri-urban villages also subjected migrant farmers to forced eviction. The Redwood leadership reached an agreement with developers to redevelop an area of the village into residential real estate. The plot of land was located in the hilly areas at the edge of Redwood, where around 10 migrant farmer households had resided since the 1980s. In 2017, the government paid the village collective 8 million yuan to obtain rights to the land plot. As non-locals, migrant farmers were not entitled to the land compensation. The developer subsequently agreed to compensate migrant farmers for their loss of property, but interviewees indicated that the amounts were far from sufficient for them to resettle or rebuild homes in the vicinity. Although some resigned to the reality of eviction, others refused to sign the compensation agreement and resorted to holdout tactics as a way of resistance. As of the end of 2019, around six migrant farmer households continued to occupy the land. Their refusal to move created conflicts with local villagers who demanded that the farmers return the land so that the redevelopment project could proceed.

The dated municipal regulations on migrant farmers offered no protection to the group in terms of land use and housing rights (People's Government of Zhuhai Municipality, 1989). Migrant farmers who had no land to farm following state expropriation are required to return immediately to their place of hukou registration or face repatriation (*qiansong*) (Articles 6 and 7). In the process of eviction, housing built by migrant farmers that had not been legally registered is not entitled to compensation (Article 10). Redwood's transition to a land rent regime thus entailed both the loss of housing and means of production for migrant farmers. For many, this is experienced as full dispossession: Due to long years of absence from their native village, many migrant farmers had lost access to land in their hometowns and their claim on collective assets. Although they might have left in the 1980s as “semi-proletarianized” peasants that had land back home as a safety net, the actual measure of protection that landholding offers and the feasibility of return declined over time the longer the migrant farmers were away. As one migrant farmer described his circumstance upon losing his farmland in Redwood: “I have thought of leaving Zhuhai and returning to my hometown, but I have been away for too long. I no longer get land in my home village; the collective will not give us a share anymore. In any case the land back home is no longer fit for farming. Many of us left for work and the fields are abandoned and infested with pests. I can only continue my life here in Redwood” (Interview, 2017).

In summary, land-based accumulation operated as a powerful force of differentiation in Redwood Village, amplifying already-existing inequalities between local villagers and migrant farmers. Expropriation separated migrant farmers from the land on which they depend for livelihood, while the rent that expropriated land generated accrued solely to local villagers, the government, and property developers. It was in Redwood (and not when they left their home village 30 years ago) that migrant farmers experienced dispossession and became fully proletarianized—driven now to find non-farm wage employment as they lost access to land both in Zhuhai and in their hometown.

## 6 | DISPOSSESSION AND THE POSSIBILITY OF COLLECTIVE AGENCY

The dispossession of land has been viewed as a precursor to class-based contention (Bernstein, 2010). Zhang, for instance, noted that “access to and control over land-based resources have become the centre of contention between competing class interests: capitalist producers want to enclose these exclusively in their circuits of capitalist accumulation, but a broad swathe of rural population that engages in petty commodity production still bases its social reproduction on these resources” (2015, p. 363). The destruction of subsistence through land expropriation has been seen as a rallying force for the organization of the Chinese peasantry as a class (So, 2013).

Migrant farming and the shift to land-based accumulation add nuances to the contradictions that might arise from land expropriation. Villagers who had formal ownership rights no longer relied on the land for subsistence or

production. It was migrant farmers whose livelihoods were directly threatened, but they did not have the legal title to contest expropriation. Nonetheless, land loss did provide a basis for collective agency: Migrant farmers in Redwood mobilized collectively to petition for the right of residency, for local authorities to grant them local hukous so that they could stay behind in Zhuhai. Similar protests and organized petitions (*shangfang*) have arisen in migrant farmer communities around the city, and more broadly in the Pearl River Delta region (Huang, 2013).

For the purpose of “maintaining social stability”, authorities resorted to hukou incorporation as a way of muting opposition: offering farmers urban hukou in exchange for political quiescence (Chuang, 2014). In response to the upsurge in protests, the Zhuhai government published new policy guidelines in 2015 entitled “Guiding Opinions on Resolving the Problem of Migrant Farmers in the City”. Promulgated 26 years after the 1989 regulations, the 2015 document outlined a pathway for migrant farmers to obtain local, non-agricultural hukou. All migrant farmers, along with their spouses and direct relatives, could apply to transfer their hukou to Zhuhai if they have stable accommodation in the city and have never violated rules on family planning nor have criminal records. Migrant farmers who gained local hukou would be eligible for municipal public services and receive equal treatment as local urban residents, from employment and children's education to social insurance, healthcare, and home purchases. The document further incorporates migrant farmers in local employment assistance schemes and instructs submunicipal authorities to provide migrant farmers facing job loss with technical training as well as subsidies.

The implementation of these provisions was highly uneven. Fieldwork revealed that although migrant farmers in some localities were able to obtain local hukou, the promise of hukou incorporation is yet to materialize for many others. A key source of variation lies with selective implementation at the township and village levels. In Redwood, migrant farmers had not succeeded in their attempt of hukou transfer due to staunch opposition within the village. Local villagers were strongly resistant to the idea of giving migrant farmers local hukou, for fear that this would dilute their share in land-derived profits. “There have been government policies for giving migrant farmers local hukous since a few years back. But villagers refused, they were afraid that migrants would take their land and resources,” one local resident stated (Interview, 2019). In 2018, a village-wide vote was held among Redwood villagers where the motion was put forward by the leadership to grant non-local residents, including migrant farmers, local household registration. At the villagers' assembly, residents were asked to sign their names either in support of the decision or against it. According to participants interviewed, almost every villager opposed the motion. “Everyone voted against the decision for fear that the inclusion of non-locals would dilute village resources and undermine villagers' interests,” one villager remarked (Interview, 2019).

The power wielded by local villagers in deciding whether municipal policies are implemented also affected the housing rights of migrant farmers. Zhuhai government's revised guidelines made provisions for the formal registration of houses built by migrant farmers on village land, provided that those migrant farmers had successfully transferred their hukou, and obtained the approval of two thirds of villagers. Although it is clearly stated that hukou transfer does not give migrant farmers the right of village membership—meaning that they remain ineligible for the assignment of homestead plots and shares—villagers in Redwood remained apprehensive that granting migrant farmers more rights would undermine their own privileges. Without majority support from the villagers, migrant farmers in Redwood have thus far failed to obtain formal registration for their houses. Many worried that this would undermine their bargaining position vis-à-vis the state and developers in compensation negotiations, as migrant farmers face further property loss given the latest redevelopment plans.

If the contention over hukou incorporation unified local villagers in their protection of group privilege, it also fragmented migrant farmers as they adopted different strategies of survival. The uneven implementation of hukou incorporation meant that migrant farmers now face diverse circumstances. In some localities, migrant farmers successfully secured hukou transfer and are now members of a growing population of newly urbanized rural residents in Zhuhai. Others, like those in Redwood, were unable to obtain local hukous but have stayed behind in the city for alternative employment. These two groups now live in rented apartments or in property they have purchased. Other migrant farmers chose to leave the city entirely. Some moved out of Zhuhai in search of farm work or wage employment in other Pearl River Delta cities, continuing their lives as part of the floating workforce. There were also those

who decided to return to their original place of household registration, whether to their home village or nearby towns and counties, where work opportunities have become newly available as development comes to these less prosperous regions.

The “fragmentation of classes of labour” has been identified as an underlying cause for the dormancy of class-based contention in the Chinese countryside (Bernstein, 2010). Having left farming, many rural households are compelled to “pursue their social reproduction across multiple sites of the social division of labour simultaneously” (Zhang, 2015, p. 362), with many transitioning into multioccupational livelihoods and straddled rural–urban living (Bryceson et al., 2000; Kay, 2009). As Chuang (2015, p. 277) observes, “a new class structure, differentiating rural residents by their different strategies for survival and subsistence without land, emerges.” For Zhuhai’s migrant farmers, the collective experience of land expropriation in the first decade of the 2000s provided a basis for collective agency. Their successful campaign for hukou transfer, however, marked the beginning of differential incorporation and livelihood diversification. Rural households facing different circumstances adopted individualized strategies for survival, falling back on personal connections and networks, as well as their individual ability to adapt to non-farm employment and find work in the urban job market. The 300,000 migrant farmers in the Pearl River Delta region have become a much less visible and identifiable social group today, as they variably become members of the newly urban social class or remain part of the migrant labour force.

## 7 | CONCLUSION

Conventional accounts of the massive labour migration that has taken place in post-socialist China often focus on rural residents seeking wage employment in the urban-industrial sector. The study of how migrant farmers from more peripheral rural areas supplied substitute farm labour for peri-urban villages captures some of the nuances that frameworks of rural–urban population movement leave out. By shedding light on rural-to-rural mechanisms of transfer, this paper reveals the multilayered nature of the resource extraction that takes place between China’s rural and urban areas, and enriches understandings of the “contributions of agriculture” to industrialization (Bernstein, 2015, p. 467).

By situating the analysis of migrant farming within the changing dynamics of accumulation in China, this paper further demonstrates how the logics of surplus generation could structure differences and sharpen contradictions within rural society. Under rural industrialization and the accumulation of industrial profits through labour-intensive production, the farm labour provided by migrant farmers enabled the incorporation of local rural residents into production regimes as semi-proletarianized workers. The exclusion of migrant farmers from local welfare systems further facilitated accumulation in the industrial sector by lowering the costs of substitute farm labour. Into the 2000s, the transition towards land rent accumulation amplified inequalities within the community by incorporating local villagers into proprietorship on the one hand and dispossessing migrant farmers on the other. The disequalizing effect of land expropriation and rural rentiership exacerbated antagonisms between local villagers (who have now become the *petits rentiers*) and migrant farmers.

Rural land expropriation has been a defining feature of China’s urbanization, and much attention has been given to outcomes of dispossession and the creation of a class of “landless farmers”. The present research has shown however that the impact of expropriation and land-based accumulation is uneven across different groups within rural society. Local villagers in Zhuhai lost their landholdings but were given property assets in return, which perpetuated their privileged position within the community, while migrant farmers were involuntarily separated from the means of production. By drawing attention to how the dynamics of accumulation structure intra-village differences and place social groups in divergent relations with one another and with capital, this paper highlights the importance of looking beyond frameworks that pit state and capital against a seemingly unified peasantry, to examine how forces of accumulation could also engender politics from below.



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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Most of the data that support the findings of this article were generated by the authors through interviews and ethnographic research. These data are not shared due to privacy and ethical reasons.

## ORCID

Karita Kan  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2408-132X>

Xi Chen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4961-528X>

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