New Agricultural Operators and the Local Politics of Land Transfer in China

LING MENG is Postdoctoral Fellow at the China and Global Development Network, Department of Applied Social Sciences, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hung Hom, Hong Kong (lingmeng@polyu.edu.hk).

KARITA KAN (corresponding author) is Associate Professor in the Department of Applied Social Sciences, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hung Hom, Hong Kong (karita.kan@polyu.edu.hk).

ABSTRACT: Existing studies have shown how, under the policy agenda of agricultural modernisation, the Chinese government has promoted the large-scale transfer of rural land from smallholders to new agricultural operators (NAOs) such as agribusinesses, family farms, and professional cooperatives. Despite this national trend, there are important local variations in the extent and dynamics of land transfer, a topic that has remained underexplored in the literature. Using multiple-case methodology, this paper compares three cases of land transfer in a rural township in Shandong Province to examine how and why patterns of land transfer and management differ. Drawing on in-depth fieldwork and interviews, we reveal how trajectories of land transfer and agrarian transition are shaped by the different background and strategies of individual NAOs, which in turn structure the land and labour arrangements at each locality and give rise to distinct dynamics of interactions between the state, NAOs, and local communities. Our findings highlight the need to go beyond national statistics to explore the local politics of land transfer as well as the agency of NAOs in shaping diverse trajectories of agrarian transition.

KEYWORDS: land transfer, new agricultural operators (NAOs), local politics, agrarian transition, agricultural modernisation, Shandong Province, rural China.

To promote agricultural modernisation and revitalise rural areas, the Chinese government has in recent years introduced major reforms that facilitate the transfer of rural land from village collectives and households to commercial operators. This was achieved by creating new categories of rights in rural land through the institutionalisation of a "tripartite" or "three rights separation" system (*sanquan fenzhi* 三權分置). Previously, rural collectives in China exercised ownership rights (*suoyou quan* 所有權) over rural land while households were given contract rights (*chengbao quan* 承包權) over individual plots for family-based farming. Now, operation rights (*jingying quan* 經營權) have been introduced, which enable households with contract rights to lease their land to a third party for management, a process known as land transfer (*tudi liuzhuan* 土地流轉). To facilitate the formation of land rental markets, the introduction of land transfer was accompanied by a nationwide campaign of titling. Around 1.5 billion *mu* of farmland had been registered to contracting households as of 2021, among which 555 million *mu* had undergone the process of transfer, accounting for 37% of all contracted farmland in the country.[1]

In official and media narratives, land transfer has facilitated the flow of capital investment to the countryside (*ziben xiaxiang* 資本下鄉). From the concentration of farmland by agribusinesses for industrial-scale farming, to the transfer of land to tourism and hospitality companies for rural tourism projects, increased access to rural land has prompted growing corporate involvement in rural land development (Ye 2015; Kan 2021). Recent scholarship has nevertheless added nuance to representations of corporate takeover

1. "'農村土地經營權流轉管理辦法'3月1日起施行: 15億畝承包地如何合理有序流轉" ("*Nongcun tudi jingying quan liuzhuan guanli banfa*" 3 *yue* 1 *ri qi shixing:* 15 *yi mu chengbaodi ruhe heli youxu liuzhuan*, "Measures for the management of the transfer of rural land operation rights" to be implemented starting 1 March: How to ensure the rational and orderly transfer of 1.5 billion *mu* of contracted land), *Jingji ribao* (經濟日報), 8 February 2021, https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-02/08/content_5585799.htm (accessed on 20 June 2024).

and reveals important variations at the local level. In their survey of land transfer in more than 900 cash-cropping farms in four inland provinces, for example, Rogers et al. (2021) revealed distinct patterns of land, labour, and capital arrangements in apple, tea, orange, and coffee-growing areas. In orange-growing villages in Hubei Province, where smallholders were thriving, there was little incentive for either farming households or government officials to engage in land transfer because it made little economic sense for them to do so. By contrast, in southern Shaanxi's tea-growing counties, a vast majority of households transferred their land at the behest of rural cadres to agribusinesses and cooperatives for scaled operation, a dynamic that has also been observed in other cases of scaled land transfer for rice planting (Gong and Zhang 2017) and grape farming (Luo, Andreas, and Li 2017).

The uneven nature of land transfer compels further research into how and why implementation differs across localities. In existing studies, scholars have examined the drivers influencing farmers' decisions in land transfer, such as rural labour migration (Ji et al. 2018), stability of nonfarm employment (Su et al. 2018), farmers' perception of land tenure security (Xu and Du 2022), the degree of land tenure fragmentation (Cao et al. 2020), and the income effect of land transfer (Peng, Yang, and Chen 2020). These studies usually draw on large-scale household surveys and statistical modelling to examine household attributes and particular incentives that made households more likely to engage in land transfer, offering prescriptive recommendations in the direction of bolstering transfer rates. Less attention, meanwhile, has been given to the local political economy of land transfer to probe its specific dynamics at the township or village level.

Our paper aims to address this through field investigation conducted in 2023-2024 in a rural township in Tengzhou, a county-level city in Shandong Province. Our research there revealed that, despite similarities in geographical and policy context, different regimes of land transfer and management could be found that pointed to diverse local trajectories of agrarian transition. We asked: How and why did different modes of transferring land and organising agricultural production emerge? What explains the different paths of transition to capitalist agriculture? Comparing three selected cases and drawing on interviews with government officials, company representatives, rural cadres, and villagers, our findings highlight the agency of new agricultural operators (*xinxing nongye jingying zhuti* 新型農業經營主體, hereafter NAOs) as the crucial factor in explaining the variations observed. As agents embedded in the local political economy, NAOs play a critical role in shaping interactions between farmers, village collectives, the market, and the state. Their different backgrounds and levels of endowment in terms of political, economic, and social capital shape their individual choices and strategies in responding to government policies, and their diverse agency in turn explains not only the different trajectories of land transfer but also its variegated impact on villagers' livelihoods in terms of job opportunities and benefit distribution.

The rest of this paper provides background on the rise of NAOs as key players in China's agricultural modernisation. It then discusses our site selection and research methodology before presenting a comparative analysis of three case studies.

New agricultural operators and land transfer

Promoted by the government as "engines of agricultural development," dragonhead enterprises (*longtou qiye* 龍頭企業), family farms (*jiating nongchang* 家庭農場), and specialised big households (*zhuanye dahu* 專業大戶)[2] have gained new prominence as subjects spearheading the modernisation of China's agricultural sector (Yan and Chen 2015: 366). While support for scaling up farming emerged as early as the 1980s and 1990s, the drive to industrialise agriculture gained concrete momentum from the mid-2000s and 2010s, when active state support for cultivating NAOs signalled a clear shift in policy towards de-peasantisation (Yan and Chen 2015; Day and Schneider 2017). In place of smallholders, NAOs were viewed as vehicles of "an emerging post-peasant modernity in rural China," integrating peasants into more efficient and internationally competitive forms of production that would bring prosperity to the countryside (Trappel 2021: 9). The rise of NAOs is closely related to preferential policies that specifically benefitted the new agrarian elite. Zhang and Zeng (2021) coined the term "politically directed accumulation" to describe the way local governments nurture the new agrarian capitalist class in a targeted manner. Local governments first selected actors to serve as their agents, then capitalised their operation through the channelling of public resources to facilitate their accumulation. These NAOs then acted as policy instruments of the state in implementing policy mandates and capturing fiscal transfers (Gong and Zhang 2017).

In this light, the government's promotion of land transfer could be seen as part and parcel of politically directed accumulation, where NAOs are furnished with land resources to operate scaled-up agriculture. While earlier land transfers mainly took place between families and neighbours at the intra-village level, the 2013 Policy Document No. 1 issued by the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee and State Council[3] specifically highlighted the need to guide the orderly circulation of land operation rights to NAOs (Ye 2015). According to the latest data published by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, of the total area of land transferred as of 2022, 46.8% went to farmers while over 45% went to NAOs, including specialised cooperatives (20.28%), family farms (15.31%), and enterprises (10.32%).[4]

2. Dragonhead enterprises are agribusiness firms defined by authorities as leaders in integrating and scaling up production for agricultural modernisation. Family farms primarily rely on family members as the main labour force and the family as the basic unit to engage in large-scale, standardised and intensive agricultural production and management. Specialised big households refer to local producers who have scaled up their operations through commodity production. The differentiation between family farms and big households is not always clear, as in some places local governments still need to define their own local criteria for these classifications (see Yan and Chen 2015: 367; Kan and Trappel 2021).
3. Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, State Council 中共中央, 國務院, "關於加快發展現代農業進一步增強農村發展活力的若干意見" (*Guanyu jiakuai fazhan xiandai nongye jinyibu zengqiang nongcun fazhan huoli de ruogan yijian*, Opinions on accelerating the development of modern agriculture and further enhancing the vitality of rural development), 31 January 2013, www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2013/content_2332767.htm (accessed on 7 November 2024).
4. Data retrieved from Department of Policy and Reform, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs 農業農村部政策與改革司, "2022年全國農戶家庭承包耕地流轉年度變化情況" (2022 *nian quanguo nonghu jiating chengbao gengdi liuzhuan niandu bianhua qingkuang*, Annual changes in farmland contracted by farmers across the country in 2022), http://zdscxx.moa.gov.cn:8080/nyb/pc/index.jsp (accessed on 30 May 2024).

Existing scholarship on NAOs and land transfer has observed the crucial role played by local governments in orchestrating large-scale transfers (Xu and Fuller 2018; Luo and Andreas 2020; Kan 2021; Xu 2024). In Gong and Zhang's study of a rice-growing county in Hunan Province (2017), for example, the county government deployed a suite of incentives and disincentives to motivate township and village cadres to broker land transfer, both through adjusting cadre evaluation criteria and offering financial bonuses for meeting transfer targets. In some cases, force was deployed to pressure villagers into giving up their land and transitioning to contract farming, as documented by Luo, Andreas, and Li (2017) in their study of a grape production base in Xinjiang. While these accounts shed light on the economic and extra-economic practices that underlie land transfer processes, they tend to focus on the agency of local governments as primary actors, while the agential role played by NAOs is overlooked.

The under-researched agency of NAOs is particularly poignant given their sheer diversity in scale, type, and pathway of accumulation. NAOs are far from a homogeneous group, and their differential agency constitutes a critical factor in accounting for diverse trajectories of agrarian change. NAO diversity is itself the product of class differentiation within rural China as well as state policies of politically directed accumulation (Zhang and Donaldson 2008, 2010; Yan and Chen 2015; Zhang 2015; Zhang and Zeng 2021). In examining the emergence of new subjects of agriculture in China, Yan and Chen (2015) draw a distinction between capitalist dynamics from below and above. On the one hand, some NAOs began as farming households and evolved in scale through commercial farming and migrant tenant farming while also benefitting from state policies that nurtured "big producers." Many present-day family farms emerged through such processes of accumulation "from below." On the other hand, other NAOs have developed through dynamics "from above," for example in the form of "urban-industrial or commercial capital engaging in restructuring farming and modernizing agriculture" (ibid.: 371). Dragonhead enterprises exemplify this pattern of accumulation. The two dynamics are not mutually exclusive, as seen in cases of rural cooperatives where supportive state policies from above play "a facilitative role in nurturing and expediting capitalism from below" (ibid.: 382). The different pathways of accumulation also point to the diverse background of the new agrarian class and the sources of capital they draw on. Some NAOs have emerged from "within" the agrarian classes – whether as petty commodity producers or large landowners – while others have originated from "without," through processes of officeholding by invitation, conversion from cadres into entrepreneurs, or capitalisation on political positions to engage in agriculture-related accumulation (Zhang 2015; Zhang and Zeng 2021).

The different types and origins of NAOs underscore the need to explore their variegated agency and how that interacts with local trajectories of agrarian change. As our case studies will show, NAOs differ in terms of their founders' background, levels of political connections, economic capital, and social embeddedness in the community, which directly shape the specific land transfer and labour management strategy at each locality, thus underlining the varied pathways of transition to capitalist agriculture. The rest of this paper presents our findings in Shandong Province.

Land transfer and agricultural modernisation in Shandong Province

Located along the eastern coast of China and at the downstream of the Yellow River, Shandong has historically been a major agricultural province. It was selected as one of the first three provinces in the country to pilot comprehensive rural reform. Following the 2013 Document No. 1's call for the cultivation of NAOs,[5] the provincial government actively encouraged big households and skilled farmers to transition towards the operation of family farms. It directed family farms to engage in moderate-scale operation through land transfer, and increased financial support to NAOs through agricultural subsidies, specialised credit, and agricultural insurance. In 2018, the province also implemented the New Professional Farmer Cultivation Project (*xinxing zhiye nongmin peiyu gongcheng* 新型職業農民培育工程) to provide training to leaders of big households, family farms, cooperatives, and dragonheads.[6] As a result of these policies, the number of NAOs in Shandong saw rapid growth. In 2023, the province boasted 131,000 family farms, 231,000 farmer professional cooperatives, and 1,257 leading agricultural enterprises at the provincial level or above.[7]

This paper focuses on one rural township in Tengzhou, a county-level city. Xingfu Township[8] covers a total area of 79.8 km², governs 72 administrative villages and urban neighbourhoods, and has a resident population of 139,000. The township has a particular industrial history: it is home to four state-owned coal mines. The coal industry in Xingfu Township began to develop in the 1960s and entered a stage of accelerated growth in the late 1980s. The coal mining industry and affiliated enterprises have since constituted a main source of employment for local residents as well as migrant workers. Villagers from around 20 villages located around the coal-mining areas either worked in the mines or in related enterprises, meaning that many no longer relied on farming as the main source of household income. This local development history provided a context that was uniquely conducive to land transfer.

In 2006, the Xingfu government established the country's first rural land transfer service centre at the township level, providing services such as information communication, income assessment, contract signing, and record keeping. Land transfer service stations were set up in all 72 villages, and village accountants were

5. General Office of the People's Government of Shandong Province 山東省人民政府辦公廳, "關於積極培育家庭農場健康發展的意見" (*Guanyu jiji peiyu jiating nongchang jiankang fazhan de yijian*, Opinions on actively cultivating the healthy development of family farms), 11 September 2013, www.shandong.gov.cn/art/2013/9/11/art_267492_12339.html (accessed on 17 April 2024).

6. Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, State Council 中共中央, 國務院, "關於加快建構政策體系培育新型農業經營主體的實施意見" (*Guanyu jiakuai jiangou zhengce tixi peiyu xinxing nongye jingying zhuti de shishi yijian*, Opinions on the implementation of accelerating the establishment of a policy system to cultivate new types of agricultural business entities), 13 June 2018, www.shandong.gov.cn/art/2018/6/13/art_98255_344119.html (accessed on 10 April 2024).

7. Shandong Provincial Bureau of Statistics 山東省統計局, "2023年山東省國民經濟和社會發展統計公報" (2023 *nian Shandongsheng guomin jingji he shehui fazhan tongji gongbao*, 2023 Shandong Province national economic and social development statistical bulletin), 3 March 2024, http://tjj.shandong.gov.cn/art/2024/3/3/art_6196_10311526.html (accessed on 16 April 2024).

8. Pseudonyms are used for the township, villages, and individuals. Data in the following paragraphs were collected from government documents and work reports of Xingfu Township.

designated land transfer information liaisons. In 2007, the Shandong Provincial Department of Agriculture selected Xingfu for pioneering the development of land transfer markets. The township was to innovate with "systematic transfer" (*zhengjianzhi liuzhuan* 整建制流轉), namely the centralised transfer of land in square blocks to achieve a total transfer area covering at least 80% of a village's farmland. This process marked the expansion in scale of operation of big households in Xingfu, as well as the formation of new NAOs and land-based shareholding cooperatives. The local government motivated transfer to these entities by setting up earmarked funds to provide cash rewards for both contractors and tenants. The area of land transfer in the township increased rapidly. In 2008, the total area of land transfer was 15,000 *mu*. By 2014, the transfer area had more than doubled to 37,200 *mu*, of which about 60% (23,000 *mu*) was managed by 73 NAOs. Ten villages achieved systematic transfer. The latest figures show a continuation of these trends in the past decade. As of 2023, the area of land transfer has reached 49,000 *mu*, accounting for almost 85% of the total area of farmland contracted to households (57,000 *mu*) in the township. Thirty-four villages have achieved systematic transfer, and the number of NAOs has grown to 210, including five dragonheads and 146 cooperatives.

Data for this paper are drawn from field research and documentary sources. The first author (Ling Meng) conducted two months of field investigation in 2023 and one week of follow-up fieldwork in 2024. We first reached out to different types of NAOs in Xingfu, including dragonhead enterprises, professional cooperatives, and family farms, to understand the structural composition and basic operation of NAOs in the township. This pilot survey revealed that NAO classification based on state-designated types such as "cooperatives" or "family farms" in fact belie more complex configurations and dynamics in practice. We identified instead three common modes of operation and selected one representative NAO for each for in-depth multiple-case comparative analysis. Interviews were carried out with 60 informants recruited through the snowball sampling method, including 11 government officials at the county and township level, 14 NAO representatives, and 35 village-level informants (eight rural cadres and 27 ordinary villagers). We included both households that participated in land transfer and those that did not. Participant observation was used as a supplementary method of data collection, including participation in a land transfer bidding meeting. In addition to field research, we also carried out documentary source analysis using national and subnational policy documents related to agricultural modernisation, land management, and rural affairs. Aside from national policy documents, our data on Shandong draws on 19 policy documents published by the provincial government and its related departments, as well as county- and township-level authorities. We also collected statistical data from government websites and media reports.

Comparing three cases of land transfer

Variation in land transfer dynamics has been attributed to regional differences, crop characteristics, local agrarian history, and individual household preferences. Our field research reveals the central agency of NAOs in shaping the local politics of land transfer and management. The three NAOs below all bore the name "cooperative," farmed the same crops, and were situated within the same policy milieu, but demonstrated different pathways of accumulation: accumulation from above and within, accumulation from above and without, and accumulation from below and within. The NAOs developed varied mechanisms of accumulation because of their founders' different levels of political, economic, and social capital, and this in turn shaped and explained the specific dynamics of land transfer and labour management in each case. In the first, land transfer by the village head demonstrated a classic case of politically directed accumulation where state sponsorship facilitated the scaling up of operation and the extensive use of hired workers. In the second, the village elite's partnership with an agribusiness established a mechanism of land-based shareholding cooperation between the company, the village, and households. In the third, a local household drew on its social relations within the local community to transfer land and expand the scale of operation, and later formed an informal alliance with other big households to regulate the costs of land transfer and agricultural inputs. Each engaged with the state to different extents and in different ways, while also forging diverse relations with their own covillagers.

Case 1: State-sponsored accumulation and scaled-up operation

Pavilion Village was the first village in Shandong to successfully achieve "systematic transfer." All its farmland was leased to a cooperative managed by its village head, Lao Zhang. The village experienced wholesale resettlement in the 1990s as a result of land subsidence caused by coal mining. The relocation separated villagers' residential area from their farm plots, which, along with the abundance of better-paying jobs in the mining sector, motivated many villagers to give up farming. The high rate of land abandonment made Pavilion Village the local government's first target when it began to promote land transfer in the 2000s. Three hundred *mu* of land was assembled and put up by the villagers' committee for transfer in 2008, but no bids were received. To protect their reputation and fulfil the policy mandate, three members of the villagers' committee, led by Lao Zhang, contracted the land themselves. A ten-year lease was signed for a transfer fee of RMB 300 per *mu* per year.

Prior to becoming village head, Lao Zhang was an entrepreneur operating his own business. His ascent to political office followed the typical pathway of conversion of economic capital into political capital, as commonly observed in the career pathways of rural cadres in China. In Lao Zhang's case, his political position in turn facilitated his evolution into the new agrarian capitalist class. Following his first successful land transfer, Lao Zhang and his associates established a grain cultivation cooperative and used it as a platform to scale up production. The cooperative went on to transfer all land in Pavilion Village, then expanded to six neighbouring villages and transferred a total of 2,560 *mu* of farmland.

Lao Zhang's experience exemplified the dynamics of politically directed accumulation described by Zhang and Zeng (2021), as a case of accumulation from "within" and "above" (dominant class of elites within the village as cadres). His cooperative's eight-fold increase in land transfer area from 300 *mu* to 2,560 *mu* is part and parcel of the political capitalisation process: subsidies from the local government enriched the cooperative and helped it obtain more land; in turn, the cooperative's scaled-up production helped the local state secure more central government fiscal transfers in the form of project funds, which further benefitted both the local state and the cooperative.

This mutually beneficial relationship began with the local government's active support for Lao Zhang and similar cooperatives. The local government funnelled fiscal resources by issuing land use property rights certificates to NAOs for their transferred land, which NAOs could then use to apply for mortgage loans with full interest discounts. In 2014, the Xingfu Township government issued RMB 36.8 million in mortgage loans to seven pilot cooperatives, including Lao Zhang's.[9] Lao Zhang indicated in an interview:

> Our cooperative has a registered capital of more than 5 million *yuan*, but we haven't paid a single penny. When we don't have money left, we just take more loans. (15 May 2023)

By the end of 2023, loans called *Ludan huinong dai* (魯擔惠農貸) – Shandong Province guaranteed loans for farmers – and other rural finance policies had provided guaranteed loans of more than RMB 1.2 billion to NAOs in Tengzhou.[10] These loans enabled Lao Zhang to spend more than RMB 2 million to purchase 60 large and medium-sized agricultural machines and expand the scale of land transfer. The township government also provided special assistance to Lao Zhang in obtaining land for the construction of a grain production base, and to build offices, grain warehouses, and storage facilitates for machines. As Ms Wang, director of the township economic and management station said, such arrangements could not have been achieved through standard procedures: "If a new NAO were to attempt to acquire such a parcel of land now, it would simply be impossible" (interview, 9 May 2023).

In return for the support received, NAOs helped bid for project funds and implemented projects mandated by the central government, which in turn helped local officials fulfil their work targets and gain political recognition. This symbiosis is clearly demonstrated in Lao Zhang's formation of an agricultural machinery cooperative in 2020. At the time, the central government launched a nationwide agricultural subsidy project for deep ploughing – a technique used in preparing the land to provide optimal soil conditions for cultivation. Xingfu was designated a pilot town for the implementation of this national project, and the government needed NAOs with sufficient scale and operating capacity to implement it. Because Lao Zhang's cooperative had purchased agricultural machinery, the local Bureau of Agriculture and Rural Affairs approached him on undertaking the project, and Lao Zhang set up an agricultural machinery cooperative accordingly: "If we do not have the nameboard of an agricultural machinery cooperative, the central government will not give us this project even if we have the right tractors for deep ploughing" (interview with Lao Zhang, 15 May 2023). Securing the project brought funding and political recognition. Lao Zhang received a subsidy of RMB 15 to 30 per *mu* of land, distributed by the county government through the finance bureau. The new cooperative helped plough approximately 6,000 *mu* of land in Xingfu Township every year. In taking up the national project, Lao Zhang also helped local officials meet their work targets, as deep ploughing was included in the government's food security responsibility assessment and evaluation.

Similar dynamics of state-NAO symbiosis were found in other cases we surveyed. NAOs of similar scale to Lao Zhang's have obtained central government transfers through participating in various national projects such as "high wheat yield project" (*xiaomai gaochan xiangmu* 小麥高產項目) and "maize-soybean strip compound planting project" (*dadou yumi daizhuang fuhe zhongzhi xiangmu* 大豆玉米帶狀復合種植項目), and provincial projects like "sweet corn planting promotion project" (*shuiguo yumi tuiguang xiangmu* 水果玉米推廣項目). Once a NAO was successfully assigned a project, higher-level governments would reward it with subsidies. Sometimes prize money was also awarded for good performance in project implementation. For example, one NAO we surveyed received RMB 600,000 over two years for the various projects secured, in addition to being awarded two agricultural machines for winning first place in implementing the high wheat yield project (interview with He Jie, NAO owner, 16 May 2023).

In terms of land transfer arrangements, Lao Zhang and his associates did not negotiate with households directly but obtained consolidated land parcels through different villagers' committees. According to Lao Zhang, the transfer fee for each village's land was negotiated between villagers' committees and households. As a result, the land rental fees varied among the seven villages in which they had operations:

> The transfer fee for each village is different. Some are RMB 930 (per *mu*), some RMB 860 (per *mu*). These grain subsidies are given to the households, and there are villages where it's RMB 1,100 (per *mu*), with the subsidies given to us. (Interview with Lao Zhang, 15 May 2023)

Given the sizeable scale of Lao Zhang's operation, the cooperative relied extensively on hired workers. For routine tasks such as weeding and ploughing, a fixed wage of RMB 60 per day was paid, regardless of the amount of land or quality of work performed. Most of the workers for routine tasks were women in their sixties or seventies, recruited from villages whose land was transferred to Lao Zhang or surrounding villages. For tasks such as irrigation, the work was contracted out. There were 22 sprinkler heads on the irrigation machine, and the direction of sprinkler heads needed to be changed twice a day by workers. A skilled worker could manage two to three machines in a day, earning RMB 140 per machine and therefore approximately RMB 400 a day. During peak seasons for wheat harvesting and corn sowing, Lao Zhang also hired additional workers to operate machines. Workers operating harvesters were paid RMB 500 daily, while those driving tractors to transport grain were paid RMB 300 daily.

9. Data retrieved from the work report on the reform of rural land property rights in Xingfu Township in 2014: Xingfu Township Party Committee and Government "搭建土地流轉平臺, 推進農業規模經營" (*Dajian tudi liuzhuan pingtai, tuijin nongye guimo jingying*, Build a land transfer platform to promote large-scale agricultural operations), 16 August 2014.

10. *Ludan huinong dai* is an agricultural credit guarantee model jointly developed by Shandong Agricultural Development Credit Guarantee Co., Ltd. and financial institutions. See "魯擔惠農貸" (*Ludan huinong dai*, Ludan huinong loan), 9 April 2022, www.sdnydb.com/article/1871 (accessed on 31 August 2024); and Zhu Tingting 朱婷婷, "我市農擔累保突破30億元" (*Woshi nongdan leibao tupo 30 yi yuan*, Our city's agricultural guarantees have exceeded RMB 3 billion), *Tengzhou ribao shuzi bao* (滕州日報數字報), 1 February 2024, www.tzdaily.com.cn/html/2024-02/01/content_84948_17031168.htm (accessed on 31 August 2024).

Revealingly, villagers in Pavilion Village referred to Lao Zhang as a "big landlord" (*da dizhu* 大地主). To quote an elderly villager, "During Mao's era, anyone with a lot of land was a landlord. Nowadays, those who cultivate several hundred *mu* of land are definitely landlords" (interview with villagers in Pavilion Village, 26 May 2023). Working for large grain producers such as Lao Zhang, villagers toil from dawn to dusk and earn only RMB 50 to 60 for a day's labour. In their view, big households that contracted large tracts of land have become wealthy, while ordinary villagers fail to earn a decent income despite working intensively. Another villager said:

> We do have a few people who have gotten very rich in our village; those big households who transferred a lot of land are all very wealthy. At the beginning all of them were cadres and team leaders, none of them were ordinary villagers. (Interview in Pavilion Village, 26 May 2023)

Case 2: Land-based shareholding cooperation with an agribusiness

The second case, a cooperative headed by Secretary Wen in Tower Village, demonstrates both similarities and differences when compared with Lao Zhang's case. Like Lao Zhang, Secretary Wen was also part of the rural elite class when he became involved in land transfer. He was originally an employee of a township enterprise but was recruited by the township Party committee to return to his hometown, Tower Village, to serve as deputy Party secretary in 2003. Two years later, he was officially named village Party secretary. Upon assuming office, Secretary Wen faced the same mandate from the government to promote land transfer. Unlike Lao Zhang, who undertook the transfer himself and made farming his business, Secretary Wen engaged an external agribusiness, an agricultural input company, to take over farming operations, and established a joint land-based shareholding cooperative (*tudi gufen zhuanye hezuoshe* 土地股份專業合作社) with the company. The Tower Village case is thus a combination of dynamics "from without" (external enterprise) and "from above" (Secretary Wen as member of the rural political elite).

The agricultural input company involved in Tower Village was a subsidiary of Tengzhou's municipal supply and marketing cooperative (*gongxiao hezuoshe* 供銷合作社, or *gongxiaoshe* 供銷社 in short). Supply and marketing cooperatives have been promoted by the central government as a vehicle for advancing the socialisation of agricultural services (*nongye shehuihua fuwu* 農業社會化服務) through the contracting or trusteeship of agricultural production (*nongye shengchan tuoguan* 農業生產託管) (Kan and Trappel 2021; Dou, Xiao, and Hu 2022). The Tengzhou government has advocated for village collectives to work with supply and marketing cooperatives through a "co-construction" model (*cunshe gongjian* 村社共建), where the cooperative would take over a village's transferred land and coordinate all farming activities. With subsidiaries in agricultural inputs including pesticides, fertilisers, equipment and processing plants, the supply and marketing cooperative was viewed as a capable agent for integrating production.

As Manager Li of the agricultural inputs subsidiary remarked:

> Some new NAOs have never done farming before and started losing money once they took over. They then ran away without paying land rent to villagers. So villagers' committees started looking for capable units to take over, like our supply and marketing cooperative. Sometimes we run a loss too, but we will never owe money to the village or the people. (Interview, 18 May 2023)

Secretary Wen shared similar sentiments:

> The supply and marketing cooperative has the technology and knows how to do retail. They even have their own storage facilities for drying grains, and they provide agricultural inputs too. Once they took over our land, we saw immediate effectiveness." (Interview, 10 May 2023)

The introduction of the agricultural input company provided momentum for land transfer at Tower Village. The village has more than 600 *mu* of farmland contracted to 316 households. The company first took over 200 *mu* but soon succeeded in transferring all farmland, except for partial retention by five households who wished to continue farming. The villagers' committee led by Secretary Wen played a pivotal role in facilitating transfer. Aside from going to each household to undertake the work of persuasion and sign individual contracts, a land-based shareholding cooperative was formed to encourage transfer. The cooperative brought together the company, which invested in cash, the villagers, who contributed their land in exchange for shares, and the villagers' committee, who represented the rural collective in contributing the village's collective assets such as rural construction land, electricity, and water supply. The cooperative adopted a "guaranteed minimum plus dividend" (*baodi jia fenhong* 保底加分紅) model for profit distribution. Villagers who invested with their land were guaranteed a basic land contract fee of RMB 800-900 per *mu* per year as their share. Then, based on the profitability of the cooperative and after setting aside 20% as reserve, the remaining profits were divided evenly between four relevant stakeholders: the company, farmers, the villagers' committee, and the production and operation managers.

The land shareholding cooperative has increased the economic income of the villagers' committee. Our field research revealed that Tower Village received RMB 120,000-130,000 in dividends from the cooperative every year. The agricultural input company also benefitted in terms of profits and in increased sale of its products. As Manager Li remarked:

> On the whole, we have not lost money since the beginning of our operation. Sometimes the weather is good and the price for produce is higher, so our profits will be higher. There are also losses in some years, but overall, we are not losing money. One of the reasons for us to establish land shareholding cooperatives was to increase the sale of agricultural materials through our own planting and operation. When villagers see that the grain we cultivate is growing well, they will ask about the fertilisers we use, and they will also think about buying it from us. (Interview, 18 May 2023)

In terms of agricultural production, unlike Lao Zhang who ran the operation himself, Secretary Wen took a backseat role and was responsible only for supporting facilities such as water and electricity supply. The company was responsible for planting, materials, and financial and technical management. It hired one member of the village as "grid manager" (*wanggeyuan* 網格員), who was in charge of land management and supervision. Like Lao Zhang, the company also hired local villagers as workers during peak seasons.

The co-construction model between villages and external enterprises in land-based shareholding has been widely touted by the local government as a "win-win" partnership. As of 2023, the model has been adopted in 18 villages in Tengzhou, covering more than 7,000 *mu* of land.[11] On paper, the land-based shareholding cooperative model sets up a tripartite partnership between capital investors, the village government, and rural households, and puts in place a profit-sharing mechanism that not only provides villagers with a guaranteed minimum income from land transfer, but also gives them a stake in the company's revenues. Despite this, our interviews with households in Tower Village revealed a more complicated picture. Although Secretary Wen portrayed himself as playing merely a mediatory role between the company and village households, his relationship with villagers was fraught with conflict. During interviews, some villagers complained, "Now the village collective has taken back the land and contracted it out. How does that leave ordinary villagers with any land to cultivate?" (interview with villagers in Tower Village, 27 May 2023). Secretary Wen was regarded by villagers as the main culprit for selling the village's collective land to industrial enterprises. They also alleged that the villagers' committee did not distribute dividends in time, and that the promised welfare benefits generated from land transfer were not realised. As a result of villagers' complaints, Secretary Wen was placed under investigation by the Discipline Inspection Commission of Tengzhou for half a month. The investigation examined all the accounts under Secretary Wen's supervision since he took office, and concluded with no findings of wrongdoing. Although the villagers still had opinions privately, they were unable to pursue this further.

Case 3: Accumulation from below and alliance of big households

In contrast to the first two cases, where rural cadres played a central role in either directly transferring and farming village land or facilitating its transfer to external companies, our third case illustrates a different arrangement in which local big households acted as main agents of land transfer and agricultural production. Lakeside Village has more than 2,600 *mu* of cultivated land, all of which was transferred to 11 big households in the village. Amongst them, Du Ge was the biggest contractor, farming almost 800 *mu* of land. Three of the big households contracted more than 300 *mu* of land, four contracted more than 100 *mu*, and the remaining three less than 100 *mu*. Instead of centralised transfer by the villagers' committee, contracts were negotiated by the big households with rural families on an individual basis, where social ties and reputation played a significant role.

Du Ge can be described as a new-generation professional farmer who has chosen to enter agriculture as a young entrepreneur. Working in his father's coal business, Du Ge had no prior experience in farming. Around 2005, due to poor business in the coal sector, Du Ge ventured into goat breeding and established a breeding cooperative. It was a success: the cooperative became the largest goat breeding cooperative in Tengzhou and was named a "demonstrate site" (*shifan she* 示範社). In 2012, Du Ge capitalised on the preferential land transfer policies and contracted 300 *mu* of land in his village to plant maize, using the stalks as fodder for the goats. When the breeding market experienced a downturn, Du Ge switched to growing grain on a large scale, ultimately transferring 800 *mu* of land.

Unlike the previous case studies, Du Ge's land transfer did not take place in one instance, but gradually over time, relying heavily on the building of trust and reputation. Rather than mobilising political resources, as in the case of Lao Zhang and Secretary Wen, it was embeddedness in the local community and relational ties that facilitated Du Ge's amassment of land. The entire process of land transfer negotiation, including discussions over the actual substance of contracts, was carried out between Du Ge and individual households. Du Ge described the start of land transfer at Lakeside:

> At the very beginning, there was 100 *mu* of land in this area, and I only managed to contract 60 *mu* of it. There was still 40 *mu* belonging to different farmers. I communicated with them one by one to see if we could consolidate their 40 *mu* into one contiguous piece. Then my plot of 60 *mu* could be connected to form one big block, which would make it easier to manage. (Interview, 17 May 2023)

To cultivate trust, Du Ge always handed over land transfer fees to villagers in advance before planting and sales took place:

> Many operators who contract land pay villagers every half a year, or they do farm work first and then pay villagers. I always pay the villagers first and then do the farm work. Even if I have no income, the villagers don't feel worried. Now the villagers trust me. (ibid.)

Du Ge made a point of keeping the land transfer fee consistent across all households and all types of land, regardless of location and soil quality. He also used his farming machines to help villagers that did not transfer their land to him, as a way of cultivating relations. Du Ge invested approximately RMB 400,000 to purchase various pieces of agricultural machinery, such as wheat harvesters, maize harvesters, tractors, and seeders. He used these machines to help neighbouring farmers with small plots carry out tasks such as sowing, harvesting, and pesticide spraying, charging a small service fee. With relationships built up over time, some of these farmers eventually transferred their land to him:

11. Data retrieved from Lu Wen 魯文, "山東滕州市社: 打造農資流通新引擎, 推進'綠色農資'升級" (*Shandong Tengzhou shishe: Dazao nongzi liutong xinyinqing, tuijin "lüse nongzi" shengji*, Shandong Tengzhou municipal cooperatives: Create a new engine for the circulation of agricultural materials and promote the upgrade of "green agricultural materials"), *Zhonghua hezuo shibao* (中華合作時報), 27 July 2024, https://www.chinacoop.gov.cn/news.html?aid=1816205 (accessed on 1 September 2024).

> After a while, the neighbouring farmers would ask me for help with harvesting, rotary tillage, and sowing. One of them, who had 40 *mu* of land, didn't want to farm anymore, so he came to me directly and offered to transfer it to me. Now there are only one or two households left that have not transferred their land. (ibid.)

Unlike Tower Village, where an external enterprise took charge of farming, Du Ge and his family members were directly involved in the day-to-day operation of the farms. Aside from himself, his spouse, and his parents, Du Ge also hired a small number of local villagers for routine farm work such as weeding and spraying pesticides. Villagers viewed this as Du Ge's way of contributing to local employment. Du Ge echoed the sentiment, saying that "this could at least help solve the village's labour problem." (ibid.)

Instead of the villagers' committee being the coordinating authority, in Lakeside we found the 11 contractors forming an informal alliance of "big producers." This alliance provided a platform for joint decision-making in an otherwise decentralised pattern of land transfer, helping to stabilise land prices while acting as a community of mutual support:

> We 11 households had to make unified decisions. If a farmer did not want to transfer his land, that was fine with us. However, if he first approached one of us and then went to another one of us to negotiate a higher land transfer fee, that contractor had to refuse. Because this kind of dynamic will make us compete against one another. (ibid.)

The alliance also facilitates information sharing amongst the producers.

> We get together to study which agricultural materials, fertilisers, and seeds are good. If we need agricultural materials, we can help each other. For example, if a household needs a fertiliser that I have, I will deliver it to his door. I will charge the lowest purchasing price. (ibid.)

While facilitating solidarity between the big producers, however, the alliance also acts as a control mechanism. Because of severe weather conditions and Lakeside Village being particularly vulnerable to floods given its low-lying location, the big households decided to unite in lowering land transfer fees from a standard rate of RMB 800 per *mu* to RMB 700 per *mu*. The mutual agreement amongst big producers to not compete against each other worked in this case to lower the price that villagers ultimately got for their land. During our follow-up interviews in summer 2024, the villagers expressed dissatisfaction with the decision, arguing that land with good location and quality should fetch higher rents (interview with villagers in Lakeside Village, 28 July 2024). Some villagers voiced the opinion that big households should increase land rents in the spring in those years that the harvest is good. According to our informants, the big households subsequently promised to review land rent levels if the farms were not flooded in the autumn, but this has thus far failed to materialise due to continuous annual flooding. Out of dissatisfaction, some villagers retrieved their land from the big households and farmed independently for a year. Nevertheless, they found that the income from farming was far lower than what they could earn from migrant work plus land rentals. They indicated that it was not feasible to continue farming and ended up transferring their land back to the big producers (interview with villagers in Lakeside Village, 2 August 2024).

These grievances highlight the limited choice and weak bargaining position that Chinese villagers often have in making land transfer decisions. Nonetheless, while this could be said to apply to all three of our case studies, our fieldwork showed NAO-community relations at Lakeside to be less conflict-prone than those at Pavilion and Tower Villages. We argue that this is due to villagers' perception of Du Ge and big households of similar socioeconomic background, in addition to Du Ge and big households' efforts in maintaining social ties. Because Du Ge and other big households were not engaged in political office but rather emerged from processes of accumulation from below (expansion of petty commodity production or reinvestment of capital earned from outside of agriculture), villagers saw these big producers as business entrepreneurs rather than as cadres coming in to take possession of their land. The process of land transfer evolved more organically over time to different local contractors, rather than in a centralised manner of cadre-led or corporate-led takeover. Tellingly, villagers we interviewed referred to Du Ge and other big households at Lakeside Village as "boss" (*laoban* 老闆), rather than as "landlord" (*dizhu* 地主), as in the case of Lao Zhang (interview with villagers in Lakeside Village, 25 May 2023). This reflects villagers' perception of NAO leaders from a more transactional, market-oriented perspective, rather than as the landowning elite class. The more decentralised manner of land transfer also diffused tension, whereas in Pavilion and Tower villages, bottom-up discontent was focused on the village leaders. These nuanced differences might help explain why land transfer could provoke different responses from below.

Discussion and conclusion

Policy, media, and even academic discourses on land transfer in China sometimes paint a picture of large-scale, systematic takeover of farmland by dragonheads and agribusinesses. While the national trend is indeed one of increased transfer, implementation on the ground in fact varies between localities. Aside from crop varieties and place-specific attributes such as local agrarian history (Rogers et al. 2021), our paper highlights the agential role played by new agricultural subjects in shaping the local politics of land transfer. By comparing three cases of transfer in Xingfu Township (Shandong Province) we reveal how NAOs' different pathways of accumulation and strategies of operation both shape and explain specific dynamics of land transfer and intra-village relations, despite being situated in the same policy milieu and farming the same crops.

While this paper focuses on land transfer, our findings speak to broader dynamics of agrarian change and the combination of factors that together give rise to diverse trajectories of transition to capitalist agriculture. By foregrounding the agency of NAOs, our paper supplements current accounts of agricultural modernisation in China that tend to focus on the primacy of the state. The local state in our case studies played a pivotal role in incentivising land transfer and took advantage of NAOs as a policy implementation tool, exemplifying dynamics of political selection and capitalisation as discussed in existing studies of "politically directed accumulation" (Trappel 2021; Zhang and Zeng 2021). At the same time, however, NAOs were far from passive vehicles but displayed individual agency and strategy in transferring land, organising agricultural production, and engaging with the state and community. Our comparative study shows how differences in NAO strategies directly shaped the extent and nature of land transfer: from cadre-mediated transfer and scaled-up operation spanning seven communities in Pavilion Village, to land-based shareholding cooperation with an external agribusiness in Tower Village, to a decentralised pattern of moderate-scale, household-based transfer to big producers in Lakeside Village. NAO strategies also differ in terms of negotiation tactics with villagers as well as engagement with the state and agricultural labour. We argue that these varied strategies and modes of operation were in turn demonstrative of the diverse background of NAOs and their leaders' varying levels of endowment and resources in terms of political, economic, and social capital. For instance, village cadres such as Lao Zhang in Pavilion Village and Secretary Wen in Tower Village could better take advantage of their political position and connections with enterprises to expand their scale of land transfer and agricultural production while benefitting from the government's preferential support. Meanwhile, big households such as Du Ge of Lakeside Village did not have significant political capital and emerged through accumulation processes from below. They relied more heavily on their embeddedness within the local community to aggregate land and mobilise labour through social ties.

These findings lend support to scholarship that emphasises the need to differentiate between different accumulation pathways and types of NAOs (Yan and Chen 2015; Zhang and Zeng 2021). Subjecting NAOs to nuanced, disaggregated analysis is important for understanding the varied trajectories of transition to capitalist agriculture in China today, and how political-economic conditions and NAO agency combine to produce such variations in specific local contexts. Doing so also offers a more nuanced take on the impact of NAOs and of agrarian transition more broadly on local communities. Studies have pointed out how the reciprocal relationship between local states and NAOs has squeezed out smallholders and led to deterioration in village relations (Hu, Zhang, and Donaldson 2017, 2023). Our comparative study has also found evidence of mistrust and allegations, particularly in cases where political office was interlocked with land transfer and collective economic management, but in other cases the transition to scaled-up production did not contribute to worsened intra-village relations. Future research should thus give further attention to the variegated local politics of land transfer, with the view of understanding sources of similarities and differences.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their gratitude to the reviewers and editors for their insightful comments. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Annual Conference of China Rural Sociology in November 2023 and at the International Symposium on New Directions of Urban-Rural Development in China held at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University in June 2024. The authors are grateful to the participants for their helpful suggestions. Literature research for this article was supported by a grant from the Research Grants Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China (Project No. PolyU 15601221), while field study was supported by a Peking University – The Hong Kong Polytechnic University China Social Work Research Centre grant (Project No. P0042704). Funding from the Department of Applied Social Sciences, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, supported open access publication (Project No. P0046158).

Manuscript received on 3 July 2024. Accepted on 26 October 2024.

References

CAO, Yu, Jie ZOU, Xiaoqian FANG, Jiayi WANG, Yu CAO, and Guoyu LI. 2020. "Effect of Land Tenure Fragmentation on the Decision-making and Scale of Agricultural Land Transfer in China." *Land Use Policy* 99. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2020.104996

DAY, Alexander F., and Mindi SCHNEIDER. 2017. "The End of Alternatives? Capitalist Transformation, Rural Activism and The Politics of Possibility in China." *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 45(7): 1221-46.

DOU, Shulong 豆書龍, XIAO Ziyang 蕭子揚, and HU Weiwei 胡衛衛. 2022. "供銷部門土地託管的複合型碎片化困境及治理: 基於山東省平安縣的案例分析" (*Gongxiao bumen tudi tuoguan de fuhexing suipianhua kunjing ji zhili: Jiyu Shandong sheng Ping'an xian de anli fenxi*, The complex and fragmented dilemma and governance of land trusteeship by supply and marketing cooperatives: Basing on the case analysis of Ping'an County, Shandong Province). *Nanjing nongye daxue xuebao (shehui kexue ban)* (南京農業大學學報(社會科學版)) 22(03): 117-27.

GONG, Weigang, and Qian Forrest ZHANG. 2017. "Betting on the Big: State-brokered Land Transfers, Large-scale Agricultural Producers, and Rural Policy Implementation." *The China Journal* 77: 1-26.

HU, Zhanping, Qian Forrest ZHANG, and John A. DONALDSON. 2017. "Farmers' Cooperatives in China: A Typology of Fraud and Failure." *The China Journal* 78: 1-24.

——. 2023. "Why Do Farmers' Cooperatives Fail in a Market Economy? Rediscovering Chayanov with the Chinese Experience." *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 50(7): 2611-41.

JI, Xianqing, Zhonghao QIAN, Linxiu ZHANG, and Tonglong ZHANG. 2018. "Rural Labor Migration and Households' Land Rental Behavior: Evidence from China." *China & World Economy* 26(1): 66-85.

KAN, Karita. 2021. "Creating Land Markets for Rural Revitalization: Land Transfer, Property Rights and Gentrification in China." *Journal of Rural Studies* 81: 68-77.

KAN, Karita, and René TRAPPEL. 2021. "Negotiating Agrarian Futures in China: Capital, Collectives and Communities." *China Perspectives* 125: 3-7.

LUO, Qianqiang, and Joel ANDREAS. 2020. "Mobilizing Compliance: How the State Compels Village Households to Transfer Land to Large Farm Operators in China." *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 47(6): 1189-210.

LUO, Qianqiang, Joel ANDREAS, and Yao LI. 2017. "Grapes of Wrath: Twisting Arms to Get Villagers to Cooperate with Agribusiness in China." *The China Journal* 77: 27-50.

PENG, Kaili, Chen YANG, and Yao CHEN. 2020. "Land Transfer in Rural China: Incentives, Influencing Factors and Income Effects." *Applied Economics* 52(50): 5477-490.

ROGERS, Sarah, Brooke WILMSEN, Xiao HAN, Zoe Ju-Han WANG, Yuefang DUAN, Jun HE, Jie LI, Wanlong LIN, and Christine WONG. 2021. "Scaling Up Agriculture? The Dynamics of Land Transfer in Inland China." *World Development* 146. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2021.105563

SU, Baozhong, Yuheng LI, Lequn LI, and Yue WANG. 2018. "How Does Nonfarm Employment Stability Influence Farmers' Farmland Transfer Decisions? Implications for China's Land Use Policy." *Land Use Policy* 74: 66-72.

TRAPPEL, René. 2021. "From Peasant to Elite: Reshaping Agriculture in Gansu Province." *China Perspectives* 125: 9-18.

XU, Licheng, and Xiaodong DU. 2022. "Land Certification, Rental Market Participation, and Household Welfare in Rural China." *Agricultural Economics* 53(1): 52-71.

XU, Siyuan, and Tony Michael FULLER. 2018. "Land Transfer and the Political Sociology of Community: The Case of a Chinese Village." *The Journal of Rural and Community Development* 13(3): 38-56.

XU, Zhun. 2024. "Changing Farmland Distribution in China." *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 51(1): 1-17.

YAN, Hairong, and Yiyuan CHEN. 2015. "Agrarian Capitalization without Capitalism? Capitalist Dynamics from Above and Below in China." *Journal of Agrarian Change* 15(3): 366-91.

YE, Jingzhong. 2015. "Land Transfer and the Pursuit of Agricultural Modernization in China." *Journal of Agrarian Change* 15(3): 314-37.

ZHANG, Qian Forrest. 2015. "Class Differentiation in Rural China: Dynamics of Accumulation, Commodification and State Intervention." *Journal of Agrarian Change* 15(3): 338-65.

ZHANG, Qian Forrest, and John A. DONALDSON. 2008. "The Rise of Agrarian Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics: Agricultural Modernization, Agribusiness and Collective Land Rights." *The China Journal* 60: 25-47.

——. 2010. "From Peasants to Farmers: Peasant Differentiation, Labor Regimes, and Land-rights Institutions in China's Agrarian Transition." *Politics & Society* 38(4): 458-89.

ZHANG, Qian Forrest, and Hongping ZENG. 2021. "Politically Directed Accumulation in Rural China: The Making of the Agrarian Capitalist Class and the New Agrarian Question of Capital." *Journal of Agrarian Change* 21(4): 677-701.