

'Neo-collectivisation' through Property Rights Reforms: Villager Empowerment and State Building in Urbanising China

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Acknowledgement

The authors thank the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments on the earlier versions of this manuscript. We are grateful to all the interviewees for their support in our field work and to Ming Liang for his research assistance. All errors are the responsibilities of the authors. The work described in this paper was supported by two grants from the Research Grants Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (Project No. P0034814) and the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (Project No. P0046583) respectively.

Abstract

Over the past two decades, property rights reforms in China's peri-urban regions have succeeded in granting villagers individual rights to their collective assets. It has been argued that these reforms will lead to the demise of China's long-established rural collective system. However, based on in-depth research and case studies in southern China, we conclude that these reform initiatives have been upheld by the state and villagers to sustain and improve, rather than destroy, rural collectivism. The implementation of formal titling through shareholding reforms has not engendered full privatisation and the dissolution of collective entities; instead, it has given rise to an alternative form of rural collectivity that has reshaped the power dynamics between the state and the villagers in daily governance. Whilst this 'neo-collectivist' approach appears to have empowered villagers by enhancing their rights to collective assets and benefits, it has also strengthened the governing capacity of the socialist state by extending and legitimising its interventions in Chinese rural communities.

1. Introduction

Whether formal property rights truly empower disadvantaged individuals remains highly contentious. According to the prevailing neoliberal perspective, clearly defined and secure property rights are fundamental in safeguarding people against state expropriation of private property for public purposes (Deininger, 2003; Holland, 2022). The spread of neoliberalism in developing countries in the 1990s prompted a paradigm shift in property rights reform, with a strong emphasis on formal titling as a means to enhance individual property rights. A notable work in this era was De Soto's (2000) advocacy for the empowerment of the poor through the titling of their assets in the informal sector. This approach assumes that by enabling poor individuals to trade their assets in formal markets, a property rights system can alleviate their poverty and reduce inequality. Private property rights reforms are therefore regarded as a route towards economic prosperity, individual liberty, and social progress.

However, despite the widespread belief in the efficacy of formal property rights, numerous studies have highlighted the failure of property rights reforms to improve the situation of disadvantaged individuals. Privatisation efforts, for instance, have often resulted in the displacement of the most vulnerable people as soaring land prices make housing unaffordable for the poorest (Berner, 2000). Moreover, even those who possess formal titles continue to face precariousness, as their right to participate in property markets does not necessarily translate into rewarding participation (Bouquet, 2009; Roy, 2005; Wily, 2021). Many individuals continue to encounter difficulties in accessing credit and employment opportunities, rendering them highly susceptible to possible displacement through mortgage defaults and the brutal vagaries of market forces (Aguilar, 2008).

In the last two decades, property rights reforms in urbanising China have sparked intellectual debate on the extent to which they are effective in empowering villagers. Advocates for these reforms argue that the privatisation of property rights prevents socialist states from exerting authoritative control and extracting rural resources under the collective institutions. The key argument is that by retaining the ambiguity of collective ownership of village assets, the state can undermine the resistance of rural communities and the defiance of villagers (Brandt et al., 2002; He et al., 2007; Hong, 2015; Putterman, 2009; Sato, 2006). From this perspective, the implementation of formal property titling constitutes a key part of de-collectivisation, as it removes an obsolete rural institution that the state can use for social exploitation (Cai, 2003; Che and Qian, 1998; Tian, 2008; Zhu, 2018).

In contrast, opponents of formal titling underscore the role of collective institutions in villagers' achievement of self-governance. Their argument centres on the idea that village collectives play a crucial role in sustaining villagers' effective organisation and addressing the needs of rural communities. By pooling village resources and coordinating individual efforts, these collectives are able to provide essential welfare services (Wen, 2005; Tsai, 2007; Kan 2019) and safeguard villagers against unwanted interference from the state (Hsing, 2010; Po, 2011; He and Xue, 2014; Sargeson, 2016). From this perspective, the introduction of private property rights institutions could disturb the collective identity of villagers and weaken their sense of collective responsibility, thus ultimately undermining their capacity for mobilisation to defend their collective interests (Sa, 2021; Zhang and Donaldson, 2013).

Despite their opposing arguments, both sides of this debate claim that property rights reforms can destroy rural collectivism, with negative consequences for either the state or villagers. Our proposition, however, is that both sides mistakenly equate property rights reform with

the process of market privatisation, de-collectivisation or the marketisation of property rights. We argue that property rights reforms in rural China can achieve an alternative form of collectivism that we call ‘neo-collectivisation’ and which enables the socialist state to achieve its objectives in rural governance and villagers to address their practical concerns and interests. Indeed, our empirical investigations in peri-urban China in the last two decades show that local governments and village communities have been supportive of the property rights reforms¹. This paper elucidates how these reforms have led to the persistence of rural collective systems in China by describing their underlying mechanisms and actual effects.

As a fundamental institution in society, property rights extend beyond mere titling and possession of assets. Importantly, property rights reforms can restructure the distribution of power and resources in a society and transform state-society relations. This study will contribute towards examining a new relationship between state and society in reforming China. Numerous studies have shown the ‘state efforts at co-optation and penetration of society, and resistance and exercise of agency by social actors’ (Wu, 2017:2), characterized by a metamorphosis of socialist state domination (Li et al., 2021). The evolving state-society relationships in China are described as: ‘decentralized authoritarianism’ (Landry, 2008), ‘deliberative authoritarianism’ (He & Warren, 2011), ‘fragmented authoritarianism’ (Mertha, 2009), ‘consultative authoritarianism’ (Teets, 2013), ‘bargained authoritarianism’ (Lee & Zhang, 2013), ‘combined social management and social autonomy’ (Mahoney, 2014), ‘coordinative state-village governance’ (Wong et al., 2021), ‘party-masses model of governance’ (Cai et al., 2022), and ‘hybrid authoritarianism’ (Tang, 2023). This paper will demonstrate that the core elements of neo-collectivisation are not restricted to our case study

¹ ‘Peri-urban’ regions mean those rural areas under rapid transition towards urbanization, mostly on the periphery of furiously growing and expanding cities.

in Guangdong, but are implemented nationally. It will also highlight the theoretical relevance and empirical applications in other developing countries in which customary or common properties rights are the prevailing institutions.

2. A Conjunctural Approach to Understanding Rural Property Rights Reforms

We adopt the conjunctural approach proposed by Mouton and Shatkin (2020: 406), which emphasises the importance of studying the combined effects of ‘external forces’ and ‘deeply rooted contextual forces’. In this study, we define ‘external forces’ as the interventions made by the local state to reorganise regulatory power over the management. We define the distribution of collective assets² and ‘deeply rooted contextual forces’ as the blend of institutions that encompass the Maoist collective organisation and the village traditions and norms that have taken shape within a kinship-based network. By adopting a conjunctural approach, we aim to reassess the efforts of both the state and villagers who have interacted with village collectives for various reasons.

Between 2005 and 2023, our research team conducted comprehensive fieldwork in 22 villages undergoing urbanisation. Our objective was to examine how local officials, village cadres, and villagers navigate the challenges that emerge during property rights reform. These villages are located in Guangzhou’s Huangpu district, which was one of the first urbanising regions in China to promote property rights reforms. In urbanising villages, urban institutions and practices are gradually integrated into daily governance, while the informal norms and indigenous traditions of rural communities continue to shape the interactions among villagers.

² ‘Local state’ refers here to governments at the township and district level, which have direct experience of implementing state policies on the ground.

Table 1: From Maoist Collectivisation to Neo-collectivisation

| | Maoist Collectivization | Traditional Collectivization | Neo-collectivization |
|---------------------------|---|--|--|
| | | Bottom-up Initiatives (1984-2003) | Top-down Intervention (2003-present) |
| Collective Land Resources | - Arable land - Land for public facilities - Housing land | - Arable land - Land for public facilities - Commercial Land - Housing land | - Arable land - Land for public facilities - Commercial Land - Housing land |
| Welfare Provision | Self-sufficient welfare system fully funded and managed by the collective | Self-sufficient welfare system fully funded and managed by the collective | Expansion of state-welfare into village; the collective dispossessed of many authorities in collective income allocation for welfare provision |
| Shareholding Structure | Not applicable | No shareholding before 1996; Household-based allocation Illusively defined individual rights between 1995 and 2003: 1–22 shares (varied with age) per villager; non-inheritable; non-transferable re-allocation every three years | Clearly defined individual rights: 200 shares per villager; inheritable |
| Collective Organization | Commune-brigade-production teams | Association of Rural Cooperatives (i.e the brigade and its production teams) | Shareholding Cooperatives (i.e. production teams) |
| State Power | State control and collectives as state apparatus | State retreat and self-governing collectives | State re-entry and corporatist collectives |
| Informal Institutions | Suppressed | Substitutive informal institutions | Accommodating informal institutions |

Looking at urbanising villages in a single region, we place the analysis of property rights reforms in a spatial and temporal continuum to depict their evolution. During our field research, we made over 80 visits to these villages and conducted 200 interviews with various people.³ To gather data, we began by examining government policies that were having a

³This study summarises the interview responses and present aggregate findings to ensure the confidentiality of the individual interviewees.

direct effect on collective land and asset management. We then conducted interviews with local officials to understand how these policies had been implemented in practice. We also spoke with village cadres, who provided insights into the day-to-day operations of the collective system and shared historical records they had preserved. Furthermore, we prepared targeted questions to put to villagers, prompting them to discuss the benefits and drawbacks of collective ownership and institutions from their own perspectives.

Based on this fieldwork, our study constructs a historical account of two transformative processes after the dissolution of the Maoist commune system (Table 1). The first process occurred in the 1980s and 1990s and was characterised by bottom-up collectivisation, with villagers fighting for the establishment of a self-sustaining welfare system under the urban–rural duality system. The second process emerged in the early 2000s and involved top-down collectivisation, with local governments initiating shareholding reforms that granted villagers individual rights over collective assets. Wong et al. (2021:1743) described these processes as a shift from the ‘decentralization of governance’ to the ‘governance of decentralization’. In this study, we focus on the causes and outcomes of these two processes to show how and why the recent property rights reforms have led not to de-collectivisation or privatisation but rather to an alternative form of collectivism.

3. Bottom-up (Re)collectivisation for Self-sustaining Welfare Provision

In the 1980s, the Household Responsibility System was introduced as a means to restore private farming in China. However, this did not dismantle village collectives in Huangpu, because the villagers voluntarily engaged in collectivisation for the purpose of self-sustaining welfare provision. Following the decline of township and village enterprises, local

governments shifted their focus to urban areas and adopted laissez-faire policies towards village collectives. As a result, many self-governing villages expanded rapidly. The villages studied here started to implement the Household Responsibility System in the early 1980s. In some remote rural areas elsewhere, the implementation of this system was followed by the severe decline and even collapse of collective organisations, as the introduction of private family farming led to the de-collectivisation of agricultural production. In those villages, the village collectives that had control over villagers' production and daily lives during the Maoist era now only performed administrative duties relating to taxes and fees. Furthermore, as the central government began to relax its control over rural-to-urban migration, many young villagers moved to cities to seek employment. This led to a decline in the collective systems of these villages, with some village cadres even leaving their own villages to find work in urban areas.

However, this was not the case in Huangpu, where most villagers chose to stay in their villages and realised that they could earn more income by selling their farming products in nearby urban areas. Meanwhile, the rapid growth of township and village enterprises provided non-farming job opportunities for the villagers. In Huangpu, some village collectives, such as the Brigade, were able to adapt to the changes brought about by the Household Responsibility System. For example, one village operated a farm for raising pigs and chickens on collective land, which in the 1990s became a franchised production site supplying livestock and poultry to Hong Kong wholesalers. This collective also established two factories, one for processing poultry and one for manufacturing furniture. These township and village enterprises not only provided non-farming employment options but also generated income, which was used by the collectives for social welfare. The annual collective income from these village enterprises in the 1990s is estimated to have been around 20

million yuan. Part of this income was used to build tap-water systems, construct roads to connect the villages to highways and establish kindergartens and primary schools to provide free local elementary education for children.

While villagers were grappling with the voluntary re-collectivisation process, the Guangzhou municipal government was developing an industrial zone called the Guangzhou Development District. This development involved large-scale land requisitions, which inadvertently contributed to the ongoing process of re-collectivisation for welfare provision. Although these land requisitions resulted in the closure of township and village enterprises operated by the village collectives, the effects of the ‘reserved commercial land’ compensation policy meant that this led to an increase in collective income rather than a reduction. Under this policy, the government returned a portion of the requisitioned land (approximately 10 per cent) to the village collectives for commercial purposes. The state’s minimal support for rural areas under the urban–rural dualist system during the 1980s made self-reliance crucial for the villagers in providing public goods and services. This special compensation policy was widely adopted by local governments in the Pearl River Delta region (PRD) with the aim of supporting self-sustaining social security for villagers who had lost arable land to urbanisation.

By leasing this returned land to external investors, the village collectives were able to earn a substantial income, which played a crucial role in expanding welfare services and provided dividends to the villagers. For instance, in the 1990s, the local government took around 10,000 mu of arable land from one village and returned 995 mu of collective land as compensation. To make use of this land, the village collective leased it to outside investors

for the construction of serviced apartments and warehouses, which provided an annual rental income of 65–80 million yuan in the late 1990s.

In addition to the reserved commercial land, village collectives took control of over 70 per cent of the land compensation fees. According to the collective land system, the compensation for land value legally belonged to the village collective. Therefore, after compensating affected farming households for their farming output, the remaining compensation fees and the income from the reserved commercial land were placed under the management of shareholding cooperatives. This arrangement ensured the continuity of the collective system in the area. Villagers were willing to accept this collective management primarily because they understood that the total amount of land compensation fees would not be sufficient to sustain their livelihoods after losing their arable land to urbanisation. The compensation fee in the late 1990s was around 100,000 yuan per mu, and the average land per capita in the villages we visited ranged from 0.8 mu to 1.45 mu. If all compensation fees had been directly distributed, each villager would have received a maximum of 145,000 yuan. Therefore, most villagers did not oppose the pooling and management of their money and assets by the village collective, in the expectation of higher monetary returns and improved community facilities and social benefits. As a result of villagers' willingness to accept the central management of land compensation fees, there was a rapid expansion of collective assets: for example, in one village that had lost all of its arable land by 2002, the village collective held in custody nearly 100 million yuan of compensation fees.

As the collective income grew rapidly in these villages, the village collectives improved welfare provision. A village that could previously afford only one village doctor was now able to establish a medical clinic with 16 medical staff, at which treatment, including

medicine, cost just 1 yuan per visit. This village also built a centre for the elderly and purchased pension insurance for all villagers over 60, providing them with a monthly pension of around 500 yuan. Education was prioritised, with a scholarship established to support young villagers in continuing their studies in urban areas. The village collective also took responsibility for maintaining local order, creating self-organising security teams consisting of over 100 members and covering their operating costs.

As a result of this transformation, villages became self-governing and financially independent entities. In this context, collective organisation was strengthened rather than weakened. This bottom-up ‘collectivisation’ differed from that in the Maoist era. In the 1960s and 1970s, the collectivisation movement was compulsory and was deployed by the state as a tactic to ensure its extraction of surplus from the countryside for socialist industrialisation. In the (re)collectivisation of the 1980s and 1990s, the village collectives were no longer merely agents of the state in implementing policies. In these villages, informal institutions played a crucial role in accomplishing what the local government had failed to achieve in the provision of community facilities and welfare services.

4. Potential Crises of Village Collectives

Self-organised village collectives provided improved social services and gave villagers a platform for strengthening their collective bargaining power in dealing with the local state. Hsing (2010) described this type of village autonomy as a form of ‘village corporatism’, through which villagers self-organised to resist land requisitions from the extractive local state. Areas known as villages-in-the-city emerged due to the failure of state-led urban planning to effectively incorporate rural villages into urban development. Unauthorised

construction for rental purposes proliferated in these unregulated spaces. Villagers resisted state-led land exploitation and participated in formal elections to protect their rights to the income from collective village assets. The resistance of the villagers limited the enforcement of top-down policies.

The growth of self-governing village collectives empowered villagers to better protect their interests when dealing with the government. However, this empowerment also led to conflicts between the collective and individual villagers. Previous studies (see, for example, Hsing, 2010) have explored the impact of state–village conflicts on local governance restructuring, but our research reveals that internal conflicts within the village are equally significant. These conflicts play a crucial role in understanding the challenges faced by village collectives, which eventually paved the way for the re-entry of state power into villages in the early 2000s.

A key conflict arose from the rapid expansion of collective wealth after land requisitions, which created opportunities for local cadres to manipulate the management of collective assets. This led to increasing tensions between the village collective and individual villagers. Some cadres abused their power in negotiations and deals with external partners, siphoning funds for personal gain. The leasing of collective landed properties was often conducted through personal networks rather than following the correct procedures. As a result, the villages' reserved commercial land was typically contracted out at extremely low rents, compromising the financial well-being of the collectives. Moreover, some collectives, especially those with significant land compensation and reserved commercial land, engaged in real estate development projects to generate more income for the collective. However, increasing numbers of villagers feared that local cadres were prioritising their own interests

over those of the majority. In some cases, village cadres misused collective funds for personal purposes and even gambled with villagers' land compensation fees. This fuelled anger and acts of vandalism against the village collective. When villagers lack trust and are suspicious of cadres' intentions, it is difficult for development plans to progress.

Another significant conflict relates to the resurgence of clan-based blocs and their dominance in village governance. Lineage networks are deeply rooted in village society and have remained influential in villages for generations. Although the persistence and power of these networks declined during the Maoist era due to the penetration of the party-state, they revived in the reform period. The introduction of reserved commercial land, which made villages financially independent and self-governing entities, played a significant role in this revival. When participating in elections, villagers' political behaviour is influenced not only by external policies but also by informal institutions, such as kinship ties and family power relationships. Villagers typically favour candidates from their own lineage, as descent groups believe it is crucial to have representation within the community's management. Consequently, the power to manage collective assets and village affairs often falls into the hands of certain cadres and clan-based power blocs, disadvantaging the majority of villagers.

In addition to the internal conflicts between villagers and village cadres, village collectives faced increasing financial burdens due to the growing demands for medical care from villagers. The rapid economic growth and urbanisation of these villages led to a shift away from traditional agriculture as the primary source of villagers' livelihoods. This shift brought improvements in living standards but had unintended negative consequences for villagers' health. The reduced physical activity of villagers who were no longer engaged in farming led to a decline in their fitness and health. Consequently, chronic diseases such as diabetes,

hypertension, obesity and heart disease become common in these communities. One village collective's annual expenditure on medical insurance increased from 1 million yuan in the early 1990s to 12 million yuan in the early 2000s.

Moreover, the village collectives faced the challenge of meeting the growing demand for basic facilities, such as village roads, recreational centres and local security, due to the influx of migrant workers. During the 1990s, an increasing number of migrant workers working in nearby industrial zones started leasing housing in the villages. This generated substantial rental income for the villagers, but the responsibility for funding basic facilities fell on the village collectives, who relied on land compensation fees and incomes from the villagers' reserved commercial land. From the villagers' perspective, these facilities and services were not public property but rather their private property; they believed that they had sacrificed their land for urbanisation and thus did not agree that they were obliged to share these facilities with migrant workers. To cover their expenses, some village collectives implemented various charges on migrant workers. For instance, one village cadre mentioned that his village imposed a monthly management fee of 4 yuan on each migrant worker. This fee placed a significant financial burden on most migrant workers, who typically earned only 50 to 80 yuan per month. Due to their limited knowledge and lack of confidence in seeking legal help, many migrant workers expressed their frustration with the villagers. These issues further intensified the growing conflict between villagers and migrant workers.

5. Neo-collectivisation by Top-down Welfare and Shareholding Reforms

When the village cadres and villagers were not aligned, the local government often became the major external authority for arbitration and mediation (Wong, 2015). In the early 2000s,

the local government expanded its role to assist village collectives and lighten their financial burden. Two major areas in which the government first intervened were garbage disposal and local security services. By stepping in and assuming the costs associated with waste collection, transportation and disposal, the local government allowed village collectives to allocate their resources to other pressing needs. In addition, recognising the importance of ensuring the safety and security of villagers, the government provided local security services. This involved allocating resources, such as policing, to maintain order and protect villagers from potential threats or criminal activities.

In addition to implementing state programmes for garbage disposal and local security, the local government introduced a new cooperative medical system that operated similarly to an insurance programme. Villagers had the choice whether to participate in this system, and by 2009 over 90 per cent of them had enrolled. More than 90 per cent of the villagers were also covered by the government's pension scheme. These high rates of participation laid a strong foundation for the government's medical reform efforts. Furthermore, the local government sought to enhance medical care services through the establishment of a three-tier system. At the first tier, new neighbourhood clinics were built and existing village clinics were revitalised to create a comprehensive clinic network. At the second tier, street-level medical service centres with an approximate area of 2,000 square meters were provided for each street ward. Owing to a shortage of local qualified medical professionals, the management and operation of these centres was outsourced to county or municipal hospitals. At the third tier, community medical centres were connected to larger hospitals, allowing seriously ill patients to be referred from the community centres to these hospitals for advanced treatment. Furthermore, to eliminate the urban-rural inequality in education, the local government took

up the management of all primary schools, which were previously funded and operated by associations.

For over fifty years, villagers were excluded from the state welfare system and had relied on collectives for the provision of public goods and services. Collective ownership, which allowed periodic reallocation to meet the needs of a growing population, served as the institutional foundation for providing basic security for villagers (Wong, 2016). State welfare expansion reduced villagers' dependence on the village collective for social welfare, creating favourable conditions for the local government to promote a system of individual property rights by enacting more radical shareholding reforms. By taking on the responsibility for welfare provision, the local government demonstrated its commitment to addressing the practical needs and concerns of villagers. This tangible support and intervention in everyday issues resonated with villagers, who started to perceive the government as a reliable and trustworthy entity. Consequently, villagers became more receptive to reforming the village collective institutions under state coordination.

The reforms in Huangpu were implemented in two rounds. In the first round of reforms, carried out in 1996, the township government mandated that all villages verify and report the collective assets owned by the villagers' cooperatives, including land, properties and cash. The village collectives then converted villagers' entitlements to these collective assets into collective shares and individual shares. Individual shares, which accounted for 49 per cent of the total shares, were distributed to individual villagers, and the remaining shares were held by the shareholding cooperatives. The village collective, now known as the Association of Shareholding Cooperatives, therefore held 51 per cent of the shares and was able to adjust the

share entitlements every three years to meet the needs of newly born villagers, who lacked full access to the urban welfare system.

With the government taking on a greater role in providing social welfare to villagers, the village collectives were no longer required to retain the collective shares, which were then reallocated and distributed to all eligible villagers. To protect individual rights, the local government initiated a second round of reforms by introducing a new regulatory framework called ‘fixing the share rights’ (*guhua guquan*). Under this framework, each villager received 200 shares, which could now be inherited by family members. The total number of shares would no longer fluctuate based on age, village population or identity status. Individuals could also bequeath their shares to a chosen recipient, unlike the previous system, in which the shares of a deceased person were permanently returned to the shareholding cooperative (*si bu jian*).

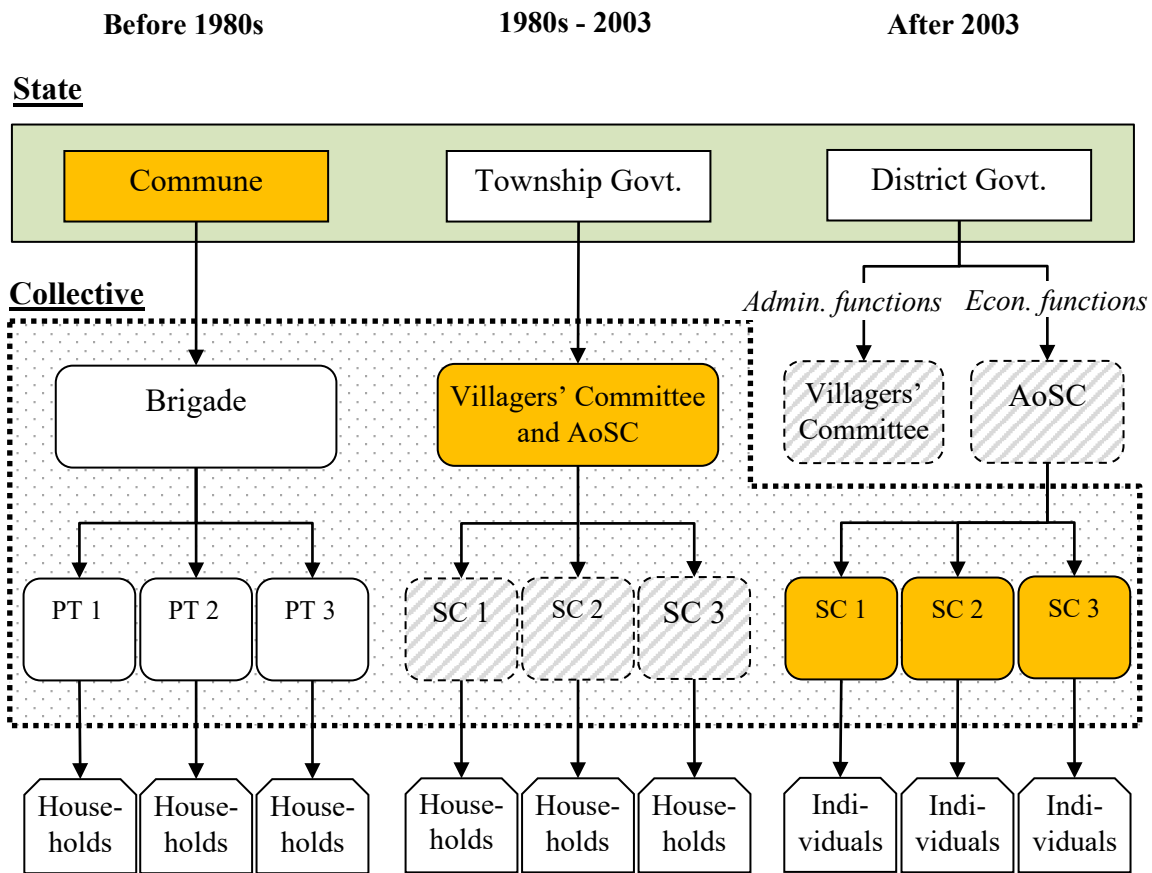
These new principles defined more clearly the rights of individual villagers, securing their entitlement to the income derived from reserved commercial land. As shareholders, villagers had the legal right to vote and participate in the management of their shareholding cooperative. Any further amendments or revisions that affected share distribution required the support of at least 95 per cent of qualified voters in the shareholders’ meeting, as determined by open ballots. This new institutional framework prevented arbitrary share reallocation and reduced the potential for misuse of power when adjusting shares periodically.

6. Restructuring of Village Collectives

Such reforms of defining individual rights to collective assets did not lead to de-collectivisation. However, it did have a significant impact on the organisational structure of village collectives, primarily through redefining the management authority and size of village collectives (Figure 1). Like their counterparts in the PRD, the Brigades and Maoist Production Teams in Huangpu were transformed into village collectives. The reforms gradually restructured them into entities resembling companies, with the establishment of a board of directors responsible for executing decisions made during shareholders' meetings, which followed a set of rules and procedures outlined in the Articles of Association. To enact these institutional changes, the local government made three key interventions.

One local government initiative was the decentralisation of collective management from the village level to the production team level. When the local government took up the funding of welfare programmes, the village collectives were no longer allowed to keep custody of villagers' land compensation fees for welfare purposes and therefore returned these fees to the shareholding cooperatives. After these reforms, each shareholding cooperative became an independent entity responsible for managing the assets of its own small group of shareholders. Consequently, village collectives were substantially reduced in size. For instance, the Association of Shareholding Cooperatives in one village centrally managed all of the assets and land collectively owned by 7,500 villagers from 11 shareholding cooperatives. After decentralisation, the village collective was subdivided into 11 smaller collectives, with an average population of only about 700 villagers.

Figure 1: Restructuring of Village Collectives



Notes:

PT: Production Team; SC: shareholding cooperative; AoSC: Association of Shareholding Cooperatives

- Decentralization of management power and downsizing of collectives
- Weakened units

Another significant initiative of the local government was the development of a new accounting system that aimed to improve transparency and accountability in the management of collective assets. In the early 2000s, the municipal government promoted a number of principles, including autonomous operation (*zizhu jingying*), independent accounting (*duli hesuan*), self-financing (*zifu yingkuai*) and democratic management (*mingzhu guanli*). In line with these principles, the district government first required all village collectives to set up

separate financial revenue and expenditure accounts for the Residents' Committee and the Association of Shareholding Cooperatives (Figure 1). In many villages in the 1990s, before this separation took place, the financial matters of these two organisations were collapsed into a single account. This ambiguity allowed some village cadres to abuse the use and allocation of land compensation fees by administrative fiat. Furthermore, to monitor shareholding cooperative accounting practices, the district government implemented a two-tier government audit system. The first tier, *shezhang cunquan*, requires the audit of all shareholding cooperative accounts by the Residents' Committee. The second tier, *cunzhang zhenguan*, necessitates the audit of Residents' Committee accounts by the street-level office. Monthly and quarterly auditor reports must also be made public, allowing villagers to scrutinise expenses and transactions.

The third initiative of the local government was the establishment of a performance appraisal system for village cadres. Unlike local officials, village cadres are not part of the state bureaucracy and do not receive a government salary or pension upon retirement. As part of the shareholding reforms starting from 2003, although village cadres were still not salaried officials, the local state set a policy that divided the remuneration of each village cadres into two parts: the first part consisted of basic subsidies provided by the government and the second part was a performance bonus provided by the village collective. The size of the bonus varied and was typically two to five times the average dividends allocated to each shareholder, depending on the profitability of their cooperative and their performance in community management. For example, one village party secretary received a monthly subsidy of about 4,100 yuan from the district government. Additionally, he and his colleagues in the Resident's Committee and the shareholding cooperatives were rewarded with a

generous year-end bonus for their performance in areas such as birth control, social security and creating a ‘civilized neighbourhood’.

Alongside these changes, a new mechanism for checks and balances between the collective and individual villagers began to emerge. Village cadres were monitored by their shareholders because they now needed to act for the interests of all shareholders if they wanted to take up a supervisory position in the collective. Meanwhile, village cadres needed to adhere to the local state’s supervision and instructions, given that the remuneration and promotion systems of senior management staff (such as members of the Board of Directors) were subject to stringent regulations by the street-level office. These relations highlighted the intermediary role of village cadres as a link between the local state and villagers, allowing the local government to secure the involvement of village cadres and villagers in the implementation of policy and to originate solutions based on compromise and cooperation.

7. Resilience of Collective Institutions

The introduction of clear and structured shareholder rights and the establishment of company-like shareholding cooperatives enhanced the transparency and accountability of collective asset management and laid a solid foundation for villagers to participate in trading their shares on the market. However, these reforms did not lead to de-collectivisation and privatisation; instead, a different form of collective institutions emerged. The main obstacles to these changes stemmed not only from the government but also from the villagers themselves.

The reforms in Huangpu were primarily a state-led process through which the local government made ongoing attempts to consolidate its power in the management of collective

assets with the aim of ensuring its control over the potential social unrest arising from rapid urbanisation. In the early 2000s, the local government re-organised its interventions in villages to regulate the operations of village collectives. This regulation served two main objectives for the state: first, to protect collective assets from potential mismanagement by village leaders who may be corrupt or incompetent; and second, to prevent villagers from aligning with village leaders to resist state policies. Since re-establishing control over village collectives, the local government has collaborated with them in delivering welfare services and undertaking village redevelopment projects.

The government has assumed the crucial financial responsibility for welfare programmes, demonstrating its commitment to supporting the needs of villagers. However, it recognises the significant role of village collectives as implementation agents to effectively deliver these programmes. These collectives possess an intimate understanding of the unique challenges faced by their residents and are therefore well equipped to identify and address the specific needs of their villages. Utilising village collectives as implementation agents creates a dynamic and responsive system of welfare delivery. These collectives operate at a grassroots level, allowing them to respond swiftly to emerging issues and adapt programmes to suit the evolving needs of their communities. This localised approach minimises the risk of misallocation and fraud, thus ultimately maximising the impact of social support.

In addition to the delivery of welfare programmes, the village collectives were required to perform a crucial role in village redevelopment. As urban expansion took place, arable land disappeared, leaving behind only village housing sites. The city government sees the contrast between run-down villages and new urban centres as a 'chaotic' landscape that could pose risks to fire safety and social security in local communities. With greenfield sites for urban

expansion running out in recent years, these similar villages, occupying prime locations with good accessibility, have become inevitable targets for urban regeneration. Village redevelopment in Guangzhou has traditionally been state dominated, and in the 1990s, property developers were not permitted to participate in village redevelopment. To expedite development, the city government introduced the *sanjiu gaizhao* policy in 2009, which encourages partnerships between villagers and developers.

Under this policy, over 70 per cent of the villages examined in this study participated in redevelopment projects as part of the municipal government's urban regeneration programme. The downsizing of village collectives from associations of shareholding cooperatives to shareholding cooperatives allowed them to effectively fulfil their role in building consensus among villagers. The support of villagers is crucial for the success of redevelopment, but achieving a consensus among villagers was extremely challenging, even though the proposed plans offered the potential for improved household income and living conditions. There were two common reasons for households to oppose redevelopment: first, they were satisfied with the rental income they were already receiving from leasing their houses to migrant workers and did not want to make any changes; second, some households supported redevelopment but disagreed over the amount of compensation. However, the downsizing reduced the population of village collectives to only around 1,000, making it much easier to obtain over 80 per cent of votes in support of redevelopment. In addition to formal voting, village collectives can engage with traditional lineage networks to help persuade and convince resistant villagers.

Furthermore, the conversion to shareholding cooperatives not only enhances the flexibility of village collectives in contracting with property developers for redevelopment projects but

also has several advantages for the local government. First, this change in organisational structure alleviates the local government's responsibility for providing finance for these projects. Instead, the shareholding cooperatives take on the task of investing capital, reducing the financial strain on the government. Second, the adoption of shareholding cooperatives eliminates the need for the government to resort to forced land acquisitions, which often involve displacing villagers and thus incite direct confrontations that carry significant political risk.

8. Discussions and Conclusions

Collectivism has long been an integral part of villagers' daily lives in China's rural society. The property rights reforms implemented over the past two decades have successfully clarified the rights of individual villagers to their collective assets and resources, without leading to the disintegration of the collective institutions in rural China. This study leads us to reject two opposing mainstream perspectives, which invariably posit that the rural collective institutions will be dissolved by property rights reforms as a result of formal property titling and asset transfer (e.g. Cai, 2003; Che and Qian, 1998; Sa, 2021; Tian, 2008; Zhang and Donaldson, 2013; Zhu, 2018). These perspectives suggest that such reforms would harm either the socialist state or the villagers, because these two parties are relying on the rural collective institutions to pursue their parochial interests against each other. On the contrary, our empirical investigation reveals that property rights reforms were actively promoted by the state and warmly welcomed by the villagers. Rural collectivism is defended by both parties and remains intact.

Our study shows that the property rights reforms have given rise to a new form of collectivisation in rural China, which we call ‘neo-collectivisation’. It departs from the Maoist commune system previously in place until the 1980s, which comprised centralised state control and top-down command of rural resources and organisations. It also differs from the ‘bottom-up village collectivisation’, which flourished between the 1980s and the early 2000s due to a weak presence of the state in rural areas. In contrast, ‘neo-collectivisation’ entails the integration of collective institutions into a formally structured, shareholding-based and geographically delimited property rights system, supported by the joint efforts of the socialist state and the villagers to sustain the rural communities. Instead of eradicating rural collectivity, neo-collectivisation has acknowledged the shortcomings of past attempts at collectivisation and sought to address them by combining both state intervention and grassroots initiatives.

The transformation is not unique to our study area in Guangdong. It is a process being implemented gradually by the socialist state in various parts of China⁴. Under the 2007 *Guiding Opinion*, the Ministry of Agriculture confirmed its commitment to experimenting with property rights reforms of rural collective organizations in pilot village areas. This trial experiment was followed by the 2014 *Pilot Plan*, which mandated every provincial government to select a county, district, or city to carry out the reforms. The full implementation of these reforms across the entire country was announced in the 2016

⁴ The relevant policy documents include: *Guiding Opinions of the Ministry of Agriculture on Steadily Promoting the Pilot Reform of the Property Rights System of Rural Collective Economic Organizations* (Nóngyè Bù Guānyú Wēnbù Tuījìn Nóngcūn Jítǐ Jīngjì Zúzhī Chǎnquán Zhìdù Gǎigé Shìdiǎn De Zhìdǎo Yìjiàn) issued by the central government in October 2007; *Pilot Plan for Actively Developing Farmers' Shareholding Cooperatives and Empowering Farmers to Shareholding Rights in Collective Assets* (Jījī Fāzhǎn Nóngmín Gǔfēn Hézuò Fùyǔ Nóngmíng Duì Jítǐ Zìchǎn Gǔfēn Quǎnnéng Gǎigé Shìdiǎn Fāng'àn) issued by Ministry of Agriculture in November 2014; *Opinions on Promoting the Reform of Rural Collective Property Rights System* (Guānyú Tuījìn Nóngcūn Jítǐ Chǎnquán Zhìdù Gǎigé De Yìjiàn) issued by the State Council of China in December 2016; and, *Central Document No. 1* (Zhōngyāng Yī Hào Wénjiàn) issued in February 2018 by the Ministry of Agriculture.

Opinions and the 2018 *Central Document No. 1* of the central government. Both policy documents support the rural collective system, with the former document clearly stating that collective land ownership remains unchanged, while user rights are transferrable for gainful uses with the consent of village collectives. The latter document urges local governments to implement the reforms by conducting audits of collective assets, determining share distributions, assessing membership eligibility, and establishing other rules. Although the specifics of these rules may vary in different parts of China (Min et al., 2019), the fundamental principles of neo-collectivisation remain in place. In June 2024, the National People's Congress approved the Rural Collective Economic Organizations Law of the People's Republic of China (*Zhōnghuá Rénmín Gònghéguó Nóngcūn Jitǐ Jīngjì Zǔzhī Fǎ*), set to take effect in May 2025. This marked a significant move towards formalising the principles and standardising the practices of neo-collectivisation across the whole country.

The advantages of neo-collectivisation for both the state and the villagers are evident from our research in Guangdong and in other parts of China. According to Chen et al. (2022), property rights reforms were completed in more than 94.9% of the Chinese villages by 2020. A national audit of rural shareholding cooperatives revealed that units with malpractices by village cadres had decreased by about 52% compared to 2011. Village collectives actively participated in various market activities. For instance, during the same period, the amount of rural collective land leased to the market for rental incomes increased more than ninefold. Net incomes to village collectives grew by over 107%, reaching approximately 213 billion yuan. The growing economic wealth of the village collectives also enabled them to allocate more money for public welfare support in the villages. The study by Chen et al. (2022) shows that this amount grew by more than 82% from 2011 to 2020. Villagers' participation in rural affairs has become more proactive. Wong et al. (2020) found that in Y district of Guangzhou,

the enthusiasm of villagers in all four rounds of elections for representatives in village collectives had steadily increased since the early 2000s, finally reaching a voter turnout rate of more than 85%. Therefore, the quality of rural governance under neo-collectivisation has been greatly improved.

The villagers not only supported the state policies, but also defended the rural collective institutions. Despite the reforms have achieved formalizing their individual rights to collective properties, few were willing to sell their shares and sever their connections with the village collectives. Our study found that villagers were motivated to uphold their rights for two main reasons. First, after the state took over welfare expenses from the village collectives, the budget was turned into additional dividends for the shareholding villagers. Some villagers reported that their annual dividends nearly tripled as a result. Second, village collectives continued to foster a sense of belonging and tribal unity for indigenous villagers, by retaining about 20% of collective income to support community charities, fund festive celebrations and maintain ancestral halls. This led most villagers to keep their associations with the village collectives as shareholders. This is in contrast to situations in other developing countries, such as Mexico, where rural communities petitioned authorities to legalize their illegal sale of land to outsiders (Leaf, 2007).

The concept of neo-collectivisation comprises three core principles that are applicable to property rights transition, natural resources management and empowerment of the rural communities in an international context (Aggarwal & Elbow, 2006; Khan, 2009; 2018). First, strengthening and formalising individual rights to collective assets do not necessarily have to eliminate collective ownership. Many property rights reforms that aim at formalisation, individualisation and transferability of rural resources have generated numerous problems in

the developing countries (Aguilar, 2008; Berner, 2000; Bouquet, 2009; Roy, 2005; Wily, 2021). They often fail to lift the poor out of poverty traps and meanwhile expose them to various risks posed by unforgiving market forces. The rural communities remain deeply impoverished, especially when the state lacks the capacity to provide essential social protection and assistance. The implementation of neo-collectivisation in rural China has proven to be a rather successful strategy for overcoming these challenges. After the reforms, villagers receive formal rights to the communal benefits while maintaining their collective organisations and preserving their indigenous communities.

Second, it is crucial to prioritize the protection of indigenous rights, common property and customary systems, which are prevalent in many developing nations such as India, Bangladesh and Tanzania (Khan, 2009). Incomplete or collective property rights is not necessarily a property right problem that inhibits economic growth, but can be effective in managing natural properties in the rural context. The establishment of statutory enabling framework that respects the role of customary authorities, like the village collectives in China, as the governing bodies is a key towards responsible management and sustainable use of rural resources (Chimhowu & Woodhouse, 2006). International experiences suggest that villagers are content without individualized, transferrable property rights, provided that there are clear provisions regarding their entitlements to the returns of communal assets (Bromley, 2003). Neo-collectivization in rural China is found to align with these trends.

Third, successful property rights systems require effective enforcement of the socially accepted rules. In customary systems, the village governing authorities generally have lower transaction costs than the central or local states to enforce the rules, mediate conflicts and implement decisions at the grassroots level (Khan, 2018). Hence, delegating power and

community management of natural resources and common properties in the rural areas are often more effective (Aggarwal & Elbow, 2006). Ostrom (1990) proposed that well-defined rights can emerge through self-organisation and self-governance within a common property regime. However, our study in rural China reveals that, in reality, internal conflicts among villagers have the potential to destabilise the village collectives. Devolution is never a panacea, and external state intervention is still necessary (Larson, 2004). Neo-collectivisation in rural China illustrates how the combination of formal state regulations and customary systems can produce positive outcomes.

In essence, neo-collectivisation is building on the customary systems by clarifying and strengthening individual rights of indigenous villagers, without dissolving the collective bonding. Formalisation of property rights in rural China is an effective means of addressing the conflicts that arise from managing and distributing the collective assets of villages during periods of rapid urbanisation. The current approach clearly defines individual rights while also adhering to egalitarian principles in the allocation of shares, and this ensures equal access to opportunities and benefits for all villagers. Furthermore, the indigenous identity of the villagers is a key factor determining eligibility for shareholding benefits. This effectively protects the benefits associated with shareholdings for those with longstanding connections to the village.

Although the concept of neo-collectivisation offers many advantages such as high legitimacy, low disputes, voluntary compliance and strong adaptability to the rural communities, it is not without weaknesses. One concern is its long-term sustainability, as many villagers in our case study have expressed their worries about the impacts of reforms on their clan-based networks and cultural traditions. A new regulation introduced by the local government in 2003 required

villagers to identify successors to inherit their shares after death. This legislation was expected to gradually weaken the lineage network, because the population of young villagers was diminishing due to the one-child policy and their shares could be inherited by outsiders. As a result, some villagers are now advocating for the reintroduction of periodic reallocation of their entitlements to collective incomes, which were previously fixed, to ensure that newly-born villagers can also benefit from the collective income and its associated advantages.

Another issue is that the reforms have substantially altered the organisational structure, capacity and role of village collectives, consequently reshaping the underlying dynamics between the local state and the villagers in their daily governance. (Li, 2009; Wong, 2015, Wong et al., 2021). Although the indigenous community has been preserved, villagers have less capacity to independently organise and resist state-imposed policies. The expansion of state power has had a notable impact on village collectives, influencing their operating scale as measured by the number of shareholding cooperatives and their management of collective assets. With the local government now having direct control over village finances, it is evident that village collectives, which were originally intended to be self-governing entities, cannot maintain complete autonomy from local state supervision.

State intervention can have both positive and detrimental effects on the rural communities. On one hand, it can contribute to community development by improving welfare services and resolving conflicts between village leaders and villagers. On the other hand, the growing regulatory control imposed by the socialist state over urbanising villages can impede bottom-up initiatives and limit the ability of villagers to self-govern without heavy reliance on the state. Striking a delicate balance between state involvement in village management and the

meaningful participation of villagers in local decision-making processes remains a significant challenge. Exploring the complementary relationship between the state and the rural society in China is undoubtedly a major area for future research.

End

Acknowledgement

[Insert here]

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