



# Creating land markets for rural revitalization: Land transfer, property rights and gentrification in China

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## ABSTRACT

The reform of collective land ownership in post-socialist contexts offers a useful window into how changes in property rights shape and structure the dynamics of territorial transformation. Focusing on China's rural revitalization campaign, this paper demonstrates how the state, as creator and regulator of land rights and property titles, facilitates landscape change by relaxing regulations over the lease of rural land and creating market institutions that favour land transfers to organized capital, in this case tourism companies and property developers. Far from being a spontaneous process of pure market forces and consumer demand, the state is actively harnessing market forces to achieve land use change and extend planning control over rural land. On the ground, the expanding presence of recreational capital has brought about the remaking of Chinese villages into leisure farms, holiday guesthouses and ecological parks geared towards touristic consumption. The paper calls for further attention to processes of exclusion and displacement that this transformation might engender. By exploring the dynamics of rural gentrification in a post-socialist context, this paper makes the case for the need to pay more attention to the comparative study of property rights and ownership regimes in rural gentrification research, and highlights how the intersection of property rights and state power reveals nuances that underscore the importance of going beyond Western conceptualizations of gentrification.

## 1. Introduction

Property rights – regulated by land tenure systems, ownership regimes and planning laws – underlie all processes of territorial transformation. Questions concerning who owns property and what rights that ownership entails affect tenure security and how property can be used and disposed of. These legal details, written into constitutions and planning regulations, have the direct effect of either facilitating spatial change or slowing down, even prohibiting, those same processes. For instance, legal devices such as freehold and leasehold may provide security for the one to stay put while exposing the other to displacement pressures, thus working to expedite or counter gentrification (Layard, 2018). Territorial processes are thus products of legal geographies, which are themselves embedded in specific historical contexts and inflect different ideologies about social and political order (Blomley, 1997).

Despite its significance, little attention has been given to the comparative study of property institutions as a factor shaping divergent dynamics of gentrification. In existing studies, the experience of North American and European cities has often been taken as the normative

point of reference in theorizations of gentrification (Lees et al., 2015). As a result, one common assumption of conventional research is the universality of individualized, privatized tenure (Ghertner, 2015). Observations by Ruth Glass on residential displacement and class struggle in inner-city London in her foundational text on gentrification (Glass, 1964) are indeed symptomatic of a distinct set of historical-institutional arrangements – that of private property rights and a free market (Slater, 2011). Such institutional conditions cannot be readily assumed of other contexts, where individualized land tenure may co-exist with a wide variety of non-privatized ownership arrangements, and where property institutions are subject to ongoing change as a result of reform or contestation (Kan, 2020a).

This paper takes the transformation of rural land rights in post-socialist China as a point of departure to advance the comparative study of property rights and gentrification. In recent years, the Chinese government has launched a campaign of rural revitalization (*xiangcun zhenxing*) which promises to modernize the rural economy and bring wealth to villagers through innovating new pathways of development in the countryside. A key institutional innovation has been the reform in rural land rights. During much of the reform era, a divide has existed

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between China's urban and rural land regimes which restricted the direct transfer of rural land rights to parties outside of the village. While urban land can be sold or leased to external capital by its landlord – the government – village collectives lacked such powers despite being nominal owners of rural land. However, with its objective to rejuvenate rural areas by attracting capital to “go down to the countryside” (*ziben xiaxiang*), the Chinese leadership has in recent years relaxed the rules on rural land transfer. The emergence of rural land markets opens up new avenues for external investors to purchase and aggregate land for commercial and residential developments, which is fast contributing to the revalorization of rural landscapes through large-scale capital reinvestments.

Drawing on documentary and field data, this paper argues that the post-socialist experience adds value to the rural gentrification literature in two ways. Firstly, it sheds light on how transformations in property rights can affect the pace and dynamics of gentrification. Enshrined in constitutions and laws, property rights are popularly understood to be fixed and inflexible (Sorensen, 2011). The study of transition economies demonstrates however that, as institutions, property rights are constantly open to reconfiguration no less because national governments carry out “properitizing projects” with the aim of mobilizing resources and transforming economies through property rights reform (Sikor et al., 2017). The case of land marketization and rural revitalization in China provides a useful window for examining how institutional change in collective land ownership shapes gentrification processes on the ground.

Secondly, the post-socialist experience foregrounds the role of the state in rural gentrification. The need to incorporate theorizations of the state, policy and politics in gentrification studies has been pointed out by various scholars (Hackworth and Smith, 2000; He, 2007; Wacquant, 2008; López-Morales, 2015). This paper contributes to the literature by focusing on the nexus between property rights and state power. The existence of diverse property arrangements in transition economies compels researchers to look beyond market forces and purely economic explanations of gentrification to consider the instrumentality of the territorial state in shaping the process (Kan, 2020a). The Chinese case demonstrates that the state plays a crucial role both in (i) creating the conditions for gentrification as the regulator of property rights and creator of land markets, and in (ii) orchestrating when, where and how gentrification takes place by selecting pilot sites and mobilizing investments from specific kinds of capital. In the rural revitalization campaign, the Chinese state has promoted the entry of recreational capital to the countryside and facilitated the remaking of villages into holiday homes, theme parks and eco-friendly farms geared towards touristic consumption. By increasing capital's access to rural land but at the same time dictating the timing, location and type of development, the state is harnessing market forces to extend its territorial control and planning power over land owned by village collectives.

The rest of the paper first reviews the theoretical literature on property rights and gentrification in transition economies. This is followed by a description of data and methodology. An examination of the marketization of rural land in the context of China's rural revitalization campaign is then presented to illustrate how property rights transformation conditions and shapes gentrification, and the importance of understanding the role of the state in the process.

## 2. Property rights and gentrification

As institutions – defined as rules and constraints created to regulate interactions between human actors (North, 1991; Streeck and Thelen, 2005) – property rights arrangements are products of pathways of historical evolutionary change that are specific to territorial jurisdictions (Sorensen, 2010). Property rights do not exist in an institutional vacuum but are constituted by ideologies about political order, economic relations, and social rules of interaction. The comparative study of property rights in land is important for revealing how different property

regimes – embedded in different historical and ideological contexts – condition gentrification processes. This literature review outlines what the study of gentrification in transition economies can productively reveal about the relationship between property institutions and spatial transformation, and the role of the state in rural gentrification.

### 2.1. Property rights in transition economies

Property in socialist economies is governed by administrative measures that assign ownership to three main types of actors, including the state, the collective, and the household (Verdery, 2004). They are distinguished from other possible actors, such as lineages in traditional societies and corporations in capitalist economies, by their right to own resources. In the 1980s and 1990s, market transition brought important change to property institutions in the former Soviet bloc and post-socialist states such as China and Vietnam. Rather than producing neoliberal notions of exclusive private rights, however, post-socialist property relations are characterized by hybridity and complexity which also vary greatly across time and space. In what is referred to as the “European” model of transition, countries in the former Soviet Union experienced rapid privatization of state assets and land ownership, de-collectivization of agriculture and enterprises, as well as restitution of communalized land and housing to pre-revolutionary owners. The partial transition gave rise to property rights that were “fuzzy”, ambiguous and indistinct (Verdery, 1999; Stark, 1996). In China, on the other hand, state and collective rights have persisted in the ownership of land and resources. Universal privatization and property restitution did not take place; rather, property reform has progressed in a gradual and uneven manner (Putterman, 1995). This has resulted in “a diverse set of property forms, including state, collective and private property, as well as hybrid forms that mix the characteristics of ideal-typical state, collective and private rights” (Yeh, 2004, p. 165).

Given the defining experience of market transition, studies on gentrification in post-socialist contexts have underscored the need to pay analytical attention to the role of property rights. This literature has made several observations. On the one hand, it is found that the fuzziness and fragmentation of property rights could act to inhibit gentrification. In China, He (2007) found that many occupants of inner-city buildings had only use rights but not ownership rights over housing. The lack of legal rights meant that property could not be sold on the market, and created hurdles for real estate developers as they sought to initiate redevelopment. In Russia, Bernt (2016) observed that incomplete privatization led to the “splintering” of property rights in housing stocks and forestalled new-build gentrification. Based on a case study of Warsaw, Górczyńska (2017) argued that few areas in the Polish capital were potentially gentrified, as the prevalence of unregulated property had discouraged investment and limited the inflow of new residents. In some cases, the fragmentation of property rights created the conditions for the direct intervention of governments in orchestrating gentrification (He, 2007).

On the other hand, it is also found that the reform of property rights serves as a powerful driver in initiating spatial restructuring. In post-Communist Europe, housing privatization, restitution and commodification have encouraged gentrification in many capital cities (Kovács et al., 2013). In Bucharest, for instance, the difference between rent caps and market value created enormous pecuniary incentives for tenants and owners to commodify dwellings (Chelcea et al., 2015). Surveying three post-socialist cities, Sýkora (2005) found that privatization has contributed to gentrification by expats, middle-class families, students and affluent individuals. It has been argued that, under extensive land and housing commodification, the mechanism of rent gap that commonly characterizes gentrification in western cities is appearing as well in the post-socialist context, with emergent housing markets creating profit-making opportunities out of past under-investment (Badyina and Golubchikov, 2005; Kan, 2016; Yang and Zhou, 2018).

While these studies have begun to unpack the relationship between

property rights and gentrification in the post-socialist context, their focus is primarily on urban areas. Indeed, the “metrocentricity” of gentrification research implies that the bulk of extant studies has focused on neighbourhood-scale changes taking place in the urban built environment (Phillips and Smith, 2018). Increasingly, however, spatial transformation and rural restructuring have brought gentrification processes to the post-socialist countryside. In Russia, Central and Eastern Europe, both top-down forces of change such as macro-level economic reforms and bottom-up political processes have contributed to the transformation of rural landscapes (Lindner, 2007; Kay et al., 2012; Mamonova and Sutherland, 2015). In peri-urban and rural China, the rising middle class and artist gentrifiers have remade rural settlements and commercialized homes for touristic consumption (Qian et al., 2013; Zhao, 2019; Kan, 2020a).

What distinguishes rural gentrification from landscape change in urban areas is its embeddedness in the natural environment. Rural gentrification unfolds in nature and is constitutive of the material transformation of nature (Phillips, 2005). Gentrification in the countryside often involves spaces other than buildings, including pastoral landscapes such as farms and fields as well as country parks and areas of wilderness (Smith et al., 2018). Rather than an exclusive focus on housing rights, therefore, legal frameworks and property regimes governing rural land and environmental resources are central to the study of rural gentrification. The following sub-section analyses rights in land and the role of the state as regulator of land rights.

## 2.2. Property rights and the state in rural gentrification

The importance of property rights transformation makes explicit the role of the state in rural gentrification. As the previous section observes, gentrification in the countryside is predicated upon regulations that govern land use and access. As the creator of property titles, the state prescribes who exercises what kinds of rights in land and over which types of land. To begin with, state regulations determine where boundaries fall and the kinds of activities that can legitimately take place on designated land areas. The state divides land up for different purposes, including land for agricultural, industrial, commercial, and residential usage, and in doing so creates the territorial basis for different processes of land- or landscape-specific gentrification. Aside from land use, the state also holds the authority to declare certain land parcels to be wasteland, abandoned land or unutilized land, and through such territorial constructs to legitimate political projects of modernization and land takings (Baka, 2013).

Through ownership assignment, the state furthermore determines who possesses what kinds of claim to property. The allocation of particular rights to particular parties determines who can legitimately access land, control how it is used, and derive income from its exploitation. Ownership and usufruct claims can vary between state ownership on the one hand and privatized, individualized land tenure on the other, with a myriad of mixed or recombinant property types in between. As the foregoing section shows, these have direct implications for tenure security and the investment of capital in land and property.

The centrality of the state in determining land rights adds an important dimension to market-focused narratives that tend to emphasize the role of market forces in bringing about rural gentrification. Similar to the divide observed in the urban gentrification literature (Slater, 2011), studies of rural gentrification often focus on either demand-side or supply-side explanations of gentrification. On the one hand, studies emphasizing demand-side factors have focused on the preferences of the middle class as active consumers (Ley, 1987). The desire for green residential and recreational space has contributed to the in-migration of urban residents into rural areas on a seasonal or more permanent basis (Smith and Phillips, 2001; Smith, 2002). The intention to consume nature, “authentic” rurality and alternative lifestyles is identified as a key driver of rural gentrification (Smith and Holt, 2005; Urry, 1995; Ghose, 2004; Hines, 2010). In contrast to consumptive

theorizations of gentrification, supply-side accounts have on the other hand emphasized economic forces. Neil Smith’s “rent gap” thesis (1982) has been adapted to explain gentrification in the rural environment. The “rent gap” refers to the difference between the actual ground rent that accrues to the owner given the present use of land, and the potential ground rent that could be derived if that land is put to its best use to generate the highest possible return (Smith, 1996). Phillips (2005) saw rural gentrification as the revalorization of resources and spaces that have become unproductive or marginal to capital. The capitalization of rural rent gaps can be observed in the material production of nature, or what has been described as “wilderness gentrification” (Darling, 2005; Smith et al., 2018).

As Qian et al. (2013, p. 343) pointed out, consumption and production are not mutually exclusive domains of analysis, and the role of government policies and institutional arrangements “has the potential of adding a new dimension to rural gentrification explanation”. By centre-staging the role of the state in creating land markets and directing capital flows, this paper advances this research agenda by underscoring how state power not only underlies market processes, but also acts through the market to achieve desired territorial change (Kan, 2019b). As the regulator of land rights, the state plays a pivotal role in producing rent gaps: it creates the conditions that enable rent gaps to be capitalized and determines who can benefit from its capitalization. In doing so, it harnesses economic forces to remake disinvested landscapes while also setting the terms of where and how territorial transformation is to take place.

Indeed, the geography of rural gentrification is shaped by property regimes that make certain land areas open to gentrification while rendering others off-limit to the same process. In their study of wilderness gentrification in the United Kingdom, for instance, Smith et al. (2018) noted how the highly uneven patterns of gentrification has to do not only with landscape characteristics but also particular land ownership that renders certain rural spaces closed to processes of rural gentrification. In her work on Adirondack Park in New York State, Darling (2005) similarly observed how the state’s land management practices created the conditions for the particular type of investment and disinvestment that occurred. As she points out, the logic of Adirondack gentrification has to do with its status as a state-regulated wilderness park, governed by a unique set of political ecological restrictions on investment that in turn produced “a distinct spatial expression of the rent gap” (Darling, 2005, p. 1016).

In summary, this literature review has identified two main areas for further enquiry. First, the role of property rights in gentrification research is under-examined. While scholars have begun to analyze how property rights transformation affects gentrification in the urban built environment, little attention has been given to how changes in rights over land and other environmental resources may shape the dynamics of rural gentrification. Furthermore, extant studies of rural gentrification have predominantly focused on the role of market forces both in terms of consumer demand and rent gap capitalization. The multiple roles of the state require further research. By examining rural land reform and landscape change in China, this paper seeks not only to advance theorizations of how state power and property rights transformation shape gentrification in a post-socialist economy, but also to analyze this in a rural context.

## 3. Data and methodology

This paper analyzes national-level policy changes as well as the local implementation of land transfer and rural revitalization in Zhuhai. To examine the changing legislation and policy frameworks governing rural land rights, national-level government documents on land management and rural property rights reform are collated and examined. These include 28 relevant documents issued by the central government, the Ministry of Land and Resources, and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs (previously Ministry of Agriculture) between 1987 and

2019. Furthermore, eight policy documents issued by the above authorities as well as the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development and China National Tourism Administration between 2017 and 2020 on rural revitalization and rural tourism are consulted. The analysis of these primary documentary sources offers insights into how key policies pertaining to rural land management, collective property rights reform, and rural revitalization have evolved over the reform period.

To further examine how the reform in rural land rights shapes gentrification in a local context, this paper draws on documentary and field research conducted in Zhuhai, Guangdong province. Located on the west bank of the Pearl River Delta, Zhuhai is one of the first special economic zones declared by the central government in 1980. Bordering Jiangmen, Zhongshan and Macau, Zhuhai is located at the heart of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area. The municipality is selected for the present study for two reasons. Firstly, Zhuhai has played leading roles both within Guangdong province and nationwide in the implementation of rural property rights reform. One of its districts was selected by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs as one of the 100 national-level pilot sites in 2017. In 2018, the entire municipality was designated by the Ministry as a pilot for rural land reform. Secondly, Zhuhai has experienced important rural restructuring in the 2000s following the decline of rural industries. The municipal government has re-positioned the city as a regional hub for tourism (Sheng and Tang, 2013). As a result, the national policy of rural revitalization was embraced and actively promoted by local officials to bolster rural tourism through the development of rural guesthouse economies and the construction of ecological villages. The municipality is home to Lingnan Dadi, also known as Lingnan Wonderland Eco-resort National Rural Complex, a rural tourism park that won recognition from the central government in 2017 as a national pilot project in eco-park construction. Land transfer and local innovations in property rights underlie these processes of spatial transformation, which provides an ideal context for examining the intersection of state power, property rights, and rural gentrification.

Documentary analysis is used to identify how changes in property rights created the conditions for gentrification, and to examine the role of the local state (municipal and district governments) in facilitating landscape change. A total of 27 policy documents on property rights reform and rural revitalization published between 2010 and 2020 by the Zhuhai government, the municipal department of land and resources, the municipal department of agriculture and rural affairs, and the municipal department of housing and urban-rural development are collated and examined. These include 19 policy documents issued by municipal authorities and eight issued by Doumen district government, where the Lingnan Dadi project is located. Government websites and media reports serve as additional online sources of data for obtaining information on land transfers and rural tourism projects. Site visits and field observations, carried out between July and December 2019 in Zhuhai, provide supplementary information in terms of understanding the type of landscape change that is unfolding on the ground.

#### 4. Reforming rural land rights in China: the conditions for territorial transformation

One crucial intersection of state power and property rights lies in the state's ability to restructure historically inherited regimes of land ownership and housing rights (Wyly, 2019). Property rights reform – often part and parcel of national economic modernization projects – constitutes one of the tools by which the state could mobilize resources and steer economic development. This section first examines the socialist legacy of collective land ownership in rural China. It then demonstrates how the Chinese government's marketization of rural land creates the conditions for spatial change.

##### 4.1. Rural land and collective ownership: issues and impetus for reform

The socialist era in China put in place a land tenure system that featured public ownership and the separation of urban and rural land. Land in urban areas was owned by the state, while land in rural areas was owned by rural collectives. Under the collectivization movement, an administrative hierarchy was put in place which organized the rural population into production teams, production brigades and people's communes. The ownership of rural resources was centralized under each of these units. According to the Draft Regulations Governing the Work of the People's Communes, commonly known as the Sixty Articles, the production team was the designated owner of rural land (Lin, 2009). While they enjoyed the right of possession and use, however, they did not have the authority to sell, lease or transfer their land, a power that was retained by the state and exercised by governments at the county level or above (Lin, 2009). Peasants and households had no individualized land rights, though they were allocated small private plots by the collective for accommodation.

The bifurcated system of state and collective ownership was maintained by the Chinese government in the reform era. With the disbandment of socialist communes in the 1980s, the "peasant collective" (*nongmin jiti*) became the nominal owner of rural land. In practice, land management rights are exercised by villagers' committees and rural collective economic organizations, both of which are staffed by village leaders and rural cadres. There are in general three types of rural land owned by village collectives: farmland, housing land or homestead plots, and construction land, which is further divided into land for public facilities and land for commercial development. In a typical village, farmland and housing land are contracted to individual households for use. Construction land, managed by the collective, is used to build communal facilities such as schools, or deployed for industrial and commercial ventures for collective economic development (Kan, 2016).

Prior to recent changes, a crucial distinction that existed between urban and rural land lies in the market transferability of use rights. In the 1980s, the Chinese state played a direct role in reforming property rights to enable the appropriation of rent from urban land. This was achieved by separating the ownership right and use right of urban land, and commoditizing the latter by making it available for market circulation (Lin and Ho, 2005; Yeh and Wu, 1996). The reform opened up a market for urban leasehold and enabled commercial users to purchase land rights through the payment of a premium, to be determined by negotiation, public tender, or auction. By contrast, rural land could not be transferred, rented out or mortgaged to external parties. While a two-tier land tenure system was also in place – ownership rights were retained by the village collective whereas use rights were granted to households – rural land use rights were not made available for market circulation. The transfer of rights was mostly limited to small-scale intra-village transfers (Ye, 2015). For the large-scale transfer of rural land, state expropriation must first take place to convert rural land from collective ownership to state ownership. Despite their status as *de jure* owners, therefore, village collectives were constrained in terms of what they were allowed to do with their land.

The differentiated property rights instituted by the Chinese state had important implications for rural areas. To begin with, rural residents' lack of rights to transfer their land to parties outside of the village resulted in widespread land abandonment and inefficient land use. China's urbanization rate increased from around 20% in the 1980s to 60.6% as of the end of 2019 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). As more and more rural residents migrated to cities and settled down, vast areas of rural land have been left idle in the countryside. While farmland contracts could be transferred, these were mostly restricted to other households within the same community. The abandonment of homestead plots is even more pronounced. Housing land accounts for 70% of the 29 million hectares of rural collective construction land in China (Caixin, 2018). Each household has approximately 0.6 mu of homestead land, which translates to 100 square meters of land per capita (CCTV

News, 2019). Because villagers did not have the right to transfer their homestead plots, they lacked the means to productively dispose of their land while working on off-farm jobs.

More importantly, while urban land rights could be traded in the market – bringing lucrative income for local governments as landlords – village collectives were excluded from the capitalization of rent from their land. The value from rural land development was captured instead by local states, who enjoyed the sole authorized power to undertake land expropriations (Hsing, 2010). Once rural land is expropriated it becomes state-owned, enabling the government to sell its land rights in the conveyance market at premium prices. Village collectives benefit only to the extent that they are offered compensation, but the amount of conveyance fee the state pockets from leasehold transfer is substantially higher than the amount of compensation they are required to pay to villagers. It has been estimated that the difference between the two sums approximated two trillion yuan (\$294 billion) for the 14.7 million hectares of land expropriated in the past two decades (China Daily, 2010). Excluded from land-derived income, expropriation often entails loss of employment and subsistence for rural communities. Over fifty million farmers were estimated to have lost their land since the beginning of market reform, generating a large population of landless peasants who had neither jobs nor social security (China Daily, 2010). For the state, this creates risks of social unrest and instability.

In this context, land reform has been seen as a crucial pathway for the rejuvenation of the countryside. Since the 2000s, rural China has seen the gradual build-up of what became known as the “three rural problems” of the peasantry, rural areas and agriculture. As the able-bodied population migrated to cities for work, villages were becoming hollowed out and faced impending issues including lack of funding, deterioration in public goods provision, and a growing population of the “left-behind”. The mobilization of land resources and capital investments is viewed as a panacea for underdevelopment. By commodifying rural land, the state could bring in capital to assist in the development of rural areas. The legal details of how rural land rights are being transformed are examined below.

#### 4.2. Creating rural land markets

The Chinese leadership has long mulled the marketization of rural land, with the State Council formally proposing the circulation of farmland contracts in the early 2000s (State Council, 2001). It was in 2013 at the Third Plenum of the 18th Central Committee of the CCP that the state was seen to be officiating what became known as China’s “third” land reform (Yuen, 2014). The meeting culminated in the promulgation of the CCP Central Committee Decisions on Major Issues concerning the Deepening of Reforms, which called for the establishment of a unified land market for construction land and the clarification of rights over farmland to facilitate transactions. In 2015, thirty-three pilot sites in Beijing’s Daxing district were selected for trial implementation. The rural revitalization campaign, first announced by the central leadership in 2017, further pushed forward the agenda of rural land reform. Jointly issued by the State Council and the CCP Central Committee in 2018, the National Strategic Plan for Rural Revitalization (2018–2022) outlines the goals of achieving rural rejuvenation by 2020 and agricultural modernization by 2035, in addition to realizing a “strong agricultural sector and full development of villagers’ wealth” by 2050. To do so, the campaign calls for “activating the market” (*jihuo shichang*) in the rural land system.

Essentially, the gist of the reform entails the market circulation of rural land use rights. Often referred to as “land transfer” (*tudi liuzhuan*), the reform makes it possible for rural land rights to be directly traded between villagers and external users in the exchange market. Rather than leaving unused land idle, villagers can sell their land rights to interested buyers for a contracted period of time and receive income from doing so. This at the same time opens up avenues for external capital to directly purchase rural leaseholds. The introduction of market

transferability affects all three types of rural land (*san kuai di*):

- For farmland, the limitation placed on rural households that restricted land contract transfers to the local community level was lifted. This was achieved by introducing a tripartite rights system (*sanquan fen zhi*) that separates the ownership right (*suoyou quan*), contract right (*chengbao quan*) and operation right (*jingying quan*) of farmland. While ownership right over rural land is held by the village collective, households may now transfer the operation right of their allotted land to external parties while retaining their contract right. This means that farmers may now lease their farmland to external companies – including agribusinesses and tourism companies – and gain an income flow from doing so, without doing the farm work themselves.
- For rural construction land, the reform aims to build a “unified market for urban and rural construction land”. At the 18th Central Committee in 2013, provisions were made to allow the entry of “rural construction land for commercial purposes” into the market upon meeting planning and land use control. Under the new system, the use rights of rural commercial construction land can be traded in the conveyance market through public tender and auction without first being subject to state expropriation. This enables village collectives to participate directly in land transfers to reap the attendant profits. From the perspective of capital, the reform opens the door for enterprises and private actors to directly purchase rural leaseholds and acquire construction land.
- For homestead plots, experimentations are underway to enable the market transfer of use rights and give free disposal rights to villagers. Different pilot schemes have been innovated by local governments, including the exchange of homestead plots for urban apartments (*zhaijidi huanfang*), the “double surrender” (*shuangfangqi*) of contracted farmland and homestead plots in exchange for urban housing, employment and welfare, and the land ticket (*dipiao*) system where villagers first transfer their homestead plots to the collective for the reclaimed land to be traded in the market (Kong et al., 2018).

By adjusting the legal details regarding what can or cannot be done with rural land, the Chinese government creates the conditions for external users and investors to enter more directly into the countryside. This enables large-scale capital inflow into previously disinvested rural landscapes. Based on the second national land survey conducted in 2016, rural collective economic organizations in China in aggregate controlled 6.69 billion mu of land, including 5.53 billion mu of arable land and 0.31 billion mu of rural construction land (Xinhua, 2017). From the government’s perspective, the current use of rural land is “scattered”, “fragmented”, “under-utilized” and “of low efficiency”. The inflow of capital is viewed as a key means of mobilizing development. By “guiding and leveraging” (*yindao he qiaodong*) capital flows towards rural areas, the state could “enliven latent rural resources” (*panhuo nongcun chenshui zichan*) and turn land into an income-generating asset (Department of Agriculture and Rural Affairs of Zhuhai Municipality, 2017).

Despite its recent implementation, the reconfiguration of collective property rights has already brought important changes. The transfer of farmland increased from 5 percent of total arable land in 2007 to 36.5 percent in 2017 (Li et al., 2018). Over 30 percent of rural households have engaged in land transfers as of 2019, which involved 470 million mu of land (Farmers’ Daily, 2019). Notably, land transfers to enterprises now represent over 10 percent of all transfers (Li et al., 2018). The scale of transfers for construction land has been equally significant. According to the Ministry of Natural Resources, in the thirty-three designated pilot sites in Beijing alone, over 10,000 plots of rural construction land with a total area of 90,000 mu has been transferred in the conveyance market as of January 2019, with a transaction amount totalling 25.7 billion yuan (Economic Daily, 2019). Additionally, 140,000 households in the pilot sites have transferred out their homestead plots, releasing a total of

84,000 mu of land. These figures point to the growing scale of land transfers, and set the scene for emerging processes of gentrification in rural areas.

## 5. Land transfer and rural gentrification: the case of Zhuhai

The previous section demonstrates the role of the state in restructuring land rights to initiate capital inflow. This section makes explicit the operation of state power in choreographing rural spatial change through determining the location and type of land development. Drawing on documentary and field data in Zhuhai municipality, it shows how the local state has facilitated the organized transfer of rural land to recreational capital and harnessed market forces to bring about desired land use change in the countryside.

Zhuhai has long branded itself as a “liveable garden city” and modelled its urban planning on Singapore (Sheng and Tang, 2013). Tourism contributes to around 16% of its gross domestic product, which tops other cities in the Pearl River Delta region. While the city experienced rapid rural industrialization in the 1980s and 1990s, it switched to a tourism-led development strategy following industrial decline and repositioned itself as a “new special zone of ecological civilization” (*shengtai wenming xin tequ*) (Sheng and Tang, 2013).

When the central government made rural revitalization its strategic goal and called for the construction of “aesthetically-pleasing, ecologically viable” villages, it was no surprise that Zhuhai embraced the initiative. In 2018, the municipal government released a strategic plan for the implementation of rural revitalization (Zhuhai Municipal Government, 2018a). The strategic plan emphasized the cultivation of “new rural industries”, including rural tourism, wellness centres, guesthouse economies, leisure country parks and recreational farms. A five-year timeframe was specified where annual earmarked funds were to be injected to support rural tourism. The municipality further issued three other policy documents that lay out detailed work plans for the development of villages into tourism sites (Department of Agriculture and Rural Affairs of Zhuhai Municipality, 2018; Zhuhai Municipal Government, 2018b; Zhuhai Municipal Government, 2018c).

In urban gentrification research, capital reinvestment in housing upgrade and new-build real estate development has been the conventional focus. In rural areas, however, tourism-related investment has been an emerging driver of landscape transformation and “wilderness gentrification” (Darling, 2005; Smith et al., 2018). In contrast to gentrification produced by residential capital, the type of spatial change brought about by recreational capital has distinct characteristics. While also catering to middle-class urbanites, rural guesthouses and recreational landscapes are for touristic consumption rather than regular habitation. The rent being capitalized does not derive from permanent homes but holiday retreats; the potential consumers being visitors rather than residents who make abodes of gentrified buildings (Darling, 2005).

In China, demand-side and supply-side factors offer partial explanations of the prominence of recreational capital in remaking rural landscapes. On the demand side, the rise of the Chinese urban middle-class and their desire for open green space, weekend getaways and countryside recreation has bolstered the rural guesthouse economy and the accompanying suite of commodified services on offer. Similar to western contexts, the consumption of nature and “authentic” rurality serves as drivers of gentrification (Smith and Holt, 2005; Urry, 1995; Ghose, 2004; Qian et al., 2013). At the same time, supply-side factors are also at play in terms of the capitalization of rent gaps. The past disinvestment in agrarian landscapes and the low productivity of abandoned rural land create lucrative opportunities for profit-making by external capital. Tourism companies in China, which specialize in a wide range of businesses including tourism development, catering, homestay services, and hotel management, are increasingly involved in the revalorization of rural landscapes through large-scale capital investment. These companies are partnering with agrarian capital – in the form of agribusinesses and agricultural development companies – to develop farm-based

recreation and guesthouses to capitalize on rural rent gaps.

Directly shaping these forces of demand and supply is the visible hand of the state. The case of Zhuhai demonstrates the role of the local state in two aspects: the facilitation of land and property transfers, and the mobilization of capital for specific types of land development.

### 5.1. Facilitating land and property transfers

First, the Zhuhai government facilitated land transfers by conducting comprehensive land registration and putting in place market institutions to mediate exchange. Land registration refers to the legal process by which land rights are formalized through the issuance of land rights certificates to rural households. One prominent issue under collective land ownership in China is the ambiguity in rural land rights. Proponents of land registration argue that titling clarifies and individualizes land use rights, which enables households to more conveniently circulate their property titles. While it is often promoted as a means of bottom-up empowerment, however, titling at the same time expedites market transfers and makes it easier for capital to obtain rural land. In Zhuhai, the government has by 2013 completed the registration of all 42,329.8 hectares of rural collective construction land (Nanfang Daily, 2013b). The registration of farmland is progressing most rapidly in peri-urban areas where urban villages own large stocks of land. In Doumen district, for instance, 45 of 78 village collectives have completed farmland registration, making 150,000 mu of land available for market circulation (Doumen District Government, 2017).

To facilitate exchange, the municipality established market institutions to ease the process of transfer. In 2019, the city’s first online-to-offline land transfer service centre was established to provide support to sellers and buyers of rural leaseholds. Land exchange platforms are being established at the sub-municipal administrative levels of districts, counties and villages, with three districts – all with relatively abundant rural land resources – being selected as pilot sites. These platforms provide a venue for information sharing where rural collectives can advertise to investors and invite companies to submit a bid for leasing or developing specific land plots.

To encourage villagers to put up their land for transfer, the government introduced a series of institutional innovations in rural property rights. One commonly used market instrument is shareholding, an arrangement where villagers are given stocks in a development project if they transfer their land use contracts to the collective or to external investors. Article 13 of Zhuhai’s tourism regulations states that rural collective economic organizations should be incentivized to participate in rural tourism projects through shareholding (Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress of Zhuhai Municipality, 2019). In return for leasing their land, villagers receive regular dividend payments from collective profits. Shareholding provides a means for collectives and investors to concentrate large areas of rural land from individual households for coordinated development (Kan, 2019a). Policy documents have emphasized “large-scale transfers” (*guimo liuzhuan*), which provide a territorial basis for “large-scale operations” (*guimo jingying*) (State Council, 2014; Zhuhai Municipal Government, 2018c). Large-scale and long-term transfers offer clear benefits to capital because it saves time and costs: external investors can assemble large swathes of land while avoiding potentially complicated and lengthy negotiations with individual households. For the Zhuhai government, the coordinated development of previously “scattered” and “under-utilized” farmland into ecological parks by established investors is precisely the type of landscape transformation desired.

Innovations in property rights have similarly contributed to housing gentrification. Holiday homes and shops are being built on rural collective construction land and homestead plots contracted out to external parties, or by redeveloping villagers’ idle apartments (Articles 34 and 35 of Zhuhai’s tourism regulations, Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress of Zhuhai Municipality, 2019). External investors can obtain the rights through various mechanisms of rights reassignment. In

some cases, the rights in homestead plots are separated into ownership right, membership right and use right. While the ownership right and membership right are retained by the village collective and the household respectively, the use right is shared between the household and the investor, with the former being entitled to a proportion of the revenues derived from guesthouse operation. The use right can also be directly transferred over to the investor, with the household receiving a fixed amount of rent from the investor. The village collective sometimes plays an intermediary role: rural households first transfer the use rights of their homestead plots to the collective, who then conduct negotiations and sign contracts with external investors.

Special subsidies and monetary rewards have been offered to rural collectives and households that are willing to put up their land and property for circulation. For example, rental subsidies are offered to rural collectives that transfer contiguous land to external investors on the basis of the entire village. This incentivizes village leaders to initiate and complete the land collection process within their own community, before entering into investment deals with developers. Some district governments provide rewards to households who are willing to upgrade their housing. In Doumen district, households who undertake refurbishment and align the outlook of their property to a coherent design are rewarded at a rate of 150 yuan per square meter. The district further gave a one-off subsidy of 20,000 yuan to low-income households to renovate their property (Doumen District Government, 2018a).

## 5.2. Mobilizing capital for recreational development

By titling land, building exchange platforms, and creating market incentives through innovations in property rights, the state plays an important role in making land available for transfer. The state further determines the type of landscape transformation that is to take place by mobilizing specific types of capital.

In its work plan on “comprehensively advancing the construction of ecological leisure villages and building country park complexes in Zhuhai” (2018), the municipal department of agriculture and rural affairs stated that, using municipal budget as leverage, private capital should be activated to participate in the development of rural areas. Governments at the municipal, district and township levels are to provide matching funds to reward enterprises engaged in rural revitalization. The tourism regulations further make provisions for facilitating the entry of capital from Hong Kong and Macau to cooperate in tourism development (Article 19) (Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of Zhuhai Municipality, 2019). Conveniently connected to the two special administrative regions by the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge, Zhuhai has positioned itself as a hub for tourism in the Greater Bay Area.

To bring about the tourism-led transformation of rural landscapes, local governments in Zhuhai have offered targeted support and privileges to recreational capital. Doumen district government, for example, brought in national and provincial enterprises in the tourism and hospitality industries to form “strategic cooperative partnerships” with local townships and villages. Rural tourism projects (*nongjiale*) that involved the development of guesthouses, farm stays, experiential farming and restaurants specializing in local cuisine can receive earmarked funding from the district government. Any projects with a capital input of 50,000 yuan or above will receive a 10% matching fund (Doumen District Government, 2018b).

Aside from financial support, recreational capital also benefits from prioritized land use. In the strategic plan for the implementation of rural revitalization, the Zhuhai government specified that rural revitalization projects would receive priority in terms of land use quotas. The land use quotas for six types of new rural industries – including rural tourism, recreational farming, experiential farming and creative agriculture – are guaranteed under municipal regulations to ensure that land is made available for recreational development (Zhuhai Municipal Government, 2018a).

The case of Lingnan Dadi, a large-scale tourism project located in Lianzhou town, Doumen district, serves as an example. To begin with, comprehensive land titling carried out by the district government created the basis for capital reinvestment. Doumen district was selected by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs as a national-level pilot site for rural property rights reform, and ten of its villages have completed rural shareholding reforms by 2014 (Doumen District Government, 2014). Shilong village, which would be incorporated into the tourism project, registered all 1800 mu of its land in 2015. Following land registration, the district government set aside special funding of 2.5 million yuan each year to reward collectives and households that are willing to transfer their land to external capital (Nanfang Daily, 2013a). In Shilong, 47 disused houses owned by villagers have been transferred to the village collective as of 2016 for refurbishment (see Fig. 1). According to reports, property rental can bring thousands of yuan in income to a village household (Doumen District Government, 2016).

With land and property made available for development, the government brought in established tourism companies and commercial guesthouse operators to build the park (Doumen District Government, 2016). Spanning 11.77 square kilometres of land obtained from several adjacent villages through shareholding and transfer, the project was launched with an initial capital injection of 3.9 billion yuan (Doumen District Government, 2020). It is being built as a comprehensive development zone focusing on leisure agriculture, ecological education, and holiday retreat. The eco-park is equipped with gardens, a museum of nature and ecology, an egret bay wetland park, a themed resort, and two luxury hotels (Doumen District Government, 2019b). According to official figures, the development of the tourism project has increased land rentals in Shilong from 1200 yuan per mu in 2014 to 2500 yuan per mu in 2018. The village has cumulatively earned 17.8 million yuan in rent and land transfer fees alone as of May 2019 (Doumen District



Fig. 1. Refurbished houses in Shilong Village, Zhuhai.

Government, 2019a).

In summary, this section has shown how the state has actively choreographed the dynamics of gentrification not only by opening up the rural landscape to reinvestments, but also by selectively supporting and prioritizing certain types of capital and land use transformation. Rather than being purely spontaneous processes of change produced by the interplay of market and social forces, what is observed in the Chinese case is the active direction and mediation of the state in using market forces to extend its planning powers over rural land. Previously, state-led expropriation has been the Chinese government's primary tool of spatial intervention in rural areas. The recent reform in collective property rights points to how the government is increasingly deploying market mechanisms and instruments to carry out its territorial projects of spatial transformation (Kan, 2019b; Wu, 2018). How the state's use of market forces to achieve rural restructuring and planning control might affect distributional and livelihood outcomes is an important subject for further research.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

This paper makes the case for the need to examine the land institutions and property relations that underlie gentrification processes. Attention to the legal geography of gentrification highlights the preponderant role of the state as the creator, regulator and enforcer of land rights and property titles. By changing laws and reassigning rights, the state plays a direct part in either facilitating or inhibiting territorial transformation. In the case of China, the loosening of restrictions over the market transfer of rural land is directly related to the state's imperative to bring capital to the countryside while releasing idle land resources for development. In what effectively amounts to the marketization of rural land, private actors can now directly purchase land rights from villagers through market exchange. Rather than being the work of the invisible hand of the market, the visible role of the state is shown to be pivotal in creating favorable conditions for capital, and in harnessing market forces to bring about land use change.

The case of China offers unique insights for comparative research on the impact of property rights and ownership regimes on gentrification. By observing how changes in land rights may affect the dynamics of rural gentrification in transition economies, this paper contributes to the agenda of producing "legally aware comparative gentrification research" (Layard, 2018, p. 462). The collective ownership of rural land, and the monopoly power of the state in determining land rights and regulating land transfers, point to some of the nuances that studies of rural gentrification outside of Western realities might productively reveal. Rather than positing "teleological arguments for a 'merging' of 'post-socialist' and 'western' realities" (Kay et al., 2012), a historically and contextually sensitive approach is instructive for bringing to the foreground how drivers and dynamics of gentrification may vary across rural spaces. More broadly, therefore, this paper lends support to the need to extend the spatial horizon of gentrification studies through an agenda of "comparative ruralism" (Phillips and Smith, 2018). The call to "decolonize" gentrification studies has helped broaden the regional scope of research to places in the Global South, but this has mainly concerned urban processes (Harris, 2008; Lees et al., 2015). At the same time, the move of gentrification studies beyond an exclusive focus on inner city neighbourhoods has drawn attention to rural gentrification, but studies have to date focused largely on rural areas in the Global North. Given the under-examined role of the state and the unique property regimes in transition economies, the inclusion of the rural Global South in gentrification research would yield valuable comparative insights.

As a concluding reflection, this paper highlights the need for future research to investigate the unfolding impact of gentrification on rural livelihoods. Gentrification is in essence a process of class transition that is associated with the displacement of low-income groups (Zhang and He, 2018). Displacement can take overt and physical forms, such as the

eviction and dislocation of residents, as well as indirect forms, through exclusion and processes of symbolic and "phenomenological" displacement that involve changes to everyday life, culture, and lived experiences (Atkinson, 2015; Davidson and Lees, 2010). How might the opening up of rural China to capital investments affect villagers on the ground? While more extensive empirical study is necessary, two sets of power relations should form the basis of further research.

The first lies in the power dynamics between state, capital and villagers. Prior to the transformation in rural property rights, state-led land expropriation has been the government's primary instrument of spatial intervention in rural areas. Villagers largely played a passive role and lacked the means to engage directly with capital. With the assignment of land rights to individual households and the permission to circulate their land contracts, villagers have now gained new agency. The option of leasing out one's farmland and houses creates an alternative way for villagers to productively dispose of their assets and gain income from doing (Zhao, 2019). This in theory strengthens their nominal rights of control, income and transfer in rural land and housing property. Indeed, the language of empowerment has prevailed policy discourse on collective property rights reform. In a 2016 policy document, the CCP Central Committee and State Council stated that land transfers would "unlock the agency of peasants", give them "the power of choice", and make them "true participants and beneficiaries" (State Council, 2016).

Nonetheless, more careful attention should be given to how property rights reform and market processes could at the same time precipitate exclusionary outcomes (Kan, 2019b). The loss of effective access and control by villagers over property leased out to external investors may constitute one such process. Once leases are signed with tourism companies or commercial guesthouse operators, villagers may lose their rights of access and control over land and housing. The longer the term of the lease, the more the transfer of rights resembles a *de facto* surrender of ownership on the part of rural residents. Although villagers still retain the contract rights to their land, the degree to which they can actively participate in the process as agents – making decisions, bargaining, and sharing in the profits with powerful state actors and capital interests – is uncertain. For example, research on land transfer to agricultural companies for commercial farming has shown how villagers faced new forms of coercion when confronted with a powerful company (Luo et al., 2017). Furthermore, the voluntary nature of land transfers should not be taken for granted. What is deemed to be consensual market exchange may belie the direct or implicit threat of force, or economic realities where households are presented with no other alternatives but to sell and part with their land (Hall, 2013; Kan, 2020b). Once their village is selected and zoned for development into an eco-tourism park, it is questionable how much bargaining room Chinese villagers have vis-à-vis the state and capital to dispute or resist proposed changes. Given the welfare function of rural land as a basic social safety net for villagers, the loss of access and control could have profound implications and contribute to displacement.

This relates to the second set of power dynamics: intra-village relations between the village leadership and ordinary households, and among households. The leaders of rural collective economic organizations play an important intermediary role between state, capital and villagers (Kan, 2019a, 2019b). As the designated representatives of rural collectives they have the authority to make major decisions on land use and work with state and capital to advance rural development. As elected leaders on the other hand they have the popular mandate to champion the interests of villagers. As they now have an increased part in mediating land transfers, the role of collective leaders would be crucial for determining distributional outcomes and the community impact of gentrification. While existing research has found that collective property rights offer villagers institutional protection against territorial encroachment, studies have also shown how collusion between village leaders, officials and developers could severely undermine villagers' land rights (Mattingly, 2016; Kan, 2020b). Power inequalities within the village thus constitutes an important dimension of analysis.

Differentiation exists not only between leaders and villagers, but also across households in possession of different levels of political and economic capital. In addition to processes of direct displacement, how gentrification may engender dynamics of competition and exclusion in the community context is a topic that deserves further research.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Karita Kan:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Resources, Data curation, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing, Project administration, Funding acquisition.

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### Appendix A. Supplementary data

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