

## – ACCUMULATION WITHOUT DISPOSSESSION? Land Commodification and Rent Extraction in Peri-urban China

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### Abstract

*The urbanization of rural China is increasingly achieved not through physical land grabs but the strategic enrolment of rural communities in the commodification of land via speculative rentiership. This article critically examines this shift in approach from the deployment of extra-economic force in state-led land expropriations toward an increasing reliance on market mechanisms in land development. A case study, the construction of a financial district in peri-urban Guangzhou, shows that the enrolment of village communities is achieved through their cooptation as corporatist market players in regimes of rent-based accumulation. While the apparent use of voluntaristic market exchange has reduced the need for coercion, however, the commodification process has at the same time created new terrain for dispossessory practices whereby value is illicitly extracted and seized by elites through rent relations. The shift from overt land grabbing to more covert mechanisms of value appropriation has important implications for rural class relations and contentious politics.*

### Introduction

The expansion of cities into the countryside has contributed to the continued reconfiguration and reconstitution of rural–urban relations in post-socialist China. The rise of state entrepreneurialism in the wake of market transition has contributed to processes of spatial restructuring at the rural–urban interface, characterized by the deepening reach of the urban into the surrounding rural hinterlands (Wu, 2017). Beginning in the 1980s, rapid industrialization and urbanization have created rising demand for rural land and resulted in the large-scale conversion of farmland to non-agricultural uses (Lin and Ho, 2005).

In the literature, this restructuring of rural–urban relations has predominantly been examined through frameworks of rural encroachment and dispossession. Referencing the notion of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ proposed by David Harvey (2004), ‘urbanization through dispossession’ has been identified as a key mechanism of capital accumulation by which rural land is appropriated from the peasantry and converted from subsistence use to an instrument for revenue extraction through commodification (Chuang, 2015). While generating highly lucrative outcomes for state actors, rural land expropriation often entails the forceful expulsion of village communities from their land, resulting in peasant landlessness and displacement (Hsing, 2010; Sargeson, 2013). The prevalence of land expropriation has led to rising rural discontent, with land-related disputes becoming one of the most contentious issues in contemporary Chinese politics (Cai, 2010).

Increasingly, however, the entry of capital into the countryside and the incorporation of rural land into chains of speculative commodification have given rise to new dynamics of urbanization and rural land development. The socialist legacy of collective rural land ownership in China has enabled segments of the rural population

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to participate in, and reap direct benefits from, the speculative extraction of value from land. While processes of rural encroachment and land seizures have prevailed, recent years have also seen the emergence and consolidation of village economies whose accumulation strategy is based on the appropriation of land rents. The enrichment of China's urban villages provides a notable example (Chung, 2010; Zhao and Webster, 2011). As land at the rural–urban fringe has become a prime target for speculative investment, these rural communities have established village-based land development companies to operate land transfers and put up office buildings, residential complexes and shopping malls to capture rental revenues (Chung and Unger, 2013).

What have emerged from these developments are new pathways of urbanization and dynamics of rural–urban interaction that are distinct from those postulated in the ‘urbanization through dispossession’ framework. This article makes the case that they reflect important shifts in the Chinese state’s governance strategies with regard to urbanization and rural land development. Specifically, it argues that, instead of the deployment of extra-economic means in seizing rural land, the urbanization of rural China is increasingly achieved through the enrolment of village communities in market-based mechanisms of speculative rentiership through land commodification. In contrast to expropriation where entire rural communities are displaced and rendered landless, the new approach has involved the selective cooptation of villagers into land-based regimes of accumulation and the formation of rural–urban alliances for the extraction of rent.

Based on empirical fieldwork in Guangzhou, this article examines the dynamics of this turn to market mechanisms in urbanization strategies and critically evaluates its political implications. It argues that while increased reliance on the market has reduced the need for local states to resort to coercive measures in physical expropriation, the deployment of economic means has at the same time created new room for dispossessory practices whereby value is appropriated and seized by means of rent extraction. Drawing on the notion of ‘value grabbing’ (Andreucci *et al.*, 2017), it is shown that the unequal distribution of value appropriated from land amongst the classes of actors involved in land development provides the basis for a new kind of contentious politics. In theorizing the new mechanisms by which accumulation by dispossession is unfolding on the fringes of Chinese cities, this article seeks both to deepen understandings of land politics and accumulation strategies in contemporary China and to contribute to the literature on urbanization and dispossession in the global South (Levien, 2011; Gillespie, 2016; Shin, 2016; Mbiba, 2017; Zhang, 2017).

### **Theorizing dispossession**

Dispossession has been identified as a key mechanism in facilitating the accumulation of capital. In the classic formulation of ‘primitive accumulation’ by Karl Marx (1976), the enclosure of land and the concomitant separation of peasants from their means of production were seen as providing the initial conditions for capitalist accumulation. The creation of private property rights dispossessed peasants of their land and compelled them to sell their labour by engaging in capitalist commodity production or wage employment, thereby supplying capital with proletarianized labour. David Harvey’s refashioned notion of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (2004) provides a conceptual framework for understanding the dynamics of capitalist accumulation in an updated context. Accumulation by dispossession refers to ‘the continuation and proliferation of accretion practices that Marx had designated as ‘primitive’ or ‘original’ during the rise of capitalism’ (Harvey, 2007: 34). While Marx focused on how land enclosure, forced expulsion and labour commodification contributed to a particular phase in the historical evolution of capitalist processes, Harvey (2004: 76) noted the contemporaneity of these practices and highlighted how accumulation by dispossession is in fact ‘omnipresent’ in all historical periods as capitalist responses to the chronic

crises of overaccumulation. Through mechanisms of enclosure, privatization and commodification, dispossession makes assets available to surplus capital at low costs and facilitates the further expansion and reproduction of capitalist relations.

In critical urban theory, accumulation by dispossession has been extensively employed to theorize spatial transformations in the built environment. Urbanization and city-building processes are linked to the flow of overaccumulated capital into new geographical terrains and long-term capital projects in what Harvey (2004) referred to as the ‘spatio-temporal fix’. Fixed capital embedded in the built environment ‘is capable of absorbing massive amounts of capital and labor’ and thus constitutes productive and profitable outlets for investment (*ibid.*: 64). At the urban scale, accumulation by dispossession has been observed from processes of gentrification and displacement (Smith, 2002; Shin, 2016; Lees, 2012), the transfer of public land into private hands (Mbiba, 2017), ‘new urban enclosures’ in housing commodification and regeneration (Hodkinson, 2012), as well as revanchist practices that separate citizens from their urban commons such as the policing of public space and the eviction of squatters (Smith, 1996; Gillespie, 2016).

The politics of land constitutes a key aspect in the dynamics of accumulation by dispossession (Peluso and Lund, 2011). The literature on land seizures and expropriations has emphasized the coercive aspect of dispossession. Extra-economic acquisitions highlight the role of the state in deploying force to expropriate land for capital accumulation (Glassman, 2006). Harking back to Marx’s theorization of ‘primitive accumulation’ in which peasants are forcefully expelled from their land, contemporary ‘land grabs’ have involved the widespread use of violence and coercive measures in the physical expropriation of land (Grajales, 2011; Borrás and Franco, 2012; Margulis *et al.*, 2013). Emphasizing the intervention of state force into the accumulation process, Michael Levien (2011: 457) conceptualized accumulation by dispossession as ‘a decidedly *political* process through which the state’s coercive power is deployed to make a key condition of production—land—available for capital’.

While physical land grabs remain a salient process, however, scholars have noted a shift in capital accumulation strategies whereby value is increasingly extracted ‘through rent and title, rather than physical appropriation *per se*’ (Goldstein and Yates, 2017: 211). Changes in property rights, achieved often through ‘voluntaristic’ market exchanges, have become a primary mechanism by which land and resources are transferred from one class to another. Similar to other instances of privatization of public assets such as utilities and public institutions, the commodification of land entails the creation and reassignment of property rights so as to ‘open up new fields for capital accumulation in domains formerly regarded off limits to the calculus of profitability’ (Harvey, 2007: 35). In contrast to extra-economic means of dispossession, such land transactions occur through the market and are deemed ‘voluntary’ in the sense that people are not coerced or legally obliged to sell to any particular party or at any particular price’ (Hall, 2013: 1592).

It has been argued that it is through such primarily economic mechanisms—rather than extra-economic means—that dispossessory processes are unfolding in contemporary societies (Harvey, 2006). The commodification and financialization of land have created new distributional struggles surrounding the valuation of rural land and the distribution of surplus value in the form of rent. In contrast to physical expropriation or ‘land grabbing’, what is illicitly seized from peasants is the value derived from land’s commodification. In the literature, this has been referred to as ‘value grabbing’, whereby surplus value is extracted through rent relations and ‘distributed unevenly between different classes and fractions of classes’ (Andreucci *et al.*, 2017: 28). Contestations surrounding who appropriates and captures rent have constituted new forms of social and class-based struggle over property relations and the distribution of value.

The economic and extra-economic aspects of accumulation by dispossession and the notion of value grabbing provide the conceptual framework for examining processes of urbanization and land development in China today. The next section observes how rural land dispossession became a primary mechanism of capital accumulation in China and how the state's strategy towards land expropriations has shifted from the deployment of force towards an increasing reliance on the market.

### **Dispossession and shifting strategies of accumulation in China**

The advent of market reform in the late 1970s accelerated urbanization processes and has given rise to new regimes of accumulation and dispossession in China. Internationally, the country's integration into circuits of global capitalism has opened up its built environment for investment which has further facilitated urbanization (Lin and Yi, 2011). Cities of the global South have acted as prime outlets for urban real estate capital from the North seeking to 'switch' and expand geographically (Goodfellow, 2017). Domestically, land management reforms contributed to land commodification and reconfigured the dynamics of capital accumulation (Lin, 2014). The gist of the reforms entailed the market circulation of urban land use rights. Previously, the right to use land was allocated by the state and no fee was charged for land use. With the commoditization of urban land use rights, a new stream of revenue was created for municipal finance (Yeh and Wu, 1996; Lin and Ho, 2005). As the *de facto* owners of urban land, local governments can extract monopoly rent by selling the use rights of prime land parcels to commercial users.

This transformation in property rights had significant implications for the rural land regime. In China, rural land is owned collectively by village communities while urban land is owned by the state. For urban users to obtain rural land, the process of expropriation must first take place to convert rural land into state-owned urban land. Expropriations are undertaken by the government, who, having obtained ownership of a land parcel, can then sell its use rights in the conveyance market to commercial users. Because the sum obtained from conveyance often far exceeds the required amount of compensation paid to villagers, rural land expropriation has become a lucrative mechanism for local states to accumulate capital. At the municipal level, urban governments have asserted their territorial control over rural areas through strategies such as administrative restructuring (Ma, 2005; Yew, 2012), the designation of special economic zones (Cartier, 2001), the deployment of strategic development plans (Wu and Zhang, 2007), and the establishment of land reserve systems to finance suburbanization (Liu *et al.*, 2016). At the submunicipal level, district and township officials have also sought to maximize control over rural land and profit from land lease markets (Hsing, 2006).

The emergence of land-based regimes of accumulation has been accompanied by intensifying processes of dispossession. The profitability of rural land expropriation has resulted in widespread landlessness and deterritorialization. Surveys estimate that almost half of China's rural communities have experienced land expropriations since the late 1990s and that the number of landless peasants ranges from 40–50 million to as high as 120 million (Hornby, 2015). It has been estimated that villagers received as little as 5% of the value of land in compensation (Bristow, 2011). The economic marginalization of rural communities and the prevalence of coercive expropriations have precipitated a rising tide of rural protests. The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences estimated that conflicts over land accounted for approximately 65% of the 187,000 mass incidents recorded in China in the year 2010 (Hanstad, 2011).

It was in this context of mounting grievance that new approaches towards urbanization were implemented. On the one hand, the literature has noted a shift towards deregulation in policy-making. Xu *et al.* (2009) observed that the Chinese state has displayed increasing acceptance of 'ad hoc' approaches to land development.

These practices of informality are marked by shifting definitions of what is authorized and unauthorized, enabling the state to flexibly create exceptions, suspend laws and alter rules to facilitate accumulation (Roy 2009). On the other hand, scholars have also observed the increased use of material incentives in soliciting compliance (Chuang, 2014). The deployment of monetary inducements represents a broader shift in the Chinese state's protest management strategy, where bottom-up resistance is pre-empted through the mobilization of economic concessions (Lee and Zhang, 2013).

This article argues that these developments represent a new governance approach that entails the enrolment of rural communities in processes of accumulation through participation in speculation and rentiership. The cooptation of villagers as corporatist stakeholders in land development and the opportunity to benefit from market mechanisms of rent extraction provide key material incentives for rural communities to align themselves with state and capital. Underlying what appears to be a neoliberal strategy of deregulation is the objective of securing compliance and dissolving opposition through promises of capital returns and improvements in material conditions. While appearing to be less reliant on coercion, however, the shift from extra-economic to economic strategies has at the same time precipitated a move from land grabbing to less overt practices of value dispossession. The rise of value grabbing points to the new means by which accumulation by dispossession is unfolding in the urbanization of rural China.

Land commodification and speculative rentiership produce far less linear outcomes on rural class relations than those predicted in the classic politics of dispossession. At one end of the spectrum, those with political, economic and social capital, who are best positioned to reap monetary benefits from the development of land, convert themselves into a petty rentier class. Their integration into urban ways of life in spatial, socioeconomic and cultural aspects enables their gradual absorption into the urban middle class. At the other end, those without such capital are unable to benefit from rentiership and find their farming skills rendered impracticable in an urbanized economy. These villagers become the unemployed or underemployed group that is dependent on welfare. The differentiated outcomes amongst members of the village have political implications for rural stratification and collective action.

The rest of this article examines these dynamics through a case study situated in peri-urban Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong province in south China.

### **Research case and methods**

Empirical fieldwork for this article focused on the changing approach towards rural land development as observed in the building of Pearl River New City (PRNC), a new financial district situated on what was once the rural fringe of Guangzhou city.

As the provincial capital, Guangzhou has undergone rapid industrialization and urbanization since reform. In the 1990s, intensifying competition from neighbouring cities like Shenzhen and Dongguan prompted the Guangzhou government to step up its investment in the city's built environment (Xu and Yeh, 2005). The PRNC was the centrepiece of the government's entrepreneurial programme. Designed to be a core financial district on a par with Beijing's Chaoyang and Shanghai's Pudong, the project represented Guangzhou's bid to consolidate its leading role in the Delta region as a centre of international finance. In 1993, the municipal government hired an American architectural firm to create a master plan for the district. Plans, modelled on Manhattan, were drawn up to create an axis of high-value commercial and residential developments and a public green area similar to New York's Central Park. A riverfront cultural cluster was planned featuring landmarks including an opera house designed by the late Zaha Hadid, a new provincial museum, a city library and a cultural centre for youth.

The PRNC was to be built on land obtained from village communities situated on the rural-urban fringe. Located on the outskirts of Guangzhou's old city centre, these



villages were historically agrarian economies with large stocks of cultivated farmland. By the 1980s, successive waves of expropriations had taken place for infrastructure construction and the development of rural industries. To undertake the construction of the PRNC, the Municipal Land Development Centre, a land bank set up in 1992 under the Guangzhou Land Resources and Housing Administrative Bureau, signed formal expropriation arrangements with seven villages in 1994. The expropriation requisitioned all remaining farmland from the villages involved, which directly resulted in the demise of the agricultural sector while also contributing to declines in industrial profits. The threat to rural livelihoods and opposition to expropriations provided the context for the changing approach to land development examined here.

Data was collected during fieldwork carried out between 2011 and 2014, with follow-up research from 2016 to 2018. Interviews were conducted in Guangzhou and Hong Kong with two main groups of informants. The first comprised local officials, urban planners and representatives of property developers that were involved in the development of the PRNC. These interviews provided a deeper understanding of the development strategy adopted by the government and its corporate partners. The second group of interviews was conducted in villages affected by the development of the PRNC. Findings from two of these communities, Liede and Temple, are presented in this article. Interviews with households from these two villages revealed first-hand information concerning the distributive and livelihood outcomes of the rural economy's shift to a new regime of accumulation. Supplementary interviews were conducted with academics and with journalists who covered the redevelopment of the villages. This article also draws on archival data collected from local annals and gazetteers, policy documents and media reports.

### **From coercion to enrolment through market mechanisms**

The urbanization of rural China is increasingly achieved not through the physical appropriation or seizure of rural land, which has often involved the deployment of force by state and parastatal agencies and contributed to the rise of 'rightful resistance' amongst village communities (O'Brien and Li, 2006), but through less apparently coercive mechanisms that entail the enrolment of villagers through market means. This section examines this new approach towards rural land development to demonstrate how it is based on the logic of absorption into speculative rentiership and a corporatist model of development. By giving villagers a material stake in the commodification of their land and enhancing their agency in the appropriation of value, rural communities are co-opted as corporatist market players whose interests are aligned with those of state and capital.

#### – Enrolling villagers through rent-based accumulation

Under the previous approach of state-led expropriation, village collectives play a largely passive role in the land development process and are entitled only to a limited sum of monetary compensation. According to the Land Management Law, villagers are compensated based on existing land use—that is, agricultural use—rather than the future non-agricultural use. The compensation consists of three main components, namely a land compensation fee, a resettlement allowance and expropriated acreage fees for lost crops and demolished buildings. It is set down in law that the total land compensation and resettlement fees must be kept to within 30 times the average annual productivity of the land in the three years prior to expropriation. By calculating compensation and setting a limit based on agricultural output value, the law essentially excludes villagers from sharing in the appreciation in rent after their land has been expropriated for development.

The new approach to rural land development involves the introduction of market mechanisms of accumulation through rentiership. Instead of exchanging their land for a

lump sum of compensation, villagers are given property rights over a proportion of their land. Known as the policy of reserved land (*liuyong di*), village communities can retain a fixed percentage of land that they are entitled to use for residential or developmental purposes (Hsing, 2010; Wong, 2015). This policy innovation enables villagers to avoid deterritorialization as they can continue to reside in the neighbourhood. More importantly, the right to develop reserved land allows villagers to participate directly in the appropriation of value from land as rentiers. Previously, the state acted as the sole agent for land conversions and enjoyed a monopolistic position in capitalizing the appreciation in the value of the land. The policy of reserved land adjusts the distributive relations between state and village in the latter's favour and gives rural communities a direct stake in land commodification. On the reserved land they are given, village collectives are granted the autonomy to engage in property development through partnership with real estate developers. This opportunity to reap direct monetary benefits is central to the compromise reached between state and village actors.

In Guangzhou, it is stipulated that the local government should reserve 5 to 8% of the total area of land to be expropriated for the village collective for housing and economic development. If the requisition takes over all of the remaining farmland of the village, 8 to 10% percent of the land is to be reserved for village use (Guangzhou Municipal Land Resources and Housing Administrative Bureau, 2013). Since the development of the PRNC financial district requisitioned all remaining farmland from the villages involved, each village was entitled to retain property rights over at least 8% of the total area of their land. Liede village was given 50 hectares of reserved land while Temple village retained approximately 30 hectares, and these land parcels served as the bases for new real estate ventures based on the maximization of rent.

In both villages, the speculative enhancement of the value of land has been achieved through redevelopment projects. Property-led neighbourhood renewal has been identified as a key entrepreneurial strategy in urban governance and often entails the wholesale demolition and reconstruction of communities (He and Wu, 2005; Shin, 2009; Chung and Zhou, 2011). Redevelopment enables village communities to benefit materially at both the collective and household levels. At the collective level, redevelopment facilitates the transformation of rural economies into rent-based regimes of accumulation. Prior to redevelopment, collective land for construction purposes in both Liede and Temple was primarily used for industrial or retail development. Redevelopment capitalized the potential ground rent by upgrading existing land use through the construction of office buildings, luxury hotels and high-end shopping malls. The increase in rental revenues from these developments significantly enriched the rural economy and enabled villages to upgrade community infrastructure, distribute lucrative payments to households, and undertake ambitious re-investments through village-based shareholding companies. The agency of these new corporate actors will be examined in detail in the next section.

At the household level, the enrolment of villagers is achieved through their conversion into a propertied class of rentier landlords. Rural households in China's urban villages had already begun to participate in rentiership prior to redevelopment, but their property rights were often informal. In the first decades of reform, the relaxation of rules governing rural-urban migration led to an influx of rural migrant workers into Chinese cities and generated a huge demand for low-cost accommodation. Urban villages located at the rural-urban fringe became informal housing markets where villagers used their assigned housing plots to build multi-storey low-rises and rented subdivided flats to migrant workers (Zhang *et al.*, 2003; Song *et al.*, 2008; Wang *et al.*, 2009). Though prevalent in practice, many of these constructions lacked official approval and their property rights were not formally recognized by authorities (Wu *et al.*, 2013). Redevelopment, which involved tearing down existing apartments and 'elevating' or 'concentrating' villagers into residential high-rises (Ong, 2014), presented

households with the opportunity to formalize their ownership rights. As compensation, villagers were given apartment flats in newly developed high-rises in return for the demolition of their old property. This arrangement formalized villagers' rights and effectively facilitated their transformation into a propertied rentier class, since the extra apartments that they did not need to use for their own residential purposes could be leased out to others. As redevelopment vastly improved the living environment of the neighbourhood, villagers were able to extract elevated levels of rent from their new property.

– Coopting communities as corporatist market players

The absorption of villagers into regimes of accumulation paralleled their cooptation by local states as partners and market players in land development. This corporatist strategy was achieved through the institutionalization of shareholding reforms.

As a property rights reform, shareholding has been extensively introduced in urbanizing villages since the 1990s as a way to deal with distributional issues arising from collective asset management (Po, 2008; Hsing, 2010). The collective ownership of rural resources has created significant ambiguity surrounding ownership rights over key village assets such as land (Ho, 2001). By equitizing these indivisible resources, the mechanism of shareholding enables the assignment of specific numbers of shares to individuals or households and thus clarifies their property rights in collectively owned resources. In Guangzhou, experimentation in rural shareholding began in the late 1980s in the two villages of Yangji and Dengfeng. By 1994, a total of 489 villages in the provincial capital had accomplished the property rights reform, accounting for 38% of all villages in the city (Guangzhou Municipal Gazette, 2013).

The institutionalization of rural shareholding is central to the state's changing approach towards greater reliance on economic means. The departure from extra-economic coercion in rural land expropriation depends heavily on the ability of the state to secure compliance through the provision of material inducements. Shareholding provides an institutional guarantee to villagers regarding how land rents will be distributed. Each villager or household is assigned a specific number of shares based on factors such as age, labour contribution and welfare needs. The number of shares delineates how much villagers are entitled to receive in annual distributions of dividends from revenues generated by the village's real estate projects. By securing their legitimate shares in rents, shareholding consolidates villagers' material stake in land development and facilitates compliance with the state's agenda.

Aside from property rights assignment, the introduction of shareholding involves the establishment of a community-based shareholding company at the village level. The company holds the village's collective assets and is a corporate entity with independent legal status. Managerial power is exercised by the board of directors, made up of five to nine members of the village and headed by a chairperson. Board directors are elected from the bottom up by eligible villagers, who, as shareholders, are entitled to vote for representatives in managerial positions. In theory, therefore, the shareholding company acts as the corporate representative of villagers' collective interests. Rather than dealing with state and private actors on an individual household basis, the establishment of the company provides an organizational vehicle for collective decision-making and facilitates the exercise of village autonomy as corporate market players in land development.

In the extant literature, shareholding reforms and the incorporation of rural actors in urbanization processes have been seen as a restructuring in state–village power relations that empowers and enhances the agency of the latter (Hsing, 2010; Po, 2011). Shareholding gives villagers greater corporate control over collective land resources and facilitates the transformation of rural economies into rent-based regimes



of accumulation following the decline of agriculture and rural industries. Aside from gaining substantial material returns from real estate investments, land-derived revenues enable rural communities to finance extensive welfare programs and infrastructure upgrades. Rental income supports a variety of rural public service provisions, including healthcare, public sanitation, elderly welfare, education, cultural and sports activities, as well as security maintenance (Xue and Wu, 2015).

The apparent enhancement of village agency by no means parallels a weakening in state power, however. Rather, urbanization has also been facilitative of state-building processes (Wong, 2015). In the present case, the incorporation of rural communities into land-based accumulation helps establish villages as independent, self-sufficient fiscal units to which social expenditure responsibilities can be discharged. Urban governments further benefit politically from engineering successful neighbourhood renewal projects. More importantly, shareholding facilitates the cooptation of rural leaders by the local state as partners in land development. The board of directors is often made up of political and socio-economic elites within the village, who concurrently occupy key leadership positions in grassroots organs of power including the party branch and the villagers' or residents' committee. They enjoy a broad array of authorities including negotiating major investment projects, managing property development contracts, preparing fiscal budgets, and determining the use of land-derived revenue. The cooptation of these rural elites as intermediaries enables the state to elicit stable compliance from below for the implementation of land development projects. As will be seen in the next section, this corporatist approach has created partnership between state, capital and the rural elites but often at the expense of villagers' participation.

### **Land commodification and the politics of value grabbing**

The increased reliance on economic means to enrol rural communities has reduced the state's reliance on coercive measures in physical land expropriations. However, the deployment of market mechanisms has at the same time engendered new avenues for dispossessory practices of 'grabbing'—not through the seizure of land per se, as in land grabbing, but in the appropriation of value in the form of rent that the commodification process has created.

The expansion of private property relations and the commodification of resources has brought to prominence what has been referred to as 'the politics of value', which has to do with how value is 'defined, measured, and appropriated' (Kenney-Lazar and Kay, 2017: 34). The institutionalization of property regimes creates new terrain for rent extraction and consequently animates struggles over the distribution of value amongst the different classes of actors involved. The state has been identified as a key actor in the appropriation of value through rent in its various roles as the creator of property institutions, the regulator of land titles and markets, and the landlord exercising de facto ownership of resources (Andreucci *et al.*, 2017). In institutionalizing property rights as well as the rules and governing frameworks that enable rent to be extracted, the state is central to the politics of value grabbing.

In the PRNC project, the incorporation of villagers into the accumulation of land rents via rentiership and the corporatist strategy of shareholding paved the way for the formation of new alliances in rural land development. In both villages, Liede and Temple, coalitions centred on the appropriation of rent have emerged featuring tripartite collaboration between the local state, village shareholding companies and private developers.

As creator and enforcer of property relations, the local state plays a fundamental role in establishing the conditions that enable the extraction of value. In Guangzhou, the state's relaxation of rules concerning rural land development made the lucrative appropriation of rent possible. Village shareholding companies and property developers were allowed to develop rural land for commercial purposes under the informal

arrangement of ‘joint development’ (*hezuo kaifa*), which entails granting property title to the developer as co-user of rural land. This practice falls outside formal legal procedures. According to the Land Management Law, rural land must go through state-led expropriation before it can be developed for commercial purposes. The arrangement of ‘joint development’ essentially expedites the development process by adopting informal mechanisms. Thus, by having its name added as a legitimate land user, the developer can undertake land development on behalf of the village in return for an agreed share of rental revenue or of the completed property. In Liede village, 439,000 of the 496,000 square meters of constructed floor area featured such joint development arrangements.

Furthermore, the local state directly facilitates rent extraction by linking up village leaders with developers. Because all development projects require approval from the local state, the government acted as the ‘master of local go-betweens’ that private developers and village leaders must go through in order to make deals happen (Hibou, 2004: 17). In the PRNC project, the government exercised enormous discretionary power in deciding which developers ‘fulfilled the qualifications’ to take part in redevelopment projects, and made the necessary introductions to link up developers with village shareholding companies. For developers, securing contracts was often a matter of cultivating personal relations or *guanxi* with officials (interview, October 2015). Referrals by government officials helped property developers purchase the use rights of land at lower prices and obtain favourable terms from village leaders.

Like the informal arrangement of joint development, such negotiated land transactions fall outside formal state regulations. According to the Regulations on the Grant of Use Right of State-owned Land by Invitation of Tender, Auction or Listing-for-bidding, issued by the Ministry of Land and Resources in 2002, all land for business purposes including commerce, tourism, entertainment and commodity housing must be publicly transferred through tender, auction or quotation. The negotiated conveyance of land for commercial development has been banned in all cities since 2004 (Xu and Yeh, 2009). The adoption of such informal practices has thus created room for rent-seeking and illicit behaviour. It is estimated that negotiated conveyance through joint development has allowed developers to pay only approximately a quarter of the price they would otherwise have had to pay in open auctions (*Jingji Guancha*, 2014).

Property developers involved in redevelopment projects were often companies with close affiliations with local governments, powerful bureaucracies or former state-owned enterprises. A survey of their corporate profiles demonstrates close connections between developers in the PRNC project and the local state. An exemplary case was that of Tianjian Real Estate Development Company, founded in 1995. Tianjian was affiliated with the Tianhe district committee for rural-urban construction, an organ of the local government. Through a series of asset transfers, the former state-owned enterprise became a subsidiary of KWG Property in 2003 (*Dichan Zhongguo*, 2014). KWG Property successfully obtained control over six parcels of land covering 600,000 square meters in the PRNC project, and went on to put up prominent developments including an International Finance Place and a luxury hotel built on the reserved land of Temple village, and a high-end residential development built on the reserved land of Liede village. The ties between state and capital thus highlight the role of the ‘shadow state’ in China’s urbanization and land politics.

The relaxation of rules has created enabling conditions for value grabbing practices. In the PRNC project, the lack of transparency in land deals has bred collusion and vastly undermined the legitimacy of redevelopment projects, resulting in popular discontent and bottom-up mobilization.

Value grabbing in rural land development takes place through covert rather than overt mechanisms, in the detailed assignment of property rights and the allocation of land revenues. Joint development agreements signed between developers and village

shareholding companies often entail highly favourable terms for developers, with the expectation that they will ‘return the favour’ by providing the village leadership with lucrative kickbacks. Because negotiations for these contracts take place at the elite level, villagers are often not informed of how property titles are assigned or revenues divided up. In one prominent real estate development in Temple village, village leaders signed a contract with a developer which specified that 70% of the profits generated from the commercial project would go to the village. These terms were later changed without the knowledge of the villagers when the leadership sold 48% of its shares to the developer for a price of 60 million yuan, a fraction of the market price for commercial-use land. Villagers complained that their leaders had sold their ‘golden land as cheap as cabbage’ (interview, October 2013). Similar arrangements have been uncovered in Liede, where the village leadership was found to lease out property to a developer at rates far below the market level, enabling the latter to pocket extremely handsome profits (*Jingji Guancha*, 2014)

In return for these lucrative arrangements, property developers flushed village leaders with gift money and other material benefits. According to a Xinhua report, developers had the habit of treating village leaders to meals at expensive restaurants during festivals (*Xinhua*, 2014b). In Liede, one developer reportedly gave out luxurious condominiums to village leaders as gifts (*Xinhua*, 2014a). In Temple village, court proceedings suggested that individual members of the leadership had each taken bribes worth between 110,000 and 1,830,000 yuan (*Xinhua*, 2014a).

These illicit transfers of interests took on a crucially political dimension as well. Developers played an instrumental role in helping village leaders maintain their power by financing election campaigns. According to court proceedings, developers supplied Temple village leaders with several hundred thousand yuan prior to the village election. The leadership then used the money to treat villagers who were eligible to vote to meals and gifts in a bid to secure their electoral support. It was alleged that the chairperson of the shareholding company personally granted several rental contracts to those developers by way of returning the favour (*Xinhua*, 2014b). Furthermore, developers were found to have offered money and gifts to government officials in return for linking them up with village leaders. The official who oversaw redevelopment projects for the PRNC, then the deputy mayor of Guangzhou, was estimated to have received tens of millions of yuan in gifts over his years of tenure (*Xinhua*, 2014a).

Value grabbing operated at the expense of villagers’ shares of land revenues. Selling land use rights at below-market prices meant that part of the profits derived from sales was illicitly appropriated from villagers and divided up between the local government, developers and village leaders. Although no physical dispossession of land took place and villagers still held nominal property rights, the value extracted from their land was in reality seized by other claimants through non-transparent deals. The prevalence of under-the-table transactions in land resources has been widely reported in the literature (Yeh and Wu, 1996; Wong and Zhao, 1999; Lin and Ho, 2005; Zhu, 2012), and the PRNC case was by no means an isolated incident.

### **Class relations and collective action in urbanized villages**

In studies of contemporary processes of rural dispossession, it is predicted that the encroachment on rural land by state and capital may precipitate political contention along class lines (Bernstein, 2010). Specifically, rural land dispossession pits peasants, who rely on the land for subsistence, against state and private interests, who seek to enclose the land for capitalist accumulation. Dispossession of land ‘poses a sudden, exogenous and irreversible threat to people’s livelihoods, homes, and ways of life’ (Levien, 2013: 362). Because it is ‘existentially threatening’ to residents, resistance against land dispossession ‘tends to be overt and takes the form of spatial struggles at the point of enclosure in which various means—physical, legal, and political—are brought to bear to defend land against cooptation and violent removal’ (*ibid.*: 378).

In contrast to physical land grabs, the dispossession of value through rent relations operates through more covert mechanisms. The illicit extraction of rent by elites and the uneven distribution of value may not pose a direct threat to villagers' subsistence and means of production, but value grabbing also creates fractures along class lines that may provide the basis for class-based conflict. Unlike the land-lost peasants commonly theorized in studies of dispossession, rural residents in the present case study were not territorially displaced. Their main grievance was not the loss of subsistence but the private appropriation of public wealth by rural cadres and collusion with the state. Rather than resisting physical dispossession, their opposition has more to do with demanding the rightful redistribution of value.

Development in the two urbanized villages provides useful empirical materials for examining whether grievances centred on the distribution of value might provide the trigger for bottom-up collective action in a manner similar to anti-dispossession politics. In Temple village, value grabbing by elites provoked sustained and organized resistance at the village level. From 2010 to 2013, villagers staged a large-scale holdout to protest against non-transparent land deals and the seizure of collective wealth by corrupt cadres. The protest succeeded in stalling the redevelopment project and eventually led to the high-profile prosecution of leaders involved in the land deal (*Guangdong Ribao*, 2014).

The absence of sustained resistance against value grabbing in Liede nonetheless demonstrates how the strategy of cooptation and enrolment through economic means might dampen opposition in the long run. While there was initial resistance to redevelopment and protests against alleged collusion, the provision of material concessions in the form of compensation payments and resettlement housing more or less succeeded in securing compliance and quelling opposition. Once initial resistance was overcome, the 'collective interests' of the village in expediting redevelopment in order to realize rental revenues was frequently deployed as a trope to mute protests. Individual households who refused to accept compensation arrangements were deemed 'troublemakers' who harboured personal grievances against the leadership (interview, September 2013). Others were seen as self-seeking opportunists who sought to maximize private gains at the expense of the collective good. The holdout households were taken to court by the village shareholding company and compulsorily evicted. These developments support observations of how the deployment of market means and economic inducements may serve to individualize and fragment rural society during redevelopment processes, and undermine the social basis for collective action (Chuang, 2014; Levien, 2011; Zhang, 2017).

The completion of redevelopment in Liede in the early 2010s offered a glimpse of how urbanization via land commodification may impact class relations and stratification patterns in grassroots society. In classic scenarios of dispossession, expulsion from their land contributes to the proletarianization of the peasantry class. Farmers losing their means of subsistence are compelled to sell their labour as commodity producers or wage workers. The commodification of land produces a more varied outcome: the opportunity to engage in and benefit from land-centred accumulation is not evenly distributed within rural communities. Speculative rentiership does not empower and enrich members of the village equally; rather, the incorporation of rural society was selective, often delineated across class and sociocultural lines.

To begin with, economic capital matters. One key status differential is the number of extra apartments that villagers can rent out. Villagers were compensated by floor area, which means that villagers in possession of larger housing plots or taller apartments in the pre-redevelopment period were able to secure greater floor area in compensation. The ability to build higher apartments in the pre-redevelopment phase is often determined by wealth and the availability of resources. Those who have successfully developed private businesses were thus better equipped to gain from the commodification of land.

Non-economic forms of capital, such as political and social capital, also play a key role in determining the ability to accumulate wealth (Levien, 2011). Households with political connections were better placed to negotiate better compensation arrangements with developers. One contention arising from the redevelopment of Liede was the granting of legal recognition to illegally built floor area. Some villagers interviewed complained that households with political contacts were able to have their illegally built flats recognized and thus could receive compensation, while those without were unable to (interview, September 2013). Levels of social and cultural capital also result in differentiation within rural society. Membership of a stronger and numerically superior lineage gives rural households greater representation in decision-making. Gender and generation figure prominently in the division of family estate. In assigning shares and deeds elder sons often benefit the most and enjoy more comprehensive property rights. In contrast, women who have married outside of the village are not considered members of the collective and do not receive any shares in collective profits.

As a result of such differentials, urbanized rural residents were, in fact, unevenly absorbed into petty rentiership. Elites at the top of the rural political and socioeconomic hierarchy are able to extract maximum benefit from land commodification. They own the largest number of apartments in the redeveloped neighbourhood and enjoy comfortable levels of living based on rental revenues alone. In terms of sociocultural conditions, these elites are able to integrate into urban lifestyles and increasingly adopt urban patterns of consumption. They and their children begin to cross class boundaries and are becoming members of an emergent rural-urban middle class. Others, as a result of factors enumerated above, have been marginalized or excluded from the benefits of land commodification. Faced with displacement and rising living costs, these residents are driven to sell their labour and engage in insecure work at the margins of the urban economy.

The impact of commodification on rural stratification supports observations made regarding the uneven distributive outcomes of entrepreneurial policies. The costs and benefits of speculative urbanization are differentially distributed across social groups, and may not necessarily 'trickle down' to those in marginal positions (Leitner, 1990). Going forward, whether and how the uneven distribution of value will affect the class dynamics of land commodification in the urbanization of rural China demands further research.

### **Conclusion**

In the face of rising rural resistance to land expropriation and forced dispossession, the Chinese government is increasingly achieving the urbanization of rural China through the enrolment of rural communities and their incorporation into land-based regimes of accumulation. In contrast to processes and issues identified by the conventional framework of 'urbanization through dispossession', where physical land seizures result in peasant landlessness and the loss of subsistence, the cooption of villagers on the basis of land commodification and rentiership engenders a distinct pathway of urbanization that appears to be more accommodating of rural agency and less reliant on state violence. Nonetheless, this article has demonstrated how the marketization process may enable dispossessory practices in the alternate form of the illicit extraction of value through rent relations. The shift in accumulation by dispossession from overt land grabbing to more covert mechanisms of value grabbing has thus sustained the contradictions between state, capital and rural society, while animating a new politics of struggles centred on the uneven distribution of value.

The shift to dispossession of value highlights the readjustment of state tactics as well as the ability of capital to reconfigure itself in the face of mounting opposition against land grabs. As noted by Harvey (2015), the resolution of one crisis in capital may pave the way for another yet to come. In terms of sociopolitical conflicts, local-level



resistance has for now remained territorially confined, though the subjection of more communities to similar processes of redevelopment and the prevalence of value grabbing may result in the emergence of radical agency and bring about coalescence into macro-political processes. The fiscal sustainability of the strategy has also come under scrutiny. Around the world, speculative urbanization centred on the maximization of land rents has been used as a key entrepreneurial strategy in engineering rapid growth and territorial transformation (Shin, 2016). The influx of investment into real estate has created a growing supply of residential and commercial property, but it is questionable whether supply is matched by domestic demand. The problem of excess supply has already created problems in other areas of the global South, such as the appearance of 'skeleton cityscapes' in major African cities (Goodfellow, 2017). The volatility of the property market also presents risks for economies that are dependent on rental revenues (Harvey, 1989).

As land-based accumulation is increasingly adopted by local states in China to achieve growth, the long-term viability of the strategy requires further research. The conversion of more and more urban villages into land rent regimes intensifies competition and creates a growing supply of high-value commercial and residential property. If not matched by demand, this could introduce macroeconomic instability. Dongguan and Zhuhai, two cities neighbouring Guangzhou, have already experienced fiscal and debt crises due to investments and demands that did not materialize (Xue and Wu, 2015; Xu and Yeh, 2005). The strategy of urbanization through speculative land commodification thus presents challenges not only to social equity, but to the fiscal stability of the economy as well.

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