Shattering the economy of appearances: How land reforms facilitate land grabs in rural China

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In the People's Republic of China, the pace and scope of material/environmental, sociocultural, and political transformation are staggering. In the post-Mao era of ref

A host of factors has recently promoted a sharp increase in investment involving significant use of agricultural land, water, grassland, and forested areas in developing and emerging countries. These include the 2008 price spike in food and fuel prices, a desire by countries dependent on food imports to secure food supplies in the face of uncertainty and market volatility, speculation on land and

1980s and beyond, “sustainable development,” “human needs,” “good governance,” and “participatory development,” have all been leading concepts in mainstream development literature (Leal 2007:70), and yet for all the well-intended rhetoric, global inequality and climate catastrophe continue at alarming rates.

Escobar and other anthropologists are concerned with the role that cultural politics play in rural development efforts. Cultural politics may be defined as the complex and dynamic ways that actors create and negotiate meaning and value embedded within the constraints and possibilities of their unique material-discursive environments. With such an understanding, it is vital that the concept of “culture” not be reduced to the economistic ideology of “capital” (i.e. “social capital” or “cultural capital”).

investors ignored the fact that thousands of artisanal miners had been working in the area for decades, knowing full well that there was no gold to be found**.**

Tsing's concepts of spectacular economies of appearances and Li's attention to practices of abstraction and inscription contribute to our understanding of how land is valued as an "natural resource" that can be integrated into the rules of the market. Economic metrics allow discrete tracts of land in entirely different geographic regions to be compared as fungible units, masking the inevitable discrepancies between the lived experience on said land and the reduction of the land to a piece of data. The material realities of geographically far-flung swaths of land are not apparent to elite investors who compare plots in the abstract, basing their investment decisions on tables such as "Potential Area of Nonforested, Nonprotected Land Close to Market Most Suitable for Different Crops under Rainfed Cultivation, (thousand ha)" (Deininger et al. 2011:80).

In their Kareiva et al. assess the importance of "valuing" (which in their case means setting a price for) "ecosystem services" as a vital component of conservation. This follows the lead of the pivotal Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA), released in 2005 under the guidance of the UN, which has spread the concept of ecosystem services into policy discussions and development planning (Kareiva et al. 2011: xv). "Ecosystem services" include "the benefits from (and losses to) living natural capital: Earth's lands and waters and their biodiversity. Food and fiber production, provision of clean water, maintenance of a livable climate, security from floods, the basis for many pharmaceuticals, and appreciation of the wonders and beauty of the natural world" (3). The authors are involved in a process of truth-production, claiming objectivity and universality by calling this valuation of ecosystem services a "global science" (Kareiva et al 2011: 5).

In China, “eco-compensation” is a recent concept that has been setting the stage for ecosystem services payments and markets. Sponsored by the World Bank, the organization Forest Trends released a detailed report in 2009 about the rise of markets for ecosystem services in China. The authors claim that “the government is driving some of the largest public payment schemes for ecosystem services in the world, and has more than US$90 billion in existing or planned schemes and market-

by the central government (Muldavin 2011; Sargeson 2004:640). For example, after the 2003 Rural Land Contracting Law (RLCL) created an unprecedented market in rural land-use rights, the state-sponsored national media sensation that followed focused heavily on land grabs occurring in rural regions by local-level officials. This focus was likely intended to distract rural people from the fact that the land-use rights are only guaranteed for thirty years, after which time they may be revoked or renewed (Sargeson 2004: 647-8). With land-use rights villagers do not technically "own" their land legally, and with the uncertainty of what will happen when their use-rights expire in the 2020s, it is often a rational choice to lease or sell their land and at least get something out of the deal rather than risk losing it anyway with no compensation (Kan 2012:25). By placing the blame on corrupt local officials, upper level government officials can mask their own complicity in massive rural land grabs (Muldavin 2011).

New opportunities and incentives to engage in agribusiness and other profit-oriented enterprises has resulted in a frenzy of activity with business-men and women rushing to stake a claim to profit and attract further investments. To

entitlement for peasants through a process of land reform in which land was appropriated from landlords and elites and redistributed to peasants. In the latter half of the 1950s, this was done on the condition of participation in collectively-operated production teams (Muldavin 2000:251-2). This land reform closely followed the revolutionary Sun Yat-Sen's (1866-1925) pivotal household-based "land to the tiller" production system, which worked remarkably well in Taiwan. However, the collectivization that followed in China caused the reform to lose many of its previous benefits, such as increased food security to farmers (Zhao 2010:163).

According to Kan, the collectivization that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s "taught us that large-scale agriculture is not always the most efficient" as it has "resulted in high entry barriers, thus privileging those with power and/or capital" (2012: 34). During this era, Mao Zedong's national "Great Leap Forward" campaign would leave tens of millions of peasants to starve to death due to a man-made famine. Top officials such as Mao attempted to guide the peasants in a miraculous increase of agricultural production through the formation of collective production teams, but in doing so, the social safety net of the previous rural organization was ripped apart and massive crop failures occurred (Unger 2002:9) (Ruf 1998:118).

Following the dissolution of the collective era production teams, the Household Responsibility System (HRS) was implemented in 1981 in the early Post-Mao reform and opening up period under the leader of the Chinese Communist Party, Deng Xiaoping. The switch made sense as a fair way to decollectivize, since it gave each household equal shares of better and worse land. However, it also often gave village-level officials greater control over collective local resources, which has increased land expropriation significantly (Xiaolin 2001: 425). Upper level government officials and outside commentators such as Jonathan Unger (2002) view the fragmentation of land holdings that occurred as a result of decollectivization under the HRS as a

major problem to efficient modern agriculture (Kan 2012: 36). The solution in their eyes is land consolidation and aid to agribusiness.

In the early post-Mao era of decollectivization, legitimate claims to rural land were made virtually impossible by the unclear and contradictory legislation that stated land was still owned collectively, but did not specify which administrative body controlled still “collectively” owned

collateral and diversify their economic activities by collecting rent while they work in urban areas.

established for dispossessed farmers, which demonstrates that government officials at all levels

that are often in more marginalized and polluted areas than their original villages (Goodman 2004). This situation of massive rural displacement is in part due to the way that local officials are incentivized to invest in spectacular economies of appearance that might attract further outside investments, rather than investing in other areas such as villagers' income levels that may take much longer to generate a return on investment (Kan: 8).

While running toilets and the like may signal an increase in displaced peoples' quality of life according to certain perspectives, we should keep in mind the cultural valuation of land discussed earlier. Anne-Marie Broudehoux reminds us that "while civic improvement creates private reserves for the wealthy, less affluent populations are increasingly impoverished and forced to become more entrepreneurial and adopt informal economic means to survive" (2004:5). This certainly seems to be the case in Golden Lake Rural World, where rural people relocated to the "new villages" complained of poorer air quality, and were forced to "illegally" raise chickens, plant soybeans in corners of lawns, and wash their clothes in the public pool. Not only that, but their relocation severed neighborly ties and led to conflict (Kan 2012:26).

Places of resistance

Rural land conflicts and protests against land grabbing have proliferated despite legislation intended to quell disputes and engineer a climate favorable to investment and large-scale agribusiness (Muldavin 2011; Sargeson 2004: 647; Kan 2012: 25; Xiaolin 2001: 427). For these resistance movements to endure, participants must promote empowerment, grassroots organizing, and sustainability in order to be successful. These concepts have been co-opted by developmentalist regimes, but that does not mean that their true potential should not be recognized and strived for through collective action.

grabbing may actually facilitate land grabbing practices by misplacing blame onto local-level officials.

This level of corruption is due in part to the incentives that local-level officials receive. They are evaluated quantitatively and not qualitatively, with quotas for agricultural land, for example (Kan 2012:8). This encourages the construction of a spectacular "economy of appearances" (Tsing 2005:57) in which the relentless drive for progress mystifies socio-material realities of inequality. The quotas set by by "higher up" officials lead to behavior geared more toward career advancement and personal profit than accountability to villagers (Kan 2012: 14-15).

Privatization of land is another issue that may present obstacles to land grabbing

for peasants while market liberalization is depoliticized and the forces behind land grabbing trends are further mystified.

Despite the difficulties in resisting the massive land grabbing trend in China, there is growing discontent and disillusionment with the party-state and escalating measures to maintain autonomous land use (Broudehoux 2004:10; Muldavin 2011; Ye et al. 2009: 188; Bo Zhao 2009). Rural protests against land expropriation are only increasing in frequency and intensity, to the point of villagers barricading the entrances to their villages and self-immolating in protest (Muldavin 2011; NPR 2013; Qin 2013). Bo Zhao states that "such conflicts are inevitable under China's current political and legal system" (2009: 98). Joshua Muldavin agrees that rural conflicts over land will only increase due to China's "shaky economic foundation" (2011). China's spectacular economy of appearances is so full of holes and contradictions that disenfranchised members of the population are left with few options but resistant those who threaten their livelihoods.

An answer to these roadblocks to resistance for many authors is a return to the local or grassroots level (Escobar 1995). Zhao argues that China needs a rural land policy that takes local

romanticized, naturally egalitarian "local" does not exist, and therefore explicit attention must be given to factors like race, gender, ethnicity, and class. Pun Ngai addresses what she calls the "triple oppressions" which are political (coming from state socialism), economic (from capitalism), and sociocultural (from the patriarchal family structure). Her attention to these forms of oppression helps to demonstrate that governmentality affects various subjects very differently, which potentially opens up space for heterogenous resistance.

Unfortunately promoting inclusive local development is difficult considering the co-option of such terms as "participation" and "empowerment" in developmentalist programs (Power 2003). Sargeson's analysis of rural land reform in China justifies suspicion of the promotion of local villagers' "participation" in government. Rather it seems that the term is a euphemism for what is really "self-disciplining" intended to enhance the party-state's program of proletarianization of the rural population and the continued expansion into a global marketplace where foreign direct investment flows in and cheap exports flow out (2004: 651).

To push onward in the struggle against rural land grabbing in China, Chinese activists and international allies should demand genuine local participation in governance. Mass campaigns of the past, from the Great Leap Forward of the Maoist era to the reform era Develop the West campaign have failed because the high-level government officials that plan the campaigns have attempted to integrate heterogeneous localities into one-size-fits-all development schemes. This has proven to be ecologically and socially disastrous for the most vulnerable members of the population. Furthermore, land reform campaigns in China have shown to have locally differentiated effects and yet local-level officials are incentivized to create the appearance of a spectacular economy, often to the detriment of the villagers in their jurisdictions. Chinese actors that embrace place-based struggles of resistance that highlight

unique cultural valuations of land might find international support that will put further pressure on the state to regulate land acquisitions more responsibly.

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