

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

Shannon Mearl Smith

Reed College

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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 reform and "opening up" to the world market, large-scale land acquisition and consolidation, or "land grabbing," play leading roles in carving out deeper and deeper socioeconomic inequalities and spatialized segregation (Unger 2002). In this paper I will consider the broad history of rural land reform and land ownership in China through various authors' fieldwork and case studies. I argue that mass land reform campaigns during both the Maoist years and in the post-Mao era have a) created unintended locally differentiated effects and b) served the interests of capital accumulation rather than those of social justice. Localized solutions to land grabbing should therefore be based on a site's unique socio-material history and cultural values, and on inclusive social relationships that resist all forms of oppression, including xenophobia, racism, sexism, and patriarchy.

Land grabs broadly refer to large scale land acquisition and consolidation generally intended to create profit through resource extraction, large-scale agribusiness, or environmental ends such as biodiversity conservation. Land grabs are carried out by a range of actors and alliances across the globe, including local elites, national governments, conservationist NGOs, ecotourist agencies, pension funds, hedge funds, commodity traders, investment firms, international financial institutions, venture capitalists, and the military (Fairhead et al. 2012; Li 2012). The rush to grab land has increased sharply after the 2008 spike in food and commodity prices (Deninger et al. 2011). While land grabbing practices certainly resemble imperialistic colonial expansion, there are factors of a fundamentally twenty-first century order that allow for a rush of large-scale land acquisitions, as the World Bank quite honestly and accurately describes:

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 commodity price increases, search for alternative energy sources, and possibly anticipation of payments for carbon sequestration. (FAO et al. 2010: 1)

The world's elites continue to search out investment opportunities in land and other "natural resources" at a rapid pace, further marginalizing peasants and rural poor who are already in disenfranchised positions in regards to policy-making and resource use (Sargeson 2004). However despite these formidable obstacles, rural people have been showing their discontent through protest more and more. Authors that are studying this resistance note that a successful tactic may be a return to the local or grassroots level and formations place-based politics and identities (Escobar 1995; Broudehoux 2004; Zhao 2010).

#### The developmentalist valuation of land as cultural politics

Understanding the complex phenomenon of land grabs in China from an anthropological perspective requires an awareness of the dynamic cultural politics that surround the valuations of land in developmentalist discourses. Influential development practitioners from international financial institutions (IFIs) such as the World Bank have passed through many phases in search of new subjects to "develop." Development practitioners have materially and discursively produced categories of "poverty" and the "Third World," as Arturo Escobar argued in his groundbreaking critical piece *Encountering Development* (1995: 4, 31, 53). In the neoliberal

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”). For example, Escobar characterizes the economy as “above all a cultural production...” (1995: 59) and points out that Marxian adoptions of political economy that critique the market also tend to reify it as a constant point of reference. Humans under this framework become “Economic” men and women rather than primarily socio-cultural beings. Escobar encourages readers not to reify “the economy,” but instead to analyze various economic relationships and political economy discourses as historically contingent cultural phenomena (59).

In considering the contrasting ways in which land is valued in processes of land grabbing within specific spatio-temporal contexts, land may be thought of as a material and discursive nexus of financial, cultural, political, and scientific interests (Fairhead et al. 2012). In developmentalist discourse, land is often referenced as a “natural resource” that is bought, sold, and traded according to the rules of the (reified) capitalist market. Land is stolen, grabbed and occupied. Land is contentious and valued in many divergent fashions: as a site of agricultural and food production, mineral extraction, construction, burial, conservation, and spiritual pleasure.

Many authors remark on the cultural value of land to rural peoples in China. Land is perceived not simply as an economic asset, but as a culturally salient form of social security and an identity-forming tie that the living share with to their ancestors (Sargeson 2004: 645) Zhao Xudong notes that “land has always occupied an important position in the ideological world of peasants” in China, seen in examples such as the ancient feudal “lineage system” in which a communal pattern of land ownership was based on “kinship and territorial relationships” (2010: 153). Different subjects value land in dynamic ways that are embedded in their cultural milieu.

Anthropologist Tania Li extrapolates on the cultural politics of valuation in what she refers to as “rushes” rather than “grabs” (2012). A rush is a “spectacular- sudden, large scale, visible, hyped- interest in a crop or resource because of its newly discovered/ enhanced value, and the riches it promises to investors to get into the business early” (1). Li proposes that resources such as land are discursively suited for a rush of investment when they are seen as a) suddenly valuable, either due to a discovery or to new global legal/political conditions opened up to trade through neoliberal policies, b) limited/scarcely, and c) poised to rise rapidly in value. Through practices of abstraction and inscription, institutions like the World Bank and various investment firms are able to render land investible through tools such as maps, satellite images, geographic information systems (GIS), and charts and tables.

This closely relates to Anna Tsing’s concept of “economies of appearances” (2005). She gives the example of the Bre-X mining scandal in which North American investors were duped after false claims were made of a gold discovery in Indonesia. The land was rendered investible through the creation of an elaborate discursive spectacle in which “profit must be imagined before it can be extracted; the possibility of economic performance must be conjured like a spirit to draw an audience of potential investors” (2005:57). This charade was possible because

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 *Natural Capital: Theory and Practice Mapping Ecosystem Services*, 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-based programs” (Forest Trends 2009:6). They note that this is a conservative estimate. The valuation of land and other natural resources based on metrics of “ecosystem services” facilitates large-scale market-based land acquisition.

China has a history of using mass campaigns to create spectacular facades that mask underlying social unrest, inequality, and injustice (See Zhou 2012 for particularly sobering examples). The frenzied construction of high-rise buildings, the beautification of cities, the showcasing of ethnic minority cultures, and the recreation of historical sites all might be seen to display a desperate attempt to attract foreign direct investment and to appear as a “modern” state. Kan Liu (2012) emphasizes this valuation of appearances and the symbolic significance given to “modern” architecture in present day China, demonstrating the state’s commitment to creating an aesthetically pleasing spectacular economy that will attract more foreign direct investment.

Whose interests are being served by these large-scale land acquisitions? In a country changing as rapidly as China, a dizzying variety of actors struggle and vie for power. In the case of China’s 173 million people who live on less than \$1.25 per day (World Bank 2012: 3), the daily struggle is to subsist despite contradictory government policies and a history of agricultural malpractice (Unger 2002:176). For local government officials in rural areas, a dynamic moral economy must be manipulated as they are simultaneously incentivized by those “up above” in the bureaucratic ranks to favor profit-oriented land grabs and used as a scapegoat for corruption

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 give an idea of just how profitable land acquisition can be, consider that eight of the ten top billionaires in China achieved their wealth through land grabs of this sort (Muldavin 2011). China already has severe urban-rural income inequality, and this kind of huge consolidation of resources could very well mean the creation of even more mass poverty for millions of people (Unger 2002).

### A brief history of rural land reform

Tracing the history of land reform in China will further illuminate the ways in which land grabbing is currently understood and justified. After the 1949 communist revolution and the founding of the People’s Republic of China under Chairman Mao Zedong, land became an



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 land (Kan 2012: 641) (Zhao 2010: 154). This was due in part to the ideologically and politically sensitive implications involved in privatizing rural land, since the tradition of honoring peasants as the backbone of communist production was important to uphold as the Deng regime experimented with unprecedented “capitalist methods” (Sargeson 2004: 641). During a neoliberal global mood in the 1980s and 1990s, Deng sought the best of both worlds as he and his government promoted “socialist modernization” that combined unique Chinese cultural values with controlled capitalist economies (Deng 1978).

The extreme urban-rural gap in China began with the *hukou* household registration system that was implemented in the 1950s which created an “invisible wall” between urban and rural areas by tying residents to the type of locale where they were born (Unger 2002). Although the restrictions to mobility imposed by the *hukou* system were loosened in the 1980s in order to facilitate rural labor migration to the cities, the social benefits that come with an urban registration card do not apply to migrant workers, who must return to rural areas to receive any welfare benefits if they lose their job (Kan 2012:4; Hansen 2009).

Then in the 1990s, further legislation strengthened villagers’ contractual and property rights to collective land in order to, as Sally Sargeson claims, “sustain the country’s competitiveness as a site of low-cost manufacturing” by facilitating rural to urban labor flows (2004: 638). This is because farmers with guaranteed land-use rights are able to use their plots as

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

Leading up to China's entrance to the World Trade Organization in 2001, planners at the Ministry of Land and Natural Resources, representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture, liberal market researchers and economists like Chi Fulin of the China Institute for Reform and Development were all pushing for secure land rights as a way to usher the agricultural sector into a competitive position in the globalized economy. These policy recommendations came after years of encouragement from such international financial institutions as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank to liberalize the market economy (641-2).

#### Modern land grabbing practices in China: the case of Golden Lake Rural World

Currently, land requisitions by the government are legally permitted insofar as they are for the "public good" (Sargeson 2004: 644). This has resulted in a myriad of conflicts between villagers and local officials, between various bureaus representing the construction sector and the agricultural sector, and intra-state conflicts. A pattern has emerged in which local-level government officials are incentivized to profiteer from organizing the sale of land to developers while relegating the required agricultural quota of their villages to remote and marginalized lands unsuited for farming. In some parts of China, this has been done through an experimental "urban-rural land exchange" program that is intended to safeguard "food security" while maintaining steady urban development (Kan 2012:6-7). Meanwhile central-government literature encourages villagers to seek their due compensation if they are dispossessed from their land, but in reality this rarely happens. In fact there is a special fund at low-levels of government

established for dispossessed farmers, which demonstrates that government officials at all levels are aware of the level of dispossession that is occurring (Sargeson 2004: 649).

There are other ways for local-level officials to get around the stipulated agricultural land quota. Kan Liu brings to our attention a bizarre and disheartening example comes from the central province of Anhui, where a complex network of “government officials and *dahu* businessmen” worked together to built an agricultural theme park called Golden Lake Rural World, earning government subsidies intended for agricultural development by claiming to educate the public about natural disasters’ impacts on agriculture (2012:12). The park is complete with a six-meter high artificial tsunami wave for tourists to surf. Golden Lake Rural World is an example of an experimental *dahu*, or profit-oriented private agribusiness firm. *Dahu* means literally “large household” and “implies production beyond subsistence” (11). Kan explains that there are five types of *dahu*: those that produce cash crops, those that specialize in horticulture, animal husbandry farms, specialized agricultural research farms, and eco-tourism sites like the theme park (11-12).

Kan goes on to delineate two types of land transfer: reversible and irreversible (22-23). Under the reversible model, no government intervention takes place and peasants lease their land directly to a dealer for a short time period. Kan argues that this is a form of security for peasants as it gives them higher rents than the official prices for land and they can find temporary or permanent work outside of the agricultural sector. Golden Lake Rural World gained its land through the latter method, the irreversible model, in which the government supported and subsidized the project and over 12,000 people from 3430 households were displaced (33). According to Kan, this particular enterprise is an exceptional case at this point, but the promotion of privatized for-profit enterprises in the form of *dahu* experimental sites are popping up all over

China with great hype and excitement (14). Since Golden Lake Rural World received “ubiquitously positive appraisals” from upper-level officials and has been touted as a model to emulate (26), it is reasonable to expect that green grabs of this sort will be increasingly prevalent as government officials continue to partner up with *dahu* businessmen and real estate developers.

Gregory Rohlf (2003) links the frontier land reclamation projects of the 1950s with the more recent “Develop (/Exploit) the West” campaign (*Xibu da kaifa*) initiated by China in 2000. As he explains, “Resettlement is an enduring component in the Party’s efforts at social engineering and must be understood with an unbroken geopolitical arc that links Mao, Deng, and Jiang” (Rohlf 2003:457). During the party-state endorsed gold-rush style expansion into the western provinces such as Qinghai over a half a century ago, “youth volunteer land reclamation teams” were awarded the highest praises in the media. They were seen as vanguards for a patriotic modernity, “as heroes engaged in a battle against nature, poverty, and cultural backwardness” (456). The national media played a part in creating a spectacular rush to the alleged storehouses of natural resources, at the same time justifying the colonization of ethnic minorities (463).

Not surprisingly, the western land reclamation campaign of the 1950s ended tragically, transforming the socio-cultural milieu and the natural landscape into one fraught with preventable famine, cadre corruption, and a devastating sabotage of ethnic minority’s cultural and political autonomy (Rohlf 2003: 463; Goodman 2004).

Following the recent “Constructing a New Socialist Countryside” campaign introduced in China’s eleventh five-year plan in 2005, the pace of rural transformation is such to reach the government’s goal of reducing the agricultural population to less than 30%, down from 48% in 2012, by the year 2025 (Kan 2012: 3). Villagers are moved to poorly constructed “new villages”

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.

Clearly the solution given to the conflicts surrounding rural land reform in China depend on what one locates as the problem. The issue at hand with rural land in China is often identified as the lack of efficiency or productivity in rural agriculture, to which rural land rights reforms are often seen as a viable solution (Unger 2002:178; Sargeson 2004). There is also a pervasive claim that “traditional,” “backwards,” or “irrational” peasant behavior is an obstacle to market expansion and economic growth into the competitive international arena (Fei 1981). Bai and Wang offer a tautological explanation of why peasants are “backwards” (because they’re backwards!). Under this persistent logic, peasants are criticized for valuing their resources in the wrong way. The then proposed technocratic fixes of large-scale agribusiness are ideologically in line with a populist rhetoric of “progress” and a nationalistic “modernity,” and ultimately, towards the overriding aim for international market expansion and power (Muldavin 2011; Sargeson 2004; Kan 2012:30).

Along with ethnic and class discrimination, rural people have many other obstacles to face in their resistance of land grabbing. Local level government corruption is one example. Local officials have shown tendencies of overriding corruption since the 1950s (Zhou 2012). Simultaneously, the central government has set out to mystify the staggering inequality of China by using corrupt local officials as scapegoats, as was mentioned above (Mudavin:2011; Sargeson 2004:640). Guo Xiaolin (2001) explores the tendency of rural villagers to uphold the central government as a source of justice and to identify the corrupt local government as the primary antagonists of injustice. He terms this the “bifurcation of the state” (536-539) and claims that using local-level government as a scapegoat for high-level corruption is one of the ways that the central-government manages a “self-managing” society. In other words, rural resistance to land

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 “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 resistance movements. There are of course those who would like to see private property rights introduced to individuals all across China. Zhao Xudong (2010) presents this debate and argues based on five months of fieldwork in 1999 in a village in Hebei province that “it does not show that peasants lose out due to unclear property rights, as some argue” (159). The author goes on to explain that informal and, technically, illegal land sales take place in which “the contract relationship is left open on both sides, which means that both parties shoulder some risks” (159). Zhao reframes the question to ask not whether or not peasants are granted private property rights, but how they benefit and if social justice is achieved. He posits that a just land policy will look different in different localities. It may be that increasingly clarified land rights serve to cut down costs by encouraging villagers to “self-govern” and promote further privatization, meanwhile failing to recognize the structural exploitation occurring on various government levels (Sargeson 2004:640). In this way, privatization has the potential to be accepted as an empowering policy



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 differentiation into account (2010: 162). Anne-Marie Broudehoux argues that globalization, albeit with certain homogenizing effects, does not result in “placelessness” but rather that there is a “persistence of place” and of “place identities” that play out in a wide diversity of particularities (2004:7-8). At the same time there is a “gradual disappearance of the traditional distinction between economic and cultural activity” as everything, from land to culture, is commodified and adjusted to the market (4).

Any authors that takes the “local” as the site of transformative action towards a workable and fair land policy must also include calls for social justice and inclusivity. Clearly a

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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