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Land Transfer and the Political Sociology of Community: The Case of a Chinese Village

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Abstract

Land assembly by various semi-legal and coercive means is universal. Assembling land into large holdings for commercial agriculture is a basic step in the process of modernization and is well documented historically in the literature on agrarian change. Knowledge of the China experience however, is scant, although land transfer (the assembly of land-use rights by outside capital) is currently unfolding at a rapid pace. This paper contributes a case of a rural community in Southwest China in which partial land assembly has taken place. Land transfer denotes the process by which land is assembled for agricultural purposes and differs from land expropriation for public goods such as roads and railways. Unlike land expropriation, in this case, land transfer tends to proceed in a passive manner and raises the question of old and new forms of authority producing moral forms of persuasion that most peasant households cannot resist. This smooth form of land transfer may not be the only way to concentrate rural land for large-scale commercial agriculture, for exceptional violent cases can also be found. However, it does represent numerous land transfer cases that are not well-documented because they lack the dramatic effects to catch media and academic attention. The dual pressures from the subtle state support and the delicate manipulation of social norms contribute to the establishment of commercial agriculture and wherein peasants become laborers on their own land in a reshaped community.

Keywords: land transfer, resistance, rural elites, community development, China

1.0 Introduction

Land is the development foundation for rural communities. The ongoing land deals in China and elsewhere have induced various reactions from the impacted communities and they will inevitably change the current mode of community development. In the international literature, large-scale land grabs for bio-fuel production, resource extraction and the construction of natural reserves in Africa, Latin America and South Asia have become the focus of land assembly, which has formed a grand discourse on agrarian change. Primitive accumulation (Marx, 2010) and accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2005), marked by conflicts together with everyday resistance (Scott, 2011), are the dominant theories used in analyzing

the ongoing processes of land assembly. Under these analytical frameworks, land grabbing is seen to involve persistent responses from peasants to protect their access to land (Adnan, 2013; Borrass & Franco, 2010).

In China's case, there are two major categories of land assembly. One is land expropriation, which refers to governments expropriating land 'in the public interest'. Land expropriation is generally for infrastructural development and often involves conflict and resistance (see Yu, 2006; Dong & Dai, 2010, Li & O' Brien, 1996; Yu, 2004; Dong, 2008; Wang, 2010). The other form of land assembly is land transfer, the topic of this paper. The current land tenure system in China is the Household Responsibility System (HRS), which was introduced in the early 1980s as a major part of the Reform and Opening up of China. Under HRS, rural farmland is divided on an egalitarian basis among village residents producing household units of between 2 and 8 mu¹ on average. Peasants only have contract right and use right over their land. They gain access to collectively owned land based on their membership in a village. To this day they have no rights to sell their land (Zhang & Donaldson, 2013). However, land transfer enables the shift of land use right among households or between households and other bodies with land interests.

Historically, the freedom of land transfer is seldom denied but it was underdeveloped before the third plenary session of the 17th China Communist Party congress in October 2008. Afterwards, the land transfer processes were rapidly accelerated. During the decade before 2007, land transfer increased 14% every year, while in 2008 it grew by 70%, followed by 50% in 2009. By the end of 2009, the total amount of land transferred had reached 152 million mu (Huang, Zhang, Li, & Liu, 2011), which accounted for 13% of the entire farmland base of China. The 18th China Communist Party Congress (2012) further enabled capital to be invested in agriculture. In 2013, land transfer reached 0.34 billion mu, accounting for 26% of Chinese farmland, which is an increase of 17% over that of 2008 (NetEase, 2014). In 2016, the China Ministry of Agriculture announced a national transfer rate of 33%.

It is noteworthy that unlike land expropriation, land transfer is initiated for commercial agricultural production, which is characterized as large-scale, industrial and capital intensive (Koc, Sumner, & Winson 2016). Large scale producers, family farms and farmers' cooperatives were promoted in the Third Plenary Session of the Seventeenth Central Committee as important mechanisms for establishing so-called 'modern agriculture'. The First Document of the Party Central Committee (2013) explicitly expressed its support for large-scale production by creating a favorable policy and legal environment for agricultural modernization (Gao, Liu, & Kong, 2013). According to the first survey on family farms (2012) by the Ministry of Agriculture, there were more than 870,000 family farms in 30 provinces in China, which accounted for 13.4% of the farmland, with an average family farm size of 200 mu (Irrigation.com.cn, 2013).

Land transfer opens the land market in rural areas. Some scholars argue that with the migration of rural labor into the cities, rural communities are 'hollowing out'. The loss of agricultural labor results in the rapid increase of underused farmland and makes land transfer a rational choice for maximum resource management (Wang & Li, 2008). Others insist that land reallocation to skilled farmers or farmers'

¹1 mu=666.67 m²

cooperatives will help achieve moderate scale effects (Bao, Xu, Gao, & Zhou, 2009; Jiao, 2005).

Under this hypothesis, one dominant research focus in China is to study and enable smooth land transfer. At the institutional level, the HRS was criticized for the ambiguity of collective landownership that deprives the peasants of freedom to trade their land (Li & Yang, 1993). Ye, Jiang and Feng (2006) also argue that a clearer property right and simpler institutional arrangement would benefit the development of a land market. Other scholars such as Wen (2008) have been more concerned with land as an economic and social safety net, arguing that when there is not enough employment to absorb surplus labor in rural communities, land is considered to be the last means of livelihood.

At the empirical level, land transfer is affected by many factors as well as rural policies (Wang & Li, 2008). For example, the elderly tend to be against land transfer in the belief that land is an essential livelihood asset (Zhao, Zhou, Yang, & Shi, 2011). Considering that land transfer agreements are signed between rural households or between outside capital and rural committees, peasant behaviors are also adjusted by local customs, a sense of community and other social relations. In this case, outside capital will find it hard to transfer land from peasants compared with local contractors. Jiao (2005) rounds out the list of personal factors affecting the process of land transfer by adding health conditions, marital status and gender as other contributing conditions. Two investigations (Gong & Zhang, 2017; Luo, Andreas, & Li, 2017) have looked into the dynamics of land transfer and highlight the difficulties confronting agro-capitals, both of which stress the government's role in smoothing local resistance and enabling land to be assembled.

The current discussion around land expropriation in China sketches a painful picture of rural resistance calling for protection of peasant rights. However, the land transfer narrative is mainly based on the calculation of economic gains and losses for the peasants. This broad description of the context in which Chinese land transfer takes place demonstrates that on the whole there are various forms of land transfer but relatively little resistance (for an exceptional case, please see Luo, Andreas & Li, 2017), compared to land expropriation.

Our paper focuses on a typical land transfer case, which does not include overt governmental intervention or coercion by capital. Instead, it represents the most common land transfer process at the rural community level that, as yet, is not well-documented in the literature. By doing this, we attempt to offer an explanation for why in land transfer, resistances are largely absent. To explore this question, we see the need to trace the interactions among the actors involved at the micro level. Equally important, we believe it is crucial to describe the political and social structures emerging in Chinese rural communities in order to understand the local policy and ideological environment that many peasants are faced with today.

2.0 Methodology

In this paper, we provide a descriptive analysis of the interactions in the processes of land transfer in a particular political–social context (a community) in order to present the local reactions from peasants to land transfer. To do this we employ a general ‘actor’ theory approach (Long, 2003), paying attention to the roles and agency of the participants—old and new, male and female, insiders and outsiders—in the process of accomplishing smooth land assembly.

2.1 Study Area

The study area is H Village, located in southern Sichuan. North of the village are mountains, while the main farmland stretches along a river valley in the south, offering most of the fertile soils for agriculture. Transportation in the village is very convenient with a highway passing nearby which enables fast communication between the village and neighboring cities, including Leshan City and the Provincial capital, Chengdu. In recent years, there has developed a large vegetable wholesale market at which many nearby vegetable farmers sell their produce.

The total population of the study village is 3,158—living in some 1,200 households and forming nine production teams. One third of the community members have migrated to Yunnan, Guangzhou and other cities in China and even overseas, and those remaining are mostly women, the elderly and children. Aging is the prominent feature in the village demographic structure. Like many other villages with heavy out-migration in China, people in their fifties are considered ‘young’ in H Village. In terms of gender ratio, the majority of the regular residents are women. Most of the children of school age return to the village from residential schools only on weekends. According to the annual statistics assembled by the Sichuan provincial government (sc.stats.gov.cn, 2014), the per capita annual net income of rural households in this municipal area was RMB² 7,895 in 2013, among which, agricultural income (RMB 3,321) accounts for 42.1%.

There are 4,550 mu of farmland in H Village, 1,065 mu of which were recently transferred from villagers to local farmers as well as to outsiders from Leshan City, accounting for 22.2% of the total community farmland. Table 1 shows the contractors, scale of land transfer, land uses and other information about the land transfer in H Village.

Table 1. *Land Transfer Information of the Study Village, 2000–2013*

Contractors	Scale (mu)	Land Uses after Transfer	Land Sources (team #)	Year
Mr. Wu	15	Tea production	7	2000
Ms. Xiao	30	Vegetable production	3	2009
Mr. Sun	20	Vegetable production	7	2010
Mr. Li	50	Watermelon and mushroom production	8	2012
Mr. Yu	60	Ginger production	8	2012
Mr. Li&Li	80	Vegetable production	7	2012
Mr. L	800	Vegetable and ginkgo tree production	1 and 2	2013

² RMB is an abbreviation for Chinese currency Yuan.

As indicated in the above table, one commercial farm, owned by Mr. L from Leshan, transferred 800 mu of land from over 250 households, which accounts for 17.6% of the total amount of land in the village. Six family farms together own 255 mu, while the remaining 1,100 households occupy approximately 3,000 mu, which on average is less than 3 mu for each household. There has been a tendency of land concentration in the research village over the past 13 years, particularly in the 2012–2013 period. The earliest case dated back to 2000 and the annual rent was RMB300/mu (RMB 100/mu for poor land). In 2009, Ms. Xiao started paying RMB1,000 for each mu of land. The rent terms varied from case to case. Mr. Wu has written contracts with the local peasants, specifying the term and rent, while Ms. Xiao pays her rent at the beginning of each year and the local peasants can take back the land when they wish or when Ms. Xiao fails to pay. The price changes according to the local market.

2.2 Research Methods

In order to observe and understand local reactions to land transfer, we conducted fieldwork on two occasions in the autumn, 2013 and winter, 2013–2014. The primary data surveys enabled us to obtain an in-depth picture of the political and social structure in H Village, especially the situation under the influence of out-migration that dates back to the 1980s. During the first period of fieldwork, we chose one land transfer case as an instance and extensively interviewed actors involved in the land transfer processes, which we grouped into Table 2. We selected several key informants to fill in the crucial details of Mr. L's land transfer case. Extra attention was paid to the feelings, understanding and insights of the local peasants during the process.

Table 2. *Key Actors in a Land Transfer Process in the Study Village*

Categories	Specific actors	Features
Political authorities	Village leaders	Business owners, more than 20 years in position
New social authorities	Production team leaders, Mr. L	Newly-elected, wood chip factory owner
Land gainer	Local facilitator, Mr. Z	Pig trader, middleman for Mr. L
Land providers	Farm workers	Age around 60, even over 70, 5RMB/hour
	Non-farm workers	Majority of the land providers

The second period of in-depth fieldwork was from December 2013 to January 2014 and deepened our understanding of land transfer in H Village. Based on the analytical framework derived from the previous survey, we verified our findings with the relevant actors and added their opinions about specific matters to better understand their sources of agency.

We relied on participatory observation to grasp the political and socio-economic context constructed by out migration in this rural community. We also conducted semi-structured interviews with various actors in the land transfer processes. During the in-depth interviews with key informants, special attention was paid to record the memories and emotions attached to crucial events. We tried to detect the peasant views of land transfer that were hidden in their seemingly peaceful actions and feelings.

3.0 Social and Political Structures in the Village

Rural China has gone through many dramatic changes over the past 30 years; among them the migratory movements of rural people deservedly attracts the most attention. Industrialization and urbanization from the 1980s onwards has turned millions of Chinese peasants into ‘peasant workers’ (nong min gong) (Ye, Wang, Wu, He, & Liu, 2013). The number of migrants reached 263 million in 2012, 80% of whom were between the ages of 21 and 50 (average 37.3 years old) (people.com.cn, 2013). Rural communities have gone through several changes due to this shift in the demographic structure. A huge loss of community members of working age and the connection that migratory populations build between ‘home’ and ‘host’ locations (Kelly, 2011), bring unpredictable consequences to rural communities and heavily influences the development of many villages (Jiao, Fuller, Xu, Min, & Wu, 2016)

Migration in H Village started in the 1980s when free flows of people between rural and urban areas were allowed after the Reform and Opening up Policy. ‘Going out’ then became a priority choice for many rural residents to increase household income. Migration increased dramatically in the 1990s due to job opportunities introduced by earlier migrants. With the growth of migration, idle uncultivated land began to appear in the village. Land transfer as a noticeable phenomenon first occurred around 1996. At that time, land was given by some peasants to others for free, and land gainers were expected to pay only the agricultural taxes and fees attached to the land in a form of usufruct. Agricultural taxes were abolished in 2006. With migration taking away the most qualified laborers in agriculture, relatively large-scale land transfer emerged in 2009 and has grown rapidly ever since.

3.1 Changing Political Authority in H Village: Political Actors

Rural political authorities, namely members of the village committee, enjoyed great respect and influence in rural society back in the collectivization era. They were the organizers and coordinators of farming activities and migration was not allowed. The authority that they possessed in political and economic matters left deep impressions on villagers such that they could depend on the political authorities to be responsible for their livelihoods and major decisions in agricultural activities. After the establishment of the HRS, political authorities lost their responsibilities in arranging collective farming activities, together with the power that they had over the villagers. However, at this stage, they were still in charge of collecting agricultural taxes and fees which, to some extent, still equipped them with a form of authority because they stood for the State.

The cancellation of agricultural taxes in 2006 took away the opportunities for the village leaders to demonstrate their political authority, leaving the routinely administrative tasks from the township government to be their main work. With out-migration increasingly bringing back money in the form of remittances and improving the living conditions of peasant households, village leaders, as

people remaining in the village, also began looking for ways to generate extra income (see Table 3).

Table 3. *Village Leaders and Their Livelihoods/Enterprises in the Study Village*

Village leaders	Main income sources	Village/Community resources in use
Party Secretary	A wood chip factory(co-owned)	Eucalyptus trees (promoted by the government)
Women’s director	A wood chip factory(co-owned); radish collecting and primary processing; bamboo plantation and land rents	Eucalyptus trees (promoted by the government), land, village workers
Village director	A fish restaurant	Fish from river, village workers
Clerk	A fish farm (under construction)	Water, land, village workers

As indicated above, all of the village leaders managed to take over the main resources in the community that the left-behind population would likely be unable to utilize, due to a lack of money or difficulties in getting permission from the township government without the necessary ‘guanxi’ (personal network influence) (Wang, Ye, & Franco, 2014). Take the women’s director, who initiated land transfer in the village, for instance. Depending on the ‘guanxi’ that she had built over the years by collaborating with the township government, the women’s director obtained 200 mu of land from the government at a low price. Besides the land used to build a family house, part of the land was planted with bamboo trees which can be sold to make paper. The rest is rented out to nearby villagers for farming. The women’s director also provides radish seeds for free in order to attract local peasants to grow radish for her on their own land. She also hires several laborers to process the radishes, including cleaning and salting, before the radishes are sold to pickle factories outside the community.

The basis of the political authority that lies in the legitimacy and capacity of organizing collective economic matters has dramatically weakened since the 2006 tax reforms, despite the fact that the collectivization era had formed a cultural memory in the minds of the older peasants that the village leaders are still their ‘leaders’ and that they serve the interests of the community. More importantly, the rationale for leadership has gradually become more economic. It is difficult to assess accurately the relation between the wealth of the village leaders and the respect that they enjoy from the villagers, even though the signs can be picked up from the way that villagers speak of their rich leaders. One important reason is that they are employed or expect job offers from them. Peasants leave their community because there are not enough job opportunities for a good livelihood, yet their absence benefits village leaders, who enrich themselves by using the land, forests and other resources left idle. Families of the migrants often end up being employed by the village leaders and once again become dependent upon them, but in a more ‘contractual’ way.

With the influence of the political authority in decline, the self-interest driven market appears to be taking over the arena that once was controlled by the state (Wang, 2013). The economic elites are playing more important roles in the development of the community and its economy.

3.2 New Social Authorities: Social Actors

Rural China is an acquaintance society which is regulated by village rules, social norms, acquaintance and local trust (Fei, 2011; Bao & Zhu, 2009). Members are very well known to each other because they are born and raised in the same community. Trust is built through daily conversations and everyday interactions. Consequently, mutual trust decreases when social circles get wider. Villagers therefore are suspicious of outsiders coming to the community. Social authorities and elites are important actors in the eyes of common villagers as they can form a protection system (Duara, 1988) when the community encounters interventions from outside forces.

There are two forms of social authority in the study village today. One does not have a formal position in the political structure of rural society, but automatically becomes a bridge between the outsiders and the community members due to connections with both parties in the relationship (Duara, 1988). For instance, Mr. Z, who was the promoter of Mr. L's land transfer, is a pig dealer. He has been a middleman for more than 10 years and has built a wide social circle in the process. However, although he is a registered resident of the village, he doesn't have a close relationship with other peasants in the community as he has already bought a house in the county town. Approximately a decade ago, Mr. L started a pig business back in his hometown, after which Mr. L and Mr. Z became permanent business partners. A couple of years ago, a local villager lost his pig farms to bankruptcy and Mr. Z seized the opportunity to inform Mr. L who then initiated his pig business in the village.

The other form of authority is that of the production team leader. Production teams in H Village are remnants from the collectivization era. They are the most common collective economic organization in the community and still form the basic social environment for villages in many parts of China (Yan, 2011; Bao & Zhu, 2009). In addition, they are crucial components in the rural governance structure and play a key role in team activities. Village committee leaders may enjoy certain political authority in people's memory from the collectivization era, while production team leaders, on the other hand, manage their teams mainly relying on traditional authority, or local social capital. He (2006) regards production teams as the real acquaintance society in China.

According to the account of a previous production team leader, in the period of the People's Commune, there were no economic benefits for team leaders in fulfilling their organizational obligations. Those who could earn the trust of the team members would be recommended to take on the responsibility. When agricultural taxes were heavy, few people were willing to have the job as they would have to collect required agricultural taxes by any means.

Today, out migration has changed the social relations within production teams. New social authorities have emerged from the community. Nowadays it is more the economic status than prestige that becomes the precondition for authority. Mr. Y is the leader of Production Team Two which is actively involved in the land transfer case that we are about to examine. He was elected as the team leader in 2006 when two communities, H and L Villages, merged into one. Mr. Y disconnected himself

from the community due to years of absence. Even after returning to the village, he still based his livelihood in the township where he opened one restaurant, a mahjong parlor and a wood factory. Lack of familiarity with the community did not pose an obstacle for his election to team leader, however. On the one hand, the team members look up to him for his capacity to make money, on the other, he offers possibilities for villagers to work in his businesses. An additional reason for his election appears to be the prevailing indifference to politics in rural areas.

3.3 The Changing Roles of Actors: Indifference to Politics Among the Peasants

In Duara's (1988) book "Culture, Power and the State", he points out that during the transition when the capable people in the community do not care to be leaders, those who seek for personal interests will take over the position and ignore the traditional rules and customs, which may well jeopardize the wellbeing of the community. According to He (2002), three aspects are important for the decision to run for election. First is the effectiveness of public opinion to constrain the behaviors of village committees. The second is whether it is an honor or just a way of money-making to be a leader. The last is about the vision of the future and whether it is worthy to sacrifice short-term gains for the benefit of the village in the long run.

Migration takes away many of the so-called 'grassroots elites' (Tang, 2006; Ruan, 2009), who are the relatively well-educated and who have bigger social circles. The main population left in the community, the elderly, women and children, are not particularly the best candidates for village leaders. Peasant workers normally stay away from their communities more than 6 months a year, some even years, and may only come back in busy agricultural seasons—planting and harvesting—or during festival times. It is impossible for them to give responsible votes if they have little knowledge of their own communities and the candidates. This indifference to politics contributes to the changes in the relations among political and social authorities.

In H Village, the village leaders have all stayed in the same positions for decades, which is partly due to their increasingly improved economic condition and is partly owed to the fact that there are no new competitors in the leadership elections. However, there are already challenges to the stability of village politics. For instance, Mr. L attempted to run for election to be village director by bribing the villagers to vote for him. It did not work out, but to some extent it confirmed that capable returnees will probably try to change the political environment. No competition among peasants in production team leader elections also allows the new economic elites to seek an entry to the political system.

4.0 Interactions Among Actors in the Processes of Land Transfer

In this section, we will present the various forms of interactions among actors involved in the process of land transfer highlighting Mr. L's case, in an attempt to elaborate on the manifestations of political sociology in H Village and their effects on the community. The forms of interaction fall into two major categories. One is the tacit support of the village cadres for land transfer, that shrewdly shifts the responsibility of land deals to the production team leaders, but de facto assists land transfer by the manifest presence of the State. The other category is characterized by the rise of new social authorities, actors who manipulate traditional values and rules as a strategy to persuade the hesitant peasants to give up their land.

4.1 Tacit Support from the Village Committee

In the literature on land transfer, village committees are constantly stressed as being the vital actor. It has been pointed out that the village committee plays the most important role as transaction intermediaries as well as organizing and coordinating peasants to facilitate land transfer (Kong, Liu, & Zheng, 2013). Village committees make decisions on prices, terms, payment methods and other important issues. In the same research, village committees work as a double agent; they are both the spokesman of the peasants and the broker for those who want the land. Some village committees charge fees, while other do not.

It is common therefore, even necessary, for the village committees to be involved in land transfer. High transaction costs and the possibility of peasants demanding high transfer rents push buyers to seek help from the village committees (Kong, et al., 2013). For village committees, gaining working funds and government awards are the top reasons why they participate actively in land transfer deals (Kong, Wu, & Zhang, 2010). Moreover, land transfers also provide an opportunity for rent-seeking.

In H village, the village committee is seemingly less active than the ones mentioned above. None of the members on the village committee were deeply involved in the negotiation process of the land transfer. In general, the village committee favored land transfer, for in their understanding—much influenced by higher level government pressure—concentration of farmland is the future trend in rural areas. However, village leaders didn't wish to put too much effort into the process. On the one hand, there were no working funds or government awards, as seen in other places, to encourage them to invest efforts in land deals. On the other, none of the village leaders would be able to derive private interests from it. Although Mr. L promised to donate a certain amount of money yearly to the village when the land transfer was completed, the fund was considered barely enough to support village activities for local women and the elderly. In this sense, leaving the troubles of negotiation to production team leaders would seem to be a shrewd choice. Bearing this in mind, it wouldn't be surprising that when asked about the land transfer situation in the village, neither the party secretary, nor the women's director, could offer sufficient material to sketch the general storyline of Mr. L's land transfer. On the surface, the village committee is a passive actor.

However, this is not to say that the village committee didn't support land transfer in the actual process. Rather, it facilitated the process in a subtler manner. Being the middleman between the state and the villagers, village leaders can draw on cultural symbols, past events and ambience as well as official discourse—government documents and official state policy—to form a sense of state authority. By using 'In the name of the State' (Wang & Ye, 2013), village leaders can invoke great authority. In H Village, the village heads applied such tactics, which were symbolically demonstrated in the land transfer contract signing ceremony.

On the day of the signing ceremony, the production team leaders and Mr. L especially invited the village committee to attend the meeting, the final step of the land deal, despite the fact that the village leaders had never been visibly involved in the process. They were arranged to sit in the most noticeable location of the site, the front of the group and the middle of the front row. With their witness, the land transfer contract was publicly announced, but selectively explained to the villagers. Approximately 300 households saw one village leader put the village committee official stamp on the contract. As a result, many peasants finally signed their names

on the contract as well as the additional document which recorded their land holdings. The signing ceremony put the hesitant peasants at ease, as they believed that the essential authority sanctioned the land transfer contract. Many of the peasants at the ceremony were elderly, whose impression of the village committee still remained in the collectivization era when it was felt that the village leaders had their best interests in mind. When interviewing the involved peasants, ‘the village committee agreed’ consistently appeared as the primary and unquestioned reason for acquiescence. Compared with land expropriation cases, the presence of the state in H Village didn’t have to depend on government documents or any material proof, for the presence of the village committee accomplished this end in and of itself.

Unfortunately, as in many instances elsewhere, the village committee betrayed the illusory trust. To start with, village leaders didn’t think they had any responsibility whatsoever for the land transfer. They refused to admit the authority they stood for merely by presenting themselves in front of the villagers, as the village committee members stated “we just sat there. Production team leaders were the ones in charge of land transfer within their teams”. They insisted that ever since HRS in full was implemented, every household makes individual decisions over their land and production, which makes them unable to force peasants to accept a deal. To further defend their passive attitude, they would insist that transferring land is beneficial for local villagers because of their strong belief that large-scale modern agriculture is the future of the village compared with leaving small pieces of land in the hands of individual peasant households. They would add that there are several actual benefits attached to land transfer, for instance, an annual rent of 1,000 RMB for the household and a job opportunity to work on the big farm, which would be formed with the land transferred, and which would offer the peasants more income than cultivating their own land. By developing a form of ‘narrative,’ the village committee justified their actions of only tacit support.

The village committee denied the authority that they inherited from the collectivization era by stressing that HRS intended to make every household responsible for its own well-being. What they deny by their narrative and which they fail to acknowledge, is that villagers still believe in their historical authority. In the case of H community, the village leaders seem to be the first ones to welcome a new era in pursuing personal interests. To achieve this goal, they may have to ignore the benefits of the whole.

4.2 Coalition of Manipulation in Land Transfer by New Authorities

In the land transfer case initiated by Mr. L in 2013, 800 mu of land was transferred from over 200 households within a month. Besides the silent support and passive action that the village committee provided for land transfer, the active participation of the emerging social authorities—economic elites—Mr. Z and Mr. Y, was essential for the success of convincing enough peasants to give up their land.

Mr. L and Mr. Z had been long-time business partners. Having pig farms in H Village made it convenient for Mr. Z to be a middleman. When land transfer was brought up by Mr. L, Mr. Z was more than happy to help make it work, for it would be another chance for him to deepen their partnership, more importantly, he and his family would get more benefits from it. Mr. Z’s wife is essential to the 800mu vegetable farm as she supervises farm workers every day and keeps a record of their working hours in order to decide their payments every month. The couple eats at the farm

cafeteria and they are the most visible of the management staff. They keep the farm running together with the brother-in-law of Mr. L.

Land transfer mainly happens at the village level. Yet, for large-scale land transfers, it is required to obtain permission from the township government and be registered in the land management system. In this regard, Mr. Z accompanied Mr. L to the government offices and assisted him in acquiring approval by engaging in the conversation to cover the shortcoming of Mr. L for being poor in words. Most importantly, Mr. Z put Mr. L in touch with Mr. Y—production team leader—and explained the issue of transferring land from his production team to Mr. L. The intention was favorably understood, and Mr. Y expressed his support at the same time. The next thing to do was to get the village representatives on board, which was not too hard considering that the representatives were appointed by the team leader himself after his successful election. According to the Chinese Organization Law of the Village Committee, village representatives should be elected rather than appointed by team leaders. Nevertheless, other investigations (Yu, 2010) find that in certain villages, village representatives are appointed by village leaders. When there is not resistance to the appointment, one reason might be that certain villagers approve of appointments rather than elections (Guo, 2003); another reason might be the villagers' lack of interest in village politics, as described above in 3.3.

Discussion about the transfer contract took place in the house of one village representative and then it was given to Mr. L and Mr. Z for consideration. Whether there was cash involved or other forms of favors remains unknown, nonetheless, according to the final version of the contract, Mr. L did not get a good deal for his team members. In the first place, the transfer fee, 1000 RMB/year per mu, is the same amount as that offered by others in the village who also want to obtain land from peasants. Land quality under Production Team Two varies, for those who own better land, this price would not cover their loss. In the second place, the contract period was settled at 10 years, during which period, the transfer fee would also be fixed. It enables Mr. L to safely invest his money on the farm without worrying that a peasant will regret the deal and want his or her land back. In addition, considering the development of the land market, the price of land will predictably go up, and this contract will leave the peasants with no space to renegotiate in the future. Finally, the contract allows peasants to have a job on the vegetable farm. The payment of a farm worker is 5RMB/hour, which means more than 500RMB a month. It is a large amount of money for peasants who used to earn only 1,000 RMB a year. However, what should be taken into consideration is that these jobs are not available to all peasants. Those who are slow in farm work will, in effect, be laid off because they won't be called upon when there is work to do.

Not all the households involved in the land assembly were pleased with the offer. One old couple hesitated to give their land to Mr. L. Their children are working in cities, leaving the two of them at home to farm their land. For them, farming isn't merely labor work; it is a way of life. They wished to tend the crops and orange trees in their spare time and eat the food harvested with their own hands. Another peasant refused to sign on the land transfer contract because, unlike other peasants, he grew fruit trees on his land, which enables him to gain an income greater than others.

Other households maybe are satisfied with 1,000 RMB a year³, but he wouldn't agree.

In these particular cases, Mr. Y applied different strategies. For the former, he discussed with Mr. L and let the old couple stay since their land was along the road, and therefore it wouldn't affect the completeness of Mr. L's holding. As to the fruit tree peasant, Mr. Y hired him to work at his wood chip factory which provided him a guaranteed same amount of income every month. For the rest who couldn't make up their minds, Mr. Y and his representatives developed a set of specific tactics, a form of guilt narrative.

To start with, Mr. Y and the village representatives formed a discourse to justify land transfer by repeatedly mentioning the rent and job opportunities that the peasants could expect once they agreed to give up their land. The key point was to compare the annual income from farming that households can get with the yearly rent which could be obtained through land transfer. Mr. Y said, "You wouldn't get so much money after a whole year's hard work (RMB400/mu). On the contrary, you can receive guaranteed 1,000 RMB without doing anything." To women and the elderly, it is important to downsize the former's value as laborers and take advantage of the latter's worry of being burdensome for their children. Mr. Y added, "When working on the farm, you can easily get 500 RMB, even over 1,000 RMB, every month, which is more than enough to buy daily supplies." "You can buy more toys for your grandchildren." "You wouldn't need financial support from your children." Repetition of the same rhetoric worked well once it reached a certain volume and especially when the proponents grasped the very ways of thinking of the left-behind village people.

Importantly, they created a false impression that the majority of team members had agreed to transfer land even when the proposal was just newly made. Persuasion commenced long before the formal signing ceremony was held in order to create an impression of a peaceful meeting with spontaneous agreement from the peasants. Those leaning towards land transfer didn't need to be convinced, in fact, they volunteered to talk other peasants into the deal because land transfer could only be realized when Mr. L could assemble a whole workable piece of land. Mr. Y and the village representatives took advantage of the situation when persuading hesitant peasants, saying "look at others. They've all agreed to give their land to Mr. L. But they can't get any money if you don't say yes....Most of our team members planned to transfer their land. How are you going to do farming when the rest of the land is used to grow vegetables by Mr. L?" The intention of this tactic is to put halting peasants under the pressure of 'inevitability', the guilt of holding up progress and going against other villagers. Mr. Y and the village representatives knew perfectly well that 'collectivity' possesses great significance in rural communities. By marginalizing the hesitating peasants and putting them on the opposite side of the majority, Mr. Y and the village representatives were able to label the reluctant members as 'jealous of the rich', 'indifferent to the common good' and 'peace breakers'. As a result, these peasants would give in to the traditional values that they respect, abiding by authority and a sense of duty to the village community.

³ Despite the difficult cases to reach an agreement, RMB1,000/mu was the final price for everyone. Other peasants like the fruit producer got compensations of other kinds than rent.

5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

Behind the seemingly peaceful land transfer process, back stage performance was far more intriguing. It is easily overlooked in the formal story telling largely due to the lack of dramatic resistance cases. However, by examining the transfer process and peasant memories, this research reveals that Mr. L's land transfer was not smooth. His eventual success lies in the assistance from the village committee, which symbolizes traditional political authority, and the emerging economic elites, who acted as social authorities in convincing local community members.

The village committee is a passive actor. It stays in the background until the symbolic moment and relies on 'old'—political—authority to persuade villagers to consent to the land transfer proposition. Instead of leading the community to prosperity (Xiao, 2006), with the absence of a great number of community members, the village leaders seek the opportunity to take advantage of the remaining resources in the village and focus on enriching themselves. Assisting land transfer would not bring them tangible benefits. Therefore, they are pleased with letting the production team leaders accomplish the deal while they only need to witness the signing ceremony, as well as take credit for promoting large-scale farming in their village. Ironically, they denied their role and responsibility in the land transfer process when questioned.

What cannot be ignored is that by merely witnessing the signing ceremony, the village committee lent symbolic authoritative weight to the land transfer, regardless of how they claim to be neutral and 'outside' the process. Because of the enduring memories from the collectivization era and the long governance history of the village committees, peasants are accustomed to depending on village committees for collective economic choices. The influence of such committees and their political authority is still at work even with the diminution of their responsibilities. Denying their actual assistance in the land transfer process is a deliberate failure to recognize their obligations in organizing peasants to defend their rights.

Compared to village leaders, the local economic elites involved in the land transfer case were more positive actors. Land transfer is in Mr. Z's interest to obtain a long-term partnership and a managerial position for his wife on Mr. L's farm. Whereas, Mr. L's purposes are relatively difficult to detect at first sight. Primarily, an alliance between rural powers is a consideration. As Mr. L is the most powerful economic figure within the community, Mr. Y seeks future benefits by offering convenience and assistance in land transfer. Moreover, as Yuan (2014) discovered in a land expropriation case, land issues in rural China provide an opportunity for economic elites to transform their financial power into political capital. As Mr. Y strives to earn a position on the village committee, sealing the land assembly deal would help him gain support from villagers who are in favor of land transfer. Taking leadership used to be about displaying one's talents and earning respect from the public (Duara, 1988). With state power penetrating into rural China, it has transformed into an opportunity for chasing personal interests regardless of the welfare of the community, as demonstrated in the land transfer in H Village.

Nonetheless, newly emerged social authorities have yet to acquire the power embedded in culture nexus (Duara, 1988) because they cannot obtain deep trust from other community members due to their absence from the community or inactive participation in community affairs. However, this does not prevent them from utilizing elements in the traditional nexus. Egalitarianism has a solid base in rural

China. It implies that the rural community has been a united entity, where members share the same benefits and suffer the same losses. Mr. Y and his village representatives applied this ideology when persuading peasants to accept land transfer. By saying that most of the peasants agreed to give their land to Mr. L, they put consensus pressure on the hesitating members. If anyone raised questions about land transfer, he or she would be labeled as a threat to the public good, ‘against progress’ and damaging the rural community.

Besides the specific strategies that the village committee and new social authorities utilized in the process of land transfer, to better answer the question why the land transfer took place in a relatively smooth and peaceful way, we need to stand back and consider the larger discourse environment that the post-migration community is embedded in.

Ever since the Reform and Opening Up, modernization as an ideology has dominated Chinese government policies (Ye, 2010). Migration pushes rural areas further on the road of commodification and urbanization. As Zhou and Yang (2004) point out, migration allows greater differentiation among peasants, especially in terms of their livelihoods. They have various economic conditions and social experiences, along with distinct values, characteristics and psychologies. Migration is a flow of ideas and values as well as labor. Communication between the urban and rural areas, through the link of peasant workers, is deeply affecting agricultural communities and reshaping the social, cultural, and political landscape of rural China.

The village committees and economic authorities are more greatly influenced by modernization than ordinary villagers. The village leaders justified their roles in land transfer by insisting that modern farming is the solution to low incomes in agriculture. Mr. L and Mr. Z labelled the reluctant peasants as “opponents to progress”. They are skilled in using modernization discourse and logic to persuade other villagers. In addition, the majority of the peasants possess few means to protect themselves from such modern ideas. For one thing, they largely agree with modernization since they’ve enjoyed increased incomes and better living conditions; for the other, unheard of food sovereignty or other alternative conceptions, Chinese peasants lack any discourse skills in the era of modernization to defend their genuine feelings of autonomy and the freedom of not to be exploited.

In terms of political sociology, this research shows how massively, and rapidly social-political conditions have changed in rural China. By presenting the case of land transfer in H Village, this paper traces a phase of the agrarian transition in rural China, a phase that is characterized by the fading away of the traditional values and customs of the community as well as the political structure of village society, which is gradually replaced by the mainstream ideology—big is better—that is imposed by governments and brought back by returning -migrants. The rural world is transforming from a supportive, interdependent network to a disruptive existence that consists of people mainly looking after their own interests even at the expense of those who are still community members. The base of political authority is leaning towards economic power rather than the true willingness to serve the public while displaying one’s talents.

Chinese rural society is undergoing differentiation among its members. The better off community members take land transfer as an opportunity to change their social and political positions in the community. New economic elites could take over or at

least threaten the status of the previous authoritative actors by forming coalitions with outside economic powers. The majority of the rural community, the elderly, women and children, are at the mercy of the strong actors, because of the shrewd manipulation of the long-respected rules by the latter, on the one hand, and the lack of defensive tactics on the side of the former. Only slight resistance from the peasants could still be sensed among the elderly group or those who cling to their attachment to land.

In conclusion, based on this research case and with reference to the literature on land issues in China, it is evident that land transfer is an ‘inevitable’ force and is ongoing. The impact of communities is threefold. In terms of governance, it is clear that new social authorities are penetrating village leadership structures and are exercising economic goals and self-aggrandizement strategies at the cost of collective community benefit. In terms of community structure, outside capital is influential and has formed alliances with new social authorities. Both these conclusions point to community renewal and economic improvement that benefit only the stronger members of the community. The individual household costs are high as peasants are losing their autonomy to become economically more insecure as they now work on their former land as farm workers and have been effectively proletarianized (Zhang, 2015). The land transfer processes are relatively smooth as the protagonists have developed effective narratives that pressure community residents to sign over their lands through contracts. As a result, a transformed community, stratified, hollowed out and based on commercial agriculture, is emerging in rural China.

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