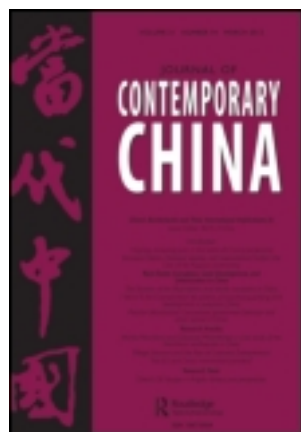


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Villains, Victims and Aspiring Proprietors: framing ‘land-losing villagers’ in China’s strategies of accumulation

SALLY SARGESON*

This paper examines how debates in the media are providing the discursive conditions for, and thereby giving impetus to, diverse strategies of ‘so-called primitive accumulation’ in China. Taking as its empirical referent Chinese news and journal articles on land enclosure, the paper analyzes three frames in which policy entrepreneurs craft varying class positions for land-losing villagers. Grounded in different ontological premises, problem diagnoses and recommendations centering on the adoption of either a statist, neo-collective or liberal rural land regime, and backed up by evaluations of local policy experiments, the frames illustrate the diversity of ideational, political and institutional configurations that could facilitate the separation of peasant producers from the land, place land-losing villagers in different relationships with the state and capital, and sustain accumulation. In foregrounding these debates over land-losing villagers’ future class positioning, the paper aims to offer a corrective to the historical determinism implicit in contemporary analyses that characterize enclosure in China as simply one national manifestation of homogenous, global neo-liberal projects of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ or ‘gangster capitalism’.

Introduction

The shift from a socialist centrally planned economy to capitalist processes of accumulation in China has created a multitude of what Scholten and Van Nispen¹ refer to as ‘wicked’ problems, problems in which there is uncertainty not only about problem diagnosis and solutions but also about the normative and procedural grounds on which decisions should be made. The current system of rural land ownership is one such ‘wicked’ problem. The dual system of state-owned (urban)

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1. Peter W. A. Scholten and Frans K. M. Van Nispen, ‘Building bridges across frames? A meta-evaluation of Dutch integration policy’, *Journal of Public Policy* 28(2), (2008), p. 184.

and collectively owned (rural) land, created in the 1950s to support the state's Soviet-style centrally planned strategy of industrialization, provides that if it is 'in the public interest' land can be transferred between ownership sectors through governments' exercise of eminent domain. When markets in urban land leases were opened in the 1980s, only state-owned land could be traded for development. Local governments thereby acquired a monopoly over the transfer of land into primary markets, and opportunities to multiply their revenue through arbitrage. Within a couple of decades, the expropriation of millions of acres of land for industry, infrastructure and urban expansion had affected tens of millions of peasants. Mass landless-ness, a phenomenon almost entirely eliminated by land reform and collectivization, reappeared in rural China.²

From 2003 to 2008, there was intense debate in China's media about a 'new enclosure movement'³ and the consequent emergence of what were dubbed in Chinese *shidi nongmin* (失地农民)—literally, 'land-losing villagers'.⁴ The number of news and journal articles, televised documentaries, list postings, blogs, tweets and other electronic ephemera centering on the topic increased dramatically. Contributors' estimates of the scale and severity of the 'social crisis' caused by enclosure and symbolized (and exacerbated) by land-losing villagers escalated.

Although this debate rarely engaged with contemporaneous conversations centering on the rise of the middle class, proletarianization and the formation of an underclass described elsewhere by Guo and Solinger,⁵ participants' use of the ideologically laden terms 'enclosure' and 'land-losing villagers' registered just how much was at stake here, politically, economically and socially. Overt referencing of Marx's emotive account of 'so-called primitive accumulation' called attention to the fact that in twenty-first century China, as in Britain's history of industrialization, it was the state's exercise of 'extra-economic force'—its 'bloody discipline' and legislative power—that was instrumental in separating peasant producers from the land, and thence transforming the land into capital and the great mass of peasants into 'vagabonds', 'paupers' and a propertyless proletariat dependent wholly on the sale

2. In the 40 years between 1955 and 1995, the term 'landless villager' was used as a key word in only one article in *Renmin ribao* (in 1957), and three articles (1957, 1983, 1992) in all periodicals listed in CNKI. In the 1957 coverage, landless-ness resulted from natural disasters.

3. Post-Mao China is said to have experienced three 'enclosure movements' (圈地运动). The first began in the mid-1980s, with the creation of economic development zones and opening of markets. The second is dated to the mid-1990s, following liberalization of urban real estate markets and fiscal changes that made lower level governments increasingly reliant on revenue from the sale of leases on expropriated land. From 1999, the 'new enclosure movement' was sparked by clauses in the 1998 Land Administration Law that made expropriation easier, the simultaneous elimination of local fees and charges and expansion of local governments' 'unfunded mandates', and growing speculative investment in real estate. See F. Wang and Z. He, 'Di san ci "quandi yundong" beihou de nongmin shidi diaocha' ['Investigation into the third "enclosure movement" behind villagers' loss of land'], *21 Shiji jingji baodao*, (12 April 2003), p. 10; Cuiying Wang, 'Shidi nongmin bianyuanhua de genyuan heizai' ['What is the source of land-losing villagers' marginalization?'], *Diaoyan shijie* 2, (2007), p. 14.

4. Not all villagers affected by expropriation lose the land they farm, or become landless. Nor do they all remain villagers: most eventually are re-registered as urban residents. Given that there are significant temporal, inter-regional and gender variations in the compensation, re-housing and re-employment of expropriated villagers, it is also unclear how many should be defined as 'dispossessed'.

5. Yingjie Guo, 'Classes without class consciousness and class consciousness without classes: the meaning of class in the People's Republic of China', *Journal of Contemporary China* 21(77), (2012); Dorothy J. Solinger, 'The new urban underclass and its consciousness: is this a class?', *Journal of Contemporary China* 21(78), (2012).

of its labor power.⁶ This, Marx had argued, was the genesis of real capital in agriculture, industry and finance. Would primitive accumulation in China also annihilate rural collective property, turn ‘the pigmy property of the many into the huge property of the few’,⁷ and so destroy the material foundation of peasant production and social reproduction? If so, what roles might land-losing villagers play in future processes of accumulation, and how would those roles require revision of the political and social compacts that had been forged between the Communist Party and the peasantry in the twentieth century? For scholars of comparative political economy, the debate poses additional questions: why and how had contention over such a polemical issue occurred in the media of an authoritarian, purportedly socialist state? And what are the broader implications of this debate for better understanding how local variants of property and production relations are integrated into global capitalism?

In addressing these questions, this paper elaborates on a statement made by Harriss-White and Gooptu⁸ that class struggles are as much struggles *over* class—over the creation and reproduction of class positions—as struggles *between* classes. The proposition advanced here is that the forced separation of people from the means of production can take multiple forms, each of which opens up the possibility of placing those people in divergent relations with capital and within the political system. Specifically it is argued that, in debating land enclosure and the future for land-losing villagers in China, policy entrepreneurs have been discursively establishing the conditions for, and thereby giving impetus to, alternative strategies of accumulation. Those accumulation strategies entail crafting different rural land regimes (statist, neo-collective and private) and diverse class positions for land-losing villagers (as a ‘reserve army’ of labor dependent on state welfare, seasonal laborers for agri-business, unorganized migrant wage workers, home-based sub-contractors and ‘self-employed’, collectively organized agricultural commodity producers, petty bourgeoisie, rentier-‘landlords’ and so on). Conflict over land enclosure in China thus manifests first and foremost as a struggle to forge new relations between peasants and landed property and, in so doing, redeploy land-losing villagers in relations of production and social reproduction. Each recommended mix of class positions, entailing distinctive strategies of political rule and ancillary public policies and administrative arrangements, is presented as a politically feasible, sustainable strategy of accumulation and a solution to the ‘social crisis’ that is said to be confronting China.

To empirically illustrate the argument, data are drawn from a survey of journal and newspaper articles listed in the CNKI database between 2000 and 2008. The survey identified all articles whose titles and keywords contained the term ‘land-losing villagers’. The unit of analysis was the individual article. Those articles containing original research in which the term ‘land-losing villagers’ was mentioned three or more times in combination with the terms government, property and policy, were

6. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1887 [1954]), pp. 667–694. See also Jim Glassman, ‘Primitive accumulation, accumulation by dispossession, accumulation by “extra-economic” means’, *Progress in Human Geography* 30(5), (2006), pp. 608–625.

7. Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, p. 714.

8. Barbara Harriss-White and Nandini Gooptu, ‘Mapping India’s world of unorganized labour’, in L. Panitch and C. Leys, eds, *Socialist Register 2001* (London: Merlin Press, 2000), p. 89.

selected for comparative reading. On this basis, the framing of 181 articles published throughout the period was analyzed. Following Entman,⁹ frame analysis involved identifying the following elements in the rhetorical construction of a goal-oriented narrative: the ontological foundations to which the narrative recurs, a problem definition and causal interpretation, refutation of competing proposals, and idealization of a land rights regime that is presented as the best means of achieving the security of both state and society during ongoing processes of primitive and real capital accumulation. Additional information was gathered from online news sites and blogs, and from interviews with bureaucrats and academics on several visits to China between 2000 and 2010.

The argument is presented in three sections. The first section examines when, why and how enclosure came to be constituted as a social crisis in China's media. The content and discourse of the three frames that dominated contributions to the debate in the Chinese media between 2000 and 2008 are analyzed in the second section. Each of the frames is shown to integrate ontological assumptions into problem diagnoses and policy solutions that hinge on reconfiguring rural land institutions, land-losing villagers' class positions, and their relations with the state and capital. The conclusion discusses the relevance of the argument for scholarship on trajectories of change in both global–local articulations of accumulation strategies and Chinese policy-making. Before proceeding, however, a caveat is necessary. Reasons of space require that in order to focus on how the framing of land-losing villagers is central to the alternative models of accumulation recommended in the debate on land enclosure, it is necessary to set aside important questions about villagers' tactical framing of their own situation in the context of land-grabbing, and whether the debate influenced decision-making by China's leaders.

A chronicle of land enclosure as a social crisis

Colin Hay interprets crisis as a strategic moment in which the state might succeed in achieving fundamental structural and systemic transformations. For Hay, crisis is a 'condition in which systemic failure has become politically and ideationally mediated', and which, in being represented as a shared problem, invites displays of agency by diverse actors who enjoy some degree of autonomy in the domain in which the crisis is identified.¹⁰ In the course of defining, searching for and deciding among solutions to the crisis, the state acquires 'a greater level of unity and cohesion during the very process of structural transformation than it displays at other times, and its constituent institutions are modified and re-coordinated'.¹¹ These arguments suggest that analysts should pay greater attention to the systemic conditions under which narratives of national crises are produced, the rhetorical means that participants use to try to influence understandings of collective risk, purpose and method, and the ways

9. Robert Entman, 'Framing: toward clarification of a fractured paradigm', *Journal of Communication* 43(3), (1993), p. 52.

10. Colin Hay, 'Crisis and the structural transformation of the state: interrogating the process of change', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 1(3), (1999), pp. 320–324.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 321.

in which political leaders capitalize on moments of crisis to simultaneously transform the state or its institutions, and legitimate their rule.

Comparative studies of socialist states' transformations from centrally-planned to market economies underscore that deliberate state intervention is essential to secure the property rights regimes that facilitate accumulation through the operation of markets.¹² A non-exhaustive list of what is required of state leaders attempting to secure a market-facilitating property regime includes the capacity to resolve anomalies between centralized planning, command-and-control cultures and decentralized electoral, legal and market institutions; restructuring the state's bureaucracy while simultaneously maintaining its policy formulation and administrative coordination mechanisms; engage in trial-and-error policy experimentation and evaluation; and mediate conflicts among and between various components of the bureaucracy and increasingly pluralized social groups over distribution of the power, resources, revenue and externalities produced by systemic transformation.¹³ Narratives of crisis are central in shoring up rulers' authority and justifying their intervention to achieve such wrenching transformations.

It was in the context of systemic transformation that enclosure and land-losing villagers came to be represented as a social crisis in China's media. China's land ownership system, originally intended to support a Soviet-style socialist accumulation strategy, turned the market economy of the 1990s into a source of uncontrolled land development. Under the impetus of demand for development sites, which inflated the value of state land to the point that it exceeded the combined worth of all other state-owned assets, fiscal reforms that reduced sub-national governments' tax share, and incentives inherited from the central-planning era to hoard and new market incentives to warehouse land, local governments expropriated extensive areas of arable land. Conflicts over redistribution of the positive and negative externalities of enclosure complicated relations among different ministries and levels of the state, as well as being unequally shared among investors, governments and villagers. Corruption and black market land transactions became commonplace. With every level of government and agencies at each level competing to 'cut a slice of this non-renewable cake',¹⁴ by 2004 income from expropriated land had grown to comprise around one third of local governments' budgetary revenue and 60 per cent of off-budget revenue.¹⁵ Much of this windfall was expended beyond the reach of central and provincial strategic planners, on payroll expansion and promotion-enhancing 'showcase' developments. Investors benefited from governments' discount pricing of land, which, in just over a decade, transferred several billion US dollars worth of assets from the agricultural sector to

12. Anita Chan, Benedict T. Kerkvliet and Jonathan Unger, eds, *Transforming Asian Socialism: China and Vietnam Compared* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999); Consuela Cruz and Anna Seleny, 'Reform and counterreform: the path to market in Hungary and Cuba', *Comparative Politics* 34(2), (2002), pp. 211–231.

13. Bob Jessop, *The Future of the Capitalist State* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2002), pp. 222–224; Anna Grzymala-Busse and Pauline Jones Luong, 'Reconceptualizing the state: lessons from post-communism', *Politics & Society* 30(4), (2002), pp. 529–554.

14. Hu Kuangfeng, 'Kaifaqu quandi wanzheng' ['Roots of the persistent problem of development zone enclosure'], *Liaowang*, (10 June 2004), p. 43.

15. Wang Jun, "'Tudi caizheng" de dongli jigou' ['The incentive structure of "land coffers"'], *Liaowang*, (12 September 2005), pp. 26–27; Zhou Feizhou, 'Shengcai you dao: tudi kaifa he zhuanrang zhong de zhengfu he nongmin' ['Expertise in money-making: governments and villagers in the development and transfer of land'], *Shehuixue yanjiu* 1, (2007), pp. 49–82.

industry and commerce,¹⁶ but the direct negative costs of using enclosure as a strategy for local government financing and urban capital accumulation were borne by land-losing villagers. By the first decade of the twenty-first century, tens of millions of expropriated villagers had lost one of their sources of livelihood and social security, and ‘mass incidents’ and petitions regarding land enclosure had become the most common type of ‘social unrest’ in the countryside.¹⁷

Enclosure therefore challenged China’s leaders to find ways to resolve conflicts among the complex assemblage of organizations, jurisdictions, institutions and interests that comprise the Chinese state, and between the state, businesses and land-losing villagers.¹⁸ At the same time, the state’s twin commitments to conserve land in order to achieve national food security, and to promote national development through infrastructure construction, industrialization and urbanization, required that it devise policies to support sustainable agriculture and ongoing accumulation. And, of course, the Communist leadership publicly had to express concern for the plight of dispossessed farmers, and demonstrate its ability to include them in its creation of a well-off, equitable and harmonious society.

Pundits are wont to mention, in the five second sound bites informing world media audiences of yet another economic or financial crash, that crises *present* opportunities. Hay’s argument prompts us to consider a more interesting proposition: opportunities are *created* by the mediated representation of crises. In acknowledging enclosure to be a social crisis, China’s leaders forged an opportunity to reset the ideological and procedural parameters within which information gathering, commentary and experimentation focusing on alternative models of primitive and real capital accumulation became acceptable. In so doing, they also seized on the chance to attempt to improve perceptions of state leadership, purpose and authority, national land policies, and local governance procedures.

The foundations for the mediation of enclosure as a ‘social crisis’ were laid in 1999 when, in response to growing concerns about the declining area of arable land and social stability in the countryside, the Ministry of Land and Resources formed a research team to investigate expropriation. The team’s report was submitted to the State Council in 2001.¹⁹

Yet as Tables 1 and 2 illustrate, it was not until 2003 that there was a significant increase in the coverage of enclosure and land-losing villagers in China’s print media. The genesis of the media wave therefore coincided with, and signaled, the new policy

16. T. Zhou, ‘Zengjia nongmin shouru guanjian zai nali’ [‘What is the key to increasing villagers’ income?’], *Zhengce guancha* no. 3, (2004), available at: <http://www.cnki.net> (accessed 12 June 2004).

17. Liao Changqing *et al.*, ‘Hubei sheng nongcun zhengdi zhong de tuchu wenti ji duice yanjiu’, *Dangzheng ganbu lunyun* no. 1, (2008), p. 10, report that a survey in Hubei found that more than 65% of rural ‘mass incidents’ were triggered by expropriation of villagers’ land; see also Yue Ma, *Bei chengshihua qugan de nongmin* [Villagers Driven Out by Urbanization], (2007), available at: <http://www.snzg.cn/article/show.php?itemid-5531/page-1.html> (accessed 14 August 2007).

18. George Lin and Samuel Ho, ‘The state, land system, and land development in contemporary China’, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95(2), (2005), p. 414.

19. Zhengdi zhidu gaige yanjiu ketizu, *Yanjiu zhengdi wenti, tansuo gaige zhi lu* [Research on Land Expropriation Problems, Exploration of Paths for Reform] (Beijing: Zhongguo dadi chubanshe, 2002). The book carried a preface by the Minister of Land and Resources, Tian Fengshan. As if to highlight the different views on enclosure taken by the outgoing and incoming administrations, Tian was dishonorably dismissed from his ministerial post in 2003 when audits uncovered irregularities in land expropriation during his tenure as Heilongjiang Governor.

Table 1. Number of academic journal article titles and keywords containing the term 'land-losing villagers'

Year of publication	Title	Keywords
2008	413	1,090
2007	419	1,150
2006	378	1,134
2005	291	769
2004	209	734
2003	56	207
2002	3	13
2001	0	2
2000	0	2

Table 2. Number of newspaper article titles and keywords containing term 'land-losing villagers'

Year of publication	Title	Keyword
2008	303	830
2007	423	1,366
2006	496	1,363
2005	227	439
2004	178	321
2003	86	156
2002	1	8
2001	0	1
2000	1	0

Source: *China Knowledge Information Database* (CNKI) Academic Journals and Newspapers (Agriculture, Social Sciences, Humanities) October 2009.

direction initiated by leadership transition. Facing strong reputational incentives to distance themselves from the metropolitan growth, inequality-enhancing policies of the previous regime, the incoming President, Hu Jintao, and Premier, Wen Jiabao, promised to emphasize 'people-centered' government, integrated rural–urban development, social justice and the security of citizens' property.²⁰ The issue of land-losing villagers referenced all these catchwords. In 2003, land expropriation was nominated as a 'key research project' by the Office for the Central Finance Leading Group, and 25 reports on the subject were submitted to the State Council.²¹ Throughout that year, front page leaders quoted Premier Wen calling for policy responses to ease the plight of land-losing villagers.²² The leaderships' public

20. See, for example, the 11th Five-Year Plan published in 2005; Wen Tiejun, 'Deconstructing modernization', *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology* 39(4), (2007), pp. 22–24.

21. *Jingji guancha bao*, (29 August 2004), available at: <http://www.cnki.net> (accessed 14 May 2006).

22. Ren Bo, "'Xin quandi yundong" molu: shiqu jiayuan', *Caijing*, (27 August 2003); *Zhongguo guotu ziyuan bao*, (1 August 2003), p. 1.

acknowledgement that land-losing villagers constituted a national problem was an exercise in regime branding that necessitated a public, methodical ('scientific') search for politically feasible, socially just strategies to sustain accumulation.

Leading bureaucrats amplified Premier Wen's call. Han Jun, Director of the Rural Economy Research Center under the State Council's Development Research Center, and Chen Xiwen, then Bureau Director of the Central Leading Group on Rural Work, Deputy Director in Han Jun's Center and advisor on agricultural issues to both the former and current Premier, published articles estimating the costs of land expropriation to villagers and the nation.²³ Chen's paper was cited soon after in a lengthy report in *Xinhua*.²⁴ Within a couple of months, similar investigative features and Op Eds had appeared in *Caijing*, *Liaowang* and *21 shiji jingji baodao*. The elevation of land-losing villagers to a national problematic authorized discussion of the subject by journalists, and self-styled advocates and policy entrepreneurs in universities, state research centers, Communist Party Schools and the Academies of Science and Social Sciences.

Although it is impossible to calculate accurately how large the population of land-losing villagers actually is at any point in time, contributors vied to attract attention to the problem—and thereby elicit support for their recommendations—by consistently inflating estimates of the size of the population and the severity of the risks it posed. In 2002, MLR staff estimated that, based on the area of arable land converted for urban and infrastructure construction between 1987 and 2001, up to 35 million villagers had been expropriated and the number was increasing annually by 1.5–2 million. At the end of 2003, however, Song Binwen warned that as many as 60 million might already be landless, and *21 Shiji chanjing* predicted that by 2030, China could have a population of 110 million land-losing villagers.²⁵ Yu Jianrong, Director of the Rural Development Institute in the Academy of Social Sciences and one of the most prominent self-appointed champions for villagers' rights argued in 2005 that the population numbered more than 66 million.²⁶ In 2007, two Communist Party School researchers independently published papers referring to contemporary populations of between 60 and 80 million land-losing villagers.²⁷ Commentary also increasingly emphasized the dire situation of what some journalists dubbed the 'sanwu youmin' (三无游民), indigent expropriated villagers lacking land, jobs and

23. Chen Xiwen, 'Nongmin shouru diwei paihuai de zhidu yinsu' ['Systemic factors in fluctuations in villagers' income status'], *Jinrong xinxi cankao* no. 5, (2003), available at: <http://www.cnki.net> (accessed 15 May 2006).

24. *Xinhua*, (9 May 2003), available at: http://www.ah.xinhuanet.com/jdy/2003-05/09/content_475492.htm (accessed 16 July 2003).

25. Song Binwen, 'Woguo wudi nongmin, shidi nongmin jiujiang you duoshao?' ['China's landless villagers, how many actually are there?'], *Zhongguo gaige bao*, (29 December 2003), available at: <http://www.cnki.net> (accessed 20 May 2005); *21 Shiji chanjing*, (4 December 2003), p. 12.

26. Yu Jianrong, 'Shenru dao shidi nongmin zhong qu' ['Probe into land-losing villagers'], *Nanfang zhoubao*, (17 July 2005), available at: <http://www.cnki.net> (accessed 20 November 2005); see also He Ge *et al.*, 'Heli anzhi shidi nongmin de gouxiang' ['A concept for rational resettlement of land-losing villagers'], *Nongcun jingji* no. 1, (2005), p. 42.

27. Wang Daoyong, 'Shidi nongmin "wentihua" de zhidu luoji ji duice' ['Systemic logic and counter-measures of the landless farmers' "problematic"], *Shanghai xingzheng xueyuan xuebao* no. 8, (2007), p. 105; Zhang Dengguo, 'Shehui gongzheng shiye xia de shidi nongmin quanyi baohu yanjiu' ['Study of safeguards for land-losing villagers' rights and interests from a social justice viewpoint'], *Ningxia dangxiao xuebao* 9(4), (2007), p. 77; see also Chen Shaojun and Zhang Huashan, 'Fengxian shehui shiye xia de shidi nongmin wenti' ['The problem of land losing villagers from the field of social risk'], *Qianyan* no. 10, (2008), available at: <http://www.cnki.net> (accessed 22 January 2009).

basic welfare guarantees, and the threat that this emergent lumpenproletariat posed to China's modernization.²⁸ Exemplifying this alarmist rhetoric, Sun Wenhua from Jiangsu Party School, wrote,

(t)he landless villager problem is a major issue for social stability. Each year the proportion of land-losing villagers among the criminal population in society increases, and their progressive marginalization accelerates the accumulation of public risk, causing and expanding the social crisis.²⁹

Sun's invocation of the subject 'land-losing villagers' to signal a mass that constitutes a social threat is consistent with a long tradition of scholarship in which negative and positive images of peasants have been attached to aspirations for Chinese modernity in order to mobilize support for different political and policy regimes.³⁰ Rarely is this imagined rural subject contextualized by geography, local political economy, generation or gender. Representing peasants as that which is pre-modern—characterized by feudal, patrimonial property and production relations, uncontrolled fertility, limited education and poverty—simultaneously indexes anxiety about the country's capacity to progress towards the end point of modernity, and endorses efforts by the state and intellectuals to modernize this subject through direct regulation, protection and training to acquire the 'quality' necessary for its self-government and employment. More recently, growing confidence in China's cultural, economic and technological histories is registered in the representation of villagers as a repository of indigenous cultural genius. For some Chinese scholars, indigenous genius is expressed in villagers' collective land tenure and enterprise. Others detect it in individual villagers' performance as already-existing moderns in China's market economy, civil society and 'grassroots democracy'. Content and discourse analysis of articles on land-losing villages illuminates three frames that similarly employ diverse (but not contextually disaggregated) peasant ontologies and explanations for the crisis of enclosure to rhetorically mobilize support for alternative models of accumulation.

Framing villains, victims and aspiring proprietors

Each of the three frames analyzed here speaks directly to the leadership's desire to devise a strategy of accumulation that reduces intra-state and state–society conflicts

28. Wang Haisheng, 'Shidi nongmin de chulu yu xianshi' ['The reality and way out for land-losing villagers'], *Zhongguo jingji shibao*, (9 April 2004), available at: <http://www.cnki.net> (accessed 26 June 2007); Sally Sargeson, 'Full circle? Rural land reforms in globalizing China', *Critical Asian Studies* 36(4), (2004), pp. 637–656. While most villagers experience a decline in household income in the short-term and many are temporarily displaced by expropriation, not all are left worse off. The more recent is the expropriation event and the closer to large cities the expropriated land, the larger the compensation sums paid to villagers. Since 2004, many land-losing villagers in proximity to large cities have become well off from investing compensation for expropriated land in rental housing, training, health services and social insurance. See, for example, Sally Sargeson, 'Women's property, women's agency in China's "new enclosure movement"', *Development and Change* 39(4), (2008), pp. 641–665.

29. Sun Wenhua, 'Shidi nongmin wenti: benzhi, chengyin yu zhengce hanyi' ['The landless villager problem: nature, causal factors and policy implications'], *Weishi* no. 12, (2007), p. 55; see also Yang Tao and Shi Guoqing, 'Shehui gongzheng shijiaoxia de land-losing villagers' ['Land-losing villagers from a social justice perspective'], *Nongye jingji* no. 10, (2006), pp. 44–45.

30. Andrew B. Kipnis, 'Within and against peasantness: backwardness and filiality in rural China', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37(1), (1995), p. 122; David Kelly, 'Citizen movements and China's public intellectuals in the Hu–Wen era', *Pacific Affairs* 79(2), (2006), p. 201.

while conserving land and sustaining economic growth. Indirectly, they index public concerns about the risks posed by land-losing villagers to China’s modernity, and by state expropriation to the country’s property-owners. They diverge in the stereotypes they evoke to define the nature of villagers and support analyses of the causal origins of the enclosure crisis, and in their proposed solutions centering on rural land reforms and repositioning of villagers vis-à-vis the state and capital.

Village villainy, a justification for the creation of state workfare

The first frame incorporates a defensive master narrative about village villainy. Not surprisingly, the view that land-losing villagers bear much of the blame for the problems arising from expropriation is most frequently espoused by in-house researchers and officials working in the Departments of Land and Resources, Finance, Planning and Construction. This self-seeking condemnation of villagers is tempered, however, by expressions of concern for villagers’ welfare and an acknowledgement that there are institutional and technical shortcomings in state methods of land expropriation and compensation, and local authorities’ investment of land revenue.

Villainy is identified at three levels: among ordinary village residents, village leaders and the town governments that are the interface between villages and the state. Portrayed succinctly in Figure 1 as canny, greedy, feckless hicks bent on maximizing short-term gains, these rural subjects are ignorant or heedless of national land laws and developmental priorities, and incapable of responding rationally and constructively to land development. Indeed, in strategizing to maximize their restitution, villagers waste scarce resources and capital. This is exemplified in widely-circulated anecdotes about villagers ‘selling their oxen to buy liquor’ and

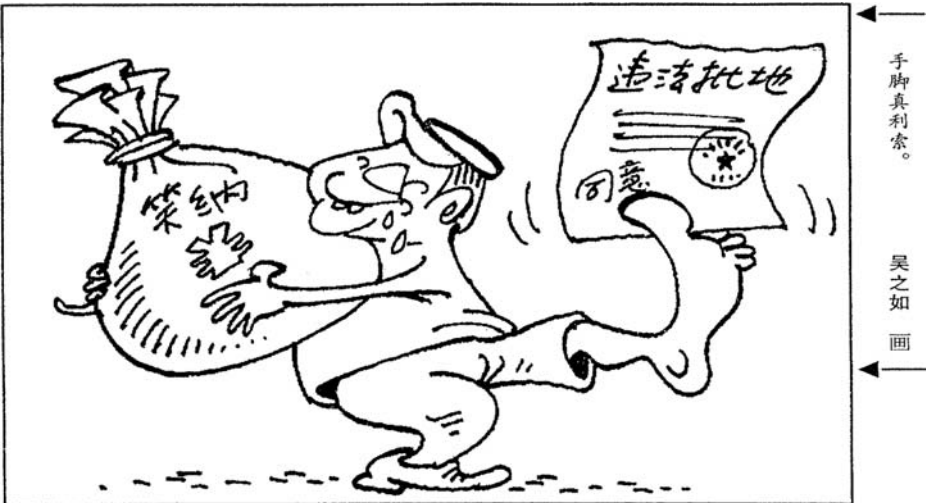


Figure 1. ‘Nifty work.’ [The money bag is labelled ‘Kindly accept (this small gift)’; the document is headed ‘Illegal land authorization’.] From *Zhongguo guotu ziyuan bao*, (24 July 2000), p. 4.

'planting houses' in order to receive additional compensation when the houses are demolished. Whatever compensation they receive is squandered, in 'all day gambling, drinking and smoking',³¹ rather than invested in skill acquisition, business or social insurance. Inevitably, therefore, they succumb to unemployment and impoverishment.

Similarly, as shown in Figure 2, frame-makers focus on village leaders' and town officials' collusion with corrupt developers to grab agricultural land, and their subsequent embezzlement or loss of compensation funds through imprudent investment. Revenue from land development therefore becomes 'dead capital'.³² Yang Dejin, an urban district planning official, explains rural officials' rashness as a consequence of their eagerness to win promotion by attracting investors, and their poor training and ignorance about the goals, planning methods and technical expertise required of government.³³ These representations draw on and reinforce both Marxist and modernization theorizations of villagers as backward-looking pariahs impeding capital accumulation, investment and productivity enhancement. Simultaneously, they imply that state intervention is essential to protect and guide an infantile population that is incapable of realizing, much less defending, its own interests.

As the dual land system is depicted as being rational and necessary to defend both national and peasant interests, and the state's organization is fundamentally sound, all that is required to secure the conditions for continuing accumulation is technical (rather than substantive) changes in the management of land transfers and land revenue, and more effective training, monitoring and supervision of local officials by higher levels of the bureaucracy. For example, local officials should be trained to utilize 'scientific' methods of land planning, and methods of pricing the land that reflect its market value, future income and the costs to the state in relocating, training and reassigning villagers.³⁴ Under stricter supervision and auditing of local finances by higher levels of the bureaucracy, the leasing of land development rights would provide local authorities with adequate revenue, eliminating inducements to grab land to fill government coffers, while wiser investment of governments' conveyancing fees in improved infrastructure would promote more economically efficient land use and attract business investment.

In so far as villagers are envisaged as playing a role in these processes, it is as participant-beneficiaries in an integrated state managed workfare program. Villagers' human capital endowment and material wealth would be enhanced by re-registering

31. Liu Shengrong, 'Zai chengzhenhua langchao zhong chenfu de shidi nongmin' ['The landless villagers bobbing on the tide of urbanization'], *Neimenggu ribao*, (3 April 2007), available at: <http://www.cnki.net> (accessed 19 May 2008).

32. "'Sannong" redian toudi: shidi shiye nongmin zhuangkuang diaocha' ['Perspectives on the "three rural problems" hotspot: an investigation into the situation of landless, unemployed villagers'], *Xinhua*, (10 July 2003), available at: http://www.agri.gov.cn/jjps/t20030710_99079.htm (accessed 16 July 2003).

33. Yang Dejin, 'Qian fada diqu shidi nongmin de chulu zhenmeyerang jieju' ['How to resolve the way out for landless farmers in less developed areas'], *Nongcun jingji daokan* no. 2, (2003), pp. 22–24. Reissued on the Ministry of Agriculture website, *Nongye bu xinxi zhongxin*, (19 March 2003), available at: http://www.agri.gov.cn/llzy/t20030319_66967.htm (accessed 16 July 2003); Wang Daoyong, 'Shidi nongmin "wentihua"', p. 108.

34. See, for example, Zhejiang sheng nongcun shehui jingji diaochaui, 'Gaodu guanzhu "shitou nongmin" de qieshen liyi' ['Pay greater attention to the personal interests of "land-losing villagers"'], *Diaoyan shijie* no. 1, (2003), pp. 26–28.



Figure 2. Cover of *Liaowang dongfang zhoukan*, (6 October 2004) advertising a special investigative report on 'The black box of land enclosure in Yancheng City'.

and re-housing them as urban residents. Second, 'client-oriented' local authorities would assist the re-registered villagers to acquire skills demanded by local employers in the manufacturing and service sectors, and direct the unemployed and retirees into voluntary civic service schemes that would reduce public outlay, prop up property values and instill community spirit in the dispossessed. Third, to protect their interests and secure their welfare, governments would invest compensation received by land-losing villagers directly into municipal government-managed social insurance funds. Through these means, the villagers would be incorporated more effectively into the urban working class and petty bourgeoisie, and their compensation channeled into the mortgage credit, savings and pension schemes that undergird urban financial capital.³⁵ These recommendations are supported by reference to policy experiments in areas of northern Zhejiang and southern Jiangsu. In this technocratic iteration of state capitalism, the political and social compacts between governments and villagers would be reinforced through relations of neo-paternalistic protection and managed dependency, and land-losing villagers' instruction in the performance of productive, compliant urban citizenship.

This frame and the derived policy recommendations have been subjected to trenchant criticism, not least of which is that they would perpetuate the state's infringement of rural collective organizations' constitutional rights as owners of

35. Chen Bochong and Hao Shouyi, 'Zhengdi buchang biao zhun de jingjixue fenxi', *Zhongguo nongcun guan* no. 6, (2004), pp. 38–39.

collective land to act as principals in the land market. For many critics, it was from precisely such infringements that the social crisis of enclosure originated. In a book published under the aegis of Hainan's Reform Development Research Center in 2004, for example, academics and policy advisors from Party and government agencies reasoned that villagers' apparently irrational responses to expropriation stemmed from governments' violation of their collective land rights.³⁶

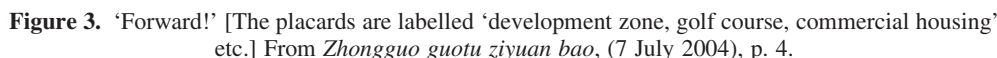
Neo-collectivism, an indigenous fix to villagers' victimization

Approximately half the articles examined in this study frame land-losing villagers as victims of governments' usurpation of village collectives' land rights and representative function. As illustrated in Figure 3, here villagers are depicted as martyrs to a temporally compressed, unsustainable Western-style model of globalization, economic growth, urbanization and excess consumption. The emphasis placed on villagers' vulnerability, impoverishment and marginalization operates in stark counterpoint to the implied abuses of power by governments and unscrupulousness of developers, to appeal to the leadership's commitment to social justice and the urban public's fears over the insecurity of their property rights. But the literature also speaks to widely held nationalist and socialist anxieties about the country's capacity to forge a uniquely Chinese alternative to both statist strategies and 'Western' neo-liberal models of accumulation. In this respect, it stands apart from the communal fixes advocated by international organizations like the World Bank and transnational environmental rights activist groups.³⁷ In China, the natural, collectivist orientations, economic potential and capacity for self-government of villagers should be harnessed to forge an alternative path of accumulation.

Most authors deploying a victim frame argue that villagers' potential to contribute to the country's modernization has been suppressed by the state's negation of their collective ownership of land. According to a wide range of commentators from the State Council's Development Research Center Rural Office, the Central Party School, various Academies of Social Sciences and universities, what superficial analyses interpret as villagers' short-sighted responses to expropriation actually are an artifact of the state's failure to relinquish power and ownership rights to organic village collective organizations. Cognitively and in practice, villagers have never been allowed to realize collective ownership of their land. Instead, they have only ever held nominal ownership. Moreover, in separating the collective's land ownership rights (which it treats as nominal and unenforceable) from households' contracted use rights (which it enforces against the collective owner), the state has transformed villagers' 'natural' representative, the village collective economic organization, into an entity that is external to and sometimes antagonistic to households' interests. As governments and developers collude to keep villagers in the dark about the substantive property rights transformation wrought by expropriation, argues Zhao Zhenjun, villagers therefore 'think they have lost their use-rights, they don't fully recognize that what they actually have lost is ownership'.³⁸ It is villagers'

36. Gaige fazhan yanjiuyuan, ed., *Nongmin quanyi baohu* (Beijing: Zhongguo jingji chubanshe, 2004).

37. See Tania Murray Li, 'Indigeneity, capitalism and the management of dispossession', *Current Anthropology* 51(3), (2010).



The main problem in the land expropriation system is that it actually uses administrative authority to violate a property right, uses public power to violate private rights ... It's the government's use of non-negotiated, unreasonable, coercive power to transform rural collective land ownership into another type of property right.⁴¹

In contrast to the villainy frame, in this literature retention of the state's monopoly over the transaction of land in land markets is portrayed as being incompatible with market principles and social justice norms. Wang Guiying, from Shaanxi Party School, reasons that when all other production factors, including capital, labor and urban land, are allocated according to markets, it is economically sub-optimal for

41. Quoted by Ren Bo, 'Xin "quandi yundong" molu'.

rural land to be appropriated and allocated by governments. Moreover, it is unjust: 'Villagers lose out both ways, for not only are they prevented from receiving a market price for their land, but they must rely on markets to find jobs or raise capital to start businesses'.⁴² Pre-empting arguments in favor of privatizing the land, however, Huang Ping insists that privatization would deliver neither an authentically socialist path of accumulation for China, nor social justice for villagers:

If we launch nationwide land privatization in the hope of increasing efficiency through building large-scale modern farms, what will be the escape route for hundreds of millions of rural residents? Should they be condemned to repeat the tragedy that already has been played out in many third-world countries, where numerous farmers became landless, then jobless, then homeless, and eventually hopeless?⁴³

This rhetorical momentum introduces enforceable rural collective land ownership as the theoretical, material and institutional foundation on which China's leaders could build a just, sustainable and innovative socialist market economy.⁴⁴ Prominent advocates, including Han Jun,⁴⁵ Liu Shouying⁴⁶ and Ping Wenjie,⁴⁷ recommend that the government's monopoly over land transfers be abolished, and expropriation of land limited. In areas planned for commercial construction, rural collectives should be allowed to compete with the state on an equal basis in a unified market for development leases. The price of leases should be negotiated directly and transparently between rural collective owner-vendors and commercial buyers, under the proviso that markets generate 'just' reparation.⁴⁸

In an implicit critique of both state capitalism and 'Western'-style neo-liberalism, neo-collectivism is represented as a uniquely Chinese, economically sustainable and socially equitable path of accumulation. Pointing to the results of experiments in Guangdong, where since 2003 provincial regulations have approved collective organizations' operation in the primary market for land leases, advocates argue that collective land ownership would counter the regional imbalances and temporal fluctuations produced by state and foreign investment and global business cycles. Allowing rural collectives to capitalize on their land assets in real estate markets would enable them to serve as the local engines of Keynesian-style economic growth: through leasing and developing their land, collectives could acquire the capital with which to develop rural financial services and industry and, by expanding dividend-paying shareholding corporations, they would subsidize villagers' employment and

42. Wang Guiying, 'Shidi nongmin biao yuanhua de gen yuan he zai', p. 14.

43. Huang Ping, *China: Rural Unrest under Uneven Development in Recent Years*, (2003), available at: http://www.cass.net.cn/chinese/09_shz/zhk/huangping/Rural_labor.htm (accessed 3 June 2003).

44. Cui Zhiyuan quoted in Zheng Yongnian, *Globalization and State Transformation in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 178–179.

45. Han Jun, 'Ru he jie jue land-losing villagers wenti' ['How to solve the problem of the land-losing villagers'], *Lilun cankao* no. 1, (2006), pp. 46–47; Han Jun, 'Tudi went shi Zhongguo nongcun de guanjian wenti' ['Land problems are a crucial issue for rural China'], *Jingji ribao*, (7 September 2006), available at: <http://www.cnki.net> (accessed 18 September 2009).

46. Quoted by Wang Hongru, 'Tudi jiu fen jicui zhengdi zhidu gaige' ['Land disputes urge reform of the expropriation system'], *Zhongguo jingji zhoukan*, (2006), available at: http://www.zzhz.zjol.com.cn/05zzhz/system/2006/03/06/006502258_02.shtml (accessed 13 August 2007).

47. Ping Wenjie, 'Land-losing villagers de kunjing yu duice tanxi' ['Probing the difficult position of land-losing villagers and counter-measures'], *Tongren diwei dangxiao xuebao* no. 6, (2006), pp. 32–33.

48. Zhang Dengguo, 'Shehui gongzheng shiye xia de land-losing villagers quanyi bao hu yanjiu', p. 79.

consumption of housing, social insurance and services. As collective property owners and participants in accumulation, villagers would be spared from the brutality of coerced dispossession, proletarianization and impoverishment. Instead, they would benefit from expanded commodification of the land.

This also would create the basis for more equal political interactions between local governments and rural citizens, and among shareholding villager-citizens. For example, Zhou Jianchun, in China's Land Survey Planning Institute, is quoted as saying 'This isn't a simple question of whether or not to give some of the compensation for expropriated land directly to the villagers, but rather, a question of whether or not to construct a stronger grassroots democracy'.⁴⁹ Contrary to Marx's predictions and the 'bloody' experience of peasants in British history then, in this frame China's villagers would not be separated from the land in the course of primitive accumulation, but rather would come to comprise an economically and politically progressive class of collectivized share-owning landlords, entrepreneurs and commercial farmers, as well as members of the working class.

However, the frame contains obvious elisions and paradoxes. In romanticizing villagers' organic economic and political collective organization, social exclusion and relations of inequality and exploitation within collectives are ignored. The analysis also fails to interrogate the gross disparities in power between collectives and the state, and incorporates mechanisms that might allow collectives to transact in markets on 'an equal basis' with governments and purchasers. Finally, as Qin Hui remarks, if rural collective land is owned in common by all members of the rural collective, in property theory and most legal systems the members' rights in the land would be regarded as an alienable private asset.⁵⁰ Supporters of land privatization view the collective organization as a brake on the enterprise and empowerment of villagers who aspire to trade in these rights.

Proprietorship as panacea

The third frame shares Marx's condemnation of small peasant agriculture as an impediment to capital accumulation, growth of the productive forces and formation of class consciousness; but rather than viewing land-losing villagers as clinging to the institutional foundations of a pre-modern mode of production, here they are framed as the heroic supporters of liberalism in markets, civil society and polity, whose inclinations are suppressed by an authoritarian state and the anachronistic property institutions and rural collective organization it has foisted upon them. This frame is evident in only a small proportion of the articles on the social crisis of enclosure in the Chinese press. However, because many of these frame-makers are employed in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and a few prestigious university faculties and think tanks, and so have privileged access to information, media outlets and blog audiences, and because they utilize an end-run frame in which they speak as champions of individual rights, their views have attracted disproportionate attention from the foreign press.

49. See *Liaowang*, (10 June 2004), p. 27.

50. Qin Hui, 'Nongmin diquan lilun' ['Theorizing villagers' land rights'], *Shehui kexue luntan* no. 5, (2007), pp. 122–123.

Problem definition and causal attribution center squarely on the state's failure to dismantle the Soviet-era separation of rural and urban economies.⁵¹ According to Yu Jianrong, the collective ownership of rural land, created to facilitate the organization of corvée labor in communes and ensure that cities became centers of socialist accumulation, serves in the market economy as the legal basis on which local government monopolists extract 'power rents'.⁵² Repeated legislative changes have lodged 'virtual' ownership rights in a multi-tiered, abstract village collective organization that has neither legal standing nor economic utility. Instead, it 'binds' villagers to the soil and encourages risk-averse 'small peasant' farming.⁵³ State monopoly and collective land ownership are identified as the twin causes of villagers becoming landless, jobless and a destabilizing social force.⁵⁴

In contrast to the representation of land-losing villagers as infantile beneficiaries of a technocratic, paternalistic state, or as the culturally and institutionally pre-disposed members of 'organic' collective organizations, here they are drafted in the role of rational utility maximizers with the inherent ability and ambition to realize the market value of their assets, manage their own reskilling and risks, and so propel structural transformation of China's rural economy. Socially, too, villagers are cast as a progressive force. It is precisely because they endorse and wish to exercise land ownership rights, and hope to hold their leaders to their commitments to 'people-centered' government, rural–urban integration and the creation of a well-off, harmonious society, that they contest land expropriation. If formal channels of adjudication fail, they resort to the modern tools of media lobbying and 'rightful' resistance, rather than primordial styles of peasant protest. While domestic reportage, such as the headline replicated in Figure 4, focuses on villagers' deployment of existing political and legal resources to right the wrongs perpetrated by misguided local authorities, it is the image of a restive citizenry struggling valiantly to defend its property against state predation that has captured the imagination of Western journalists (see Figure 5). What is common to both is that villager activism born of a liberal rationality is viewed as strengthening China's civil and political institutions.⁵⁵

Land-losing villagers' rational nature and reactions to enclosure thus serve as the ontological foundation on which advocates recommend the redesign of rural land institutions.⁵⁶ The story line leads, first, to explicit proposals to privatize

51. Li Zhang, 'Dangqian wo guo shidi nongmin liyi shou sun de zhidu fenxi' ['Institutional analysis of the undermining of landless villagers' interests in contemporary China'], *Lilun cankao* no. 1, (2006), pp. 49–51.

52. Yu Jianrong, 'Diquan shi nongmin zui jiben de quanli' ['Land rights are villagers' most fundamental right'], *Minzhu yu kexue* no. 5, (2008), p. 28.

53. Li Chenggui, 'Woguo fazhan xiandaihua nongye mianlin de zhuyao wenti he zhengce xuanze' ['Important issues and policy choices confronting China's development of modern agriculture'], *Xuexi yu tansuo* no. 4, (2007), p. 123; Yang Xiaokai, 'Wei shenme chengxiang tudi zhidu bingui shi dangwu zhiji' ['Why the merger of urban and rural land systems is a matter of urgency'], *Cankao wenxuan* no. 20, (2001), pp. 6–8.

54. Yu Jianrong, 'Ba tudiquan huan gei nongmin' ['Return land rights to villagers'], *Dongfang xueshu* no. 2, (2008), p. 13.

55. Interview, Li Chenggui, 13 November 2007; Yu Jianrong, 'Gongmin canyu shi shehui wending de huanchongqi' ['Citizen participation is the buffer for social stability'], *Xuexi shibao*, (26 April 2010), available at: <http://www.chinaelections.org/NewsInfo.asp?NewsID=175686> (accessed 21 October 2010).

56. See Glassman, 'Primitive accumulation', p. 615; Massimo De Angelis, 'Marx and primitive accumulation: the continuous character of capital's "enclosures"', *The Commoner* no. 2, (2001), available at: <http://www.thecommoner.org.uk/02deangelis.pdf> (accessed 7 February 2007).

市政府越权批地， 200农民打赢官司



Figure 4. ‘200 villagers win suit against municipal government exceeding authority in approving land (expropriation).’ From *Minzhu yu fazhi* no. 3, (2003), p. 39.



Figure 5. Stills from a mobile phone clip of villagers’ resisting expropriation. First publicized on beijingnews.com in 2005, the images subsequently were reproduced on the BBC’s website.

rural land. Indeed, the only question yet to be decided, according to Qin Hui, is one of scale:

which of the only two possible paths rural China should take—the opposite roads to agrarian capitalism that Lenin called Prussian and American: the expropriation of the peasantry from above by big landlords or companies, as in nineteenth century Prussia, or the emergence of independent small-to-medium modern farmers from below, as in nineteenth century America.⁵⁷

Like Lenin, most advocates of land privatization in China opt for the second path. In articles widely circulated among China’s leadership in 2007, Yu Jianrong’s

57. Qin Hui, ‘Dividing the big family assets’, in Wang Chaohua, ed., *One China, Many Paths* (London: Verso, 2003), p. 145.

colleague, Li Chenggui, recommended that privatization be accomplished in two stages.⁵⁸ All legislation should first be revised and the mortgaging of rural land permitted. Then within a decade, villagers should be granted full ownership rights. This would establish the institutional basis on which uncompetitive farmers would trade their land rights for business capital or leave for jobs in industry and services, while specialized farmers could expand their holdings and so improve China's competitiveness in international commodity markets. That argument has a long pedigree. As Xiang Zhaolun, of the Finance and Economic Development Leading Group, put it in 2003, 'farmers who are reluctant to work on the land can turn their burden over to those who like farming, and it can help develop large-scale production and accelerate urbanization'.⁵⁹ Pointing out that profits from their sale of land would allow people to purchase commercial social insurance, Li dismisses the 'simplistic' and 'illogical' thinking of those who argue that privatization would result in villagers' losing both their means of livelihood and source of social security: 'If we accept that villagers' social guarantees can be provided by what are only partial land rights, how could comprehensive land rights not also provide the same guarantees?'.⁶⁰ Land privatization thereby is presented as an institutional mechanism allowing villagers to manage their own risks, and generate 'real' industrial and financial capital through individual entrepreneurship, investment and waged work.

Villagers' acquisition of proprietary rights in land is also fashioned as a means of democratic state-strengthening. As individual property owners, villagers would possess legal and material resources with which to better resist state power and depredation. Yang Wenliang cites the nineteenth century US property theorists' argument that farmers enjoying secure ownership rights form the core of the national political community, to back up his declaration that 'only when property rights in land are stable can political rights be stable'.⁶¹ At this juncture, the frame dovetails with the arguments articulated by democratization advocates such as Liu Junning: 'individuals' independent and exclusive property rights ... is the precursor of all political rights and the foundation of constitutional democracy'.⁶² Moreover, privatization would bolster, rather than undermine, the capacity and legitimacy of the state. Granting a greater measure of economic and political liberty to rational individuals would spur China's modernization; and by eliminating the roots of government predation and producing a lawful stream of revenue from taxes and conveyancing on land leases, privatization would help to secure the fiscal foundations and disciplined administration of local government.

58. Li Chenggui, 'Woguo fazhan xiandaihua nongye mianlin de zhuyao wenti he zhengce xuanze', p. 123; Li Chenggui 'Zhongguo nongcun tudi zhidu gaige de san bu qu' ['A three step dance for reforming China's rural land system'], *Xuexi shibao*, (7 August 2007), available at: http://news.ifeng.com/opinion/200708/0807_23_179670_1.shtml (accessed 17 March 2008).

59. *China Daily*, (3 March 2003), available at: www.chinaview.cn (accessed 12 June 2003).

60. Li Chenggui, 'Zhongguo nongcun tudi zhidu gaige de san bu qu'; See also Zhao Xiaodeng, 'Zhongguo tudi heimu jiegou' ['Deconstructing the inside story on China's land'], *Lilun cankao* no. 3, (2004), p. 47.

61. Yang Wenliang, 'Guanyu wending nongmin diquan de faxue sikao' ['Legal reflections on stabilizing villagers' land rights'], in Gaige fazhan yanjiuyuan, ed., *Nongmin quanyi baohu*, p. 390.

62. Liu Junning, cited in Zheng Yongnian, *Globalization and State Transformation*, p. 173.

Conclusions

The question of whether the media debate over China's enclosure crisis influenced deliberation on land policy was considered in the introduction to this paper. Nevertheless, before drawing out the broader implications of this analysis, the following brief postscript seems warranted. As mentioned above, highly influential advisors in central government agencies contributed to the framing of land-losing villagers in this wave of reportage. Two sets of solutions supported by alternative frames were (and continue to be) piloted in various provincial locations. Interviewees whose policy proposals were circulated among the leadership in 2007 claimed that their arguments had been given serious consideration, and there is circumstantial evidence that some recommendations did, in fact, inform subsequent policy decisions. After extensive consultation, on 12 October 2008 the Communist Party Central Committee released its *Resolution on Major Issues Concerning the Advancement of Rural Reform and Development* that tacitly endorsed some of the neo-collectivist changes advocated by victim frame-makers. In particular, in areas planned for construction, rural collectives were to be allowed to trade land for development. On the other hand, since 2008, highly placed ministry researchers and provincial bureaucrats have told me that although their offices had been persuaded by the neo-collectivist argument and had counseled that the Central Committee *Resolution* be implemented in their jurisdiction, they met with stiff resistance from other sections and levels of government. Media coverage of recent protests by land-losing villagers over the unfair terms of expropriation testify that this remains a critical policy problem for China's leaders. In other words, finding evidence that the debate influenced past policy decisions cannot assist us in predicting future policy implementation.

What, then, can we deduce from this study? Parsing frames of land-losing villagers' in this media debate offers two important correctives to current conceptualizations of global-local integrations of capitalism and the class positioning of the peasantry in processes of accumulation, and to interpretations of the politics of policy-making in China.

First, David Harvey, among others, has argued that to prevent crises of accumulation from becoming generalized, international institutions and state interventions articulate global and local strategies of accumulation by organizing dispossession on new terrains, through localized instances of devaluation and dispossession.⁶³ Land enclosure and the privatization of collective goods and services in developing and post-socialist states are cited as examples, yet rarely is this analytic lens applied to empirically study of how, and with what class consequences, accumulation is articulated locally. Close reading of the debate over the social crisis of enclosure in China shows us that, *contra* Marx's historical determinism and Harvey's characterization of enclosure as a manifestation of a homogenous, global neo-liberal project of 'accumulation by dispossession',⁶⁴ (or, as some scholars depict

63. David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 137–182; Farshad Araghi, 'The invisible hand and the visible foot', in A. Haroon Akram-Lodhi and Cristóbal Kay, eds, *Peasants and Globalization: Political Economy, Rural Transformation and the Agrarian Question* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), pp. 130–137.

64. Harvey, *The New Imperialism*, pp. 154–161.

it, ‘gangster capitalism’⁶⁵), the strategy of accumulation in this developing, post-socialist state is by no means pre-determined. Rather, it is emerging from decentralized, highly contested, variegated and experimental processes. Moreover, not all the strategies of accumulation being advocated render inevitable the privatization of rural land and the forcible dispossession of villagers, or assign villagers to the proletariat. Instead, in casting villagers as either the passive working class ‘beneficiaries’ of an authoritarian capitalist state, or as self-governing collectivized entrepreneurial landowners, or as individual commercial farmers, salaried and self-insured wage workers and businesspeople holding the state to account through property right and democratic mechanisms, the contributors to this debate set out a variety of ideational, political and institutional configurations that have the potential to sustain accumulation in China. From these imagined class positions, villagers are predicted to interact on different terms with—and in new conflicts against—both government and capital. Hence, in the debate over enclosure, struggles *over* class—over the creation and reproduction of class positions for land-losing villagers—logically precede, and are likely to influence subsequent struggles *between* classes.

A second important finding from this study is that, while the debate over proposed solutions to the social crisis of land enclosure in China was teleological and instrumental, its course and content was not shaped solely by top-down propaganda directives, or by bottom-up competitive policy entrepreneurship. China’s in-coming leaders sought to distinguish their rule by publicly canvassing alternative policy approaches that would demonstrate their commitment to ‘people-centered’ government, integrated rural–urban development, social justice and the security of citizens’ property, and reduce the political and social risks attendant on accumulation. By identifying the national problematic of land-losing villagers, and initiating a search for, and acting as meta-arbiters between solutions to the crisis of enclosure, China’s leaders projected an image of omniscience, purpose and authority. Indeed, it was in mediating this debate that the state temporarily was re-constituted as a deliberate, rational agent of systemic transformation. This interpretation offers a new perspective on associations between the policy capacity and legitimacy of China’s state. In an immensely insightful essay, Sebastian Heilmann argued persuasively that ‘China’s experiment-based policy-making requires the authority of a central leadership that encourages and protects broad-based local initiative and filters out generalizable lessons but at the same time contains the centrifugal forces’.⁶⁶ In contrast, the conclusion derived from the analysis here is that the search for answers to the questions posed by enclosure was not so much *reliant* on the authority of a central leadership but, rather, was politically *productive* of that authority. In choosing between alternative rural land regimes, class positions for landless villagers, and the accumulation strategies founded on those institutional arrangements and class positions, China’s leaders produced the effect of unity, objectivity, policy creativity and flexibility, and, hence, legitimacy.

65. Kathy Le Mons Walker, ‘“Gangster capitalism” and peasant protest in China: the last twenty years’, *Journal of Peasant Studies* 33(1), (2006), pp. 1–33.

66. Sebastian Heilmann, ‘From local experiments to national policy: the origins of China’s distinctive policy process’, *The China Journal* no. 59, (2008), p. 29.