

When Capital Comes with a Familiar Face: Embedded Agricultural Capital and Failed Peasant Rent Protest

During the past 15 years, the Chinese state has made aggressive efforts to create a national land-rental market to facilitate the consolidation of farmland. Under the name of “land transfer” (土地流转),¹ these interventions aim to replace inefficient, small-scale peasant households with large-scale commercial farms. As national policies have been actively encouraging migrants to return home to start businesses (返乡创业) since the early-2010s, policymakers see land transfer as an opportunity to attract returning-home workers and businessmen to invest in agriculture. The advanced business ideas, technologies, and capital brought back by these future agricultural entrepreneurs would help modernize Chinese agriculture, create local economic growth and employment, and narrow China's huge rural-urban inequality. While state interventions do lead to a rapid jump in land transfer rate from below-10% in 2000 to over 40% in 2018 (Figure 1), and create tens of thousands of big commercial farms, they also cause widespread resistance and land-transfer disputes in the countryside (Figure 2). Not only is the process of land transfer often coercive and against peasant wills,² but peasants also fail to receive rent payment from commercial farmers. As early as 2014, *People's Daily* has warned about unpaid land rent.³ Although land-rent issues clearly have huge impact on peasant livelihood and generate enormous rural social contention, they are insufficiently examined by scholarly research. Literature on agricultural capitalization mostly traces the pro-capital turn in state policies, labor dynamics under capitalist agriculture, and the immediate process of land transfer. Scholarships on China's rural social protests largely focus on tax resistance, local corruption, and land dispossession for urbanization.⁴ To fill this important lacuna, this article examines three natural villages in northern Anhui Province, where land transfer has resulted in unpaid land rent and grievances. It answers two crucial questions: *How do land transfer and rent protests take place? Why have peasant households failed to demand land rent?*

¹ Government coined this term to downplay the commodity nature of farmland and reduce political sensitivity.

² Landesa Rural Land Institute, “Landesa 6th 17-Province China Survey: Summary of 2011 Findings, 2012, <https://www.landesa.org/china-survey-6/>; Luo, Qiangqiang, Joel Andreas, and Yao Li. “Grapes of wrath: Twisting arms to get villagers to cooperate with agribusiness in China.” *The China Journal* 77, no. 1 (2017): 27-50.

³ It is extremely difficult to accurately estimate how many peasants are owed land rent, due to extreme data scarcity. However, anecdotal evidence and the author's fieldwork suggest this happens in many provinces, including but not limited to Henan, Anhui, Shaanxi, Hebei, and Zhejiang. *People's Daily*, “Nongcun tudi liuzhuan buneng paopian le”. [*Rural land transfer shouldn't go astray*]. March 18th, 2014, <http://house.people.com.cn/n/2014/0318/c164220-24662534.html>. The 2022 film ‘Return to Dust’ describes how commercial farmers owe peasants land rent due to business difficulties.

⁴ On relevant literature, see next section.

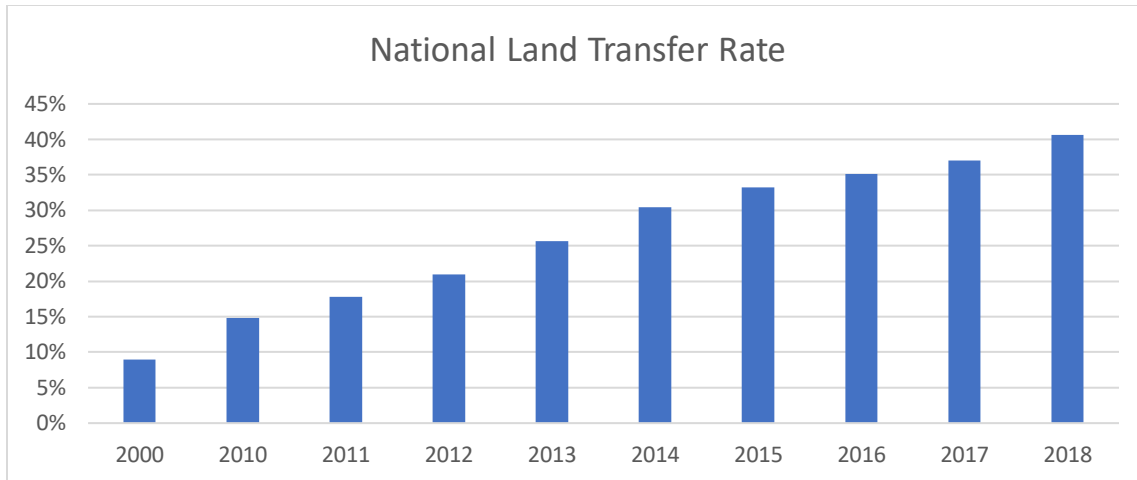


Figure 1. National Land Transfer Rate. Source: China Agricultural Statistical Yearbook, 2000-2019.

Drawing from 10 months of ethnography and interviews with commercial farmers, land-renting village households, and village, township, and county officials, this article argues:

1. Under China's unique agricultural land rental institution, land-rent disputes are emerging as a new source of rural social grievances. Unlike in urban China and other countries, where change in control over land is often permanent and takes place under a change of ownership, change in control over farmland is only temporary and conditional upon rent payment in rural China. This sets the stage for continuous and repeated interactions and conflicts between agricultural capital and peasants, even long after the completion of land transfer.
2. Local elites and pre-existing kinship/village connections play contradictory roles in land transfer and villagers' rent protests. On the one hand, village/kinship elites actively ally with commercial farmers. They use hierarchical, local social structures to mobilize and pressure weaker villagers to transfer land without extensive state intervention. On the other, however, this mobilization is only one-way. Ordinary villagers cannot use local social networks to collectively protest against commercial farmers over unpaid land rent, as the alliance with commercial farmers makes clan/village leaders unwilling to intervene. Moreover, farmers and peasants' shared embeddedness in multiplex local social relations make villagers unwilling to escalate disputes into collective actions. Consequently, farmers have been able to fragmentize rent protests and contain social tension, without paying much land rent.
3. Land-rent disputes display several new dynamics. First, peasant grievances often target commercial farmers, instead of state actors, who were the main antagonist in rural contentions in previous years. Second, commercial farmers and local elites have appropriated many tactics previously used by state actors to contain peasant rent protests, and direct repression by state actors have decreased correspondingly. Lastly, when capital and villagers are embedded in the same social connections, land-rent disputes may not take the forms of large-scale, dramatic protests. Instead, they can be more hidden, everyday-based, and individualized.

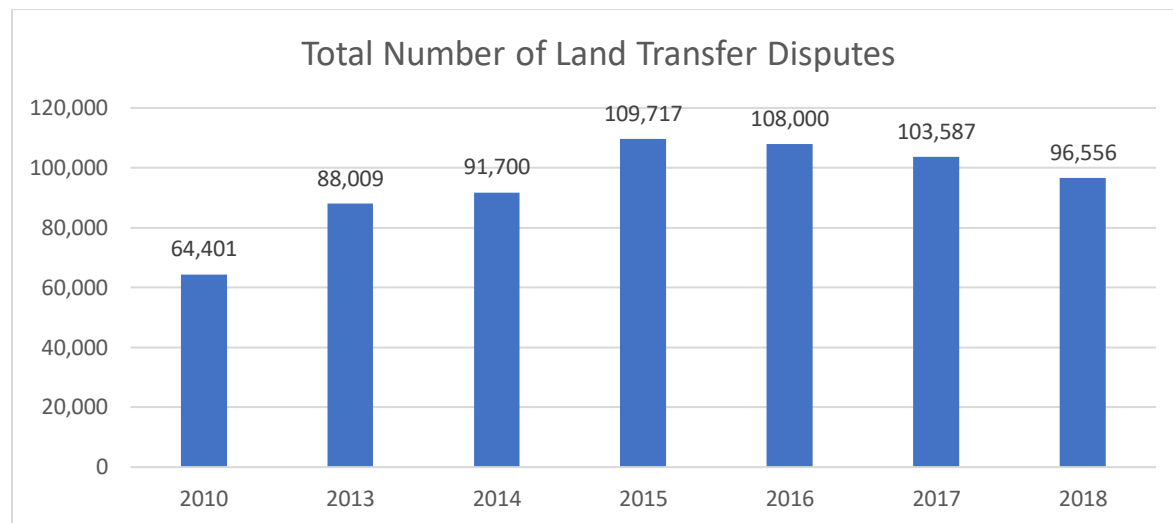


Figure 2. Total Number of Land-transfer Disputes. Source: Ministry of Agriculture websites; China Rural Production and Management Statistical Yearbook, 2015-2018.

Existing literature and theoretical contribution

The rapid development of capitalist agriculture in China in the past 15 years has caught widespread scholarly attention. Recent works examine different dimensions of this process. Some trace, debate, and criticize the pro-capital and pro-big-farm turn in state policies.⁵ Some examine how local governments push capitalist agriculture, sometimes through coercive means.⁶ Lastly, some others explore how commercial farming organizes labor force, and its impact on potential rural proletarianization.⁷ This body of literature reveals the historical origins and ongoing processes of land transfer and large-scale commercial agriculture, which are the direct causes of land-rent protests.

The literature on rural social protest, on the other hand, points to important grievances, actors, mobilizing structures, and tactics that give rise to and determine the success/failures of rural protests. It identifies heavy taxation, predatory local state activities, and rampant state-led land

⁵ Weigang Gong, and Qian Forrest Zhang. "Betting on the big: State-brokered land transfers, large-scale agricultural producers, and rural policy implementation." *The China Journal* 77, no. 1 (2017): 1-26; Jane Hayward, "Beyond the ownership question: Who will till the land? The new debate on China's agricultural production." *Critical Asian Studies* 49, no. 4 (2017): 523-545. Jingzhong Ye, "Land Transfer and the Pursuit of Agricultural Modernization in China." *Journal of agrarian change* 15, no. 3 (2015): 314-337. Tiantian Liu. "'Enclosure with Chinese characteristics': a Polanyian approach to the origins and limits of land commodification in China." *The Journal of Peasant Studies* (2022): 1-29; Mindi Schneider, "Dragon head enterprises and the state of agribusiness in China." *Journal of Agrarian Change* 17, no. 1 (2017): 3-21.

⁶ Luo et al, "Grapes of Wrath"; Qian Forrest Zhang, and John Donaldson. 2008. The rise of agrarian capitalism with Chinese characteristics: Agricultural modernization, agribusiness and collective land rights. *The China Journal*, 60: 25-47; Qian Forrest Zhang, and Hongping Zeng. "Politically directed accumulation in rural China: The making of the agrarian capitalist class and the new agrarian question of capital." *Journal of Agrarian Change* 21, no. 4 (2021): 677-701.

⁷ Hairong, Yan, and Yiyuan Chen, "Agrarian Capitalization without Capitalism? Capitalist Dynamics from Above and Below in China." *Journal of Agrarian Change* 15, no. 3 (2015): 366-391. Philip Huang, Yuan Gao, and Yusheng Peng. 2012. Capitalization without proletarianization in China's agricultural development. *Modern China* 38(2):139; Yiyuan, Chen. "Land outsourcing and labour contracting: Labour management in China's capitalist farms." *Journal of Agrarian Change* 20, no. 2 (2020): 238-254.

expropriation for urbanization as primary causes of peasant grievances since the 1990s.⁸ As many peasants stage protests to seek justice, local leaders, including (former) village cadres, teachers, and lineage heads, often played leading and organizing roles. Moreover, close-knitted, pre-existing social networks, such as kinship and neighborhood connections, have provided crucial organizational resources for villagers' mobilization.⁹

Beyond large-scale protests, where protesters often try to recruit help from influential patrons within government to pressure local state and force concessions¹⁰, Michelson posits another tactic frequently used by peasants, which he calls "justice-from-below." Instead of seeking "justice-from-above", he argues that peasants are more likely to address grievances by involving local cadres and influential villagers to mediate in disputes.¹¹ To counter and control collective protests, state actors also deploy various tactics. In addition to forceful crackdown, they frequently exercise relationally based power. Through exploiting individuals' interests and various connections with the state, they divide protesters and exert pressures individualistically to dissolve collective resistance.¹² This literature points to important aspects of rural protests that this article will examine.

While providing useful insights, neither literature has paid much attention to rural contentions concerning land rent. Moreover, as few studies, except by Luo et al, utilize the social-protest literature to examine the coercive dimensions of agricultural capitalization in great detail, the two scholarships have so far been in limited conversation with each other. Therefore, by identifying agricultural land transfer and land-rent disputes as new sources of social grievances and examining their micro-level dynamics, this article fills an important empirical lacuna and connects the two scholarships.

This article further sheds theoretical lights on several limits of existing literature. First, discussions on rural social protests have so far primarily focused on confrontations between

⁸ Thomas Bernstein, and Xiaobo Lü. "Taxation without representation: peasants, the central and the local states in reform China." *The China Quarterly* 163 (2000): 742-763; Jay Chih-Jou Chen, "A Protest Society Evaluated: Popular Protests in China, 2000–2019." *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 25, no. SI (2020): 641-660; Jay Chih-Jou Chen. "Peasant protests over land seizures in rural China." *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 47, no. 6 (2020): 1327-1347; Alvin So, "Peasant conflict and the local predatory state in the Chinese countryside." *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 34, no. 3-4 (2007): 560-581.

⁹ Xuefeng He, *New Rural China*, Beijing: Peking University Press, 2013; Lianjiang Li, and Kevin O'Brien. "Protest leadership in rural China." *The China Quarterly* 193 (2008): 1-23. Yao Lu, "Empowerment or disintegration? Migration, social institutions, and collective action in rural China." *American Journal of Sociology* 125, no. 3 (2019): 683-729; Yao Lu, and Ran Tao. "Organizational structure and collective action: Lineage networks, semiautonomous civic associations, and collective resistance in rural China." *American Journal of Sociology* 122, no. 6 (2017): 1726-1774; Yusheng Peng, "When formal laws and informal norms collide: Lineage networks versus birth control policy in China." *American Journal of Sociology* 116, no. 3 (2010): 770-805; Patricia Thornton, "Comrades and collectives in arms: Tax resistance, evasion, and avoidance strategies in post-Mao China." In *State and Society in 21st Century China*, ed. Peter Gries and Stanley Rosen, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 87-104.

¹⁰ Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li. *Rightful resistance in rural China*. Cambridge University Press, 2006; Kevin J. O'Brien, "Rightful resistance revisited." *Journal of Peasant Studies* 40, no. 6 (2013): 1051-1062.

¹¹ Ethan Michelson, "Justice from above or below? Popular strategies for resolving grievances in rural China." *The China Quarterly* 193 (2008): 43-64.

¹² Yongshun Cai, "Local governments and the suppression of popular resistance in China." *The China Quarterly* 193 (2008): 24-42; Chen, "A protest society evaluated." Julia Chuang, "China's rural land politics: bureaucratic absorption and the muting of rightful resistance." *The China Quarterly* 219 (2014): 649-669; Yanhua Deng, and Kevin O'Brien. "Relational repression in China: using social ties to demobilize protesters." *The China Quarterly* 215 (2013): 533-552; Kevin O'Brien and Yanhua Deng, "Preventing protest one person at a time: Psychological coercion and relational repression in China." *China Review* 17, no. 2 (2017): 179-201; Luo et al, "Grapes of Wrath."

“peasantry” and the “state.”¹³ As this article traces capital-elite interactions and conflicts between commercial farmers and ordinary villagers that do not center around local state, it shows how new forms of rural protests have emerged as rural communities undergo capitalist transformation. Instead of following the old peasant-vs-state fault line, new protests often involve tensions among state, capital, local elites, and ordinary villagers, and do not necessarily target local cadres. Therefore, this article problematizes the peasant-vs-state framework and shows the need of a new analytical lens, which can de-center the state and incorporate new actors and growing complicities in rural protests.

Second, under the peasantry-vs-state framework, existing literature often highlights the role of local elites/social structures in leading/organizing protests or mediating local disputes. It does not emphasize the hierarchical and unequal sides of local social structures and examine how it shapes rural contention. This work shows that, when agricultural capital penetrates into and becomes embedded in local communities, the roles of local elites and social structures can change significantly. Instead of mobilizing villagers to address grievances, they can help commercial farmers contain peasant protests by actively exploiting long-lasting power imbalances. This change renders earlier tactics ineffective by depriving villagers of influential leaders, who could potentially lead protests or mediate disputes, and organizational resources. Therefore, to understand dynamics of protest formation and containment in rent disputes, we need to pay more attention to within-community power relationships, which have emerged as a vital factor under capital's growing influence in villages.

Lastly, analyses of tax resistance, land dispossession, or land transfer often focus on confrontational or dramatic events that are of brief duration, and pay less attention to more subtle, hidden, and everyday forms of resistance/protests.¹⁴ This article fills this gap by examining protracted disputes over land rent, which take place long after land transfer is over.

In a nutshell, findings from this article urge a rethinking on how existing literature conceptualizes local leaders/networks' roles in rural social protests, and the changing nature of rural protest under growing penetration by agricultural capital. In the remaining sections, I first briefly lay out China's rural land reform leading towards the current period of intense land transfer. I then introduce the three villages, where I conducted my fieldwork. The next sections delve into the dynamics of land transfer and land-rent protests in the three villages. This article ends with a summary and theoretical discussion.

Land Right Reform

China's rural land reform started with the well-known Household Responsibility System (HRS). The HRS, while keeping collective land ownership (所有权) intact, distributed land-contract right (承包权) to peasant households. Under this two-tier system, peasant households had the freedom to make productive decision and keep extra income after meeting state procurement quota. Although the HRS boosted agricultural production until early-1980s, it gradually lost steam during the mid-1980s, as agricultural production plateaued. Since then, criticism of the HRS, from both officials and academics, emerged. These voices pointed out the low efficiency of peasant household

¹³ In almost all earlier protests, especially those concerning heavy taxation, birth-control, or local predatory state, the state is the undisputed chief antagonist. Even in those concerning land dispossession for urbanization, capital often does not directly interact with peasants. It is the local state, who clears peasants off the land and then sells land to real-estate capital.

¹⁴ James Scott. *Weapons of the Weak*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008.

production and argued for the creation of larger, specialized farms. Into the mid-2000s, with continuous rural-to-urban migration reducing population pressure on land, these criticisms gained significant policy influence.¹⁵ The central government encouraged local authorities to actively promote land rental and create large-scale farms. This orientation gathered full steam in the 2010s and crystallized in the Land-Right Separation Policy in 2016¹⁶. By separating land-use right (使用权) from land-contract right and making the former a rentable property, this policy transformed the pre-existing two-tier land system into a three-tier one. Capital-holders from outside the community would pay rent for land-use right to concentrate land management. By making land-use right a transferrable property, central government systematically encouraged long-term, large-scale land-rental on a national-level.

However, two factors undermine the three-tier system's pro-capital position. Not only has it intentionally stayed away from changes in land ownership to reduce political and ideological instability, but it also tries to protect peasant interests by stipulating that land-contract right still belongs to peasants, even if they rent their land-use right to farmers. Therefore, dynamics of farmland concentration in rural China differ significantly from many other countries, where land consolidation is often permanent and a result of change in land ownership. Under the three-tier system, farmers' access to peasant land is only temporary under law and depends upon on-time rent payment, and peasants have strong legal claims over land. This institutional setup creates conditions for repeated, continuous interactions between peasants and commercial farmers, even after land transfer has long completed. It is under this context that land transfer and land-rent disputes emerge.

Land Transfer in Village C, D, E

This research zeroes in on Deer Village, which is an administrative village in northern Anhui Province. It has traditionally been a deeply agricultural and poor region, with most households engaging in migration and household farming for livelihood. Since 2012, the village party secretary, Mr. Wang, began to promote land transfer and encourage local migrants to return home and start business. In the following years, he helped set up 7 commercial farms in 3 adjacent natural villages (Village C, D, E) under his jurisdiction (Table 1). All 7 farmers are ex-migrants who used to work in urban sectors and responded to state policies, as they saw commercial agriculture as good business opportunities. Except Mr. Li, all the others have local connections in Deer Village. Mr. Dai was a Village-D local, and Mr. Sun was a Village-C local. Mr. Kang and Miao are related to Deer Village through marriage. The remaining two, Mr. Gao and Fang, although without connections themselves, were good friends with Mr. Miao. The three came as a group and conducted land transfer together. With government help, they set up a County-Level Specialized Peach Production Base in 2015. Given such stellar performances, Deer Village's Party Branch was awarded as an "Advanced Unit in Promoting Land Transfer".

¹⁵ Xingqing Ye, *Modernization and peasants entering city*. Beijing: China Yanshi Press, 2013; Qiren Zhou, *Urban and Rural China*, Beijing: Citi Press, 2013.

¹⁶ General Office of the Central Committee of the CCP and the Office of the State Council, "Opinions on Improving the Separation of Land-Ownership Right, Land-Contract Right, and Land-use Right," October 30th, 2016, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2016-10/30/content_5126200.htm

	Number of Land-Transferring Families	Total Village Land Size (mu)	Amount of Land Transferred (mu)	Land Transfer Rate
Village C	63	400	370	92.5%
Village D	21+12	330	100	30.3%
Village E	60	775	259	33.4%

Table 1. Land Transfer by village. Source: Author's fieldnotes and village census.

Commercial Farms (by farmers' last name and the year when Land Transfer Happened)	Size (mu) By 2021	Product	Land Transferred from:	Rent Payment
Gao (2014)	47.35	Peach	Village C	Owing 3-4 years of rent
Miao (2014)	210	Peach	Village C	Owing 3-4 years of rent
Fang (2014)	110	Peach	Village C	Owing 1-2 years of rent
Dai (2012)	67	Pear/Peach	Village D	Owing 3-4 years of rent
Sun (2017)	33	Duck	Village D	Full Payment
Kang (2018)	106	Trichomanias	Village E	Full Payment
Li (2012)	153	Pear/Chicken	Village E	Full Payment

Table 2. Land transfer by commercial farms. Source: Author's fieldnotes.

Divided and Hierarchical Villages

As farmers returned home, what types of peasant households and village communities did they face when negotiating to transfer land?

First, due to years of rural-to-urban migration and growing reliance on wage labor for household income, village households often have varying economic interests. Concerning land transfer, as Chen finds out in her research, the dividing line is both generational and occupational.¹⁷ During negotiations, working-age villagers, who have migrated and worked in off-farm sectors, did not resist the idea of land transfer. Some even welcomed it, as they deemed a 750-yuan/mu land rent much better than farming by their left-behind household members, which was both unstable and low. Moreover, as most young villagers were away from home for long periods of time, they could not intervene in negotiation even if they wanted.

Contrary to young, working-age villagers, those who could not migrate and do off-farm work opposed land transfer more strongly, as it affected their only source of livelihood. This included, firstly, old villagers. As a 57-years-old villager, Kefang, recalled:

“95% of people who were living in Village D were against land transfer. These were old people whom nobody wanted for any other work. We worried about not receiving land rent,

¹⁷ Yiyuan Chen, *Capital Flowing to the Countryside*, Beijing: Chinese Academy of Social Science Press, 2020.

because we've heard it happened in other places. Working our own hand was much saver. If we lost it, what were we going to eat?"

Those who stayed in village due to reproductive duties or illnesses were also against land transfer. For instance, Jiabang could not find migrant work, due to a previous eye injury. Ruzhong and his wife were forced to stay to care for their only daughter, who had cerebral palsy since childhood. From the 2000s, they made informal pacts with relatives and fellow villagers, who have migrated and abandoned farming. Ruzhong and Jiabang could farm their lands and keep all the income, in exchange for performing some reproductive works or a very low nominal rent.¹⁸ Before land transfer, the pacts allowed Jiabang to farm 20 mu of land (only 5 mu was from his small household), and Ruzhong 27 (his own was 4.8 mu). For them, since what they paid under informal arrangements was much smaller than the land rent paid by commercial farmers, they could not stop relatives and villagers from taking land away from them. Therefore, although land transfer did not create strong resistance among young villagers, it nonetheless greatly undermined the livelihood of old villagers and people like Ruzhong and Jiabang. For them, land transfer meant losing access to most of their land and farming income. It is with the second group of villagers that commercial farmers spent the most energy.

In addition to different economic interests, villages are further divided by pre-existing, lineage-based hierarchies. In Village C, 6 of its 9 extended households have the surname Wang and are relatives. The rest are 2 households with the surname Sun and 1 with the surname Dong. 3 brothers from the Wang households, whose father used to be the village teacher and landlord before the revolution and was rectified after the Cultural Revolution, have served as village cadres during the past three decades and controlled village politics.

Village D is roughly the same size as Village C. The Dai clan, whose ancestors used to be landlords before the revolution, is the village's major lineage and consists almost 60% of its population. Mr. Dai, the commercial farmer, is also from this clan. The rest of Village D's population comes from several individual households.¹⁹ Although the Dais do not dominate Village D's politics like the Wangs do in Village C, they still have important influence in village issues. In Village E, 60% of its population comes from the Liu Clan, so does the former Deer-Village party secretary, who continues to wield power even after retirement.

As commercial farmers approached the unwilling villagers, these powerful figures and kinship connections have been their most important organizational resources.

When Capital Comes with a Familiar Face

Instead of seeking help from local officials, all commercial farmers started persuading villagers by utilizing pre-existing social connections within the villages. Although Mr. Miao is not from Village C, he has been intimately familiar with the village's power structure, as he married the daughter of one of the powerful Wang brothers. Therefore, when he, alongside Mr. Gao and Mr. Fang, began to transfer land, he readily approached his father- and brothers-in-law for help. Miao treated the Wang brothers' households with cigarettes, dinners, and a red pocket of 1,000 yuan for each

¹⁸ This arrangement is called “种白地”. It is common in many parts of rural China. For relatives and fellow villagers, rent payment is usually no more than 50-100 yuan/mu, or a bag of rice or flour during Spring Festival. Local cadres also identify these villagers as the most ardent resisters against land transfer.

¹⁹ Village D used to be a trading town which was protected by walls, ditches, and cannons. The minor households are descendants of traders and artisans, who settled here before the revolution.

person, seeking to mobilize his relatives' help. Having received Miao's money, the Wang brothers' households, including Miao's brother-in-law, went door-to-door to persuade other villagers to sign the land-transfer contracts. For each household agreeing to sign, the Wangs also gave its head 100 yuan. With this small sum of money, they successfully recruited some villagers into their efforts of lobbying others. Just as one villager described, "He (Miao) knew exactly who to go to in the village. These were all influential people. With them taking the initiative, other villagers just went along and agreed."

In Village D, Mr. Dai also started from his own lineage to consolidate land, by first merging his parent's and brothers' lands to his own. His closest household members then helped him lobby his uncles, other relatives, and fellow villagers, who have been his neighbors since he was born. The proposal of land transfer was often coated in talks about long-term kinship affections and village relations. So, others found it extremely difficult to refuse. As young Dai's uncle later complained "He is your own nephew, how can you ever say no to him?"

In the case of Village E, Mr. Kang recruited his relative from the village to help him persuade other villagers. Even Mr. Li, the only farmer without local connection, still sought to use Cadre Liu's influence in the Liu clan. He secretly gave Liu a 30,000-yuan red pocket to make Liu negotiate land transfer on his behalf.

In addition to monetary gifts and persuasion, the farmers' status as local businessmen and their deep and long-time connections to the villages are perhaps the most important factors helping them gain trust from villagers. First, their local background appealed to many villagers, who deemed it safer to rent their land to someone they knew, rather than strangers from outside. Moreover, during critical moments in negotiation, village leaders' support for farmers helped overcome trust issues. When people from Village C worried that the farmers may run away and not pay rent, it was Wang Keguang, who has served as village head for 2 decades and was Miao's relative, stood out and assured the villagers. He said: "If they run away and do not pay your rent, I am still here and I will pay!" Eventually, it was Keguang's assurance that convinced many villagers. As one recalled, "Miao would have never been able to get us agreeing to rent our land, if not for Keguang's promise."

Effective use of local leadership and pre-existing kinship connections reduced the need for direct state intervention to persuade the majority of villagers, including many elderlies. As villagers later recalled, local cadres rarely participated in these negotiations. Indeed, cadres were perfectly content to take a back seat and watch the informal exercise of political power by farmers and village leaders. This not only fulfills land transfer quota set by higher authority, but also avoids potential state-peasant conflicts. However, when it comes to households who still refuse, like Jiabang and Ruzhong, the façade of peaceful, equal negotiation quickly drops. In these cases, local cadres both play a much more direct role, and give a free hand to commercial farmers and influential villagers to exploit local power imbalances to pressure and coerce villagers.

A good example is Village C. As village-wide negotiations came towards an end, 3 households, including Jiabang's, still resisted land transfer.²⁰ To deal with them, the Wang brothers paid several villagers to stay in the field all day to disrupt these households' farming activities. As Jiabang furiously recalled, they even sent people to sit on and throw pigshit onto the harvesters to prevent him from harvesting his crops, as the village party secretary turned a blind eye. Village C's unequal

²⁰ In the other two households, left-behind, old villagers, who resisted land transfer, have passed away in the past several years. So, the narrative here is based on recounts by other villagers.

power relations becomes evident in such confrontations. The Wang brothers, with firm control over local politics, have no concern when bullying weaker households and bending them to their wills. As a villager privately complained, they all behaved like “thugs.”

In Village D, it was cadres themselves who stayed in the field to disrupt sowing. They eventually destroyed Ruzhong's entire field to force him into transferring land. Such outright coercion was more severe in Village E, as Mr. Li was not from local. In one extreme case, which happened in a different town, village cadres called the police to arrest resisting villagers to force through land transfer.²¹ In such instances, direct display of despotic power by local elites and the state eventually led to “compulsory” land transfer.

Village Hierarchy and One-Way Mobilization

After commercial farmers managed to consolidate farmland, developing farms into profitable businesses turned out to be much more difficult. Over the years, all 7 farmers have incurred deep losses, become heavily indebted, and encountered difficulties paying land rent.²² Mr. Sun, Kang, and Li paid only through heavy borrowing. The other four farmers have delayed payment to ease financial pressure. Consequently, most households from Village C and some from Village D have not received rent for several years (Table 2). Although grievances permeated the two villages, peasant households have so far failed to organize collective protests against farmers. This section examines reasons behind such failures.

Unequal history

The Wang brothers' dominance in the process of land transfer is only the most recent manifestation of years of bullying, exploitation, and coercion by them in the village. These histories have created enduring conflicts and divisions, which prevented many other villagers from appealing to the Wangs to use their influence to address land rent grievances.

The history of imbalanced power relations dated back to the late-1970s. As collective farming was abandoned, local governments allowed production teams, which were mostly organized around natural villages, to divide up land among villagers. During the 1980s and 1990s, routine land redistribution took place to adjust to local population change.²³ In Village C, each of the 9 major households sent a representative to form a team, which would decide each household's landholding size and land boundaries. Although state policies clearly stipulated that every person should receive the same amount of land and each household's land size was determined based on its population, the Wang brothers still dominated the team and manipulated land redistribution. This led to unequal landholdings among households in Village C.²⁴ As villagers recalled:

‘We were so silly back then. There were 4 people in my family, and 4 in theirs (Wang). Why did we only get 6 mu of land, but they get 8? At the time, the team used a bamboo stick to measure land, they stealthily stuck it a bit further to occupy more land for

²¹ Interview with village cadre. April 2021.

²² This article does not seek to explain why commercial farms have failed to develop. The author will examine this question elsewhere. Rather, this article looks at the consequences of such failures, from the perspective of rent protests.

²³ James Kai-sing Kung, and Shouying Liu, Farmers' preferences regarding ownership and land tenure in post-Mao China: Unexpected evidence from eight counties. *The China Journal*, 38 (1997): 33-63.

²⁴ The author's fieldwork further shows that this is a fairly common phenomenon in Anhui and other parts of rural China. Higher authorities lacked the necessary information to check real conditions and abuses of power in the village. They mostly sanctioned whatever was reported from the village level.

themselves. But we could not challenge them even if we wanted, because we were illiterate back then and had no evidence.'

The direct victims of the Wangs' abuse of power were minority households in the village, the Suns, and the Dongs. Although they were coerced into accepting the Wangs' de facto extra landholding, they still had violent, physical fights with the Wangs over land boundaries until the early-2000s. As old Sun described: "We fought all the time over whose land it was. Conflicts only subsided in recent years, as people migrated. But even today, our relations are not good. We never socialize with each other." Even other members of the Wang clan have fallen victim. The Wang brothers' neighbor, who came from a more distant line, complained bitterly,

"In the last land redistribution during the 1990s, they occupied 2 mu of our land. They even changed the land records afterwards! We can't fight them, so we just stayed far away from them. Even if we don't have the ability to get our rent back, my household would never talk to them. We just have to endure it."

The long history of being exploiting and fighting with the Wang brothers prevented other villagers from making more sustained efforts to recruit the Wangs' help in organizing collective rent protests.²⁵

From the Wang brothers' perspective, their encroachment on other households' lands has also made them reluctant to engage in protests against farmers, as such activities would require the publishing of land records and likely expose their extra landholding and rent income in front of other villagers. This reluctance was further strengthened by their close ties with Mr. Miao and cash payments they received from the farmers. Therefore, although the Wangs did not seek to dissuade villagers from protesting, none of the leading figures during land transfer was willing to cooperate and lead protests. Keguang, who assured villagers about rent payment in negotiations, has moved to the city, and no longer showed up in the village. Members from the Wang households made various excuses when other villagers asked them to join the protests. As one villager described their indifference:

"There is no way that they can spit out what they have eaten. They would not say a word to you, and they don't care whether you get your rent so long as they get theirs. Everyone knows that they have extra land and rent."

However, non-involvement from the Wang brothers still deprived villagers' protests of leaders, who possessed enough social, political capital in local communities that commercial farmers could not ignore²⁶. Knowing that powerful figures would not turn against them, farmers feel confident when dealing with other villagers (more in later sections). As Mr. Miao said, "For this kind of thing (protests) to happen, there must be ringleaders. Without them, no one else would ask." What

²⁵ In addition to vertical conflicts between people occupying different positions in village power structure, there were horizontal tensions between those who have equal social standing. Such grudges could also impede collective action. For instance, Jiabang and Kedi were distant relatives in the Wang clan and both their families have lost their land without receiving payment. However, Jiabang never considered collaborating with Kedi in collective action, as he thought Kedi looked down upon him because he had no son.

²⁶ He, *New Rural China*.

happened in Village C reveals that, instead of a cohesive, tightly knitted community, a village can be very divided and unequal internally. While such hierarchies may facilitate top-down mobilization, they could also prevent bottom-up mobilization by weaker villagers. The old state-vs-peasantry binary does not adequately capture these internal conflicts, as well as the informal, but nonetheless coercive use of political power by the alliance among local leaders and agricultural capital.

“Face” and kinship: Land transfer’s social embeddedness

If weaker villagers could not rely on local leaders, can they bypass the village hierarchy and organize by themselves to confront the farmers? The fact that farmers and land-transferring peasants are often tightly embedded in the same kinship and village social networks means that they do not consider demanding land rent as only an economic issue. Its social implications present another barrier against collective action. This has been the case in both Village C and D.

As discussed above, Mr. Dai began consolidating land in Village D by first persuading his relatives. However, after he stopped paying rent, his brothers, uncles, and aunts could not ask for rent due to their close ties with him. They felt talking about money with close relatives was an embarrassing issue, which would undermine kinship relations. Moreover, they worried that pushing too hard on Dai would permanently wreck social relations within the extended household and make the Dais a laughingstock for other villagers. As Dai’s uncle said,

“It is your own nephew. You can’t press his head to force him to give back your money. He has pretty much lost everything after transferring land. Every New Year, you see cars lining up in front of his house asking for money. Other people can do this, but we can’t. Who is closer to a nephew than his uncle? I have given up on him paying my rent this couple of years. We simply don’t talk to him anymore.”

Such feelings made many of his relatives unwilling to talk about the situation, especially with people from outside the village. They considered this an act of speaking badly about their relatives behind their backs. It would undermine the extended household’s cohesion, give themselves bad reputations in the village community, and put shame on all relatives. These considerations are particularly evident in Hongkuo’s case, who is Dai’s grandfather’s brother. When we first met at the village’s small shop, he steadfastly refused he was owed any money. However, when we talked behind his doors later on, he said,

“I didn’t talk about it the first time we met because I didn’t want others to say it was Dai’s grandfather who was talking bad about him to strangers. How can I open my mouth? I am so furious with him. But I still cannot ask money from him.²⁷”

For other villagers, who have more distant connections with Dai, concerns about the impacts on local social relations also shape their decision on how to demand money. As they have been living as neighbors for several decades, they felt that pressing Dai in a collective manner would “make him lose face” and unable to stay in the village, especially when his relatives have not been asking for money themselves. They also worried that this would cause conflicts with Dai’s extended

²⁷ Unwillingness to talk to outsiders about conflicts within village, especially in front of other villagers, has posed some major challenges for the author in the initial stage of this research. In this context, doing individual interview in private settings is much more effective than conducting group ethnographic observation in village public spaces.

households, which would paralyze normal, everyday village life. As one villager explained the lack of effort to organize among themselves:

“We are all from the same village and know each other throughout our lives. No one wants to lead because we are too embarrassed to organize. After all, we will still be neighbors, no one will move away. Moreover, Dai’s extended household has at least several dozen people. You still have to socialize with them in funerals and weddings. If we fall out over land rent, how are we going to run other things?²⁸ Therefore, whenever we ask money from him, there is usually only 1 or 2 people.”

Even in Village C, where the hierarchical power relations have obviously worked against most villagers, they still did not consider collective protest or legal action as attractive tactics. Adopting these options would mean a complete disregard of familiar structures and ties in local society, which undergirded villagers’ everyday life, and put conflicts on the table. Such social costs were too heavy for many villagers. Like old Sun said, “It’s easier to get your money back in the cities than at home. No one wants to have a complete falling-out with them. We still have to see each other every day.”

Therefore, when agrarian capital penetrates through kinship and village social connections, it also embeds the issue of land rent into what scholars call “multiplex social relationships,” as land transfer entangles with other aspects of village social life.²⁹ Michelson demonstrates that this embeddedness in multiplex relations has disincentivized many in rural China from petitioning through legal channels.³⁰ Findings in Village C and D show that this also holds true concerning collective action. Villagers’ strong desire to maintain kinship connections and normal social activities, even only on a surface level, discourages them from escalating tensions onto the public space. Furthermore, the embeddedness of agricultural capital in local social fabrics deprives villagers of influential local leaders, who can potentially mediate. Both dynamics render the “justice-from-below” tactics ineffective.

What happens to Mr. Li in Village E is a counter example, revealing kinship and village connections’ contradictory roles in shaping rural collection actions. As Mr. Li is an outsider without local connections, land transfer for his farm was primarily carried out by the village party secretary and Cadre Liu’s strong will. Per the land-transfer contract, Mr. Li should pay next year’s land rent by October 1st. However, in 2018, villagers did not receive their rent until 3 months past the deadline, as Mr. Li ran into business difficulties. To demand land rent, villagers quickly organized themselves. Within one month, every household sent a representative to form a protest team of 30 people. The team then selected a leader, who was a senior member in the Liu Clan. He approached the party secretary, telling him that they would collectively file a formal petition to the county government if Mr. Li still did not pay rent by the coming Spring Festival. The team then went to Mr. Li’s farm and blocked its front gate. They further threatened him that they would tear

²⁸ Attending each other household’s funerals and weddings carries great social value for villagers, as it is one of the most important, routine rituals through which they maintain village social ties. Villagers generally believe that the more people come to your event, the more respected and better connected you are in the local community.

²⁹ William LF Felstiner, “Avoidance as dispute processing: An elaboration.” *Law and Society Review* (1975): 695-706; Michelson, “Justice from above or below.”

³⁰ *ibid*

down his chicken sheds and dig out his pear trees unless he paid the money. These impressive organizing efforts put sufficient pressure on Secretary Wang. Through his intervention, Mr. Li paid rent a month later. When I asked why villagers could organize so quickly, old Liu replied concisely,

“Li is a stranger from outside. We are not related to him in any way. So, we have no concerns when confronting him. It’s very simple, we only talk about money.”

This case shows that, when agriculture capital is not embedded in local communities, existing social structures can still effectively mobilize villagers against outsiders, despite its internal hierarchy. This stands in sharp contrast to Village C and D, even though the villages are located next to each other and belong to the same administrative village. As a township cadre aptly summarized,

“When there are outsiders, no matter how serious the internal strife was, villagers, even village cadres, could always unite. However, as soon as the outsiders are gone, they will immediately go back to fighting each other.”

This article does not argue that the presence/absence of kinship and local connections alone determines the results of rural protests. As earlier studies show, consequences of collective actions also depend on political opportunities, local officials’ incentive structures, and other factors.³¹ Rather, the emphasis here is on the contradictory roles played by local leaders and social relations in the early-stage formation of collective actions (Table 3). While they facilitate rural protests in earlier years, we should also be aware of how internal hierarchy and dense social embeddedness can dissolve within-village solidarity for collective action.

	Village C	Village D	Village E
Agricultural capital’s embeddedness with influential villagers/lineages	Strong	Strong	Weak
Local leaders, kinship connections’ role in rent protests	Absent	Absent	Mobilizing
Formation of collective rent protests	No	No	Yes

Table 3. Dynamics of rent protest in three villages. Source: Author’s fieldwork.

Individualized Confrontations

As villagers could not use local social structure to organize collective protests, they have few other options but to ask for rent individually. This takes place either in-person or through phone calls. Instead of formal land-use right and land-transfer contract, peasants often base their claims on immediate needs, which may include emergency medical bills, loss of other income source, expenditure on children’s marriage, and so on. In this sense, peasants’ actions largely follow a subsistence logic, although their needs today have less to do with physical survival and more with social reproduction.³² Because such needs vary greatly across households, villagers’ efforts are

³¹ O’Brien and Li, “Rightful Resistance in Rural China,”; Jay Chih-Jou Chen, “A Protest Society Evaluated.”

³² James Scott, *The moral economy of the peasant*. Yale University Press, 1977. For definition of social reproduction, see page 1342-1343 in: Jacka, Tamara “Translocal family reproduction and agrarian change in China: A new analytical framework.” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 45, no. 7 (2018): 1341-1359.

highly sporadic, and they rarely go in large groups. The best they can manage was to form small groups of 4-5 people. As one villager says, "Each household only asks for its own rent. There is no fixed schedule. We go whenever we need money."

The subsistence logic also dictates how villagers interact with farmers. The most common approach they use is to emphasize their material difficulties and desperation, hoping to gain farmers' sympathy and mercy. In one interaction the author witnessed, one woman pleaded Mr. Gao to give her some rent he owed her. She told Mr. Gao that a recent waist injury has made her unable to make and sell bums in nearby villages, which was her primary source of income. When Mr. Gao showed reluctance, she further lowered her bargaining position and said, "At least you can give me a little, if only to just dispense a beggar. Otherwise, I would not even have money to buy bums and vegetables. We had no land left." Eventually, Mr. Gao gave her 5 yuan, not even enough to buy one dinner.

Such individualized interactions sometimes turn into very dramatic display of emotions and intense confrontation, especially when reproductive needs suddenly appear. Under urgent pressure, peasants often choose to 'make scenes' to maximize pressure on farmers, as refusal to help may jeopardize farmers' position in local communities. It differs significantly from what Scott has described as "weapons of the weak," which are often disguised and latent. For instance, Rujie recalled a late-night chase, where his nephew drove him to a lavish restaurant in the county seat to confront Dai. Rujie demanded some rent payment in front of Dai's friends, as he needed 800 yuan for his relative's wedding the next day. In another incident, Dai's aunt went to Dai's house to ask money for her son's wedding. She took the extreme measure of crying and staying there for two days until he agreed to pay some.³³

However, these individualized efforts only have very limited success. First, peasants are generally reluctant to escalate tension, even in isolated interactions, due to their embeddedness in multiplex kinship and village social relations. Second, farmers have developed a series of tactics to effectively stall and avoid most peasants' demands.

Farmers' Tactics

Farmers use four tactics to skillfully exploit villagers' long-term migration and internal division to deal with rent grievances: (1) no-response and delay (2) divide and conquer; (3) hide and seek; and (4) direct intimidation.

First, as working-age villagers work and live in cities during most time of the year, the only thing they can do to ask for rent is to make phone calls to farmers. However, their physical absence from village greatly reduces the risk of them causing troubles. It creates room for farmers to not respond to their phone calls and delay rent payment. For instance, in autumn 2019, Jiaxue's daughter-in-law suffered injury in a traffic accident and was in urgent need of surgery. With his son not having enough money at the moment, Jiaxue called Mr. Gao to demand 5,000 yuan of his land rent. However, as Jiaxue angrily said, he must have called "3,000 times," but was still not able to talk to Mr. Gao. Many other villagers experienced the same. Jiabin, who owed money to workers because he recently rebuilt his village house, described his interaction with Mr. Gao:

"At the beginning, he said he wanted to talk over the phone. Then he added me on WeChat. However, I called him many times. He didn't even bother to pick up the phone or reply to my message. My father also called him, and he said he had no money."

³³ Attending funerals and weddings are essential components of village social life. Most people consider the associated costs as indispensable expenditures if they want to maintain their standing in the village.

According to Mr. Gao, his lack of response was intentional, as he tried to delay paying rent for as long as possible. He would give villagers a small sum only when they pressed him hard enough and were in desperate need.

Farmers further seek to divide and conquer those villagers, who can meet them in person, through secret and selective rent payment. On the one hand, they would privately pay full rent to the few influential villagers, who have helped them consolidate land, to keep them out of other villagers' organizing efforts. On the other, farmers incrementally gave small sums to a handful of households, who were in extreme economic difficulties. According to old Sun, who recently got 2,000 yuan from Mr. Miao for his daughter's wedding:

“When he agrees to pay you some rent, he would send you a WeChat message telling you to come to his home at a certain time. When you arrive, you would find the money on the table. But he is not there. His father would tell you to not tell others that you have got the money. Villagers always go to his house secretly. But you will never get the full amount you are owed.”

Farmers use a third tactic, which villagers call “hide and seek,” to avoid meeting and protests. This tactic follows a clear seasonal pattern, which is shaped by peasants' migration cycle. In particular, farmers would intentionally hide away from their farms and the villages before and during the Spring Festival, as this is the only time when young villagers can go back home and potentially escalate local tensions. Mr. Miao, who is from local, has been using the time to do inter-province fruit transportation during the past several years. As villagers complained, “He will just hide away during this time of the year and use our money to eat and drink. Isn't he shameless?” When pressure from villagers get too strong, farmers sometimes pretend to agree to meet by giving out false locations and times. However, they rarely show up in these scheduled meetings. These tricks help them out-wait villagers, who have to leave quickly after the festival to re-start migrant work.

When interaction become confrontational, farmers would use direct intimidation and verbal abuse as a last tactic. For instance, two old women from Village C once asked Mr. Miao about rent. Mr. Miao furiously replied, “I don't have any money. Go back where you come from. You can cut off my trees. I dare you!” Farmers would also imply that they have connections, which could protect them against peasants' claims, and challenge villagers to bring disputes to local cadres or the court. As Mr. Dai told his fellow villagers, “Just go and sue me. I don't care!” These moves have been successful at intimidating peasants. As one villager complained, “They say you can cut off their trees. But they have relatives who are township and county officials. Who dare to really do it!” Sometimes strong responses from farmers could even break up fragile alliances among villagers, discouraging them from making further attempts. According to Aunt Sun, who used to be very active in protesting,

“One time I went to Mr. Fang's house with three other people from the village. We ended up having a fight with his son. His son spoke very impolitely. He even smashed bottles and tried to beat us. The person who led us saw him getting angry and got scared. She backpaddled and started playing nice! I ended up being the villain. After that, I got disheartened and no longer wanted to participate.”

These dynamics in peasant-farmer rent interaction have three consequences. First, as peasants have no option but to emphasize their reproductive needs and material difficulties in interactions with farmers, they open space for farmers to appropriate the subsistence logic and use it against them. In negotiations, farmers turn peasants' difficulties into a criterion, which they alone could use to judge whether certain households' needs are urgent enough and, therefore, 'deserve' to be paid rent. According to Mr. Miao,

“We give rent based on who the person is asking. We know some families do have economic difficulties. So, we normally would pay some of their rent, although not in full amount. There are other families who cry poverty “哭穷” in front of us. But our villages are next to each other. We know they have a lot of saving. So, we don't pay them.”

In this way, farmers legitimize and rationalize their decision of delaying and selectively paying rent. Their appropriation of the subsistence logic transforms rent-payment from a right, protected by law and the land-transfer contract, into a privilege, which peasants need to compete and earn. This turns land rental into de facto land dispossession.

Second, the divide-and-conquer tactic creates further fragmentation and suspicion among villagers, thereby adding more barriers for collective actions. On the one hand, as payment is made in secret, villagers often do not know which households have received rent and how much. No household, not even the influential figures, who have helped the farmers, would admit they have got the money in public. As Jiabang complains, “Whenever you ask, they would say they haven't got the money, like the rest of us.” The situation was so muddled that other villagers did not know for certain that the Wangs have got their rent until it accidentally slipped out of their mouth during an afternoon chat, which the author has witnessed. The son of one of the Wang brothers, who has done door-to-door lobbying and pressuring for Mr. Miao, bragged in front of other villagers, “I never worried about not getting my share. Whenever I ran out of money, I went to Keguang and Mr. Miao. I think I even had more money than what I was owed.” The secrecy has created an atmosphere of distrust among villagers, as everyone thinks the others may have got their rent. For those who have received some rent through piecemeal payments, they would prefer to maintain this under-the-table channel. Therefore, they are unwilling to jeopardize their relationship with farmers by participating in collective efforts. Although villagers all play their angry face in public to avoid being targeted at and maintain a façade of village solidarity, many have different thoughts in private. As one villager says,

“Our village is small, but very complicated. Our hearts do not work in the same direction. Everyone is talking about others behind their back. Otherwise, we would have long got our rent, like Village E.”

Here, it is evident that farmers skillfully exploit villagers' individual interests to divide them and contain collective resistance. They have appropriated the relational repression tactic used by state actors, which is documented by earlier studies.³⁴ However, instead of exploiting connections to the state bureaucracy, farmers' tactics depend on their deep knowledge about each peasant

³⁴ See Deng and Luo et al.

household's needs. In other words, the effectiveness of this tactic derives from farmers' embeddedness in local community.

Last, the difficult experience of interacting with farmers and frequent failures in getting rent payment have demoralized many villagers and discouraged them from making further attempts. Such impacts are particularly evident among old villagers. After many futile attempts over the past several years, nowadays most villagers have given up hope of talking to farmers. As one villager complains, "I have been asking for rent every day and said everything that can be said. I have had enough, and I don't want to do it anymore."

The Missing Cadres

As both collective and individual efforts by peasants have met with failures, could they resolve the disputes by appealing to local cadres, who have traditionally been effective mediators in solving rural conflicts in China? The answer is often negative. Interview and ethnographic observation show that village and township cadres are notably absent in rent conflicts, despite villagers' effort to get them involved.

From the government side, although land transfer is primarily a from-the-top policy, officials on various levels have shirked their responsibility in mediating disputes. According to the county Agricultural Bureau, conflicts over land rent are 'civic disputes over contracts' that should be resolved between farmers and peasants within village collectives. The county government has no duty to mediate.³⁵ At the township level, the party secretary has explicitly ordered his subordinates to "not get involved in rent disputes and leave them to the villages." As a result, although grievances over land are widespread among villagers, they are entirely absent in government agendas from township and above. As one cadre, who was recently reassigned to the township and knew about the situation from interview with the author, said, "I am so puzzled. Why has nobody ever talked about this in the township government?"

As higher-level authorities refuse to get involved, village cadres are equally unhelpful. When villagers approached them, cadres would normally reply "I'll ask them for it. Come back later." However, such promises were almost never fulfilled. Even when cadres did ask the farmers, these conversations did not lead to any results. Over the years, villagers have realized that cadres are only "doing empty formalities". On some occasions, responses from cadres could be very hostile. As one villager recalled about her encounter with Secretary Wang,

"There is this one time when we went to the village party branch to ask for help in talking to Mr. Dai. As soon as he heard our words, Secretary Wang got angry. He yelled at us 'Is it me who's farming your land? Why do you ask me! If I tell you to eat shit, will you eat it too!?'"³⁶

³⁵ Interview with county official, August 2021.

³⁶ Sometimes officials do acknowledge their responsibility in helping peasants negotiate with farmers. As one cadre said, "It was village cadres who made the effort at the beginning to make villagers agree to transfer their land. Now that villagers don't receive rent, of course they would come to us." However, cadres often make such confessions when no villagers are around, and rarely turn them into direct action, as they do not want extra duty for little gain.

Several factors contribute to this lack of reaction from government officials. The first concerns the changing nature of rural social protests. In earlier protests, local state officials have consistently been the primary actors who interacted with peasants. It is at them that peasants have targeted their grievances. This binary defines the relationship between the subordinate and the superordinate, and has been the focus of most studies on China's rural protests. However, the penetration of agrarian capital, as well as its daily presence, in local communities has significantly altered this dynamic. The mobilization of local leadership and kinship structures has significantly replaced state-peasantry interaction and direct state coercion in the process of land transfer. Therefore, many cadres do feel they do not bear responsibility, as many contracts are signed without them formally playing a part. In other words, the informal exercise of power through non-state, local social relations has provided state actors an excuse to extricate themselves from dealing with the aftermaths of land transfer, despite it being a state-pushed agenda.

Second, as cadres have only carried out land transfer, but not the daily management of commercial farms, some of them genuinely believe that they should not be held accountable for consequences of farmers' businesses failures, over which they have no control. In this sense, their unwillingness to intervene does not entirely originate from a negligence of duty or a lack of material incentives. Instead, it reflects cadres' awareness of the limits of their power. Under capital's deepening penetration into agricultural production, they know very well that a large part of the reasons causing villagers' grievances lie in the market and are beyond their control. Many cadres confess that there is little they can do in helping villagers. As Secretary Wang says, "Dai is still owing me 50,000 yuan. What can I do? Even if Xi Jinping comes, he will not be able to solve the problem. The business is just not profitable. All I can do is to have a word with him."

Villagers reacted differently to cadres' irresponsiveness. Some, especially those who experienced coercion during land transfer, have become deeply disappointed and distrustful of local government. Repeated failures to get cadres involved made them believe seeking cadres' help to address rent disputes is futile. They increasingly saw cadres' actions as solely driven by desires to make monetary profits. As one villager put it, "The cadres have no material gains in helping us. Of course, they would want to do less instead of more. We were all used to it."

However, other villagers shared cadres' feeling and only blamed the farmers. They acknowledged the major parts played by villagers themselves. Some even privately said that they felt embarrassed to seek help from cadres too frequently, as some land-transfer contracts were signed between farmers and villagers without cadres' intervention. Old Sun's opinion represented the second group:

"Government has been good to us. The issue that bothered villagers the most now is rent payment. But we have to blame ourselves for it (following the Wang brothers' mobilization). It's not the government's fault."

This difference has created confusion and division among villagers, in terms of the target of their grievances. As Kedi said, "I don't even know who to blame for this entire thing. We can't find the source of it. The whole thing is a mess!" New tensions among local state, agricultural capital, local elites, and ordinary villagers have diverted a lot of tension away from local cadres and made it more difficult for villagers to organize.

Even for those who are unsatisfied with the cadres, few dared to escalate their anger into direct conflicts. The concerns they had were very similar to those preventing them from pursuing more confrontational tactics towards commercial farmers. According to Rujie,

“We are afraid of pressuring the cadres too hard. The most we can do is to have a small quarrel. If you have a fall-out with them, they will target you and make your life very difficult. To do things in the village, such as building a new house or getting government poverty subsidies, you still have to rely on them.”

Peasants' fear of damaging their relations with cadres reflects how land-rent disputes have become firmly embedded in multiplex, yet unequal, local social relations. This embeddedness contains individual grievances from evolving into collective actions, which would damage peasants' other interests.

Conclusion

Existing literature on China's rural social protest has so far focused on collective actions caused by heavy taxation, local corruption, and land appropriation for urbanization. This article points to a new source of rural grievance: unpaid land rent by commercial farmers. Given the scale of nationwide campaign to promote agricultural land transfer and the rapid development of large-scale commercial farming, contentions concerning land-rent payment can have widespread impacts across many parts of rural China. Therefore, this article fills an important gap in the social protest literature, and connects it to a quickly developing scholarship on increasing capitalization in China's agriculture.

In particular, this article traces the mobilization and leadership structures, tactics, and consequences of rent protests/disputes. It argues, first of all, pre-existing local leaderships and social connections play contradictory roles in land transfer and rent protests. When commercial farmers form alliance with village/kinship leaders through pre-existing village/kinship connections, they could exploit unequal power relations to facilitate land transfer. However, this mobilization is only one-way, as weaker villagers could not recruit local elites or use existing social connections to organize rent protests.

On the one hand, this is because dense connections between agricultural capital and local elites make the latter unwilling to play leadership roles. On the other, agricultural capital's embeddedness in multiplex local social relations, as relatives and fellow villagers, also make peasants unwilling to escalate tension into collective action, as they hope to maintain everyday social life. The same concerns also prevent peasants from adopting more aggressive tactics against non-responsive local cadres. In this way, agricultural capital's embeddedness in unequal local social relations prevents villagers from organizing collective actions. Fragmented and individualized protests have met little success and are contained by commercial farmers.

These findings further shed theoretical lights on the limits of the peasant-against-state framework, which has greatly shaped earlier conceptualization of rural social protests in China. First, the predominant framework often sees local elites, like village cadres and lineage heads, as leaders acting against state encroachment or mediating disputes, and local social connections as mobilizing structures. However, this understanding downplays how they may undermine peasants' effort to organize. This article shows that, agricultural capital's growing and daily presence in China's deep

rural hinterland not only exposes pre-existing hierarchies and tensions within local communities, but also actively exploits them to contain peasant grievances. The capital-elite alliance deprives ordinary villagers of leaders and organizational resources in potential rent protests. It further renders the justice-from-below tactic ineffective, as few local elites are willing to mediate between villagers and farmers. Since local elites and agricultural capital form alliances in a relatively autonomous manner and without extensive state intervention, the target of peasant grievances moves away from local state actors. Therefore, dynamics of land-rent contentions differ from earlier rural protests.

One consequence of this re-centering is that direct confrontation between state and peasants becomes less frequent in rent protests. Despite this change, relational exercise of power through individualized persuasion, pressure, and coercion, which have helped local cadres control other rural social tensions, mostly remain effective. Commercial farmers have appropriated these tactics to push through land transfer and contain rent disputes. However, one important change does take place. Differing from cadres, who mostly exploit individuals' connections to state bureaucracy, farmers' power comes from localized knowledge and social embeddedness. This article points to the growing complicities in China's rural social protests and calls for a new analytical framework to analytically incorporate changing dynamics among capital, state, local elites, and ordinary villagers.