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Land dispossession, rural gentrification and displacement: Blurring the rural-urban boundary in Chengdu, China

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ABSTRACT

Rural China is experiencing rapid socioeconomic transformations, including suburbanisation and rural gentrification. In this paper, we argue that to understand these processes, we have to take into account the changes in rural land rights. Based on an analysis of a pilot case for China's rural collective commercial construction land (RCCCL) reform policy at the edge of Chengdu City, we demonstrate how state-led rural land reform paves the way for stealthy land dispossession and rural gentrification. Our argument in this paper is threefold. First, given the entrenched collective land use rights of rural villagers in China, state-led land commodification, is a necessary condition for rural gentrification in China. Secondly, the prospect of capital accumulation through rural gentrification motivates entrepreneurial public and private actors to promote such reforms in ways that dispossess rural peasants and peasant collectives of their land (use) rights. Thirdly, the particularities of dispossession through state-led land reform result in particular experiences of displacement and displacement pressure on the side of affected rural communities. Our findings contribute to the decentring of rural gentrification theory, in that they underline the necessity to include the particular histories of land commodification and dispossession in our understanding of rural gentrification in contexts where rural land is partly or wholly shielded from market influences. In the case of China, dynamics of rural gentrification are blurring the rural-urban boundary on three dimensions: political economy (land use governance), material infrastructure (landscape and residential architecture), and socio-cultural practices (rural livelihoods and identity).

1. Introduction

Changes at the rural-urban fringe have received ample academic attention in high-income western economies (Thissen et al., 2021). Processes like suburbanisation or rural gentrification have blurred the boundary between city and countryside, forming hybrid social, economic and spatial orders in peri-urban areas (Qvistrom, 2007; Woods, 2009). In middle and low-income countries, such processes have attracted less scholarly attention. Nonetheless, the growth of the middle classes in upper-middle income economies like China, Russia or Turkey and their consequent insertion into rural and peri-urban areas (Kocabıyık and Loopmans, 2021; Mamonova and Sutherland, 2015; Qian et al., 2013), has triggered a debate about the globalisation of peri-urban processes and its theoretical consequences (Cocola-Gant, 2018; Phillips and Smith, 2018; Wu and Keil, 2020). It challenges the Anglo-American hegemony in urban and rural studies and calls for a multi-centred theorizing of gentrification, including from 'the Global East' (Kong and Qian, 2019). In response, rural gentrification has gained some interest from scholars in China, who so far mainly focused on the cultural and consumption dimensions of the phenomenon (Qian et al., 2013; Wu and Gallent, 2021; Yang and Xu, 2022; Zhang, 2022), leaving the production side largely unattended.

In this paper, we argue that exactly this production perspective of rural gentrification merits attention in the case of rural China, as it teaches us valuable lessons for rural gentrification in other economies beyond the West. The particularities of land tenancy in rural China are well known, and its consequences for urban expansion and rural revitalisation policies have been documented extensively. Only a few, however, have directly related them to rural gentrification. Kan (2019b, 2021), as a rare example, does emphasize the politics of land transfer in the study of rural gentrification, but does not elaborate all of its consequences, e.g. for displacement. With a case study of a peri-urban development in Chengdu, China, we aim to fill this gap in the debate on rural gentrification in China by explicitly linking the particularities of

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China's political economy of rural land to gentrification-induced displacement in peri-urban areas.

Theoretically, we argue how in the case of China, the forms of displacement resulting from rural gentrification cannot be decoupled from the specific processes of land rights dispossession required for it. We rely on three interrelated arguments. First, state-led land commodification, based on land use rights reforms and voluntary land rights transfers, is a necessary condition for rural gentrification in China. Secondly, the prospect of capital accumulation through rural gentrification motivates entrepreneurial public and private actors to promote such reforms in ways that dispossess rural peasants and peasant collectives of their land (use) rights, both directly and indirectly. Thirdly, the particularities of dispossession through state-led land reform affect gentrification induced experiences of displacement. Whereas the particularities of rural gentrification in China are very much grounded in strong legal, economic, and cultural distinctions between the city and the countryside, the process itself blurs the rural-urban boundary in three different ways: it introduces a more urban style of land governance in rural areas, hybridises the rural residential architecture and landscape, and changes socio-cultural practices and economic life.

The key contribution of this paper is both theoretical and empirical. Theoretically, we expose the difficulties of transposing rural gentrification theories from land regimes which are based on private property and market transfers of both ownership and use rights of land to contexts where land, being under a state or commons-based regime, is wholly or partly shielded from market influence. Consequently, we emphasize that gentrification and displacement should not be studied in isolation, but be related to the moments of commodification and dispossession which pave the way for it, and the actors and practices mediating these processes. However, the study of land commodification and dispossession is not simply an additional step in the analysis of gentrification. The commodification step is a fundamental component of the historicity of rural gentrification and displacement; its influence reverberates throughout the process, explaining the uniqueness of rural gentrification in particular places. Empirically, our case study is strategically well-chosen as a case which, being a pilot district for the policy experiment leading to the rural collective commercial construction land (RCCCL)-reform, is informative for what might be happening in the coming decades in rural towns and villages nationwide and therefore allows us to give valuable policy advice.

In the remainder of the paper, we will first discuss the relevance and limits of rural gentrification theories to understand processes at the urban-rural fringe in China and introduce two necessary amendments: the issue of land rights and dispossession, and its connection with a broad understanding of gentrification-induced displacement. Secondly, we will introduce our case study and research methods. Afterwards, our empirical findings will first focus on the relation between gentrification and land consolidation and commodification, after which the particularities of displacement are discussed. Based on these insights, we conclude our paper with a reflection on a rural gentrification theory for China, rural gentrification's effects on the rural-urban boundary and suggestions for China's rural revitalisation agenda.

2. Connecting land dispossession, displacement and rural gentrification

Rural gentrification competes with other perspectives such as counter-urbanisation or amenity migration as a theoretical framework to understand population mobilities and related socioeconomic dynamics at the rural-urban boundary. Generally, rural gentrification, like urban gentrification, indicates an influx of higher income dwellers in rural areas, combined with (re-)investments in the built environment and the displacement of original residents of a lower income category. For two reasons, we believe a rural gentrification perspective is helpful to understand our case study. First of all, our case study does not merely involve urban-to-rural migration, but also forms of displacement, a dimension largely ignored by other theoretical perspectives on peri-urban development but intensely theorized in the literature on (rural) gentrification (Marcuse, 1985; Phillips et al., 2020; Slater, 2009).

Secondly, we aim to identify the political economic drivers of change in rural China. Rural gentrification in China is not sufficiently explained by the new middle classes' rural idyll and amenity seeking behaviour. In a context where rural land has long been collectively held and legally untradable, we need to take into account the particularities of land commodification, and its promotion by the state, to understand gentrification. Inspired by Smith's (1984) rent gap theory which explains gentrification through the profit-calculation of land owners and real estate investors, rural gentrification studies have developed a theoretical apparatus which captures reality beyond the mere movement of people and their consumer behaviour, and takes into account control and conflict over land ownership, land use and land value. In the case of rural China, where land is held by the village collective and legally untradeable, market-driven behaviour is attenuated. To allow gentrification to happen, the state needs to first create land markets through which a rent gap can express itself. To understand rural gentrification and ensuing displacement in China, we need to adapt Western political economic theories to account for the multifaceted role of state governance in the commodification of land (use rights) and the creation of land markets (Haila, 2007).

2.1. State-led land commodification and rural gentrification

In the West, the distinctiveness of rural gentrification has often been framed around the so-called 'rural idyll', explaining the influx of middle class consumers through the romanticized ideas they held about countryside living (Phillips et al., 2020). Rural China, it seems, has long been devoid of such romanticized images, considered backward and lacking the necessary amenities by the wider public (Wu, 2020). China's long experience with rural decline and rural-to-urban exodus (Li et al., 2021; Liu and Li, 2017) has stimulated a productivist attitude towards rural sustainability (Zhang, 2022). Nonetheless, in the 2006 'building a new socialist countryside' (later 'rural revitalisation') policy, rural revitalisation is promoted through land consolidation for increased economic efficiency, as well as the introduction of middle class consumers (Li et al., 2018a). This promotion of rural leisurely consumption taps into an emerging 'aestheticization' of the countryside amongst rural Chinese urban middle classes (Cody, 2019). Nonetheless, the emergence of a consumable rural idyll, while being a driver for middle-class migration to the countryside and an instrument of rural revitalisation, is not our main reason for applying a rural gentrification framework to China. The value of rural gentrification lies elsewhere, in its attention for the function of land rent and land governance. To deploy these insights in China, the particularities of China's rural land regime need to be taken into account.

Political economy approaches to gentrification have been developed in the context of capitalist housing and land markets. Although the role of the state has received increasing recognition in the past decades (Aalbers, 2019; Hackworth and Smith, 2001; Hochstenbach, 2017; Loopmans, 2008), most studies focus on countries where land ownership is largely private and relatively unregulated land markets have a long history. In such contexts of fully commodified land, the rent gap appears as the dominant mechanism to explain spatial variation in rural gentrification, with various self-interested private actors reacting to, as well as influencing the rent gap (Gkartzios and Scott, 2012; Phillips, 2005; Solana-Solana, 2010). Western studies of rural rent gap dynamics have developed valuable insights into the role of state actors and legal and institutional contexts (Phillips, 2005; Sayre, 2011; Walker, 2017), generally focusing on how the rent gap is affected by planning (Darling, 2005; Murdoch and Marsden, 1995) or (infrastructural) development policies (Bijker and Haartsen, 2012; Fertner, 2013; Gkartzios and Scott, 2010; Grimsrud, 2011). In rural China, entrepreneurial local state representatives and village cadres have also been identified as rent-seeking

actors stimulating gentrification (Qian et al., 2013; Yang et al., 2018), and the impact of public infrastructure on the value of rural land has equally been noted (Liu and Kesteloot, 2015). Nonetheless, Western perspectives on the role of the state do not suffice when it comes to understanding the emergence and operation of land markets and their relation to gentrification in China (Haila, 2007). In rural China, the direct transfer of land use rights to and between private investors has only recently been allowed through legal reforms and land markets have been consciously, but selectively created through the combined action of central and local state actors (Shin, 2016).

China's land system features a three-pronged urban-rural dualism that complicates rural land markets. The first duality concerns ownership: urban land and rural land belong to different owners (Ho and Lin, 2003; Po, 2011). Whereas urban land is owned by the state (and managed by urban governments), villagers collectively own rural land (generally managed by a rural economic organization or a village committee). The second one is based on the separation of use rights from land ownership, and the different legal statuses of rural and urban land use rights (Wang et al., 2015). Urban use rights are freely tradable via the market, but in rural areas, use rights can only be redistributed between members of the collective. The third dualism relates to legal land use restrictions. Urban construction is only allowed on state-owned (urban) land, whereas most of the collectively owned rural land is reserved for agricultural production and rural housing. Consequently, market-led urban development has always required an administrative relocation of land from rural collectives to urban governments.

However, recently, under the flag of rural revitalisation, governments have also resorted to more stealthy, cooptative forms of land commodification in rural areas themselves (Kan, 2019a; Zhang, 2018b). As Kan (2019a, 2019b) observed, new mechanisms for land development in peri-urban areas enable village collectives to transfer land use rights to development companies who consolidate and develop the land for more profitable use such as large scale agriculture. Moreover, since 2004, the so-called 'linkage policy' (*Zengjian Guagou*) allows the transformation of agricultural land to urban construction land to be compensated with a reduction of rural construction land (Li et al., 2018b; Long et al., 2012). Villagers moving to concentrated settlements and transforming the remaining rural construction land into agricultural land, win 'urbanisation quota' which can be traded for a profit to developers in urban areas via the 'linkage policy'. Finally, a 2015 policy experiment focused on the commodification of RCCCL, destined for industry, commerce, or other economic functions, but not for residential purposes. After a set of local experiments, it has now been integrated in the general *Land Administration Law* and rolled out nationwide. This policy reform allows the direct transaction of RCCCL use rights. Different from other categories of rural construction land (for rural housing or public facilities), use rights can be purchased by external investors directly from the village collective (represented by a collective asset management company, CAMC henceforth), without the need for prior land ownership transfer to the (urban) state (Tian et al., 2020).

The central role of various state levels and legal reforms in the commodification of rural land has important consequences for those who benefit from gentrification. But the consequences are mediated by the form of dispossession that is required for such commodification. Hence, to elaborate a theory of rural gentrification and displacement in China, we need to develop a situated understanding of land dispossession first (Kan, 2021).

2.2. Dispossession and displacement

The term 'dispossession' has been introduced by Harvey (2003) to denote the persistently violent and disruptive origins of capital accumulation. Dispossession entails the loss of access, by extra-economic force, to particular resources to the benefit of a more powerful actor (Levien, 2012; Nichols, 2018). Recent studies on urban gentrification have indicated dispossession through state- (Lopez-Morales, 2016) or market-led interventions (Ortega, 2016) as a necessary precursor to gentrification (Shin, 2016), but studies of rural gentrification have, so far, remained relatively silent about it. Nonetheless, also in a rural context, land dispossession is seen as an important condition for contemporary capital accumulation (Chuang, 2015; Kan, 2019a; Levien, 2011). Rural dispossession has a long history and comes in the form of direct land and commons grabbing (Xu, 2018) as well as more indirect value grabbing (Andreucci et al., 2017; Kan, 2019a).

In rural China, land commodification through 'direct' land dispossession for the purpose of market-based urbanisation and industrialisation has occurred under the impulse of revenue-hungry urban governments and has resulted in (forced and sometimes violent) displacement of whole villages (Gürel, 2019; Sargeson, 2013; Shih, 2017; Zhang, 2018a). When expropriating rural land for urban development, urban governments provide a one-off administrative compensation to village collectives, while themselves receiving market-based lease fees from real estate developers using the land. This means villagers miss out profitable development opportunities whereas urban governments reap high interests as cities expand (Wu et al., 2007). Moreover, urban development displaces villagers from their agricultural land, depriving them of their original livelihood.

Land dispossession and displacement through requisition by urban governments have been the cause of significant rural unrest (Guo, 2001; He et al., 2009). But more stealthy forms of dispossession through the direct commodification of land or value grabbing without the intervention of urban governments have not gone uncontested either. Villagers are able to accrue some benefits for themselves, such as monetary returns through rent from private companies and access to an enhanced level of services in concentrated settlements (Liu et al., 2018), but these are not equally distributed amongst village populations. The village committees, controlled by rural cadres, are deeply involved as land brokers, and reap the most benefits (He and Wu, 2009; Kan, 2019b; Yang et al., 2017) whereas others incur evident losses (Zhao and Webster, 2011), even when not physically displaced (Zhao, 2019). The unequal distribution of costs and benefits between villagers, village cadres, local governments and land developers is concealed through 'complex geographies and temporalities of dispossessory arrangements, financing mechanisms and discursive tactics' (Zhang, 2018b), but nonetheless, dispossession by stealth remains highly divisive (Xu, 2018), creating new rural stratifications amongst villagers, and between villagers and newcomers (Chuang, 2015).

When commodification and dispossession are oriented towards rural gentrification, the outcomes can become even more complex. Some villagers are able to grasp the arrival of middle class urban consumers in their village as a business opportunity, renting out rooms or setting up leisure-oriented businesses on their family properties (Qian et al., 2013). Referring to the classical text of Marcuse (1985) on displacement, Qian et al. (2013) explain how in their case study, villagers are protected from direct physical or economic displacement through their use right of rural residential land, but other groups, including pioneering gentrifiers, in the village effectively experienced economic displacement. Yet Zhao (2019) pleads to include sociocultural changes in the analysis, as some villagers might experience 'displacement pressure' (Marcuse, 1985): their livelihoods and cultural practices are rendered impossible through the dispossession of agricultural land, settlement concentration, cultural dominance of middle class consumers and rising living costs (Zhang, 2022; Zhao, 2019), in a case study of tourism gentrification, identify how those who are not able to tap into the emerging gentrification economy fail to cover the rising costs of living in gentrified areas, and continue to out-migrate to cities. Paraphrasing Marcuse (1985), we could call this economic displacement pressure.

To conclude, we have indicated two ways in which rural gentrification research in China can add to gentrification theory, building on three interrelated arguments (Fig. 1). First, we emphasized that in rural China, gentrification is not possible without a prior phase of land commodification and dispossession, given the country's particular land

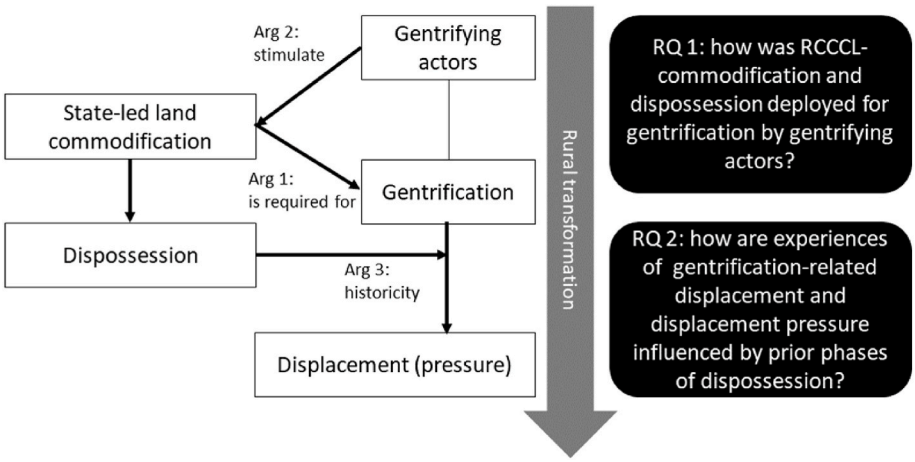

Fig. 1. Theoretical framework.

regime (argument 1). To mobilize (commodify) land for rural gentrification, state actors at various scales, given their centrality in the regulation of access to land, are stimulated by other gentrifying actors to facilitate land dispossession, whether by force or by stealth (argument 2). Secondly, we have emphasized the historicity of gentrification-induced displacement in relation to these prior phases of commodification and dispossession. The socio-economic consequences of rural gentrification cannot be disentangled from the particular processes through which China's land regime is opened up to it. Dispossession introduces inequalities between villagers and affects rural livelihoods, consequences which are expected to transpire through and exacerbate gentrification-induced displacement or displacement pressure (argument 3). Hence, when looking at rural transformation through the lens of rural gentrification, we need to take into account the original processes of land commodification.

Empirically, we zoom in on these arguments through a case study of the RCCCL policy experiment in Baiyun village, exploring 2 research questions. First, RCCCL, as one of the strategies to commodify and dispossess rural land, was seized as an opportunity for gentrification by gentrifying actors (research question 1); secondly, we discuss the villagers' experiences of gentrification-induced displacement (pressure), and explore its historicity in relation to prior phases of commodification and dispossession (research question 2). In the discussion, we relate our findings back to our 3 theoretical arguments, and reflect on how this history of gentrification-related rural transformations is blurring the rural-urban boundary.

3. Research case and methods

3.1. Baiyun village as a case study

Our case study is situated in Baiyun (Fig. 2), a village in Hongguang township in the northwest of Pidu District, Chengdu City (the capital of Sichuan Province, located in the southwest part of China). The village was selected as a case study for four reasons: it had a long history of peri-urban development pressure, witnessed one of the earliest RCCCL commodification programs leading to rural gentrification, received ample state and media attention as an exemplary pilot district for the RCCCL reform[1], and offered the main author feasible access to interviewees.

Pidu's selection as a pilot district for the RCCCL experiment came after a history of land consolidation practices under the 'linkage policy' (Shi and Tang, 2020). Started under the linkage policy, but fully developed under the RCCCL policy reform, Tony's Farm (*duoli nongzhuang*) is a residential project in Baiyun village which targets urban middle class consumers and was promoted as a model of rural development by the town- and county-level government. Exemplary for RCCCL-related gentrification, it allows us to investigate in detail the particularities of this relatively novel form of gentrification. Baiyun has only 1697 residents and 606 households in 2018 (Interview with village cadre (2019–18), 2019), the majority of which have been relocated to new concentrated settlements. This allowed for easy access to resident interviewees, without interference from officials.

3.2. Research methods and data collection

The main data for this study comes from in-depth semi-structured interviews, official documents and statistics and observation. We conducted 52 interviews, including 13 villagers, 10 village cadres, 11 state officials, 16 employees of Tony's Farm and similar projects in Pidu (ranging from managers to odd-job workers) and 2 academic researchers in rural studies. Interviews lasted between 30 min and 3 h. Apart from these interviews, we observed meetings of village officials and training courses on rural land surveys and rural development for rural cadres.

The data were collected in three rounds of fieldwork. In February 2017, the main author visited the Pidu Land Resource Bureau (now Pidu Natural Resource Bureau) and the construction site of Tony's Farm. In July 2019, besides visiting the same bureau, interviews were conducted in the official platform mediating RCCCL transactions (Pidu Branch of Chengdu Agriculture Equity Exchange, PBCAEE henceforth), the village committees and CAMCs in Baiyun and two adjoining villages: Hanjiang and Koujiaba. In January 2021, the main author revisited these villages, projects, and state offices to conduct complementary interviews.

4. Building Tony's farm: stealthy land dispossession, rural gentrification and displacement

To explore the two research questions of this paper, we will describe our case study according to the 3 theoretical arguments developed earlier. First, we discuss the politics of commodification and dispossession for rural gentrification in our case study, and analyse which gentrifying actors are involved in these politics. Secondly, we investigate the kind of gentrification it resulted in, and explore who benefits from it. Finally, we analyse the character of displacement and displacement pressure, and how it is related to prior moments of

[1] Tony's Farm has been awarded many times, such as 'Sichuan Provincial-level Model Leisure Farm', 'National Model Base for Popularization of Agricultural Science for Youth', 'Key Agricultural Development Project of Sichuan Province', 'Top 50 of Chengdu Tourism Destination'. See http://www.pidu.gov.cn/pidu/c126006/2020-04/09/content_2051771a1d004bdeb9c30606ad3f59d6.shtml, access on 30 October 2022.

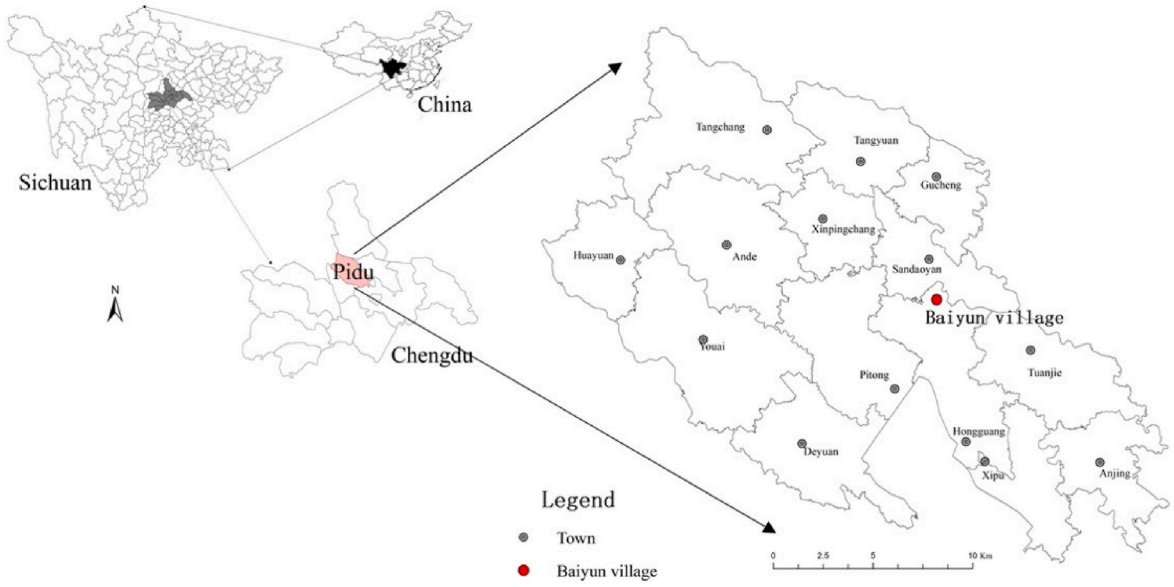

Fig. 2. The location of Baiyun village.
Source: authors' drawing.

dispossession for commodification.

4.1. Two-step dispossession through commodification

Under the Rural Revitalisation agenda, China's policies for rural land use favour market-driven development (Kan, 2021). Yet, such market-based developments require a commodification of rural land, and hence its dispossession, as China's *Land Administration Law* prohibits transfers of land ownership and land use rights outside the village collective. In our case study, construction land was commodified in a two step process of stealthy dispossession (Fig. 3).

Source: authors drawing; G1 is the villagers' group 1, and Gn is the nth villagers' group; CAMC: collective asset management company: PBCAEE: Pidu Branch of Chengdu Agriculture Equity Exchange; Xuyan and Duoli: the names of the invest companies.

The first phase started in 2008. Xuyan signed an investment contract with Hongguang Town government to consolidate agricultural land in 3 villages (Baiyun, Hanjiang and Koujiaba) and develop a project called Pastoral Times (*tianyuan shidai*), which aimed to appeal to the rural idyll of urban consumers by developing vineyards and rural tourism. With this project, Xuyan claimed to stimulate the local economy and increase the villagers' income. To realise the land consolidation, Xuyan convinced many villagers to rent out their agricultural land to the company. It promised a rent of 34,125 Chinese RMB/ha/year,[2] higher than the average revenue from agriculture on the land. Second, in collaboration with the village committees, the company encouraged villagers to give up their residential construction land, demolish the farmhouses and replace them with apartments in concentrated settlements which take up less land. Trading the abandoned construction land for agricultural land, the company hoped to gain profitable urban development rights under the 'linkage policy' to finance the operation. The company promised better living conditions in the new multi-storey flats and monetary compensation to rent a place while construction was ongoing.

The result of the project was a *de facto* dispossession by Xuyan of the household's use rights of a large amount of farmland and rural construction land. Nominally, they returned to the village collective, whereas Xuyan exercised the land use in practice. However, Xuyan failed to *grab* the land's *value*, as it did not make enough profits from grape cultivation and related tourism. Moreover, it did not cash in on the consolidated rural construction land quota, as the rural land collected through the demolition of farmsteads was deemed unfit for agriculture so that the quota could not be transferred to an urban area. A village cadre told us:

> *Xuyan transferred more than 1000 mu (66.67 ha) of farmland from our village and planted grapes on the farmland. However, the company failed to continue (to plant grapes and build tourism for profits)…it re-transferred part farmland to villagers at the price of 40% of 'double seven hundred'.* (Interview with a village cadre (2021-9), 2021).

The second phase started in 2013, when Xuyan, failing to make a profit, traded its development contract to the Duoli company. With fresh capital, Duoli started the construction of a new residential-touristic complex in Baiyun on the transferred farmland and rural construction land and revamped the land consolidation process. Taking advantage of the 2015 policy reform which allowed the commodification of RCCCL, the CAMC negotiated to relabel the village's rural residential construction land, which could not be turned into agricultural land under the 'linkage policy', as RCCCL. This allowed Duoli to legally acquire the RCCCL use rights and autonomously develop this land as it saw fit. This trickery, as explained below by a village cadre, has increased the legitimacy and legal sanctioning of land dispossession, with the willing collaboration of the village cadres:

> *In the beginning, we (CAMC) demolished our villagers' housing and took away the individual deed of rural residential land. Then we apply to nullify the individuals' deeds and ask for a new deed in the name of each village collective from the Bureau of Land Resource of Pidu, and the land use type on the new deed is for business (RCCCL), instead of for houses. The next step is to submit the new deed to the PBCAEE to trade the land with the company (and developer). Finally, we get the money, and the company gets the land (use rights)…actually the company rents our land for several decades. After 40 years, we can renew the transaction contract or sell the land use rights to another company for another period* (Interview with village cadre (2019-6), 2019).

[2] Villagers called this amount as 'double seven hundred' (a price equals 700 Jin (350 kg) wheat and 700 Jin (350 kg) rice according to the market price that year).

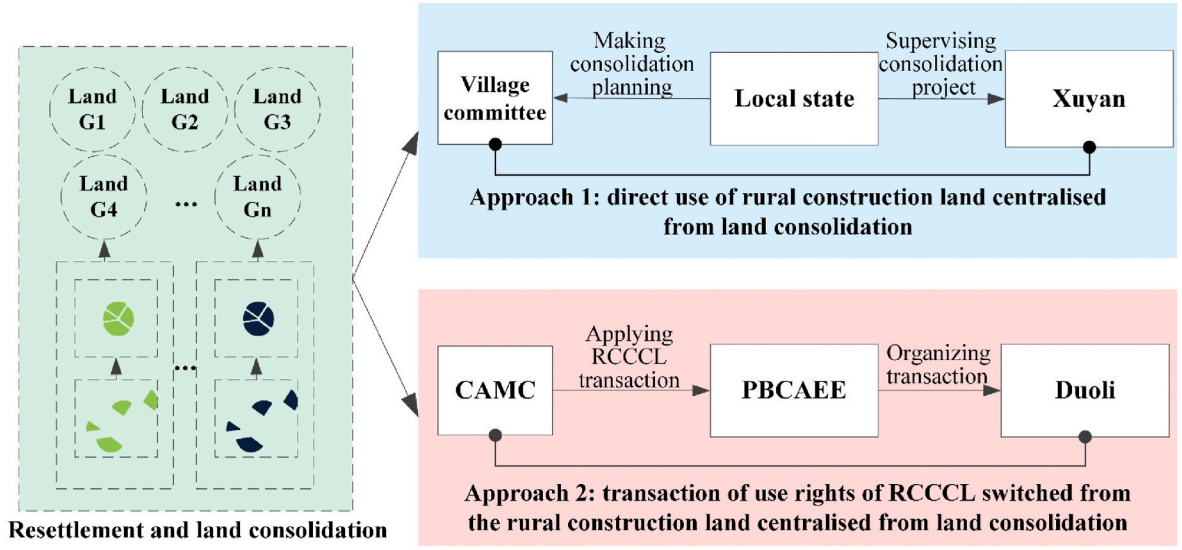

Fig. 3. Commodification process of rural collective-owned construction land.

4.2. *Value grabbing through gentrification*

Different from other cases studied in China, where original villagers, capitalizing on their privately owned residences, grab a piece of the pie when gentrification is initiated (Qian et al., 2013; Yang and Xu, 2022), Baiyun villagers played no role in the production of gentrification. Having moved to concentrated settlements, they were not able to rent out parts of their farmhouse or develop catering businesses for the incoming middle class consumers. Gentrification, and the related value accumulation, are entirely controlled by Duoli and its partner companies, a monopoly resulting in a particular gentrification landscape. The acquisition of RCCCL land use rights paved the way for Duoli's gentrification of Baiyun. Together with a professional company for real estate construction, Greentown China, Duoli company chose to build countryside villas on the RCCCL (in the red areas in Fig. 4), ignoring the explicit prohibition of residential real estate development on RCCCL in the RCCCL reform's central policy document (Economic Economic Daily, 2019). Tony's Farm, as the project is called, advertised their villas as mini-farms, only selling them to buyers with a business licence to pretend they are business-oriented instead of residential real estate. Even then, the buyers of the first batch received real property use rights certificates (*budongchan zhengshu*, valid for 40 years, instead of 70 years for urban housing) for the villas, issued by the Pidu Land Resource Bureau. This turned the project manager optimistic about the official stature of the project:

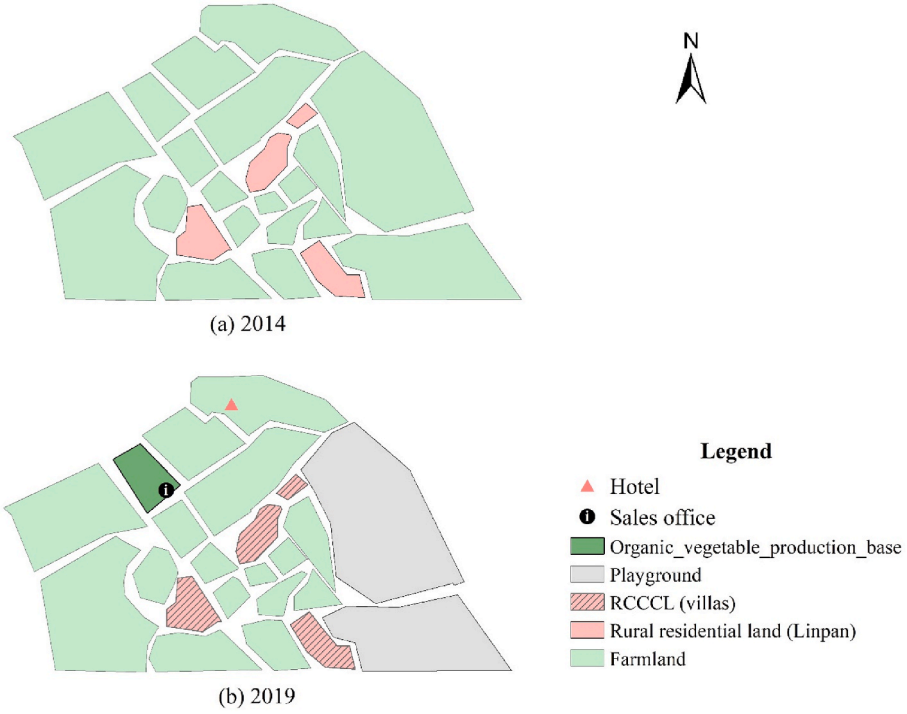

Fig. 4. Land use on Tony's Farm (construction-completed part) before and after the construction of the residential project.
Source: Google Earth.

It is a great policy transformation. I do believe the policymakers will be more open-minded and embrace the opportunity for residential development in rural areas since our villas received their own real estate certificates issued by the Pidu Land Resource Bureau, which is a very positive signal. (Interview with the project manager of Tony's Farm (2017-2), 2017)

The manager's optimism is mirrored by the project's popularity in the capital market. In early 2017, Ping An Insurance company, a global top 500 company, became a leading shareholder of Tony's Farm. It advertised the villas through its internal network of high-end customers. In October 2017, Xiexin, a professional company for real estate investment and construction, joined Tony's Farm project as the dominant shareholder. The locals in Baiyun village realised that the shareholder switch from an agribusiness-oriented company (Duoli) to a professional real estate company (Xiexin) would redirect Tony's Farm even more towards residential development.

Ping An stayed low profile. For instance, it offered these villas to only a small group of big clients. However, when Xiexin became the biggest shareholder (of the project), villas were advertised publicly, using traditional marketing methods in the real estate industry, for instance, overwhelming advertisements on real estate websites. They were different. (Interview with an employee in a project in neighbouring Hanjiang and Koujiaba villages (2019–29), 2019)

Compensating for the failed transfer of land development quota to urban jurisdictions, real estate development in this rural area had to take on a different form to be profitable. To increase land values, Tony's Farm appeals to the rural idyll of middle class urbanites. First, the project's slogan 'enjoy the real farming life near the fence' refers to the classic poet Yuanming Tao's famous verse 'picking asters near the Eastern fence, my gaze rests upon the Southern mountain' which elicits the idyl of his recluse rural life. This idyl is materialized in the layout of the project and the individual housing plots, offering a 'rural' living experience, a striking architecture which refers to an imagined Chinese rural past and carefully managed collective green spaces. Compared to high rise urban housing, the villas offer urban consumers unusual access to private open and green space, with front- and backyards, a private garden, and even optional affiliated farmland (up to 2667 m^2), where residents can grow their own vegetables (Fig. 5 and Table 1) – or hire local farmers to do this for them and have the vegetables delivered on their doorstep.

Second, the villas feature an unusual architecture. All these villas, especially their facade, were built in traditional Hui style architecture (Fig. 6(a)) alien to southwest China. This luxurious and sophisticated architecture, championed by rich Huizhou merchants from the eastern Anhui Province, has become famous throughout China and appeals to the cosmopolitan taste of the urban middle classes.

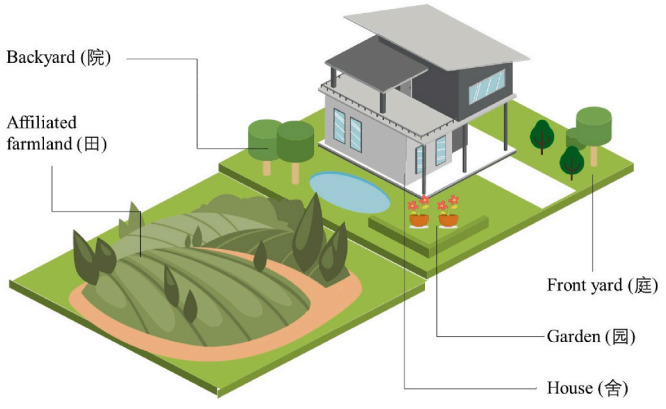

Fig. 5. Layout of a villa in Tony's Farm.
Source: authors' drawing based on the marketing material from Tony's Farm.

Table 1
The villa types in Tony's Farm.

Type	Construction area (m^2)	Area of front yard and backyard (m^2)	Garden area (m^2)	Affiliated farmland area (m^2)	Total use area (m^2)
A	188	220	950	2667	4025
B	127	208	450	2000	2785
C	136	218	760	2667	3781
D	107	182	650	667	1606
E	88	232	520	0	840
F	136	244	910	1334	2624

Data source: fieldwork in 2019.

Third, besides the spacious private garden and farmland, Tony's Farm offers vast collective green spaces with ornamental plants, an animal park and playgrounds, where residents and tourists are offered year-round entertainment by the company. The original prototype villa complex was remodelled into a hotel, Peach Garden Demenrenli Hotel (Fig. 6(d) and (e)), with a restaurant where visitors can enjoy local hotpot or can buy a gift box with organic vegetables and fruits from Tony's Farm.

The villas, whilst sold at prices well beyond the reach of the original villagers in Tony's Farm are selling like hotcakes. The average price in Tony's Farm was above 20 thousand Chinese RMB per m^2 in 2017, compared to average housing prices (Anjuke, 2018) in Pidu District and Chengdu City of respectively 7318 and 12,034 Chinese RMB per m^2. The first batch of villas was sold in one month. The second and third batches of villas have been presented soon after, with an avalanche of advertisements for these villas on various online real estate websites. At the sales office of the project, there is a poster showing which villas have been sold and which are still for sale (Fig. 6 (c)).

The gentrifiers buying these villas are, according to an employee of Tony's Farm interviewed in 2019, mainly middle and upper-middle class middle-aged urbanites from Pidu District. From the second batch onwards, after Xiexin joined as a shareholder, the villas attracted a broader audience from beyond Pidu District (mainly adjacent Jinniu and Qingyang Districts), including younger professionals interested in smaller size villas. The accesses to farmland and a green environment were mentioned as the most important amenities attracting buyers.

4.3. Dispossession and displacement of Baiyun villagers

Whereas new villa residents indulge in residential luxury and leisure, the original villagers experience the project differently. Having been dispossessed of their farmland and houses, they soon realised that they had also lost all impact on decision making about the project. Their housing situation and livelihood was affected differently by the Xuyan and the Duoli period. In the Xuyan period, direct, non-economic displacement was more prominent. But in the Duoli period, additional economic and cultural displacement pressure (Marcuse, 1985) resulted from the large scale gentrification project. This displacement is determined largely by their prior dispossession of farmland and farmhouses. It deprived them of local income opportunities and their rural lifestyle, while facing with rising living costs.

At the start of the project, villagers handed over their farmhouse and farmland to Xuyan, sacrificing their livelihood and becoming entirely dependent on the lavish rent promised by the company. Yet due to Xuyan's mismanagement, the rent paid was lower than promised, and eventually, payment was stopped. Lacking sufficient income, villagers were facing economic displacement. In response, villagers first asked the rural cadres to solve the rent issue. When they realised the village committees were unable to do so, they petitioned the township and county governments. The rising tension can be sensed from a letter on the online complaint platform of the Sichuan government, Sichuan Online (2015):

Fig. 6. Living amenities in Tony's Farm.
(a) Outside of a villa (b) inside of a villa (c) selling control poster of Tony's Farm: stickers indicate houses sold (d) entrance of the hotel (e) the hall of the hotel. Source: authors' photography in 2019 fieldwork.

> Xuyan has rented the farmland from villagers and committed to compensating the price of two harvests (a year) as rent to use the farmland. But villagers hardly received any money. Last year only the price of one harvest was paid in reaction to the villagers' petition. Now another year has passed (since the petition), how will we receive the money for this year, if we even haven't received the money for last year's second harvest yet?

Under pressure, the local government urged Xuyan to pay its debts, which pushed the Pastoral Times project to bankruptcy.

Meanwhile, villagers were also left to wait for new housing, resulting in direct residential displacement. According to the annual government work report of Hongguang township in 2012, four years in the project, only 846 persons (about 15% of the population in the three villages) had been resettled, whereas many more already had their houses demolished by Xuyan. Xuyan's bankruptcy further delayed new settlement construction, forcing villagers to move out of Hongguang Town, a villager in Baiyun explained:

> *Xuyan promised to build apartments for us as soon as possible. However, I highly doubt it since the company even cannot pay the rent in time. Many of us have to find other places to live, like Sandaoyan Town. The company gave us 160 Chinese RMB per month per capita for a living subsidy during the resettlement construction and increased the subsidy up to 240 Chinese RMB and 320 Chinese RMB 6 months and 12 months after our housing was demolished. It is ok for me because my family has 5 people and we rent an apartment for 750 Chinese RMB per month. But if you are a household of one or two people, I am not sure (whether the subsidy is enough).* (Interview with a villager (2019–20), 2019)

Duoli revamped the resettlement program and constructed four new concentrated settlements. This solved the problem of direct displacement and provided villagers with better facilities, a local official describes:

> *The environment becomes better because villagers do not cook by burning wood anymore with the gas and electricity in their apartments … pollution is less because there are trash bins in their community.* (Interview with a state official (2019-1), 2019)

However, once resettled, villagers faced other problems. Social life has changed significantly while moving from a traditional 'Linpan' residence, where several households live together in a circle surrounded by trees and bamboo in the middle of their farmland (Fig. 7(b)) to an urban-style, gated, and high-density settlement without farmland or outdoor space (Fig. 7(a)). Paying for tap water, gas, and electricity increased the living costs. The rent paid by Duoli, while comparably high, does not cover these, so villagers need to find additional sources of income.

Source: authors' photography in 2019 fieldwork.

However, dispossessed of their access to farmland, and living in small apartments with insufficient storage for agricultural tools or space to dry grain, they had to give up farming (even for self-provision, which added to the rising living costs), while their limited apartment space inhibited them from tapping into the gentrification industry autonomously.

Consequently, they are left with two alternatives to find jobs. A small number of villagers tried to stay on by working as day labourers on the organic farmland of Tony's Farm. One of them explains the working conditions:

> *We work from 6:00 am to 5:00 pm, and we are paid 80 Chinese RMB per day; that is, if they have work for us that day. It is relatively easy money, if you compare it with having to migrate to nearby cities…The job is to take care of vegetables, which I have been doing before. The company (Duoli) pays us at the end of the month, which is acceptable to me. But it still owns me last month's wages.* (Interview with a villager in Baiyun, working as a day labourer at Tony's Farm (2019–20), 2019)

As farm work is seasonal and weather-dependent, there are days that the company does not require their labour, and doesn't pay them, as they aren't offered a legal contract. Duoli did not improve employment opportunities in the village. Not interested in agriculture but in real estate, it even laid some farmland to waste, only cultivating the land around the villas. Therefore, most villagers had to seek better-paid and full-time jobs outside the village. Some started commuting to an industrial park near Baiyun; others have migrated outside the village in search of jobs, continuing the labour migration from before the revitalisation projects of Pastoral Times and Tony's Farm. One villager told:

> *The company promised to offer job opportunities for villagers. But the truth is there were very limited job openings: taking care of the facilities and ornamental vegetables … many had to find jobs in the town.* (Interview with a villager (2021-8), 2021)

In the words of Marcuse (1985), the loss of local job opportunities can be considered a form of economic 'displacement pressure'. But such loss of rural livelihoods equally translates into cultural displacement pressure, as testified by a villager bemoaning his loss of identity:

> *I think I am a farmer because I have a rural hukou.… I am a farmer, so my duty is farming. (I can accept that) it (farming) can be not profitable… now I cannot farm like before, I do not know what I can do living in the apartment…It might also be true urban people called us 'not rural, not urban'.* (Interview with a villager in Baiyun (2019–21), 2019)

5. Discussion

5.1. Analysis: dispossession, displacement and the urban-rural boundary

The RCCCL reform has been integrated in China's *Land Administration Law* and is now rolled out throughout the country. This case study in the village of Baiyun demonstrates how it can lead to gentrification and displacement in peri-urban areas accessible to middle class urban consumers. Simultaneously, it provides us with insights into the way these changes contribute to the blurring of the urban-rural binary in China.

Two theoretical lessons can be drawn about the relation between dispossession, gentrification, and displacement in rural China. First, our

Fig. 7. Comparison of the new resettlement (a) and *Linpan* (b).

case study aligns with Kan (2021) in affirming that, distinct from western contexts with near-fully commodified land markets, land dispossession is a necessary condition for rural gentrification in China, as it facilitates the commodification and hence market transfer of land. Whereas in western contexts with liberal rural land markets, the rent gap explains rural gentrification (Darling, 2005; Phillips, 2005), in China, a land market first has to be created to allow for a rent gap to be expressed. Different from urban expansion projects involving rural-to-urban land reassignment (Guo, 2001; He et al., 2016), dispossession for rural gentrification does not entail the use of eminent domain by the state, but is a more complex, stealthy process where private investors, rural cadres and the local state collaborate in complex ways (see also He and Wu, 2009; Kan, 2019b). While under the 'linkage policy' (Li et al., 2018a; Long et al., 2012; Zhang, 2022), the actual surplus value is realised in urban areas, the dispossession of RCCCL has required the *in situ* production of surplus value through rural gentrification, turning the countryside into a consumable environment for the urban middle classes. In Baiyun, different from other cases in China (Qian et al., 2013; Yang and Xu, 2022), prior dispossession of crucial assets prevented villagers from partaking in the production and accumulation of value, showing how the contribution of different actors to gentrification can differ case by case, related to prior processes of dispossession.

Secondly, gentrification-induced displacement is strongly affected by prior moments of dispossession. In Baiyun, the first phase of *de facto* dispossession of residential construction land resulted in direct residential displacement when the construction of alternative housing lagged behind; a situation aggravated by the fact that Xuyan failed to pay the rent for the use of their farmland. In the second phase, whereas dispossession was formalized, displacement became stealthier. The construction of new settlements solved the problem of direct residential displacement (even though rural households are relegated to the concentrated settlements, being excluded from access to Tony's exorbitantly priced farm). Yet in line with Zhao (2019), we observed some degrees of economic and cultural displacement pressure. The new, better serviced concentrated settlements increased the costs of living whereas the farmers, dispossessed of their farmland and farmhouses, were unable to maintain their rural livelihoods, nor tap into the business opportunities offered by gentrification (Qian et al., 2013; Yang and Xu, 2022). Only a handful of villagers were offered jobs at Tony's Farm (a pattern seen elsewhere in China when agribusiness takes over from smallholder farming (Andreas et al., 2020). Hence, a strong economic displacement pressure, based on a lack of income opportunities and higher living costs, stimulated villagers to emigrate to urban areas. These observations nuance previous arguments that land consolidation and rural revitalisation are a more voluntary and beneficial form of 'commodification without dispossession' (Zhang and Wu, 2017).

Our case study also reveals the consequences of rural transformation through gentrification in relation to the boundary between cities and the countryside. Gentrification in our case study has blurred this boundary in three different ways: it introduced a more urban approach to land governance in the village, altered the material outlook of landscapes and residences, and transformed everyday socio-cultural practices and livelihoods.

First, a salient feature in China is the blurring of the difference between urban and rural land governance regimes. This is distinct from discussions in the western literature on rural transformation where differences between rural and urban land regimes are less important (Thissen et al., 2021; Woods, 2009). The distinctive and long-standing duality in land governance (Shih, 2017) separating urban from rural land in China is under pressure, both in terms of its legal treatment, as in terms of its governance practices. The commodification of land use rights, transferring them via market transactions, long a distinctive urban feature is on the rise in rural areas, with the RCCCL reform as its most formalized example. Village cadres and local governments are eager to cash in on these opportunities by grabbing (parts of) the created land rent in collaboration with private investors, revealing themselves as equally entrepreneurial to urban governments in the past decades (Wu, 2018).

Second, the combination of dispossession, gentrification and displacement has produced a hybrid material environment. Woods (2009) emphasized the material distinctiveness of the rural, but in Baiyun, this distinctiveness has been blurred in various ways. Original villagers are now living in small apartments in concentrated multistorey settlements, not all too distinct from the residential neighbourhoods in nearby cities. Urban gentrifiers, on the other hand, reside in a pastiche rural environment which appeals more to the rural idyll cultivated by urban middle classes than resembling the traditional Linpan settlements of the region. The rural landscape, once dominated by functionalist farmland, is now dotted with parks, playgrounds and other leisure venues while Duoli's agribusiness farming practices are mainly oriented towards the consumptive experiences of high income urban visitors and residents.

Finally, the social, economic, and cultural experience of rural everyday life has shifted. As farmers are alienated from their means of production through dispossession, rural livelihoods have disappeared, to be replaced by urban-style day-labour regimes for Duoli and waged jobs outside the village. Social and cultural life has become dominated by the urban consumption-oriented lifestyle of higher-income gentrifiers and tourists. Newcomers, nor original villagers are able to tell what the proper identity of the village and its residents is today. Paraphrasing Phillips and Williams (1984) we could claim that 'some people are of the village but are not in it, whereas others are in the village but are not of it'.

5.2. Methodological limitations and future research directions

This study has two important methodologic limitations. First, it should be clear that a single case study is incapable of representing the huge regional variety of development pathways exhibited in rural China. Moreover, our case has focused on a particular sub-policy in China's rural revitalisation agenda with very particular characteristics, and should not have the ambition of representing the variety of real existing rural policy experiences. While offering transferrable theoretical insights about the relation between dispossession gentrification and displacement, these interconnections should always be situated in particular geographical and historical contexts. In order to be able to do so, further comparative research on rural land commodification and gentrification is needed.

Secondly, our qualitative case study had to rely on policy documents and interviews to do so. These limited sources do provide us key insights into the spatiotemporally situated relations between processes of dispossession, gentrification and displacement, but have not provided us many insights in related processes of rural transformation, nor have they allowed us to in any way quantify the economic impact of these processes. More diverse and sophisticated methods will be required to, as Levien (2011) suggests, actually measure the amount and degree of commodification and dispossession involved over time. We particularly look forward to future studies attempting to quantify the combined distributive socioeconomic effects on rural populations and actors of rural gentrification and dispossession.

6. Conclusion

This paper has taken a political economy approach to investigate the particularities of rural gentrification beyond the western world of near-fully commodified rural land markets. In this conclusion, we spell out our main theoretical contributions, after which we discuss their implications for rural revitalisation policies in China (and to some extent, beyond).

6.1. Theoretical contributions

Our analysis has contributed to the theorizing of rural gentrification and its effects on the urban-rural distinction in China in two ways. First, we have explicated land dispossession and commodification as a necessary precondition for rural gentrification, stemming from China's rural-urban difference in land governance. Different forms of dispossession through state-led land reform, both explicitly coercive and more stealthy manipulative ones, open up opportunities for capital to flow into the countryside and seek profit from rural gentrification. Second, we discussed the relation between various practices of dispossession and gentrification-induced displacement in rural areas, thereby enriching and contextualizing our understanding of the latter. We have revealed how displacement in rural China can take the form of direct physical displacement, but more often comes in disguise. In all instances, the impact of prior moments of land dispossession was clear.

6.2. Policy implications

These insights echo the difficulties in contemporary China's rural revitalisation agenda. The rural exodus in China is a real problem and needs to be curbed. It is caused by low incomes from farming, a lack of alternative jobs and dwindling services. Market-based developments are expected to turn the tide, which explains initiatives to commodify land such as the RCCCL reform. Dispossessing land in stealthy ways, however, obfuscates the distribution of costs and benefits of the process. Resultant rural gentrification processes express the inequalities embedded in stealthy dispossession practices through various forms of displacement. Benefits from such developments are divided unfairly, with private development companies, village cadres and local governments and gentrifiers largely gaining from the process, whereas villagers stand divided between those who face various forms of displacement and those who happen to be savvy enough (and have not been dispossessed of the means) to turn rural gentrification into a business opportunity for themselves. Such inequality is harmful, since, as Liu and Li (2017) have emphasized, "villages must be developed for locals, not for investors".

Based on our analysis of the Baiyun case, we propose three suggestions, each aiming at another policy level, to make development policies more for locals than for investors and mitigate the impact of rural gentrification. First, the central state could make clearer policy guidelines to define equitable, pro-poor allocation of land rights, protecting the rights of villagers. The policy-making process should cover the whole process of land development, including land (use) transactions, project building and value redistribution. Second and practically, village-based self-government ability can be improved. The heavy involvement of self-serving village cadres and the local state in the process of dispossession is not merely a weakness, but also an opportunity. CAMCs, which play a central role in economic matters in villages, could be democratized so as to make them play a greater role in bottom-up self-governance. Instead of being virtually represented by village cadres, and duped by private development companies, villagers could be more directly involved in CAMCs, which would offer them proper control over the distribution of costs and benefits from the use-right transactions on collectively-owned land. Finally, the commodification of land should be accompanied by local planning instruments able to suppress the near total autonomy private developers claim over surplus value creation on land transferred to them; subnational spatial planning (*guotu kongjian guihua*) in rural areas could orient developments away from private interests towards the collective good.

Author statement

Renhao Yang: Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Funding acquisition; Investigation; Methodology; Resources; Visualization; Writing-original draft; Writing-review & editing. **Maarten Loopmans**: Conceptualization; Supervision; Methodology; Writing-original draft; Writing - review & editing.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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