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Peasants' land rights and the hollowing out of communal property management in rural China

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Abstract

In recent years, China has strengthened the land rights of peasants while weakening the system of communal ownership of rural land. This study explores the rationale of land ownership policies enacted in China since 1978 to understand the trend toward privatization. Commonly, support for land ownership privatization has rested on two main assumptions. First, it is seen as a means to protect peasants' interests and stimulate investment in agricultural production. Second, well-defined property rights may facilitate the transfer of land, thereby reducing transaction costs, and promoting the efficient utilization of land resources. However, this study finds that these assumptions in favor of strengthening peasants' individual land rights are not borne out in the strategic behavior of land-rights holders. The ambiguity in how the Chinese household registration system qualifies who is a peasant, and thereby endowed with rights, has effectively allowed urban migrants to retain significant control over the majority of rural land while showing little interest in local village affairs. Qualitative research conducted in Anhui province reveals that instead of privatization promoting efficient land utilization, it creates a divide between land managed by local peasants who have remained

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committed to continuous cultivation and supplying fresh food, and land managed by absentees, which is often left idle for years or underutilized. This study contends that many elements of the increasingly marginalized communal land system are conducive to ensuring local food security, maintaining active rural governance, and preserving the social cohesion of rural communities.

Keywords
land privatization, common property, peasants, villages, rural-urban migration, local food security, rural communities

Introduction and Literature Review

In China, rural land is ostensibly under communal management, rather than individual ownership by peasants. Historically, natural villages or administrative villages[1] (collectively referred to as villages in this paper) have communally managed rural land. Since the establishment of China's Household Responsibility System (HRS),[2] peasants have been incrementally granted new ways of asserting land use rights. In the early 1980s, Chinese peasants were offered 15-year contracts to self-manage (but not to sell) newly distributed individual landholdings. In 1993, as the conclusion of the first round of land contracts neared, the government decided to make adjustments to land distributions to accommodate shifts in peasant household populations. Furthermore, they decided to allow more substantial 30-year land contracts, which would come into effect in 1997 (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 1993). As the end of this second round of land contract periods approached, the government opted to maintain the existing land allocation pattern for an additional 30 years (until 2027) to, as Xi (2017) suggested, provide Chinese peasants long-term and stable land use rights.

The escalation of individual land rights laws suggests that, despite a nominal system of communal ownership of rural land, China's system of rural land property rights has taken on quasi-private rights characteristics (e.g., Kung, 2002; L. Zhang et al., 2020). Despite the continuing ambiguity between private and communal, academic debates about the composition of land rights systems have often privileged the privatization narrative, focusing on the potential for achieving two goals: tailoring the land rights system to foster investments in modern agricultural production systems, while ensuring peasants' tenure to encourage productivity.

Some scholars claim that tenure insecurity has discouraged land investments and lowered output growth and, therefore, have called for deepened land privatization or tenure (Li et al., 2021), while other studies reveal a more complex picture. Several empirical studies have suggested that stronger tenure security rights positively affect long-term land investments (e.g., Gao et al., 2017; Q. Zhang, 2022). Private land rights can increase the marketization of land rentals and are a precondition for efficient land allocation (Qiu et al., 2021). However, other studies have argued that a common-property regime is better suited for the transition period of the Chinese agriculture industry. Liu et al. (2023) showed that land privatization leads to "brain drain" from the agricultural sector that

[1] In this article, the term "village" predominantly pertains to natural villages. Natural villages, also known as village groups in China, are historically evolved, typically comprising farming communities with strong geographical, social, and even kinship bonds. In contrast, administrative villages, also known as village committees in China, are usually established by government authorities to serve administrative functions. As a result, an administrative village may encompass more than a dozen natural villages and manage the livelihoods of thousands of residents due to administrative convenience, as illustrated by the case of the administrative village in this article. In such instances, these larger administrative villages may not fully encapsulate the essence of a rural community with a shared social life. However, it is worth noting that due to the complicated geographical landscape in China, there are circumstances in certain regions where administrative villages closely resemble natural villages.

[2] The Household Responsibility System (HRS) was introduced in China's rural areas during the late 1970s and early 1980s, signifying a noteworthy shift away from the previous collective farming model in favor of individualized farming by rural households. Under the HRS, although the land continued to be commonly owned, it was evenly distributed among individual rural families based on their household size. These households were granted the autonomy to determine their farming practices, sell their products, and lease the land out.

decreases productivity and output. In terms of investment, Lina et al. (2023) observed that privatization may encourage individual investment, but at the cost of communal investment.

While some scholars argue that Chinese peasants exhibit a preference for land privatization that can bring them more security (e.g., Qin et al., 2011), others suggest that individual productivity is not hindered by a perceived lack of tenure (Qian et al., 2022). Indeed, when unpacking the complexity of rural behavior, some scholars found that communal land systems are more advantageous to peasants and local communities in ways that are increasingly relevant to modern society. J. He et al. (2020) highlighted the desires of rural communities to assert communal (rather than patchwork individual) ownership of a forest. In doing so, they could strengthen their bargaining power vis-à-vis powerful external actors like tourism companies while providing fairer access to products like valuable mushrooms that are not easily commoditized. In a behavioral study in Southeast China, Yiwen and Kant (2022) found that peasants favor equitable land redistributions, especially for forested land. From a more practical viewpoint, X. He (2010, p. 331) argued that comprehensive agricultural land privatization would greatly complicate investment in communal infrastructure, such as agricultural irrigation, drainage, and farmland recomposition.

"Private Property" and "Common Property"

China's advocacy for land privatization is consistent with the global trend, although China has, in many ways, stopped short of providing conditions of private property mechanisms comparable to those found in other regions. Existing definitions of private property center around three characteristics: exclusivity, alienability, and the collocation of decision rights and consequences in the same entity. Only the owner can control how their object shall be used; this right of control is transferable, and the owner alone embraces the costs and benefits of their decisions (Dyson et al., 2019; Edmans & Holderness, 2017; Murtazashvili & Murtazashvili, 2016). The assumptions about market change and growth embedded in these conditions have led to the widespread belief that private property can create incentives for optimal resource allocation. The potential for such outcomes is related to the configuration of private property rights, which are less prototypical than the research depicts, even after successive phases of privatization in China under the HRS.

Concurrently, the system of communal property management in China has diverged from the classical configuration that has been regularly criticized by economists. Hardin's (1968) "The Tragedy of Commons" introduces the most influential idea about commons, but one that would be unrecognizable even under the pre-HRS communal land management system in China. According to Hardin, an individual herder is only minorly affected by overgrazing and is thus incentivized to increase animal count beyond the communal pasture's capacity. In recent years, many scholars have begun to differentiate among the diverse configurations of communal ownerships. Most contemporary models of common property explain it as an asset over which a discrete group of people shares ownership rights and exerts exclusionary power (D'Alpaos et al., 2023; Peredo et al., 2018; Sugden & Punch, 2014). Rather than being a prototype of private or common land ownership, incremental iterations of China's HRS reveal a complex ownership system in which private and communal characteristics interact to allow for unexpected outcomes. To understand the real-world outcomes of the evolving property rights regime, it is important to more carefully characterize the historical rural land management system in China.

The Decline of Common Property Regimes in Rural China

Since the foundations of the People's Republic of China were laid in 1949, the Chinese leadership has actively promoted collective agriculture. Private land ownership was abolished, and agricultural cooperatives were established. Rural land, livestock, and farming tools were transferred from individual peasants to these cooperatives. Peasants' work was quantified through "labor points" (known as *gong fen*), documented by agricultural cooperatives while prioritizing egalitarianism rather than returns on individual efforts. By 1956, agricultural collectivization had been realized throughout the country (Kerkvliet & Selden, 1998). Subse-

quently, the lack of peasant autonomy and low incentives to produce were blamed for the Great Famine, which lasted three years (1959–1961) and exacted a toll of 15 to 30 million lives (Lin & Yang, 1998) and led China to transition to the HRS. After 1978, China's agricultural economy experienced a period of substantial growth in which grain production increased by 4.7% per year between 1978 and 1984 (Huang & Rozelle, 2010). Many scholars have highlighted the decollectivization as the decisive factor in the impressive growth of this period (Bramall, 1993).

Since then, the decollectivization has escalated with successive phases upholding individual land contracts, such that residual powers of communal land management have been increasingly hollowed out. Indeed, the goal of privatization has even superseded one of the defining characteristics of the transition in land rights in China, namely the redistribution of land to accommodate new demographic realities and reduce landholding inequality. The Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (1993) proposed maintaining consistent land allocation regardless of changes in household population ("*zeng ren bu zeng di, jian ren bu jian di*"). This principle, applied during the second period of land contract reforms (from 1997), dictated that villages should refrain from making land redistributions for demographic changes.

With increasing rural–urban migration, the state has developed policies to provide peasants with existing land rights in their rural hometowns, offering various protections and promoting individual transactions of farmland use rights. The Law of the People's Republic of China on Land Contract in Rural Areas (2002) acknowledged the legality of the market transfer of rural land. The Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (2014) stipulated that villages should not appropriate peasants' revenue from land transfers. This directive emphasized that the decision regarding land transfer, including its pricing and terms, should be determined by the individual peasant households.

A critical requirement for encouraging individual responsibility and market transactions was clarification of rural land records and titling. Under communal management, village-level land records were more fluid, responding to occasional land redistribution events, which later became a hindrance to precise market transactions of land. Therefore, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs (2011) prioritized precise measurements of peasants' land, set up a land use rights registry, and certified these rights at the individual level. Perhaps due to the urgency of the task, it took only five years to complete the work of surveying, registering, and certifying peasants' land use rights, starting in 2013 (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 2013).

The promotion of individual land rights has occurred in the context of widening efforts to reshape peasants into individual rather than communal agents. Most prominently, this was initiated by the central government abolishing agricultural taxes (and informal fees) after January 1, 2006 (China Xinhua News, 2009). The subsequent Rural Tax Reform (RTR), a significant development in rural governance, abolished the use of compulsory labor in rural areas, implemented direct subsidies to peasants, and enacted other measures to alleviate the financial burden on peasants. Although the abolition of agricultural taxes has been largely supported by peasants, it has engendered communal problems, such as the neglect of rural public goods due to lack of community labor and a decline of village-level governance due to the lack of tax support. Zhao (2010) pointed out that the RTR caused villages to withdraw from the overall management of rural public goods and peasants to step away from the cooperative supply of public goods such as irrigation systems. Tian and Chen (2010) indicated that after the RTR, the direct connection between state power and peasants gradually increased, which in turn, weakened the local grassroots governance.

Following the progression of these policies, as shown in Table 1, a discernible trend emerged of empowering individual land rights at the cost of common property management in China. According to government documents and existing studies on individual land tenure (Gao et al., 2017; Li et al., 2021; Qin et al., 2011; Qiu et al., 2021; Q. Zhang, 2022), the rationale behind these policies is (a) to protect peasants' interests and encourage production and (b) to facilitate market transactions of land

and reduce transaction costs by ensuring clear and stable land rights. This study casts doubt on this rationality and the underlying behavioral assumptions through in-depth research. Through qualitative methods, a survey on land management and peasants' livelihoods in Anhui province was conducted. The results demonstrated numerous cases that refuted the simplistic narrative that stabilizing peasants' individual land rights achieves efficient outcomes for rural development and agricultural promotion.

Research Methods and Study Area

The research was conducted in Huashi[3] administrative village under the jurisdiction of Chuzhou City in the southeastern part of Anhui province, near the area bordering Jiangsu province, from December 2020 to January 2021. Anhui province and particularly Chuzhou are appropriate case studies for studying rural land rights as they have experienced a considerable outflow of migrants. At the end of 2022, the registered population[4] of Chuzhou was 4.54 million, while the number of permanent residents was 4.05 million, which indicates an outflow of close to 500,000 people (Statistics Bureau of Chuzhou City, 2023).

Due to the outbreak of COVID-19 and initiation of lockdown policy in January 2020, direct fieldwork was interrupted. However, as no positive cases were reported in the county where Huashi is located, the county government permitted residents to move freely while wearing masks, provided they recorded their whereabouts using their mobile phones. After confirming my eligibility, I obtained approval from the village committee of Huashi to conduct face-to-face research in the village.

As an administrative village, Huashi governs 31 villager groups (natural villages), including 15 groups that were dissolved in village resettlement projects introduced by the government.[5] The registered population in 2021 was approximately 4,000 people, comprising approximately 1,300 households. The registered population of each villager group ranges from 80 to 160 (20 to 40 households). The resident population represents over half of the registered population according to the village committee of Huashi. The land ownership is nominally vested in the villager groups, as opposed to the Huashi administrative village. Each villager group owns 400 to 1,000 mǔ[6] (66–

Table 1. Policies that Strengthened Individual Land Rights of Peasants

Period	Rural policies
1978	HRS extended nationwide; peasants have been endowed with land use rights while villages still own land
1993	Inception of the principle of maintaining consistent land allocation regardless of changes in household population
1997	Start of the second land contract period (30 years)
2002	Transfers of land contracted by peasants are permitted
Early 2000s	Commencement of RTR favoring direct peasant–state interaction over communal governance
2013–2018	Land surveying and registration of individual land rights
2017	State intention to renew the second round of land contract period for another 30 years

[3] The name of the village is a pseudonym.

[4] The registered population refers to individuals whose household registration (hukou, as illustrated in footnote 7) is located in Chuzhou.

[5] In recent years, China has witnessed widespread government-led village demolition and resettlement projects, which involve the demolition of rural homes, with the reclaimed land repurposed for urban economic development, or to compensate for insufficient arable land. Residents from these demolished areas are relocated to more urbanized environments, facilitated by government provisions. This approach is also anticipated to effectively increase urbanization rates.

[6] Mǔ (亩) is a traditional unit of land measurement used in China. Typically, one mǔ is equivalent to approximately one-sixth of an acre or 666.67 square meters. However, the definition of mǔ can vary across regions in China. In Chuzhou, for example, there is a local variation where one mǔ is equal to approximately 1,000 square meters. In this article, the unit mǔ is used in the standard sense (666.67 m2). For conversion: 1 mǔ = 0.165 acre = 0.067 ha; 6.07 mǔ = 1 acre = 0.405 ha; and 15 mǔ = 2.47 acres = 1 ha.

165 acres or 27–67 hectares) of arable land, mostly made of paddy fields, with the main crops being rice, wheat, and rapeseed. As some villager groups are geographically distant, and some of them were already slated for demolition, the survey was conducted in three adjacent villager groups in Huashi that have not yet been earmarked for demolition: Groups D, G, and Y. To understand the trends, questionnaires were utilized (see Appendix), and the research was deepened through open-ended interviews with both the villagers and leaders of the villager groups.

Over these two months, I made frequent visits to the villager groups, ranging from three to five times a week. The local custom is to keep yard doors open as a sign of someone being at home, and it was possible for me to enter their homes and strike up conversations with them in the local dialect. The majority of the villagers were more than willing to share information with me regarding land rights issues, and some even offered to introduce me to their neighbors to confirm various points. When it came to vacant houses, I verified with the villagers whether these homes had been unoccupied for an extended period or were temporarily vacant, to faithfully record the number of permanent residents. After primary fieldwork ended in January 2021, I made four follow-up visits to Huashi after the lockdown measures were eased. Furthermore, after my departure from Chuzhou, I supplemented the survey data by conducting telephone interviews.

The questionnaire survey included questions on the composition of household members and their employment status (population, gender, age, status of residence in the village, rural household registration, occupation, and income). The survey also asked about agricultural operation status (transferred land area, operated land area, agricultural output) and contacts between the out-migrant population and the village (residence status of out-migrants, frequency of returning to the village, participation in agricultural operation, participation in village public affairs). The open-ended interviews further provided in-depth data, including insights into land transactions between the resident villagers and non-local farmers, the agricultural practices employed by villagers and their approach to handling harvests, civic activities in the era since the Rural Tax Reform, and the perspective of residents regarding the future of the village.

Results

An important prerequisite of this analysis was determining the on-the-ground reality of out-migration and the extent to which it diverges from official statistics. The resident population in this paper refers to individuals who live in the village for more than six months out of a year; others are referred to as the out-migrant population. When surveyed directly, the actual population outflow exceeded the account of the village committees significantly, sometimes even diametrically. Based on the information provided by the leaders of the three groups, Group D, Group G, and Group Y have registered populations of 118, 120, and 85, respectively. Compared to the resident population enumerated in this research (see Table 2), the population loss rates for these villager groups stand at 78%, 75%, and 75%, respectively. Even direct observations in the field (Table 2) could not account for the full out-migrant population of these villager groups because over half of the houses remain unoccupied (and therefore, incalculable) throughout the year. This significant out-migrant population, and its imprecision, may be attributed to the geographical proximity of these villager groups to the town's main road, as they are

Table 2. Resident Population and Out-Migrant Population

Group	Resident population	Out-migrant population	Total	Number of households
D	26	36	62	13
G	30	45	75	15
Y	21	20	41	9
Total	77	101	178	37

located only about 3 to 6 miles (5–10 km) from the town's industrial parks, commercial centers, and urban residential areas. Many people have relocated to the town.

An important consideration when enumerating out-migration is understanding how the peculiarities of the Chinese household registration system (*hukou*) impact bureaucratically defined versus actual residence.[7] Households in this survey are defined as units of people whose hukou belongs to or had previously belonged to a shared household, and who have lived together for a certain period. Relatives, such as children, parents, and grandchildren, who may no longer live together but did in the past, still have strong ties to each other, and are financially codependent, were also counted as household members, regardless of whether they are currently registered in the same hukou. Thirty-seven households were surveyed; the resident population of these households was 77 while the out-migrant population was 101. Understanding the impact of this scope of out-migration on land use is a critical issue.

Income and Demographic Trends of Out-migrants

The survey results indicate that the predominant holders of rural land are actually the out-migrant population, while household members who remain in the village are often compelled to lease out their land in accordance with the preferences of their urban household members. These out-migrants, who make up the majority of the officially registered population in the village, retain their rural hukou and associated rural land rights despite working and living in urban areas. It is worth noting that, in accordance with existing policies and laws, the villager group lacks the authority to request the return of such land.

As shown in Table 3, young and highly educated individuals have largely left the village, found employment in nonagricultural sectors, and achieved higher income levels. The mean and median incomes in Table 3 refer to the mean and median per capita annual family incomes. The per capita family income was calculated by dividing the total annual income of the family by the total number of family members (including nonearning minors and elderly people). The incomes of the out-migrant population and their household members living in the village (the resident population) were calculated separately for comparison purposes. This also facilitates comparison with the urban population. While the annual per-capita disposable income of urban residents in Chuzhou in 2022 was 41,043 CNY (US$5,574; Statistics Bureau of Chuzhou City, 2023), the income of some out-migrants exceeded this number. Despite achieving parity or surpassing urban income standards, most out-migrants have chosen to maintain their original rural hukou. Only three individuals switched to urban hukou. This pattern of behavior has strategic considerations for land use and implications for rural governance, which will be discussed further below.

A further explanation for the high proportion of out-migrants in the village is the gender disparity in migration. It remains common for one partner to migrate; in the study area, the trend diverges from the national trend of male-dominated migration from rural areas.[8] In contrast, it was observed in each group that men were more likely to remain

[7] The current household registration system (*hukou*) in China was founded in the 1950s to designate Chinese citizens as permanent residents of specific regions. After undergoing various reforms, hukou no longer primarily serves as a tool for restricting population migration, but it remains complex and challenging to exchange a person's hukou due to its implications for social welfare benefits. One crucial feature of hukou is its inheritability, meaning that it is passed down to an individual's offspring. Consequently, it is common for an individual's hukou registration and their current residence to be incongruent. Nowadays, hukou still maintains a rural–urban dual structure, which classifies Chinese citizens into two categorizations: agricultural (known as rural hukou) and non-agricultural (known as urban hukou). The rural hukou is closely linked to access to rural land rights. In the context of this study, for example, regardless of whether an individual resides in an urban or rural area, possessing a rural hukou remain the only condition for enjoying rights to local rural land.

[8] Since the 1980s, the phenomenon of left-behind women has become increasingly permanent in China. As the government has eased its control over rural–urban migrations, many men have relocated to urban areas in search of work, leaving their wives behind in rural

in the village, while women were more likely to migrate. This trend might be explained by the tradition that elderly women often join their children's homes in urban areas to help take care of the grandchildren, while their husbands remain in the village. The mobility of women, children, and grandparents to urban areas can also explain the high proportion of out-migrants in this sample.

lives of the resident population, with 75% still involved in farming, although only 20% regard it as their main source of income. This is discussed in detail in the next section.

Agricultural Operations

The majority of the agricultural land rights of the three groups have, to some extent, been transferred

Table 3. Basic Information of Registered Population in Three Villager Groups

		D		G		Y		Total	
		RP[a]	OP[b]	RP	OP	RP	OP	RP	OP
Age	Mean	58.88	33	63.17	33.29	52.62	35.7	58.84	33.66
	Median	63	35	65.5	32	52	34.5	59	34
Gender	Female	12	18	13	25	10	12	35	55
	Male	14	18	17	20	11	8	42	46
Education	Elementary education and below	19	5	23	14	9	10	51	29
	Between elementary and high school graduation	7	17	7	29	9	8	23	54
	College education and higher	0	8	0	2	3	2	3	12
	Missing value[c]		6						
Hukou	Rural hukou	26	29	30	43	21	20	77	92
	Urban hukou	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	3
	Missing value		6						
Farming	Self-consumption[d]	21	0	19	0	3	1	43	1
	Employment[e]	1	0	4	0	10	0	15	0
	Never farmed	4	36	7	45	8	19	19	100
Annual income (USD)	Mean	2,683	12,948	2,283	2,891	3,065	10,127	2,677	8,655
	Median	2,342	7,230	1,377	3,386	2,597	8,371	1,989	4,091

[a] "RP" refers to the resident population.
[b] "OP" refers to the out-migrant population.
[c] There was one household whose members were coincidently not at home during the in-person survey. Their basic information was obtained through a call to their relatives in Group D, but accurate information on their education and hukou was not obtained, which resulted in 6 missing values in Group D.
[d] Farming for self-consumption means that more than half of agricultural output is consumed by the household members (including as food or as gifts to others).
[e] Farming for employment indicates that more than half of the agricultural output is sold.

Agriculture remains an essential part of the

to several individuals for large-scale operations (see

areas to care for their children and elderly parents. In the context of Huashi village, the dynamic has shifted as younger generations have increasingly migrated to urban areas. In the new scenario, young women have also begun working in the cities. Meanwhile, older women have moved with their children to undertake domestic work, which has left older men to live alone in the village.

Table 4. Large-scale Agricultural Operations in the Three Groups

Group	Farmer	Land area	Price	Main produce
D	Farmer 1	160 mǔ (26 acres)	250 CNY/mǔ (US$211/acre)	rice, wheat, maize
	Farmer 2 (nonlocal)	300 mǔ (49 acres)	400 CNY/mǔ (US$339/acre)	rice, wheat
G	Farmer 3 (nonlocal)	515 mǔ (85 acres)	430 CNY/mǔ (US$364/acre)	rice, wheat
Y	Farmer 4 (group leader)	150 mǔ (25 acres)	350 CNY/mǔ (US$296/acre)	rice, wheat, maize
Y	Farmer 5	200 mǔ (33 acres)	350 CNY/mǔ (US$296/acre)	rice, wheat, maize, rapeseed

Figure 1. Villagers Were Drying Locally Sourced Meat to Produce Traditional Bacon

Photo taken on December 25, 2020, by the author.

Table 4), but with mixed outcomes. Indicative of this, within Groups D and G, most of the land has been leased to nonlocal farmers and external companies from regions beyond Chuzhou since 2010. As reported by residents in these groups, leasing the land has not resulted in better cultivation practices. In fact, it is common for tenants to leave the land uncultivated. Because external entities approach land management from a profit-driven perspective, calculating inputs and outputs meticulously, if the land does not yield a profit, they stop farming. In contrast, the resident population often operates under a different mindset: they do not strictly factor their labor into the cost equation, and a portion of the land's output serves as a food source for themselves and their urban-dwelling offspring. The remainder can be used as feed for poultry and livestock, providing them with a fresh source of meat (see Figure 1). Any surplus can be sold to local grain traders, farmers markets, or restaurants.

The large proportion of agricultural land leases implies that villager groups do not have the willingness or capacity to farm all the land they have available, an assumption that is not directly borne out by this study. Households commonly managed a vegetable garden of about 0.2 mǔ (0.03 acres or 0.01 ha; see Figure 2) and raised chickens, ducks, geese, pigs, and fish. Some villagers retained 0.5–1 mǔ to farm rice for daily consumption (e.g., Case 1 below). Such households were classified as farming for self-consumption in Table 3. In many cases, more land could be farmed under the resources of the resident population, as some local farmers continue to do (such as in Group Y). However, 74% of the farmland in Group D and all farmland in Group G has been leased, primarily to external actors. According to their reports, the transfer of land rights in Groups D and G is primarily due to the desire of out-migrants, who collectively make up about 75% of the population. Those who stay in the village (who are often elderly) are compelled to follow the decision of their children in urban

areas. Some of the resident population have shown their dissatisfaction with the situation by clearing abandoned land to grow grains for self-sufficiency and to keep busy (e.g., Case 2).

In particular, external lessees have often failed to manage the land properly and/or did not keep their contracts. This has led some residents to claw their land back (see Figure 3). Few outsiders have been able to maintain their ventures for more than three years. According to their explanation, this is because the rising costs of land rent and agricultural labor prices make it difficult for them to profit. In the case of Farmer 2, predicting a financial loss, he had left the land idle and refused to pay rent to the villagers since 2020. Subsequently, some residents in Group D began to farm their land after they stopped receiving their rent (e.g., Case 3). Nevertheless, local farmers (Farmers 1, 4, and 5) have not experienced this loss. This could be attributed to their ability to lease land inexpensively through local connections, as well as the fact that operations under 200 mǔ demand minimal labor.

All land of Group Y is cultivated by the resident population and has never been transferred to nonlocals. The leader (Farmer 4) and another villager (Farmer 5) from Group Y farmed 150 mǔ and 200 mǔ of land, respectively. The out-migrant households in Group Y leased their land to the two farmers, while the resident population cultivated the land around their households (e.g., Case 4).

Figure 2. A Vegetable Garden in Group D

Photo taken on December 24, 2020, by the author.

Figure 3. Villagers Were Reclaiming their Land from Nonlocal Farmers for Vegetable Cultivation

Photo taken on December 25, 2020, by the author.

Case Studies

The trends emerging from the survey of the village revealed not only the large extent of out-migration but also the concomitant scope of land rentals. To understand whether the land rental market lives up to the claims of proponents and the aspirations of government policy of land rights privatization, it is helpful to explore the range of outcomes. An indicative range of the dynamics is captured below in four case studies.

Case 1—Retaining land for self-consumption

Household 1, belonging to Group D, comprises five people: a 74-year-old father, 71-year-old mother, 49-year-old eldest son, 47-year-old second son, and 44-year-old daughter. The father and mother lived in the village, the second son and daughter lived in the county, and the eldest son lived in Jiangsu province. The household had a total of 11.6 mǔ of land, including 10 mǔ of paddy fields and 1.6 mǔ of dry fields. In 2019, 8.6 mǔ of the paddy fields and all of the dry fields were rented out to Farmer 2 at 400 CNY/mǔ (US$339/acre), while the remaining 1.4 mǔ of paddy fields were farmed by the mother and father. The retained paddy field could produce approximately 2,205 pounds (1,000 kg) of rice a year, which is sufficient to feed the parents and raise chickens, as well as send some to their children.

Case 2—Clearing abandoned land

Household 2 belongs to Group G and includes a 76-year-old father, 70-year-old mother, 46-year-old daughter, 43-year-old son, 22- and 18-year-old granddaughters, and a 13-year-old grandson. The father and mother lived in the village, and the son and his children lived in town, while the daughter and her child lived in the county. The household had 12 mǔ of land, including 11 mǔ of paddy fields and 1 mǔ of dry fields, which were all transferred to Farmer 3 in 2017. Although the mother was elderly, she still worked on a nearby chicken farm, where she earned approximately 10,000 CNY (US$1,410) per year. The father had a few chronic diseases and was not fit for formal employment. In 2020, the father cleared a 0.5 mǔ of abandoned land to plant some wheat and sweet potatoes, in order to "have something to do."

Case 3—Re-appropriation of underutilized rental land

Household 3 belongs to Group D, which includes a 55-year-old father, 56-year-old mother, and 29-year-old son, all living in the village, although the father and son commute to town for work daily. The household had 16 mǔ of land, including 13 mǔ of paddy fields and 3 mǔ of dry fields. Although all 16 mǔ of the land was leased to Farmer 2, the mother planted some crops on the land in 2020 after Farmer 2 left it idle and did not pay the rent. The mother stated that she thought it would be wasteful to leave the land idle; she was planning to take the land back eventually.

Case 4—Self-commercialization and self-sufficiency

Household 4 in Group Y includes a 53-year-old father, 51-year-old mother, 32-year-old son, 31-year-old daughter-in-law, and 95-year-old grandmother, with all five living in the village. The father, son, and daughter-in-law commuted to town for work. The household had 20 mǔ of land, with 15 mǔ of paddy fields and 5 mǔ of dry fields. The land was farmed by the mother and the father. The household harvested 13,228 pounds (6,000 kg) of rice, 3,307 pounds (1,500 kg) of wheat, 331 pounds (150 kg) of rapeseed, 2,205 pounds (1,000 kg) of sweet potatoes, and 110 pounds (50 kg) of maize in 2020. Of this, 11,023 pounds (5,000 kg) of rice was sold to a local grain trader at 2.4 CNY/kg (0.15 US$/pound) in 2020, while the rest was used for self-consumption, as feed for the poultry and livestock, and as gifts for relatives and friends.

Interaction Between the Out-Migrant Population and Huashi Village

The level of villager engagement in local governance of the three groups is strikingly low, partially as a consequence of the significant proportion of absentee residents and the heavy dependence of local governance on financial support from higher-level authorities. The overhaul of RTR shifted the funding source for village-level governance from local taxes to state funding. Since then, there have been minimal civic activities that require the active participation of villagers. One of the few exceptions is the election of the village committee every three years. Despite the relative proximity of many out-migrants and occasional visits to their

rural households, they often exhibit apathy toward village elections and rarely participate in local social activities. Most local residents do not perceive a sense of vitality or a promising future for the village; in fact, many express a desire for the government to demolish the village and resettle them in urban areas. This perception is exacerbated by the prevalence of dilapidated houses and poorly managed public facilities in the village. (See Figures 4 and 5.) The exception is Group Y (the village with no land rentals to outsiders), where the out-migrant population maintains stronger connections to the villagers, and the residents exhibit a higher level of resistance to village demolition. This sentiment may stem from the fact that a more significant portion of Group Y's resident population relies on agriculture as their primary source of livelihood and has continued their occupation despite the possibility of land rental (Figure 6).

Table 5 summarizes the factors explaining urban–rural interaction, including the distance between the out-migrant population and Huashi village, their current residence, and their frequency of returning to the village. The majority of the out-migrant population lives no farther than 15 km (9.3 miles) from the village, and most of them choose to live within the town or county. Approximately 34% of the out-migrant population was able to go back to the village once a week, while an additional 16% of them were able to return once a month.

Figure 4. A Dilapidated House in Group G

Photo taken on February 10, 2021, by the author.

Figure 5. An Unmanaged Pond in Group D

Photo taken on January 29, 2021, by the author.

The results of a further assessment of civic participation indicate that associated out-migrants with more physical connection to the land (due to farming or rental within the villager group) are

more likely to participate. The resident population answered questions regarding the participation of out-migrants in civic and private activities, such as management of farmland, the village committee and the group leader election, and organization of weddings and funerals. The responses were recorded by the household as a unit rather than by individuals (see Table 6). Villagers were asked, "If you are unable to continue farming the land for various reasons, to whom would you transfer the farmland?" Nearly all households in Groups G and D believed that their children would not take over the management of the land in the future, and the majority preferred transferring the land to someone who could pay high rent. In contrast, more than half of the respondents in Group Y preferred to transfer their land to their children or neighbors.

Regarding the question of whether out-migrants vote in elections for the group leader and the village committee, around half of the respondents in Group D and more than half of the respondents in Group G said that out-migrants entrusted their voting rights to their household members living in the village and were not interested in the

Figure 6. Meticulously Maintained Land in Group Y

Photo taken on January 18, 2021, by the author.

Table 5. The Current Residence of the Out-Migrant Population and their Frequency of Return

		Number of the out-migrants			
		D	G	Y	Total
Distance	Less than 15 km (9.3 miles)	27	39	15	81
	15–30 km (9.3–18.6 mi)	5	2	2	9
	30–100 km (18.6–62 mi)	2	1	0	3
	More than 100 km (62 mi)	2	3	3	8
Residence	The town	3	21	7	31
	The county	24	18	7	49
	Chuzhou City	5	2	2	9
	Anhui Province	0	0	1	1
	Jiangsu Province	3	3	1	7
	Shanghai	1	0	2	3
	Shandong Province	0	1	0	1
Frequency of return	Once a week	11	13	10	34
	Once a month	9	7	0	16
	Every half a year	8	18	3	29
	Once a year	8	7	7	22

decision. Contrastingly, more than half of the respondents in Group Y answered that the out-migrants cast their votes based on their own judgment.

In terms of social events, among all three villager groups, approximately half of the out-migrant population did not participate in any village social events, while the other half indicated that they attended some events depending on the situation. The last question asked whether the respondent would approve of the villager group being dissolved and resettled by the government, similar to the 15 groups previously split in the administrative village. Group D and G were unsure about or approving of the dissolution, while Group Y was predominantly against it.

Discussion

According to this survey conducted in three natural villages in the Huashi administrative village, the arguments put forth by recent policies in favor of strengthening individual land rights for peasants do not align with the behavior or outcomes in reality. These policies aim to safeguard the interests of peasants and promote the market transaction of land use rights to enhance the efficient utilization of land resources. However, in many cases, the consequences of the land rights trade are diametrically opposed to the goals (e.g., in terms of productivity) or are more complex than theory would dictate (e.g., in terms of village governance). An important starting point in understanding these outcomes is investigating how the identity politics of rural peasants diverges from the bureaucratic system of household registration (hukou).

In examining the protection of peasants' interests, it is important to note that the question of who is a "peasant" (*nongmin*) in the Chinese context has historically been the source of heated debates. In the legal/ administrative dimension, the identification of peasants is often oversimplified. In Chinese laws and policy documents, the term "peasants" generally refers to the holder of an agricultural hukou (Schneider, 2015). This identification ignores some important characteristics of peasants, such as the use of households as units of production and the noncommodified production of value in the households (Q. F. Zhang & Donaldson, 2010). This situation leads to intricate repercussions. If hukou is used as the standard to delineate who qualifies as a peasant in the current context, it invariably includes a diverse group of individuals, many of whom are not involved in agriculture or in rural areas at all. Some individuals, for example, reside in urban areas and have never been involved in agricultural activities, yet they possess a rural hukou, which classifies them as part of the peasant group and grants them rural land rights according to laws and regulations. Examining the data from the three villager groups in Huashi, these so-called peasants in urban areas have shifted away from agricultural pursuits. Their income levels are on par with or

Table 6. Participation of the Out-Migrant Population in Village Affairs and Social Activities

	Number of households			
	D	G	Y	Total
Land management				
My child (children)	0	0	3	3
Relatives	1	0	0	1
Neighbors	2	0	1	3
Anyone who can offer high rent	9	14	3	26
Missing value[a]	1	1	2	4
Participation in elections				
Yes	6	3	6	15
No	7	12	3	22
Social events				
Depending on the situation	5	7	5	17
Never	8	8	4	20
The demolition of the village				
Oppose	4	3	5	12
Approve	4	7	2	13
Unsure	5	5	2	12

[a] Missing values arose in 4 households, which reported never considering the issue thoroughly.

even surpass the average income of urban residents. However, due to their control over a substantial portion of rural land, the voice of the "authentic peasants" living in the village has been diminished.

This is well illustrated in the case study of Huashi village, which reveals that the economic growth in nearby towns and cities has created non-agricultural employment opportunities for rural people, but simultaneously hollowed out civic participation and other rural maintenance activities, including farming, social activities, elections, and local governance. Furthermore, RTR has exacerbated this situation, as villages have ceased to rely on funds from local villagers for exercising administrative power. This shift has resulted in village-level governance becoming more accountable to the state rather than to local residents. As the towns have experienced increasing prosperity and vibrancy, rural areas, in contrast, have faced crumbling infrastructure and an isolated elderly population. Villagers have become disillusioned with the deteriorating and desolate state of their villages, perpetuating a downward spiral in local engagement. In some cases, villagers even hoped for government-led demolitions and relocation to urban areas. In this context, leasing one's land for profit while alienating oneself from the rural area that afforded the land rights in the first place (i.e., the rural hukou) presents an unfortunate logic.

Considering the potential social costs of wide-scale rural land privatization, does it at least really result in a more efficient utilization of land resources? Examining the experiences of Group D and Group G in Huashi reveals that large-scale agricultural producers adhere to the logic of capitalist production. They cease their operations as soon as land becomes unprofitable for them, leaving land unsightly and idle, or in some cases refuse to pay rent. For peasants living in Huashi, observing idle land that could supplement incomes or provide for self-sufficiency is a painful daily reminder of the hollowing out of rural land management. Out-migrants who visit irregularly or do not maintain meaningful social ties are, naturally, less bothered by the wasteful agricultural decline in their hometowns. To resident villagers, land carries a significance that extends beyond being a mere commodity or a means of production; it represents a resource through which they secure sustenance, reproduce the landscape, and encounter a profound sense of life. To some extent, this was revealed in the experiences of Group Y, which maintained more independent farmers, did not lease land to external agents, and did not face nearly the same extent of abandoned land, political disaffection, or loss of civic engagement. The food produced by resident peasants has not only helped ensure their own food security, especially during the COVID-19 lockdown, but also provided sustenance for their urban relatives. In addition, surplus food is sold at local markets or makes its way to the urban population. Such outcomes were less common in village groups, in which out-migrants instrumentalized their rural land to rent to external entities who had little accountability to the rural economy, landscape, or civic affairs.

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

In the prevailing global capital-driven agricultural and food systems, traditional rural commons such as communal land, forests, and pastures are on the decline. Given the widespread adoption of market liberalization, future research must explore methods of advancing democratic governance within rural communities and pioneering novel approaches to harnessing commons through local initiatives. This is essential for revitalizing commons within diverse market economies, collectively addressing the challenges posed by the capitalization of agri-food systems on rural commons.

To this end, this paper reviews the ongoing debate surrounding the privatization of rural land in China and reexamines the distinctions between private and common property. I stress the notion that the common property is not "everyone's property"; rather, it should be equitably utilized within a certain group. Tracing the historical evolution of China's rural land policy reveals two primary motivations for enhancing individual land rights for peasants: safeguarding peasants' interests to stimulate their enthusiasm for production and facilitating land market transactions to optimize land resource utilization.

As discussed above, the theoretical justifications for strengthening individual land rights for

peasants scarcely match the on-the-ground experiences of Huashi village. This is because a significant portion of the rural land is now controlled by individuals who have migrated to urban areas. They have often carelessly leased their land to the highest bidder, despite the invariable consequences of a capitalist mode of operation that fails to achieve resource efficiency in absolute terms or by the standards of the previously peasant-driven agricultural systems. By 2022, 295.62 million people in China had transitioned from rural areas to urban settings, marking an increase of 3.11 million compared to 2021(National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). With the ongoing rural–urban migration, it becomes essential to explore ways in which rural governance can be maintained and land resources can be continuously utilized. This study reveals that the escalating privatization of land has not pointed in this direction. The case of Group Y, which avoided some of the pitfalls of privatization and maintained stronger social and civic ties, may offer some clues as to such a formulation.

In this regard, this paper aligns with the position that some aspects of land privatization have hamstrung local governance in Chinese villages. This suggests that local governance should remain empowered to modify the distribution of rural land to optimize land use and support local food security, particularly if absentee land rights holders do not take their rural responsibilities seriously. First, this approach can help avert the situation described in this article, wherein urban migrants control the majority of the land but are no longer engaged in agriculture or interested in local governance. Second, communal management encourages the recognition that land has significant symbolic value in rural life. Through their diligent efforts in cultivating the land, peasants not only sustain themselves with a rich array of nourishing food but also contribute to the well-being of urban residents by fostering family connections and supplying local markets with fresh and wholesome produce. Finally, a portion of profits from communal land can be directed toward the upkeep of shared agricultural machinery, irrigation systems, road maintenance, communal facilities, and cultural activities—all of which keep economic and civic life moving. This can enhance the bond between villages and their inhabitants in the post–Rural Tax Reform era, in which such communal engagements have become increasingly optional.

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Appendix

Questionnaire on Population Mobility and Dynamics of Rural Farmland Management

Questionnaire No.: _____

Since the 1980s, China has experienced increasing rural-to-urban migration, rapid urbanization, and robust economic growth. This questionnaire survey aims to grasp the impact of population mobility on village management and land operation, to support relevant research topics and policy decisions. The data collected through the questionnaire will be used exclusively for related research. Thank you for your cooperation and support!

Address:

- Province
- City
- County
- Township
- Administrative village
- Villager group

Part 1: Household Characteristics

1. **Composition of Household Members and Employment Situation**

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Relationship with the Head of the Household[a]	1 Head of Household 2 Head of Household's Spouse 3 Head of Household's Daughter 4 Head of Household's Son 5 Head of Household's Daughter-in-Law 6 Head of Household's Son-in-Law 7 Head of Household's Grandchild 8 Other Member							
Who permanently resides in the village?	1 Head of Household 2 Head of Household's Spouse 3 Head of Household's Daughter 4 Head of Household's Son 5 Head of Household's Daughter-in-Law 6 Head of Household's Son-in-Law 7 Head of Household's Grandchild 8 Other Household Member							
Gender	1 Female 2 Male							
Age								
Current Hukou	1 Rural hukou 2 Urban hukou							
Is he/she the single child? [b]	1 Yes 2 No							
Education	1 Elementary education and below 2. Junior school 3. High school 4. College education 5. Postgraduate education and higher							

Employment	Agriculture	How many days does he/she work within a year?								
		Annual Income (CNY)								
	Non-agricultural sectors	Business Owner or Formal Employee	How many days does he/she work within a year?							
			Annual Income (CNY)							
		Informal Employee	How many days does he/she work within a year?							
			Annual Income (CNY)							
		Does he/she engage in farming activities?	1 Yes 2 No							
Is he/she a cadre in the village committee or the village group leader?		1 Yes 2 No								

[a] In hukou system, each household has a designated head, typically a married male.

[b] The single child refers to an individual who is without any siblings, a circumstance that may include those affected by the one-child policy implemented in China since the 1980s.

Part 2: Farmland Operation

2. Size of Farmland Operated

Paddy fields ____ mǔ (Allocated area ___ mǔ； Leased in ___ mǔ; Leased out ___ mǔ)

Dry fields ____ mǔ (Allocated area ___ mǔ; Leased in ___ mǔ; Leased out ___ mǔ)

Mountain ___ mǔ (Allocated area ___ mǔ; Leased in ___ mǔ; Leased out ___ mǔ)

Water ___ mǔ (Allocated area ___ mǔ; Leased in ___ mǔ; Leased out ___ mǔ)

Other

3. Input and Output in Agriculture

Crops	Sowing Time (Lunar Month)	Planting area (mu)	Labor	Investment (CNY)									Total Yield (jin[a])	Sales (jin)	Selling Price (CNY/jin)	Self-consumption (jin)
				Land Rent	Hiring Workers	Seeds	Chemical Fertilizers	Pesticides	Machinery Operations	Electricity	Plastic Mulch	Other				
Wheat																
Rice																
Rapeseed																
Cotton																
Corn																
Soybean																
Peanut																
Vegetables and Fruits																
Other																
Total Input																

[a] One jin is approximately equivalent to 0.5 kg, 1.1 lbs.

4. Do you use homemade farm compost (homemade compost: self-made fertilizer produced by fermenting manure, plant materials, etc.)?

① Yes, I use. ② No, I do not use.

5. Have you purchased large agricultural machinery?

① Yes (with details about the price and the year of purchase)

Tractor: _____ CNY (year of purchase _____)

Seeder: _____ CNY (year of purchase _____)

Thresher: _____ CNY (year of purchase _____)

Harvester: _____ CNY (year of purchase _____)

Dryer: _____ CNY (year of purchase _____)

Water Pump: _____ CNY (year of purchase _____)

Corn Thresher: _____ CNY (year of purchase _____)

Other Agricultural Machinery: _____ CNY (year of purchase _____)

② No

Part 3: Interaction Between the Out-migrants and the Village

6. If you were unable to continue farming the land for various reasons, to whom would you transfer the farmland?

   ① My child(ren) (child(ren)'s age ____, residing in A rural/ B urban）

   ② Relatives in the village

   ③ Neighbors in the village

   ④ Whoever offers a higher rent, including non-local farmers and external companies.

   ⑤ Other (e.g., _____)

7. Where do your children currently reside (multiple choices allowed)?

   ① Rural (in the same village as you) ② Rural (in a different village)

   ③ Urban ④ No children

8. What is the distance between your children and your residence (multiple choices allowed)?

   ① Within 15 km ② 15–30 km ③ 30–60 km ④ 60–100 km ⑤ More than 100 km

9. How often do your children come back (multiple choices allowed)?

   ① Once a week ② Once a month ③ Once every six months

   ④ Once a year ⑤ Once every few years

10. Do your children come back to help during the busy farming seasons (multiple choices allowed)?

    ① They come back every busy farming season

    ② They occasionally come back to help

    ③ They do not come back to help

11. After China introduced the long-term and stable land use rights policy, are your children interested in managing the farmland in the village?

    ① Yes ② No

12. When you get older and need someone to take care of your daily life, who do you plan to have as your caregiver?

    ① Children take turns if you have both son(s) and daughter(s)

    ② Son(s) if you have both son(s) and daughter(s)

    ③ Son(s) if you only have son(s)

    ④ Daughter(s) if you only have daughter(s)

    ⑤ Nursing home

    ⑥ Not clear

    ⑦ Other

13. Where would you like to spend your later years?

① In your village (where your children also live in the village)

② In your village (where your children do not live in the village)

③ At your children's home (where your children do not live in the village)

④ Not clear

14. When you can no longer work to earn money, where will your retirement funds primarily come from? (multiple choices allowed)?

① By relying on my own savings, as well as the government's pension for rural elderly

② By leasing out farmland to others and using the land lease income for retirement

③ Financial support from children

④ Not clear

Part 4: Civic Participation

15. What are the activities in the village that require participation from villagers?

① Village committee elections ② Road, ditch, and other public facilities repairs

③ Distribution of grain subsidies ④ Other

16. How often does the village committee convene a village assembly?

① Once a year ② Twice a year ③ Three times a year

④ Irregularly, with ad-hoc meetings as needed

17. Do your children living in urban areas participate in village committee elections and other village affairs?

① They participate in elections but do not participate in other matters.

② They never participate in elections and other affairs.

③ They actively participate in all affairs.

④ Not clear

18. Do your children participate in wedding ceremonies and funerals in the village?

① The village has an organization to manage these events, and all villagers with local hukou, even if they work elsewhere, are required to participate.

② The village does not have specific organizations to manage these events, and their participation depends on specific situations.

③ They never participate.

④ Not clear.

19. As more young people are settling in cities, rural villages are facing increasing aging and depopulation. What are your views on the future village governance?

① I oppose demolition of rural houses and relocation.

② I support demolition and relocation; villagers can move to urban communities.

③ I have no strong preference.

The questionnaire ends here! Thank you for your cooperation!