



# Vulnerability and livelihood restoration of landless households after land acquisition: Evidence from peri-urban China

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## ABSTRACT

The large-scale rural land acquisition projects for non-agricultural purposes has cast a long shadow on rural households' livelihoods in China. In this paper, by applying Sustainable Livelihood Framework and vulnerability approach, and based on our longitudinal study (2008–2017) on a land acquisition case in S village, Jining city, Shandong province, we discuss the dynamism of households' livelihood changes before land acquisition and in decade after land acquisition. It is found that households' different vulnerabilities and livelihood restorations in decade after land acquisition, are the results of their different capabilities of building various livelihood capitals. Another evident finding is that land acquisition as it is increasingly practiced with China's rapid urbanisation process has triggered risks to most rural households' livelihoods. The implications of the research indicate the necessity of local governments to guarantee for sustaining rural households' livelihoods after land acquisition.

## 1. Introduction

As China rapidly urbanises, massive amounts of agricultural land in rural areas is being acquired for non-agricultural purposes (Cao, Feng, & Tao, 2008; Mullan, Grosjean, & Kontoleon, 2011). This includes both urban construction uses such as commercial and residential projects to achieve the goal of urban expansion (He, Liu, Webster, & Wu, 2009) and industrial purposes (Chen, Ye, Cai, Xing, & Chen, 2014) often driven by market forces (Zhang, 2000). For instance, a large number of industrial or high-tech parks have been established across the country for the express purpose of advancing industrialisation (Long, Li, Liu, Woods, & Zou, 2012). Consequently, throughout the country, urban built-up areas have largely increased (Chen et al., 2014; Liu, Zhan, & Deng, 2005) while agricultural land has decreased significantly (Ministry of land and resources, 2017; Yang & Li, 2000).

These extensive land acquisition projects lead to significant shifts in the livelihoods of rural households in China (Song, Wang, & Lei, 2016; Wang, Yang, & Zhang, 2011). It is from purely agricultural or natural capital, for example land resources, based livelihoods (Li, 2011; Ministry of land and resources, 2010), to livelihoods that require a wider range of capitals to sustain. These include physical capital indicating households' housing infrastructure and facilities after land acquisition; social capital indicating their integration into social networks (Chambers, 1989); and human capital indicating their education

and professional skills other than farming (Bebbington, 1999), which significantly influence their employment transformations after land acquisition, and thus financial capital particularly income.

Much recent scholarly attention has been paid to the significantly negative impacts of land acquisition on rural households' livelihoods in China (Hui & Bao, 2013; Long et al., 2012). However, these studies do not point to ways to investigate the dynamism of households' livelihood changes due to land acquisition in long-term. Similarly, they do not examine the abilities or inabilities of households to sustain or enhance access to various livelihood capitals in long-term after land acquisition. Given that restoring livelihoods after land acquisition is a dynamic process, which demands significant time for households to build various livelihood capitals, there is a need for studies that help to consider households' ability or inability to adapt to and recover from the impacts of land acquisition. The extent to which this affects their livelihoods can be thought about in terms of vulnerability (Adato & Meinzen-dick, 2002; Kelly & Adger, 2000; Pelling, 2003), and whether their livelihood restorations are sustainable in long-term after land acquisition.

In this paper, we assess households' vulnerabilities and livelihood restorations from longitudinal perspective, from 2008 to 2017, based on household level data collected in a single, in-depth case of S village in Jining city, Shandong province. By applying a Sustainable Livelihood Framework that constitutes various livelihood capitals such as natural, financial, human, social and physical capitals (Hall, 2007; Scoones,

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2009), we offer an understanding of different vulnerabilities and livelihood restorations in decade after land acquisition, and argue that difference in households' experiences are the results of their different capabilities in building various livelihood capitals within this period.

## 2. Literature review

While the continuously increasing numbers of landless farmers (BAO & Peng, 2016), are deemed to be the sources of substantial social unrest in China (Ding & Lichtenberg, 2011), they are also the group of people who have suffered the most in land acquisition in various aspects (Chen & Zhang, 2007; Liang, Lu, & Wu, 2014; Liang & Zhu, 2015; Tan, Li, Xie, & Lu, 2005; Zhu & Prosterman, 2007). The impacts of land acquisition on landless farmers are also found to vary among different ages (Tong, Zhang, Lo, Chen, & Gao, 2017), different genders (Fan, 2004), and different spatial location and land acquisition degree (Zhang, Lu, & Mi, 2006). However, common impact is reduced employment opportunities for farmers and difficulties in restoring their livelihoods in urban settings (Chen, Cai, Liu, Zhou, & Zhang, 2013; Chuang, 2014; Long et al., 2012; Zhen, Fu, Lü, & Zheng, 2014). This is mainly due to the fact that many landless farmers have limited educational attainments, as well as the fact that job skill trainings and social networks are less accessible in urban areas (He et al., 2009). At a more interpersonal level, there are issues with recognition and identity politics between urban and rural residents (Liang & Zhu, 2015), which can often mean newly arrived rural residents continue to be unemployed (Cao et al., 2008).

In fact, many landless farmers are involved in temporary and part-time jobs with harsh working conditions and low, unstable salaries (Shen, 2002; Wang & Fan, 2012). For example, based on 162 effective questionnaire surveys in suburban areas in Wuhan, Chen and Zhang (2007) find that more than 80% of landless farmers are either unemployed or rely on unstable temporary employment. As the consequence, the financial conditions of landless farmers have become deteriorated (Chen et al., 2013; Ding, 2007; Hui & Bao, 2013). For example, Zhang and Liu (2005) mention a survey conducted by National Bureau of Statistics of China, in which nearly half of landless farmers' net incomes decrease, while their living costs increase due to extra purchase on foods and increased water and electricity payments. Furthermore, without an urban *hukou* (urban residential registration), those landless farmers, who migrate to urban areas, are significantly discriminated with their urban counterparts (Cheng & Selden, 1994). For example, rural residents are restricted to enjoy government-provided social services and welfares (Chan & Buckingham, 2008), such as education, medical facilities and better employment opportunities (Wang, 2005).

However, we find that studies comprehensively comparing households' livelihoods before, and in decade after land acquisition by applying livelihood vulnerability analytical framework are rare. Filling this empirical gap allows for the examination of the dynamic livelihood changes over the years as often households can either gain or lose relevant livelihood capitals in long-term. The integration of a Sustainable Livelihood Framework and vulnerability approach enables consideration of different types of livelihood capitals, as means (Chambers & Conway, 1992; Ellis, 1999) to identify vulnerabilities of rural households encountering external changes (for example land acquisition) on their livelihoods at local scale (Rogers & Xue, 2015). The approach also reveals their capabilities to adapt to and recover from the changes (Linnekamp, Koedam, & Baud, 2011). Such integration is emerging for land related issues (Hesselberg & Yaro, 2006; Huang, Li, Bai, & Cui, 2012), and is particularly useful in the Chinese context where we are seeing tremendous transformations of rural households' livelihoods (Huang, Huang, He, & Yang, 2017). Additionally, there is a lack of studies which describe livelihood outcomes at a household level over long-time scales after land acquisition. The net livelihood effects within a household allow for an understanding of the combinations of adaptations to different livelihood capitals as a means of confronting

challenges (Scoones, 1998). This is especially significant in the cultural context of rural China, where commitments to family mediate approaches to change in livelihoods (He & Xue, 2014).

In this paper, we describe our longitudinal findings, on a land acquisition project in S village, Jining city, Shandong province, China. Through both quantitative assessment and qualitative techniques, we explore the abilities or inabilities of households to sustain or enhance access to different livelihood capitals, and we also investigate to what extent households transform these capitals to reduce vulnerabilities and restore livelihoods in decade after land acquisition in S village. We then explain how some households are more vulnerable in some aspects of livelihoods than another, as well as how most rural households in this region are exposed to threats in their livelihoods.

## 3. Method

We selected a land acquisition project, in S village, southeast Jining city, Shandong province, as our case study due to a series of primary concerns. Firstly, our extensive local contacts in S village allowed access to sufficient numbers of households, which also facilitated the follow up visits in decade after land acquisition. Secondly, being located in a suburban area, S village has a broad demographic profile and contains villagers with various socioeconomic status, which is important for research that seeks to understand variation in access to different livelihood capitals in decades after land acquisition. Thirdly, S village was resettled because it is in a coal mining site in which land was acquired by local government for a state-owned enterprise. The broader context of land acquisition in S village therefore also gives insights into whether land acquisition projects, in the name of local economic growth and rural industrialisation development, have benefits for local households.

The land acquisition officially commenced in November 2002. In early 2003, local government, the state-owned coal mining enterprise and the villagers, had decided the compensation standard. According to the land acquisition plan, released in 2005 that was based on most of the villagers' opinions, all the land in S village would be expropriated and the villagers would be provided newly built apartments in new S village. The resettled apartments on the site were completely built in the end of 2010 and we have maintained attention on the project since 2005. The first round of fieldwork was conducted from April to June in 2008, in which we conducted face-to-face surveys of 300 households in their preferred locations. This is about 85% of the total households in S village.

This approach helped to establish a representative sample and avoid any biases, which is often the result of selecting a small group of households. The average household size was 4.2 people, while the number of single-headed households was 8. There were 3 people of working age on average for each household. Survey questions included household demographics, household members' pre-land acquisition occupations, households' pre-land acquisition net income per year and income sources. Based on household net income per year, we calculated the per capita incomes within each household. The second round of fieldwork was conducted from March to September in 2017. Again, we issued 300 face-to-face surveys to the same households with the same questions. Then, we combined the data of households' annual income changes and its members' employment status after land acquisition, to know who had increased, steadied or decreased annual incomes, and why.

In interpreting the quantitative results, we also conducted 100 interviews with households that were randomly selected to avoid selection bias. These interviews were held in the households' preferred places, including homes, restaurants and workplaces, with no one present besides the interviewees and researchers and local facilitators during the interviews. Each semi-structured interview was about 1 h, allowing in-depth exploration of households' less visible experiences of livelihood change in decade after land acquisition (Adato & Meinzen-Dick, 2002).

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