



Local farmland loss and preservation in China—A perspective of quota territorialization



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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a critical review of post-Mao local farmland loss and preservation, particularly since the mid 2000s. Nationwide, annual loss of farmland has declined significantly from an average annual decline of 14 million *mu* (about 930 thousand hectares) between 1999 and 2005, to 1 million *mu* (about 67 thousand hectares) since 2006. The slow-down of farmland loss can ostensibly be attributed to the central land policy of “1.8 billion *mu* farmland preservation” stipulated in 2005, a key environmental policy to cope with China’s land transformation crisis since the 1990s. However, I argue that three key quota territorialization tactics to skillfully promote economic development behind central government’s sustainable land policy can be found: (1) intra-territorialization (consolidation of fragmental rural land in order to shift newly obtained quota to urban districts in the same city); (2) inter-territorialization (exchange of land conversion quotas between two different cities); and (3) extra-territorialization (development of marginal lands that are used not to be counted as useable lands). Operations of these three quota territorialization tactics are facilitated by central-local dynamical interactions in manipulating ecological modernization discourses and related technologies.

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1. Introduction: inconsistencies between official statistics and ground reality

Spatial transformation is without doubt a key dimension in understanding China’s economic transition since 1978 (Lin, 2009; Hsing, 2010; Liu et al., 2014). In the late 1980s, the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was revised to separate land ownership and land use rights. As a result, vast tracts of farmland were converted to commercial, residential and industrial use. Between 1996 and 2005, China’s cities collectively expanded by 12,000 km², an average annual expansion of about 1000 km². Between 2007 and 2010, an additional 7000 km² of land was built up, for an average annual increase of about 2500 km².

This paper takes a critical look at official farmland statistics and finds them to be incompatible with the ground reality. Surprisingly, the nationwide trend of farmland loss is on the decline. According to official statistics, annual farmland loss averaged 11,000 km² from 1999 and 2005, but fell dramatically to 1000 km² after 2006. These numbers suggest that farmland loss was effectively brought under

control in the late 2000s, a contention which stands at odds with the increased pace of urban development over the same period.

This paper seeks to explain this inconsistency. On the surface, the slow-down of farmland loss is regarded as a function of local implementation of the central government’s 2006 land preservation policy of ‘1.8 billion *mu* farmland preservation’ (*shi ba yi mu geng di hong xian*, hereafter the ‘1.8 million *mu* policy’),¹ a key environmental measure designed to cope with China’s land transformation crisis which began in the 1990s (Chen and Han, 2015). This paper reviews local implementation of this central policy and explores when and under what circumstances local governments were able to circumvent the policy and continue aggressive development.

Inspired from the perspective of political ecology (Swyngedouw, 2009; Tilt, 2007), I argue the farmland issue should be understood as a political process behind environmental change. In this paper, I pay particular attention to the role of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (including its cadre evaluation, central-local dynamics, and authoritarian control) (Edin, 2003; Zheng, 2007; Chien, 2010), and argue that under the CCP party-state mechanism, local governments engage in strategies which allow them

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¹ *mu* is a Chinese unit for measuring areas. 1 ha equals to 15 *mu*.

to meet performance targets imposed by upper-level governments, and which are critical factors in the career prospects of local officials. Local government officials seek to ostensibly preserve farmland as a response to central's policy while skillfully obtaining or even creating land available for development. They accomplish this in three strategic ways: (1) consolidation of fragmented rural lands in order to shift these land quotas to urban districts in the same territory, and (2) exchange of land conversion quotas between different cities; and (3) the development of marginal lands that used not to be accounted as land quotas before. Each empirical tactic can be related to one quota territorialization concept, namely, intra-territorialization, inter-territorialization, and extra-territorialization. Ecological modernization-related discourses about better ways of life and modern technologies for scientific monitoring and surveying are manipulated in order to support these quota territorialization tactics. Despite a focus on short-term land development, these local responses to central farmland preservation policies produce additional social and environmental negative externalities.

The rest of the paper is divided into four sections. Section 1 identifies features of local land management practices in China. Four dimensions are highlighted: state-land ownership, party controls of the state, interactive dynamics between the central and local governments, and China's centralized performance-based cadre evaluation system. Section 2 reviews the central government's 1.8 billion *mu* farmland preservation policy, including its background, principles and follow-ups. Section 3 discusses three quota territorialization tactics that are used to create more land quotas for development while maintaining land preservation quotas. In Section 4, I examine the manipulation of related discourse and technologies which lie behind these local quota territorialization tactics for farmland loss and preservation.

2. Understanding local power over land use in China

Development, from economic growth and social equality to food production and to ecological sustainability, requires land resources. Local governments generally have certain powers over lands located within their jurisdictions. Issues on dynamics between local power and land change process can be widely understood as environmental politics research. Post-socialist China is often positioned as a case of so-called authoritarian environmentalism, in the sense that the state controls environmental decision process with affording little or even no roles of social actors and their representatives (Gilley, 2012; Eaton and Kostka, 2014). In this respect, there are four key characteristics in terms of local land management practices in China.

First, since its inception in 1949, the PRC has outlawed the private ownership of land. All land in China is either state-owned by city governments or collectively owned in rural areas. The amendment of PRC's constitution in the 1990s allows for separation of land ownership and land use rights, thus allowing for the leasing of state-owned lands to private developers and citizens through market mechanisms. But the state has absolute discretion to grant or terminate such land use rights as it sees fit (Lin, 2009; Hsing, 2010; Yeh and Wu, 1996; Tian and Ma, 2009).

Second, urban authorities in China enjoy significant power not only due to its monopoly on land ownership but also because the authoritarian nature of the party state mechanism (Zheng, 2010). Under the doctrine that the party controls the state, the administration dominates the legislature and judiciary with very few checks and balances, leaving relatively restricted political space for an independent media or civic groups. Leading cadres, including party secretaries, mayors and county chiefs basically have a final say over any change to land use policies. Under the context that

the top priority is given to economic growth, most local leaders see land purely as an economic resource and means of generating fiscal revenue, and tend to ignore or even oppress those who advocate contrary views over land development, or stress the need for environmental protection, conservation or social rights (Mertha, 2009; Brodsgaard, 2001; Chan, 2004).²

Third, the CCP manipulates the behavior of local cadres through authoritarian mechanisms for political promotion. Local leaders in China are not elected by local citizens but selected by upper-level governments (Chien, 2010; Blanchard and Shleifer, 2000; Edin, 2003; Chen et al., 2005). Career prospects of subnational leaders are directly impacted by top-down evaluations- those who meet or exceed their economic performance targets assigned by the upper-level governments are more likely to be promoted; on the contrary, those who fail to accomplish their performance requirements may face punishment of demotion. Therefore local cadres under CCP authoritarian control are driven to behalf in a way accountable toward upper-level governments. It is noted that importance of such performance-based and upward accountability cadre evaluation system is selective in two ways. On the one hand, economic indicators like production of Gross Domestic Products (GDP), generation of fiscal revenue and so on, are much more important than other social ones like distributions of educations and welfares. On the other hand, the system is more applicable to those local leaders at the lower-level (like county-level and prefecture-level) than those at provincial-level. Selection for county-level leaders and prefecture-level ones are more performance-based but selection for provincial-level leaders tends to be more political-driven and network-based (Lü et al., 2014; Choi, 2012).³

Last but not the least, the PRC's constitution does not provide for the firm regulation of the central and local governments. Rather, it allows and even encourages dynamic relations between local and central governments, providing multiple channels through which they are able to influence each other. The central government can easily centralize or decentralize various administrative powers to control or stimulate local enthusiasm for economic development. On the other hand, local authorities keen to utilize their localized and decentralized competences to devise coping strategies for dealing with central government policies. Generally, local governments have more power over locally-initiated projects or the local implementation of central policies. It is partly because the central government has insufficient resources or expertise to provide detailed oversight and partly because the central government intentionally allows local states to serve as policy laboratories for the selective experimental implementation of central policies prior to nationwide adoption (Montinola et al., 1995; Cao et al., 1999; Qian and Weingast, 1996).

To sum up, local power over land use in the context of authoritarian environmentalism China can be identified four institutional features: state-ownership of land, pro-growth authoritarian government, upward accountability in related to performance-based cadre evaluation, and local-central interactive dynamics. These four features, the first two on the state-society relationship and the latter two on central-local relationship, collectively play a deci-

² Recent years have seen a marked increase in local environmental movements like 'not in my back yard' (NIMBY) protests against local development decisions. However, in most cases, China's local governments still exercise much greater authority over civil society.

³ It is partly because number matters- there are 2856 county-level administrations, and 345 prefecture-level ones and only 31 provincial-level ones (not including Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan). Considerations for selecting relatively small numbers of provincial-level candidates in China must involve more political dimensions like factions. Instead, management of large size of county-level and prefecture-level candidates, whose territories most farmland loss and preservation processes take place, should more rely on performance competition

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