

Bridging the Urban-rural Divide? A Case Study on Rural Land Transition in Sichuan Province, China

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ABSTRACT. Rising concern over urban-rural economic disparity in China in the early 2000s spurred a series of policy initiatives to improve people's quality of life in rural areas. A recently launched Rural Land Transition Program in Sichuan Province aims to increase land-use efficiency and rural incomes by consolidating fragmented land plots under large commercial firms for agricultural production. In this paper, we document the scheme of implementation of the land transition project through the pilot case of Renshou Village in Sichuan Province, drawing attention to its contested premise. The paper suggests that the goals of achieving greater economies of scale in agricultural production and increasing rural incomes via land consolidation have met with mixed success.

KEYWORDS. *Rural land transition, land consolidation, urban-rural disparity, rural land reform, China*

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1. INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the 21st century, following more than two decades of near double-digit economic development rates in China's eastern seaboard and industrial cities under Deng Xiaoping's mantra that "after the rich become rich, common prosperity will reach all people," the lack of priority given to the development of rural and interior regions of the country has emerged as a major policy issue in China. The dual structures in place for development in rural and urban areas have led to disparities in incomes, poverty distribution, and populations that threaten to disrupt social and political stability in China's rural areas. Deteriorating conditions in the countryside have sparked concern over China's ability to maintain sustainable growth and the potential of regional economic disparity to undermine social and political stability.

In response to worsening regional inequality, China's policy makers turned their attention, beginning in the 1990s, toward equalizing development in China's interior and rural regions, and these efforts have been expanded since the early 2000s (Yao, 2008). At the important national conference held in March 2003, the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, central government leaders expressed concerns about rural incomes and regional income disparities. To address these issues, the Chinese government, during the 2005 National People's Congress, proposed the construction of a Harmonious Society, and ratified this concept as part of the Eleventh Five-Year Plan in 2006, reflecting the leaders' attempts to integrate societal balance and harmony into China's economic development policies (Fan, 2006; Wu et al., 2005). Following these proclamations, China's government took a new set of policy actions to bridge the urban and rural divide. Some goals of the rural development programs include the elimination of certain rural and agricultural/forestry taxes, improvements in grain supply management via agricultural subsidies, the expansion of the financial system to make credit accessible in rural areas, the establishment of more rural social security programs, and the advancement of comprehensive and coordinated rural-urban development projects through a series of land reforms to increase rural land-use efficiency.

This paper focuses on a recent pilot policy effort to reduce urban-rural disparity in the central province of Sichuan. The pilot project is a Rural Land Transition Program (RLTP), in which farmers forgo property rights and household-level operation of their small land plots, which are then consolidated and transitioned to large commercial firms for agricultural production. An underlying assumption of the program design is that low marginal output values in the agricultural sector can be attributed to the small-scale nature of farming in China. The RLTP was designed to introduce efficiency to rural communities with the basic premise that if farmers give their land rights to the village collective, and the collective consolidates land fragments into one large land parcel to be leased to a commercial agricultural firm, greater land-use efficiency can

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