

# The Land Question in China: Agrarian Capitalism, Industrious Revolution and East Asian Development

by Shaohua Zhan

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Shaohua Zhan writes that the purpose of this book is to 'search for alternative solutions to rural development problems in China' (p. x). Using the entry point of land, he juxtaposes two development paths—agrarian capitalism and industrious revolution. The former entails dispossession of rural smallholders and concentration of land for capitalist agriculture with hired labour. The latter, on the other hand, would ensure broad access to land for rural smallholders for a labour-intensive industrious revolution and imply very different scenarios for China's countryside. Zhan points out that the industrious revolution happened twice in China. One was in the eighteenth century (in the Qing Dynasty), and the other was in 1980s and 1990s (following the Open and Reform Policy). By going back to the historical data and examining the contemporary situation, Zhan argues in favour of an industrious revolution over agrarian capitalism. He holds that the current dominant mode of rural development—a transition to agrarian capitalism facilitated by the state—is problematic and high-stakes, particularly in a context of precarious urban employment and population pressure.

Zhan defines the land question in China as 'whether rural smallholders—including peasants, migrant workers, and rural entrepreneurs—should maintain land rights in a rapidly industrializing and urbanizing economy' (p. 1). He draws ideas and inspiration from Akira Hayami, Fernand Braudel, Giovanni Arrighi and Kenneth Pomeranz, among others, to discuss the conditions for the emergence of an industrious revolution, its effects on Chinese society and the forces that undermine it from a global-historical perspective. Industrious revolution in his book refers to 'an economic change when great economic progress is made by and shared among a large population in rural areas. It usually takes place when peasants and rural entrepreneurs can access and use land resources for farm and nonfarm purposes' (pp. 5–6). His main arguments in its favour could be summarized as follows: (1) an industrious revolution would occur when rural smallholders' access to land is guaranteed, the state takes the side of the smallholders and market conditions favour them over large producers, who become non-existent or restricted; (2) industrious revolution would create an inclusive development in which nearly all social classes and groups, particularly the poor, get a share of the benefits, thus presenting an alternative in at least some regions and some sectors of the capitalist system that have been unable to accommodate a generalized living wage for the world proletariat; and (3) historical evidence in China and the lessons from other countries show that swinging away from industrious revolution would jeopardize the speed of development and lead to polarization of wealth, urban slums and land struggles.

The book is composed of three sections, sandwiched between an introduction and a conclusion. The introduction briefly discusses the concept of industrious revolution, its main arguments and the sources of data through which it can be studied. Both historical and contemporary field data are utilized to facilitate the analysis. Chapters 1 and 2 trace the history of two industrious revolutions in China to show how an industrious revolution

could be incubated. Based on this historical analysis, Zhan argues that access to land for rural smallholders is a necessary but inadequate precondition. In previous industrious revolutions, the states also played an essential role in creating supportive policies for smallholders and restricting large landholders or enterprises. The socialist legacy in the 1950s and 1960s such as improvement of agricultural infrastructure and the abilities of rural communities to take collective action also contributed greatly to the emergence of the second industrious revolution.

Chapters 3 and 4 explain why the second industrious revolution ended. The author attributes this to urban bias since the 1990s and the acceleration of agrarian capitalism in the 2010s. Growing taxes and fees, insufficient infrastructural investment, drying up of rural credit, and marketization of education and health care in the 1990s resulted in rural crisis and an economy dependent on out-migration. Private and foreign capital from various sources flooded into the countryside as an answer to 'who will till the land' while rural populations were fleeing into cities for cash income. Collective enterprises were privatized, and land was taken away from the hands of rural smallholders, directly or indirectly under the garb of food security and agricultural modernization. Although there was some counter-movement in the mid-2000s, like the proposal to build a new socialist countryside by balancing urban and rural development, these changes benefited agribusiness companies more than rural smallholders.

In the last section (Chapters 5 and 6), the author takes the argument to the global level, comparing China to South Africa, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan in terms of the land question. South Africa represented the most pessimistic scenario with the rise of agrarian capitalism, in which the majority of the rural population was forced off the land but the urban sector was unable to absorb them. Japan, South Korea and Taiwan were the opposite, resembling the most optimistic scenario. China, according to the author, was somewhere in the middle, with a mixture of vibrant agrarian capitalism and the industrious revolution. However, the author warns that even the most optimistic scenario could become a mirage due to the unavoidable periodic slowdown of economic development and ensuing rising unemployment rate. A productivist welfare regime like the Chinese state that 'subordinates social policy to the overriding policy objective of economic growth' (p. 128) might deteriorate the situation.

The book ends with concerns over the current rural vitalization strategy, introduced in 2017, since it again provides opportunities to both rural smallholders and agribusiness companies. Zhan predicts that the future of the countryside in China will depend on the dynamics between the two.

Zhan's take differs from modernization theory and class-based approaches to development. He views the rural village as a community and believes the main conflicts in agrarian transition exist between the rural community and outsiders like agribusiness companies and large farms. He is not completely against urbanization and modernization either, since he recognizes that rural smallholders need urban jobs and markets to reproduce, to accumulate and to prosper. Deep in his argument hides an eclectic soul: he seeks to carefully regulate urbanization and modernization processes and rein in capital so that rural populations released from the land could be gradually absorbed by the urban industrial sector, and to support smallholders remaining in the land for a dignified life. In other words, he sticks firmly to the thesis of 'accumulation without dispossession' (a term proposed by his supervisor Giovanni Arrighi). His argument is of great value particularly when the big picture of contemporary land politics is characterized by widespread land dispossession and surplus population whose 'land is needed, but their labour is not' (Li, 2011).

What is interesting is that although Zhan based his argument on the darkness of the capitalist system (objectified as precarious employment or surplus/unwanted population), he does not dialogue much with either neo-institutional economics or Marxist political economy. He, therefore, misses the opportunity to engage with a substantive literature on questions of land and labour efficiency in peasant production and the future of the peasantry. Terms like 'efficiency', 'class' or even 'peasants' barely find mention in his book. Instead, he talks about 'rural smallholders', a term he avoids defining (e.g., how small is 'small?'). His analytical framework, which is not clear in the book, might be taken to be 'small' versus 'large' and 'inside' versus 'outside'. To put it simply, small capital from inside the rural community is acceptable and meritorious, but big capital from outside is evil and dangerous. This type of dichotomy is always questionable when explaining complex social realities. For instance, it cannot explain why sometimes dispossession comes from 'inside' rural communities instead of from outside (Yunan, 2018), i.e., through land alienation emanating from class differentiation.

Besides, this book fails to explain effectively what put an end to the two previous industrious revolutions. For the first industrious revolution, Zhan believed that the key reason was a lack of an effective county administration system, which made the pro-poor land and agricultural policies difficult to continue (p. 33). But how could these policies be enforced in the first place without such an administration system? For the second industrious revolution, the undermining forces highlighted in part two include urban bias and rise of agrarian capitalism. But why was there a sudden shift in the policies? Zhan gives an inadequate answer in pointing towards party leadership: the change of the chairman, from Zhao Ziyang (in favour of the rural) to Jiang Zheming (inclined towards the urban). By excluding class analysis, this book also gives up the possibility of exploring reasons for such shifts in policy at the macro level. For similar reasons, the book also does not make any links or comparisons between the two industrious revolutions.

Despite these limitations, this book is a valuable piece of research, with rich national data and in-depth case studies, especially for readers who are keen on the history of land tenure system and agrarian transition in China. The land question and the issue of precarious employment remain areas that deserve to be studied from different viewpoints, and this book is an important contribution towards the same.

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