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To cite this article: Xingyan Chen & Shaohua Zhan (09 Apr 2025): Building a collective economy, but for whom? ‘Three conversions’ and rural revitalization in China, The Journal of Peasant Studies, DOI: [10.1080/03066150.2025.2476004](https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2025.2476004)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2025.2476004>



Published online: 09 Apr 2025.



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Building a collective economy, but for whom? ‘Three conversions’ and rural revitalization in China

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ABSTRACT

The recent campaign to build a rural collective economy in China has been perceived as a major policy shift. This paper shows, however, that the policy outcome deviates significantly from building a genuine inclusive collective economy. The main measure that the Chinese state implemented to strengthen rural collectives under the new policy initiative has been to convert village resources, funds, and people into marketable assets, shares, and shareholders, known as ‘Three Conversions’ reform. Our fieldwork in a pilot village selected for implementing the policy shows that the newly established collective economy is not inclusive for all villagers. Rather, the policy empowered rural cadres and private investors, who have increased their control of village resources for personal gains, whereas ordinary villagers are increasingly detached and excluded from access to farmland and other village resources. As a result, instead of building an inclusive collective economy, the Three Conversions reform has facilitated the rise of state-led agrarian capitalism in rural China.

KEYWORDS

Agrarian transition; collective economy; rural revitalization; three conversions; China

1. Introduction

China’s rural collective economy was severely weakened after rural reforms in 1978, which replaced collective farming (1956-1978) with the Household Responsibility System and a market-oriented economy. In the past two decades, many scholars have contended that the Chinese countryside has been transitioning to a system of agrarian capitalism, characterized by the increasing importance of agrarian capital, large farms, and private investors (Zhang 2010; Schneider 2017; Zhan 2019b). And yet, since the year of 2017, the Communist Party of China (CPC) under Xi Jinping launched the ‘Rural Revitalization Strategy’ (RRS), and a key goal of the strategy is to (re-)build a rural collective economy (SCMP 2020; Yan, Bun, and Siyuan 2021; Farmers’ Daily 2022).

The primary measure to build a rural collective economy is the policy of ‘Three Conversions’ reform (三变改革), referring to ‘the conversion of village resources into collective assets, village collective funds into shares, and villagers into shareholders’ (JCB 2018). Building a rural collective economy, if successful, would challenge the thesis that China is transitioning to agrarian capitalism. Thus, an important question for the scholarship of China’s agrarian change is whether the initiative of building a collective economy, or

the RRS in general, would counter or reverse the country's transition to agrarian capitalism, which should comprise two concurrent processes: rising importance of agrarian capital and declining importance of smallholders in the rural economy (Zhan 2019b).

There have been two opposing views on the issue. One view regards the RRS, including the policy of building a collective economy, as part of the Polanyian countermovement against marketization and capitalist transition in the past four decades (Liu 2022). The other view, held by Hairong Yan and her colleagues, argues that the 'three conversions' policy is likely to make rural resources including land 'available for investors, a strategy amounting to 'vacating the cage for a new bird' ... ' They further contended, the 'Three Conversions' reform will not stop rural differentiation and will most likely be troubled by the familiar problem of elite capture, as well as by tension and conflicts among villagers, rural elites, and investors' (Yan, Bun, and Siyuan 2021, 863).

While these authors hold differing views, they have not conducted empirical research on how the Three Conversions reform was implemented on the ground, and their conclusions have been mainly made based on the analysis of policy documents, the synthesis of past research, or interviews with policy makers or intellectuals. This is problematic because processes of policy implementation and outcomes may not follow the schematic design by the central government at the top. James Scott reminded us that modernist schemes and policies, backed by the strong authoritarian state, often failed to help their intended beneficiaries because they ignored practical knowledge, informal processes, and local diversities (Scott 1998).

We conducted an empirical investigation and examined the implementation of the Three Conversions reform at the village level. We selected Flatland Village¹ in Henan Province, a pilot village that implemented the policy in the early phase, for an in-depth case study. There are at least three reasons why we selected Flatland Village and why our findings in the village could be generalized to many villages in Henan and other provinces. First, the village has been one of the 100 villages selected as the pilot sites in Henan Province to implement the Three Conversions reform. As will be shown below, the village resembles most of the pilot villages in terms of having a low collective revenue and owning limited collective resources. And these problems are not exceptional to villages in Henan Province but a common phenomenon nationwide. Second, we have maintained close contacts with the village and gained trust with village cadres and ordinary villagers. Thus, we were able to collect first-hand, reliable data, which enabled us to understand the empirical process of the Three Conversions reform. Last, we have interviewed county officials to learn about the experiences of other pilot villages and gathered information from newspapers and local government reports, which allowed us to situate Flatland Village in the larger context.

We made multiple trips to the village from 2016 to 2021. In winter 2016, we first interviewed a few officials in the county. Then we were introduced to Flatland Village, which was about to implement the Three Conversions reform. We visited several ongoing government-subsidized projects in the village and attended village meetings. In the summer of 2019, we spent another two weeks tracing the progress of the reform by conducting interviews with local cadres and villagers. In 2021, we conducted ethnographic research in the village for one and a half months, interviewing dozens of villagers, village cadres,

¹The names of the village and research participants are pseudonymized.

farm managers, and farmworkers. From 2021 to 2024, we maintained follow-up telephone contacts with county and township officials, village cadres, and some villagers to keep ourselves updated of latest development in the village. The multiple visits, on-site participation, and follow-up connections allowed us to build trust with the villagers and closely observe the implementation of the Three Conversions reform. We also conducted multiple interviews with Mr. Lin, who served as both the village's head and party secretary, and Mr. Han, the owner of an agricultural machinery company.

Our research shows that the initiative of building a collective economy has not involved or benefited ordinary villagers as it was intended. Rather, the implementation of the Three Conversions reform has accelerated land concentration and rural differentiation in the village. Furthermore, we find a wide gap between schematic design of the Three Conversions and local practices. The design of the policy fails to recognize the importance of common community resources and informal rural activities, such as farming small plots of common land, the functions of local shops, and the use of small farm machinery. By doing away with or weakening these resources or activities, the policy exacerbated the vulnerability of low-income households in the village.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. The next section reviews the trajectory of China's rural collective economy since 1949, particularly the recent period of building a new rural collective economy. After that, the paper introduces the case of Flatland Village and examines how the Three Conversions were implemented in the village, followed by an assessment of the impacts of the Three Conversions on various groups in the village.

2. China's rural collective economy: past and present

The CPC's practice of building the rural collective economy has undergone several shifts, driven by different ideologies, policy reforms, and bottom-up initiatives. This section divides the evolution of China's rural collective economy into four phases: agricultural collectivization (1956-1978); rural industrialization (1980s and 1990s); the expansion of agrarian capital (late 1990s to mid-2010s); and building a new collective economy (since the mid-2010s). By tracing this historical trajectory, we can clarify what 'collective economy' means in the Chinese context and understand what constitutes a 'village collective' today.

2.1 Agricultural collectivization (1956-1978)

After taking national power in 1949, the CPC implemented land reform, redistributing land and rural resources from landlords to poor peasants and tenants. Household-based production briefly took hold, and it soon gave way to agricultural collectivization in the mid-1950s. During the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960), the People's Communes were formed to accelerate the transition to communism, but it led to harvest failures and a severe famine. In the early 1960s, the CPC introduced a three-tier system comprising production teams, brigades, and communes. Production teams – typically 20-30 households – oversaw day-to-day production and distribution, while brigades and communes provided larger-scale coordination and management. This structure remained the principal form of rural collective economy throughout the 1960s and 1970s (Unger 2002). The collective economy during agricultural collectivization was relatively inclusive and

equitable (Gao 1999). All rural households were the members of rural collectives such as production teams, and they received yield distributions mainly based on their labor contributions, and this eliminated the differentiation from land ownership.

It has been a matter of debate whether the socialist collective economy in this period was a success or failure. The de-collectivization in 1978, which largely eliminated the socialist collective system, was followed by significant yield growth. However, the growth was also caused by the use of chemical fertilizers and high-yield seeds (Hinton 1983; Xu 2013). Furthermore, the collective economy had laid the foundation for rural economic growth after the reforms. A good example was the expansion of the irrigation system, which allowed rural households in the reform period to adopt water-intensive, high-yield crops (Gürel 2023).

Rural reforms that started in 1978 replaced collective farming with household farming under the new Household Responsibility System (HRS). This had undermined the collective economy, as collective farms were divided, and farmland was contracted to rural households for use. Some forms of the collective economy continued to exist. For example, although the farmland was contracted to rural households, the farmland was collectively owned by the village (Zhan 2019b). Many villages also maintained some collective assets, particularly public infrastructure such as irrigation facilities. Nevertheless, agriculture was largely de-collectivized after the rural reforms, and the main form of the rural collective economy in the 1980s and 1990s was collective rural enterprises.

2.2 Rural industrialization and TVEs (1980s and 1990s)

The rise of Township and Village Enterprises (TVEs) in the 1980s and 1990s had led to the expansion of the collective non-agricultural economy in rural China, and these enterprises became the primary organizational form of the 'rural collective economy' in this period. The TVEs originated from the Commune and Brigade Enterprises in the 1960s and 1970s (Zhan 2015). After the rural reforms, these enterprises were maintained and renamed, and they were owned collectively by villages or township governments.

In the 1980s and 1990s, these collective enterprises were highly profitable and became an important source of local revenue. This led local governments to further promote the development of TVEs. The central government also issued favorable policies for these enterprises, such as bank loans, tax relief, and easy approval of land use (Putterman 1997; Oi 1999). In addition to collective TVEs, villagers established millions of private and household enterprises, which also contributed to rural industrial expansion in China (Huang 2008).

The success of TVEs benefited both rural elites and villagers. For the former, collective enterprises provided fiscal revenue and a means to control rural economic resources, partly compensating for economic and political losses during agricultural de-collectivization (Oi 1999). For the latter, the expansion of TVEs significantly increased rural employment and income, thereby improving rural living standards. Rural industries were typically labor-intensive, and local governments sometimes used collective enterprises to reduce rural poverty (Oi 1999). When land was expropriated for constructing TVEs, peasants were compensated with wage jobs in TVEs, which were more remunerative than farming (Zhan 2019a).

In the 1990s, China entered an era of accelerated urbanization. Policies such as tax reliefs, bank credits, and easy access to land favored urban and foreign-invested enterprises, shifting the focus away from rural industries (Huang 2008). Fiscal reforms in 1994, which gave the central government a larger share of tax income, pressured local governments to increase tax rates on farming and other rural economic activities. Consequently, TVEs were put in an increasingly unfavorable position, leading many to go bankrupt or at a loss (Zhan 2015). In the late 1990s, the Chinese state implemented policies to privatize all rural collective enterprises, and many state-owned enterprises as well (Chen and Zhan 2022), mirroring agricultural de-collectivization in 1978 and after. As a result, the rural collective economy in the form of TVEs was severely weakened, marking the end of the era of rural industrialization.

2.3 Agricultural modernization and the expansion of agrarian capital (late 1990s to mid-2010s)

With agricultural de-collectivization and the privatization of TVEs, the rural collective economy in China reached its nadir in the late 1990s. In the meantime, the Chinese countryside descended into a severe social and economic crisis, which was summarized as the 'Three Rural Problems' (TRP, 三农问题), namely, the problems of agriculture, rural areas and rural people. The discussion of TRP drew public attention to social disintegration and economic stagnation of rural China (Wen 1999, 9; Li 2002, 1-3).

In October 1998, CPC issued a guideline document on the future development of agriculture and rural areas.² The goal was to achieve agricultural modernization by introducing agrarian capital to agriculture. The document attaches importance to large agricultural or agribusiness companies, which are called 'dragonhead companies.' The Chinese state encouraged dragonhead companies to sign contracts with rural households and help the latter in purchasing inputs, organizing production and marketing produce (Schneider 2017).

With the support of the state, the number of dragonhead companies in China had grown rapidly from a few hundred in 2000 to more than 129,000 in 2016 (Zhan 2022, 49). While accurate statistics on these companies are unavailable, it is indisputable that a significant proportion of agricultural capital, land, labor and market networks were under their control. According to official statistics, the number of large agricultural units (including dragonhead companies) that engaged in scaled-up agricultural production, reached 280 thousand in 2012. These involved 110 million large rural households, that is, half of the total, and covered 60 percent of cropping areas.³ Based on these data, it can be estimated that dragonhead companies had contracted with 17.7 percent of rural households and exercised some power of control over agricultural production in 24 percent of cropping areas. Zhang and Donaldson (2013) thus argued that the increasing clout and rapid expansion of these companies demonstrated the rise of agrarian capitalism in China.

²The document is titled 'Decisions by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party on Several Key Issues in Rural and Agricultural Works', which was passed in the 3rd Plenary Session of the 15th Party Congress on October 14.

³China Association of Agricultural Leading Enterprises (CAALE) http://www.caale.org.cn/index.php/Index/index/menu/menu_id/7.html.

The rise of agrarian capitalism triggered debates among scholars and policy makers in China (Zhan 2020). The proponents of agricultural modernization and a free market favor the expansion of agrarian capital because they believe that agricultural companies and large farms hold the advantage over scattered small household farms due to economies of scale (Zhang and Donaldson 2013; Jiang, Paudel, and Mi 2017). They also supported land transfer from peasants to large farms to speed up the process of urbanization (Cai 2016; Wen and Xiong 2014). However, the opponents argue that the expansion of agrarian capital has led to adverse social and economic outcomes, such as forceful land transfer, underemployment, social differentiation, and social inequality (Yan and Yiyuan 2015; Huang 2015; Luo, Andreas, and Li 2017). Some scholars and social activists who engage in rural reconstruction argue that a key reason for rural underdevelopment is the decline of the collective economy and social organizations in rural areas, which was partly caused by the expansion of agrarian capital. Thus, they propose to rebuild the rural collective economy and rural communities by establishing rural cooperatives and organizing social and cultural activities at the village level (He 2012; Yan, Bun, and Siyuan 2021).

2.4 Rural revitalization and building a new collective economy (mid-2010s to present)

The Rural Revitalization Strategy (RRS) under Xi Jinping's administration can be seen as a set of national schemes launched partly in response to the above debate on rural development. Compared with rural policies before the mid-2010s, which aimed to achieve 'agricultural modernization' by introducing and supporting agrarian capital, RRS is intended to achieve 'agricultural and rural modernization as a whole' by 'strengthening the rural collective economy' (Jiang 2020; Xinhuanet 2021). The main policy measure to achieve the goal is the 'Three Conversions' reform, which would be carried out across the country.

Influenced by the debates over capitalist expansion in rural China and concerned with the negative effects of scaled-up agriculture, the Chinese government and state-affiliated academics have shown the intention to decelerate the rate of land transfer in the mid-2010s. Liu (2022) argued that many policies after 2017 reflect an ongoing state-led 'Polanyian double-movement' against 'excessive labor and land commodification,' aiming to protect the peasantry and maintain social stability. China's political narratives on rural development have also shifted its emphasis from large, capitalist farms to family farms and rural cooperatives. Meanwhile, the Chinese state carried out the collective property rights system reform, which aims to strengthen rather than weaken the collective land ownership (CCCPC and State Council 2016). With these measures, the Chinese state aims to build a new rural collective economy, with new forms of organization and new ways of utilizing collective resources including land.

In 2017, the No. 1 Central Document, which is the most important policy guide for each year, first mentioned the 'Three Conversions' reform, and the policy was further emphasized in the following two No.1 Central Documents in 2018 and 2019. Our analysis of official reports and press releases shows that the implementation of the Three Conversions usually follows three steps (Farmers' Daily, 2022). The first step is to establish a rural collective economic organization (RCEO, 农村集体经济组织), led by village cadres. RCEO will combine the 'underused' rural land and government funds into the collective

economy to ‘activate’ (激活) rural resources. The second step is to strengthen the village collective by collaborating with private investors, converting collective-controlled resources such as land and earmarked funds into the shares of agribusiness companies. The third step is to distribute land rents and dividends to villagers based on their shares.

This approach aligns with the core guidelines outlined in a 2016 government document (CPC and State Council 2016). The document emphasizes ‘quantifying rural collective assets into shares for collective members as the basis for income distribution’ and ‘integrating collective funds with governmental funds.’ It encourages ‘utilizing these funds in various forms, such as investing in leading agribusiness enterprises, forming village-enterprise partnerships, and initiating poverty alleviation projects to develop the collective economy.’ These measures demonstrate that the reform does not exclude agribusiness enterprises. Instead, it encourages RECO to invest in these enterprises, and the returns from the investment are shared by the members of RECO, which include nearly all villagers. An official report in 2020 shows that 80 per cent of the villages across the country had completed the pilot reform to the collective property rights system, and about 600 million peasants had become the members of RECOs (Xinhuanet 2022). It seems that after four decades of rural market reforms, a new type of rural collective economy is being established under the national campaign of RRS.

The national data, though helpful, does not tell how the policy of Three Conversions was implemented on the ground and whether the policy has achieved the goals, that is, building a new rural collective economy that would reduce peasant differentiation, increase peasants’ property income, and engage more rural households in the process of agricultural modernization. The next section addresses these questions based on the case study of Flatland Village.

3. The new collective economy under the three conversions: a case study

Flatland Village is located in northern Henan Province, one of the main grain-production areas in China. The village covers an area of 302 hectares. The amount of arable land is 2,800 mu, 1.0 mu per capita (1 mu equals 0.0667 hectare), which is lower than China’s national average level (1.4 mu per capita). More than 75 per cent of the farmland was used for growing wheat and corn in rotation, while the rest was used for small vegetable farms, goat pens, chicken farms, and mushroom greenhouses. There were 648 households, 2,718 residents registered in the village. But like most agricultural villages in China, Flatland Village has also witnessed large-scale labor outmigration in the past decade to cities such as Zhengzhou (the capital city of Henan Province), Guangzhou, Beijing, and these migrants worked in the industries such as manufacturing, transportation, hospitality, and construction, while the young and the elderly were left behind in the village.

Before the village was designated as a pilot village for the Three Conversions reform, the collective income of the village was less than 30 thousand yuan a year. Most income came from the rent of 200 mu of collective reserved farmland, which was not leased to households but held by the village collective. The village cadres divided the land into about fifty small plots and rented them out to the rural elderly, disabled and the poorest families for 200–300 yuan per mu each year, far below the average land rents in the market. Additionally, there were ten mushroom greenhouses subsidized by the local government. The village collective could receive approximately 20,000 yuan each

year by renting these greenhouses to villagers. However, according to our interviews with village cadres, the revenue could barely cover the annual expenses of the village, which include the payments for environmental preservation, facility maintenance, and village security.

In 2016, Henan Province selected 100 villages as pilot sites for building a new rural collective economy, and each pilot village was provided with 1.6 million yuan in earmarked funds to conduct the Three Conversions reform. Many villages competed to become a pilot site as it would receive the fund. Mr. Lin, the head and party secretary of Flatland Village, told us that the village seized the opportunity by using the village cadres' social connections with government officials, including Lin's brother, who was the director of the local Bureau of Land Management.

Before the Three Conversions reform started, each pilot village sent a representative, usually the village head, to a training program organized by the provincial government. Mr. Lin described the first training session during the interview.

Before the training session started, the instructor came in and asked, 'for those whose village's collective income can reach 300 thousand yuan annually, please raise your hand.' However, no hands were raised. He went on to ask, 'how about 100 thousand yuan per year?' Still, no one responded. 'All right, how about those collective incomes of less than 30 thousand yuan?' Then eventually, almost all village representatives put their hands up.

Lin was one of those who raised their hands at last as annual income of his village was below 30,000 yuan. The village collective once owned three brick factories in the 1980s, which provided the main source of collective income and local non-farm jobs for the villagers. In the 1990s, the brick factories were privatized and sold to individuals due to the policy of privatizing TVEs. After that, the village collective did not have any significant source of collective and could hardly make ends meet.

Lin's village is not a rare case. According to a recent study, more than half of the 613 thousand villages in China had no collective income; 21 per cent had an annual revenue between 10 and 50 thousand yuan; 9 per cent between 50 and 100 thousand yuan; and only 20 percent could earn more than 100 thousand yuan (Wang et al. 2015). That is, if the expenses of a village, such as facility maintenance, cleaning, security, etc., require about 100 thousand yuan a year, 80 percent of the villages could not cover the expenses with their revenue. According to our research in Henan and other provinces, many villages that derived income from short-term land sales, particularly those near the city, very few could generate a sustainable income through productive investments. Many villages did not have any collective assets such as farmland as all land was leased to villagers. In this sense, the collective economy of Flatland Village was not in the worst situation as the village owned 200 mu farmland and 10 greenhouses as collective assets.

During the training sessions, Lin learnt that this top-down push to build a rural collective economy was based on the experiences of two villages in Guizhou Province, Shepeng Village and Tangyue Village. Both are remote and mountainous villages without successful collective agriculture or rural industry in the past. The official propaganda promotes them as a new model of rural development because the Three Conversions reform in the two villages had greatly strengthened their collective economy, increased household income, and improved the villages' overall economic conditions (Wang 2016). However, we found later that Flatland Village could not replicate the success of these two villages

due to the differences in local conditions. These include the availability of potential arable land and forest resources, the presence of strong and entrepreneurial village leadership, and a local power structure enabling external investors to allocate a portion of their profits to the village collective. In what follows we examine how the Three Conversions were implemented in Flatland Village, respectively.

3.1 Converting village resources into assets

The first conversion is ‘converting rural resources into assets.’ The goal of this process, as originally designed, is to register the village’s collective resources – such as ‘underused’ land, forests, floodplains, and fishponds – and transform them into measurable and marketable assets. This enables the village collective to leverage these assets for profitable investments. For instance, official reports indicate that the total area of farmland (excluding newly added forest land and fishponds) controlled by Tangyue’s village collective expanded from 1,572 mu to 4,881 mu, providing a solid foundation for building the collective economy (Li 2017). The increase in collective farmland was so drastic that even the author of *The Tangyue Road* described it as ‘unexpected’ (Wang 2016, 42). However, no public reports revealed the details of how the village collective managed to expand collective farmland to more than three times.

We speculate that the reported expansion of collective farmland in Tangyue could be due to two reasons. First, based on Mr. Lin’s account, it was possible that the village reclaimed large areas of uncultivated hillside and riverbank lands and that these were re-classified as collective farmland after the reclamation. Second, the previously reported farmland acreage was an inaccurate estimate, and the updated figure reflected a result of precise measurement. The first possible reason depends on whether a village has potential farmland available for re-development. However, most Chinese villages have a high ratio of population to arable land; thus, this condition does not exist. Flatland Village serves as a typical example, as it has neither ‘underused’ land nor ‘wasteland’ available for reclamation, according to Mr. Lin.

Nonetheless, the ‘first conversion’ was soon carried out in Flatland Village under the directives of the upper-level governments. What was identified as ‘underused’ land includes the small paths and ditches among household farms, small pieces of land at the village’s margins, and the reserved collective lands, which account for less than 10 per cent of the total farmland area of the village. To build large collective farms, the areas of small paths and ditches and the reserved land are not sufficient, thus, the village collective transferred land from rural households. The land transfer contracts, which were signed between villagers and the village committee, were set for a duration of ten years. Under these agreements, villagers’ farmland was counted as the shares of the village’s RCEO. The contracts in principle did not allow villagers to take back their farmland before the ten-year contract expires, but we found that three households asked the village collective to return their farmland and succeeded in doing so.

We participated in a village meeting in December 2016, during which Mr. Lin explained to other village cadres why land transfer was necessary.

After attending the training course, I realized that it is short-sighted to allow peasants to cultivate farmland individually. Nowadays, all well-to-do villages have a strong collective

economy. We should learn from their experiences, transfer the land from peasants, and then consolidate the scattered lands into larger farms. Only in this way can we use the increase in collective land for more profitable agricultural investment. Our specific plan is to grow chrysanthemums and oil rapeseeds, and then develop the processing industries and rural tourism.

Mr. Lin's understanding of the first conversion misaligns with the central policy guidelines, but this misalignment is the only viable option. In the schematic design at the central level, the first conversion should consolidate underused common lands rather than the land leased to rural households. The purpose of this approach is to register those land with unclear property rights to the village collective, preparing for profit distribution among collective members in the future (CPC and State Council 2016). However, the problem of unclear property rights is not as serious as thought. Villagers in Flatland were well aware of which lands were controlled by the collective, which lands could be cultivated, and which could not. In other words, lands that could be 'converted into assets' had long been converted. Therefore, in the absence of additional land resources, large-scale land transfer is the only feasible approach to highlight their achievement of the reform. As a result, although 'land transfer' was not emphasized in the central policy documents, it has become the 'core' or 'breakthrough point' of the 'Three Conversions' reform in the guidelines issued by many local governments in Henan Province (Luoyang BARA 2021; Xin'an BARA 2022).

Land transfer in Flatland Village proceeded primarily through everyday mobilization rather than coercion. This approach is similar to those used in Tangyue Village. Village cadres would visit villagers' home to eat, drink, and chat in order to build rapport. If direct attempts failed, they would enlist someone with a closer relationship to the reluctant villager to persuade them. In other words, cadres adopted a 'soft' approach, assuring villagers that land transfers were experimental, negotiable, and potentially reversible.

Furthermore, the village cadres did not try to transfer all the farmland at once. If a piece of farmland slated for transfer belonged to a villager unwilling to participate, that the villager could swap with someone who was willing. For those who were undecided, the cadres promised that anyone taking part in the reform would become a shareholder, entitled to both land rent and dividends. Thanks to government subsidies, the village was able to offer a notably higher land-rent rate – 1,000 yuan per mu, about 400 yuan above the market average. These strategies enabled the transfer of roughly 2,000 mu of farmland from peasant households, which are more than three quarters of all farmlands in the village.

The first conversion was conducted without overt resistance from the villagers, but it turned out that the total area of farmland was not increased as a result of consolidating small paths and marginal lands. In the past, peasants dried their harvests in their small courtyards, and they stored corn in self-made iron baskets for both self-consumption and for sale. These did not require extra land. After land consolidation, however, large farms required more space for drying harvests, parking harvesting machines, and constructing processing facilities and dormitories for farmworkers. Thus, the village must allocate new land to build all these facilities. Furthermore, the village need to build wider roads for agricultural machines such as pesticide-spraying machines to travel, and these roads also took up land. As a result, the land saved from consolidating small paths and marginal lands was used to build facilities and roads for large-scale production.

The consolidation of marginal lands also hurt the interest of the rural elderly. These lands, usually located around the village, were utilized by the left-behind rural elderly to grow vegetables and breed rabbits or goats on a small scale to subsidize their family income. After these lands were consolidated into collective land, they had lost an important source of income.

In short, the first conversion, i.e., ‘converting rural resources into assets,’ aims to increase collective assets including land, according to the policy design. However, a pre-requisite for this design is that there should be a large amount of land yet to be utilized, and this land can be converted into marketable assets. In most Chinese villages, however, nearly no land space is ‘underused.’ In addition, the ‘underused’ land in Flatland Village was actually farmed by vulnerable groups such as the elderly and women. Therefore, the design of the first conversion is built on two false assumptions: one is that there is a large amount of underused land; and the other is that rural resources are not valuable until they are converted into marketable assets for investment. This may lead to a process of de-peasantization and rising social dissent, as Scott (1998) has shown.

3.2 Converting funds into shares

The second conversion is ‘converting funds into shares.’ This conversion is designed to convert various sources of funds, particularly governmental earmarked funds into shares held by the members of the village’s RCEO, which is usually controlled by the village collective. Through the share-holding system, the village collective can form partnership with agricultural enterprises to exchange resources, capitalize on their complementary strength, and share profits.

This approach has been proven effective in Tangyue Village. Recent publications indicate that during their collaboration with a vegetable production company, Tangyue contributed land and capital as equity, while the company provided technology, market access, and its own financial resources. In the first three years, the village collective acquired cultivation techniques and developed marketing channels through this partnership. The village Party secretary characterized this process as establishing an ‘underground party’ within the company. After three years, the village collective requested the withdrawal of the company-appointed employees, and replaced them with villagers, thereby ‘utilizing their technology and market connections to generate employment opportunities for our village residents’ (Yan, Gao, and Ding 2024, 84).

Although Tangyue’s investment in an agricultural company proved successful, this achievement should be largely attributed to the presence of strong and entrepreneurial village leadership. The village committee of Tangyue Village demonstrated a strong capability in learning and leadership, and village cadres accumulated extensive experience in areas such as crop selection, cost control, and market linkages. However, the ‘capital into shares’ policy, derived from the experience of Tangyue Village, presuppose a local power structure under which the village collective holds more sway than does the enterprise in decision making. This perspective overlooks the powerful role that private investors may play in many other villages.

First, involving private investors appears a necessary condition for the village to run the collective economy. In Flatland Village, Mr. Lin and other village cadres planned to establish a peasant cooperative to manage the collective farms. However, they had neither

operational experiences nor market resources to manage these large farms. All they had was an earmarked fund of 1.6 million yuan for the Three Conversions reform. In 2016, they reached out to Mr. Han, the owner of an agricultural machinery sales company, and tried to convince him to lead agricultural production for the collective farms. Mr. Lin prepared a proposal with a detailed cost–benefit analysis of a 2000-mu collective farm growing oil rapeseeds, and promised Mr. Han that the investment would be profitable. To increase Mr. Han’s incentive, the township government offered a government-subsidized project of constructing 200-mu ‘high-efficient water-saving spraying system,’ which would save two thirds of labor costs in future production. The village also promised to provide a land-rent subsidy of 400 yuan per mu per year. That is, Mr. Han only needed to pay 600 yuan per mu to the villagers for using their land. These incentives eventually convinced Han to invest in Flatland Village’s collective farms and lead the production.

Mr. Han’s investment boosted the county government’s confidence, leading to a substantial allocation of government project funds towards the village. However, the application for these funds often requires prior investment, which further enhances the negotiating power of private investors relative to village cadres. Take the funding project named ‘Enhancing Rural Industries to Build a Strong Township Economy’ (产业强镇) as an example. The project provided 13 million yuan to the township where Flatland is located, of which three million yuan were allocated to Flatland Village. However, to be eligible for the funding, a village must build up their own rural industrial facilities in advance, as the application is based on of the principle of ‘build first, subsidize later’ (先建后补), which is to ensure that the village selected by the project has sufficient fiscal and organizational capacity to carry out the project. To apply for this fund, Lin had to request for Mr. Han’s help again in building an oil-crushing factory and a drying plant, with which the village succeeded in securing the fund. Similar principles are applied to other funding projects. For example, the project of ‘strengthening collective economy’ and the project of ‘building a beautiful countryside’ also require 7–10 per cent of supplementary funding available at the application stage.

Mr. Lin employed a metaphor, ‘borrow a hen to lay eggs’, to describe the village’s relationship with Mr. Han. The hen refers to the Han’s prior investment while the eggs refer to more government funds. The reliance on Mr. Han enabled Flatland Village to secure a total of 10 million yuan of government funds, which were used to build or develop various projects, such as constructing modern agricultural facilities, improving rural roads and drainage systems, and disseminating modern agricultural technologies. These funds have greatly improved the village infrastructures and helped to maintain the relatively high land rent paid to rural households. However, in terms of ‘capital into shares,’ Mr. Han had used much of the funds for his own investment, and he declined converting these funds into the village’s shares.

According to the policy design, these earmarked funds should be counted as the collective assets that belong to the village’s ‘collective economic organization.’ However, after the infrastructure and facilities were built and put into use, Mr. Han enjoyed the full access to them and did not agree to turn them into the shares of the organization. In 2020, when Mr. Lin proposed to use the government funds (which were already spent together with Mr. Han’s own investment in the infrastructure and facilities) to buy shares from Mr. Han, the latter rejected it outright. Mr. Han remarked during our interview,

The oil-crushing factory and drying plants are my investment. Therefore, the funding should be given to cover my operational expenses. Lin's proposal to buy the shares from my business is nonsense. I don't want to give even one cent to the village collective, as I don't need one cent from them. Without my permission, no one could move the funds as the funds should be used for these industries.

Mr. Han had strong reasons for rejecting profit sharing. He argued that he had paid land rent to the villagers, made great efforts, and bore risks when developing industries in the village. The collective economy would not even exist without his prior investment, and the government funding thus should go to his company account to cover expenses and expand production. He was willing to pay some token fees to the cadres, but they had to concede on the ultimate right of funds distributions. As a result, based on our observation in 2021, a project fund of three million yuan allocated for 'Building a Beautiful Countryside' was ultimately used to cover production costs and operational losses, rather than being converted into village collective shares.

In the case of Flatland Village, the village collective has minimal control over government funds, while private investors like Mr Han exerted significant influence. The extent to which village collectives can control government funds is influenced by at least three factors: the organizational and managerial capacity of the village collective, the nature of the project funds (whether for productive or public purposes), and the profitability of agricultural investments.

In Flatland Village, projects captured by outside elites were primarily those aimed at productive investments, such as subsidies for processing equipment, irrigation systems, and greenhouses. In contrast, projects with public purposes, such as road construction, well drilling, and environmental improvements, were controlled by village cadres. In most pilot villages of the Three Conversions reform, both productive and public goods projects are highly concentrated, providing opportunities for both external investors and village cadres to profit. However, successful conversion into village collective shares is rare. In another pilot village case located in the same county, the agribusiness company's owner was the village party secretary. Thus, although there were still issues with the misappropriation of project funds, the presence of a relatively strong village leader that monopolized project resources prevented similar conflicts during the second conversion.

In summary, the second conversion can be viewed as a joint venture between the village collective and private investors, with the latter providing financial, managerial, and technological supports that the former lacks. The architects of this conversion assume that such collaboration will boost both the village's profit-making capacity and the scale of the rural collective economy. However, the experience in Flatland Village shows that the village collective may lack control over government funds, given the influential role of private investors in acquiring and using these funds. Whether government funds can be converted into collective shares also depends on the investor's willingness. As a result, the second conversion in Flatland Village – which is supposed to transform government funds into shares of the rural collective economic organization – has largely failed to meet its original objectives.

3.3 Converting peasants into shareholders

The third conversion is to 'convert' peasants into shareholders by converting peasants' land and funds into shares of the share-holding cooperative. According to the central

policy documents, this will enable peasants to increase their income by receiving both land rent and dividends.

In Flatland Village, the conversion to shareholders was only eligible for villagers who participated in land transfer and who lent money to the village collective. By 2017, two thirds of the villagers had become the shareholders of the share-holding cooperative by contributing either money or land. These include 146 households that contributed money, 3,000 yuan per household, to cover the initial costs of infrastructural investments, including road improvement, well drilling, house demolition, etc. Therefore, the shareholders in Flatland Village included those who agreed to land transfer and those who were better off enough to lend or contribute money to the village collective.

It is ambiguous in the official guidelines whether converting only a proportion of villagers into the shareholders aligns with the policy design. For instance, the local guideline on 'Three Conversions' specifically emphasized 'encouraging farmers to voluntarily contribute their contracted land management rights as shares,' which suggests that Flatland Village's approach of only including the villagers who contributed land or money as shareholders is acceptable. At the same time, the guidelines emphasize that the reforms should 'ensure that the process benefits a broad range of peasants,' which implicitly assumes the reform's inclusivity. However, those who opposed land transfer, mostly the left-behind elderly, have generally been excluded from the reform process.

In addition, even after becoming shareholders, the villagers were not necessarily able to receive the dividends of their shares, which depends on whether the business of the village collective could make sufficient profits. In fact, collective farms of Flatland Village were exposed to more market risks than ever before. In 2018, unexpected weather conditions caused the early ripening of oil rapeseeds. Thousands mu of oil rapeseeds fell to the ground and these rapeseeds had to be harvested by hand. The village spent hundreds of thousands yuan hiring labor for harvesting, but the quality of oil rapeseeds was too poor to sell in the market, and the village had to store them in the warehouse. In addition, the following Covid-19 outbreak heavily struck rural tourism. Many tourist activities related to viewing rapeseed flowers were halted. A racecourse jointly invested by Mr. Han and the village collective also broke down and was transformed into a vegetable farm.

The business failures made the village collective unable to pay the dividends and land rents to the villagers as promised. In the year after, villagers protested and demanded that the land rent must be paid before the crops could be harvested. Village cadres had to borrow a total of 0.8 million yuan from a local bank to pay for the land rent to maintain social stability. After 2020, the village committee stopped providing farmland rent subsidy of 400 yuan to Mr Han, and the collective farms were reverted to growing wheat and corn, which carry lower market risks than oil rapeseeds.

With the help of a 200-*mu* new spraying system and favorable weather conditions, the large collective farms ultimately turned its losses into profits. Nonetheless, as of 2021, none of the shareholders had received any dividends while the promised land rent decreased from 1,000 yuan to 850 yuan per mu. Mr. Han found that more and more villagers threatened to take back their land due to the rent decrease, while some others started to steal corn and soybeans from the collective farms.

In April 2024, eight years after Henan Province selected the 100 pilot villages for the Three Conversions reform, we conducted a follow-up phone interview with Mr. Tao, a

senior county-level official. Over these years, Henan Province had allocated project funds to support over 7,000 villages to implement the reform. During this period, the county was designated as a key pilot site, tasked with implementing the reform in ten pilot villages. However, Mr. Tao shared that he was pessimistic about the future of the rural collective economy and that other pilot villages faced similar challenges to what we found in Flatland.

4. Winners, losers, and bystanders: impacts of the three conversions

In rural China, farmland is collectively owned but use rights have been contracted to rural households. It is argued that this dual-layer land system creates social and institutional protection that prevent private investors from taking land from peasants to build large farms (Zhang and Donaldson 2013). Other scholars contend that collective land ownership accelerated land transfer from peasants because the coordination by village cadres could reduce transaction costs of land deals (Trappel 2015; Gürel 2019; Xu and Fuller 2018).

During the Three Conversions reform in Flatland Village, rural resources, including land and government funds, were offered to private investors while village cadres shifted from being protective agents of the peasantry to the organizers and facilitators of land transfers. This process has no doubt removed barriers for agrarian capital to invest in farmland and facilitated land transfers from peasant households to agrarian capital. This section examines the impacts of the Three Conversions on different groups in Flatland Village.

Village cadres' administrative power has been strengthened due to the reform. Taking the party secretary Mr. Lin as an example, the new investments had given him more power to allocate profitable opportunities. The construction of rural infrastructure, including roads, workers' dormitories, processing plants and production facilities, created the opportunities to purchase raw materials and hire construction teams. The newly established collective farms also need to hire managers, technicians and farmworkers. The allocation of these jobs enabled Lin to increase his social and political influence in the village. Sang Ping is a case in point.

Before the conversions, Sang Ping was known as a 'troublemaker' and a frequent critic of the village collective. For example, he reported to the upper-level government that Mr. Lin had engaged in corruption in a road-building project. The tension between Lin and Sang had lasted for years, and many villagers were aware that Sang had information on Lin's misconduct. After the Three Conversions, Mr. Lin hired Sang Ping as a manager of the collective farm. Following this appointment, Sang Ping became Lin's ally and ceased reporting Lin's wrongdoings.

Some villagers have benefited from the reforms. It is important to acknowledge that although the Three Conversions reform may not have achieved its initial goals, the substantial financial investment had resulted in higher land rents in Flatland Village compared to non-pilot villages. Compliant individuals received an income of about 400 yuan per mu above the local market price in the first two years. Additionally, other villagers, particularly those involved in the processing and sale of new products, gained local wage employment opportunities. However, these modest gains pale in comparison to the tens of millions of yuan invested by the local government.

Some villagers lost out in the Three Conversions reform. Qiao Xi, a 60-year-old man owning a small agricultural store in the village, is such an example. He sold seeds and fertilizers to fellow villagers and offered them farming advice. Before the Three Conversions, his store earned him more than 5,000 yuan per month. Meanwhile, he and his wife leased approximately 20 mu of farmland from his neighbors for 400 yuan per mu, growing wheat and corn. They also rented 1.2 mu of the reserved land from the village collective to grow vegetables and breed rabbits.

During the Three Conversions reform, the village collective offered a more competitive rent in land transfer, 1,000 yuan per mu at the beginning. Thus, the land that Qiao leased from his neighbors was soon transferred to the village collective. The large collective farm also purchased agricultural implements from outside rather than from the village stores. Qiao's agricultural store as well as the other three small stores, lost their business. Furthermore, the village collective increased rent for the vegetable farm cultivated by Qiao and his wife, which went up from 300 yuan per mu to 800 yuan per mu with an advanced payment for at least two years. As a result, Qiao's livelihood was severely affected by the reform. Qiao bitterly complained during the interview, 'why does the state always favor the huge vanity projects rather than our small farms?'

Old Zhang is another example. Before the land transfer, Zhang bought a harvester at the price of 50,000 yuan. By harvesting wheat for fellow villagers during the harvesting season, he could earn up to 30,000 yuan each year. However, after the collective farm was established, all harvesting work was monopolized by Mr. Han's agricultural machinery company. Old Zhang bought his machine from the company and he knew he was not able to compete. Thus, he sold the harvester back to Mr. Han and found a temporary job in a local brick factory. However, the brick factory was only allowed to operate for half a year due to government policies. Old Zhang thus became unemployed during the other half year. In the past, both Qiao and Zhang were decent middle farmers in the village, but they lost their main sources of income after the Three Conversions reform and could hardly make ends meet.

The losers in the Three Conversions comprise three groups of villagers: i. the left-behind elderly who could not find jobs in the urban labor market while still being capable of doing some farm work, ii. a small number of middle farmers who had leased farmland from relatives and neighbors, and iii. harvester owners and small agricultural store owners who could previously sell commercial goods and services to fellow villagers.

Most villagers can be considered 'bystanders' in the Three Conversions reform, as their interests were not significantly impacted, and they remained largely indifferent to the changes. This group includes those working as migrant laborers in cities, who typically lease out their land because wage employment in urban areas generates more income than farming. Additionally, some left-behind women transferred their land to the village collective, as they were burdened with caregiving responsibilities, such as looking after the elderly and school-age children, leaving them unable to participate in intensive agricultural work. The reform did not directly affect their interests, as they would have transferred their land regardless.

Nevertheless, potential risks may emerge for these villagers. For one thing, the economic slowdown made it difficult to find wage jobs in the city. For another, the newly established collective economy is highly labor saving, characterized by large-scale,

specialized, and mechanized production. Thus, it can be foreseen that the collective farm will hire fewer villagers in the future, and most villagers would have to find employment elsewhere.

According to the central government's schematic design, the village collective economy should engage the members of the village in production, management, and welfare provision. However, the outcome of building a collective economy through the Three Conversions reform in Flatland Village has been a far cry from these defining features. The Three Conversions reform in the village only involved and benefited a small number of people, including village cadres, investors, and managers of the collective farm. Furthermore, the reform concentrated collective resources, including farmland, government funds, and employment opportunities, in the hands of rural elites, which exacerbated social inequality in the village.

5. Conclusion

This paper set out to address two questions: whether will the policy of building a collective economy, or the RRS in general, counter or reverse the country's transition to agrarian capitalism? To what extent have the implementation of building a collective economy through the Three Conversions reform at the village level has followed schematic designs at the central level?

Our findings in Flatland Village suggest that the policy of building a collective economy is unlikely to counter or reverse capitalist transition in rural China. The Three Conversions reform did not reduce but elevate the importance of agrarian capital in the rural economy as private investors such as Mr. Han were invited and supported to invest in and take control of rural production. Meanwhile, rural resources including land were concentrated in the hands of the village collective and made available for agrarian capital to control and exploit. Although peasant households still held the nominal contract right (承包权) and received rent, they lost 'the right to farm their land' (经营权). Furthermore, they were excluded from the access to common resources in the village as these resources were turned into marketable assets made available for private investors. Thus, instead of countering capitalist transition, the policy of building a rural collective economy gives rise to a particular form of state-led agrarian capitalism, in which case the Chinese state supports and empowers agrarian capital in the disguise of a collective economy. In the new rural collective economy, the winners, at least in the short-term, are village cadres, private investors, managers of collective farms and a few compliant individuals, whereas the intended beneficiaries, i.e., ordinary farmers, have lost out in the Three Conversions reform.

Our research also finds that the implementation of the Three Conversions reform has been a far cry from the policy scheme designed by the central government. The designer of the policy assumes that large amounts of rural resources are 'underused' and can be converted into marketable assets and that private investors will share the profits with the rural collective. However, neither assumption is valid in the case of Flatland Village. In reality, there were hardly any underused collective resources. Small pieces of common land in the village, including marginal lands, small paths and ditches, and the reserved land, had been utilized by ordinary villagers, particularly the vulnerable groups such as the rural elderly. Private investors had become more powerful during

the Three Conversions than before, and they enjoyed the support from the government and were not willing to share profits with the village collective.

The outcome of the reform is also different from what policymakers have intended to achieve. Instead of strengthening the rural collective economy and benefiting ordinary villagers, the Three Conversions reform in the village was skewed in favor of agrarian capital and increased the power of rural cadres in controlling rural resources and distributing employment opportunities. Meanwhile, ordinary villagers such as the rural elderly, middle farmers, and small farming service providers lost out in the reform. This is reminiscent of James Scott's argument that state-supported high modernist projects have often failed in their own objectives (Scott 1998).

Acknowledgement

We thank Rachel Murphy and Peter Ho for the opportunity to share the initial draft at ICARDC XVI (International Conference on Agriculture and Rural Development in China), which was held at Oxford University in August 2022. We also extend our gratitude to Qian Forrest Zhang, Jane Hayward, Yitian Ren, and Ang Gao for their insightful comments. Additionally, we appreciate the anonymous reviewers' constructive comments, which helped us to improve the paper significantly. The research for this paper is partly supported by a Tier 1 Grant (RG44/20) from Singapore Ministry of Education.

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