

Singapore Management University

Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University

Research Collection School of Social Sciences

School of Social Sciences

7-2017

China's agrarian transition: Peasants, property, and politics, by René Trappel

Qian Forrest ZHANG

Singapore Management University, forrestzhang@smu.edu.sg

Follow this and additional works at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/sooss_research



Part of the [Agricultural and Resource Economics Commons](#), and the [Asian Studies Commons](#)

Citation

ZHANG, Qian Forrest.(2017). China's agrarian transition: Peasants, property, and politics, by René Trappel. *China Journal -Canberra-*, 78(July 2017), 189-191.

Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/sooss_research/3203

This Journal Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Social Sciences at Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Collection School of Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. For more information, please email cherylids@smu.edu.sg.

ZHANG, QF. 2017. "China's Agrarian Transition: Peasants, Property, and Politics, by René Trappel," *The China Journal*, no. 78 (July 2017): 189-191.
<https://doi.org/10.1086/691673>

China's Agrarian Transition: Peasants, Property, and Politics, by René Trappel. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016. v+203 pp. US\$85.00, £54.95 (cloth).

Rene Trappel's book is an ambitious attempt to address some of the key issues in the complex process of agrarian transition unfolding in China today. Trappel favors the "commodification of farmland" – the transfer of the land rights of small-scale farmers, especially to large-scale agribusiness producers – as a necessary condition for agrarian transition. He selects this as the dependent variable for his investigation and equates this with 'agrarian transition'. He collected information from four counties (one each in Sichuan and Shandong and two in Guizhou) through three field trips between 2008 and 2010.

The first chapter summarizes several strands of relevant literature about rural China, including studies on agribusinesses and other large-scale producers, the cultural framing of peasants and rural land, land-use changes, and the role of local states. Chapter 2 reviews the theoretical literature on agrarian transition, focusing on the works of Robert Brenner and Karl Polanyi. Based on this, Trappel identifies three conditions as "the independent variables" that are of core importance in shaping land commodification: peasant differentiation, rural politics, and property institutions" (27). Chapter 3, the longest chapter, provides a thorough review of China's collective land system and family farming under the Household Responsibility System (HRS). It draws from a wide range of policy documents, scholarly publications, legal texts, and media reports to provide a detailed account of the rise, changes, and proposed reforms of the HRS. Researchers who study this key institution in rural China will find this a very useful source.

The following three chapters present the empirical analysis, each focusing on one of the three independent variables. Chapter 4, on "peasant differentiation and smallholder frustration", identifies a set of conditions constraining smallholders' agricultural production and discusses two effects: exit from farming and devaluation of land. The chapter, however, does not provide any concrete evidence to show in what ways the presumably homogeneous 'peasant smallholders' have now become different types of agricultural producers.

Chapter 5 focuses on the role of local states. It discusses how "financial, political and moral incentives" (??) and pressures motivate local cadres to push for agrarian transition, which includes increasing farming scale, raising rural incomes, and supporting so-called dragonhead agribusinesses. While the political and financial forces have been widely discussed before, Trappel attempts to bring in a new perspective on the moral pressures and opportunities that local cadres face. Based on interviews with local officials, he finds a strong sense of moral obligation among them toward raising rural incomes through 'modernizing agriculture' – a synonym with large-scale farming, especially by agribusinesses, in the context of rural China today. The book, however, does not discuss to what extent the cadres' sense of moral obligation is genuine and, if so, what created among them this conviction that 'modernized agriculture' does indeed raise rural incomes.

Chapter 6, on farmland commodification, is empirically the most substantive chapter. The first part is a textual analysis of land transfer contracts between rural households and agribusinesses he obtained from field sites, which shows that contract terms are often

unfavorable to farmers. The second part is an analysis of texts that describe the establishment and operation of two new 'instruments' for land transfer: land transfer 'cooperatives' and land transfer service centers. For the cooperatives implemented in Anju district in Sichuan, the analysis is based on the district government's coaching materials for local cadres and a Basic Agreement, a document listing the structural features of the cooperative in one village that Trappel visited. Trappel focuses on land transfer service centers – brokerages set up by local government to facilitate land transfer transactions – in two of the locations he visited: in Guizhou's Xifeng county, using an internal government handbook, and in Laixi County, Shandong, relying on the texts of two posters, one electronic board, and one blank contract prepared by the center. We can only assume that interviews with farmer participants of the land-transfer cooperatives and service centers were never obtained or that Trappel prefers to focus on official texts over farmers' actual experiences. Without including the farmers' perspective, the chapter does not offer answers to questions such as how the transfers of farmers' land to agribusiness really operate in practice, whether farmers' participation is voluntary, and whether they really benefited from these.

The book's conclusions rest on two types of data: documents such as government-issued materials and land rental contracts between agribusinesses and farmers, and 36 interviews with local officials. Researchers of rural China are aware that wide discrepancies often exist between what is written on paper and what is done in real practice. Textual analysis can be useful but can rarely provide us the full picture. The views of local cadres are crucial for understanding the role of local states, but so too are those of small-scale farmers. Trappel acknowledges "it was difficult to speak with villagers independently" (172), as the field visits were mostly arranged by officials and he was accompanied by local cadres and representatives from a partner institute in Beijing. This is unfortunate, because ultimately the book's conclusions are based exclusively on one perspective.

The commodification of farmland is a central issue in the study of China's agrarian transition, and the active involvement of local governments, as this book has tried to document, is a key driver. But a deeper and more accurate understanding of the complex dynamics driving both land commodification and dispossession can be gained from in-depth examinations of specific cases in *practice*, as several recent studies have demonstrated. This book on 'China's agrarian transition' would have benefited from actually studying agricultural production and how capital, labor, state, and nature confront each other in this process in which small-scale Chinese farmers lose their landholdings.

Qian Forrest Zhang
Singapore Management University