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### Rural land dispossession in China and India

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#### Citation

ANDREAS, Joel, KALE, Sunila, LEVIEN, Michael, & ZHANG, Forrest Q..(2020). Rural land dispossession in China and India. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 47(6), 1109-1142.

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## Rural land dispossession in China and India

Pre-publication version. For the final published article, see:

Andreas, Joel, Sunila Kale, Michael Levien, and Qian Forrest Zhang. 2020. "Rural land dispossession in China and India." *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 47(6): 1109-1142. (<https://doi-org.libproxy.smu.edu.sg/10.1080/03066150.2020.1826452>)

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### INTRODUCTION

This special issue of *The Journal of Peasant Studies* brings together the work of scholars who are studying the dispossession of rural land in China and India. "Land grabbing" has been a major issue in many countries and the subject of many articles in *JPS*. Much of this recent scholarship, influenced by the surge of transnational investments in farmland during the 2000s, has focused on Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia. China and India, however, are arguably the epicenters of global land grab conflicts in terms of both scale and political contentiousness. The world's two most populous countries, they both have large rural populations that continue to depend on access to land for farming, grazing, timber, household industries, and housing. In addition, in both countries, rapid economic growth has spurred an insatiable demand for rural land, leading to accelerating dispossession that has incited widespread resistance and violent conflict. The first aim of this special issue is to deepen our understanding of the drivers, consequences, and politics of dispossession in each of these two countries.

The second aim is to push the growing scholarship on land dispossession in a comparative direction. Most of the scholarship on land grabs takes one of two forms. The first is the birds-eye overview that helpfully illuminates relevant macro-forces but is typically inattentive to regionally specific dynamics, social structures, and micro-processes on the ground. The second is the single case study that is highly attentive to the latter, but does little to place the field site within a larger comparative frame, even subnationally, much less cross-nationally. Many ethnographers are content to point out that their case looks different from another, seldom asking *why* this might be true. One thus finds very little scholarship on land dispossession that is even implicitly comparative, much less based on an explicit methodological comparison. Scholarship on India and China is no exception to this trend. While there are large and growing literatures on land dispossession in both countries, for the most part these exist in silo-like isolation from each other.

Of these two aims, we believe this special issue is most successful in the first. Contributions to this issue, in our view, make important advancements on existing scholarship on land dispossession in two countries that together contain about one third of the world's population and a large if unquantifiable proportion of its land conflicts. These articles offer new insights about the extent and patterns of dispossession, the complex dynamics driving it, the consequences for farmers, as well as the factors shaping resistance or compliance.

On the second aim, we claim more modest success. Given the challenges of regional expertise, language skills, training and academic incentives, we never expected to generate explicitly comparative contributions. However, we claim some success in advancing an implicit comparative awareness among the scholars of both countries, which is reflected in the contributions to this issue. This project began with a workshop in Singapore in the summer of 2018 in which most of the contributors participated. Pairing India and China papers together on panels, we began to collectively look for commonalities and differences and to think about their causes. Such cross-regional exchange, which continued during the review process at JPS, was extremely fruitful, and helped to minimize two types of errors that are common in regional scholarship. The first are errors of false particularity: believing something is specific to a country that in fact can be found in other places. The second are errors of false generality: believing something is common to a phenomenon that in fact varies across places. After going through this rigorous comparative exchange, we believe the contributions to this issue are attentive to both hazards, and engage a broader range of scholarship than they might have otherwise. Certainly, as editors we came away with a far better understanding of the dynamics of land dispossession in the country other than the one we study. Moreover, we emerge only more convinced that advancing our understanding of land dispossession requires comparative scholarship.

In what follows, then, we advance some explicit comparative observations about the processes of land dispossession in each country that emerge from the articles in this issue and our larger exchange. While seeking to uncover features common to rural land dispossession in China and India, we also seek to illuminate differences that shape the processes of dispossession in each country. Among the important factors addressed in this issue are rates and patterns of economic growth; regime types, state structures, and legal systems; compensation policies and strategies of protest management; land tenure and agrarian social structures; kinship and social relations; histories and idioms of peasant protest; cultural orientations towards land; and agro-ecological contexts. To impose some order on this complexity, we distinguish similarities and differences that arise from state-capital relations from those that arise from differences in agrarian milieu (encompassing social structures, land tenure, and local political histories). After discussing commonalities and variation in both, we then examine how their interaction affects political conflict and shapes the consequences of dispossession. Comparison of the two countries along these dimensions helps us to not only understand the future implications of this enormously important issue for economic growth, social inequality and politics in both countries, but also contributes insights useful for understanding this issue elsewhere in the world.

## Trajectories of Dispossession: From Developmentalist Era to Liberalized Economies

Since Indian Independence in 1947 and the Chinese Revolution in 1949, the two countries have followed distinct paths, but both have passed through two extended periods that share common characteristics. For several decades, both India and China pursued developmentalist strategies that were, to differing degrees, statist and autarkic. Then, after carrying out modest market reforms in the 1980s, both adopted much more radical economic liberalization policies in the 1990s. Levien (2018) observed how patterns of rural land dispossession shifted as India took the path of economic liberalization, and the shift has been just as dramatic in China. During the developmentalist period, the Indian and Chinese governments both expropriated large tracts of rural land—displacing millions of villagers—for state development projects, including dams and public sector industry. The subsequent period of economic liberalization has been different not only because the pace of rural dispossession has greatly accelerated, but also because the purposes deemed appropriate for dispossession have greatly expanded. Today, both governments acquire land not only for public-sector projects, but also for private, commercial endeavors, with state officials routinely using coercive power to displace peasants for pecuniary objectives and even speculative investment. In both countries, the state continues to play an indispensable role in acquiring village land, but because most projects are now profit-oriented endeavors, capital has become a driving force behind these projects. Although there are broad similarities in the historical trajectories of rural land dispossession in the two countries, the structures of the capitalist sectors in the two countries are considerably different, the product of distinct histories and growth patterns. Understanding the parallel but distinctive trajectories of dispossession in India and China is important for comprehending the contemporary patterns discussed in the articles in this issue.

### *India*

While the postcolonial Indian government sought to break with extractivist colonial capitalism and build a self-sufficient national economy (Goswami 2003), it left intact much of the template for land dispossession inherited from two centuries of British rule. The East India Company, followed by the British Government of India, had established a grid of private property—vested in some regions with large landlords and in others with peasants—and a corresponding realm of government land, which included the vast forests and grazing commons of the subcontinent. Imposing this property regime itself involved tremendous and foundational dispossession, undermining the land tenure of small peasants and transforming vast tracts of inhabited land into plantations and state forests (Guha 1989; Guha 1996; Sivaramakrishnan 1999; Kashwan 2017). To build the infrastructure (railways, ports, canals) for colonial extraction, the colonial state had further established the legal framework of eminent domain for expropriating private land for “public purposes.” The Land Acquisition Act of 1894—building on several precursors from the 1820s onwards—was distinguished by its liberal conception of “public purpose” (which allowed

for land acquisition by private companies), its insistence on compensating landowners at assessed value under prior land use, and the significant discretion it gave to colonial officials (Ramanathan 2008). The postcolonial state inherited wholesale this colonial system for dispossessing land but put it in the service of a distinct model of state-led development.

The “Nehruvian” development model invested comparatively little in rural health and education and accomplished only modest land reforms, but sought to build economic self-reliance through projects like large dams and public sector industries, which involved dispossessing millions of rural people. For this, the draconian Land Acquisition Act—as well as colonial policies governing the use of forest and common lands—proved extremely useful. The result was an abysmal and relatively well-documented record of displacing rural people, disproportionately *Adivasis* (indigenous groups), with very little in the way of “resettlement and rehabilitation” (cf. Fernandes and Thukral 1989; Mathur 1995; Cernea 1999; Fernandes 2008).

The thoroughgoing liberalization of the Indian economy over the past three decades has dramatically transformed the character of land dispossession. After turning decisively towards neoliberalism in the early 1990s, the Indian government quickly dismantled the “license raj,” encouraged private investment in most sectors, and gradually liberalized foreign direct investment (FDI) and international trade. None of these policies revived a sluggish manufacturing sector (nor did they seek to meaningfully revive agriculture), but they did give great impetus to emerging industries in information technology and back-office services. While employing a small and relatively educated share of the workforce, these sectors have played an outsized role in India’s post-liberalization growth (Bardhan 2013; Mitra 2013). Simultaneously, liberalization of land and natural resources generated a massive land boom. Rural land ceilings were scrapped and many restrictions on buying and converting rural land were lifted (Sud 2014). Liberalization of the mining sector, where the state previously had held a monopoly, was another important driver of rural dispossession (Lahiri-Dutt 2014, Oskarsson 2018). In urban areas, while residential real estate had been dominated by the public sector in most Indian cities, policy moves—like the scrapping of urban land ceiling laws—opened it up to private actors (Searle 2016; Ghertner 2015). The liberalization of real estate finance, including foreign finance in the early 2000s, helped unleash a dramatic bubble just as hot money was pouring into emerging markets. By the mid-2000s, real estate prices in many India cities were increasing by at least 30 percent annually (Government of India 2008: 79)—likely a vast under-estimate given the prevalence of black money in real estate transactions—and rural land prices came to rival those in the United States (Chakravorty 2013). The privatization of infrastructure dovetailed with the land boom, further driving up land prices. Large capital projects like highways, ports, and airports, were increasingly built on a Public Private Partnership (PPP) basis, and developers were often compensated with adjacent land for commercial and residential development. Most developers were Indian, though they were increasingly tapping into global capital markets, pointing to an important feature of India’s political economy: while economic liberalization has increased the presence of multinational companies, including through the forms of

financialization analyzed by Michael Goldman (this issue), India's domestic bourgeoisie has played the major role in its post-liberalization growth.

In response to these economic impulses, India's state governments—which have primary discretion over land and were now competing against each other for private investment—began in the 1990s to dispossess land for a much broader range of purposes than during the developmentalist period (Levien 2018). Urban development agencies no longer built their own housing, but acquired vast tracts of peri-urban land in order to resell to private developers. Industrial development parastatals similarly transitioned from building their own industrial estates to brokering land to private and foreign investors. This transformation into land broker states culminated with India's Special Economic Zone policy (2000) and law (2005), which incentivized state governments to dispossess unprecedentedly large chunks of land for what would be privately-run satellite cities, most devoted to information technology and real estate. Importantly, while India thus attempted to copy China's SEZ model with the purpose of jumpstarting a labor-intensive manufacturing sector, these zones wound up being overwhelmingly populated by the already thriving IT and back-office services sector. Many of the 600 approved SEZs failed to attract industry and amounted to little more than real estate scams (CAG 2014). While this has tarnished the SEZ model, many other schemes and special zones—from “Smart Cities” to Special Manufacturing Zones and industrial corridors—appear as repackaged attempts to similarly transfer agricultural land to private industry and builders. Crucially, then, much of the growth driving dispossession in post-liberalization India is relatively non-labor intensive and rent seeking in nature. Moreover, deepening state involvement in lucrative land markets has been accompanied by tremendous amounts of illicit graft, giving rise to levels of corruption and high-profile scams that dwarf those of the much maligned “license raj” (Chandra 2015; Levien 2018: 54-60).

### *China*

The Chinese Revolution brought about a more radical break with the past than did Indian independence. Instead of inheriting pre-existing laws and patterns of land tenure, the new regime radically reorganized almost all aspects of rural Chinese society. Yet, the development model pursued by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) also required the acquisition of very large expanses of rural land for public sector projects. Compared to the postcolonial Indian government, the new Chinese government was more ambitious—and more effective—in reordering rural society. After carrying out radical land reform, the party fashioned a new village leadership, largely recruited from poorer households, which then presided over a state-directed collectivization drive that placed all village land under their control. Party-run rural collectives became an effective instrument for investing in village infrastructure and small-scale rural industry, as well as rural education and health care; at the same time, they facilitated state expropriation of large tracts of village land for state projects.

During the developmentalist era, the Chinese state requisitioned massive swathes of rural land to build dams and reservoirs, an extensive national railway network, highways, huge mining operations, and large numbers of state-owned factories. The previous Nationalist regime had similar plans, but had been largely unable to carry them out. In contrast, between 1949 and 1990, over twelve million people were displaced to make way for reservoirs alone, of which some 86,000 were built (Ying 2005, Chapter 1). During the “Third Front” drive from 1964 to 1980, the government, motivated by military considerations, built new industrial facilities in mountainous and other remote agricultural regions in the interior of the country, creating complete new cities. At the same time, in more developed regions, county, township, and village authorities used village land to build smaller state- and village-owned factories. Some of the displaced villagers were resettled on inferior land, while others were given jobs, sometimes in the factories that displaced them (Gürel 2015, Tilt 2015, and Ying 2005).

In China, the beginning of the era of economic liberalization was announced by Deng Xiaoping’s famous tour of foreign-invested factories in Shenzhen and other special economic zones (SEZs) in 1992. While limited market reforms carried out in the 1980s de-collectivized agriculture, more radical reforms in recent decades have opened the way for massive displacement of villagers from their land. Huge numbers continue to be displaced to make way for public-sector infrastructure projects and the scale and extent of these projects--such as the Three Gorges Dam--is far larger than in India (Mertha 2008, Tilt 2015). In recent decades, however, even greater numbers have been removed from their land for a wide range of private commercial purposes, and local officials have become brokers for all kinds of land acquisition deals. Their role in brokering land has been even greater than that of local officials in India, where land can also change hands through the market, because in China *any* transfer of village land to outside investors requires state intervention.

Even before 1992, when there was little room for domestic capital in China, the state had begun expropriating rural land for diasporic and other foreign capital to build factories in Shenzhen and other SEZs (Hsing 2010, pp. 123-127). Since then, domestic capital has grown rapidly and, as in India, has provided the major impetus for land dispossession around the country. Chinese firms involved in rural land taking were fashioned by the wave of radical economic reforms that began in the 1990s. These reforms created a capitalist sector with a variety of ownership structures. A relatively small number of very large firms remain in the state sector, but now sell shares to domestic and foreign investors and are oriented toward maximizing profits. The vast majority of former state and collective enterprises have been privatized, with many sold to their managers, creating a new class of private capitalists closely tied to the state. At the same time, the CCP also encouraged the emergence of new private enterprises and large-scale investment by foreign capital. As in India, infrastructure, real estate, and mining projects are centrally important in China and are now backed by influential lobbies promoting dispossession. However, two other sectors of capital--manufacturing and agribusiness—play a much more important role in China than in India (Zhan 2017).

Since the turn of the century, central leaders have been strongly promoting urban expansion and this agenda has been pushed even more aggressively by local municipal officials, who have been joined by real estate development companies. Although the real estate industry only emerged after the privatization of housing in 1998, many of these companies have since grown into powerful behemoths and influential proponents of urban expansion. Conversion of rural land for urban development now accounts for over half of local government revenues and it has become a major source of profits for companies engaged in real estate development projects.

China has been more successful than India in developing a wide range of manufacturing industries, particularly in export-oriented production, which has grown spectacularly over the past two decades. Both domestic and foreign companies have required extensive land for new greenfield factories, initially in coastal areas, but increasingly in inland areas as well.

After neglecting agriculture during the 1990s, for the last two decades, Chinese leaders have been strongly promoting agricultural modernization through policies that are replacing small household production with large-scale farming. Since 2007, well over one third of farmland in China has been transferred from smallholders to large farm operators. As Luo and Andreas explain in their contribution to this issue, local officials act as land brokers, often imposing long-term leasing arrangements on villagers, who are compelled to give up use rights in exchange for rental income. Many of the large operators are agribusiness processing and marketing companies, which in recent years have been moving directly into farming on a grand scale. This massive scaling up of agriculture—which has no counterpart in India—has been developed in tandem with policies promoting rapid urbanization, with both driving rural dispossession (also see Zhan 2019, Gong and Zhang 2017).

Chinese cities administer vast rural areas, often encompassing millions of rural residents, and these areas have been the focus of land-hungry development programs. These programs are often based on the “three concentrations” model, which divides the rural peripheries of cities into separate residential, industrial, and agricultural zones, with the intention of concentrating, intensifying, and scaling up all three sectors (Zhan 2017). As these plans have been implemented, countless villages have been razed and their inhabitants now live in large tightly packed housing compounds, often far from village farmland (Ong 2014). Although no precise data exists for either country, it is clear that the combination of aggressive policies to encourage rapid urbanization *and* industrialize agriculture has led to rural displacement on a scale far greater in China than in India.

### **State and legal structures**

If the trajectories of development sketched above have resulted in parallel but distinct trajectories of dispossession, involving different sectors of capital, differences in the countries’ state and legal structures also matter for the politics and outcomes of dispossession. These include differences in regime type, state capacity and organization, federal structure and specific laws and policies related to land dispossession.

## *India*

Compared to the Chinese state, the Indian state stands out in three key respects. First is the obvious difference in regime type. Since the constitution came into force in 1950, India has been the largest electoral democracy in the world. It is also a federal system, in which the central government sets the overall policy direction but state governments enjoy significant discretion on many issues, including land. Second, India's state capacity is nowhere near that of China. Characterized as an intermediate case in most neo-Weberian analyses (see Evans 1995; Rudolph and Rudolph 1987) India does have a coherent bureaucratic structure shepherded by the elite Indian Administrative Service at the top and state administrative services that fill key positions in state-level government. Nevertheless, it is also widely characterized as porous to social interests (Murali 2017), politicized (Kohli 2012), inefficient to the point of exercising structural violence (Gupta 2012), and lacking in transformative capacity (Bardhan 1984, Rudolph and Rudolph 1987). Regardless of perspective, it is indisputable that there is no Indian counterpart to the Chinese state's massive powers of planning and coordination, which can be seen in its role as midwife to the most dynamic manufacturing sector in the world, its regulation of population movements, and the rapidity and decisiveness with which it builds capital projects and accomplishes others feats of social engineering through its various state-directed campaigns, whether land titling (Zeng this issue), agricultural modernization (Luo and Andreas this issue) or what Friedman (2018) calls "just in time urbanization." The types of land use planning that occur at the state-level in India, described by Solano et al. in this volume, are consequential for facilitating dispossession, but do not translate into authoritative restrictions on land use anything like the quota system for maintaining arable land described later (see also Chen 2013). This difference in state capacity surfaces repeatedly in contributions to this volume.

Nevertheless, the third difference is that India's legal and administrative system for dispossessing land has more clearly defined, long standing procedures, in which state governments play the key role. The overall framework established by the British in the 19<sup>th</sup> century remains roughly in place. There is a large domain of government land for which distinct mechanisms exist for transferring land—whether forest land, over which the central government retains discretion in granting conversion approvals (Kashwan 2017); or village grazing and wastelands that can be transferred relatively easily through various means at the state and, to a lesser extent, village level (Brara 2006; Baka 2013). For forest lands, a new law—the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act (FRA)—was passed in 2006 under the rubric of strengthening the customary rights of forest-dwelling and forest-dependent communities. As with the 2013 land legislation (discussed below), the most stringent safeguards against unlawful dispossession were diluted as the draft bill was negotiated into its final form; moreover, the implementation of FRA remains weak (Choudhury and Aga 2019) and uneven across states (Kale and Mazaheri 2019). But for the vast majority of agricultural land, which is in private hands, expropriation has historically been accomplished

through the eminent domain laws derived from the British legal system. The Land Acquisition Act of 1894 (LAA), moderately amended in the postcolonial period, was used continually, largely by state governments and their parastatals, but also by the central government for its own projects. The LAA established a broad and vague conception of public purpose; outlined a variety of administrative steps for acquiring land, from notification to possession; and stipulated payment of compensation at market value. In practice, the LAA became notorious for its anti-democratic implementation, sub-market compensation (calculated based on past sales which are typically undervalued at registration to avoid taxes), neglect of affected non-landowners, and absence of provisions for resettlement and rehabilitation (which were largely provided in an ad-hoc way that varied by state and project).

In 2013, as a result of the protracted protests by farmers against SEZs and other projects discussed below, the Congress-led central government replaced the LAA with the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Resettlement and Rehabilitation Act (LARRA). This act retained the basic framework of eminent domain for public purposes and most of the procedures of the LAA. However, LARRA increased compensation to farmers, for the first time required compensation for landless affected people and instituted various procedural safeguards. The latter included, most importantly, social impact assessments and the consent of 80% of affected farmers for private sector projects and the consent of 70% for PPPs. If implemented faithfully, the latter could have constituted a significant brake on land dispossession.

Although the law had many weaknesses and loopholes—the result of aggressive lobbying by industrial and real estate interests—and was thus criticized by farmers' groups, it was nevertheless deemed too pro-farmer by industry and pro-market economists who, after the notoriously pro-business Narendra Modi was elected in 2014, rapidly lobbied the new BJP government to dilute it. Early in his first term, Modi's government used an ordinance (roughly an executive order) to strike the new law's key provisions requiring consent and social impact assessments (though not compensation). Ultimately, sustained pressure from farmers groups—including from the farmers' wing of his own Hindu-right coalition—led him to relent. The result has been something of an impasse; seemingly few states use the new law and the central government has controversially allowed state governments to formulate their own less stringent laws, something that was not previously considered legal (Menon, Kohli, and Gupta 2017).

At present, then, the Indian state seeks compliance to dispossession through geographically and socially uneven combinations of compensation and coercion. Given the dubious legitimacy of expropriating land for private companies—which can no longer compel “sacrifices for the nation”—everything comes down to the willingness of state governments to include farmers in the spoils and/or to use force against the recalcitrant.

## *China*

For centuries, the state has played a more overarching role in Chinese society and this has been particularly true since the 1949 Revolution brought the CCP to power. The party has built a state apparatus that is much more ambitious and has much greater capacity than its Indian counterpart, and that faces fewer constraints. The party continues to maintain a political monopoly and effectively suppresses organized opposition. As a legacy of the Revolution and its aftermath, the Chinese state is more deeply embedded in the countryside and, despite centrifugal tendencies, authority remains more centralized in China than in India. Major policy orientations are set in Beijing, and although local officials implement these policies in ways that reflect their own interests and priorities, central party leadership retains a relatively high degree of hierarchical control (Edin 2003, Kung, Cai, and Sun 2009). In recent years, Chinese leaders have been able to use the considerable capacity of their state apparatus to obtain rural land in an even more aggressive fashion than have their Indian counterparts.

Local governments in China have a rapacious appetite for acquiring land for development projects and—like India’s state governments—they compete with one another for capital investments that require land. The incentives to requisition rural land for urban use are particularly compelling for two reasons. On one hand, local governments rely heavily on land conveyance fees as a revenue source. On the other hand, in a country where the urban population has increased by 120 million in just the six years from 2012 to 2018, they face strong demands from urban capital for more land and from urban residents for lower housing prices and better public services.

The appetite of local governments for land, however, is powerfully restrained by the central government. National rural land transfer regulation has been shaped not only by efforts to spur urban/industrial development, but also by competing agendas to increase agricultural production and limit environmental damage (Chen, Zinda, and Yeh 2017); moreover, the pace of transfers has been impacted by concerns about social stability.

China places a higher priority on farmland preservation than does India, in part because the latter has 31.6% more arable land (World Bank, 2016 figure). Concerns about national food security and self-sufficiency have led the central state to impose on itself and its local agents the most stringent policy to protect farmland in the world. Farmland preservation, however, should not be confused with peasant preservation. While preserving farmland, the central state is also pushing for the transfer of farmland from rural households to capitalist producers.

Farmland protection is implemented through a strict process of land use planning that starts from the central level and goes down to the lowest level of government—towns and townships. Master plans are drawn up at every level, each requiring the approval of a higher level of government. At the core of these plans is one issue: how much agricultural land can be converted to urban uses.<sup>1</sup> It is under these constraints that a convoluted scheme like “rural

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<sup>1</sup> The most memorable item from the current national Master Plan is the 120 million-hectare ‘red line’ for farmland preservation — a bottom line that cannot be crossed if China is to ensure food self-sufficiency. By 2017, however, the country’s total farmland has already declined to 135 million ha, leaving little room for further loss.

residential restructuring,” described below, was contrived to create larger quotas for converting agricultural land.

The Chinese government continues to play a much more extensive and direct role in rural land transfers than does the government in India, where the great majority of land is privately owned and changes hands through market transfers. Although advocates argue that land privatization would protect Chinese villagers from state expropriation, the experience of India shows that private property rights would not obviate the pressure for large-scale land dispossession by the state. Given its existing development model, the Chinese state would still use expropriation to consolidate large contiguous plots of land for economic purposes. It is more likely that land privatization would simply add large-scale land alienation through the market to large-scale land dispossession by the state, increasing the total amount of land loss (Zhang and Donaldson 2013).

As it is, China’s rural land tenure system, despite four decades of gradual liberalization, continues to bear hallmarks of the collective structures established in the 1950s. Most rural land in China continues to be owned by collective entities—administrative villages, village groups, and in rare cases, towns/townships. This land is divided into three land-use categories: 1) agricultural land (*nongyongdi*), which includes farmland (*gengdi*), grassland, forestland, and wasteland, 2) construction land, which can be used for building enterprises, public utilities, and rural residents’ housing, and 3) unused land. Most has been allocated to village households as a part of their rural *hukou* (household registration) entitlement package (Andreas and Zhan 2016).<sup>2</sup> Therefore, most rural citizens have, as part of their village citizenship rights, long-term (30-year) use rights over some agricultural land for agricultural production and a plot of construction land for building a homestead.

The most recent reforms, designed to commodify land rights in order to facilitate the transfer of land from smallholders to outside investors, have run into resistance on the ground, as Zeng (this issue) recounts in her study of the nationwide land titling campaign begun in 2013. Zeng finds that villagers preferred the conventional practice of periodically circulating farmland among village households to ensure that future generations would have access, and village cadres feared titling would complicate land transfers by reducing flexibility, as it would not allow them to reallocate remaining village land after some was expropriated. Her account illuminates the obstacles to state-sponsored land commodification posed by longstanding conceptions of land rights cultivated by the collective system.

While land rights are being commodified through titling, the central role in land transfers continues to be played by the state, underpinned by its coercive power. Rural land transfer is governed by China’s Land Management Law, but practices are evolving more quickly than the

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<sup>2</sup> In 2016, the Department of Public Security terminated the use of rural and urban *hukou* as two separate categories and unified all *hukou* simply as residential registration; the differences in entitlement, however, remained.

law.<sup>3</sup> Today a rural household may part with its land rights in three ways. First, rural residents can rent out their allocated agricultural land to anyone as long as it is used for agricultural production. This sub-contracting of the farmland use rights has accelerated greatly in the last decade, in no small part thanks to the government’s aggressive push to scale up and modernize agriculture (Gong and Zhang 2017). Most sub-contracting of agricultural land, albeit often brokered by the village authorities, takes place through mutually agreed, market transactions, but many farmers have been compelled to surrender their use rights for decades and in some cases, they have been pushed off their farmland by strong-arm tactics, as detailed in the paper by Luo and Andreas.

Second, village land—both agricultural and construction—can be expropriated (*zhengshou*) by local governments under their land use master plans.<sup>4</sup> State requisition must take place before rural land can be used for any non-agricultural purpose, including urban development, infrastructure building, industrial production, and mining. State requisition turns collectively owned village land into state-owned urban land and thus deprives the affected members of the rural collectives of their land rights. For this deprivation, the Land Management Law requires the state to provide compensation to rural citizens. It is this compensation that has become the most contentious issue in rural China today, as discussed in detail in the papers by Cai et al., Chen, and Jiang, Sargeson and Tomba.

Finally, rural citizens can also lose the rights over their allocated housing land (*zhaijidi*) in a complex new process that has been called “rural residential restructuring.” This process, now sweeping much of rural China, is the focus of Deng, O’Brien, and Zhang’s paper in this issue. Local governments use residential restructuring to relocate rural residents from their previously scattered, independent family houses to newly built sites of “concentrated living,” often in multi-story buildings. The purpose is to reduce the amount of village land used for housing; this “construction” land is then turned into farmland, which, under different local schemes, allows an equivalent amount of agricultural land elsewhere to be turned into construction land, which can then be converted to urban use (see Zhang and Wu 2017 for details). Unlike the first two types of land transfer, which are governed by the national Land Management Law, rural residential restructuring has been advanced through experimental programs run at the sub-national level (now in 19 out of the 33 provincial-level units). Thus, the institutional design and implementation process varies greatly across the country, as do the impacts on rural residents and communities.

Put simply, the first process is about moving farmland out of the hands of rural households and into the hands of large-scale, capitalist agricultural producers, while the second and third processes are about converting agricultural land to urban uses. The first is very

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<sup>3</sup> The Land Management Law, which took effect in January 1999, contains a great deal of ambiguities and oversights. The national legislature passed a revised version in 2019 and it took effect in January 2020. The changes introduced are incremental and concentrate in just five areas, some of which are discussed later.

<sup>4</sup> The county government is the lowest level in the state administrative hierarchy that has the authority to approve land requisition, but only within the confines of its annual quota, pre-approved by the provincial government.

different from the latter two. In the first, rural residents sub-contract land use rights for a fixed period, while in the second and third the state expropriates their land and residents face the permanent loss of land rights and often a termination of their rural citizenship.

In sum, the processes of expropriating farmland in China are more varied and are substantially different from those in India. Further, dispossession is executed by a far stronger state that, though interested in conserving farmland and maintaining legitimacy, faces fewer legal and political obstacles to achieving its objectives, as we will further discuss below.

## **Agrarian Social Structures**

When the Chinese and Indian states dispossess land for capitalist development, they encounter very different agrarian social structures. There are, of course, also significant regional differences within each country and within India in particular. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to sketch out in general terms important differences in rural social structures that have shaped the politics and outcomes of dispossession in the two countries.

### *India*

At Independence, India had a patchwork of agrarian social structures that varied tremendously but were almost everywhere highly unequal. Land reform in the 1950s and 1960s largely succeeded in abolishing large landlords, but left intact vast inequalities in the distribution of land that were highly correlated with caste and varied significantly by region (Herring 1983; Frankel 2005). Starting from these unequal foundations, the uneven commercialization of agriculture—given a major impetus by the Green Revolution and large irrigation projects—proceeded to generate prismatic forms of agrarian class differentiation that remained correlated in complex ways with caste, creating a mosaic of agrarian inequality that nevertheless did not, in most regions, take the form of polarization (Harriss 1982; Harriss-White et al. 2004). Agricultural development was ultimately sidelined even before the onset of neoliberal policies, commercialization remained weak in rainfed areas, and it never furnished the surpluses for industrialization as envisioned in the agrarian “transition” perspective (Lerche 2013). While three decades of debate over the “modes of production” in Indian agriculture ended indecisively (Patnaik 1991), it is relatively clear that by the 21<sup>st</sup> century most rural people in India were integrated into capitalist markets of varying kinds—including for their labor—even if capitalist relations of production never became universalized in agriculture.

The onset of neoliberal policies has been accompanied not necessarily by generalized agrarian crisis: capitalist farmers continue to accumulate in certain regions (Lerche 2013) even as the grim total of farmer suicides continues to mount in others (Vasavi 2012; Nagaraj et al. 2014). Nevertheless, it is clear that agriculture is sustaining a shrinking portion of the population and a shrinking portion of the livelihoods of diversifying agrarian households. Off-farm diversification, given the limited pull of labor-intensive industrialization in India, proceeds from the uneven

basis of agrarian assets which creates a far better springboard for dominant agrarian castes, who in many regions invest in education, obtain government or formal sector jobs, or start small businesses (Jeffrey and Lerche 2000; Harriss-White and Janakarajan 1997). Those from India's *Dalit* (lowest caste) and *Adivasi* (indigenous) communities are the least likely to have benefitted from India's economic growth model; they also tend to be disproportionately landless or semiproletarian, living in absolute poverty, and therefore more likely to be compelled into precarious and migrant labor, often in construction (Pattenden 2016; Shah et al. 2018). While a smaller fraction of the agrarian population is thus constituting itself as a diversified petit bourgeois or petit rentier class, a larger fraction is becoming semi-proletarianized, dependent on various combinations of agricultural production, wage labor, and government welfare schemes (particularly the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, NREGS).

For our purposes, this highly schematic rendering highlights a few key contrasts with China that are relevant for understanding the politics and outcomes of dispossession. One is that the degree of agrarian differentiation, never checked by radical land reform and collectivization, is far higher than in China. Highly diversified agrarian capitalists, sometimes from ex-landlord backgrounds and in many cases no longer residing in the village (though still exercising political power there), often co-exist with extremely impoverished semi-proletarians and landless laborers and tenants, with many shades in between. These class inequalities remain highly correlated with India's distinctive caste hierarchies, which are being reconfigured but not dissolved by neoliberal capitalism (Harriss-White 2003; Shah et al 2006; Hayer 2010; Shah et al 2018). As we explore further below, this translates into highly unequal opportunities for farmers in the context of land dispossession—especially where significant compensation or other economic opportunities are available—with attendant consequences for the politics of dispossession. Dominant castes, in many cases, can find ways to gain by projects premised on their dispossession and often serve as brokers of this process. These class and caste inequalities, moreover, intersect with steep though regionally inflected patriarchies, which deprive women of land rights (Agarwal 1994) even though they have a high stake in agriculture and in livestock and forest economies on common lands. Second, there is probably even more variation in the character of these inequalities in India, making generalizing difficult and necessitating careful sub-national comparisons. Third, while agriculture is increasingly unprofitable for many farmers in India, the off-farm opportunities also remain weak due above all to a stagnant manufacturing sector. This heavily incentivizes maintaining even small plots of land in the absence of very significant compensation for land dispossession (Levien 2018). Finally, perhaps most obviously, Indian agriculturalists in the vast majority of cases own their own land and there is no counterpart to the collective system. This not only means they can sell their land individually, but also that in the context of its expropriation there is no clear role for deliberative village bodies (though village *gram sabhas* do have some power in approving forest conversions). Further, certain policies—for example the allocation of plots as compensation—can very effectively individualize households without even the need for the household-by-household negotiations that often happen in China, as described by several contributions to this volume. Instead of party cadres negotiating with households,

village brokers, acting on their own behalf in search of commission, can induce farmers to sell their plots and land.

### *China*

After the CCP came to power in 1949, the new regime carried out the most thoroughgoing land reform in the post-war world, seizing land previously owned by landlords and rich peasants and redistributing it to other villagers. The campaign, along with the subsequent collectivization drive, violently leveled the old village and lineage group hierarchies, turning formerly wealthy and powerful households into political and social pariahs, and empowering a new group of rural cadres, recruited largely from among the poorer strata of villagers. The new social order turned villagers into members of rural collectives and city dwellers into members of urban work units, and the household registration (*hukou*) system sharply limited movement from the countryside to the city. The Household Responsibility System (HRS), established in the 1980s as the rural collectives were disbanded, reflected the social leveling brought about by land reform and collectivization. Land was allocated equally among village households, creating a system of smallholder agriculture based on what was probably the most egalitarian distribution of land in history, at least on this scale.

While these early reforms marketized the rural economy, they continued to inhibit village polarization and the development of capitalist relations in the countryside as well as urban expansion. Under the HRS, the village retained collective ownership of the land, while households had use rights. These nominally belonged to all members--male and female--although patriarchal traditions, which fostered patrilocal marriage and associated land with patrilineal entitlements, continued to be used to deprive women of their land rights (Sargeson 2012). Households could not sell their plots and initially even leasing was sharply restricted. Villages and townships also retained ownership of small rural factories, which expanded rapidly to fill niches created by early market reforms, providing local jobs to villagers. At the same time, the *hukou* system continued to constrain migration and urban expansion (Perkins 2009, Zhan 2010).

Over time, however, this relatively insular system gave way to a system of circular migration. In the late 1990s, privatization led to a decline in employment in township and village factories and it became increasingly difficult for villagers to make a living by farming, in part due to unfavorable government policies. At the same time, urban employment was opened up to rural migrants, leading tens of millions of villagers to seek work in China's cities. By the early years of this century, most rural households had been semi-proletarianized; their land entitlements were too small to sustain social reproduction, their social existence fully commodified, and they increasingly depended on income derived from outside employment. Thanks in large part to China's labor-intensive manufacturing dynamic, that employment was more widely available and remunerative than that available to dispossessed farmers in India. Because the jobs available to villagers were still highly precarious, however, they continued to

also depend on their village land; when economic conditions or age made it difficult to find urban jobs, they returned home (Chuang 2020, Zhan 2019).

In some ways, circular migration helped consolidate the smallholder agrarian economy. Income from urban wages was invested in household farming and small rural enterprises, leading to a widespread and gradual capitalization of petty commodity production (Huang, Gao, and Peng 2012). Over time, however, social differentiation within villages increased, facilitated by government programs to promote the development of “big households.” As the state fostered the expansion of the farmland rental market in the late 1990s, some village households began operating large-scale, labor-hiring farms, giving rise to what scholars have called “capitalism from below” (Yan and Chen 2015, Zhang and Donaldson 2008, 2010).

Since the turn of the century, agrarian “capitalism from below” has been supplemented and then surpassed by “capitalism from above” (Yan and Chen 2015; Zhang 2015). This dynamic has been driven by the central government’s new agenda of scaling up and modernizing agriculture and aided by local officials’ land brokerage. Through organizing contract farming and other means, large agribusinesses—so-called “dragon head” companies—have expanded their control of agri-food commodity chains, further weakening the positions of smallholding, independent producers (Gong and Zhang 2017, Luo, Andreas and Li, 2017, Schneider 2017, Yan and Chen 2015). Moreover, in the late 2000s, the state began strongly promoting direct investment by agribusinesses as well as other urban capital in agricultural production, and local cadres began pushing smallholders to transfer their land to large operators (Luo and Andreas in this issue).

Aside from capital’s inherent drive for accumulation, a key force promoting capitalist expansion into agriculture is the changing role and development agenda of the state. Fiscally, with the abolition of agricultural taxes in 2006, the state has changed from extracting rural surplus to injecting capital into the countryside—to serve a range of policy goals such as social stability, food security, and poverty reduction. However, this capital injection is done through various state-directed development projects and welfare programs that have usually brought with them the state’s biases for markets, consumption, economies of scale, and urban-industrial interests, accelerating the foreclosure of other non-capitalist alternatives of rural and agricultural development (Day and Schneider 2018).

These developments have started to push large numbers of petty commodity producers off their land. As villagers lose access to their land, they are not only pushed out of agriculture, but also many other small-scale entrepreneurial activities that were dependent on land (Day and Schneider 2018; Luo and Andreas, this issue; Zhan 2019). The rural population has been further differentiated into a variety of class positions straddling the rural-urban divide. These include a small number of small capitalist farmers and business owners who regularly employ wage labor and a somewhat larger number of commercial farmers and entrepreneurs who depend largely on their own labor, while the vast majority of households continue to depend on small plots of land and outside employment, and a growing number of landless households depend entirely on precarious wage labor (Luo and Andreas, this issue, Zhang 2015).

In sum, although by now there is significant economic differentiation in Chinese villages, the emerging classes are newer and less fixed than in India. Guaranteed land allotments have--until recently--prevented landlessness and destitution and, together with the relaxation of *hukou* restrictions, have underpinned a system of circular migration, in which most rural families depend on both land-based petty commodity production and outside wage labor. Although the urban jobs open to rural migrants are highly precarious, they are more widely available than in India, easing the dependence of rural households on land. These conditions provide the socio-economic context in which conflicts over dispossession are taking place in China.

## **Politics of Dispossession**

Over the last two decades, rural land expropriation has become one of the leading causes of popular protests and political contestation in both India and China.

### *India*

Resistance to land expropriation in India became particularly explosive in the 2000s, but has a longer history than in China. As early as the 1970s and 1980s, extensive developmentalist-era dispossession had given rise to powerful anti-dam and other anti-displacement movements, which were ideologically formed by the post-emergency, non-party left currents that combined Gandhianism, environmentalism, and various strands of Indian socialism (Kothari 1984; Guha 1988; Omvedt 1993; Baviskar 1995). It also gave rise to probably the world's largest civil society and academic community concerned with issues of displacement and rehabilitation.<sup>5</sup> While these were some of the first and most notable anti-dam movements in the world, they were few in number, relatively isolated, and were rarely successful in stopping projects. One of Modi's first acts as Prime Minister was to finish the long-opposed Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP) in his native Gujarat, effectively bringing the heroic thirty-year struggle of the Narmada Bachao Andolan to an end.

By the mid-2000s, however, shifts in the political economy of land dispossession had given rise to a new generation of anti-dispossession movements that quickly proliferated across rural India and became known as "land wars." No longer concentrated in remote river valleys and forests, these struggles now arose in the plains as villagers opposed land grabs for SEZs and other "new economy" projects. High profile struggles against a car plant in Singur, an SEZ in Nandigram (both West Bengal), and a bauxite mine in Lanjigarh (Odisha) catapulted the issue to the national spotlight (see Nielsen 2018; Banerjee 2014), but were only the tip of the iceberg. A large number of SEZs across India, including India's largest FDI to date, the POSCO Steel

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<sup>5</sup> There are shelves of Indian libraries devoted to volumes on development-induced displacement, resettlement, and rehabilitation, and cost-benefit analyses of large dams. This vast trove of research—albeit uneven in quality—is largely ignored by current studies on "land grabs." There are also countless NGOs and policy and research institutes that focus on the issue.

Plant proposed for Orissa, were stopped by farmers using human chains, barricades, and media pressure (Levien 2013). Large-scale protests in Goa led to the cancellation of all SEZs in the state (Sampat 2015). Opposition parties started to support (albeit instrumentally) such protests in states where they were vying for power (see Jenkins et al. 2014, Nielsen 2018), marking a shift from the previously autonomous character of anti-dispossession struggles in the country. Land acquiring agencies also faced less spectacular opposition, sometimes in the form of legal challenges. Although there is no precise quantification of land dispossession protests, a consortium of journalists called Land Conflict Watch (2020) has recorded over 700 active conflicts.<sup>6</sup> According to another indirect measure, by the early 2010s land acquisition difficulties were stalling capital projects worth 3% of India's GDP (CMIE 2012). It was this unprecedented politicization and effective obstruction of land dispossession that led to the passage of LARRA.

While these anti-dispossession protests have been cumulatively successful in slowing down and in some cases halting land dispossession, and forcing increased compensation, they are diverse in their goals and ideologies. Some farmers wish only to better the terms of their dispossession, often through increased compensation. Such aspirations are increasingly stimulated by soaring land prices accompanying new economy projects, and are particularly prevalent among commercialized farmers near cities. Nevertheless, and in contrast to China, in India one finds many protests by farmers who appear determined to stop their dispossession altogether and sometimes succeed in doing so. While all protests are driven by one of these two concrete goals, they can be articulated to very diverse political ideologies and projects (Levien 2013).

As protests have shifted to the plains and been taken up by almost all political parties (when they are not in power), the ideologies of anti-dispossession protests have become more varied and muddled. Themes of indigenous autonomy are not relevant to the new generation of land struggles by commercial and caste-divided farmers in the plains, and the older Gandhian and anarcho-socialist overlays—pioneered by the Narmada Bachao Andolan and the National Alliance of People's Movements—often have less resonance. It is not uncommon to find farmers who otherwise support the BJP, for example, temporarily fighting a BJP government's land acquisition. Even the farmers' wing of the RSS, a key ally of the current BJP government, has been vocally critical of land acquisition for SEZs and other projects. Meanwhile, in the remote forested areas of India protesting farmers have sometimes received support from armed Maoists (Sundar 2016). Caste inflects the politics of land dispossession in regionally variegated ways (see Nielsen, Sareen and Oskarsson 2020). And in contrast to romantic depictions of indigenous people as resolutely anti-development, recent scholarship has painted a more complex picture of *Adivasi* land politics (Shah 2010; though see also Baviskar 1995), even as indigenous identity continues to be instrumentally invoked in such struggles (Sareen and Oskarsson 2020). The ideological plurality is such that it is common to find several distinct political tendencies within a single anti-dispossession struggle (Nielsen 2009).

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that their definition of land conflict is broad and that their database cannot be taken as representative or comprehensive.

Crucial to understanding the politics of dispossession in any particular locale in India are local agrarian social structures. The substantial class and caste differentiation within Indian villages—with huge differences between poles but infinite gradations in between—plays right into new forms of compensation to divide villages. Rural individuals and households with even small advantages in education, income, and social networks—all highly bound up with caste status—are able to negotiate new opportunities for real estate speculation and construction contracts from which others are locked out (cf. Levien 2018; Agarwal and Levien 2019). This uneven terrain often produces compliance from the better placed, diminishing the potency of resistance, or it generates dominant-caste led protests with narrow aims of compensation that shut-out the interests of tenants and landless. It is thus all the more remarkable that in so many cases across the subcontinent, villagers have, despite such inequalities, formed remarkably strong, even if instrumental, alliances against land dispossession. Given the tremendous diversity in agrarian structure across India, the permutations of this type of micro-politics are seemingly endless as are the opportunities for subnational comparative research. Scholars have only begun to identify the factors shaping the emergence, character, and success of such struggles.

India's *relative* democratic openness matters in several ways for the politics of dispossession. First, it has created space for a very rich and ideologically diverse tradition of non-party social movements and NGOs, including those opposing displacement and the prevailing development model more generally. Forty years of vibrant advocacy and research on the issue of displacement, beginning with large dams, has built a rich civil society—as well as alternative and mainstream media awareness—that can support and amplify the voices of protesting farmers. This space is much more constricted in China. Second, India's *relatively* independent judiciary provides some recourse to farmers to challenge their dispossession. While such challenges are rarely successful in stopping dispossession and can have a demobilizing effect on movements (Nielsen and Nilsen 2015; Nielsen 2018), they are nevertheless often successful in increasing compensation and delaying projects—which can create time for other strategies to work in what is essentially a war of attrition. Third, since the issue became electorally salient in the 2000s, there are now many different political party actors involved in resistance to and negotiation over dispossession. While the Indian National Congress retained a relatively tight grip on power for India's first two decades, elections in the late 1960s brought a range of regional and other political parties to power, initially in state elections. The Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) grew large enough by the 1990s to claim status as a second national party. For the last three decades, these two national parties have alternated in power at the center—both sharing the goal of economic liberalization—and have often governed in coalition with a variety of regional and caste-based parties. The latter make party systems at the state level far more complex and competitive, where a larger number of parties can capture seats in state assemblies, though this varies significantly across states (Chibber and Nooruddin 2016, Ziegfeld 2016). With many parties at all levels now getting involved—albeit in most cases opportunistically—these complex electoral dynamics have now become relevant to the politics of

dispossession, sometimes creating opportunities and leverage for oppositional forces to stop and stall projects or increase compensation.

Its formal democracy notwithstanding, the Indian government has never been reluctant to use force against populations deemed marginal, “anti-national,” or “anti-development.” This tendency has greatly strengthened in recent years, especially under the present Hindu nationalist government. The state’s coercive capacity—through the local police, the Central Industrial Security Force, various paramilitary and security agencies—has ensured that much protest to dispossession is met with violent repression. State actors can target resistance to dispossession in several ways, from beating and shooting protesters, jailing and filing (very often false) cases against protesters, restricting assembly, and labeling social movement leaders as anti-nationals, to eliminating them in “encounter killings,” though the latter is more common in the “Maoist” belt and other conflict zones. Repression by government entities is supplemented by a large and expanding sphere of private security forces that guard IT campuses, industrial installations, and mining outposts. Yet, given the highly politicized nature of land acquisition in India, repression can often backfire. How to balance the land demands of private capital and the voting strength of farmers in India’s electoral democracy remains an ongoing contradiction for central and state governments.

Contributions to this issue help illuminate several contrasts with the politics of dispossession in China. Collectively, they underscore the plurality of actors that participate in processes of dispossession in India, especially as compared to China, where most individuals and entities involved have some relationship to the state, whether as local officials or village cadres. Although it is clear in India that only the state holds the authority to dispossess, there remains a great deal of space for other actors, both in the processes of dispossession and in managing its effects. As Kale (this issue) shows through fieldwork in Odisha in eastern India, Corporate Social Responsibility units of private companies, along with NGOs, have come to play an important role in managing dispossession by compensating land losers and others whose livelihoods are affected by extractive industry. On the other side of the country, in Gujarat in western India, Sud (this issue) analyzes the politics of India’s largest SEZ, whose shifting and permeable boundaries come to resemble an “amoebal zone.” Analyzing the interaction between “everyday” and party politics, she shows that a heterogeneous array of actors, including farmers, fishworkers, pastoralists, local and global NGOs, and politicians from contending parties have very different ways of conceptualizing the nature of land, its value and uses, and land rights, which become discursive material in battles that have extended over two decades. The greater plurality of actors in India is evident even in a domain like planning, in which one might expect the state to play a commanding role. As Silva, Nielsen, and Bedi (this issue) show through an analysis set in the southern state of Goa over several decades, planning constitutes a terrain of struggle, albeit one in which private actors—particularly capital—have an outsize voice. In China, even this much space for contesting land use planning does not exist.

In India, the politics of dispossession is thus generally explosive but diverse in goals, ideologies, actors, and organization. While the Indian state often uses brutal coercion to

dispossess land, the country's relative democracy openness and vibrant civil society has allowed farmer protests against land dispossession to become a major constraint on the growth model favored by capital and state.

### *China*

Political contention over land legislation is far more constrained in China than in India; there are no organizations mobilizing peasants to defend their land rights, nor are there contending political parties vying for village votes. Although there has been a protracted process of formal consultation and debate about revising land laws, and a number of influential rural policy experts have urged caution, the dominant voices have been those pushing for expanding the access of capital to rural land. Thus, while Indian politics produced a law that introduced new safeguards for peasants (and set up battles over implementation), Chinese politics have produced legal and policy changes that have further facilitated dispossession, even if--in response to protests--they have required improved compensation (Heurlin 2016, Zhan 2019).

Efforts to resist dispossession in China continue to be sharply constrained by the heavy-handed political control exercised by the CCP. Although the party tolerates local protests, it does not allow protesters to create formal organizations or build links with other localities. Urban supporters, including academics and NGOs, are allowed a little space to operate, but this space is very limited and precarious, and has been further restricted in recent years.

Even under these conditions, however, resistance to rural dispossession has proliferated. While displacement caused by state projects, including the dams China continues to build on an ever larger scale, spurs sharper local resistance than in the past (Lin 2007, Mertha 2008, Tilt 2015, Ying 2005), these protests have been greatly augmented by protests against land taking for private capitalist ventures. The eleven-week occupation of Wukan village by thousands of angry residents in 2011 made international headlines, but large numbers of similar protests take place regularly (Lagerkvist 2012, Ren 2017). As Chen recounts in his contribution to this issue, land taking has become the main cause of protests in rural China. Based on a quantitative analysis of press reports, he shows that protests over land expropriation grew steadily from 2000 to 2014, and extended from the coastal regions inland, before declining in recent years. The number of accounts of repression of land protests also grew, increasing sharply in recent years under the Xi Jinping administration. Resistance often starts with collective petitions, the conventional method of appealing to authorities in China, but escalates into larger and more confrontational protests, with villagers blocking roads, surrounding party and government offices, and attempting to stop the demolition of their houses. Many rural land conflicts have led to violent confrontations between villagers and police, thugs, and demolition crews. Key leaders are often arrested, even if protests eventually lead to significant concessions (Ong 2018, Sargeson 2013).

While villagers confront local officials, they seek to win the support of higher authorities, and are careful not to challenge the regime as a whole. Instead, they often employ the party's own discourse, using socialist and anti-capitalist language (sometimes hoisting portraits of Mao),

invoking official promises to protect farming and peasant livelihoods, and citing official slogans against cadre corruption and abuse of power. Intellectual supporters have also introduced broad idioms about protecting land rights, “food sovereignty,” and preserving the smallholder, peasant economy. Because, unlike in India, villagers have only rarely been able to stop projects, contention has focused on the terms, rather than the fact of dispossession. Under these conditions, the contributions in this issue by Cai, et al. and Chen show, concrete grievances and protest demands end up being largely about improving compensation (especially when villagers receive far less than the market value of land nearby), limiting harm, punishing cadre corruption, and failure to adhere to legally-required land transfer procedures. Protests against land taking, like protests in China in general, constantly test the boundaries of what is tolerated, but try not cross the boundaries (Heurlin 2016, Lagerkvist 2012, Li 2019, O’Brien and Li 2006, Ren 2017).

Resistance to the expropriation of land for urbanization has been far stronger than resistance to the transfer of land to large farm operators, even when the latter has involved coercion. As Luo and Andreas explain in this issue, there is good reason for this. Expropriation for urban purposes often results in the complete loss of livelihoods and often village citizenship. Moreover, it allows only one chance for compensation, creating very high stakes, and the huge difference between the low rates of compensation offered to villagers and the ultimate value of the land once it is converted to urban uses creates great indignation and means there are large sums that can potentially be contested. In transferring agricultural land, in contrast, households retain their contract rights to the land (even if they lose access for an extended period), and, in any case, farmland rent is low, so there is not much to be gained by contesting the level of compensation.

The key role in all of these conflicts—and in all land transfers in rural China—is played by village cadres, who serve as local land brokers and mediators. This is apparent in all of the articles about China in this issue, and several—by Deng, O’Brien, and Zhang, Luo and Andreas, and Zeng—analyze their role in particular detail. Village cadres perform a mediating role that is somewhat analogous to the role of land brokers in India (Sud 2014, Levien 2015), but they operate under greater bureaucratic control. Deng, O’Brien, and Zhang describe the challenges created by the intermediary position of village cadres. On the one hand, they are obliged by party discipline to support state policies and county and township projects, and they often have personal pecuniary interests in the projects or have close family or business ties to the investors involved (particularly in the case of smaller local projects). On the other hand, they have close social and kinship ties in the village, and may face challenges in village elections, which require them to be responsive to demands from below. Moreover, they are not only responsible for transferring land, but also for maintaining social stability, which requires them to minimize and contain collective petitions and protests.

Land transfer for big projects takes place through high pressure campaigns, managed by village cadres, that typically involve collective meetings and protracted negotiations, persuasion (using positive and negative inducements), threats, and—if other methods fail—violence. Authorities try to avoid using force and employ it selectively; for this reason, Deng, O’Brien, and

Zhang describe the typical methods used as “compulsion without force.” Even when they do not resort to force, however, the threat of force underpins all land taking carried out by state authorities.

Several articles in this issue, including those by Cai, et al., Chen, and Jiang, Sargeson, and Tomba, recount that land-losing villagers expressed particular indignation about the failure of local cadres to adhere to laws, policies, and regulations about land transfers, including those that require public consultation, transparency, and procedural safeguards. As Deng, O’Brien and Zhang point out, brokering land acquisitions in China is a demanding process that requires village cadres to expend their local social capital, and the losses that villagers suffer erode their legitimacy and social standing, leaving them isolated, especially if they ultimately use coercive methods. It is also not unusual for retired or sidelined village cadres to be involved in mediating land conflicts; sometimes they even lead struggles for more compensation (which may enhance their social standing in the village, or may land them in jail).

As will be discussed in the next section, resistance often leads to villagers winning better compensation packages. The impact of protests, however, can be measured not only in the immediate concessions won by protesters, but also in their influence on state policies and practices. Party leaders are centrally concerned about maintaining social stability, and as protests have proliferated, they have been willing to increase compensation standards significantly in order to diminish threats to social order and facilitate the implementation of their development strategies. They have also taken limited measures to curb the most egregious practices of local authorities and developers, slow the pace of certain types of displacement, and develop welfare programs to better provide for the displaced.

It is an open question whether, even in the absence of the democratic process and the role played by civil society in India, China has increased its compensation to farmers any less than India. Nevertheless, it is clear that Chinese authorities have been more effective at keeping protests within bounds, and preventing villagers from forming alliances that could openly and effectively challenge the overall development model.

## **Outcomes of dispossession under various compensation models**

### *India*

Under India’s developmentalist period, the outcomes of land dispossession were almost universally poor. This was less because of the nature of the projects than because of the nature of compensation. Public sector townships and irrigated farming did create important avenues for social mobility and the basis of a small but growing middle class, but these benefits accrued to a small minority, circumscribed by caste and class (see Bardhan 1984; Nilsen 2010). For the rest, abysmally low compensation and little regard for resettlement and rehabilitation were ideologically justified by the compulsions of economic development in a newly independent poor country, and politically made feasible by the fact that many of the displaced were *Adivasis*

and lower castes. The dispossessed, as Nehru put it at the inauguration of one dam, would have to “sacrifice for the nation”; but these sacrifices were severe and unevenly distributed. Few of the dispossessed were ultimately included in the fruits of “development.” Much of the massive literature on development-induced displacement in this period paints a picture of generalized impoverishment, proletarianization, and cultural dislocation (cf. Fernandes and Thukral 1989; Mathur 1995; Cernea 1999; Fernandes 2008). Gender-biased compensation policies combined with India’s stark patriarchy to ensure, moreover, that these deep costs were most severely felt by women (Mehta and Srinivasan 2000; Mehta 2009). In some cases, however, relatively elite or politically powerful farmers did receive better compensation, including irrigated land and public sector jobs (Mathur 1997: 12, 21; Parasuraman 1999; Parry and Struempell 2008).

In India’s post-liberalization period, the outcomes of dispossession are shaped by increasingly exclusionary growth and, due to intensifying political resistance, somewhat better compensation policies. On the one hand, the non-labor intensive and often speculative forms of capital accumulation that drive so much dispossession in India today have little to offer dispossessed farmers. There is little prospect for employment in real estate projects and IT campuses, even as support staff (see Levien 2018). And even dispossession for previously labor-intensive sectors like manufacturing and mining projects, as Chatterjee’s and Kale’s contributions to this volume show, are increasingly mechanized and fail to create secure employment opportunities for dispossessed farmers. These contributions thus underscore the exclusionary nature of growth *even in the sectors that are most likely to absorb dispossessed farmers*. This reflects, above all, the aggregate disjuncture between the supply of labor power being “released” from rural India and sluggish demand, a product of “late development.” This gives rise to what Marxists call an expanding relative surplus population (understood here as an aggregate disjuncture in the supply and demand for labor, which puts downward pressure on multiple classes rather than constituting a specific class). This disjuncture is exacerbated in India by the relative absence of a dynamic labor-intensive manufacturing sector that is even remotely comparable to China’s. Moreover, the wage labor that capital projects do generate are invariably informalized and insecure; this is increasingly the case even in “formal” sectors like automobiles (Barnes 2018). Across all forms of dispossession, then, the idea that promises of employment or inclusion in economic development may be enticing for farmers increasingly rings hollow, particularly in regions where farmers have observed the results of previous rounds of dispossession (cf. Banerjee 2014: 281, 297; Balakrishnan 2013: 808).

At the same time, by the end of the 2010s few states could get away with the type of sub-market compensation that sufficed for most of India’s history. For a brief period after LARRA was enacted in 2013 it seemed the new law would create a national standard, but compensation policies still vary substantially across states. In some states, especially where the electoral power of farmers is strong, there has been a shift to using various kinds of market incentives. In peri-urban areas, this might involve allotting commercial plots next to projects (Levien 2018). This can also happen through what are called land-pooling schemes in which farmers collectively sign over land in one area and receive smaller compensated plots in another (Sampat 2016). Where

and when land prices are rapidly rising--as they were in much of peri-urban India during the 2000s--such policies create the potential for some farmers to cash in significantly on real estate appreciation. Importantly, many of these compensation policies create highly individualized opportunities for gain—based on different size of landholdings, other economic assets, as well as cultural and social capital. This creates the basis for increasingly differentiated outcomes, which take their specific forms from local agrarian social structures. These increasingly unequal class-caste outcomes also continue to intersect with deep gender inequalities to exclude women from decision-making and, due to the continued effective absence of women's land rights, to place compensation--whether cash or plots--in the hands of men (Levien 2017).

In more remote rural areas, such as in the context of mining projects, where inclusion in real estate prices is less of an option, other strategies increasingly come into play and outcomes are less differentiated. In many cases, farmers are displaced with very low compensation, often with more emphasis on Corporate Social Responsibility or non-binding promises of employment. In many cases, marginalized populations of *Adivasis* and *Dalits* are forcibly evicted with compensation that continues to be egregiously low. The gendered effects of displacement in mining areas are varied but negative. Whereas greater numbers of landless and generally poorer women find themselves engaged in informal or small-scale mining (Lahiri-Dutt 2018), women in households that receive compensation (which typically includes a job for one male per household) often become confined to social reproductive work (Nayak 2020). Resistance to dispossession is often most fierce in mining areas, where both the displaced as well as those in neighboring villages face disastrous social and environmental effects from extractive projects; the results can take the form of a kind of paralysis, as Oskarsson (2018) puts it, with seemingly no settlement possible. Relatively generalized impoverishment has also been occurring in the case of some public sector SEZs, such as Polepally in Telangana, where largely Dalit semi-proletarians have been dispossessed with scandalously low compensation (Agarwal and Levien 2019).

The articles in this issue, particularly those by Chatterjee and Goldman, underscore the generally exclusionary nature of the processes of dispossession driving growth in contemporary India; and, simultaneously, how existing inequalities of caste, class, and gender are exploited and often exacerbated through the processes of dispossession. Chatterjee analyzes an industrial area in Western India that was originally established two decades earlier by the state. As an instance of the developmentalist mode of dispossession, one might have expected relatively better outcomes in terms of plentiful industrial employment. Even there, though, the range of employment that the dispossessed secured varied tremendously, and it was women and men from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes who were left with the most precarious non-farm jobs. Similarly, Goldman's study of a financialized infrastructure project outside of Bengaluru shows that a small number of politically and socially well connected participate in a process of rent seeking that excludes the vast majority. In this, China and India bear greater resemblance; in both countries, uneven access to economic and social capital conditions the effects of dispossession, allowing some to benefit from new opportunities while leaving the majority

locked out. Yet the degree of differentiation, rooted in India's highly unequal social structures, is far greater in India; the floor for negative outcomes is also probably much lower in India compared to China.

### *China*

Far greater numbers of villagers are being displaced by state-backed development projects in China than in India. At the same time, however, they are much less likely to become destitute. One reason is that China has a much greater capacity than India to absorb displaced rural labor, especially in its large low-wage manufacturing sector. Another is that, since the 1950s, the Chinese government has taken greater responsibility for the fate of the dispossessed than has the Indian government. This continues to be true, although there have been major changes in the extent to which the state takes responsibility and the ways it carries out this responsibility.

In the developmentalist era, when the government took village land for state projects, it did not offer cash payments to the village collective or to member households. Instead, as previously noted, it resettled displaced villagers, providing land in another location or industrial jobs. The specifics mattered greatly, as the land might be nearby and fertile or in a distant wasteland, and the job might be in a state-owned factory, accompanied by housing, health care, and pension benefits as well as urban *hukou*, or it might be in a poorly equipped rural workshop.

Today, in the context of a highly marketized society in which the great majority of land is taken for commercial profit-oriented projects, the state provides "resettlement and rehabilitation" packages valued in monetary terms. A central element of most packages is cash payments or equivalent property based on the value of the farmland, houses, and other structures lost by village households. As in India, compensation for expropriated farmland is based on the "agricultural" value of the land, far less than the price it will fetch once it has been converted to urban purposes. This gap has been the source of sharp conflict in both countries and although Chinese authorities still insist on paying only the agricultural value, in practice compensation rates have increased substantially in response to protests (see also Heurlin 2016, Lin 2007, Mertha 2008, and Zhan 2019).

In their contributions, Cai, et al., and Jiang, Sargeson and Tomba scrutinized the compensation received by land-losing villagers and their perceptions of the impact on their wellbeing. Both found a great deal of variation. Jiang, Sargeson, and Tomba found that in the villages they investigated compensation arrangements were largely *ad hoc* and were a far cry from the resettlement and rehabilitation "models" widely referred to in both official and scholarly publications. In a survey that included 1209 residents of peri-urban villages, Cai and her collaborators found that 756 had lost land (far more than one would likely find on the outskirts of any city in India). As might be expected, those who received substantially less than the market value of urbanized land nearby were particularly discontent, as were older residents. In previous work, Sargeson (2012) also emphasized the significant variation in the gendered outcomes of dispossession, which--in contrast to India where women are generally deprived of

independent land rights--hinge on more localized practices of including or excluding women in village membership.

The most important part of many compensation packages is subsidized new housing, which is typically located in “concentrated villages” made up of multistory apartment complexes. A common problem is that these complexes are often located far from the residents’ remaining fields and urban jobs, leaving many with little way to make a living (Chuang 2020, Ong 2014). While in the current era of open labor markets and precarious employment, it is much less common than in the past to offer jobs as compensation for land, in some cases in which village land is taken to create an industrial district or a “production base” for an agribusiness company, members of displaced households are promised jobs as part of their compensation. These jobs, however, can be unstable, as employers may ultimately prefer to hire migrants, and employees may end up searching for better employment. In any case, there are seldom enough jobs for all of the displaced.

When the state expropriates the land of an entire village on the urban periphery, the village is converted into an urban district and the *hukou* status of the residents changes. While rural residents once considered urban *hukou* a valuable prize for giving up their land, today this change means very little. The significance of *hukou* status is fading as market reforms eliminate not only the land guarantees provided by village *hukou*, but also the employment and welfare guarantees once provided by urban *hukou* (Andreas and Zhan 2015). To ease the difficulties faced by the dispossessed, many compensation packages have included land-for-welfare arrangements (see Cai, et al. and Jiang, Sargeson, and Tomba this issue, as well as Cai 2016) and the state has recently begun to establish broad pension programs in the countryside. While these provide only minimal benefits, they are being created in part to facilitate the removal of an ever-increasing part of the rural population from the land.

The contributions of Jiang, Sargeson and Tomba and Luo and Andreas both stress that land taking projects impact different economic strata differently, with the specific impact depending on the nature of the scheme. The wealthiest “big households” often initiate land-taking projects to enlarge their own domains, or they sign on as key inside players in bigger schemes hatched by outsiders. Even if they are not involved in initiating a project, better-off, better-connected villagers can sometimes take advantage of it, while in other cases they can avoid being displaced or win better compensation. On the other hand, commercial farmers who lease sizable tracts of land from other villagers often have the most to lose, as they depend on land for their own operations, while peasant-migrant households rely to a greater extent on outside wage income. Households that do not have outside income and have no other means of subsistence besides their own allotment of village land are the most likely to become destitute as a result of land taking projects (Chuang 2020).

In their article, in which they survey the compensation received by residents of villages in three of China’s most developed regions, Jiang, Sargeson, and Tomba describe resettlement and rehabilitation packages far more generous than in poorer regions. In some villages, they included not only new housing, but—as in similar arrangements in India—also an additional allotment of

property connected with the development project, which could be used to build rental housing or commercial shops. Even in these cases, however, they found that dispossession left villagers less autonomous and more vulnerable. The fates of individual households were now tied to projects controlled by state and corporate authorities, and villagers lost not only their individual economic autonomy, but also the participatory mechanisms that had been set up to govern collective property. While these villagers did not end up in the dire situations that many land-losing households in poorer regions have, they also lost more. As a result, especially if one considers the non-economic consequences, their current circumstances hardly fulfill official assurances that the displaced would be left “no worse off.”

## **Conclusion**

What have we learned through this effort to compare China and India and what are the implications for research about rural land dispossession in other developing countries?

Both countries have followed a similar trajectory: the two distinct eras that Levien highlighted in his work on dispossession in India—the first characterized by developmentalist and the second by economic liberalization orientations—stand out clearly in China as well. In fact, the contrast between the two eras is even sharper in China. In the earlier era, land was expropriated exclusively for public projects, while today the great majority is being taken for projects run by and for private capital. We expect that this epochal shift can be observed in other developing countries as well, even if the specifics--timing and degree of liberalization, patterns of growth and state policies and practices--vary considerably.

One specific that differs between India and China is the sectors of capital driving dispossession in the current era. While real estate and infrastructure projects (which provide lucrative contracts for construction companies and extensive opportunities for capital investment) play major roles in both countries, as does mining, in India information technology and services (closely tied, of course, to commercial and residential real estate) has played a major role, while in China manufacturing and agribusiness are far more important. This difference has important consequences. The articles in this issue highlight two: 1) factories provide more jobs for the displaced than do IT companies, and 2) agribusiness does not simply take land at the margins of rural society, but fundamentally reorganizes the economic activity at its heart, supplanting the smallholder economy. As a result, the numbers of the displaced are far greater in China, a fact that is only partly mitigated by the jobs provided by new factories and agribusiness farms.

The sectors driving dispossession in India and China can also be found at the center of land conflicts around the developing world, but sectoral composition varies by country and in some countries, other sectors--like mining and agricultural plantations--play a bigger role. In both India and China, domestic capital is the main driver of dispossession, but in other developing countries, foreign capital (including Indian and Chinese capital) remains more important.

Differences in state systems are also consequential. In comparing India and China, the most salient contrast, but not the only one, is between a liberal democratic regime featuring political competition and a single-party authoritarian regime. In India, it has been possible to organize anti-dispossession *movements*, which bring together broad coalitions to oppose land grabbing, expound their own ideologies and political programs, and cultivate ties to politicians and parties that contend in local and national elections. Under these conditions, popular movements have been able to play a role in battles over state and national legislation, and rural dispossession faces organized popular resistance not only at the local, but also at the state and national levels. In China, in contrast, debate about legislation and policy is limited to elite circles, and it is only possible to muster popular resistance at the local level. Moreover, because efforts to build formal or extra-local organizational links are suppressed, resistance is largely cellular and spontaneous. Even under these conditions, however, protests have been extensive and have had a significant impact.

State organization and capacity are also very important. The Chinese state is significantly more ambitious and it is more effective in implementing its programs and policies. It is also centrally involved in all aspects of the dispossession process. While dispossession in India involves a broad array of public and private agents and brokers, the CCP relies on its own local officials, including village cadres, who play the key role in getting villagers to relinquish their land. In terms of state organization and capacity, we expect that most developing countries will look more like India, although a few countries, such as Vietnam, have adopted versions of the Chinese model.

Differences in agrarian social structure and land tenure arrangements also matter. In India, land is privately owned and in most places it is distributed very unequally. In China, in contrast, land is owned collectively by the village, with use rights distributed equally among households (although large economic differences have reemerged in recent decades). The caste system in India and lineage groups in China—and the ways these intersect with economic and political power in the village—also help define the context for land takings. We note below some ways these structures, which vary greatly by locality, shape who is impacted and how, as well as the composition of coalitions organized to confront dispossession projects.

Although forms of resistance differ, protests against land taking projects have had a major impact in both China and India. As state expropriation has increased and been extended to provide land for private ventures, protests have proliferated, and the legitimacy of appeals to villagers to sacrifice for the “public interest” has collapsed. The impact of resistance on laws and policies—whether more directly, as in India, or indirectly, as in China—has been considerable. Protests have driven up compensation in both countries. This is the case because, despite the difference in regime types, both Indian and Chinese leaders are concerned about political stability and legitimacy. We expect that this will also be true in other countries, although processes and outcomes will differ (as they do in India and China).

One major difference is that protests have actually stopped projects in India, while they stand little chance of stopping projects in China. This reality helps reinforce differences in the

characteristics of resistance in the two countries. In India, villagers in many cases form “people’s movements” to dispossession and even challenge the prevailing development model. In China, where there is much less room for organized local resistance--let alone broad anti-dispossession movements--and few projects are blocked altogether, villagers focus on minimizing harm and improving compensation.

Due to differences in socio-economic contexts, as well as great variation within each country (and within each village), it is difficult to compare the compensation that villagers have been able to win in India and China. We will, however, venture two inferences about the outcomes of dispossession in these countries: in China, distribution among villagers is more equitable and fewer have been left destitute. One key factor is China’s land tenure system, but others include the fact that the Chinese state takes more responsibility for the displaced, has greater bureaucratic control over the brokers and institutions involved, and requires more local deliberation. Moreover, China’s political economy ultimately provides more jobs and welfare to the dispossessed. Compared with India, land taking in China -- and the displacement it creates -- is driven by a *relatively* more inclusive model of economic development, characterized by greater state investment in infrastructure and social welfare and greater labor absorption, first in manufacturing sectors and now increasingly in labor-intensive urban services. While faster economic growth has spurred more displacement in China, it has also provided more opportunities for displaced villagers to integrate productively into the urban economy. On balance, then, dispossession is a bit more developmental in China than it is in India. Nevertheless, as papers in this issue show, villagers still have little say, compensation is still very inequitable, many are left considerably worse off, and some are left destitute.

The cumulative weight of the essays in the special issue suggest that comparison is instructive, but comparative insights are difficult to achieve. This is true for subnational comparisons within these two large heterogeneous countries, and it is even more true for cross-country comparison. Not only is it challenging to develop comparative frameworks adequate for very different situations, but it is also hard to gain the depth of knowledge required to understand an individual country (with all of its idiosyncrasies), while also gaining the same depth of knowledge about another very different country. Nevertheless, the alternative of passing over these difficulties with global abstractions about land grabs, primitive accumulation, or accumulation by dispossession is no real solution: the national and subnational factors emphasized in this issue shape almost everything we want to know about the outcomes and politics of dispossession. Parochial focus on the single case--which defines much of the empirical land grab literature--is also inadequate. It is impossible to fully understand any one case without comparing it to others.

Our nascent efforts to compare rural land dispossession in India and China have produced valuable, but still limited results. There remains plenty of room for comparative investigation about the two countries, as well as research that brings in other countries. We hope this special issue will help spur further interaction and cross-fertilization across parochial scholarly divides

and promote more comparative scholarship about this consequential and politically explosive issue.

### **Acknowledgements**

Early drafts of most of the articles in this issue were presented at a workshop held at the Singapore Management University in July 2018. We thank the American Council of Learned Societies and the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange for providing funding that made the workshop possible, Singapore Management University for generously providing a venue without charge, the editors of *The Journal of Peasant Studies* for supporting the workshop and encouraging us to put together this special issue, and the many reviewers of the articles that are part of this issue.

### **Disclosure statement**

The authors reported no potential conflicts of interest.

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