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Land grabbing by villagers? insights from intimate land grabbing in the rise of industrial tree planation sector in Guangxi, China

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Land grabbing by villagers?

insights from intimate land grabbing in the rise of industrial tree planation sector in Guangxi, China

Yunan Xu[1]

Abstract

While most studies focus on large-scale foreign corporation-dominated land grabbing, the relatively small-scale land acquisitions initiated by local villagers in various locations globally receive much less attention. This reflects that the scale, the identities of investors and a simplified role of villagers tend to take precedence in analyses of land grabbing. To go beyond the common dichotomies of "large vs small", "outside vs local actors" and "victim vs grabber", this paper takes the dynamics of social relations around land and production processes as the key analytical elements for the analysis of the villager-dominated land grabbing in Guangxi.

In Guangxi province, with the rise of the industrial tree planation (ITP) sector, some villagers have gained control over the land from local or nearby village collectives and have become owners of ITPs. In the course of these practices, grabbers are not from "outside", but "local villagers" themselves. They are able to control land which originally belonged to collectives and benefit from it at the expense of their neighbours and kin, under certain institutional and social structures. Such land control change is called intimate land grabbing in this paper.

The case of Guangxi demonstrates that: (1) small-scale land grabs are not necessarily less significant than large-scale ones; (2) local actor-dominated land grabs sometimes might have more serious adverse impacts on local communities, due to villagers' unregulated intensive production practices; and (3) within land control changes, villagers can also be grabbers that accumulate from their fellow villagers rather than simply victims, or otherwise resisters. In bringing the issue of intimate land grabbing into the debate, this paper hopes to offer some insights into the differentiation among villagers and contribute toward a fuller picture of global land grabbing.

Keywords: intimate land grabbing, villagers, differentiation

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1 Introduction

In the era of the global land rush, corporations, especially transnational ones, are highly visible. In the current literature on land grabbing, these corporations are framed as key grabbers- acquiring large tracts of land more or less facilitated by state actors. Their control over land is either for offshore food/nonfood production, natural resource extraction or speculation (Borras Jr et al. 2011, White et al. 2012).

Meanwhile, underlying land grabs, villagers became victims- losing the control over land they previously used. They are dispossessed, or even displaced -what Tania Li illustrated that, "their land is needed, but their labor is not" (Li 2011, 286). In response, in some cases, these villagers choose to resist these land deals in either overt or covert ways (Borras and Franco 2013) or to adapt (Mamonova 2015).

These are all quite important issues and are well covered in the literature. What is missed is the fact that land grabs are not only large-scale and (transnational) corporations-dominated, but also occur at relatively small scales and initiated by local villagers. Thus, correspondingly, local villagers are not always "victims" and "resisters", but sometimes grabbers themselves. In this paper, inspired by the idea of "intimate exclusion " (Hall et al. 2011, 145-146), such land grabbing is called *intimate land grabbing*.

Industrial tree plantation (ITP) sector is among the booming sectors in Southern China.[2] In Guangxi province, with the rise of the ITP sector, some villagers gained control over the land from local or nearby village collectives and have become owners of eucalyptus tree plantations. Within these practices, grabbers are not from "the outside", but are "local villagers" themselves. They are able to gain access to land which originally belonged to collectives and benefit from it at the expenses of their neighbours and kin. Compared with their corporation-dominated counterparts, these land grabs sometimes are even observed to have more serious negative impacts. Why and how did these villagers take and keep control over land? What are the implications of these land grabs? In what way are these land grabs similar to and different from those corporation-dominated ones?

To answer these questions, this paper goes beyond the common dichotomies of "large vs small", "outside vs local actors" and "victim vs grabber". It unfolds the dynamics of individual-dominated industrial tree plantations in Guangxi, in terms of their land access, production mode and consequences. The analysis is based on an extensive set of primary data collected from author's four fieldwork trips in Guangxi province (in spring 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2017) and secondary data collected from reports, official statistics, and academic articles.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: The next section introduces some key academic debates on land grabbing; the third section presents and examines the conjunctures of such land grabbing (why to grab land? why local villagers? Why locally?); the fourth section focuses on the mechanisms of these individual-dominated land grabs (how to gain and keep access to land); the fifth section explores the impacts of these land grabs in comparison with corporation-dominated ones.

2 Debates on land grabbing within crop booms

Prior to detailed analysis of the empirical case, key debates on land grabbing in response to a crop boom are introduced in this section. As pointed out by Hall (2011), when a crop boom takes place,

[2] In this paper, ITPs not only refer to those large-scale forestry plantations owned/controlled by corporations, but also include large-scale individual-owned and small-scale villager-owned tree plantations. Among these, eucalyptus trees (especially the fast-growing species E. grandis and E.urophylla) have become the most popular in Guangxi, and are thus the main focus in my study.

there is a rapid increase of land for the cultivation of that certain crop in a given area. This is not only a process of massive land-use change, but, often, following land acquisitions/land grabs in varying ways and at different scales. These land acquisitions include a dynamic process of land control change: when someone, either capitalist or individual villager gained access to land, those who were previously using land lost their part of or full control either actively or passively. This aligns with the definition of Borras et al., that land grabbing essentially constitutes 'control grabbing': "grabbing the power to control land and other associated resources such as water in order to derive benefit from such control of resources" (Borras et al. 2012, 850).

In current literature on land grabbing within a crop boom, most studies have focused on large-scale and corporation-dominated (especially those transnational company-dominated) land control and land use changes, which resulted in either expulsion or resistance of the affected villagers. Then, does it mean that intimate land grabs, which occurred at a smaller scale without the engagement of agribusiness, and did not lead to massive expulsion or overt resistance, are not worth studying? To disaggregate the question, first, is the importance of a land grabbing case associated with its hectares? This is a debate on the scale of land grabbing. Second, does a land grab dominated by a foreign corporation have more serious impacts than one dominated by local actors? This is linked with the identity and power of a grabber. Third, encountered with a crop boom, are the affected villagers only left to be victims or resisters? This is a question about the role of villagers. Taking these questions one step further, what are the key elements of land grabbing that should be counted and what might be misleading? And thus, how can we analyse a land grab?

2.1 Large vs small

Recently, the scale of a land acquisition has become a vital selection benchmark of media reports and academic studies. In other words, those large-scale land grabs catch more attention and get more critiques. It has been clearly pointed out by Oya (2013, 515) that: "[i]n debates about impact and generally about the efficiency and equity of land use, the 'small vs large' dichotomy looms large. Most studies and reports criticising 'land grabs' make frequent recourse to general arguments in favour of smallholder farming and against large-scale farming."

However, over-focusing on scale, or vividly described as "fetishizing of hectare" by (Edelman 2013, 488) can be problematic and even misleading. Firstly, it is about the accuracy and reliability of data on land areas *per se*. On the one hand, as the firsthand data on land areas are difficult to be collected by researchers and journalists, most data (re)used are provided by actors who are deeply involved in the process of land-based changes and then intend to over- or under- report the scale based on their distinct interests. On the other hand, land grabs are not static and always developing into actual production as announced. In reality, a huge array of land grabs has been proven to have failed and sometimes never be realized due to different reasons.[3] Thus, selecting and evaluating cases based on such unreliable and outdated data can be fraught.

Secondly, the scale is not the primary element to evaluate the importance of a case. Besides land scale, land quality and geographic local also matter (Scoones et al. 2013). Moreover, as already noted by Borras et al. (2012), such over-emphasis reflects a "too land-centric" view. It misses some other critical elements, for instance, the scale of capital involved (Borras et al. 2012, 850) and the power relations behind the scene (Edelman 2013). When a large-scale land deal occurred, in certain context, previous land users might be willing to lease land with relatively reasonable compensations, and have better livelihood sources (e.g. off-farm wage works). Is this situation worse than a small-scale land grab, under which villagers lost their land as their originally primary income source and were not able to be employed by this grabber or in any other sector? In this sense, large-scale land grabs are not necessarily more important than small-scale ones.

[3] For example, the actual scale of Chinese land investments in Africa is proved to be much less than reported (Brautigam and Ekman 2012).

Thirdly, the over-focus on the large-scale land deals, in turn, will (re)shape the trajectory of land grabs. To be specific, large-scale land deals are bound to get more attention. Thus, large-scale projects do not always go beyond official announcements, being changed, suspended or terminated due to outright social resistance in host countries or various economic, political or legal issues (Borras and Franco 2013). Furthermore, due to their high visibility, they supposedly have to comply with national and international norms and standards under certain contexts. On the contrary, small-scale land grabs often slip under the radar and are much less exposed to public control. Therefore, they are more likely to hit the ground running and bring serious social-political and environmental impacts. In this vein, small-scale grabs should not be ignored.

In short, small-scale land grabs are no less important than large-scale ones. But this does not mean that the scale of land acquisitions should not be discussed at all. Instead, I argue that it is problematic to solely focus on the issue of scale and use scale as the only criteria for case selection in investigations and reports, while ignoring the dynamics of social relations around land and production process on the ground.

2.2 Outside vs local actors

As for land grabbers, those from foreign countries are spotlighted, although domestic ones are equally and even more active within the land rush (Borras and Franco 2012). These foreign land investments, or directly called as "foreignisation of space" by Zoomers (2010, 429) are usually critiqued to be harmful to local development. On the one hand, these investments are more or less facilitated by the states of host countries, which, in most cases, engage in a race to bottom to attract direct foreign investment. This implies that these foreign investments are not equal market exchanges, but granted with a series of preferential conditions to investors (e.g. tax reduction, low land rent). On the other hand, these land grabs are either for offshore food production or/and extraction of land-based resources which externalized social and environmental costs to land recipient countries and mostly, if not only, benefit grabber countries (De Schutter 2011).

These arguments are valid and very critical. However, are the negative impacts caused by these land grabs necessarily owed to the nationalities of the grabbers? In other words, will local grabbers, if they do exist, do less harm, or even do any good, to local development? If we compare two cases -- one is a land acquisition dominated by a foreign individual farmer via land lease based on negotiation with villagers; another one is a land grab initiated by a local elite without any compensation to original land users -- which one has more significant negative impacts on the local community? Obviously, the answer is the latter one. These two cases are ideal types, but such comparison reveals an element that is more important than the nationality of grabbers, that should be taken into account, namely, the power relations of control change.

Power relations are embedded in social-political-economic context, and associated with the power of a grabber at the one end, and the agency of targeted landowners at the other end. When the institutional context and previous land users are given, foreign grabbers are not necessarily less powerful than local ones due to two reasons.

Firstly, both foreign and local grabbers are not homogeneous, but highly differentiated, ranging from state-owned corporations, private companies to individual entrepreneurs. Different groups of grabbers have different capital sources and then correspondingly distinct power situations. Meanwhile, these different groups of grabbers might choose different ways to exercise their power during land control change, via either economic means, extra-economic means or both. An individual farmer who leased land in a foreign country is not as powerful as a state-owned company which expropriated land in a local village. So, it can be problematic to conflate investors/grabbers under a big umbrella according to their countries of origin, as "China", for example.

Secondly, compared with outsiders, local players usually have additional power of legitimacy in both seeking and maintaining control over land at an intimate scale due to their social bonds. As analyzed by Hall et al. (2011, 146) in their book *Powers of Exclusion: Land Dilemmas in Southeast Asia*, "social proximity freights exclusion with moral weight and has consequences for personal standing". According to the examples analyzed in the book, it is difficult for villagers to request their kin to pay a market price as land rent when they are actually using their land or evict them when an outsider is willing to pay a higher price. Moreover, when outsider big investors usually are facing high costs on maintaining land access and production process due to everyday forms of resistance from affected villagers (Scott 1977), local investors/grabbers can benefit from both geographic and social proximity. Therefore, although local grabbers are often overlooked, their negative impacts on local community are not necessarily less than outsiders. Instead of focusing on whether a grabber is from outside or local, what should be emphasized is the power exercised by a grabber during control change and its actual impacts on the local community embedded in a certain context.

2.3 Victims vs grabbers

Land grabbing, closely linked with Marx's "primitive accumulation" and David Harvey's "accumulation by dispossession", is a process through which peasants are separated from their means of production. It, on the one hand, enables capitalists to have their wealth and power enhanced via the control over the means of production, while, on the other hand, it creates "double free labour" (free of property and free to sell labour) serving as cheap wage labour (Lenin 1982, 130-131). Thus, land grabbing facilitates the ongoing capital accumulation in both ways.

Then within the process, villagers, who are the original users of land are commonly portrayed as victims. Villagers are observed to be directly dispossessed in India for the Special Economic Zones (Levien 2012), in Guatemala for the development of sugarcane and oil palm industries (Alonso-Fradejas 2012), in Ethiopia for export-oriented food production (Moreda and Spoor 2015), and in many other places for various other land-uses.

However, as reminded by Borras et al. (2012, 850), "analytically and empirically land grab does not always require expulsion of peasants from their lands; it does not always result in dispossession". Land control can be gained without direct enclosure, but under schemes of out-growers and with villagers incorporated (White et al. 2012). When land grabs do not directly dispossess villagers, villagers can still become more vulnerable in one way or another due to the long-term impacts of those large-scale land investments: they might go bankrupt during the competition with the large-scale investors, as the case in Ukraine (Mamonova 2015); they can get excluded because of the squeeze of the upstream and downstream market and their limited or no control over the process of production and outputs, as the case in Bolivia (McKay and Colque 2016); and they would still be trapped into poverty even when they are incorporated due to their unfavourable terms of inclusion, as the case in Indonesia (McCarthy 2010).

Therefore, even when villagers are not outright dispossessed during land acquisitions, in current academic studies and media, they are observed to be adversely affected to varying extents. Then, some villagers are observed to resist these land deals in diverse forms, ranging from individual covert forms of everyday resistance (Moreda 2015), individual overt "rightful resistance"(O'Brien et al. 2006), and collective overt movements (Edelman 1999, Martiniello 2015), to more mixed and dynamic forms (McAllister 2015, Alonso-Fradejas 2015). However, it does not mean that the role of villagers is limited to this.

As highlighted by Borras and Franco (2013, 1724) and Hall et al. (2015), villagers are not homogeneous. They have distinct resource endowments, including land control, labour conditions, financial resources and social relations. Based on these, some villagers are able to adapt and find their

own niches within the land-use and land control changes, as the case in Ukraine (Mamonova 2015). Moreover, in some cases, villagers have already been differentiated and spilt into distinct social classes due to their different relationships to the means of production. In the case of highlanders in Indonesia, "[i]nitial landownership was unequal and overtime, efficient farmers were able to accumulate land and capital and pay workers to expand their farms and profits" (Li 2014, 7). With the crop boom, such social differentiation was further deepened. When some villagers were forced to sell their land due to the failure of their cash crop production, other villagers are able to get additional land and become more prosperous.

In this sense, encountered with crop booms and the following massive land-use and land control changes, villagers do not necessarily lose and become passive victims. Under certain contexts, villagers can even become land grabbers themselves, as has happened in Indonesia. Some villagers are heavily dispossessed by their neighbours. It reminds us that before simply pronouncing villagers as victims of land grabs, it requires a more careful examination about the actual wins and losses during the process based on different resource endowments of villagers.

In short, besides large-scale transnational land deals, those small-scale land grabs initiated by villagers, such as these intimate land grabs in Guangxi, can also be quite important and deserve in-depth investigation. The importance of a land grab is represented not by its scale, or the nationality of the grabbers, but by the *de facto* consequences, especially the distribution of the social-economic and environmental costs and benefits, of a land acquisition. In the same vein, when analyzing a land grabbing case, instead of focusing on the hectares and the identity of grabbers, the *dynamics of social relations around land and production process* should be key analytical elements.

3 Background: the conjunctures in rural China

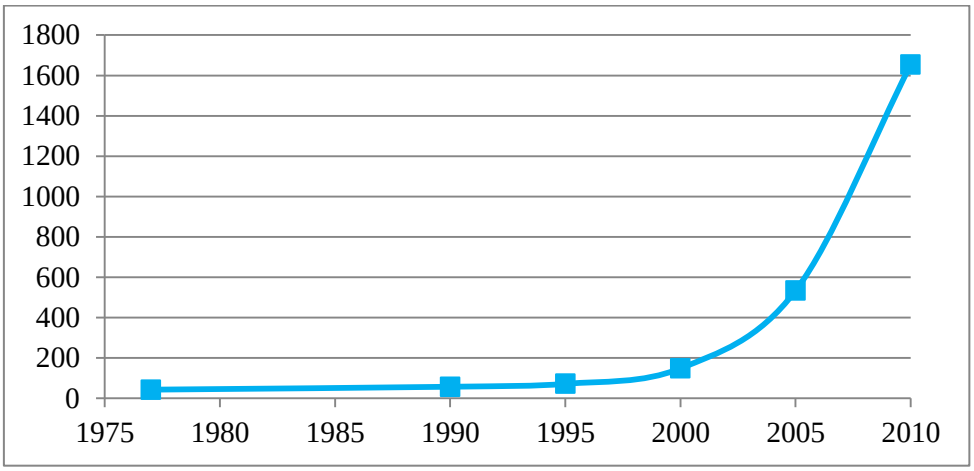
The intimate land grabs in Guangxi emerged at certain conjunctures, namely (1) the rise of ITP sector in Guangxi and (2) the agrarian transformation in rural China, in a dynamic and relational way. These land grabs occurred with the rise of the ITP sector in Guangxi. On the one hand, land use change towards the monoculture of eucalyptus tree is the target of the land control change. In other words, the crop boom is a key factor that stimulates the emergence of these land grabs. On the other hand, the features of the ITP sector (e.g. social-economic and environmental impacts), in turn, (re)shape the trajectory of land control and land-use changes. Meanwhile, the agrarian transformation in rural China is not only the specific structural and institutional contexts that these intimate land grabs emerged, but also a critical factor that leads to the intended and unintended outcomes of these land grabs.

3.1 The rise of the ITP sector

In the past two decades, ITP sector is expanding rapidly and massively in Guangxi. As shown in Figure 1, ITPs began slowly in the 1980s, but gained momentum in the 1990s and have expanded dramatically since then. Before the year of 2000, the area of eucalyptus increased slowly, by about 1.3 times from 43.2 thousand ha in 1977 to 57.6 thousand ha in 1990. From 1990 to 2010, the area covered by eucalyptus skyrocketed, expanding twenty-nine times to the total of 1653.3 thousand ha. To date, by the eucalyptus area, Guangxi ranks first in China.[4]

[4] However, the expansion of ITPs might slow down since 2013 when the Guangxi Forest Department issued policy to generally reduce the area of eucalyptus trees in Guangxi to 4 million Mu (equal to 0.27 million Ha) in 2020. (http://www.forestry.gov.cn/main/392/content-737409.html accessed on 16th Jan 2017)

Figure 1 area of eucalyptus trees in Guangxi (1000 ha)



Source: 1977-2005 data (Pang 2006), 2010 data (Wei 2011).

Within the Guangxi ITP sector, both overseas and domestic companies are involved. The foreign investors (Stora Enso from Finland and APP from Indonesia) mainly specialize in paper products, and the domestic ones, including the state-owned forest farms, mainly specialize in timber/board/furniture products. The commodities produced from the ITPs are mainly destined for Chinese domestic consumption.

The ITP sector has key features that have important economic, agronomic and environmental contradictions (Lungo, Ball, and Carle 2006). Economically, fast-wood tree crops are quite attractive, considering a huge domestic demand of those products caused by country's fast urbanisation rate and remarkable population growth. Together with the features of fast returns on investment and regeneration ability,[5] the investments in ITP tend to yield great monetary profits, as commented by a villager in Guangxi, "planting eucalyptus trees is like (constructing) a bank there" (Field notes on 6 March 2015). In practice, however, not everyone can benefit from it.

Environmentally, the ITP sector has significant effects on the local ecologies. On one hand, the ITP's fast-growing feature is linked to sharp demands of water and soil nutrition within a short growth period (Calder et al. 1997, Calder 2003). In Guangxi, ITPs are often criticised as "water pumps" and "nutrition pumps" by local people, due to their negative effects on local hydrological and soil conditions. Moreover, the industrial production mode, especially the chemical fertilizers and herbicides used, aggravates the environmental destruction.

Socially, ITPs generally need less labour. Job opportunities of the ITP sector are limited and temporary, concentrated during the planting and harvest stages.[6] On the one hand, in cases where peasants are separated from their land, its low labour demand almost eliminates the chances of them being incorporated into the value chain as wage labourers. Thus, in the ITP sector, expulsion is likely to be more complete, as the cases in Ecuador (Gerber and Veuthey 2010) and in Brazil (Kröger 2012). On the other hand, the non-intensive labour demand makes it possible for villagers (i) to keep ITPs as supplementary income while working farm or off-farm jobs at the same time, and (ii) to become large-scale ITP holders based on family management and with little and even no wage-labour employment. In this sense, the ITP sector can provide villagers with additional livelihood options, as the case in

[5] Eucalyptus can be logged in 4-6 years rotation. And one eucalyptus tree can generate two or three shoots after logging naturally. (Data from interviews with eucalyptus specialists in Guangxi University on 13 Mar 2014 and 17 Mar 2014)

[6] The trees just need labor in the first 6 months and the harvest season (about 2days per year per mu on average) according to the information from fieldwork in Guangxi.

Vietnam (Sikor 2011), and at the same time condition the individual-based investments in the sector, as the following case in Guangxi.

The rise of the ITP sector, especially the investments by big companies, motivated a few individual villagers to engage in the land grabbing, as illustrated by one villager who controls over 110mu of forestland in the village,[7]

> I used to do migrant work outside. When the Finnish company (Stora Enso) came to our village and leased the forestland at the price of 8 Yuan per mu per year, I felt it is not worthwhile. I think it is better that I cultivate by myself. At that time, the timber is quite cheap with only 260-280Yuan per ton… (I) never thought the price would increase to the level today (at around 600-800 Yuan per ton). (Field notes, 18 March 2015)

But such motivation will not be automatically transformed into land grabbing practices. These individual villager-based land grabs occurred under certain social-institutional contexts, which conditioned their land control, and continuously (re)shaped the trajectory of their land grabs. Thus, it is important to look into the agrarian transformation that is relevant to our understanding the dynamics of the intimate land grabs in the southern part of this country.

3.2 Agrarian transformation and rural differentiation

In this part, the focus was put on (i) conditions and institutions of land, especially the undistributed and collective-owned forestland in rural Guangxi, which is the targeted land involved in this type of land grabbing, (ii) rural-urban migration and its implications on the labour supply in the countryside, as well as on the household incomes of villagers, which turns out to be one of the main capital sources for these individual villager-based land investments, and (iii) based on the above land-labour condition changes, the rural differentiation that then fostered and shaped the trajectory of the intimate land grabs.

Before the rise of ITP sector, most of the forestland remained degraded in Guangxi since the destruction of a big area of forests for food production in the 1950s-1970s (Li 2008, 27).[8] However, degradation does not mean that no one ever uses these forestland plots. According to author's fieldwork in Guangxi in 2016 and 2017, a group of villagers used to "live on cutting firewood" (Field notes, 3rd Mar 2016). It means the land control and land use change of these forestland plots are bound to have significant impacts on this group of villagers in terms of their livelihood.

As to the property rights and institutions, different from farmland, most of collective-owned forestland had not been contracted to each household under the household responsibility system (HRS) reform in the 1980s, and was still at the hand of the collective. While, in practice, some undistributed "waste" forestland plots had already been customarily "owned" by some villagers. In most villages, "who claims the wasteland (forestland) owns the land" (Field notes, 6th March 2015). Customary ownership is commonly agreed. In other words, once someone in the village reclaimed one piece of forestland, the land plot is then believed to be "owned" by his/her household; no one else in the village will use it. These pioneers are usually those with rich labour resources in the household and extra money for the venture, sometimes, even with special social positions (e.g. village leaders) to have better information access. In 2008, forestland reform was introduced to formally distribute and clear the user rights of the

[7] Mu refers to a unit for the measurement of land – 15 mu equals 1 hectare.

[8] According to Li (2007), those less hilly and rocky forestland plots (around 0,7 million ha) were used for grain and sugarcane cultivation, leaving other non-arable forestland plots in a state of "waste". Later, even under state-led reforestation movement in the 1990s aiming at recovering the waste forestland, these "waste" forestland plots were still "underused" with several pine or acacia trees planted here and there. Such degradation was partly related to the slow economic returns (usually more than 15 years) of the tree crops (pine and acacia), which provides few incentives for forestland investments.

collective forestland.[9] Although, before this reform, most of the land plots have already been used or occupied by internal villagers or external investors especially since the rise of the ITP sector and the issue of reforestation subsidy policy in the early-2000s.[10]

Amidst these changes, the rural land market in China was gradually opened (Spoor 2012, 187). In the mid-1990s, rural land rental market emerged in some pilot counties and developed rapidly (Zhang, Ma, and Xu 2004).[11] In 2008, the central state deepened the land reform, further loosening and simplifying the procedures of land transfer.[12] According to the *Law on the Contracting of Rural Land (2008)*, community members have the priority to lease the land owned by their village collectives.

Along with the conditions of land control, labour conditions also changed in rural China, in the context of rural-urban migration. Millions of villagers, usually the young and the physically strong ones – who are referred to as "peasant workers" (*nongmingong*) – leave their villages and seek jobs in the cities. Such internal migration is always temporary and seasonal. But it has taken away a large amount of labourers in rural areas. Taking Guangxi for example, the total number of rural-urban migrate workers reached 11.65 million by the end of 2015, which equals to more than one fifth of the total population there.[13]

The internal migration- whether a forced survival option in the context of the current capitalist system (Bernstein 2010) or an active livelihood choice of the villagers to "form twin legs and/or crutches" (Huang, Yuan, and Peng 2012, 164) - has significantly changed the labour-land relation in rural China. Such change, on the one hand, is a great fit for the development of labour-saving crops such as eucalyptus. On the other hand, it contributes to the social-economical differentiation among villagers, considering their distinct labour conditions and inflows of remittances.

Following the land and labour condition changes in rural areas, villagers tend to be differentiated, although about the sources of differentiation, there are still debates. Some scholars believed the differentiation is related to non-farm work. According to Zhang (2012, 469), "the primary source of rural inequality is access to non-farm incomes". Similarly, Jacka (2017) also observed the social differentiation led by outmigration. Then, such differentiation is demographic and circular, although might later contribute to a polarized differentiation. Meanwhile, some scholars argued that in rural differentiation, farming plays a more important role. As Hairong and Yiyuan (2015) investigated, Chinese rural differentiation is associated with land control changes via diverse channels. Thus, such transformation is an economic and permanent process. Common to the two types of differentiation is that, in both cases, it leads to inequality among villagers in access to and control over livelihoods resources (e.g. natural capital, economic capital and social capital), which becomes the key dynamic of the intimate land grabbing afterwards.

4 Mechanisms

In the conjunctures discussed above, some villagers are able to gain control over land for the cultivation of eucalyptus via distinct channels. The means that these grabbers employ are both economic and extra-economic, as summarized in Table 1. These practices enable some villagers to

[9] http://www.gov.cn/jrzg/2012-10/29/content_2252860.htm , accessed on 22nd Apr 2016
[10] Reforestation subsidy, sponsored by Chinese central government, is intended both to stop the abandonment of amble land due to the immigration from rural to urban areas and, besides, to improve the eco-environment at the same time. And during the first round (from 2003 to 2011), the subsidy included 150 kilos rice per mu and 50 Yuan in cash for 8 years.
[11] What could be transferred are land user rights, and the selling and buying of land remains forbidden (Zhang et al. 2004, 464).
[12] Central Document No. 10 (2008)
[13] Data source: http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-12/11/content_5022563.htm , accessed on 16th Jan 2017

accumulate at the expense of their neighbours and kin, including (i) enclosing previously commonly-used land based on their resources (particular the labour and social resources) they possessed to exclude the latter from using it, (ii)leasing collectively-owned forestland earlier or with the prices the others cannot afford, (iii)lending money to landholders in exchange for the control over land-use and outputs, and (iv)involving in the up-/down-stream business to enhance the former group's capability on land control.

Table 1 distinct channels of individual villager-dominated land grabbing

Type	Channels	Number of interviewed cases	Scales (mu)
Extra-economic	Customary occupation	56	0.5-200
Economic	Leasing	20	7-500
	Loans	1	Hundreds
	Control of up-/down-stream business	15	-

Source: author's fieldwork in Guangxi in 2015 and 2016

The first practice is more common, normally everyday (piecemeal), by stealth, and mostly at relatively smaller scales, as shown in Table1. Under this scheme, these grabbers controlled undistributed and collectively-owned forestland via customary occupation. They are those villagers whose households have abundant labour resource to claim the degraded forestland, and access to information about profitable land-use. As explained by a villager in a focus group discussion when I asked about the uneven distribution of forestland in their village: "if you have better labour condition, physically stronger, you can occupy more land. (Because) (forest-)land is not yet distributed" (Field notes, 11 March 2016).

In spite of having suitable labour conditions, most villagers can only grab very small scale of land, usually less than 10mu, while a small group of villagers get access to more land, reaching as much as hundreds mu. The common land is limited. These villagers get more land as they started the practice earlier than others. Why did these villagers seize the chance and spend time and labour force on claiming these degraded land plots, which, before the eucalyptus boom, was originally thought as "valueless and unwanted by people" (Field notes, 13 March 2016); while other did not? It is closely allied with villagers' ability to access information. As the case of an ex-leader of a village I visited in the March of 2016, he got the information about the rise of the ITP sector form the friends in county government and became the first one to claim the undistributed and collectively-owned forestland. He controlled around 200mu of forestland via this means. And later other people around saw it. A few also started to claim the land, but at a much less scale (around tens mu).

In this sense, to gain control over restricted land via customary occupation, only those villagers who have social connections to get information and then sufficient labour resource are able to seize the opportunity. Meanwhile, when these villagers control the land, the others are inevitably dispossessed, excluding from their (possible) original, as well as future, use of land.

The latter three practices mainly draw from market power. To directly control the land, some villagers leased land from their community based on their financial capital. The economic capital advantage mostly comes from non-farm work. Among the 20 villagers that leased land from the collectives I

interviewed in Guangxi in 2015 and 2016, all of them are or/and were doing non-farm work in town or/and urban areas, ranging from wage work to transportation, construction and trade businesses, as the main source of their households' incomes. This implies that access to profitable non-farm work is vital for these grabbers to gain direct control over land via this channel.

Among these land tenures, seventeen are completely independent landholders, with the scale ranging from 7mu to 500mu. Three villagers shared part of the landholdings, at the scales of 30mu, 50 mu and 200mu respectively, with their few friends or kin (1 to 3 cooperators) through cooperation.

In addition to land lease, there are also indirect ways for individual villagers to control land-use and products. One way is the use of loans, which is less common, but still exists. To give an example, a villager who has already had 150 mu ITPs lent money to another planter, enabling him buy chemical inputs, in exchange for the contract to purchase his tree at a certain price after 4 years (Field notes, 18 March 2015). Another way is to control the value chain of the ITP sector, via engaging in one or more upstream or downstream businesses, including transporting trees and timbers, preliminarily processing, and trade (i.e. being brokers).[14]. In this way, villagers can get included in a better term and enhanced their control power.

These practices are not completely independent. Some grabbers used multiple ways to get control over land. The villager who lent money to control the outputs produced by other villagers also leased land from his village to directly control 150mu ITPs. Six villagers I interviewed of those who leased land to build ITPs are engaging in up- and down-stream businesses of the ITP sector at the same time.

These land grabs occurred in a much smaller scale, compared with that of Stora Enso (82.26 thousand ha) and APP (around 100thousand ha ITPs) (StoraEnso 2016, Liu 2010). Accordingly, the amount of capital involved in their investment is much less than the big companies. However, it does not mean that these grabbers have less control power. Their easier and firmer land control is secured by powers of regulation and legitimacy based on their identities as villagers and geographic and social proximity. Legally, villagers are endowed with the priority to contract their collective land according to regulation. Thus, their land claims are legitimized. Socially, these villagers, mostly elites, usually have better connections with cadres who are in charge of land distribution and transfer, which can make their land access easier than those "outside" investors.

Moreover, when APP and Stora Enso, which, encountered with resistances, either stopped acquiring land in Guangxi since 2008 (APP)[15] or reduced its land control from 90.2 ha in 2014 to 86.3 ha in 2016 since it started to correct and revise their land leasing contracts in 2009 (Stora Enso),[16] these intimate land grabbers are able to maintain their control over land more firmly. On the one hand, due to their intimate relations with their fellow villagers, compared with those "outside" investors, villagers usually met much fewer overt resistances. On the other hand, they can better manage different forms of resistance, including pilferage, arson, sabotage and encroachment. They are geographically close to the land plots they controlled. When such resistances erupted, they can quickly prevent the practices, as explained by a villager who controls 150 mu ITPs:

> If the (plantation) is not in the same village, it is very difficult to manage. When the trees are planted outside, no one can watch it if other people steal trees. Right? People will not steal when they know it belongs to individual. And it will be troublesome if the

[14] Brokers are those who purchase trees from other planters, harvest, and then trade the outputs.
[15] See Tongxin. 2016. *The Real Exploration of the 'Plantation-Pulp-Paper integration'* *林浆纸一体化探索* 2015, accessed on 21st June 2016, Available from http://www.yicai.com/news/4730287.html.
[16] Data from an official reply from Stora Enso online, http://www.beihai365.com/bbs/m/iphonetest/read.php?tid=3443840&onlylz=1 , accessed on 25th Apr 2016; and Sustainability Report. In *Stora Enso's Annual Report 2015*: p 47.

> trees are burnt during the Qingming Festival [17].When trees are planted in the place where I can watch, if the trees are burnt, I can just find several people to put out the fire. (Field notes, 18 March 2015)

In this way, compared with big foreign companies, intimate land grabbers have not weaker, but sometimes even stronger control power. However, this does not mean their land control is static and their investments are always well-off. In reality, their investments are also full of risks. During the long growth cycle, villagers also have to bear the volatility of market and the uncertainty of agronomic conditions (e.g. the weather). One "intimate land grabber" I interviewed in Hepu County of Guangxi told me that due to the typhoon last year (in 2014), his trees were all "broken" and he had a big loss. Due to the loss, some grabbers reduced and even gave up their land control.

5 Consequences

With the land control and land-use changes, local communities are remarkably affected, economically, socially and environmentally. Some of these are associated with land control change. When the user rights are changed and concentrated in the hands of a few villagers and companies, villagers who previously used the land then are dispossessed. They lost the control over the originally collectively owned and freely used land. Thus, they lost at least part of their original source of income. In addition, they are also deprived of the possibilities to expand their livelihoods based on originally commonly-owned land. In other words, when villagers noticed the economic value of eucalyptus trees, they had already lost the control of the land, which they otherwise could have benefited from.

Some of the impacts are related to land use change, more specifically the features of crop. As already introduced in part 3.1, the land-use change towards eucalyptus trees will inevitably change the ecological environment of the neighbouring land plots (e.g. hydrological, nutrition and sunshine condition). Such change, in turn, will have significant adverse influence on villagers' farming. As one villager explained:

> "There is no other crop that can be grown besides the eucalyptus trees. For one thing, (eucalyptus) trees are very tall. They will put shade on the land nearby that belongs to others. … What's more, I observed that the roots of eucalyptus trees can stretch 20 m to absorb water." (Field notes, 30 March 2015)

In this sense, after the land use change, villagers' yields tend to decrease. This means villagers' income from farming further declines, albeit the earning from farming is already a very small share in rural China.

Whoever the grabbers are, the above two types of impacts will always occur, as long as the land grabbing is targeted for the ITP sector. However, different from corporations, these individual villager-dominated land grabs have some particular influences on labour employment and local environment due to their distinct production practices.

5.1 Labour employment?

Different from corporations-dominated production, which have to completely depend on wage labour, these intimate grabbers can at least partly exploit their family labour. According to author's interviews, when the scale is less than 30mu, the production practices (including seeding, weeding and fertilizing, but excluding logging) are usually conducted by family members. When the scale of ITP is over 30mu, they tend to hire seasonal labour to sow, plant, weed, fertilise and log, as the same as other

[17] According to the culture, people will burn the spiritual money when people visit ancestors' graves on the hills in Qingming Festive.

big companies. An illustration of this is when, in 2015, a villager who contracted 500mu forestland from his own collective was asked by me whether he is able to manage such large-scale plantation. "If (you) have money," he replied, ", it is fine no matter how many hectares (you cultivate). Work can be done by hired people" (Field notes, 13th Apr 2015).

As to labour employment, foreign companies prefer local wage workers, as explained by an employee of a foreign company:

> "the wage of the local workers is higher. But the majority of the employed is from local...(Because) considering the costs of transport and discontinuity, the total cost of (employing) outsiders is higher. When it rains, the boarding cost will be 50-60 yuan per day per capita. It the rain lasts long, the project will stop" (Field notes, 19 March 2016)

While some intimate land grabbers like migrant workers, because they considered less about continuity due to their smaller scale of ITPs, but more about pure wage costs, as explicated by a villager who owned 300mu ITP:

> Normally (I employed workers) from Yunnan and Guizhou Province. These migrant workers work harder, and they are cheaper. There is one leader of these migrants from Yunnan. He talks with the bosses (the investors), and then goes back to take a group of migrants. He will also gain some money from it. We call him the broker. It is more secure (for us) to employ through him. And (we) only need to pay him. (Field notes, 13 April 2015).

Surprisingly, individual villager-dominated land investments create even fewer job opportunities for local populations than foreign company-dominated ones. These grabbers usually take more economic rather than moral factors into consideration. Different from the assumptions of moral economists (Scott 1977), in which villagers act based on principles of reciprocity and collective moral, in practice, these villagers act out of their own interests, which are based on their class relations (i.e. relations with the means of production).

5.2 Environmental friendly?

Moreover, compared with their foreign counterparts, these intimate land grabs sometimes are observed to have more serious negative impacts, due to their intensive production practices. During author's fieldwork in 2015, one can easily tell the trees planted by these "intimate land grabbers" from those planted by foreign companies because, as shown in Figure 2, these grabbers usually plants trees with higher density and log in a shorter period (so the trees are with smaller diameters).

Figure 2 eucalyptus trees planted by an "intimate land grabber" (left) and by Stora Enso (right)

Such difference is linked with the distinct public attentions given to them. Compared with big companies, especially those foreign ones, these individual investors are much less exposed to the public. They do not need to follow the strict ecological standards and to receive environmental assessments from international NGOs as their foreign counterparts do. Thus, they are able to cultivate the trees in a more profitable way as mentioned above, although it might bring more significant environmental destructions.

Therefore, the impacts brought by intimate land grabbers is not less, but even more significant than those foreign grabbers. Following their acquisition of land, their fellow villagers dispossessed from the collectively-own land that they originally used or will potentially use, and hardly get employed in those ITPs. Meanwhile, due to these individual investors' intensive production practices, their neigbours have to bear those more serious adverse impacts on local ecology, which will in turn increasingly affect their agro-production and the corresponding income from it.

In addition to the impacts on local community, intimate land grabbing also shapes the agrarian transformation in China. As shown in Figure 3, there is contemporary trend in China that massive amounts of villagers are giving up farm work in rural areas and migrating to urban areas as cheap wage labour in the industrial sector to facilitate capital accumulation (Arrighi 2007). However, the intimate land grabbing denotes an adverse flow of labour and capital, as a few villagers gave up wage jobs in the urban areas and used the income earned from industrial sector to invest in ITP sector.

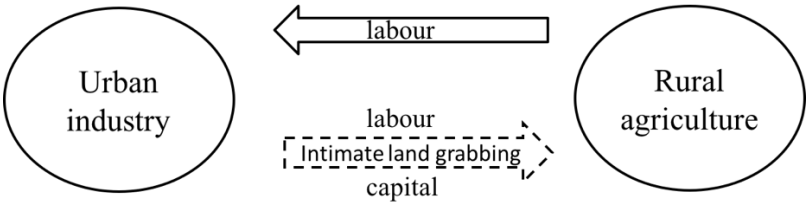


Figure 3 labour and capital dynamics between urban (industrial sector) and rural (agricultural sector)

When these grabbers accumulate based on their land control and become better-off, the other villagers, especially the marginalized, become more vulnerable. Thus, the social differentiation is further deepened. Following it, some of the dispossessed will choose to out-migrate as an adaptive livelihood strategy. Such dynamics of labour and capital show a circular rather than a linear city-countryside relationship, which is worth further studying.

6 Conclusion

As summarized in Table 2, intimate land grabs are dominated by local individual villagers and emerged at relatively smaller scales. But their capability to gain and maintain control over land is not weaker and sometimes even stronger than those capital-abundant corporations' due to certain institutional settings and their social and geographic proximity. Moreover, their impacts on local communities are not less, and even more due to their certain production modes out of their interests.

Table 2 A comparison of corporate-dominated and villager-dominated land grabs

	Corporate-dominated	Villager-dominated
Scale	Large	Relatively smaller
Role of local villagers	Victims/ resisters	Grabbers/ Victims/Resisters
Investors	Outsider	Local
Means	Economic and extra-economic means;	Economic and extra-economic means; Easier and firmer control: social relations and geographic proximity
Consequences	The dispossession of original users; Ecological impacts due to industrialised production mode.	The dispossession of original users; Worse ecological impacts; Further rural differentiation

Therefore, aligned with theoretical discussions, the case in Guangxi demonstrates that (1) small-scale land grabs are not necessarily less significant than large-scale ones; (2) local actor-dominated land grabs sometimes might have more serious adverse impact on local communities; and (3) within land grabs, villagers can also be grabbers that accumulate at the expenses of their fellow villagers rather than simply victims or resisters. This reminds us to go beyond the dichotomies of "small vs large", "outsider vs local actors" and "victims and grabbers", and focus on the political economic dynamics of land control and land use changes.

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