

**Rights to Land, Rights to the City and Rights (Not) to Farm:
Politics and Practices in the Transfer of Rural Land Use Rights in China**

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Ongoing marketization, globalization, and urbanization continue to threaten smallholders' access to land, food and incomes. The new wave of land acquisitions triggered by the financial, fuel and food crises since 2007 has added to the struggles over land, mostly in the countryside in the global south. Rural China is witnessing similar processes, with rights to rural land changing hands rapidly. Under current rules, local authorities formally subcontract collectively owned land to villagers, and only the use rights to such land can be transferred. Transfers of rural land use rights ('rural land transfer', or RLT below), forbidden by law until the 1980s, are now incorporated into China's development policies and implemented nationwide, as a central strategy to reduce rural poverty and rural-urban income gaps. Whether promoting RLT would achieve these claimed goals, however, remains to be examined. Meanwhile, the question of land rights is not only about who has access to land, but also intertwined with the questions of who is qualified to farm and who can migrate to the city.

This dissertation project will uncover the intentions behind, processes of, and outcomes from RLT practices. It asks: (1) Who is involved in rural land transfer (RLT), in what ways and through what procedures? (2) Who gains and who loses with the emergence of RLT? Why? (3) To what extent has agricultural land, or the right to it, been privatized, commodified, and marketized, as defined by law, protected by the state and realized in practices? This research will combine document research, interviews, and participant observation for an in-depth case study of Chengdu in southwest China. Findings on who gains and who loses from grassroots perspectives will provide timely and thorough evaluations of the policies promoting RLT and will enhance efforts to make the latter better serve the well-being of rural villagers in China. The research will also contribute to the theorization of rights by presenting how rights are translated (or not) to actual benefits and decision power. Further, the detailed documentation of how social differentiations take place in rural China through RLT practices, will enable future comparative studies and will inform policy making on land and resource regulation in a broader context.