

The Land Question in China: Agrarian Capitalism, Industrious Revolution, and East Asian Development

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I write this book review at home self-isolating during the coronavirus pandemic currently sweeping the UK. The national economy is grinding to a halt and businesses are offloading “surplus” employees, in their thousands, into the growing ranks of the unemployed. Debates are raging in political circles about what to do when a large portion of the population has no means of income. How can a national government provide for millions of people for whom the corporate sector has no need? This may seem like a rare problem for a time of crisis but, as Zhan makes clear in this book, for some countries, and for China in particular, this scenario is all-too prevalent, as contemporary capitalism premised on a strong bias towards large-scale corporations and urban living is unable to provide a secure livelihood for much of the population. To solve this problem, argues Zhan, we should look to the countryside and the organization of rural land.

Shaohua Zhan is a sociologist at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. He undertook his graduate training at Johns Hopkins University in the United States, supervised by Giovanni Arrighi until his passing in 2009. The influence of Arrighi’s *Adam Smith in Beijing* (2007) is evident in the book, particularly with respect to the importance Zhan attaches to the concept of the industrious revolution. In contrast to an industrial revolution, such as that underpinned by the English enclosure movement which expelled peasants from the land to form a large urban proletariat, an industrious revolution sustains rural livelihoods through labour-intensive, market-oriented household activities including farming and handicraft production. Current trends in China’s rural policy point to a path of agrarian capitalism based on large-scale agribusiness. This will likely lead to the concentration of land under corporate management while large portions of the rural population are moved (or evicted) into cities, reminiscent of the enclosure movement. In the current neoliberal moment based on the informalization and precarity of labour, Zhan warns, the result will not be a productive industrial work force, but overwhelming urban poverty.

The book is beautifully crafted, skilfully incorporating historical perspective and international comparison into six concise chapters, paired into three digestible sections. Each chapter is clearly structured, accessibly written and mercifully short, but also densely packed with important information. There are references to significant policy announcements and prominent debates to help the reader navigate the twists and turns of Chinese policymaking. There is also a helpful appendix setting out chronologically, from the 1980s until today, the names of key policy documents for both rural and urban land and a brief description of their significance in the trajectory of the ongoing reforms.

The chapters of part one, “Historical perspective,” examine and compare the historical conditions for two industrious revolutions in China, during the 18th century under the Qing, and the Household Responsibility System of the early reform period. Zhan draws attention to the importance of the state in supporting smallholders in both cases. Successive Qing emperors sought to protect smallholder tenancy rights, constrain tax burdens, and promote agricultural technology and innovative cultivation practices. The success of the Household Responsibility System, meanwhile, rested on the legacies of the strong developmental role played by the socialist state

under Mao, including its implementation of land reform and support for rural industries. Part two, “Undermining forces,” first examines how the successful industrious revolution of the early reforms was undercut from the mid-1980s by a switch to policies focused on the growth of cities. State support for the countryside, including investment and fiscal resources, was redirected to benefit urban development. Local rural officials starved of funds squeezed peasant households with extra taxes and fees and engaged in widespread land expropriations. Living conditions nose-dived. Second, Zhan traces the rise of China’s agrarian capitalism. This is driven by a turn in policy circles towards an ideology of agricultural modernization which valorises large-scale corporate farming and regards small household farming as backward and inefficient, effectively erasing the success of the preceding industrious revolution. This ideology is buttressed by its attachment to the question of national security – an enduring Cold War conviction that China must maintain self-sufficiency in grain production at all costs. As agricultural land is increasingly lost to urban development, the question becomes ever-more pressing. In part three, “Comparative perspective,” Zhan provides an international dimension. First, he examines how, in South Africa, a strong agricultural sector based on large-scale agribusiness hinged on the expulsion of black African peasants and tenant farmers from designated white areas, resulting in widespread poverty and underemployment. The final chapter contrasts this with the broader East Asian experience. After the Second World War, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan all implemented agrarian reforms, redistributing land from landlords to peasants, establishing a strong smallholder economy able to sustain a large population. As neoliberal policies have led to increasingly precarious modes of living, the three governments respectively are taking new measures to revitalize their rural economies. China, argues Zhan, should take note. Rural smallholding is the future, not the past.

This timely, thought-provoking and informative book is suitable for both specialists and non-specialists. It constitutes an important contribution to contemporary scholarly debates on the development of agrarian capitalism in China. It will also be particularly useful for undergraduate and graduate students looking to make sense of China’s agrarian reforms and how they relate to broader questions of development. Highly recommended.

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The Shenzhen Experiment: The Story of China’s Instant City

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As the first book-length monograph on the city of Shenzhen, Juan Du’s *The Shenzhen Experiment* breaks new ground in China studies and contributes to global study of urban space, particularly the model of land expropriation and development that characterizes Special Economic Zones worldwide. Du is a practising architect who has been an observer of Shenzhen since her first visit in 2005, when she was sent to curate an exhibition for the city’s 25th anniversary. Her narrative of Shenzhen’s