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China's rural development challenges

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Preface

It is such a paradox that China's rural land has reemerged as one of the major factors responsible for social inequality, conflicts and poverty – socio-economic ills which the land revolution aimed to redress. The goals of the revolution were short-lived as the problems confronting China are far more severe than in the pre-reform era under Mao who abolished the system of unequal landownership that prolonged the deprivation of the Chinese peasantry. In spite of 30 years of unprecedented economic growth triggered by the market-led reform, China is facing new challenges of equitable and sustainable development whereby land tenure continues to be a perplexing issue to be effectively addressed and tackled. The trajectory of China's land reform thus is a contradiction in terms—if Mao was still alive, he would be devastated by the fact that the reform through both collectivization and ongoing decollectivization has not proved to be an effective mechanism for pro-poor institutional changes.

My research aims to develop a better understanding of the nature, dimensions and context of China's land tenure reform by employing interdisciplinary perspectives. Three years ago, I had little idea of how to design this research when I decided to embark upon a challenging and uncertain career at the University of Groningen. But I believed that I would succeed given my deep-rooted interests and experience in rural development in China. The strong support of my promoters Prof. Peter Ho and Prof. Leon Verstappen gave me ample confidence to conduct the research. Their encouragement and guidance in this process were indispensable. I learnt how to develop a critical and comprehensive and thus integrated approach to studying the complex issues. I also benefited from their invaluable insights and experience in this field of study, which contributed to the successful completion of this study within a 3-year time span during which I worked as a project manager and researcher at the Centre for Development Studies (CDS) of the Faculty of Spatial Sciences. I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to both promoters in this regard. My special thanks also go to the external readers – Prof. Benjamin van Rooij, Prof. Meine Pieter van Dijk, Prof. Rafael Wittek, Dr. Arjan de Haan and Dr. Hans Schoenmakers for their critical and constructive comments on the earlier drafts.

My research was a part of the Protection of Farmers' Land and Property Rights in China (ProLAND) project coordinated by the CDS. This project provided an indispensable contribution to an understanding of China's land tenure reform and land management through research, training and internationalization for Chinese

land researchers, experts and policy-makers. Our collaboration with the Chinese and Dutch partners was pleasant, stimulating and fruitful. In particular, I would like to acknowledge the strong backing of the funding organization – the Asia Facility for China of the Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs under Mr. Jorden Splinter as project adviser. It was a great pleasure to work with him whose patience and support were absolutely invaluable not only to me, but also to the rest of the project team in view of unexpected obstacles which arose from the highly controversial and sensitive topics. I would also like to thank dedicated colleagues from the project's implementing institutions in both countries, Prof. Paul van der Molen, Prof. Xiaoying Wang, Prof. Xiaoping Shi, Prof. Peixin Zhu, Dr. Yinping Dai and Mr. Xiaoyun Zou, among others, for their insightful advice and facilitation of the research.

Working with my CDS colleagues has been memorable and enjoyable. Special mention goes to Dr. Pieter Boele van Hensbroek for countless rounds of reading my draft chapters and for providing meticulous remarks and advice. Dr. Leandro Vergara Camus made very constructive comments on my chapters and his advice on some critical readings were highly useful. And to Mr. Arthur de Boer, who met me on my first day of arrival and ever since has provided unflagging support. I greatly appreciate the collegial friendships formed, which I hope will continue far into the future. I am fortunate to have met so many nice colleagues at the Faculty of Spatial Sciences and the Faculty of Law. In particular, I would like to thank the senior management staff of the two faculties for their kind facilitation of the research and the provision of needed resources. Special thanks are due to Stiny Tiggelaar for her wise and timely advice on preparations for the PhD graduation process and her time spent on helping me through all those complicated procedures. I would also like to extend my sincere gratitude to other faculty colleagues for their involvement and support; there are too many names to mention here.

No pain no gain; but to me, the pain pales in comparison to the contribution I am making in my current capacity as assistant professor at the Faculty of Law. This PhD study has groomed me well for this new career path, which I believe will pay off, as we have been working on land reform issues on a global scale. In a nutshell, the last 3 years have been extremely rewarding, which has given me the confidence to strive for greater achievements in the coming years. As China has become an emerging world economic power, its reform experiences – irrespective of success or failure – have many repercussions on the world political and economic landscape. I believe that significant work lies ahead for me.

A Chinese saying – “behind a successful man stands a strong woman” – may apply to many people. Although I do not think that I am that successful, I believe that my

wife Lin is my greatest pillar of support. Her unfailing encouragement and love have eased and lightened this somewhat tough journey and made it less painful. There is no way I can thank her for her boundless sacrifice. The same can be said of my beloved daughter Yang, my parents and family members, whose caring support and love I humbly cherish. My mother would have been so happy and proud of me if she could see it herself today! Her dream has come true. To my many Chinese and Dutch friends, I would like to say how much I appreciate their friendship. Here, I would like to thank Dr. Zhenghong Chen and his family for all their care and encouragement over the last two years, which made my time in the Netherlands highly memorable and enjoyable. Finally, I would like to thank Gina Rozario, my English editor, for her brilliant job in editing this manuscript. I really learnt a lot from her.

I hope that the reader will gain some insights from this study. I must say that it remains an uncompleted mission for me. I plan to spend more time on a substantial revision of the manuscript. As China's land tenure reform continues, I hope my research will deepen and grow so that it keeps abreast with current reform and future policy changes. I also hope to continue enjoying the support and inspiration of colleagues and friends as I embark on new adventures—psychologically and intellectually.

Yongjun Zhao
Home in Groningen, The Netherlands
May 2010

