

The Modernization Brought by Acceleration of Land Rights Transfer Using the Case of North China in the Early 20th Century, with a Focus on Resources from Southern Manchuria Railway Investigation Department

Introduction

With the exploration of new trade routes and the gradual formation of the global market, commodity economy has been largely developed since Ming and Qing dynasties, leading to an acceleration of land rights transfer. In the early 20th century, the speed of land rights transfer suddenly increased, and it became common for land to change hands several times within a year. As a result, it triggered structural changes within the landlord class and boost the modernization of China. This historical phenomenon was caused by various factors. In brief, the reasons for the frequent land rights transfer can be summarized into three aspects: the decline of traditional customs and the formation of absentee landlords group. This essay pays much attention to resources from Southern Manchuria Railway Investigation Department in order to get a comprehensive and objective view¹.

What is Southern Manchuria Railway Investigation Department?

The Southern Manchuria Railway Investigation Department (SMRID), established in the early 20th century, was a key institution in Japan's expansionist activities in China. It conducted extensive economic and social research beyond mere railway management, covering natural resources,

¹ This research also quotes many works based on Southern Manchuria Railway Investigation Department's resources such as Huang, P. (1985). *The peasant economy and social change in North China*. Stanford University Press.

agriculture, industry, finance, and local customs across various Chinese regions.

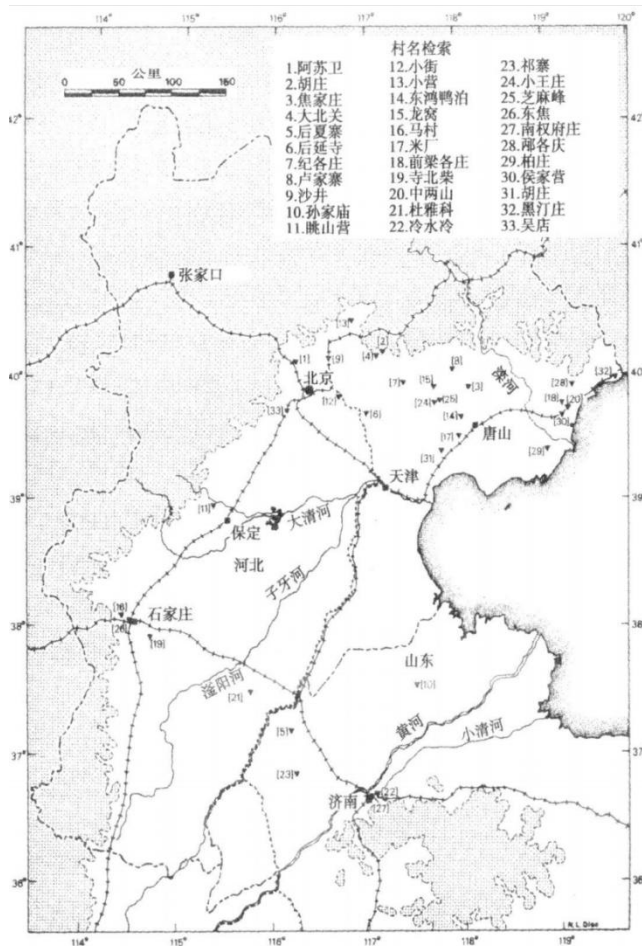
SMRID expanded its staff, becoming a refuge for left-wing intellectuals escaping repression in Japan. These intellectuals, some aligned with Marxist ideologies, often infused their reports with analyses that challenged the Japanese military's goals.

Despite its contributions to academic knowledge, SMRID's operations were closely tied to Japan's military and colonial apparatus. The department's rural surveys, conducted under military protection, often faced resistance from local populations. Many rural residents, fearing of Japanese authorities, deliberately misreported their economic conditions, potentially skewing survey results. However, there are also reports talking about the welcoming attitude towards researchers in SMRID since they are usually fair and authorized, which means they are able to resolve conflicts between villagers efficiently and equitably. For example, the villages of Sha Jing (沙井村) and Shi Men (石门村) used income from temple lands (20 and 23 mu, respectively) to fund village needs after ceasing to support monks around 1885. In 1942, Fan Baoshan (樊宝山), a recently released criminal from Shi Men, and Zhao Hui (照辉), a monk from the Cheng Huang Temple, falsely claimed the temple lands belonged to the City God's Temple. The villagers, intimidated by Fan, were unsure how to respond. They asked help from the Mantetsu (South Manchuria Railway) surveyors, specifically Saito (旗田), who was in charge. Saito reviewed tax receipts and documents from 1915 onward and mediated a meeting with the involved parties. His investigation led to a county official reprimanding Zhao Hui and forcing him to renounce his claims to the land. Zhang Rui, a former village leader and witness to these events, shared this story in 1980, expressing gratitude for the Mantetsu scholars' intervention.[\[1, p. 47-48\]](#)

It's also noteworthy that why resources from SMRID are often used in eastren asia studies. According to Professor Cao Xing-sui (曹幸穗), "Based on its (SMRID) survey report, you can reconstruct Beijing in 1939 and

Shunyi County's (now known as Shunyi District, a suburb of Beijing) Sha Jing village in 1941. The village entrance had several trees, the thickness of each tree, the number of bowls in the surveyed farmers' homes, and the bowls' place of origin were all documented. Even the pigsties were drawn with cross-sectional diagrams."[\[2\]](#)

In summary, SMRID played a crucial role in providing vital economic and social intelligence for Japan's colonial enterprise in China. Although it is criticized for its expansionist and imperialist background, its resources are academically valuable and reliable, especially when it is comprehensively referred with other historical sources such as official resources from Chinese government



Map of 33 villages that SMRID did research on

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Firstly, the decline of the traditional customs, especially for the custom that villagers are more willing to sell their land to their relatives and other members in their community, has provided a precondition for accelerating land transfer in rural societies. Natural villages in the northern China region are settlements where people live based on blood ties and geographical relationships. In such traditional societies with low social mobility, individuals form a collective consciousness of "shared fortunes and poverty (休戚与共)" and "mutual assistance (守望相助)". During major life events (such as weddings and funerals), the entire community often mobilizes to assist the involved families. In times of famine, fellow villagers would also support each other to overcome difficulties. Living in this kind of social atmosphere, people are easily influenced by the collective consciousness when they make decisions about their possessions. This means that before selling land or houses, one would first inquire within the clan; if no one within the clan is interested, the inquiry then extends to close neighbors, and if they too decline, to the rest of the village. Only after no one within the community expresses interest can the sale be made to outsiders (including those from other villages, counties, or provinces). As land and houses were the primary means of production and living in traditional Chinese society, successive dynasties institutionally supported transactions involving these properties. Regulations stated that, "relatives and neighbors have the priority; if they do not wish to or can't match the price, negotiations may proceed elsewhere (如有典卖庄宅，准例房亲、邻人合得承当；若是亲、邻不要及着价不及，方得别处商量，和合交易)". [\[3, p. 1910\]](#) Although different dynasties made adjustments to this rule up until the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republican era, the essence of the practice persisted. The tradition and the relative government system make this custom exist for thousand years.

However, the custom had its drawbacks, as there were people who often exploited it to extort those selling land. As the disadvantages of this practice mounted, the Qing government legislatively negated it and affirmed the legality of free trade in land, stating that those who gives

priority to relatives and neighbors and using this as an excuse to extort for lower prices would be punished according to severe laws (执‘产动归原’先尽亲邻之说，借端措勒，希图短价”者，“俱照不应重律治罪”).[\[4, p.202\]](#) During the period of the Republic of China government, Ta-Li-Yuan (大理院), the Supreme Court's predecessor, also denied the effectiveness of the right of first refusal in its judgments, reasoning that "the custom of giving priority to relatives in selling property restricts the function of ownership and hinders economic circulation and local development; thus, it cannot be recognized as having legal effect (卖业先尽亲房之习惯既属限制所有权之作用，则于经济上流通及地方之发达均有障碍，即难认为有法之效力)".[\[5, p.142\]](#) This provided institutional conditions for the frequent transfer of land rights. In fact, the rapid development of commodity economy, as a result of globalization, since the Ming and Qing dynasties posed an unprecedented challenge to the custom of preemptive rights. Under the surge of commodity economy, the turnover of land rights in rural societies accelerated dramatically, with land commodification becoming an unstoppable trend. Moreover, the collective consciousness of "shared fortunes and poverty" and "mutual assistance" gradually gave way to economic rationality. Consequently, the pursuit of maximum profit in land transactions became increasingly prevalent. From 1912 to 1940, although the custom of preemptive right still existed in Henan Village of Shunyi County, land transactions were already determined by the highest bid.[\[6, p.3\]](#) In conclusion, the custom of preemptive right, losing institutional support and depressed by the wave of commodity economy as well as globalization, gradually lost its former power over land transactions, thereby unleashing the shackles on the circulation of land rights.

§2

In 1930s and 1940s, Japanese conducted numerous field surveys in North China, including information on the absentee landlord class. Among 35 natural villages surveyed, the average proportion of rented land to total cultivated area was about 27.86%. However, there were only 14 landlords living in the villages, and these landlords were not necessarily wealthy. They might have lacked labor, found farming inconvenient, or needed

money urgently, leading them to rent out their land. The remaining landlords were all absentee landlords[16]101. As Philip C.C. Huang (黄宗智) pointed out, "In many villages on the North China Plain, there were no landlords at all. The landlords in North China were mainly urban-dwelling absentee landlords. Those landlords living in the villages often owned only a small amount of land, and in many villages, even these small landlords did not exist".[\[7, p.97\]](#)

The rapid turnover of land rights was the main pathway for the formation of the absentee landlord class on a large scale. The emergence of most absentee landlords in the villages of Simubeichai (寺北柴村) and Wudian (吴店村) was due to the residents of these villages borrowing large amounts of external debt and being unable to repay it, resulting in the transfer of ownership of land to creditors through transactions.[\[6, p.459-470\]](#)

Under this condition, many warlords purchased large amounts of land to become absentee landlords. For example, Yuan Shikai (袁世凯) purchased 400 hectares of land in Zhangde (彰德), Ji Country (汲县), and Hui Country (辉县), with his land in Zhangde County accounting for one-third of the county's total land.[\[8, p.56,62-63\]](#) Although the quantity and speed of land purchases by civilian landlords could not be compared to those of warlord landlords, it was precisely these numerous civilian landlords who bought land in other communities, resulting in the formation of the absentee landlord class on a large scale. Absentee landlord Wang Zanzhou(王赞周)'s land management through hiring peasant in Simubeichai village demonstrated that land transactions were an important pathway for the formation of absentee landlords. Similar examples were widespread, such as Wang Luoyao (王洛耀), Wang Luo'kui (王洛魁), Wang Lian'gui (王连贵), and others, who became part of the absentee landlord class through land rights transactions.[\[6, p.3\]](#)

The extended family, as a unit of action, held certain advantages in rural political and economic activities.[\[9, p.208\]](#) However, in the North China rural society during early 20th century, both wealthy and poor families

were influenced by various factors, often experiencing dividing of family property. Generally speaking, there were several causes for the division of family property during this period. First, conflicts or disagreements among family members were inevitable after living together for a long time. The forms of conflicts were diverse, including disharmony between fathers and sons, mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, brothers, and so on. According to the survey data of the South Manchuria Railway Company, family conflict was the most common cause of the division of family property in rural society. Second, families divided their property due to economic hardship. When the head of the family is unable to improve family's economic situation, they would reluctantly divide their limited family property according to certain distribution methods. Third, wealthy individuals in rural communities divided their property to avoid becoming targets of bandits and thieves.

Since the 1920s and 1930s, China was plagued by wars, successive conflicts, and rampant banditry. Farmers who owned substantial land attracted bandits, leading to kidnappings and robberies. Wang Qingchang(王庆昌)'s division of his family in Houxiashai Village (后夏寨村) was an attempt to evade these threats.[\[9, pp. 34-35, 424\]](#) The process of dividing family properties created pathways for the emergence of absentee landlords. One way this occurred was when family members, after the division, resettled in other villages. The distance between their new residence and the inherited land made cultivation impractical and uneconomical, prompting them to rent out the land, thus transforming into absentee landlords. Furthermore, following the traditional custom of equal inheritance among sons ("all sons have a share"), they would acquire a portion of land. However, due to constraints such as their original occupation and distance from the land, they tended to abandon personal cultivation in favor of leasing the land, thereby also becoming absentee landlords.

The opinion of "attachment to the land" is deeply rooted in traditional society. However, in modern times, the phenomenon of villagers leaving their communities became increasingly common. The reasons behind this shift included: First, the harsh social environment in northern China,

manifested not only in frequent natural disasters but also in the turmoil of warlord conflicts and activities of bandits. To escape these upheavals, many villagers relocated to safer villages or cities. Second, relying on agriculture became increasingly inadequate for sustenance. The lure of higher commercial profits driven by the rapid development of commodity economy prompted some landowning farmers to abandon farming in favor of more lucrative industries or businesses. These factors collectively altered China's long-standing tradition of residing in one location, making the migration away from hometowns a prevalent trend.

The influence of the absentee landlord group on rural politics is mainly reflected in the mechanism of rural power generation. In the absence of the state, members of the rural society, relying on factors such as wealth and status, stepped onto the stage of power. That is to say, in the traditional formation of rural power, those possessing economic capital have a high likelihood of becoming community leaders. However, the relationship between this economic capital and the mechanisms for generating rural power changed. Absentee landlord group previously mentioned resides outside the village community and largely avoids the various economic burdens associated with the land's resident village community. Consequently, when faced with significant economic pressures, not only is agricultural productivity affected, but even sustaining livelihood becomes difficult because those who are able to pay the bill leave and refuse to do so.[\[10\]](#) This makes the collection of levies increasingly challenging, which is a primary duty for the grassroots power hierarchy. To accomplish their tasks, local leaders often personally cover the costs upfront, which not only exposes them to economic losses but also fails to garner the understanding of community residents, and may even provoke hostility. Thus, the power hierarchy of the village community finds itself squeezed between the state and local demands.[\[11, p.102\]](#) After the establishment of the Republic of China, military requisitions multiplied, and levies increased exponentially, prompting resignations of original village leaders in Wu Dian Village (吴店村), with some even relocating from the village.[\[12, p.420,430\]](#) In Cold Water Ditch Village (冷水沟村), the respected

village head, Du Fengshan (杜凤山), resigned due to the burden of levies, and other reputable villagers refused to take his place.[\[9, p.6\]](#)

The withdrawal of original community leaders provides a rare opportunity for local bullies to step in. Additionally, in some villages, positions vacated by the wealthy were filled by the poor.[\[12, p.420\]](#) Therefore, the growing number of absentee landlords alters the relationship between economic capital and the mechanisms for generating rural power. Economic capital gradually moved away from grassroots power. Instead, rogues, hoodlums, and bullies often supplanted them as community leaders, thereby generating a rural political crisis at the time.

§3

China's modernization, propelled by accelerated land circulation, left positive and negative impacts on rural society. On the one hand, frequent land transfers and the sudden rise of absentee landlords have promoted the commercialization of rural economy. Land, now tradable with its value determined by the market, integrated rural areas into market economy, driving economic development and modernization. Conversely, the two factors also led to social and economic disparities such as marginalization of landless laborers. Moreover, this shift might be too swift for the delicate community structures at that time.

Furthermore, when talking about the decline of traditional customs and erosion of communal bonds, focus on individual economic gain and land commercialization weakened the collective consciousness of shared fortunes as well as poverty and mutual assistance. This transformation had profound implications for rural social cohesion, fostering atomization in Chinese society. Communities dissipate, kinship ties loosen, which in turn reduces the government's concern when making decisions on exploiting peasant class.

In summary, the acceleration of land rights transfer in North China during the early 20th century under the background of globalization, driven by growth of market economy and changing social values, played a crucial role in the modernization of China. While it contributed to the commercialization of the rural economy, it also led to social and economic problems and the erosion of traditional communal values. Imagining in another world, Qing dynasty doesn't open the door. There is no globalization and the traditional rural society remains the same, will people be happier? The answer remains unknown, but what is certain is that time flows on, and nothing newer changes.

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² The highlighted reference is the sources from Southern Manchuria Railway Investigation Department