



## China's farmland

### This land is my land

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#### Peasants for privatisation



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"LAND to the tiller" has been a slogan of Chinese revolutionaries since Sun Yat-sen used it in 1924. Mao Zedong came to power in 1949 with just such a promise. Now some of China's peasants want his party to make good on the pledge. Late last year groups in different parts of China began simply claiming land as their own individual private plots.

China's constitution decrees that rural land is owned by "collectives". But it does not make clear who represents these collectives. This vagueness has been one of the biggest causes of rural unrest in recent years. Rural officials, eager to make money for themselves as well as their localities, often appropriate land from farmers to sell to developers. They say they are acting on behalf of the collective. The farmers disagree. If they receive any compensation at all, it is only a fraction of the market value.

In recent years a few Chinese scholars have suggested that privatising rural land would make such land grabs far harder. Their views have been dismissed by Communist Party officials, for whom the collective ownership of rural land is one of the very few core ideological principles left standing in the rush to embrace capitalism.

Of the handful of incidents that have come to light where peasants have taken matters—and land—into their own hands, the first was in the province of Heilongjiang. A statement circulated on the internet in December by leaders claiming to represent 40,000 peasants in 72 villages in Jiamusi prefecture called on village representatives "to pledge to fight to the death" to protect land from seizure by corrupt officials. It said the current system of collective ownership had turned peasants into serfs. Peasants, it said, should have the right to negotiate their own price for land appropriated from them.

Isolated groups of peasants elsewhere followed suit, including some in Shaanxi, Jiangsu, Sichuan and Tianjin. Villagers have likened themselves to the group of peasants in 1978 in a village in central Anhui, who broke up the land into plots farmed by individual households. At the time, they seemed to be taking a big risk. But the party itself soon decided that the Mao-era communal farms had failed and households should be allocated plots of land. The Anhui villagers became famous and the new "household-responsibility system" pushed up yields and incomes. Land ownership remained unchanged.

The flurry of land-rights declarations was soon suppressed. Human-rights groups report that two peasant leaders in Heilongjiang were sentenced in January to labour camp. At least two leaders in Shaanxi have also been detained. Chen Yongmiao, a Beijing lawyer following these developments, says other villagers are preparing to issue similar declarations, but have been slowed down by the recent lunar new year celebrations.

The central government has given a frosty response to the idea of privatising rural land. On January 30th a senior party official, Chen Xiwen, said he saw no prospect of such a move. But some state-controlled newspapers have given unusual prominence to the issue. In January *Southern Metropolis Weekly* published a lengthy account of the incident in Heilongjiang. It mentioned that peasants did briefly enjoy private land-ownership rights after Mao took over. Other newspapers have published academics' appeals for new thinking on land ownership.

The party may have hoped that such debate would be put to rest by the passage last March of China's first law on property rights. This allows the renewal on expiry of the 30-year land-use leases most peasants were granted when plots were divided among households. Officials said the process would be automatic, with renewals granted indefinitely. But peasants still cannot sell or mortgage their plots.

The government worries that the country's food security will be jeopardised by the loss of farming land. So it is alarmed that peasants living close to cities have increasingly been behaving as if the land is theirs anyway. Urban demand for housing has pushed prices up rapidly in recent years. Farmers have been taking advantage of this by selling land, or even their own homes, to developers without proper authorisation. Urban residents have been keen to buy these village properties because they are considerably cheaper than legitimate ones in the cities.

In January the central government issued a directive reminding city-dwellers that they were banned from buying village properties. But enforcement is likely to be half-hearted at best. Chinese press reports have suggested that as many as one out of five homes purchased in Beijing are on rural land unauthorised for such use. Evicting their occupants would anger the middle classes. Their wrath frightens the party far more than the tillers'.