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Processes of Spatialization
under the Global Condition

Michaela Böhme

**Re-spatializing
food security:
Chinese
agri-investments
in Australia**

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Re-spatializing Food Security: Chinese Agri-investments in Australia

Introduction

Since the release of the report “Who will feed China?”, published in 1994 by the private environmental research organization World Watch Institute, there have been widespread concerns over China’s ability to feed its population in a sustainable and long-term manner. Against a backdrop of continued economic growth and changing consumption patterns, the World Watch Report predicted that China¹ would need to rely on massive food imports, eventually leading to food scarcity on global food markets and a food crisis of global magnitude.

Dramatic improvements in domestic food production have allowed China to avoid the catastrophic outcomes predicted by the World Watch Institute. Yet, concerns over the question of “who will feed China” have recently gained renewed attention, driven by the expansion of Chinese overseas agricultural investment. China’s overseas investments have come under particular scrutiny since the 2007/08 global food price crisis and the ensuing global “rush for farmland”.² Today, Chinese investors do not only own or lease large tracts of overseas farmland but have also acquired control over agricultural assets higher up the value chain, including processing plants, logistics facilities, food brands and technology.

The rapid expansion of Chinese overseas agricultural investment activities has been interpreted as a new strategy towards food security in the face of the dual challenge of increasing domestic resource constraints and growing consumer demand.³ Scholars have pointed out how ongoing processes of industrialization and urbanization have resulted in the dramatic loss of arable land as well as the large-scale deterioration of soil and water resources.⁴ This predicament is captured by the common trope of China feeding 21 per cent of the population with only 10 per cent of arable land supplies and 6 per cent of the world’s fresh water supplies.⁵ These challenges are compounded by changing food consumption patterns resulting in what Weis calls “dietary convergence”,⁶ i.e. the radical shift from carbohydrate-rich, staple-based diets towards more diversified, “Western-style” diets based on the intake of large amounts of animal proteins (particularly meat and dairy products) as well as the consumption of sugars and processed foods. The dietary shifts transforming demand patterns in China are highly uneven—both socially and geographically—and have given rise to a “particular politics of food security” that seeks to maintain minimum dietary standards for the poorest segments of the population while supplying predominantly urban households with a diverse, animal protein-based diet.⁷ China’s increasing role as an investor in global food and agricultural resources must be situated against this background.

The transformation of China’s food security via investments in global farmland and agricultural assets has, however, not remained unchallenged. In the Australian context, the steadily growing number of farms and agribusinesses sold to Chinese investors in recent years has triggered a polarizing debate about the merits of China’s agri-investments and their implications for Australia’s ability to position itself as a dominant actor in global food security. Within Australia, many believe that, as a net food exporter, Australia stands to

1 When using the term “China”, this paper focuses on the particular geographic and political space that is the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

2 J. Clapp, *Food*, Cambridge: Polity, 2012; GRAIN, “Seized: The 2008 Landgrab for Food and Financial Security”, www.grain.org/article/entries/93-seized-the-2008-landgrab-for-food-and-financial-security (accessed 14 May 2017).

3 S. Y. Lin, “An Asian Way to Safeguard Food Security: Transnational Farmland Investment”, *Asian Perspective* 41 (2017) 1; S. Y. Lin, “State Capitalism and Chinese Food Security Governance”, *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 18 (2017) 1; S. Y. Lin, “From Self-Sufficiency to Self-Supporting: China’s Food Security under Overseas Farmland Investment and International Norms”, *Issues & Studies* 51 (2015) 3; F. Lisk, “‘Land Grabbing’ or Harnessing of Development Potential in Agriculture?: East Asia’s Land-Based Investments in Africa”, *The Pacific Review* 26 (2013) 5; H. Zhang and Q. Cheng, “China’s Food Security Strategy Reform: An Emerging Global Agricultural Policy”, in: F. Wu, H. Zhang (eds.) *China’s Global Quest for Resources: Energy, Food and Water*, London 2016.

4 N. Thomas, “Going Out: China’s Food Security from Southeast Asia”, *The Pacific Review* 26 (2013) 5, pp. 531–562.

5 Ibid.

6 T. Weis, *The Global Food Economy. The Battle for the Future of Food and Farming*, London: Zed Books, 2007, p. 11.

7 M. Schneider, “Developing the Meat Grab”, *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 41 (2014) 4, p. 625.

benefit from increasing global, and particularly Asian demand for food. Deeply shaped by neoliberal principles of trade and market-based solutions to food insecurity, this understanding imagines a future in which Australia will increase food production and agri-exports to become a “food bowl” for Asia. Within this optimistic outlook, however, the role of Chinese agri-investments is fundamentally contested. While some voices emphasize the positive effects that Chinese investment would generate for boosting Australian food production, others cast Chinese investors as rivals competing “unfairly” for access to increasingly scarce and valuable natural resources. These contradictory understandings do not only shape debates but have also produced distinct material-institutional outcomes as Australian actors renegotiate who can legitimately invest in Australian agriculture, access resources, and obtain profits from food production. Arguably, these contestations and struggles will be consequential for the ways in which food security is understood and acted upon by powerful state and corporate actors within the global agri-food system.⁸

This paper explores these questions within the specific geographical context of Australia. It examines Australian responses to Chinese agri-investments and analyzes the contradictory ways in which Australian actors interpret the links between food security and Chinese agri-investment. The paper argues that the apparent tensions over Chinese agri-investments are illustrative of a broader struggle over the ideological, material, and spatial principles that determine how solutions to food insecurity are organized within an increasingly multipolar food system shaped by the rise of new actors, new axes of power, and new flows of capital. The neoliberal ideology framing food security as the capacity for “individuated acquisition of food in the global market”⁹ has been challenged by China’s “state capitalist” approach to food security, whereby the state encourages national firms to secure control over global agri-food supplies and value chains in a bid to reduce reliance on global food markets and Western-dominated transnational agribusiness.¹⁰ This paper uses the debates around China’s agri-investments within the context of Australia as a prism through which to examine the discursive and material processes that reconfigure the spatial organization of food security within an increasingly multipolar global agri-food system.

The analysis pays particular attention to the spatial arrangements that underpin neoliberal and state capitalist framings of food security and the ways in which they shape and contradict each other. Previous research has made important contributions to understanding China’s state capitalist strategies in the agri-food sector and has evaluated the extent to which such strategies both contradict and reaffirm the neoliberal characteristics of the global agri-food system,¹¹ however, so far, little attention has been paid to the spatial dimension of these dynamics.¹² This paper conceptualizes China’s overseas agricultural investment and the responses it has generated in Australia as conflicting projects seeking to respatialize the geographical organization of food security. More specifically, the analysis presented in the paper draws on insights from critical socio-spatial theory¹³ to highlight how tensions over Chinese agri-investments in the Australian context have found expression in ambivalent processes of food security re-territorialization on different geographical scales. Following this logic, the renewed attention to the question of “who will feed China” can

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- 8 Following the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), this paper conceptualizes the agri-food system as a “set of activities and relationships that interact to determine what and how much, by what method and for whom, food is produced, processed, distributed and consumed” (M. p. Pimbert, J. Thompson and W. T. Vorley, “Global Restructuring, Agri-Food Systems and Livelihoods”, London, *Gatekeeper Series* 100, (2001), p. 4). Agri-food systems exist at various scales, including the local, national, regional, and global scales; however, there is a clear trend towards the globalization of agri-food systems as food production, distribution, and consumption are become increasingly interlinked and bound together across diverse local, national, and regional contexts. This global agri-food system is characterized by the adherence to the principles of comparative advantage, standardization, geographical division of labor, control by a few large, mostly Western-dominated corporations, as well as multilateral trade agreements organized under the auspices of the World Trade Organization (WTO) (ibid.: 5).
- 9 L. Jarosz, “Defining World Hunger: Scale and Neoliberal Ideology in International Food Security Discourse”, *Food, Culture & Society* 14 (2011) 1, pp. 117–139.
- 10 P. Belesky and G. Lawrence, “Chinese State Capitalism and Neomercantilism in the Contemporary Food Regime: Contradictions, Continuity and Change”, *The Journal of Peasant Studies* (2018).
- 11 Ibid.; Lin, “State Capitalism and Chinese Food Security Governance”, pp. 106–138; p. McMichael, “Land Grabbing as Security Mercantilism in International Relations”, *Globalizations* 10 (2013) 1, pp. 47–64.
- 12 Much agri-food literature on China’s emergence as a global agri-investor is implicitly attentive to questions of geography and the challenges China’s rise presents to the spatial organization of the modern agri-food system. However, few authors explicitly conceptualize the spatial categories that inform their analysis. A notable exception here is S. Zhan and L. Huang, “Internal Spatial Fix: China’s Geographical Solution to Food Supply and its Limits”, *Geoforum* 85 (2017), pp. 140–152.
- 13 B. Jessop, N. Brenner and M. Jones, “Theorizing Sociospatial Relations”, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 26 (2008), pp. 389–401; N. Brenner, “Beyond State-Centrism? Space, Territoriality, and Geographical Scale in Globalization Studies”, *Theory and Society* 28 (1999), pp. 39–78.

be understood as both a site and a stake of political strategies and struggles over the socio-spatial organization of food security.

The argument presented in this paper is based on an analysis of policy recommendations, laws, guidelines, whitepapers, as well as grey literature published by a wide range of Australian and Chinese state and corporate actors, including government institutions, industry peak bodies, lobby organizations, research institutes, and think tanks. This material is supplemented by interviews and speeches of relevant state and corporate actors that have been made available via newspaper and media outlets. Together, these documents allow to trace the dynamic and contested framings of food security and their implications for the spatial reconfiguration of the agri-food system as China emerges as global agri-food investor.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: The next section summarizes current debates from critical food studies on the emergence of China as a powerful actor in the global agri-food system. Combining this body of literature with approaches from socio-spatial theory, the section highlights the benefits of a spatial analytical perspective for the study of Chinese overseas agri-investments and issues of food security. The third section contextualizes the emergence of overseas agri-investments and elaborates their relationship to food security debates within China. The next section then investigates responses to such agri-investments within the specific context of Australia, and the final section discusses their implications for the socio-spatial organization of food security within the agri-food system.

China's Expansion of Overseas Agricultural Investments and the Respatialization of Food Security

At a time of growing instability, fluidity, and change in the global agri-food system, the question of China's food production has gained renewed attention. Against the backdrop of China's growing power and influence within an increasingly multipolar global agri-food system, the long-standing question of "who will feed China" now coalesces with more recent concerns over China's overseas agricultural engagement, particularly China's role in the acquisition of global farmland and agribusinesses. In recent years, a large body of literature has emerged at the intersection of agri-food studies, international relations, and critical international political economy that examines China's changing role within the agri-food system and its implication for global agrarian transformations. This body of literature has made important contributions to evaluating the scale and scope of China's overseas agricultural investments;¹⁴ analyzing the internal and external dynamics driving such investments;¹⁵ exploring the multidimensional impacts of agri-investments on the social relations around land, labor, and capital within the countries and regions targeted by Chinese investments;¹⁶ as well as examining their broader implications for the socio-political and economic dynamics currently reshaping power relations in global agro-industrial value chains.¹⁷

There is a broad consensus amongst scholars that China's increasing overseas agricultural engagement reflects a transition from a domestic to a global approach to food security.¹⁸ Researchers have demonstrated how a range of factors, including environmental pressures, geopolitical constraints, as well as socio-cultural change such as urbanization and the "meatification of diets"¹⁹ have exposed the limits of a food security strategy traditionally rooted in the principle of "China feeding China". According to these scholarly accounts,

14 I. Hofman and p. Ho, "China's 'Developmental Outsourcing': A Critical Examination of Chinese Global 'Land Grabs' Discourse", *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 39 (2012) 1, pp. 1–48.

15 S. Y. Lin, "An Asian Way to Safeguard Food Security", pp. 481–518; Zhan and Huang, "Internal Spatial Fix", pp. 140–152; Zhang and Cheng, "China's Food Security Strategy Reform", pp. 23–41; M. Schneider, "Developing the Meat Grab", *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 41 (2014) 4, pp. 613–633.

16 G. de L.T. Oliveira, "Chinese Land Grabs in Brazil?: Sinophobia and Foreign Investments in Brazilian Soybean Agribusiness", *Globalizations* 15 (2018) 1, pp. 114–133; D. Brautigam and H. Zhang, "Green Dreams: Myth and Reality in China's Agricultural Investment in Africa", *Third World Quarterly* 34 (2013) 9, pp. 1676–1696.

17 Belesky and Lawrence, "Chinese State Capitalism"; G. de L.T. Oliveira and M. Schneider, "The Politics of Flexing Soybeans: China, Brazil and Global Agroindustrial Restructuring", *The Journal of Peasant Studies* (2015); M. Keulertz and E. Woertz, "States as Actors in International Agro-Investments", in: C. Gironde, C. Golay, p. Messerli (eds.), *Large-Scale Land Acquisitions: Focus on South-East Asia*, Leiden: Brill Nijhoff, 2016, pp. 30–52.

18 Lin, "An Asian Way to Safeguard Food Security", pp. 481–518; Zhan and Huang, "Internal Spatial Fix", pp. 140–152; Zhang and Cheng, "China's Food Security Strategy Reform", pp. 23–41; Lin, "From Self-Sufficiency to Self-Supporting", pp. 89–129; Thomas, "Going Out: China's Food Security from Southeast Asia", pp. 531–562.

19 Schneider, "Developing the Meat Grab", pp. 613–633.

as the Chinese leadership has begun to look for alternatives to domestic food self-sufficiency, improving access to overseas agricultural resources with which to supplement domestic supply has emerged as a key element in China's new food security strategy.²⁰ State-owned enterprises (SOEs), privately-owned national champion firms,²¹ and financial institutions such as China's policy banks and sovereign wealth funds (SWFs) have been identified as the main actors investing in a diverse range of overseas agricultural products such as grain, rubber, palm oil, cattle, and dairy.²² More recently, scholars have broadened their focus from investments in farmland and primary production of agricultural commodities to acquisitions in the agribusiness sector, exploring their implications for the restructuring of the relations of power in global food supply and value chains.²³ For example, recent studies have analyzed the transformation of COFCO, China's largest state-owned agri-food company, into the world's fourth largest grain trader, following a series of international mergers and acquisitions, as well as the ChemChina's merger with Swiss-based Syngenta within the context of corporate concentration and restructuring in the agri-chemicals and seeds sector.²⁴

China's Role within the Neoliberal Food Security Paradigm

The dynamics outlined above have sparked debates about the extent to which China's global agri-food strategy presents a challenge to neoliberal solutions aimed at providing food security. In its most commonly accepted definition provided by the United Nation's (UN) Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), food security is defined as "a situation that exists when all people at all times have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs for an active and healthy life".²⁵ Despite its seemingly objective and theoretical character, the concept of "food security" is highly problematic. Indeed, as critical literature on food security has demonstrated, food security is neither a neutral concept nor an innocent representation of unambiguous, scientific facts. Rather, it should be conceptualized as a socially constructed discourse shaped by the needs and interests of powerful groups of actors within the agri-food system.²⁶ In other words, by focusing on how actors discursively frame and produce food security, we can unpack the ideological assumptions and material interests that determine how these actors "perceive reality and what course of action [they] choose".²⁷

Critical literature on the concept of food security has shown how, since the mid-1980s, the term food security has become closely linked to neoliberal modes of agri-food provisioning.²⁸ Neoliberal solutions to the issue of food insecurity are associated with market-based approaches to food production and distribution that favor trade liberalization, privatization, and deregulation. Under neoliberal food security, the state is encouraged to reduce intervention in the domestic agricultural sector—for example in the form of subsidies, loans, and marketing boards—while adopting an outward-looking and import-driven approach to food security.²⁹ In addition, neoliberal solutions to food insecurity privilege productivity increases over questions of distribution and power. This productivist logic—marked by specialization, intensification, and an emphasis on technology—has tended to benefit the interests of transnational agribusiness, while harming the livelihoods

20 Lin, "An Asian Way to Safeguard Food Security", pp. 481–518; D. Zha and H. Zhang, "Food in China's International Relations", *The Pacific Review* 26 (2013) 5, pp. 455–479; K. Morton, "Learning by Doing: China's Role in the Global Governance of Food Security", RCCPB Working Paper 30, 2012, pp. 1–39.

21 National champions are privately-owned companies favored by the state for their potential to compete with foreign multinational agribusiness. Because of their potential to form internationally competitive, domestically-owned firms that are able to counter the hegemonic position of Western-dominated agribusiness in the global agri-food system, national champions receive high-level political support as well as preferential access to finance.

22 Lin, "From Self-Sufficiency to Self-Supporting", pp. 89–129; Hofman and Ho, "China's 'Developmental Outsourcing'", pp. 1–48.

23 Keulertz and Woertz, "States as Actors in International Agro-Investments", pp. 30–52; Oliveira and Schneider, "The Politics of Flexing Soybeans".

24 Belesky and Lawrence, "Chinese State Capitalism".

25 Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (UN FAO), *Food Security, Rome, Policy Brief, Issue 2, 2006*, p. 1.

26 C. Rosin, "Food Security and the Justification of Productivism in New Zealand", *Journal of Rural Studies* 29 (2013), pp. 50–58; I. Tomlinson, "Doubling Food Production to Feed the 9 Billion: A Critical Perspective on a Key Discourse of Food Security in the UK", *Journal of Rural Studies* 29 (2013), pp. 81–90; Jarosz, "Defining World Hunger", pp. 117–139.

27 J. Muldavin, "From Rural Transformation to Global Integration: Comparative Analyses of the Environmental Dimensions of China's Rise", *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 54 (2013) 3, p. 261.

28 S. Zhan, "Riding on Self-Sufficiency: Grain Policy and the Rise of Agrarian Capital in China", *Journal of Rural Studies* 54 (2017), pp. 151–161; G. Otero, G. Pechlaner and E. C. Gürcan, "The Political Economy of 'Food Security' and Trade: Uneven and Combined Dependency", *Rural Sociology* 78 (2013) 3, pp. 263–289; Jarosz, "Defining World Hunger", pp. 117–139.

29 Otero, Pechlaner and Gürcan, "The Political Economy of 'Food Security' and Trade", pp. 263–289.

of small-scale farmers and the ability of “weaker” states in the Global South to protect domestic agriculture from international competition.³⁰

The neoliberal food system has been centered on a number of key institutions, notably the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Bank (WB), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Together, these institutions have encouraged member states to abandon national self-sufficiency strategies and allocate their resources to sectors in which they have a comparative advantage while relying on global agri-food markets for their food supplies. As McMichael notes, “under these circumstances, ‘food security’ became food dependency”,³¹ deepening a trade pattern that releases grain surpluses produced in North America, Western Europe, and Australia into markets in the Global South. Yet, despite the emphasis on free markets and trade, the neoliberal food security paradigm has involved a “central double standard”: while promoting market-based solutions to food security around the world, the United States as well as other advanced capitalist countries such as Japan, Canada, and the European Union have relied heavily on strong state intervention in the form of trade protectionism and subsidies for the agricultural sector.³² The continued persistence of this double standard reminds us of the often-cited “tension between the theory of neoliberalism and the actual pragmatics of neoliberalization”.³³ With respect to food security, this then suggests that the adoption of neoliberal modes of food provisioning should not be conceptualized as a coherently functioning, regime-like state but rather as an uneven and contradictory process.

Within the neoliberal food security paradigm, China plays an ambiguous role. Since its accession to the WTO in 2001, China has gradually liberalized its agriculture sector by opening its market to food imports and investments from foreign agribusinesses. However, at the same time, the state has taken active measures to limit the influence of global trade and multinational agribusinesses on domestic food production.³⁴ These state interventionist policies have been successful in maintaining high levels of domestic agricultural production. Despite China’s well-known role as the world’s largest importer of soybean, when taking into account the country’s overall trade balance in global grain markets, China, surprisingly, is not at present a major food importer.³⁵

Beyond the promotion and protection of domestic agricultural production, the state is also actively involved in strengthening China’s position as an actor within the global agri-food system. In recent years, state actors have designed support policies to encourage Chinese companies to invest in food and farming sectors abroad. Best known under the label of “agricultural ‘going out’ strategy”, the policy package offers guidance as well as (financial) support to SOEs and national champions seeking to invest in food and agricultural resources overseas. Aimed at securing global agri-food supply and value chains, China’s efforts to promote agricultural “going out” have been described by scholars as state-capitalist or (neo)mercantilist strategy in which state actors and state-related, economic entities cooperate closely to enhance China’s position within the power relations constituting the global agri-food system.³⁶ Following these accounts, China’s state capitalist strategy in the agri-food sector challenges the neoliberal food security paradigm in two important ways. First, direct investments in overseas agricultural resources and farmland by state-linked economic actors are seen to reduce China’s reliance on global agri-food markets, thereby effectively bypassing the agri-food trading system established under WTO rules—a strategy that has been termed “agro-security mercantilism”.³⁷ Second, support for government-favored actors to acquire agribusinesses, brands, and technology has allowed Chinese national firms to challenge the historical dominance of

30 G. Lawrence, “Re-evaluating Food Systems and Food Security: A Global Perspective”, *Journal of Sociology* (2017), pp. 1–23.

31 P. McMichael, “Food Security, Land, and Development”, in: J. Grugel, D. Hammett (eds.) *The Palgrave Handbook of International Development*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 675.

32 Otero, Pechlaner and Gürcan, “The Political Economy of ‘Food Security’ and Trade”, p. 267.

33 D. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 21.

34 M. Gaudreau, “State Food Security and People’s Food Sovereignty: Competing Visions of Agriculture in China”, *Canadian Journal of Development Studies* (2018); M. Schneider, “Dragon Head Enterprises and the State of Agribusiness in China”, *Journal of Agrarian Change* 17 (2017) 1, pp. 3–21.

35 Clapp, *Food*, p. 150. It should be noted that there is a complex relationship between China’s relative independence from agri-food markets and the skyrocketing growth in soybean imports. For an account on how China has achieved continued high levels of food self-sufficiency by sacrificing domestic soybean production see H. Yan, Y. Chen and H. B. Ku, “China’s Soybean Crisis: The Logic of Modernization and its Discontents”, *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 43 (2016) 2, pp. 373–395 and Schneider, “Developing the Meat Grab”, pp. 613–633.

36 Belesky and Lawrence, “Chinese State Capitalism”.

37 McMichael, “Land Grabbing as Security Mercantilism in International Relations”, pp. 47–64.

Western-dominated transnational agribusinesses, thereby reshaping relations of power in the global agri-food system.³⁸

Contestations around Agri-investments and Food Security as “Projects of Respatialization”

To analytically capture the dynamics transforming food security within the global agri-food system, this article focuses on the processes of (re-)spatialization that underpin the contestations around Chinese investments in food and farmland. It aims to conceptually link debates from agri-food studies on China’s emergence as global agri-food investor with a spatial lens that captures the “large-scale transformations of socio-spatial organization”³⁹ that have been restructuring geographies of capital accumulation and state regulation under conditions of intensified globalization. Arguably, such a spatial lens provides a productive analytical perspective through which to investigate how the socio-spatial relations of food security are continually transformed as new actors and constellations of power restructure relations of agri-food production, circulation, and consumption across diverse geographical sites and scales. Despite the apparent merits of applying a spatial perspective to the study of China’s emergence as a global agri-investor, agri-food studies have paid scant attention to the ways in which China’s agri-investments transform the socio-spatial organization of the agri-food system and, by extension, of food security. To address this gap, this paper conceptualizes China’s overseas agri-investments and the contestations they have generated in host countries as “projects of respatialization” that seek to reproduce, transform, or challenge the socio-spatial organization of food security.

To conceptually grasp such “projects of spatialization”, the actors and interests driving them, as well as the spatial outcomes they produce, this paper draws on a number of insights from socio-spatial theory.⁴⁰ Most fundamentally, perspectives developed in socio-spatial theory start from the assumption that the geographies in which human interactions unfold are a constitutive dimension of social relations. Rather than being a container in which social processes unfold, it is through social processes that space is produced, reconfigured, and transformed. In Smith’s succinct wording, “It is not that material and social events take place in ‘space and time’, rather that material and social events *make* the spaces and times they occupy.”⁴¹ Consequently, changes in social processes, practices, and relations that structure socioeconomic activities produce changes in the geographies underpinning these activities. This conceptualization of space is not only a dynamic one but also profoundly political in its character, turning space into both “a site and a stake of political strategies and struggles”.⁴² Second, much work in socio-spatial theory has explored these political struggles over space from the vantage point of capitalist development and has highlighted the state’s key role in shaping, managing, and maintaining spaces of capitalist growth and commodity exchange. Here, the state is seen as a strategic agent that facilitates capital accumulation through the use of diverse “spatial strategies” across a wide range of geographical sites and scales.⁴³ Third, and relatedly, these spaces of capitalist development are marked by a contradictory socio-spatial dialectic of de- and re-territorialization, continuously transforming the geographies of capitalist accumulation.⁴⁴ Following Brenner, capitalist development is characterized by an endemic drive towards geographical expansion or, in other words, de-territorialization. However, at the same time, capitalism relies on the production of territorial infrastructures for industrial production, transportation, communication, and consumption—a tendency of re-territorialization that gives rise to “relatively fixed, provisionally stabilized configurations of territorial organization on multiple geographical scales”.⁴⁵ While Brenner’s perspective focuses on general “tendencies” and “forces” of de- and re-territorialization, this paper positions concrete groups of state and corporate actors at the center of the

38 Keulertz and Woertz, “States as Actors in International Agro-Investments”, pp. 30–52.

39 Jessop, Brenner and Jones, “Theorizing Sociospatial Relations”, p. 390.

40 N. Brenner and S. Elden, “Henri Lefebvre on State, Space, Territory”, *International Political Sociology* 3 (2009), pp. 353–377; Jessop, Brenner and Jones, “Theorizing Sociospatial Relations”, pp. 389–401; Brenner, “Beyond State-Centrism?”, pp. 39–78.

41 N. Smith, “Remapping Area Knowledge: Beyond Global / Local”, in: T. Wesley-Smith, J. D. Goss (eds.), *Remaking Area Studies: Teaching and Learning Across Asia and the Pacific*, Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2010, p. 27.

42 Brenner and Elden, “Henri Lefebvre on State, Space, Territory”, p. 367.

43 Ibid.

44 Brenner, “Beyond State-Centrism?”, pp. 39–78.

45 Brenner, “Beyond State-Centrism?”, p. 43.

analysis to highlight how the dialectic between re- and de-territorialization is driven by multiple and often conflicting interests and goals, producing highly uneven and contingent outcomes.

Drawing on the conceptualization of “projects of respatialization” developed above, the neoliberal food security paradigm, then, can be conceived as a provisionally stable spatial configuration of places of production and consumption, flows of food, and access to natural resources that fix the social relations around the provisioning of food in spatial form. The socio-spatial relations of food security produce specific articulations between state power, access to resources, and profit opportunities—articulations that are continuously contested, reworked, and reconstituted by competing interests within the agri-food system. China’s emergence as a global agri-food actor—manifested by increasing overseas investment activities since the proclamation of China’s agricultural “going out” strategy in 2007—has further intensified struggles over the spatial organization of food security. These struggles have found their expression in competing projects of re-spatialization as host governments reposition themselves vis-à-vis Chinese agri-investments. These repositioning maneuvers involve spatial strategies on different scales, aimed at reshaping spaces of exchange, transforming capital and commodity flows, and strengthening boundaries and state control. In the Australian context, Chinese agri-investments have provoked contradictory responses, which seek at once to re-regulate inflows of foreign capital into Australian agriculture and to facilitate capital accumulation for Australian agribusiness at the global scale. While it is too early to ascertain the impact of these contestations on the neoliberal food security paradigm, it seems clear that China’s rise poses a major challenge to the current socio-spatial organization of food security. An analytical perspective that frames the current contestations around Chinese agri-investments in the Australian context as projects of spatialization can help to further elucidate the processes through which the spatialities of food security are being renegotiated within the historically and geographically specific context of contemporary Australia.

Evolving Conceptualizations of Food Security in China: From Self-sufficiency to Global Integration

Chinese framings of food security are traditionally grounded in the notion of “China feeding China”. Shaped by China’s unique political, economic and historical conditions, food security has acquired a specific meaning that emphasizes self-sufficiency (*ziji zizu*) in basic foodstuffs, with a central focus on the production of food grains. In the Chinese context, food self-sufficiency has historically been viewed as essential for establishing the political and symbolic legitimacy of the Chinese state.⁴⁶ With memories of China’s last big famine during the Great Leap Forward (1959–1961) still fresh on policy-makers’ minds, self-sufficiency has become a political imperative of China’s food security strategy. As president Xi Jinping emphasized at a policy meeting of the Central Rural Work Conference in December 2013, “[the] rice bowl of the Chinese people must be held firmly in our own hands. Our rice bowl should be filled primarily with Chinese cereals.”⁴⁷

China’s emphasis on food self-sufficiency is also a reaction to the international discourse that constructs China as a threat to global food security. Since the mid-1990s, under pressure from the “who will feed China” debate, the Chinese state implemented a series of policies aimed at increasing domestic production of basic staple grains. Policy measures included government-set output targets, price support programs, tax reductions targeted at agricultural producers, farmer subsidies, as well as the creation of a grain “buffer stock” and reserve system to balance domestic supply and demand.⁴⁸ In a 1996 white paper titled “The Grain Issue in China”, the State Council established a 95 per cent baseline of domestic staple grain production, thus demonstrating to the world China’s commitment to feeding itself.

46 Zhang and Cheng, “China’s Food Security Strategy Reform”, pp. 23–41.

47 People’s Daily, Zhongguoren de fanwan yao duan zai ziji shouli – baozhang lianghsi anquan he shehui wending [Chinese People’s Rice Bowls Must Be in their Own Hands – Safeguarding Food Security and Social Stability], 2014, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2014/1125/c390916-26091764.html> (accessed 20 September 2018).

48 A. Kuteleva, “China’s Food Security Situation: Key Issues and Implications for Canada”, 2016, <https://cloudfront.ualberta.ca/-/media/china/media-gallery/research/occasional-papers/food-securityanna-kuteleva201604.pdf> (accessed 9 October 2017).

The basic principle for solving the problem of grain supply and demand in China is to rely on the domestic resources and basically achieve self-sufficiency in grain. China endeavors to increase its grain production so that its self-sufficiency rate of grain under normal conditions will be above 95 percent and the net import rate five percent, or even less, of the total consumption quantity.⁴⁹

Policy measures to increase domestic output have achieved notable outcomes. Between 2003–2013, grain production increased by 40 per cent and reached the target of 500 million metric tons for 2010 set by the Chinese government.⁵⁰ China's success in feeding itself is widely recognized by analysts, commentators, and international organizations. Indeed, in publications of the World Bank, China is routinely praised for its "impressive gains" in agricultural output and their unprecedented role in rural poverty reduction and development.⁵¹ China's agricultural success is also a source of pride for the Chinese government. Official discourses do not only stress the significance of China's agricultural output growth for the goal of eradicating extreme poverty at home and transforming China into a "moderately prosperous" society by 2020, but also emphasize the global dimension of China's domestic agricultural achievements. For example, in a 2004 report titled "On the State of China's Food Security" the Chinese Ministry of Agriculture (MoA)⁵² contends that:

[...] China is confident and capable of securing food security by relying on its own resources, and will continue to strengthen exchanges and cooperation with various countries in the world, making new and greater contribution to the world food security.⁵³

However, over the past few years, cracks in China's self-sufficiency narrative have appeared. Today, Chinese officials commonly acknowledge that growing food demand, natural resource constraints, and agricultural liberalization mandated by China's accession to the WTO in 2001 have resulted in a surge of imports that call into question China's long-held principle of food self-sufficiency. China has been a net importer of grains since 2004, and demand for vegetable oils, meat and dairy products, as well as agri-industrial raw materials has also increased significantly.⁵⁴ Importantly, it is not simply growth in demand that has resulted in an increase of imports but rather changes in the structure of demand, reflected in an ongoing process of the "meatification" of Chinese diets, described by Schneider.⁵⁵ Schneider demonstrates how growth in domestic meat consumption and the concomitant need for animal feed stuffs propelled Chinese officials to liberalize the import of feed grains, and particularly soy. As a result, imports of soybeans have soared, turning China from an erstwhile net exporter of soybeans into the world's largest soybean importer.

In response to these developments, China's framing of food security is shifting from a focus on national self-sufficiency to a narrative that emphasizes the use of "two markets, two resources" (*liang ge shichang, liang zhong ziyuan*). The "two markets, two resources" approach, officially promulgated since December 2013 in the government's "new food security strategy" (*liangshi anquan xin zhanlüe*), re-conceptualizes China's food security as being premised on national production supplemented by international imports. As a 2014 strategy report on "China's Food Security and Agricultural Going Out" explains, China must give up its long-cherished imperative of self-sufficiency in favor of a dual approach that combines continued domestic production increases with growing imports from global agri-food markets.⁵⁶ In subsequent years, the

49 China State Council, *Zhongguo de liangshi wenti* [The Grain Issue in China], Beijing (1996), www.china.org.cn/e-white/grainissue/index.htm (accessed 8 October 2017).

50 F. Gale, J. Hansen and M. Jewison, "China's Growing Demand for Agricultural Imports", EIB-136, 2015, www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=43940 (accessed 10 April 2017).

51 World Bank, "World Bank Development Report 2008: Agriculture for Development", Washington, D.C., 2008.

52 In March 2018, following the first session of the Thirteenth National People's Congress, the Ministry of Agriculture was transformed into the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs. The new government department is largely a replacement of its predecessor and bundles a number of additional agriculture-related responsibilities formerly situated within the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Land Resources, and the Ministry of Water Resources.

53 MoA, "Report on the State of China's Food Security", Beijing (2004), emphasis added.

54 Gale, Hansen and Jewison, "China's Growing Demand for Agricultural Imports".

55 Schneider, "Developing the Meat Grab", pp. 613–633.

56 J. Han, "Zhongguo liangshi anquan yu nongye zouchuqu zhanlüe yanjiu" [China Food Security and Agricultural Going Out Strategy Research], Beijing: Zhongguo Fazhan Chubanshe [China Development Press], 2014.

“new food security strategy” has been reiterated in a series of Number One Policy Documents⁵⁷ and is also reflected in China’s thirteenth Five-Year Plan.⁵⁸

Despite acknowledging the role of imports for domestic food security, China’s stance towards the global agri-food market is marked by deep contradictions. On the one hand, officials have advocated the global market as a mechanism for the rational allocation of global resources that should be harnessed to alleviate the pressure on domestic resources and to stabilize domestic supply and demand. Such a view is expressed by Finance Minister Lou Jiwei, who, in a widely publicized address at Tsinghua University, openly questioned the logic of self-sufficiency and urged the Chinese government to reduce protectionist measures and boost imports instead.⁵⁹ Arguing that protectionist measures have distorted domestic food prices and hampered China’s agri-industrial modernization, Lou presents growing reliance on international food markets as an unavoidable step in China’s development process. Similarly, speaking at the 2016 High Level Food Security Forum in Beijing, Gao Tiesheng, former director at the State Administration of Grain, called on Chinese policy-makers to “promote liberalization and facilitation of global food trade and eliminate unreasonable protectionism and trade frictions”.⁶⁰ Increasing liberalization of food trade is also warmly welcomed by China’s agri-businesses who are keen to capture larger profits from international agri-food markets. For example, Ning Gaoning, former CEO of China’s largest state-owned agri-food company COFCO, and Liu Yonghao, chairman of the privately-owned agribusiness giant New Hope Group, have both been outspoken advocates of free trade policies, repeatedly urging the government to give up protectionist policies.⁶¹ On the other hand, there is a deep-seated distrust in the global agri-food system and the neoliberal principles that govern it. Chinese officials consider the global agri-food market as unreliable and poorly constructed, tightly controlled by Western-based multinational food companies, and serving mainly the interests of the food exporting countries of the Global North rather than those of the countries reliant on food imports.⁶² They worry that an uncontrolled surge of imports will lead to a decline in domestic production and harm the interests of Chinese farmers unable to compete with cheap imports from highly mechanized and subsidized food exporting regions such as the US and Canada or Europe. To protect its domestic farm sector, China negotiated a tariff rate quota (TRQ) system under its accession protocol to the WTO. The TRQ system limits the quantities of food staples such as wheat, rice, and corn that can be imported by assigning high tariffs to food grain imports outside of an annually designated quota, set at approximately five percent of annual consumption.⁶³ Ironically, the TRQ system is also hurting the interests of Chinese companies that have invested in overseas food production but failed to obtain a large enough share of the annual quota from the government, as has been pointed out in an analysis by researchers from the China Academy of Agricultural Sciences.⁶⁴

Against this background, numerous commentators and scholars have called on Chinese state and corporate actors to enhance China’s position in the global food system.⁶⁵ This proposition is rooted in the belief that China should leverage its growing geopolitical weight to reshape the structures, patterns, and power

57 “Policy Document Number One” is the name traditionally given to the first policy statement released by the central government each year and is seen as an indicator of policy priorities. The document traditionally focuses on agricultural and rural issues.

58 China State Council, “2014 nian zhongyang yi hao wenjian” [2014 Policy Document No. 1], Beijing (2013), www.moa.gov.cn/ztlz/ghwj/2015/wjhj_1/201502/t20150202_4378630.htm (accessed 9 October 2017); China State Council, “2015 nian zhongyang yi hao wenjian” [2015 Policy Document No. 1], Beijing (2014), www.moa.gov.cn/ztlz/2016zyghwj/hgyghwj/201603/t20160304_5039590.htm (accessed 9 October 2017); China State Council, “2016 nian zhongyang yi hao wenjian” [2016 Policy Document No. 1], Beijing (2015), www.xinhuanet.com/2016-01/27/c_1117916568.htm (accessed 9 October 2017); National People’s Congress, “The Thirteenth Five-Year Plan for Economic Development of the People’s Republic of China”, Beijing (2016).

59 J. Lou, “Lou Jiwei Qinghua Daxue yanjiang: woguo keneng huaru zhongdeng shouru xianjing” [Lou Jiwei Gives Talk at Tsinghua University: China Risks Getting Stuck in Middle Income Trap], 2015, <http://finance.sina.com.cn/china/20150501/135822089571.shtml> (accessed 11 October 2017).

60 T. Hong and H. Fu, “Zhongguo liangshi anquan fazhan baogao 2015–2016” [China Food Security Development Report 2015–2016], Beijing: Jingji Guanli Chubanshe [Economic Management Press], 2017, p. 183.

61 S. Antonioli and D. Zhdannikov, “China’s COFCO to Enter Global Grain Super-League with Listing”, 2015, www.reuters.com/article/us-cofco-ipo-idUSKBN0NC22H20150421 (accessed 26 September 2018).

62 Zhang and Cheng, “China’s Food Security Strategy Reform”, pp. 23–41.

63 Gale, Hansen and Jewison, “China’s Growing Demand for Agricultural Imports”.

64 Y. Wang and X. Wang, “Nongye zouchuqu, zou de kuai hai yao zou de wen” [Agricultural “going out” should be both fast and steady], 2017, http://theory.gmw.cn/2017-05/18/content_24514913.htm (accessed 10 October 2017).

65 CASS, “Zhongguo yanghuo Zhongguo de liangshi anquan xin zhanlüe” [“China feeds China”: The New Food Security Strategy], 2014, www.cssn.cn/sf/bwsf_jj/201408/t20140811_1286004.shtml (accessed 23 September 2018); X. Ye, “Zhunque bawo guojia liangshi anquan de si ge xin bianhua” [Correctly Grasp Four New Changes in the National Food Security Strategy], 2014, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2014/0117/c83865-24152538.html> (accessed 21 May 2018).

relations of global agri-food trade in ways that better reflect China's own interests. Agricultural investment abroad, also referred to as agricultural "going out" (*nongye "zouchuqu"*), plays a crucial role in this regard. Agricultural "going out" involves nurturing internationally competitive agribusinesses through overseas investments in farmland, food production, processing, storage, and transportation facilities. Supported by policies such as subsidized loans, credit guarantees, information services for investment opportunities, and training courses,⁶⁶ state-owned enterprises as well as China's national champions and competitive private agribusiness firms are encouraged to gain control over global food supply and value chains, while simultaneously reducing China's dependence on Western-dominated agri-TNCs. State officials and researchers emphasize that agricultural "going out" goes beyond the acquisition overseas farmland for agricultural production. For example, an analysis by the Foreign Economic Research Center (FECC) of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs on Chinese agri-investments in Asia highlights that the goals associated with China's agricultural "going out" range from the acquisition of productive agricultural resources to the promotion of supply chain integration and the nurturing of internally competitive agribusinesses.⁶⁷ Indeed, increasing concerns about the difficulties associated with and limited benefits of overseas farming have led some state authorities to call on Chinese agri-investors to focus on "becoming traders rather than farmers" and invest in agri-businesses and assets higher up the agricultural value chain.⁶⁸

State-owned COFCO is a prominent example of the ways in which agricultural "going out" has been employed to reconfigure value chains and power relations in the agri-food system. Through a series of strategic asset acquisitions between 2014 and 2016, COFCO has emerged as one of the world's largest grain traders. Due to its acquisitions, COFCO now operates a fully integrated global agri-food supply chain, including processing capabilities, logistics, and distribution channels and commands a substantial share in the global grain market.⁶⁹ Hence, agricultural "going out" is meant to effect a shift from the passive import of agricultural products to the active reshaping of power and control in agri-food trade.

Beyond the attempt to reconfigure physical infrastructures and material flows of food, Chinese officials are eager to enhance China's "discursive power" (*huayuquan*) in the global agri-food system. In the Chinese context, "discursive power" is understood as the ability to influence the norms, rules, and discourses that determine how food security is understood and acted upon by actors in the global agri-food system. With respect to global commodity markets, "discursive power" denotes the influence different groups of actors have on the market institutions that determine global commodity prices and trade flows.⁷⁰ To gain influence in international debates on how to address issues of global food insecurity Chinese officials have highlighted the significance of agricultural diplomacy (*nongye wajiao*) in China's international relations.⁷¹ By framing China's growing presence in the global food system as a win-win that brings mutual benefits through the sharing of experiences, technologies, as well as through the promotion of what Chinese state actors perceive to be fairer and more rational agricultural trade rules, agricultural diplomacy initiatives seek to legitimize Chinese agri-investments in overseas food and farming sectors. Importantly, Chinese state actors emphasize that overseas agricultural engagement will not necessarily increase food imports to China. Rather, they argue, by enhancing agricultural output and productivity of the places where China invests,

66 Gale, Hansen and Jewison, "China's Growing Demand for Agricultural Imports".

67 FECC, "Woguo duiwai nongye touzi de mubiao yu renwu" [The Goal and Task of China's Foreign Agricultural Investment], 2017, www.fecc.agri.cn/ggxxfu/ggxxfw_zcfg/201704/t20170412_264884.html (accessed 12 October 2017).

68 C. Wang, "Zhongguo nongye 'zouchuqu' chulu zai nali? Zuo 'liangshang' er bu shi zuo 'nongmin'" [Where is the road to China's agricultural 'going out'? Becoming traders rather than farmers], 2013, www.ceweekly.cn/2013/1223/71657.shtml (accessed 16 November 2017).

69 Belesky and Lawrence, "Chinese State Capitalism".

70 "Huayuquan" is a term used in Chinese policy circles to refer to the ability to lead, guide, and influence international debate. The term is closely connected with discussions about China's lack of influence on international commodity markets (Cf. D. Murphy, "Huayuquan 话语权: Speak and Be Heard", in: G. R. Barmé, L. Jaivin, J. Goldkorn (eds.), *China Story Yearbook 2014: Shared Destiny*, Acton, AU: ANU Press, 2015, pp. 52–57). Within the field of agri-food studies, Yan et al. render the term in English as "discursive power". The authors highlight China's lack of "discursive power" in the soybean sector, i.e. China's lack of influence on the pricing of soybeans despite being the world's largest soybean importer (cf. Yan, Chen and Ku, "China's Soybean Crisis", p. 385).

71 Farmer's Daily, "Zhongguo nongye wajiao mai ru xin shidai" [China's Agricultural Diplomacy Enters New Era], 2017, www.farmer.com.cn/xwpd/btxw/201712/t20171226_1346122.htm (accessed 23 March 2018).

Chinese investment can help stabilize prices and boost global food security.⁷² This view neatly summarizes the scalar shift that has transformed state strategies towards China's food security. While earlier state strategies operated at the national scale, arguing that China can best serve the world by taking care of its own needs, their scale of operation is now extended to the global level and legitimized by a logic claiming that China's needs create new opportunities for the world.

Australian Responses: Renegotiating Chinese Agri-investments and Food Security

The re-scaling of China's food security strategy is transforming socio-spatial relations across other geographical sites and scales and have produced diverse conflicts and struggles. Within the Australian context, the broader theme of "who will feed China" has become closely linked with debates over China's growing agri-investments and their implications for agricultural power relations, profit opportunities, and the established norms and principles governing agri-food trade.

China's growing interest in Australian food and farming is embedded in a longer history of Australian "resource booms" ushered in by China's demand for overseas resources as the country maintains high economic growth rates and industrial development. While earlier resource demand was primarily focused on minerals, there has been a recent shift towards food and agricultural resources. Today, China is not only Australia's most important export market for food and agricultural products but also Australia's second largest foreign owner of farmland as well as second largest source of foreign direct investment in the agribusiness sector.⁷³ Accounting firm PwC has enthusiastically labelled this transformation a "dining boom" that will turn "milk, beef, wheat and wine [into] Australia's new iron ore".⁷⁴ Viewed from this perspective, China's demand for Australian agricultural resources and the concomitant rise in China's agri-investments form a virtuous cycle. Enthusiasts point to the historical relationship between overseas funding and the growth of Australian agricultural exports to argue that China can provide much-needed capital that will help expand Australian agricultural production and increase food trade between the two countries, thereby making a contribution to food security for China and the world. Increases in food production and trade, conveniently, will also increase profits for the Australian food and agriculture sector. Where the "dining boom" perspective sees reasons for optimism and profits, critics warn that Chinese agri-investments shift patterns of ownership and control in ways that are harmful to Australia's interests. Such voices are concerned about "strategic investments" by the Chinese government and its associated entities in the name of food security. Such investments, critics insist, pose the risk of turning Australia into an overseas production base, enabling the Chinese government to exploit Australia's resource wealth with little or no benefits to the Australian economy.

While Australian debates about China's food security and related agri-investments have provoked contradictory responses, they start from the shared premise that the future of global food supplies is insecure and that Australia has a key role to play in the future landscape of global food security. At the center of this notion is an often-quoted estimate: in order to feed the population of 9 billion people estimated to inhabit the planet by 2050, food production will have to grow by 70 per cent. This argument forms the basis of much of Australian policy thinking on food security and has been widely reproduced in reports, analyses, and white papers. For example, one analysis of Australia's role in global food security, published

72 H. Song, "Nongye 'zouchuqu' qiye ruhe zou wen zou hao?" [How to Help Improve China's Agricultural "going out"?], 2014, http://szb.farmer.com.cn/nmrb/html/2014-05/01/nw.D110000nmrb_20140501_2-03.htm?div=-1 (accessed 9 October 2017); X. Chen, "2012 nian Zhongguo nongye fazhan gao ceng luntan zai Zhongguo Nongye Daxue zhaokai" [2012 China Agricultural Development Forum Held in China Agricultural University], 2012, <http://finance.chinanews.com/cj/2012/05-23/3909375.shtml> (accessed 9 October 2017).

73 According to the Register of Foreign Ownership of Agricultural Land, China now beneficially owns 9.1 million hectares of Australian Farmland (Australian Taxation Office, Register of Foreign Ownership of Agricultural Land: Report of Registrations as at 30 June 2017 [2017]). In terms of overall agricultural foreign investment in the food and farming sector, China's proposed investments for 2015/16 stood at a cumulative \$996 million (Foreign Investment Review Board, Annual Report 2015–16 [2017]). The annually published investment report by the Foreign Investment Review Board (FIRB) and, particularly, the more recently established Land Register aim to increase transparency around foreign investment in Australian agriculture. However, there remains much debate about the scope and quality of the data made available in these publications as well as the ways in which these should be interpreted.

74 PwC Australia, "The Dining Boom", www.pwc.com.au/agendas/food-trust/dining-boom.html (accessed 10 October 2018).

by the Prime Minister's Science Engineering and Innovation Council,⁷⁵ argues that the combined pressures of increasing global demand and growing land and water scarcity will require farmers worldwide to produce "more from less". Importantly, growing demand is not only driven by population growth but also by a change in developing countries to more meat-based diets. As the report explains, although Australia only accounts for three percent of global food production, it is amongst the net food exporting nations in the world and is well positioned to make an important contribution to this task. Indeed, pressures to increase global food production may present a "great opportunity for Australia to become a world leader in food security",⁷⁶ the report ambitiously proclaims. The key solutions the report proposes to tackle the daunting task of producing more from less critically hinge on the development of new technologies, agricultural intensification, and the promotion of free markets and trade—a set of "productivist" answers long-practiced within Australia's neoliberal agricultural policy framework.⁷⁷

Other reports produced by government-related research departments have investigated the geography of future food security. In a series of publications by the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Science (ABARES), researchers have modelled scenarios of future world food prices, production, and trade. These reports show that geographies of future food security are highly uneven, with most of the expected growth in demand to occur in Asia, and, more specifically, in China.⁷⁸ In a study on China's expected food demand, ABARES projects an increase in the real value of China's food consumption of 104 per cent, with consumption of high value products such as beef, dairy, sheep and goat meat, as well as sugar projected to rise the most as incomes increase and China's urban middle classes move towards more Western-style diets.⁷⁹ While the report expects China's domestic production of agri-food products to grow, increases in production are estimated to be smaller than increases in projected consumption. As a result, a portion of the demand, specifically for dairy products, beef, sheep and goat meat, as well as oilseeds are projected to be met by imports, creating "significant" opportunities for food exporting nations such as Australia.⁸⁰ The representation of global food security as an economic opportunity for Australia is widely reflected in policy papers, reports, and speeches of Australian governments across the entire political spectrum. A white paper on "Australia in the Asian Century", produced in 2012 under the Gillard Labor Government, proclaimed that "Australia is well placed to capture a healthy share of growing [food] markets"⁸¹; at a press conference on the release of a joint Australia-China study entitled "Feeding the Future", former Minister for Trade and Competitiveness Craig Emerson hailed Australia's potential "to *contribute* to this great humanitarian challenge [of food security] and to *benefit* from that contribution";⁸² and an "Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper" by the Liberal-National Coalition Government stated that "future growth in global demand presents a significant opportunity for Australian agriculture, as populations and incomes increase in developing countries. [...] As a net agricultural and food exporting country, we can, and must, capture a greater share of the growing demand in our region."⁸³ In these accounts, food security is framed in the neoliberal language of markets, individual purchasing power, and accumulation opportunities for agri-food exporters. Although Australia does not have the capacity to satisfy all of the food demand growth projected for the region, it has a reputation for producing high-quality and safe products for which it can command a premium price. "[Australia] may never be the food bowl of all of Asia, but [it does] have an opportunity to be its favourite delicatessen".⁸⁴

Seizing new market opportunities from growing Asian food demand, however, requires increases in productivity and output. A widely quoted study by the Australia and New Zealand Bank (ANZ) claims that be-

75 PMSEIC, "Australia and Food Security in a Changing World", Canberra (2010).

76 PMSEIC, "Australia and Food Security in a Changing World", p. 9.

77 G. Lawrence, C. Richards and K. Lyons, "Food Security in Australia in an Era of Neoliberalism, Productivism and Climate Change", *Journal of Rural Studies* 29 (2013), pp. 30–39.

78 V. Linehan, S. Thorpe, N. Andrews, K. Yeon, F. Beaini, "Food Demand to 2050: Opportunities for Australian Agriculture", Canberra (2012).

79 P. Hamshere, Y. Sheng, B. Moir, F. Syed, Faraz, C. Gunning-Trant, "What China Wants: Analysis of China's Food Demand to 2050", Canberra (2014).

80 *Ibid.*, pp. 1–2.

81 Australian Government, "Australia in the Asian Century: White Paper", Canberra (2012), p. 221.

82 C. Emerson, "Press Conference on the Release of 'Feeding the Future': Transcript", Canberra (2012), https://trademinister.gov.au/transcripts/Pages/2012/ce_tr_121220.aspx?w=GyLX0mNSz4nLQKYuPOSgLQ%3D%3D (accessed 10 October 2018), emphasis added.

83 Australian Government, "Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper", Canberra (2015), p. 118.

84 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

tween 2011 and 2050 Australia stands to capture another \$0.7 to \$1.7 trillion in additional revenues from agricultural exports linked to growing global food demand.⁸⁵ “Seizing the prize”, however, will not happen of its own accord. According to the study, capital investments of about \$600 billion by 2050 are needed to achieve the levels of productivity, output, and competitiveness required to tap into increased global demand. Naturally, commentators agree, agricultural investment cannot rely on domestic sources of capital alone. Indeed, there is widespread agreement that, as a small and open economy, Australia has always relied on foreign investment to develop its economy and make up for its shortfall of domestic savings.⁸⁶ In other words, with the sum of total national savings being less than the amount of investment required in the economy, foreign investment is considered a crucial source of funding to fill the gap.⁸⁷ Conversely, this widespread view of foreign investment considers a lack thereof as a serious drawback for economic growth and development in Australia. As an article by the Australian Farm Institute (AFI) on the role of foreign investment for the farming sector put it, “in the absence of this overseas funding, interest rates would have been much higher, major economic developments [...] would have been severely constrained or delayed, and the nation as a whole would be much worse off”.⁸⁸

While there is widespread agreement on Australia’s need for foreign investment, not all sources of capital appear to be equal. Agri-investments from China have proved to be a particularly contentious issue. For supporters, Chinese investment is just another source of funding that follows the same logic as earlier agri-investment waves, starting with Great Britain in the nineteenth century, the US in the 1960s, and Japan through the late 1980s.⁸⁹ Supporters of Chinese agri-investments also emphasize the inherent complementary of Chinese and Australian interests. The “Joint Australia-China Report on Strengthening Investment and Technological Cooperation in Agriculture to Enhance Food Security”, for example, defines Australia and China as “natural partners for collaboration” who “share a common interest in ensuring food security nationally, regionally and globally”.⁹⁰ By bringing land, capital, and know-how together, the report asserts, both countries can make an important contribution to global food security.⁹¹ The report emphasizes the potential of Chinese investment to achieve the improvements in productivity and productive capacity seen as indispensable for addressing the challenge of food security and underlines the commitment of both partners to a vision of food security premised on efficient global markets, free trade, and a logic of commercialization.

The views expressed by the report have not remained a pure intellectual exercise but have found their expression in distinct institutional and regulatory arrangements. In 2015, presumably in response to the report’s emphasis on northern Australia’s development potential as an area with “large tracts of unused or under-utilized land”,⁹² the Australian government launched a large-scale policy initiative to develop Northern Australia. The initiative imagines northern Australia as an “agricultural powerhouse” which could be developed to be “on par with Brazil’s Cerrado”.⁹³ To realize this vision, the government has put support policies in place, organized a series of investment forums aimed at attracting foreign investment, and produced numerous publications of “investor ready projects”.⁹⁴ The initiative stresses the importance of Chinese capital investments into large-scale water and soil projects, which are seen as key to stimulate development. An often-quoted “success story” of this type of collaboration is the Chinese property conglomerate Shanghai Zhongfu, which has invested in establishing a 40,000 hectare integrated agricultural industrial hub along

85 ANZ, “The Global Soft Commodity Opportunity for Australia and New Zealand”, ANZ Focus: Greener Pastures, (2012).

86 K. Sanyal, “Foreign Investment in Australian Agriculture”, 2014 http://apo.org.au/files/Resource/ParliamentaryLibrary_ForeignInvestmentInAustralianAgriculture_Feb_2014.pdf (accessed 11 July 2016); B. Moir, “Foreign Investment and Australian Agriculture”, Canberra (2011).

87 For a discussion how assumptions about the need for foreign capital have shaped Australian debates about agricultural investment from both state-led and finance-backed actors, see S. R. Sippel, “Financialising Farming as a Moral Imperative? Renegotiating the Legitimacy of Land Investments in Australia”, *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 50 (2018) 3, pp. 549–568; S. R. Sippel, “Food Security or Commercial Business?: Gulf State Investments in Australian Agriculture”, *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 42 (2015) 5, pp. 981–1001.

88 M. Keogh and A. Tomlinson, “Australia Has an Open Door for Foreign Investment, But Voters Hold the Key”, *Australian Farm Institute’s Quarterly Newsletter* 11, (2014) 1, p. 2.

89 Ibid.

90 Australian Government, “Feeding the Future: A Joint Australia–China Report on Strengthening Investment and Technological Cooperation in Agriculture to Enhance Food Security”, Canberra (2012), p. 6.

91 Ibid., p. iii.

92 Ibid.

93 Australian Government, “Our North, Our Future: White Paper on Developing Northern Australia” (2015), p. 56.

94 Ibid., p. 11.

the Ord River irrigation area aimed at sugar production.⁹⁵ “Joint interests” have been further institutionalized in the China–Australia Free Trade Agreement (ChAFTA) that seeks to facilitate two-way trade and investment. According to business analysts, the agreement is expected to stimulate Chinese investment in a number of key, including agricultural production and food processing.⁹⁶

However, not all see reasons for optimism. Where the joint report frames China as a partner whose investments strengthen the commercial and market-based logic underpinning Australian framings of food security, Chinese agri-investments have also provoked opposition and fear. These concerns have given rise to numerous Senate inquiries into the ways in which Chinese agri-investment, and foreign investment more broadly, touches on aspects of food security. A key inquiry in this regard was a Senate-mandated examination of foreign investment into Australia’s agriculture sector by the Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee (RRATRC) conducted from July 2011 to June 2013.⁹⁷ In its final report,⁹⁸ the committee argues that increasing challenges arising from global food security are reflected in a growing trend by foreign governments and their associated entities to invest in Australian agriculture for food security purposes. Such investments, the report continues, undermine the neoliberal principles of open markets and free trade upon which Australia’s contribution to global food security is premised. In the words of the committee,

*[...] foreign investment in Australia [should] be based on commercial motives and not strategic concerns of foreign governments about food security. Australia will not have the capability to effectively contribute to the future global food task if its agricultural capital and trading markets are distorted by foreign government-owned companies who invest in Australian agriculture but do not participate in the market on a genuinely commercial basis.*⁹⁹

Countries such as China and the Arab Gulf States face particular scrutiny. As nations who are perceived to face high levels of food insecurity, they are considered to be highly incentivized to use their Australian investments as production bases to provide food to the home country, especially in times of food crisis.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, state-owned commercial entities such as sovereign wealth funds and state-owned enterprises are the object of much controversial debate. There is concern that such entities might not act in the same way as private investors. Indeed, an earlier inquiry into the role of SOEs in foreign investment, led by the Economics References Committee, argued that state-led entities “may be more explicitly political in their behaviour and may seek to exert influence in ways that extend beyond seeking to protect their investment.”¹⁰¹

In the Chinese case, however, distrust also extends to private investors, which are often seen as being enmeshed in state-led strategies. For example, during the RRATRC’s investigation into Australia’s foreign investment regime, one of the investment cases closely scrutinized by the committee involved the acquisition of iconic cotton farm Cubbie Station by private Chinese company Shandong Ruyi and its Australian minority partner Lempriere. As the largest irrigated agricultural property in Australia, the 2012 sale of Cubbie Station to an investment consortium led by Chinese interests triggered an intense debate and was further examined by the committee in a public hearing. Originally a state-owned company, Shandong Ruyi was privatized in 2001 as part of a wave of SOE privatization in the 1990s and early 2000s aimed at increasing efficiency and profitability in the state-owned sector. Despite the fact that Shandong Ruyi retains no discernible government links and operates Cubbie Station together with its Australian minority partner Lempriere, the committee’s concerns about the potential non-commercial nature of the investment promoted Lempriere’s managing director to testify before the committee that “[...] we have every incentive to maximize the profitability of this business within Australia and every intention.”¹⁰² Thus, the RRATRC report reflects a fundamentally different interpretation of the nature and goals of Chinese agri-investments than the voices

95 Australian Government, “Northern Australia: Emerging Opportunities in an Advanced Economy” (2015).

96 KPMG, “China Outlook 2015”, Sydney (2015).

97 See Sippel, “Food Security or Commercial Business?”, pp. 981–1001. For a detailed account of the RRATRC senate inquiry and its implications for Australia’s foreign investment regime.

98 RRATRC, Foreign Investment and the National Interest, Canberra (2013).

99 RRATRC, Foreign Investment and the National Interest, Canberra (2013), p. 11.

100 Ibid., pp. 107–108.

101 ERC, Foreign Investment by State-Owned Entities, Canberra, Australia (2009), p. 47.

102 RRATRC, “Foreign Investment and the National Interest”, p. 61.

unconditionally welcoming Chinese investment. Rather than framing Chinese agri-investments as complementary to Australia's interests as a leader in global food security, investments are seen as undermining the neoliberal modes of food provisioning defining Australia's approach to global food security. In other words, by *growing* their own food *in* Australia rather than *buying* their food *from* Australia, Chinese agri-investors challenge the neoliberal principles upon which Australia's framing of global food security is premised.

These debates have produced particular material-institutional outcomes. In May 2015, the Australian government announced a new set of policies aimed at strengthening Australia's foreign investment regime. The package included measures to increase scrutiny of agricultural investment by lowering the screening threshold and to improve transparency through a register of ownership of foreign farmland. The land register was seen as a crucial step towards strengthening the monitoring and information-gathering capacities of the state. By requiring foreign investors to register farmland investments—irrespective of size and value—the register is supposed to provide an adequate database to assess the extent of foreign farmland ownership and inform future policy change. Additionally, the lower screening threshold requires all investments in agricultural land exceeding the cumulative value of \$15 million and investments of \$55 million and above in agribusiness to receive approval from the Foreign Investment Review Board (FIRB). For government-owned investors such as SOEs, a zero-dollar-threshold applies, i.e. all investments regardless of investment value must be assessed by the FIRB.¹⁰³

Australia's revised investment regime can be interpreted as a selective reversal of the neoliberal policies that have defined its stance towards foreign investment.¹⁰⁴ However, the debates about Chinese agri-investments and their implications for food security are ongoing. Recent inquiries into the foreign investment review framework and Australian agricultural regulation by the Senate Economics References Committee (ERC) and the Australian Productivity Commission (PC), respectively, have voiced concerns that tightened investment regulations may deter investment and increase the cost and complexity of investing in Australian agriculture.¹⁰⁵ Foreign investment, the ERC finds, is a "complex and constantly changing policy area" that requires Australian government to strike a "balance between securing the benefits of such investments without jeopardising Australia's long term strategic interests".¹⁰⁶

Within Chinese business and policy circles, many have voiced their apprehension regarding the heightened scrutiny around Chinese agri-investments. As has been reported in a number of business studies, Chinese actors feel that their investments have been unfairly singled out for criticism and that the recent changes in Australia's investment regime have undermined the Australian government's efforts to promote an international image of a good investment environment.¹⁰⁷ The material consequences of Australia's tightening of investment regulations for levels of Chinese agri-investments, however, remain much debated. While, so far, there has been only one case in which the screening process resulted in the rejection of an agri-investment proposal by Chinese investors,¹⁰⁸ a number of government investors have failed to follow through on their highly publicized investment announcements, including China's sovereign wealth fund China Investment Corporation (CIC) and the Beijing–Australia Agriculture Resources Cooperative Development Fund, underwritten by capital from the Beijing local government.¹⁰⁹ At the same time, Chinese SOE

103 See FIRB, "Monetary Thresholds", 2018, <http://firb.gov.au/exemption-thresholds/monetary-thresholds> (accessed 22 September 2018). The zero threshold for SOEs was maintained in the recently negotiated China–Australia Free Trade Agreement despite China's hope to take advantage of FTA negotiations to relax investment restrictions and limitations applying to its SOEs. In contrast, the screening threshold for SOEs from Japan, South Korea, and the US—all of which have signed FTAs with Australia—is significantly higher at \$1,094 billion.

104 See also Sippel, "Food Security or Commercial Business?", pp. 981–1001.

105 ERC, "Foreign Investment Review Framework: Interim Report", Canberra (2016); PC, "Regulation of Australian Agriculture: Productivity Commission Draft Report", Canberra (2016).

106 ERC, "Foreign Investment Review Framework", p. 29.

107 CICIR, "Australia–China Bilateral Relations: Mixed Messages", 2015, <http://aus.thechinastory.org/australia-and-chinaa-joint-report-on-the-bilateral-relationship-with-cicir/australia-china-bilateral-relations-mixed-messages-2015/> (accessed 30 December 2016).

108 In a protracted, 20-month sales process of Australia's largest beef cattle company, S. Kidman and Co., between 2015 and 2016, the sale of the majority interests to a consortium of Chinese buyers was blocked twice by the FIRB, quoting national security concerns related to the enormous size of the property and its location in proximity to a weapon testing site. In December 2016, the company was eventually sold to Australian Outback Beef, an investor consortium led by Australian interests. Interestingly, the minority investor in Australian Outback Beef is Chinese property developer Shanghai CRED, who had also been involved in the previous, failed bids for Kidman. For a detailed summary see Sippel, "Financialising Farming as a Moral Imperative?", pp. 549–568.

109 Information obtained from interviews in Australia, 2017.

Beidahuang has announced plans to significantly downsize its investments in Western-Australian grain production, with some commentators speculating that this decision may have been provoked by the difficult investment climate and the fierce public opposition Beidahuang's investments have faced in Australia.¹¹⁰

At the same time, Chinese state and corporate actors have started to engage more proactively in the political debates around Chinese agri-investments, apparently seeking to better communicate their goals and intentions to the Australian public. To address the negative meanings associated with Chinese agri-investment some investors have begun to cultivate an image of partnership and cooperation. In a recent article in the state-owned newspaper outlet *Global Times*, the chairman of agri-business New Hope Group Liu Yonghao explained the group's Australian investment strategy: "I have found many investments made by Chinese enterprise in Australia, they have acquired this, they have acquired that, but... I think if we can develop with our Australian partners, isn't it much better?"¹¹¹ And undoubtedly, as New Hope Group's Australian chief executive officer Nick Dowling emphasizes, such partnerships will create commercial opportunities "where we [New Hope Group] can bring our resources and market access to give life to opportunities that business wouldn't otherwise have".¹¹² Furthermore, Chinese officials have begun to discursively fashion China as a "staunch champion of free trade".¹¹³ In the news coverage accompanying Premier Li Keqiang's 2017 visit to Australia, the rhetoric of free trade has been prominent, casting China and Australia as a "perfect example of how free trade has not led to a tit-for-tat combat, but generates handsome gains for both".¹¹⁴ With respect to the agricultural relationship between China and Australia, the goal of such rhetoric appears to be to cast China's food security within a global space promising profits and commercial gains for everyone—a story that might be hoped to resonate with the Australian framing of food security as being premised on open markets, free trade, and the commercial interests of corporate actors.

Conclusion: Chinese Agri-investments, Australian Responses, and the Spatial Reordering of Food Security

Since the publication of the World Watch Institute's report "Who will feed China?" questions about China's food security have exercised the minds of policy-makers, corporate actors, and commentators worldwide. Initially, this debate was focused on the implications of China's food security for the stability of international agri-food markets; however, since the 2007/08 global food price crisis and the subsequent global "land rush", debates have begun to coalesce around concerns over China's overseas agri-investments as the country emerges as a major investor in farmland and agricultural resources on a global scale.

This article has examined responses to Chinese agri-investments in the Australian context. It has shown how different discursive constructions of food security by Australian political and corporate actors have provoked contradictory material responses vis-à-vis Chinese agri-investments. While supporters see Chinese agri-investments as an opportunity for Australia's agriculture sector to increase production capacity and output, thereby enhancing Australia's position as a "world leader of food security", critics warn that the "non-commercial" character of Chinese agri-investments may undermine Australia's ability to "contribute to and benefit from" global food security. These different positions towards Chinese agri-investments have provoked ambivalent processes of both attracting and restricting the inflow of Chinese capital into the Australian agriculture sector.

In the context of these dynamics reshaping the global agri-food system, the main purpose of this paper has been to bring together debates about China's emergence as a global agri-investor with arguments from socio-spatial theory on the shifting relationships between state power, resource access, and capital accumulation under conditions of globalization. By focusing on the "projects of spatialization" pursued by state and corporate actors from both China and Australia, the paper offers an analytical perspective through which to investigate the transformative dynamics underpinning China's integration into the global agri-food

110 Information obtained from interviews in Australia, 2017.

111 *Global Times*, "New Hope Group Wants to Invest 1 Billion Dollars in Australia", 2017, www.globaltimes.cn/content/1031060.shtml (accessed 29 September 2018).

112 *Ibid.*

113 Xinhua Net, "Commentary: China, Australia Show how Free Trade Works for Mutual Gains", 2017, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-03/24/c_136155140.htm (accessed 28 September 2018).

114 *Ibid.*

system. More specifically, the paper has demonstrated how interpretations of Chinese agri-investments as government-led strategies of securing food supplies abroad have led to a partial reversal of Australia's adherence to neoliberal modes of food provisioning, which, in turn, has given rise to new territorial strategies aimed at strengthening state control over the inflow of foreign capital into the agriculture sector. As China has become involved in the production and stabilization of a food security regime on the global scale—vying for strategic access to global agricultural resources and fostering a domestic agri-food sector whose accumulation patterns are becoming increasingly globalized—concerns over the state-led characteristics of this strategy have provoked a protectionist response in Australia that has called into question established neoliberal principles such as the deregulation of foreign investment and the ability of cross-border capital to gain unrestricted access to Australia's agricultural resources. More concretely, by imposing new forms of monitoring, information-gathering, regulation, and control upon investment inflows, Australia's tightened investment regime allows state actors to selectively reject those sources of foreign investment that are perceived to be detrimental to Australia's interests as a "major contributor of global food security". Ironically, as Australia's unconditional embrace of neoliberal food politics is currently put into question, Chinese state and corporate actors have responded by rhetorically fashioning themselves as staunch supporters of free agri-food markets, trade, and investment and, hence, as desirable business partners according to Australia's own standards.

The emergence of new powerful actors in the agri-food system has provoked contestations over the socio-spatial organization of food security. In response to what is considered a challenge to Western states' dominant position in the global food system, host states such as Australia have begun to re-mobilize territorial strategies such as the strengthening of state control over inflows of foreign capital into agriculture, signaling an, at least, partial retreat from the neoliberal food security paradigm. Importantly though, this reversal does not fundamentally question a capitalist logic that links food security with profit maximization for dominant agri-exporters. Quite on the contrary, the contestations over Chinese agri-investments must be interpreted as an attempt to ensure continued capital accumulation and political power within an agri-food system transformed by continuing rounds of globalization and the emergence of new powerful actors. The case of Chinese agri-investments in Australia examined in this paper sheds light on how these dynamics play out within a specific geography of the food system and illuminates their transformative effects on the socio-spatial relations of food security.

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