

Politics of rural land acquisition in Africa: The evidence from Chinese agricultural investments in Tanzania and Zambia

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary processes of rural land acquisitions have been studied primarily through the lens of land grabbing and dispossession. Recent literature starts to emphasize the important and nuanced role of domestic institutions in shaping foreign land investment. This paper contributes to this scholarship by systematically analysing how subnational land tenure regimes (LTRs) shape the *locational* choices of Chinese agricultural investments (CAgrils). The analysis is based on an original case database of CAgrils in Tanzania and Zambia constructed using fieldwork data. I find that Chinese investors have significantly stronger preference for a private property regime where foreign land access and landholding are supposedly supported by the host state. Additionally, the other types of LTRs that authorities have discretionary power of land allocation over, receive much lower levels of CAgrils. The findings reveal nuances in land politics in the process of rural land acquisitions in Africa, which put the land grabs and dispossession narrative in question.

1. Introduction

Since the 2008 food, fuel, and financial crises, rural land acquisitions in developing countries have surged (R. Hall et al., 2015; McMichael, 2012), with 1,560 transnational agricultural deals covering 30 million hectares globally (Lay et al., 2021a, p. 19). Sub-Saharan Africa has been the primary target of these foreign land acquisitions (FLAs) (Chen et al., 2017, p. 365). Driven by demands for food production, green energy, and planetary urbanization, the questions of land remain central to debates in rural studies, development, inequality, and African politics (Shattuck et al., 2023).

Contemporary processes of rural land acquisitions are largely analysed through the lens of land grabbing and dispossession (Andreas et al., 2020). Scholars link these processes to agrarian questions of capital and labor, highlighting how states and transnational capital enclose land and displace peasants (Borras and Franco, 2013; Oya, 2013). Others situate land grabs within the broader crises of accumulation in the neoliberal globalization project (McMichael, 2012; Mora, 2022; Sassen, 2013), conceptualizing rural land seizures via violent 'accumulation by dispossession' (D. Hall, 2013; Harvey, 2003; Kato and Leite, 2023; Levien, 2012). Levien (2011) highlights the coercive role of

the state in rural land acquisitions as a deeply political process, which in Africa is intensified by weak land governance (Anseeuw et al., 2012; Arezki et al., 2015; Cotula, 2012a) and cyclical historical processes of enclosing of commons for private uses and conservation practice (Edelman et al., 2013; Kelly, 2011).¹

As the literature evolves into more grounded research, scholars have critiqued the overreliance on land grabbing and dispossession as the default analytical frames, arguing that they oversimplify the complex, context-specific dynamics of rural land acquisitions (Kan and Sun, 2024; Lu, 2021; Wachira et al., 2023). For instance, scholars challenge the simple portray of domestic elites as colluders in the process of FLAs, instead these actors have their own agenda and complex motives (Burnod et al., 2013; Porsani et al., 2017), such as intimate exclusion from within the communities (Wachira et al., 2023), and irregular and illegal misallocation of public land via the bureaucracies and legal professionals (Manji, 2012). Some highlight the agency of residents and the role of social resistance in contesting land acquisitions (Gillespie, 2016; Mora, 2023; Oliveira, 2018), and others link these dynamics to African land tenure systems, showing how variations in tenure arrangements shape the scale and effectiveness of such resistance to FLAs (Boone, 2015; Dieterle, 2022).

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¹ Scholars emphasize the importance of historicizing analysis of the cyclical waves of land dispossession to understand the current phenomenon of land grabbing. For example, in Central America, the violent dispossession of land is hand in hand with a long history of agrarian conflicts from the late 19 century of liberal reforms, then banana concessions, to 20 century agrarian reforms and then counter-reforms (Edelman and León, 2013).

This paper contributes to recent research on politics of rural land acquisitions in three ways. First, it extends our understandings of rural land politics by applying the concept of African land tenure regimes (LTRs) (Boone, 2014) to examine the mechanisms shaping the locational choices of Chinese agricultural investments (CAgrils) in Tanzania and Zambia –beyond land grabs and dispossessions. I argue that the *subnational* LTRs play a prominent role in determining the locational choices of CAgrils through their distinctive configurations of foreign land access and landholding rules. This institutional argument challenges the dispossession framework by highlighting the host state’s regulatory role in shaping the spatial distribution of FLAs.

Second, this study addresses the empirical gap on outward CAgrils, which have expanded significantly since the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013 (Gooch and Gale, 2018). Media reports by GRAIN (2008) and *The Economist* (2011) helped frame CAgrils as land grabs, a narrative that entered academic and public debates (Hofman and Ho, 2012). While China-Africa scholars have challenged these claims and exposed flaws in the data (Brautigam, 2009, 2015; D. Bräutigam and Zhang, 2013), more nuanced approaches are needed to investigate the nature and dynamics of these investments.

Third, recent studies exploring the micro-level dynamics of land politics and CAgrils often focus on single projects or countries. In Mozambique, Porsani et al. (2017) reveal how land acquisition for a CAgril was both facilitated by the government and later obstructed due to party politics. In Laos, CAgrils have served as tools of state territorialization (Lu and Schönweger, 2019), while in Zambia, Yang (2024) shows how investment strategies vary with land tenure regimes. However, it is essential to conduct cross-country subnational *spatial* comparisons to further deepen our empirical understanding of land politics of CAgrils across space and enhance the wider applicability of the institutional argument that *subnational* LTRs significantly shape the locational choices of FLAs.

The following section develops the conceptual framework, arguing that LTRs in Africa—varying across space and time—are political-economic institutions that shape land rights (Boone, 2014) and influence foreign investor behaviour (Dieterle, 2022; Yang, 2024). I hypothesize that CAgrils are most likely to locate in LTRs that legally permit foreign land access and offer state-backed guarantees of landholdings. Section 3 outlines the methodology and introduces an original database analysing the subnational distribution of CAgrils in Tanzania and Zambia from 1990 to 2021. Section 4 presents the empirical evidence, showing Chinese investors strongly prefer private property regimes, particularly Zambia’s private leaseholds, and tend to avoid LTRs where land access depends on government or customary authority discretion. Section 5 tests alternative explanations, and the conclusion discusses the contributions of the paper to debates on African rural land politics.

2. African land tenure regimes: an institutional variable at subnational level

I understand land tenure in rural Africa not merely from its economic and legal dimensions, but through the lens of power and authority (Berry, 2017; Lund, 2002). This paper builds on Catherine Boone’s conceptualization of land tenure regimes (LTRs) that ‘define[s] the manner and terms under which rights in land are granted, held, enforced, contested, and transferred’ (Boone, 2014, p. 4). She argues that two broad and contrasting LTRs – statist and neocustomary LTRs – can be differentiated according to one key factor: who has the authority to allocate land (Boone, 2014). State agents assert direct control over land administration and allocation under statist LTRs, whilst neotraditional leaders of local communities enjoy the prerogative to regulate land. This statist-neocustomary distinction varies across subnational territories, roughly at the district level, as picked up by the Round 4 Afrobarometer data in question on ‘Who allocates the land?’ (Boone, 2017, p. 280).

I argue different LTRs, with different rules on foreign land access and landholdings, heavily influence investor choice of which LTRs to invest in, and thus present a pattern in the subnational location of CAgrils. Here, foreign land access and holdings in each LTR consider both legal rules as well as day-to-day practice and enforcement of such rules. These factors are complicated by the struggle over authority to control land between national and local actors (Berry, 2002; Sikor and Lund, 2009).

Under statist LTRs, there are two subtypes which the central government has direct power and authority to define and enforce foreign land access and holdings. First, a private property regime is a particular subtype of a statist LTR where land allocation is primarily based on markets which are established, regulated, and enforced directly by the state.² In most parts of Africa, foreign investors have legal access to acquire transferable private leasehold from the land market. In credible private property regimes, authorities and private actors are presumably constrained by law and institutions, and private property is protected and enforced by a constrained state.³

Second, a government leasehold regime for city settlements, special zones for industry, farming, conservations, etc. is another subtype of statist LTR which is directly run by the host state. Foreign investors often need to meet certain qualifications to invest in such government leasehold regimes and negotiate with state agents directly to acquire a conditional and non-transferable government leasehold. In countries where the executive branch enjoys extensive prerogative to confiscate the property of ‘unproductive’ investors (Bélair, 2018), the security of foreign investor’s landholdings relies on ‘the goodwill of government actors’ (Gagné, 2021, p. 678).

By contrast, under neocustomary LTRs, land governance is mediated through neotraditional leaders, like chiefs, lineages and families, whose prerogatives in allocating land and adjudicating disputes within their customary jurisdiction are recognized by the law and held to be constitutional. Two subtypes can be differentiated based on whether foreign investors have direct access to customary tenure or not. In many countries, such as Ghana, Uganda, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, and Malawi, national laws permit foreign investors to lease use rights in customary land from landholders in leaseholds. In this way, customary land tenure remains in the family, lineage, and chieftaincy, and upon completion or cancellation of the leasehold contract, the leased land shall revert back to the rightful owners.⁴

In a less common scenario, for example in Zambia and Botswana, where national laws forbid direct land access and transfer from customary tenure to non-citizens, customary tenure must be converted to private or government leaseholds (statist LTRs) prior to being allocated to foreign investors.⁵ Such customary land conversion will gradually erode the power of the neotraditional leaders and expand the

² I do not include the ‘vernacular land markets’ developed in communal areas in the category ‘private property’ (Chimhowu and Woodhouse, 2006), nor the private appropriation of customary tenure outside the legal framework. Here, I consider the already individualized, transferable property rights and their lease and sale on the open and competitive land markets. As Kironde (2000) points out, the land markets in Africa have not been well studied as a means of land transfer and acquisition.

³ In reality, some states may have limited administrative, adjudicative, and policing capacity to enforce private property rights (Murtazashvili and Murtazashvili, 2016, p. 106). In such cases, investors may hire specialists in violence to fill in the gap, such as private security companies and ‘land guards’, as seen in Accra, Ghana, to protect land from encroachment or occupation (Joireman, 2011, pp. 104-5).

⁴ Ghana Land Act of 2020, Part One, Section 6 and 10. Uganda Land Act of 2010, Section 40. South Sudan Land Act of 2009, Chapter VI, Section 27. Malawi Land Act of 2016, Part V, Section 37. Also see Section 7(3), where ‘private land’ in Malawi is classified as freehold, leasehold or customary estate. Sierra Leone The Customary Land Rights Act of 2022, Part V, Section 15.

⁵ Botswana Trial Land Act of 2018, Section 24 and Part V. Zambia Land Act of 1995, Section II.8.

central government's direct control of national territories (Nolte, 2014). To avoid being caught up in the power struggles between the central government and local power, in practice, foreigners might still be able to access customary land without obtaining formal legal rights, via other structural and relational mechanisms (Ribot and Peluso, 2003). Therefore, foreign land access and terms of use the land might play out in 'shades of grey' depending on the local context (Borras et al., 2010, p. 582).⁶

Overall, from the above reasoning, I expect a strong institutional effect of LTRs on the level of CAgrils flows to subnational areas. I test the following hypotheses (also see Fig. 1).

Hypothesis 1. CAgrils are most likely to happen on private property regimes that legally permit foreign land access and guarantee landholding.

Hypothesis 2. CAgrils are less likely to be located on the types of statist LTRs where central governments hold discretionary power over foreign land access and landholding.

Hypothesis 3. CAgrils are less likely to occur on the types of neocustomary LTRs where neotraditional authorities hold discretionary power over foreign land access and landholding.

Hypothesis 4. CAgrils are least likely to be located on the types of neocustomary LTRs which legally forbid foreign land access and require complex procedural (high transaction) costs to obtain foreign land access.

3. Methodology and data

This study employs a cross-country, subnational case study approach to examine how LTRs shape the locational decisions of CAgrils. This approach offers a methodological contribution to a field that remains dominated by single-country studies and national-level indicators—methods that have often yielded inconsistent findings on the relationship between land rights and foreign land acquisitions (FLAs).⁷ Despite the methodological promise of this approach, it has been

⁶ In Ethiopia and Mozambique where all land is nationalized, yet de facto, much access to land is governed by local land users (Vermeulen and Cotula, 2010). This is similar to the case of Tanzania, which I will present later, where, in practice, decentralized local governments have room to redefine the land access rules, at the margins of what state law might deem illegitimate or as formal leasehold or ownership. Thus, local negotiations and alternative access mechanisms exist both in statist and neocustomary LTRs.

⁷ Previous studies related to the links between land governance and foreign capital have produced conflicting findings as to whether tenure insecurity and customary tenure encourage foreign 'land grabs'. These studies are constrained by the fact that most discussion on this issue is either based on national-level indicators or single case studies alone. Scholars, using national-level indicators, disagree on the direction of the effect of land tenure insecurity on foreign land acquisitions (FLAs) (Arezki et al., 2015; Lay and Nolte, 2018), the effect of type of tenure system on FLAs (Conigliani et al., 2018; Giovannetti and Ticci, 2016), and effect of institutional distance between the investor country and the target country on FLAs (Raimondi and Scoppola, 2018). Similar contradictions are observed in single case-based analyses as well. While much of the literature in this group seems to suggest that common land and land with multiple claimants are the predominant targets of FLAs (Bae, 2023; Dell'Angelo et al., 2017). This is either because common-property systems are vulnerable to external drivers, or because national land laws deny customary rights holders the protection that they offer to holders of private property (Wily, 2011). In contrast, Chu (2013) finds that foreign investors are attracted to Zambian agriculture because of the availability of privately titled farmland. Likewise, most agricultural land-based investments in the last 20 years in Kenya's Nanyuki area have occurred on privately owned land, via a well-functioning local land-market (Giger et al., 2020), which is in line with findings in Zambia (Lay et al., 2021b) as well as Southern and Eastern Africa (Abeygunawardane et al., 2022).

underutilized due to the scarcity of comparable subnational data (Garriga, 2021). To address this gap, I constructed an original database through extensive fieldwork, offering a rich empirical account of land politics across subnational regions in Tanzania and Zambia. Although the data is limited to two host countries and Chinese investors, the comparative design strengthens the generalizability of the institutional argument: that subnational variations in LTRs play a crucial role in shaping the locational preferences of FLAs.

3.1. Independent variable: subnational land tenure regimes

The key independent variable (IV) is *subnational LTRs*. The unit of observation for the IV is subnational rural jurisdictions, using district level as the territorial scale. Tanzania and Zambia are selected as the most similar cases to enable a cross-country subnational comparative study. Zambia has both statist and neocustomary LTRs, including private leaseholds, government leaseholds, and customary tenure. Tanzania has two subtypes of statist LTRs - government land and village land. The level of CAgrils in different LTRs can be leveraged as an analytical device to explore the effect of LTRs on investment decisions.

These subnational LTRs are comparable because the two countries are very similar in two major pull and push factors behind CAgrils. The first factor is the location of water and land resources which is regarded as the most significant pull factor for transnational agricultural projects (Cuffaro et al., 2022; Fischer et al., 2012; Fonjong and Fokum, 2015; Mehta et al., 2012). I use *nutrient* and *workability* to show Tanzania and Zambia have same levels of suitability for agriculture (Conigliani et al., 2018). Secondly, overseas economic interests are closely connected with bilateral foreign relations (Shi, 2015, p. 27), including combining aid with investment (Fon, 2018; Schneider and Frey, 1985; Stone et al., 2022). I use *UNGA voting alignment* and *agricultural aid* to show China has had very similar bilateral relations with Tanzania and Zambia (see Appendix A).

3.2. Zambian private leasehold land

The Land Act of 1995 increased scrutiny of land expropriation by the state (Brown, 2005, p. 86), and provides a dispute resolution method at Land Tribunals (Mushinge, 2017, p. 17). From the beginning of the 1990s to 2021, Zambia private leasehold land was accessible to foreigners, with 99-year renewable leasehold tenure. With the growing scarcity and increasing price of private leasehold land, the National Land Policy (NLP) draft 2017 promised to put heavier restrictions on foreign land acquisition.⁸ The subsequent enactment of the NLP 2021 has the potential to put free foreign land access and transfer to an end, depending on how the specifics of 'extent and tenure of land lease' are addressed in a forthcoming implementation plan (Land Portal, 2021).⁹ Therefore, private land has become increasingly subject to the discretionary power of the state since 2021, as state agents rather than markets allocate land directly.

3.3. Zambian government land

Government land in Zambia includes land that is allocated for urban

⁸ The Republic of Zambia, Ministry of Lands and Natural Resources, draft National Land Policy, 2017 December. p. 28.

⁹ The NLP 2021 was much condensed and left out many specific actions that had been included in the 2017 draft. Objective 5 of the Policy provides for 'land ownership of non-Zambians' and Measures (i) and (ii) state "(i) regulate access to land of non-Zambians; (ii) limit extent and tenure of land lease for non-Zambian." The unspecific 'extent and tenure' is left to be addressed in a forthcoming implementation plan. Therefore, the policy uncertainty of the land rights of non-Zambians in Zambia continues even after the enactment of NLP 2021.

IV: LTR type	Statist		Neocustomary	
Land rights	freehold and private leasehold	government leasehold ^a	family, lineage, chieftaincy customary freehold and leasehold ^b	
Foreign land access	Yes	Yes ^c	Yes ^d	No
Foreign land transfer	Yes Market exchange transfer right	No Partial market mechanism with state allocation of non-transferable leasehold	No Local tenure arrangement of non-transferable leasehold	No Land right conversion required prior to foreign transfer
Foreign land control strategy (continuous holding)	State protection	State selective enforcement; Alternative means of protection required	Alternative means of protection or seek state protection through conversion	Conversion to seek state protection; Alternative means of protection
DV: Locational interests of CAgrils	I. High	II. Low	III. Low	IV. Least
Subnational LTR cases (IV)	Zambian private leasehold land (90s-2021) ^e	Zambian government land / Zambian private leasehold land (2021-) ^f / Tanzanian government land / Tanzanian village land	Zambian customary land (access via customary institutional mechanisms)	Zambian customary land (access via legal customary land conversion)
Level of CAgrils (DV)	40	4 / NA / 5 / 5	3	0

Fig. 1. Land tenure regimes (LTRs) influence the level of interest from Chinese agricultural investors (CAgrils)

Notes: a. A private property regime is a particular subtype of a statist land tenure regime, where land allocation is primarily based on the market and transacted between private actors. The market is established, regulated, and enforced directly by the state. In other statist LTRs, central or local state organizations are the direct controllers of the land. b. Forms of neocustomary authority range from family groups, lineages and clans, to chieftaincy as conceptualized in Boone (2014). This dissertation only contains case studies of chieftaincy-level authority. c. On rare occasions, some countries may have government land under decentralized/village control where foreign investor may not have direct land access. e.g. foreign access to state land devolved to Tanzanian villages is prohibited. d. In theory, if national law permits (e.g. Ghana, Uganda), investors may negotiate with landholding families, local leaders, or neotraditional chiefs to acquire land. This dissertation does not have a case study for this type of LTR. e. Zambian private leasehold land (90s-2021) was privately held property from the 1990s until the National Land Policy (NLP) 2021 came into effect. f. Zambian private leasehold land (2021-): privately held property since the NLP 2021. Private landholding continues until the next land right transfer commences or tenure expires, whichever comes first.

development, transportation infrastructure, nature reserves, military camps, settlement schemes, and national development projects. These national development projects are most relevant to CAgrils, and are where government agents administer the registration and allocation of rural land directly and thus assert direct authority over investor land acquisition and continuous landholdings. Additionally, investors do not have transfer rights but a conditional use right in government land, which makes a significant difference to private leasehold land with transfer rights.

3.4. Zambian customary land

The Land Act of 1995 prohibits land sales in any customary areas (Sitko, 2010), which are deemed to have no commercial value. However, the Act makes it possible to acquire private title to customary land by converting it into leaseholds. Such conversion requires permission from the neotraditional leaders, who are recognized by the Zambia Constitution and the Chiefs Act 1994 as rightful authorities to allocate land and adjudicate disputes within their customary jurisdiction. The design of the uni-directional customary land conversion raises political contestations between chiefs and central government since chiefs will gradually lose their influence and control over resources and people when they lose control over customary land (Chileshe, 2005, p. 100).

3.5. Tanzanian government land

In Tanzania, the Land Act of 1999 states that non-nationals may only

be granted government leaseholds for investment purposes.¹⁰ According to the Act, foreign investors may be issued derivative titles of government land, while the original titles of the land are vested under the Tanzania Investment Center (TIC). Through separation of contingent use rights from land ownership, this Act increases the marketability of government land hand-in-hand with strengthened bureaucratic discretion (Gray, 2018, p. 141). Furthermore, the Land Acquisition Act of 1967, which remains in force, widens the discretionary power of the President to decide what ‘public purpose’ is, and thus enforces the power of the executive and the government agencies in land administration (Sundet, 1997, p. 37).¹¹

3.6. Tanzanian village land

Despite the terms ‘customary land’ and ‘Certificates of Customary Rights of Occupancy’ (CCRO) being used in the Village Land Act of 1999, I categorize the LTR for Tanzania village land as essentially ‘statist.’ Village land is administered and allocated directly by the government’s devolved bureaucratic apparatus at local level, the Village Councils, in contrast to indirect administration through neotraditional authorities as in the case of Zambia customary land. The Act prohibits foreigners and foreign companies from accessing village land; it is illegal for citizens to transfer and sell customary land rights to non-citizens. Instead, village land can be converted to government leaseholds

¹⁰ URT 1997. National Land policy, 2nd ed., as cited in Kennedy (2013, p. 230). The Investment Promotion Act was repealed and replaced by the Tanzania Investment Act, Cap.38 RE 2002.

¹¹ Land Acquisition Act of 1967. Section 4(1) enables the President to ‘acquire any land ... for use by any person or group of persons who, in the opinion of the President, should be granted such land for agricultural development.’

through the creation of a Granted Rights of Occupancy (GRO), and the 'derivative' rights of GRO can then be leased to investors.¹²

3.7. Dependent variable and case database

The level of CAGriIs in each type of LTRs is the dependant variable, which varies significantly as shown in Fig. 1 (also see Appendix B, the case database, for detailed records of CAGriI projects). I include all CAGriIs in Tanzania and Zambia that I was able to identify through six months of fieldwork in Tanzania and Zambia. To the best of my knowledge, this is an exhaustive list as of 2019 for Zambia and 2021 for Tanzania. The analysis rests on descriptive data collected from interviews and field site observations as the main input. I rely on 140 semi-structured interviews with relevant Zambian and Tanzanian government officials, local elites, experts, civil society organizations, and Chinese investors, business managers, and Chinese business organizations operating in Tanzania and Zambia. Secondary data was collected from the Zambian National Archives and the National Museum of Tanzania, and documentary research on land use plans, policy papers, public reports, as well as from unpublished internal reports that were shared by my informants.

3.8. Alternative explanations

Numerous studies identify the location of water and land resources as the most significant pull factor for transnational agricultural projects.¹³ Yet, the uneven locational choices of FLAs within suitable agro-ecological zones remains unexplained (Lay et al., 2021a, p. 15). Cotula (2012b) suggests that investors are often interested in the best fertile land with proximity to markets and infrastructure. Infrastructure and economic prosperity are both likely determinants of foreign investment (Bellak et al., 2009; Du et al., 2012; Tocar, 2018). However, current studies disagree on the direction or relevance of market size, development, infrastructure on subnational foreign investment (Garriga, 2021; Samford and Gómez, 2014). I include *Road density* and major city settlements as proxies of transportation infrastructure, proximity to market, and development.

In order to test the hypotheses and establish causal effects of subnational LTRs, I combine locational data with detailed case analysis. I use locational data for each case from the case database to analyse the correlation between types of LTRs and CAGriIs. To further test the causality, I analyse the timing of CAGriIs to investigate the endogenous nature of the development of LTRs and development of railways and cities at subnational level, especially in Zambia. I conduct analysis of the timing of CAGriIs and the changing dynamics of subnational LTRs between 1990 and 2019 in Zambia and between 2000 and 2021 in Tanzania (where data is available) (see Section 5). Such analysis disproves the infrastructural and economic determinism hypothesis and strengthens the institutional explanation proposed in this study.

4. Land rights and the structure of Chinese agricultural investments: locational choice

"Our neighbours, like Tanzania, differentiate citizens and foreigners. Foreigners can only access land as second class [citizens]. But, Zambia has no differentiations between locals and foreigners in respect of accessing and acquiring land."

¹² Tanzania Investment Center, 2015.

¹³ One concept used in measuring land resources is 'Land Balances,' which refers to the share of remaining land suitable for agriculture not yet in use. SSA has high concentration of countries with a positive net land balance (Cuffaro et al., 2022; Fischer et al., 2012). Independent to land resource, 'water grabbing' is also problematized by scholars (Fonjong and Fokum, 2015; Mehta et al., 2012).

–The Commissioner of Land, Zambia, 2019 (Interview, 26 June 2019)

A key difference in the two countries' land laws is that in Tanzania, 'non-nationals' may only be granted land for investment purposes with conditional land use rights (i.e. derivative titles) on government land under central control. By contrast, in Zambia, a 'non-Zambian' has legal access to, and extensive control of, private leasehold land where she or he is either a permanent resident or an investor. I argue that it is this defining difference in foreign land access and holding between Zambia (pre-NLP, 2021), where foreigners are treated as equals to citizens, and Tanzania, where foreigners are second-class, that contributes to the different levels of Chinese agricultural investments across Tanzania and Zambia since the 1990s.

Map 1 shows the locations of CAGriIs in Zambia. The base map in Map 1 represents the two distinct types of land tenure regime in Zambia: the statist land tenure regime are shaded green, including government leaseholds and private leaseholds, and the customary land is shaded white (Tembo et al., 2018). Four cases are on government leaseholds, and they are all located in special economic zones developed or under-construction by Chinese state-owned enterprises. Six cases are identified on customary land, yet none involves land rights transfer. 40 cases, 80 % of the total, are private leaseholds. This is consistent with Chu's (2013) finding that foreign investors are attracted to Zambian agriculture because of the availability of privately titled farmland. All Chinese investors in the 40 cases studied acquired their land from individual landholders, including larger size landholdings from former White and Asian settlers, and small-to medium-size landholdings from Zambian and Chinese individuals. This is consistent with Lay et al. (2021b) who find that most large-scale farms established in last two decades are located in existing agglomerated commercial farming areas.

Map 2 presents the location of CAGriIs in Tanzania. The base map in Map 2 represents the boundaries of national reserved areas (e.g. national parks, nature reserves, etc.) in dark colour. The remaining white area includes both government leaseholds and village land. No map has been produced which shows clear boundaries between village land and government land (Chung, 2017, p. 110), because not all village land is registered with clear land surveys, and government land is a residual concept which includes urban areas and unused/undeveloped village land. In total, ten cases of CAGriIs are found in Tanzania, including five cases of government leaseholds, and five cases of village land.

Chinese investors' locational choices demonstrate their significantly stronger preference for Zambia's private property regime. This confirms hypothesis 1 that CAGriIs are most likely to happen on private property regimes that legally permit foreign land access and guarantee land control. Zambia's government leaseholds attract similar level of CAGriIs as Tanzania's government leaseholds and village land. All of these sub-

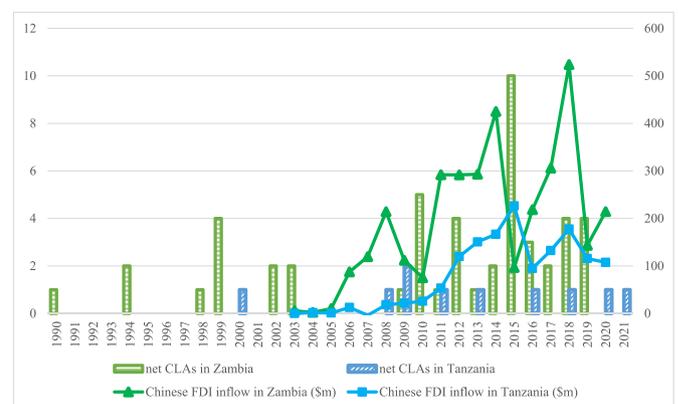
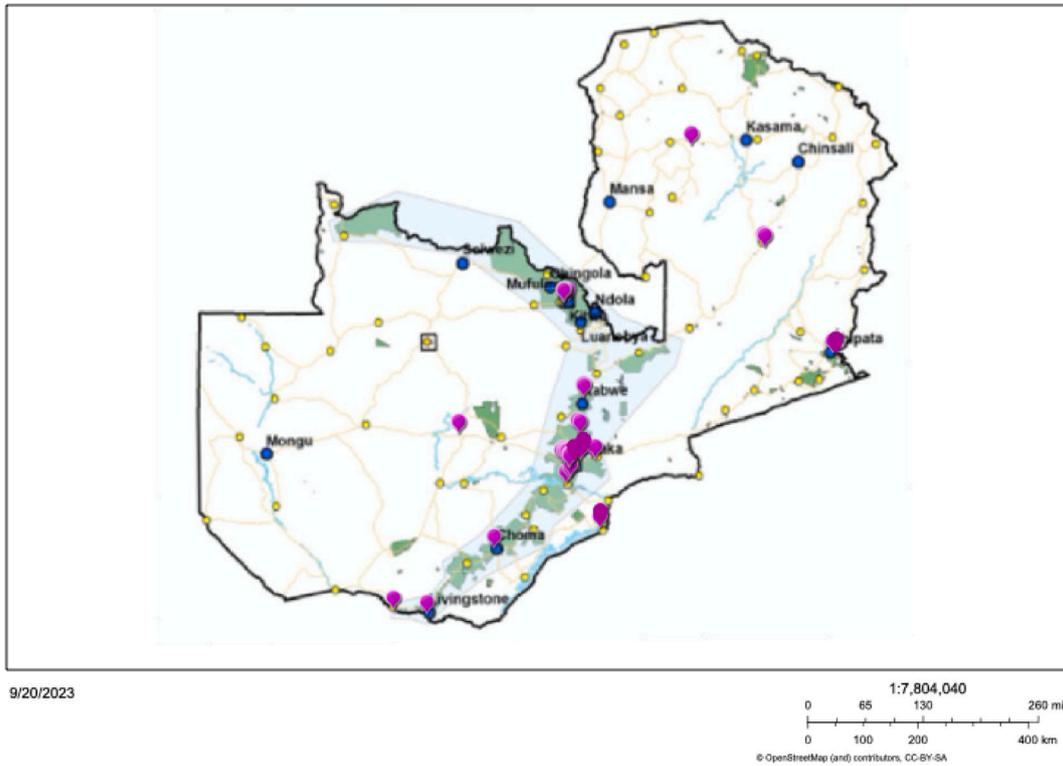
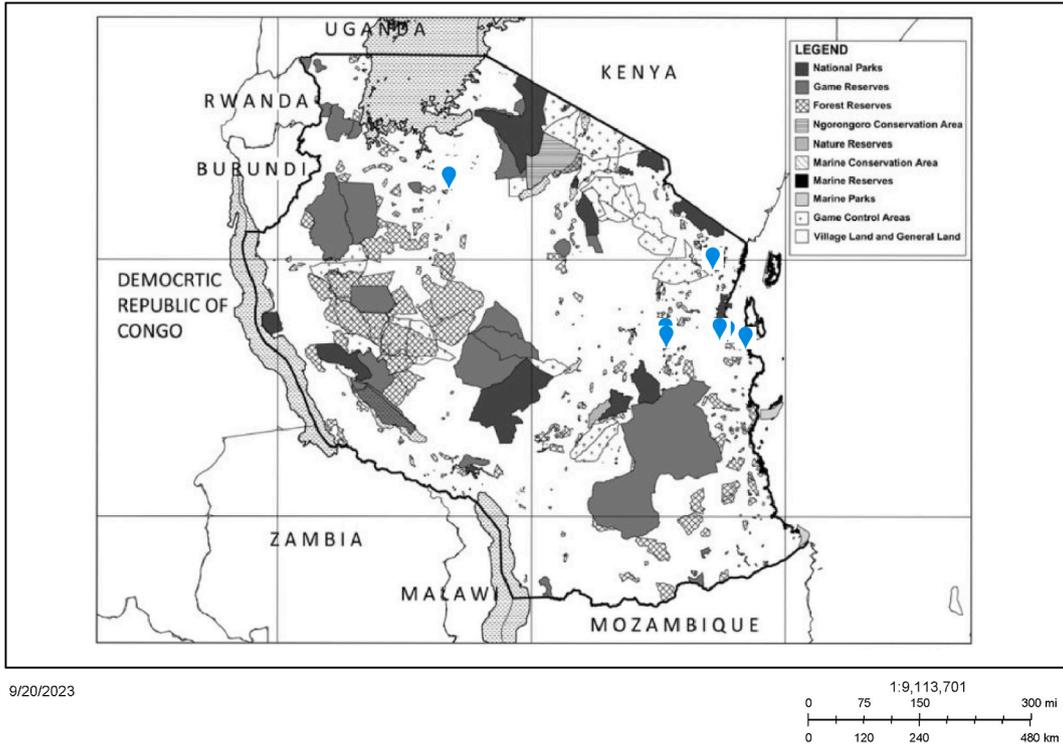


Fig. 2. The timing of Chinese land acquisitions in Tanzania and Zambia. Source: Author's own data on CLAs. Data on Chinese investment in Africa from China Africa Research Initiative (2023).



Map 1. Locations of Chinese land acquisition for agriculture in Zambia.

Source: Author's own data compiled on the base map, which indicates the boundaries between state land and customary land (Tembo et al., 2018). Green shading indicates State Land, including private leasehold and government land, and white shading is Customary Land.



Map 2. Locations of Chinese land acquisition for agriculture in Tanzania.

Source: Author's own data compiled on the base map, which indicates boundaries of the reserved areas (Burgess et al., 2010). The area in white includes both village land and government leaseholds.

types of statist LTRs attract significantly fewer investment projects than private property regimes. This confirms [hypothesis 2](#) that CAgrils are less likely to be located on the types of statist LTRs where central governments hold discretionary power over foreign land access and landholding.

As predicted by the LTR theory, in practice, foreigners might access customary land without obtaining formal legal rights, via other structural and relational mechanisms ([Ribot and Peluso, 2003](#)), depending on the local context ([Borras et al., 2010](#), p. 582). Three CAgrils are found on Zambia customary land where there is no conversion of customary tenure to leaseholds. Firstly, one Chinese immigrant investor integrated with his Zambian wife's family lineage and obtained use rights of customary land. The other two cases are larger value chain companies which used contract-farming to obtain indirect use right of customary land. The limited numbers of projects confirm [hypothesis 3](#) that CAgrils are less likely to occur on the types of neocustomary LTRs where neo-traditional authorities hold discretionary power over foreign land access and landholding.

Many informants confirmed that customary land conversion attempted by Chinese individuals or corporates most often ended up in failure (Interview, 25 July 2019). Many such attempts made by interviewees in my fieldwork had been withdrawn, suspended, or failed at certain stages of the land conversion procedure. For example, one security company's expression of interest to convert customary land and build a company recruitment camp near Lusaka was dismissed by a chief (Interview, 26 August 2019), who I knew from other informants had a reputation as 'protective' of her land (Interview, 20 August 2019). A construction company withdrew its application to convert land for farming near Kabwe due to long delays, and demand for side payments at the district council (Interview, 21 November 2018). Meanwhile, an investment firm's application to convert land to the west of Lusaka reached the Ministry of Lands and Natural Resources (MoL) yet was suspended after the change of leadership within the MoL (Interview, 26 July 2019). The complex procedure involved in converting customary land means high transaction costs which coincide with three levels of land governance in Zambia - chiefdom, district, and central government - each guarded by its respective gatekeeper - chiefs, district councils and Commissioner of Land ([Brown, 2005](#); [Chilombo, 2021](#)). This confirms [hypothesis 4](#) that CAgrils are least likely to be located on the types of neocustomary LTRs that legally forbid foreign land access and require complex procedural (high transaction) costs to obtain foreign land access. The findings are aligned with [Pedersen's \(2016\)](#) view that the African land governance agency is placed at multiple levels and their land granting processes are more contingent than the current literature depicted.

5. A rival argument: the infrastructural and economic determinism hypothesis

I have proposed an institutional explanation for the locational choice of CAgrils at subnational level. This section further tests this argument by considering two most prominent rival explanations that have been identified in the existing literature—the location of water and land resources ([Cuffaro et al., 2022](#); [Fonjong and Fokum, 2015](#)), and the proximity to infrastructure and economic prosperity ([Bellak et al., 2009](#); [Du et al., 2012](#); [Tocar, 2018](#)).

[Map 3](#) and [Map 4](#) illustrate that although all CAgrils are situated in areas with suitable agroecological conditions, their locational choices are more closely aligned with infrastructure availability and broader economic factors. This subnational distribution aligns with broader patterns observed in the locational choices of FLAs more generally ([Cotula, 2012b](#)). Agricultural suitability is assessed using two indicators—*nutrient* and *workability*—as adopted from [Conigliani et al. \(2018\)](#). In this context, suitability is determined only when both indicators fall within the same class (ranging from Class 1 to 7), with lower classes indicating fewer constraints on plant growth and cultivation

activities. I use *road density* and major city settlements as proxies of transportation infrastructure, proximity to market, and development.

Someone who reads [Map 1](#) and [Map 3](#) closely might spot that the majority of CAgrils are located in the private property regime in Zambia, and this geographical concentration is aligned with *road density* and major city settlements in Zambia. A similar observation may be made in the case of Tanzania, though it less apparent (see [Map 1](#) and [Map 4](#)). Historical analysis indicates that economic and infrastructure factors are endogenous to the development of the private property regime in Zambia. The 1928 Northern Rhodesia Order in Council formally established a bifurcated land administration system which, *mutatis mutandis*, remains the contemporary land tenure system in Zambia ([Baldarelli, 2018](#)). The Order categorized 'Crown Lands' for European settlement under English Land Law of freehold and leasehold, and 'Native Reserves' to confine natives to designated areas managed in accordance with local customary law.¹⁴ Crown land was expropriated for White settlement at Mbala, in the North, at Chipata, in the East, at mining towns in the Copperbelt, and along the line of the railway ([Honig, 2017](#)).

In order to further test the causality, I analyse the timing of CAgrils to investigate the endogenous nature of the development of LTRs and development of railways and cities at subnational level, especially in Zambia. [Fig. 2](#) shows the timing of CAgrils in Zambia (green bars) and Tanzania (blue bars). In each country, the recording starts from the earliest CAgril and stops at the year of my final data collection in the country, 2019 in Zambia and 2021 in Tanzania. The two lines on the secondary axis of [Fig. 2](#) serve as a comparative baseline denoting overall (all sectors) Chinese interest in investing in Zambia (green line) and Tanzania (blue line). Both lines are plotted using data from the Statistical Bulletin of China's Outward Foreign Direct Investment published by China's Ministry of Commerce, which represents Chinese FDI inflows to the two countries between 2003 and 2020 ([China Africa Research Initiative, 2023](#)).

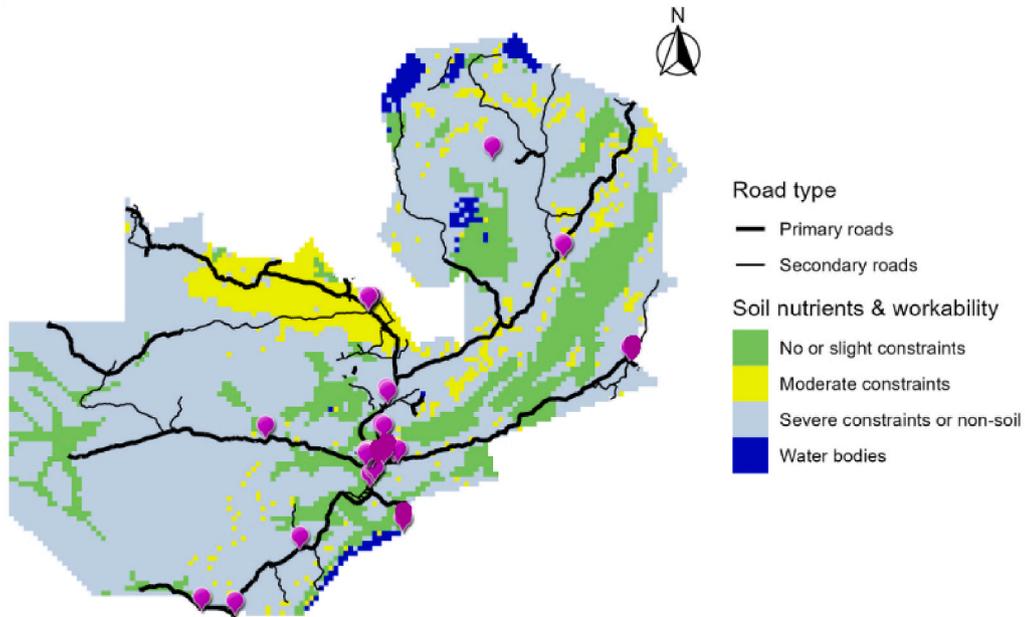
Both in Tanzania and Zambia, CAgrils started at the time of changes in political atmosphere and domestic politics regarding the desirability of foreign investment in national economy. In Tanzania, CAgrils started right after the land law reform, the Land Act of 1999, which reopened the land market for government leaseholds.¹⁵ The NLP draft of 2016 signals a trend of strengthening centralized land control and setting aside more land (i.e. government leaseholds) for commercial investment projects ([Lekaita, 2017](#)). Yet, the overall interest in agricultural land from Chinese investors has remained low due to the lack of private property regimes in Tanzania.

In Zambia, CAgrils started when the newly elected Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) promised to restore private property rights and signalled a strong message of respect for, and enforcement of, private property rights in the country ([Baldarelli, 2018](#)). CAgrils increased after the enactment of Land Act 1995, which significantly strengthened individual property rights ([Lourenço et al., 2017](#), p. 131), but then declined sharply after the NLP draft of 2017, which proposed to restrict the terms and conditions of landholdings by foreigners. This sharp decline of interest in land acquisition is in clear contrast to the overall investment inflow (all sectors) recovered since 2015 (as indicated in the green line). During fieldwork in 2018 and 2019, the Zambia NLP draft was mentioned by Chinese investors many times to justify their anxiety and hesitancy to invest further in land. For example, one investor said, "*Since the NLP draft spread out the possibility of tightening down land tenure for investors, my company has stopped purchasing new land*" (Interview, 31 Aug 2019).

¹⁴ I am aware that the word 'native' has particular connotations of colonialism and controversial baggage. I only use the word as part of the historical narratives of land history.

¹⁵ I use 'reopened' to indicate there was a period of land market freeze after independence before land reform in the 1990s in Tanzania (as well as in Zambia).

Zambia

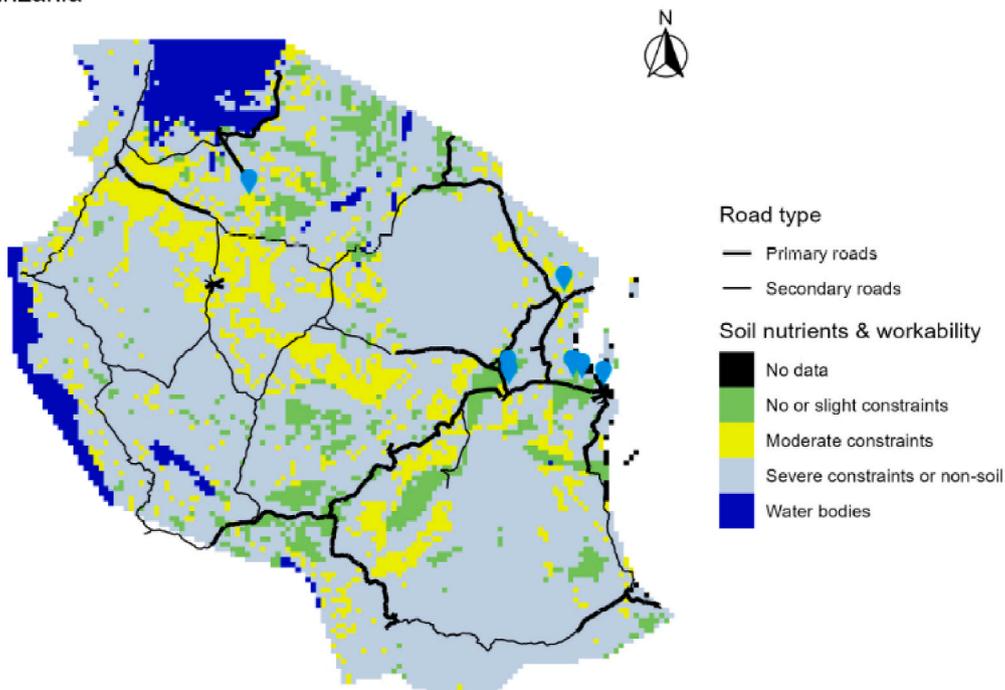


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Map 3. Locations of Chinese land acquisition for agriculture in Zambia (rival argument).

Source: Author's own data compiled on the base map, which indicates the suitability for agriculture (Harmonized World Soil Database v 1. 2, Fischer et al. (2008)) and the proximity to infrastructure and economic prosperity (GRIP global roads database Meijer et al. (2018)).

Tanzania



Map data © OpenStreetMap contributors, Microsoft, Facebook, Google, Esri Community Maps contributors, Map layer by Esri

Map 4. Locations of Chinese land acquisition for agriculture in Tanzania (rival argument).

Source: Author's own data compiled on the base map, which indicates the suitability for agriculture (Harmonized World Soil Database v 1. 2, Fischer et al. (2008)) and the proximity to infrastructure and economic prosperity (GRIP global roads database Meijer et al. (2018)).

The above analysis of the timing of CAgrils in each LTR, especially in private Zambian land, provides additional supporting evidence for the hypothesis about institutional effects on CAgrils. The within country, ‘before and after’ test shows the impact of an abrupt change of rule configurations of a LTR while keeping all other variables constant, in particular the economic variables (i.e. economic development, proximity to infrastructure). The evidence suggests that economic and infrastructural factors may have positive effects on the inflows of CAgrils,¹⁶ but political and institutional factors have stronger effects on the locational choice of CAgrils within a country.

6. Conclusion

This paper investigates why CAgrils distribute in particular areas in Tanzania and Zambia, demonstrating that subnational variations of African LTRs—especially the rules governing foreign land access and landholding—play a decisive role in directing investment. The findings generate four key lessons that speak not only to rural studies in Africa, but also to wider debates on foreign land acquisitions, African state capacity, and comparative political economy.

First, the relationship between transnational capital and host states is more complicated than conventional portray of collusion. In the Zambia case, Chinese investors obtained rural land through long-standing private property regimes where foreign land access and landholdings have been supported by the state since the colonial era, not through state-backed expropriation or coercive ‘land grabs.’ Clear demarcation of these private holdings meant no recorded dispossession when recent Chinese projects were established. Future debates should therefore focus less on presumed state–capital collusion and more on how specific land-tenure institutions mediate rural land acquisitions.

Second, although soil fertility, water availability and infrastructure proximity have positive effects on attracting foreign investors, the subnational land tenure institutions play a decisive role in directing investment. Comparing the Zambia and Tanzania cases, the results suggest that market-oriented private leasehold arrangements—backed by predictable state enforcement—offer the certainty that transnational capital seeks, whereas authority-based regimes (government leaseholds in Tanzania; customary tenure in Zambia) introduce discretionary risks that most CAgrils avoid.

Third, the variations in LTRs unveil the relations between the LTRs and the state. The state has power to define foreign access to land and the terms and conditions of foreign landholdings, rather than leaving it to the market alone. The failed or abandoned attempts to convert Zambian customary land reveal how negotiations must pass sequential gatekeepers—chiefs, district councils, the Ministry of Lands—each adding delay, rent-seeking, and political uncertainty. Only investors with strong relational capital or long-time horizons engage such terrains. Recognising this layered governance is essential for analysts and policymakers seeking to predict or manage investment flows.

Finally, the study deepens our understanding of rural land acquisition from a comparative and subnational dimension. The original database I constructed through fieldwork provides rich empirical

Appendix A. Case selection

Following Mill’s method of difference, I select Tanzania and Zambia as the most similar cases (Table A.1). They are similar in terms of the suitability for agriculture and China’s political and economic presence in both countries. These two factors are the two main alternative explanations for different levels of Chinese agricultural investment in a recipient country. The agronomic factor is explained in Figure A.1, where the maps suggest that Zambia and Tanzania are both located in suitable agroecological zones. Table A.2 provides a sixty-year overview of China’s agricultural engagements in Africa—Tanzania and Zambia in particular, the changes and continuities. The review shows, firstly, that the changes over time in the Chinese

materials and offers new insights into cross-country subnational institutional determinant of foreign investment. These results speak to the body of literature which emphasizes the importance of property institutions in understanding the socio-economic and political dynamics in rural Africa (Berry, 2002; Lund, 2008; Mamdani, 1996). In particular, it contributes to a nascent stream of research, which analyses the effects of subnational land governance on foreign land acquisitions.

There are limitations of this study, particularly regarding the limited scope and temporal window. The project follows only Chinese investors and two African countries. It remains unclear that whether the motivations and risk tolerances of Chinese investors are different from other investors in the agricultural sector. The binary focus on two countries limits the statistical generalizability of findings. Second, the temporal window (1990–2021) captures major policy inflections but cannot test post-2021 trajectories, notably the implementation of Zambia’s National Land Policy and Tanzania’s continuing village-land titling drive. Future research can extend the LTR typology to countries across the Global South to test whether the institutional logics observed here travel to regions with different colonial legacies and resource endowment. Furthermore, the framework could illuminate mining, forestry and renewable-energy concessions, beyond agricultural sector, where property institutions likewise mediate foreign capital’s footprint.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the author(s) used [ChatGPT] in order to [check the spellings and grammar and improve the readability of the manuscript]. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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Declaration of competing interest

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

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¹⁶ This analysis also aligns with the ‘spatial capital’ theory that a mutually reinforcing relationship between physical environments (such as buildings and infrastructure) and human activity in a given locale (Marcus, 2025).

agricultural engagement model, from aid to business, are similar in Tanzania and Zambia and fit with the overall pattern across the African continent (Brautigam & Tang, 2009). Secondly, since the 1960s Tanzania and Zambia have received parallel agricultural aid projects, which suggests that China's foreign policy toward agriculture in the two countries should be identical. The review also indicates for Zambia starting to receive more Chinese agricultural investment than Tanzania from the 1990s onwards. Therefore, the different levels of agricultural investment are most likely due to Chinese investor preference to engage with Zambia due to the country's own political economic situations.

Table A.1

Method of difference: most similar countries—Tanzania and Zambia

	Tanzania	Zambia
Suitability for agriculture	Yes	Yes
China's political and economic presence	Active since independence	Active since independence
LTR Time 1 ^a	Government leasehold land	Private leasehold land
1. Foreign land access	Foreigners as second-class investors	Foreigners as equal to Zambian citizens (under debate since 2017)
2. Foreign land transfer	Partial market mechanism with state allocation of non-transferable derivative rights up to 99 years	Market exchange of transfer rights up to 99 years (under debate since 2017)
3. Foreign land control strategy	State selective enforcement and alternative means of protection required	State protection
Impact of political mobilization/policy debate	Land as politicized rhetoric during 2015 elections	Electoral competition featuring an anti-Chinese platform between 2008 and 2012
Outcome I	Very limited interest in investing in agricultural land by Chinese investors; with onset of the 2015 elections, Chinese investors across sectors left Tanzania and none of them moved into the agriculture sector	Significantly more interest in investing in agricultural land by Chinese investors compared to Tanzania; with onset of the 2008–2012 elections, Chinese investors across sectors acquired agricultural land
LTR Time 2		
Impact of political mobilization/policy debate	NLP drafts proposed pro-investment agenda since 2015	NLP draft proposed to designate foreigners as second-class and shorten land tenure to investors since 2017
Outcome II	The NLP drafts had no significant observed effect on Chinese investors	The uncertainty introduced by NLP draft significantly reduced Chinese investors' interest in acquiring agricultural land

Note.

a. There are two types of LTRs in Tanzania and three types in Zambia. For the purpose of this table, i.e. to justify the two country case selection for the method of difference research design, I only list the key contrasting LTRs between Tanzania and Zambia which make the most difference to foreign land investors. Therefore, in this table, I consider government leasehold land in Tanzania and private leasehold land in Zambia. Within country, subnational comparisons are discussed in detail in the paper.

Suitability for agriculture is measured by two indicators, *nutrient* and *workability*. The two indicators are chosen following Conigliani et al. (2018). *Nutrient* is a measure of the quality of land, including soil limitations for plant growth. *Workability* measures the soil conditions that may limit cultivation activities. Both are ranked in seven classes (1–7).¹⁷ The lower the class (class 1), the fewer limitations there are for plant growth and cultivation activities. Data is obtained from the Harmonized World Soil Database v 1.2 (Fischer et al., 2008). The data shows that Tanzania and Zambia have very similar levels of suitability for agriculture (Figure A.1).

Bilateral relations are measured by two indicators, *UNGA voting alignment* and *agricultural aid*.¹⁸ *UNGA voting alignment* is well established in the FDI literature as a consistent indicator of positive correlations with FDI to aligned countries (Stone et al., 2022). Evidence suggests that Chinese foreign aid is correlated with UNGA voting (Strüver, 2016). Meanwhile, Morgan and Zheng (2019) show the links between China's historical *agricultural aid* and contemporary investment in Africa. Data on *UNGA voting alignment* is obtained from United National General Assembly Voting Data (Voeten et al., 2009). China's *agricultural aid* in Tanzania and Zambia since independence has been compiled by myself from secondary sources (see Table A.2). The data shows that China has had very similar bilateral relations with Tanzania and Zambia (Figure A.2).

¹⁷ 1: No or slight limitations; 2: Moderate limitations; 3: Severe limitations; 4: Very severe limitations; 5: Mainly non-soil; 6: Permafrost area; 7: Water bodies.

¹⁸ United Nation General Assembly, UNGA.

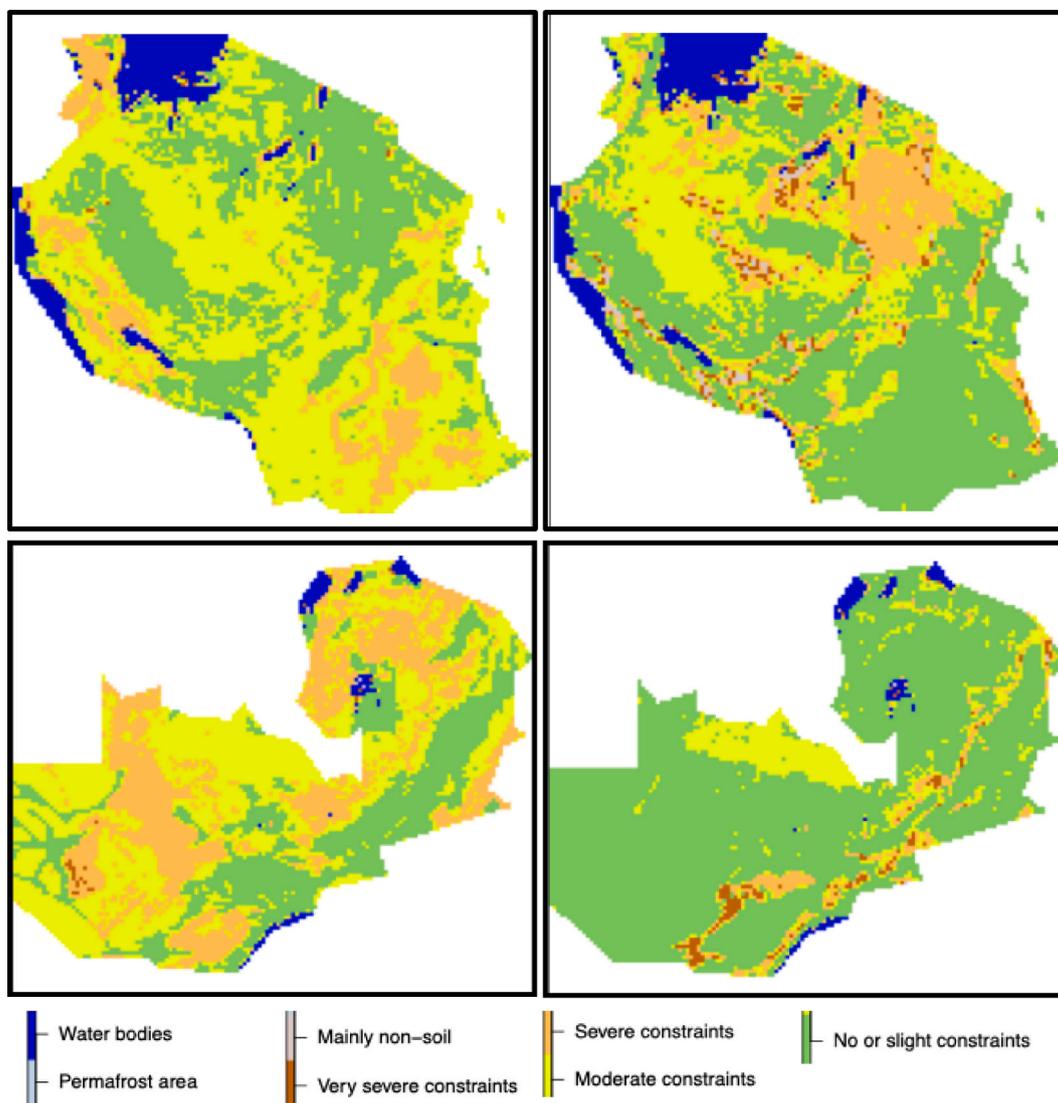


Fig. A.1. Suitability for agriculture in Tanzania and Zambia. Note: Maps on the left show *nutrient* and on the right show *workability*. Tanzania is shown in the top two maps, and Zambia in the bottom two.

Source: Author’s own compilation based on data from Harmonized World Soil Database v 1. 2 (Fischer et al., 2008).

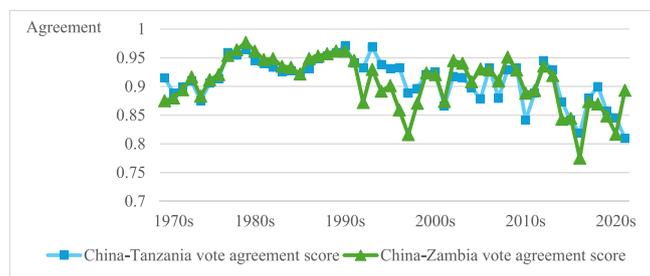


Fig. A.2. UNGA voting alignment score.

Source: Author’s own compilation based on data from United National General Assembly Voting Data (Voeten et al., 2009).

Table A.2

China’s agricultural aid to Tanzania and Zambia

Time period	Chinese agricultural aid to Tanzania	Chinese agricultural aid to Zambia
1960s—early-1980s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ruvu State Farm 1965: co-financed by Tanganyika for 2,834-ha (ha) of farmland. China also financed an irrigation and hydroelectric dam to generate power for the farm. - Upenja State Farm 1965–1969: 526ha. financed and provided with training and technical assistance. Built 13 deep wells for irrigation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Kafushi Agricultural Technical Cooperation 1975: joint Chinese and Zambian government rice growing project, with irrigation system. - Agricultural Station in Kafue (1980) <p>Factories that may have impacts on agriculture:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Chingola Maize Mill 1981–1983: maize processing.

(continued on next page)

Table A.2 (continued)

Time period	Chinese agricultural aid to Tanzania	Chinese agricultural aid to Zambia
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mahonda State Sugar Cane Farm and Processing Factory 1974: assisted with the development of a 1,1216-ha plantation. - Mbarali Rice Farm 1971–1977: built and assisted management for decades, over a 5,575 ha, self-contained state farm. - Built at least five agricultural extensions and farmer training stations. Factories that may have impacts on agriculture: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Urafiki Textile Factory 1968 - Ubongo Farm Implements Factory 1971 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Zambia-China Mulungushi Textile factory^a
Mid-1980s—late-1990s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mahonda Rehabilitation (twice): 20 million TSH soft loan in mid 1980s, and \$2 million in 1996. - Food Aid (twice): \$1 million in 1985, and loan of an unknown amount in 1999. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unknown^b
2000—present	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sino-Tanzania ATDC 2009-: designed, constructed, and continues to manage and provide assistance. - Technical assistance and capacity building 2006-: sent 3 experts 2009–2010 - Agriculture-related training programs in China 2006-: 10–20 Zanzibaris were sent to China for training per year in 2006–2008, 70 in 2009, over 100 in 2010, and nearly 200 in 2011. - Agricultural machinery donations 2005: \$123,615 worth of agricultural machinery. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Technical support 2001: RMB20 million with unknown purpose.^c - Food donation: 4,500 tons of maize in 2003; \$1 million grant for food purchases.^d - ATDC 2011-: designed, constructed, and continues to manage and provide assistance.^e Have trained thousands of agro-technicians, and cooperated in research and education.^f - Three Maize Mill, over 1,000 wells in rural areas. - Concessional loan: built 9 large farm barns. - Agriculture-related training programs in China 2006-: over 500 in total.

^a It was inaugurated in 1983 after five years of construction financed by a 11.17-million-pound interest-free loan from the Chinese government. Accessed in Jan 2018. http://en.people.cn/200311/27/eng20031127_129097.shtml.

^b I cannot find the data for this period, not even some ambiguous project names, but I strongly doubt there's nothing during this period.

^c AidData. Accessed in Jan 2018. <http://china.aiddata.org/projects/2116>.

^d AidData. Accessed in Jan 2018. <http://china.aiddata.org/projects/2127>.

^e AidData. Accessed in Jan 2018. <http://china.aiddata.org/projects/19844>.

^f Speech from Yang Youming, Chinese ambassador in Zambia. Accessed in Jan 2018. http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/fz_677316/1206_678698/1206x2_678718/t1482809.shtml.

^g On SAIS-CARIS website, "Our Data for Chinese Agricultural Investments in Africa". Accessed in Jan 2018. <http://www.sais-cari.org/data-chinese-agricultural-investments-in-africa>.

Sources: Author's own compilation based on Bräutigam and Tang (2012); Yan and Sautman (2010); SAIS-CARI Data; AidData. ^g

As Table A.2 shows, China has a long history of relations with Tanzania and Zambia. After establishment of the People's Republic of China, it started diplomatic relations with Tanganyika and Zanzibar in 1961 and 1963 respectively, and extended this to the new United Republic of Tanzania when Tangayika and Zanzibar united in 1964. China and Zambia established diplomatic relations in 1964, and bilateral cooperation subsequently developed smoothly.

The patterns of change of Chinese agricultural aid over time in Tanzania and Zambia echo with the patterns across the African continent identified by Bräutigam and Tang (2009) and many others. These patterns over time are predominantly associated with China's domestic development changes that are situated within and actively adjusted to the international political environment and global economic trends.

From the 1960s to the early-1980s, China experienced a period of substantial outflows of agricultural development aid into newly independent African countries, albeit China then its own period of harsh poverty and economic difficulties. From the mid-1980s to the late-1990s, China's agricultural aid projects slowed down and moved into a period of consolidation and experimentation with a new model of cooperation, which finally led to aid reform and emergence of SOEs in the African agriculture sector. Since 2000, China's agricultural engagements have gradually matured toward a model of mixed aid-trade-investment packages, which prioritize African agricultural development as well as boosting commercial opportunities for Chinese firms (Buckley, 2013; Sun, 2011).

Appendix B. The Case Database

To gather information about each particular investment project, I travelled throughout both countries, seeking interviews.¹⁹ Thanks to the kindness and generosity of people I encountered, I was able to conduct 96 qualitative interviews in Zambia and 42 in Tanzania with different actors in the land sector, ranging from central state agents (i.e. permanent secretary, commissioner of lands, bureaucrats), local political leaders (i.e. senior chiefs, chiefs, headman), civil societies (i.e. researchers, academics, NGO activists), to Chinese communities (i.e. investors, senior managers, employees, immigrants). Each interview took 40 min on average, and they ranged from 20 to 90 min. The interviews took place in various locations. In the majority, I travelled to informants' offices or farms or met them in cafés in malls near them. On rare occasions, I was invited to their houses as a guest and I was showered with food and drinks and received gifts of fruit to take away. Sometimes, the conversations occurred organically during a long car ride, or a social gathering. Interviewees were chosen because of their relevance to the subject matter, accessibility and availability. The fieldwork for this project was approved by The LSE Research Ethics Committee.²⁰ Before conducting interviews, I was granted a research permit and permissions from the Tanzanian and Zambian authorities.

¹⁹ When I embarked on this study, I considered that my positionality as a Chinese national studying in Britain might offer a new perspective on studies of the China-Africa encounter. I had hoped to distinguish myself from a Chinese researcher based in China. It was only after I started the fieldwork that I realized what a subtle but sensitive position I was in. Thus, I was careful to be reflexive and tried to triangulate the interview data as much as I could. With respect to positionality in the field, I tried to mimic female counterparts in my case countries in terms of self-presentation. I dressed in a feminine way and put myself in a gendered role in the workplace that my participants were familiar with.

²⁰ I completed all the essential data security training. My Data Management Plan was submitted to a Research Ethics Review at the LSE, and was approved at departmental level because of the low risk involved. I did not collect any biodata. Any potential identifiable information at project or individual level has been anonymized to protect the participants.

To the best of my knowledge, my research covered all Chinese agricultural projects in the two countries that were active during the time of my field research, as of 2019 for Zambia and 2021 for Tanzania. To reduce survivor bias, I tried to identify and gather information on any failed Chinese agricultural land investments in the two countries. I found five aborted projects in Zambia, and I was not able to identify any failed projects in Tanzania. Among the 60 recorded projects, some I have more information on than others, due to the quality of interviews. For some projects, I have limited information either because the project owner/manager refused to talk to me, or my connections could not reach to them. For some projects, the interviewees only provided a vague year of investment and size of land acquired. In these cases, participants usually used phrases such as ‘2010 ish,’ ‘after 2015,’ ‘maybe around 2013,’ or ‘between 10 and 20 ha’ I recorded the approximate year and farm size as the numbers mentioned by the interviewees. For example, I recorded ‘2010 ish’ as 2010 and ‘between 10 and 20 ha’ as 10–20 ha. Any information not available was recorded as n/a.

Table B.1

Overview of Chinese agricultural investment projects in Zambia: The case database

Zambia					
LTRs	Case Code	Time ^a	Location	Size (ha) ^b	Production
Private leasehold land	ZA01	1990	Lusaka	667	Wheat, soybean, maize
	ZA02	1994	Central	3700	Chicken, maize, soybean, wheat
	ZA04	1998	Lusaka	40	Maize, wheat and cabbage
	ZA05	1999-2012/13-	Copperbelt	2700 at beginning; 2012/13 gov appropriated 1500. 1200 ha left.	Cattle
	ZA06	1999	Lusaka	10–20	Chicken
	ZA07	1999	Lusaka	10–20	Chicken
	ZA08	1999–2015	Central	1400 sold to a white settler in 2015	n/a
	ZA11	2003-2009-	Lusaka	80 sold to Chinese immigrants in 2009	Maize, soybean, wheat, egg chicken
	ZA37	2018	Lusaka	3000	Seed soybean, maize, wheat, cattle
	ZA03	1994	Lusaka	8	Chicken, vegetables, grocery shops, family houses
	ZA09	2002	Lusaka	1.2	Egg laying hens, chickens, soybean oil pressing
	ZA10	2002	Lusaka	20.2	Chicken, organic fertilizers, vegetables
	ZA11	2009	Lusaka	80 Chinese immigrants purchased from cop in 2009	Maize, soybean, wheat, egg Chicken
	ZA13	2010–2012	Lusaka	Project was aborted in 2012, land rights remained with the family	Chicken
	ZA14	2010	Lusaka	10	Vegetables
	ZA15	2010	Lusaka	10 (leasehold) + 8 (sublease)	Chicken, vegetables
	ZA23	2014	Lusaka	25	Chinese vegetables, cabbage, maize
	ZA30	after 2015	Copperbelt	n/a	Vegetables
	ZA31	after 2015	Copperbelt	n/a	Vegetables
	ZA32	after 2015	Copperbelt	n/a	Vegetables
	ZA38	2018	Lusaka	20	Watermelon, strawberry, Chinese vegetables, Tanzania rice
	ZA39	2018	Lusaka	24	Fruits
	ZA41	2019	Lusaka	30	Watermelon
	ZA42	2019	Lusaka	7	Chinese vegetables
	ZA43	2019	Lusaka	41	Green maize, cabbage, soybean
	ZA12	2010	Copperbelt	500	Wheat, maize, soybean
	ZA16	2011	Southern	1000	Cattle
	ZA18	2011	Central	250	Wheat, soybean, maize
	ZA19	2012	Lusaka	20	Tomato, vegetables
	ZA24	2015	Central	500	Cattle
	ZA25	after 2015	Southern	300	Not yet developed (proposed agritourism)
	ZA26	after 2015	Lusaka	40	Agritourism
ZA27	after 2015	Lusaka	1300	Fruit trees	
ZA28	after 2015	Southern	100	Not yet developed (proposed agritourism)	
ZA29	after 2015	Lusaka	n/a	Fish pond & agritourism	
ZA33	2016	Central	75	Vegetables, chicken, goat, rabbit, pig, process meat	
ZA34	2016	Muchinga	3000	Not yet developed (proposed cash crops)	
ZA36	2017	Lusaka	140	Rice	
ZA20	2012–2015	Lusaka	1,500 m2 bankrupted in 2015	Mushroom cultivation	
ZA40	2019	Southern	2500	Chilli pepper, marigolds	
ZA44	2017	Northern	140,000	FB EPC + F and MOU on further agricultural project development	
ZA45	2018	Muchinga	147,000	FB (proposed project, at bidding process)	
ZA21	2013	Lusaka	10,000 m2 factory	Commercial mushroom cultivation	
ZA22	2014–2019 (lease stopped)	Lusaka	100	Vegetables	
Customary land	ZA47	After 2012	Eastern	A few hectares	Tobacco, maize, fruit
	ZA35	after 2016 (proposed)	Muchinga	20,000	Cash crops
	ZA49	Around 2010	Lusaka	700	Not yet developed

(continued on next page)

Table B.1 (continued)

Zambia					
LTRs	Case Code	Time ^a	Location	Size (ha) ^b	Production
	ZA50	after 2012	Most likely to be Central or Lusaka	n/a	n/a
	ZA46	2003–2011 (injected CADfund in 2011)-	Eastern	40,000–50,000	Cotton
	ZA48	2015	Lusaka	n/a	Cotton
				precurring from smallholders in Lusaka, Central, and Southern Provinces	

Table B.2

Overview of Chinese agricultural investment projects in Tanzania: The case database

Tanzania					
LTRs	Case Code	Timing ^a	Location	Size (acre) ^b	Production
Government leasehold land	TZ01	2000	Morogoro	5900 ha	Sisal production and processing
	TZ08	n/a	Mbeya	200	Rice
	TZ09	2018–2021 (relocated)	Dar es Salaam	5	Agroprocessing factory
	TZ10	after 2008	Dar es Salaam	around 5	Agroprocessing Factory
	TZ02	2011–2019 (state expropriation)	Morogoro	2700	Sisal
	TZ04	2009	Dar es Salaam	5	Vegetables
	TZ03	2013	Shinyanga	8	Agroprocessing factory
Village land	TZ09	2021	Dar es Salaam	8	Agroprocessing factory
	TZ05	2016	Pwani region	50	Vegetables
	TZ06	2009	Pwani region	8	Vegetables
	TZ07	2021	Tanga region	100	Mixed farming

Note.

a. In some cases, interviewees were either unsure or vague about the exact starting time and size of the project.

b. For anonymization purposes, the exact location is not provided.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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