

The Analysis of Representation and Mechanism of Application of Strong and Weak Ties in Rural Land Circulation — A Case Study of Gaopo Village in Sichuan Province

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Abstract: *At present, the market institutions and legal framework for rural land circulation in China are underdeveloped, and social relations play a crucial role in this process. Based on typical case studies, this paper analyzes the correlation between strong/weak ties and rural land circulation. The results indicate that rural households make land circulation decisions based on their social networks: households with limited social capital tend to choose land circulation through strong ties, which is characterized by a narrow circulation scope, predominant oral agreements, lack of time limits, and difficulty in forming large-scale operations. In contrast, households with abundant social capital are more likely to engage in land circulation through weak ties, featuring a broad circulation scope, written agreements specifying circulation duration and rent, and the ability to achieve large-scale operations. Ultimately, social relations in rural land circulation serve as a supplement to the defective market allocation mechanism, but may also give rise to negative effects.*

Keywords: Strong ties; weak ties; Farmland transfer; Social capital.

1. INTRODUCTION

The household contract responsibility system has made remarkable contributions to stimulating farmers' enthusiasm, accelerating China's agricultural development, and advancing the industrialization process. On the other hand, the equal land distribution under this system has led to issues such as land fragmentation and the atomization of rural households. Additionally, with the rapid socioeconomic development, the income gap between urban and rural areas has widened significantly. Driven by economic interests, a large number of rural laborers—especially young and middle-aged workers and rural elites—have migrated to cities, resulting in scattered agricultural production, extensive farming practices, and frequent land abandonment. Against this new historical backdrop, the institutional arrangement of the household contract responsibility system has exhibited certain limitations, which necessitate reform. Rural land circulation is an effective solution to address land fragmentation, abandonment, and idleness in China's rural areas. It plays a vital role in optimizing land resource allocation, improving land use efficiency, promoting agricultural restructuring, and increasing farmers' income and rural economic development [1].

As early as 1984, the Central Government Document No. 1 *Notice of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Rural Work in 1984* proposed "extending the land contract period." In 1993, when the first round of land contracts was approaching expiration, the State Council issued Document No. 11, stipulating that the contract period would be "extended for another 30 years." In 2008, the *Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Several Major Issues Concerning Promoting Rural Reform and Development* adopted at the Third Plenary Session of the 17th Central Committee emphasized "full and guaranteed land contract management rights, and the existing land contract relations shall remain stable and unchanged for a long time." In 2013, the Central Government Document No. 1 *Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Modern Agriculture and Further Enhancing Rural Development Vitality* proposed "urgently studying specific forms to maintain the stability and long-term invariance of existing land contract relations, guiding the orderly circulation of rural land contract management rights, encouraging and supporting the transfer of contracted land to large professional households, family farms, and farmers' cooperatives, and developing various forms of appropriate large-scale operations." It is evident that the government has long emphasized the long-term nature of land contracts and attached great importance to improving the land circulation system.

Current academic research on rural land circulation in China is abundant, covering various aspects: the formation of the land circulation market and institutional innovation [2-5], the definition of land property rights and legal

issues in circulation [6-8], factors influencing farmers' circulation behavior and willingness [9-11], the protection of farmers' rights and social security [12], the performance of land circulation [13-15], and social risks in land circulation [16-19]. These studies have laid a solid foundation for subsequent research with their extensive coverage. However, it is noteworthy that most studies focus on economic aspects, while research on social relations and social issues in rural land circulation is relatively scarce. Economics, by its disciplinary nature, pursues efficiency and optimal solutions, thus emphasizing the optimization of land resource allocation and efficiency improvement. Nevertheless, whether efficiency should be the sole or primary policy objective is debatable.

It is an undeniable fact that China's land circulation market is imperfect. In economic activities, under conditions of insufficient competition (e.g., shortage economy and monopoly), incomplete information (e.g., uncertainty, asymmetry, or high information costs), and imperfect rules, social relations tend to exert significant influence [20]. Therefore, exploring the connection between rural land circulation and farmers' social relations is conducive to enriching the research on this topic.

The authors conducted a 14-day on-site survey in Gaopo Village, Yibin City, Sichuan Province in July 2013, followed by a 3-day follow-up survey in February 2014. Based on the survey data, this paper attempts to analyze land circulation behavior at the micro level of rural households and explore how they use strong and weak social ties to make circulation decisions.

2. OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY AREA AND CURRENT STATUS OF LAND CIRCULATION

2.1 Overview of the Study Area

Gaopo Village is affiliated to Cuiping District, Yibin City, Sichuan Province, located 42 kilometers away from the urban area. It borders Muping Town to the east, Changning County to the south and west, and Gao County to the north. The village has a total population of 971, distributed in 277 households, with approximately 550 left-behind residents, mostly elderly people and women. It has 1,157 mu of paddy fields, 234 mu of dry land, and 217 mu of forest land (1 mu \approx 0.0667 hectares). Characterized by a shallow hilly terrain with limited flat land, the village has a subtropical climate with an average annual temperature of 18°C and an average annual rainfall of 1,050 mm, boasting abundant water resources. The main crops grown are grain and oil crops such as rice, corn, and rapeseed. A large proportion of households engage in concurrent businesses. Currently, the village is vigorously developing animal husbandry and has established an aquatic cooperative specializing in soft-shelled turtle breeding.

2.2 Current Status of Land Circulation

A basic condition of Gaopo Village is a large population with limited land: the per capita cultivated land is 1.43 mu, and the average number of plots per household is 3.7, indicating a serious degree of land fragmentation. With the large-scale migration of laborers, many households face a shortage of agricultural labor and are willing to transfer their land. Additionally, elderly residents, as they grow older and lose labor capacity, are increasingly inclined to transfer their land. The village lacks large-scale agricultural operators, with only a few external investors renting land for animal husbandry. Consequently, the land circulation market in Gaopo Village is currently in a state of oversupply.

Land circulation in the village mainly takes two forms: spontaneous circulation among households and capital-led circulation by external investors. The former is dominated by farming on behalf of others and subcontracting, while the latter mainly involves leasing and shareholding. Due to the difficulty in statistics for spontaneous circulation such as farming on behalf of others, there are no official data. According to the survey of 120 households, 53 have participated in land circulation, with farming on behalf of others, subcontracting, leasing, and shareholding accounting for 45.28%, 24.53%, 16.98%, and 13.21% respectively.

At present, the existing large-scale circulation operators in the village fall into two categories: external capital investors who transfer land for aquatic breeding (specializing in soft-shelled turtles), and some left-behind rural laborers who, for various reasons, do not migrate for work and increase their income by transferring land for agricultural production, known locally as "large grain-growing households."

2.3 Application of Strong and Weak Ties in Land Circulation

The concept of "ties" was first proposed in the analysis of the labor market. In 1973, Granovetter published *"The Strength of Weak Ties"*, defining the strength of ties based on four dimensions: interaction frequency, emotional intensity, intimacy, and reciprocal exchange. Granovetter argued that "strong ties" exist among homogeneous groups and are less effective in information acquisition compared to "weak ties," which form between individuals from different groups. Due to the low similarity among these individuals, they possess distinct information, enabling weak ties to act as "information bridges" connecting different groups [21].

However, many scholars, based on China's traditional cultural background of "differential mode of association" and "acquaintance society," argue that "strong ties" play a more significant role. Bian Yanjie verified the role of strong ties in Chinese society through a study on job seekers in Tianjin, proposing the "strength of strong ties" [22]. Lin Nan put forward the social resource theory, suggesting that people within the same social stratum share similar social resources and tend to form "strong ties," while those from different strata, with significant differences in social resources, tend to form "weak ties" [23].

Domestic research on social ties has mainly focused on migrant workers and employment, highlighting the need to expand the application of social tie theories based on China's reality [24].

In Gaopo Village, due to the scattered operation of individual households, the diverse endowments of land resources, and the high cost of information acquisition and dissemination, social ties inevitably influence both parties involved in land circulation. Furthermore, the traditional culture of rural China is centered on familism, which attaches great importance to clan relations and strengthens the social atmosphere for the operation of ties [25].

In this paper, strong and weak ties are defined based on the relationship between the two parties in land circulation: if Party A and Party B (the two parties involved in circulation) are family members, relatives, or close friends, the circulation is defined as "strong-tie circulation"; conversely, if they are strangers, acquaintances in passing, or have minimal interaction, the circulation is defined as "weak-tie circulation." The following sections summarize typical cases of strong-tie and weak-tie circulation.

2.3.1 Strong-Tie Circulation

Case 1: Zhang, Male, 54 Years Old**

"My family has over 6 tiao of land (a local unit of land area; 4 tiao = 1 mu), divided into 3 plots. The largest plot is a paddy field of 3.5 tiao, and the smallest is a dry land of 1 tiao. My son and daughter-in-law work in interior decoration in the city, bought a house there, and invited us to live with them to take care of our grandson. As a result, no one is left at home to farm the land. We didn't want it to be abandoned, so we gave it to my son's uncle to cultivate."

"Why didn't we rent it out? We couldn't find anyone willing to rent it. The location of our land is not good; external investors aren't interested. What social connections do rural people have these days? Who do we know?"

"Now many people want to transfer their land, but there aren't that many renters. Some even have to beg others to take their land for free, and others still pick and choose."

"When you ask someone you know to take care of the land, why sign a contract? That would be ridiculous—they're not outsiders. We've been doing this for two years, and my son's uncle brings us 100 jin of new rice every year after the harvest."

In this case, Mr. Zhang's children have settled in the city with stable jobs and incomes, so they invited the elderly couple to live with them for retirement and childcare. This left no labor at home for agricultural production, prompting the family to transfer their land. Due to the oversupply in the village's land circulation market and the poor location of their land, they couldn't find a tenant willing to pay rent. To avoid land abandonment, Mr. Zhang decided to transfer the land to his son's uncle (a direct relative) through strong ties, in the form of farming on behalf of others.

Case 2: Yang, Female, 43 Years Old**

"My family currently has 17 mu of land, including 15 mu of paddy fields and 2 mu of dry land. There are 5 family members: two daughters studying outside, my husband working in a distillery in Changning County (he usually comes back after work in the afternoon), and my 78-year-old mother living at home. Only 2 mu of dry land is actually owned by us; the other 15 mu is transferred from others."

"At first, because I had to take care of the children and the elderly, I couldn't go out to work, so I had to farm myself. Later, some relatives went out to work and asked us to take care of their land to prevent abandonment. After all, we're family—why sign a contract? A verbal agreement was enough. They didn't charge me any money, but we usually give them some new rice as a token of gratitude. At that time, since I couldn't go out to work, I wanted to farm more land to increase my income. During busy farming seasons, my husband comes back to help—fortunately, the distillery is not far. Later, I simply asked relatives, friends, and neighbors to let me farm their unused land, and we even rearranged some plots to make them more concentrated. I also rented two plots at 400 jin of rice per year. I usually take care of the fields during the day, and my husband helps in the afternoon. During peak seasons, we hire additional labor. Now, including my husband's salary, our annual income is about 40,000 to 50,000 yuan, which is enough to support my eldest daughter through college."

In this case, Ms. Yang couldn't migrate for work due to her elderly mother and young children, but her family still had sufficient labor: her husband engaged in concurrent business (working in the distillery during the day and farming in the afternoon), and her daughters and mother could provide temporary labor during busy seasons. Most of the land she transferred was from relatives and neighbors (strong ties) in the form of farming on behalf of others (for free) or low-cost leasing (400 yuan per year). She mainly grows grain crops and is regarded as a "large grain-growing household" locally. Her family income and land circulation model are consistent with the characteristics of "middle peasants" proposed by He Xuefeng—her land transfer is almost entirely completed through strong ties such as relatives and neighbors.

The above two cases illustrate land circulation decisions made through strong ties. Such circulation exhibits the following characteristics:

- Narrow scope of circulation partners, mainly relatives, friends, and neighbors (based on kinship and geographical proximity);
- Limited scale of operation (e.g., Ms. Yang only managed to form a 17-mu scale);
- Dominant circulation methods: farming on behalf of others and subcontracting, with low rent (often in the form of in-kind payments) and no formal written contracts (relying on verbal agreements);
- Land use after circulation: mainly grain cultivation;
- Initiative: Transferors take the initiative to find recipients to avoid land abandonment, while transferees passively accept the "donated" land.

These characteristics are closely related to the use of strong ties. Under the oversupply condition of the land circulation market in Gaopo Village, farmers struggle to find tenants and gain economic benefits from land transfer. To ensure a fallback option if they return to the village, they are unwilling to abandon their land and thus seek help from relatives and friends through strong ties.

Furthermore, the left-behind population in the village is highly homogeneous, characterized by kinship, clan affiliation, and vulnerability: most left-behind residents are related by blood or marriage (the village is dominated by surnames such as Li, Zhang, and Wang), and the majority are the elderly, women, and children with limited social capital. In such a homogeneous village, information on land circulation is relatively accessible, but the oversupply means only a few can rent out their land for profit. Most households cannot "connect" with external investors through their social networks to achieve market-oriented circulation [18], and thus resort to spontaneous, non-market-oriented circulation through strong ties.

In strong-tie relationships, both parties have a strong sense of obligation to help each other (especially when they have the ability to do so), as closer ties often lead to willingness to provide assistance without immediate reciprocation [20]. For example, Mr. Zhang "gave" his land to his son's uncle, and Ms. Yang farmed land

"donated" by relatives. Such circulation relies on a single direct tie rather than a chain of ties, thus failing to form market-oriented transactions. However, strong ties are built on mutual trust, and spontaneous circulation among relatives/friends is a form of reciprocal exchange. As Bian Yanjie [26] noted, "In a relationship-based culture, people are obligated to provide favor-based help to relatives and acquaintances, expecting reciprocal favors in the future."

Trust in strong ties reduces uncertainty, transaction costs, and risks, shaping the aforementioned circulation characteristics. This aligns with Xiang Biao's research on the "Zhejiang Village," which argues that people "expand" their economic activities by relying on existing social ties [27].

2.3.2 Weak-Tie Circulation

Case 3: Li, Male, 62 Years Old**

"My family has 2 plots of land, totaling 7 tiao. We cultivate 2 tiao of dry land ourselves, and the 5 tiao of paddy fields (with a good location) are rented to the village's aquatic cooperative. Nowadays, tenants choose the land—if you want to rent it out, you either need good land or connections. The cooperative is run by external investors engaged in large-scale aquatic breeding. My daughter bought some gifts and asked her junior high school classmate (who works in the government) for help. Coupled with the good location of our land (close to water sources), we successfully rented the 5 tiao of paddy fields to the soft-shelled turtle breeder. We signed a 10-year contract with rent adjusted every three years. The current annual income is about 1,200 yuan, which we are quite satisfied with. Without this connection, it would have been difficult to rent out the land. With this relationship, the investor knows we are acquainted with government officials and will not delay the rent payment. I don't have the energy to farm all the land myself—if I hadn't rented it out, I would have had to ask relatives and friends to take care of it for free, and strangers wouldn't agree to do it, let alone pay rent."

In this case, Mr. Li's children migrated to work in cities, leaving only him and his spouse (elderly with limited labor capacity) in the village. They chose to rent out their high-quality land to a local cooperative (external capital) through weak ties. The circulation process involved a chain of ties: Mr. Li's daughter → her classmate (government employee) → aquatic cooperative investor. The classmate acted as a weak-tie node connecting the landowner and the investor. The circulation was formalized with a 10-year written contract, and the annual rent (1,200 yuan) was much higher than the local average (600 yuan).

Case 4: Song, Male, 45 Years Old

"I am from Chengdu. I rented 60 mu of land here and converted it into fish ponds, mainly breeding soft-shelled turtles, which are sold in Chengdu and two stores in Yibin's urban area. Now I cooperate with the township government to run an aquatic breeding cooperative, and the land area has expanded to 100 mu."

"How did a Chengdu native end up here? Mainly because I have some connections here—I am a son-in-law of Yibin. At that time, I mentioned to a friend A that I wanted to rent land for fish farming and asked if he had any connections. He said he knew a friend B in the township government and helped arrange a meeting. Through friend B (who is now my partner), I connected with the township government."

"B is well-connected locally—he knows many government officials and can secure agricultural projects with government subsidies. I invited him to dinner several times, gave him a share of the profits, and he helped coordinate with township leaders, apply for government projects, and manage subsequent operations. Finally, we selected the land, drafted the contract, and the township government signed agreements with farmers directly. The contract is for 10 years: the rent was 800 yuan per mu in the first two years, and now it has increased to 1,000 yuan per mu, adjusted every three years. The benefits are good, and I plan to expand the area to breed high-end fish species."

In this case, Mr. Song (from Chengdu) rented 60 mu of land in Gaopo Village for aquatic breeding, signing 10-year contracts with local farmers at a current rent of 1,000 yuan per mu. His land transfer relied on a chain of weak ties: Friend A → Friend B → Government → Village Collective → Farmers. This process reflects the production and reproduction of social ties—Mr. Song established and maintained new relationships through successive weak-tie nodes (from Friend B to government officials and farmers).

As Lin Nan [28] explicitly stated in his social capital mobilization model, this is a two-step process: first, social actors join resource-rich social networks to gain access to potential social capital; second, they consciously mobilize these resources to achieve their goals. Both Mr. Li and Mr. Song successfully completed these two steps and achieved their expected economic benefits. In contrast, households relying on strong ties lack access to resource-rich social networks and thus cannot realize market-oriented transactions.

In terms of trust, weak ties have a much weaker foundation than strong ties. Therefore, weaker ties often require immediate reciprocation—for example, Mr. Li's daughter gave gifts to her classmate, and Mr. Song offered shares to Friend B and paid "management fees" to the township government and village collective. Due to the fragile trust foundation, formal written contracts are essential to clarify rights and obligations in weak-tie circulation.

The above two cases illustrate land circulation completed through weak ties. Such circulation exhibits the following characteristics:

- Broad scope of circulation partners, including local villagers and external capital;
- Large-scale operation (e.g., the aquatic breeding cooperative in Case 4 has expanded to 100 mu);
- Dominant circulation methods: leasing and shareholding, with high rent (in the form of monetary payment), formal written contracts specifying duration and rent standards;
- Land use after circulation: mainly high-efficiency cash crops and breeding;
- Initiative: Both transferors and transferees show strong initiative, actively pursuing instrumental goals (e.g., high economic returns).

3. COMPARISON OF LAND CIRCULATION CHARACTERISTICS UNDER DIFFERENT TIE TYPES

Based on the above analysis, the characteristics of land circulation under strong and weak ties are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Characteristics of Land Circulation Under Different Tie Types

Circulation Characteristics	Strong Ties		Weak Ties	
	Transferor	Transferee	Transferor	Transferee
Circulation Partners	Relatives, friends	Relatives, friends	General villagers, external capital	General villagers, external capital
Circulation Scale (mu)	—	17	—	60-100
Representative Case	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Case 4
Circulation Methods	Farming on behalf of others, subcontracting	Farming on behalf of others, subcontracting	Leasing, shareholding	Leasing, shareholding
Contract Form	Verbal	Verbal	Written	Written
Time Agreement	None	None	Yes	Yes
Rent Form	None, in-kind, monetary	None, in-kind, monetary	Monetary	Monetary
Land Use After Circulation	Grain cultivation	Grain cultivation	Cash crops, breeding	Cash crops, breeding
Initiative	Active	Passive	Active	Active

4. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

Based on the on-site survey in Gaopo Village, this paper explores the role of social relations in rural land circulation. Through typical case studies, it analyzes the correlation between strong/weak ties and land circulation, arguing that the use of social ties in this process arises from the imperfect market mechanism and inadequate policy supervision and legal systems for rural land circulation.

For land transferors, all hope to obtain economic benefits not lower than those from grain cultivation. However, when the number of transferors far exceeds the demand for land, farmers can only engage in economic activities through their existing social networks to retain a fallback option if they return to the village. Due to the lack of social capital and high homogeneity of the left-behind population, they rely on strong ties (e.g., relatives and friends) to take care of their land, resulting in the aforementioned circulation characteristics shaped by the trust foundation of strong ties.

In contrast, households with sufficient social capital can establish tie chains through weak ties and tend to pursue market-oriented economic transactions. Transferees in strong-tie circulation only farm "donated" land without access to resource-rich weak ties, leading to limited policy support and small-scale operations. In contrast, external capital possesses more social resources and can obtain greater policy preferences and subsidies through various ties (both strong and weak), making it easier to form large-scale operations—though this may also lead to non-grain production.

Social ties serve as both a means of interest acquisition and resource allocation, with both positive and negative effects. At the macro-social level, the widespread use of ties may indicate underdeveloped institutions and laws. Similarly, in the context of China's imperfect rural land circulation market, social ties play a dual role in optimizing land allocation and improving the market system.

Due to the imperfect market, information asymmetry, and scattered operation of atomized households (resulting in high information costs), farmers naturally rely on social networks for land circulation. With most young and middle-aged laborers and rural elites migrating to cities, the left-behind population (elderly, women, and children) has narrow social networks with short tie chains, dominated by strong ties. Under such conditions, spontaneous circulation occurs primarily through strong ties. Although this type of circulation has low efficiency and small scale, it helps form a "middle peasant" stratum and serves as an effective supplement to the defective market allocation.

On the other hand, individuals with abundant social capital may use ties to "purchase" public power for personal gain, leading to the concentration of social resources. For example, government and corporate capital have incomparable social ties compared to rural households. If not properly regulated, this may result in rent-seeking behavior in land circulation, damaging farmers' interests.

Therefore, the primary goal of rural land circulation policies should not be the blind pursuit of production efficiency, but rather the promotion of national and social sustainable development. Given China's current socioeconomic conditions and national conditions, the practice of pursuing ever-expanding operation scales and encouraging capital to enter rural areas warrants reflection and discussion. Instead, policies should respect local realities, continuously improve the legal and regulatory system, and standardize and improve the rural land circulation market under the premise of promoting national sustainable development.

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