

# Theoretical Challenges, Practical Contradictions, and Collaborative Governance in the Modernization Transformation of Small-scale Peasant Production

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**Abstract** Small-scale peasant production is the fundamental mode of agriculture in China, and its modernization transformation faces significant theoretical and practical challenges. Theoretically, classical agricultural modernization theories are inadequately tailored to the specific national condition of small-scale peasant production in China. The coexistence of multiple conflicting paradigms has resulted in systemic fragmentation, and there remains a deficiency in comprehensive investigations into the subjectivity of small-scale peasants. At the practical level, prominent contradictions include imbalances in factor supply, outdated business models, and the limited capabilities of main bodies. To address these issues, it is essential to establish a multi-stakeholder collaborative governance framework involving the "government, market, social organizations, and small-scale peasants". This framework should enhance government guidance, fully leverage the role of market allocation, activate the bridging functions of social organizations, and prioritize the cultivation of intrinsic motivation among small-scale peasants. Through the coordinated efforts of these multiple entities, barriers to transformation can be overcome, thereby facilitating the integration of small-scale peasant production with modern agricultural practices.

**Key words** Small-scale peasant production, Modernization transformation, Theoretical challenge, Collaborative governance

## 0 Introduction

As a historically traditional agricultural power, China has predominantly maintained a small-scale peasant economy as the foundational pattern of its agricultural economy. By the end of 2024, small-scale peasants constituted over 80% of agricultural business entities and managed approximately 70% of the total cultivated land area. They continue to represent a crucial foundational force in ensuring national food security and stabilizing the supply of agricultural products. With the comprehensive advancement of the rural revitalization strategy, the modernization of agriculture and rural areas has become the overarching objective of agricultural, rural, and farmer-related work in the new era. The modernization transformation of small-scale peasant production is a central task and a critical link in the broader process of achieving agricultural and rural modernization. Contrary to the simplistic notion of "eliminating small-scale peasants", the essence of this modernization transformation lies in respecting the subjectivity of small-scale peasants while promoting the transition of small-scale peasant production from traditional extensive methods to modern intensive practices through the empowerment of production factors, innovation in operational models, and institutional support. This approach establishes effective integration between small-scale peasants and larger markets, and enables these peasant groups to equitably share the benefits of agricultural modernization.

Currently, the modernization transformation of small-scale peasant production in China has achieved significant phased progress. Agricultural mechanization and digitalization levels have

steadily advanced, new forms of agricultural business entities have developed rapidly, and the organizational level of small-scale peasants has gradually strengthened. Nevertheless, due to intrinsic characteristics of small-scale peasants, such as limited production scale, dispersed operations, and weak risk resilience, as well as external factors including the persistent urban-rural dual structure and imbalanced allocation of factors, the transformation process continues to encounter numerous pressing challenges that require resolution. At the theoretical level, the absence of a targeted support system leads to significant conflicts among multiple theoretical paradigms, causing a disconnection between theoretical guidance and practical requirements. At the practical level, notable deficiencies exist in areas such as factor supply, business models, subject competencies, and institutional support, which collectively hinder the comprehensive progress of the transformation.

## 1 Fundamental connotations and theoretical foundations of the modernization transformation in small-scale peasant production

**1.1 Fundamental connotations** The modernization transformation of small-scale peasant production constitutes a multi-dimensional and multi-level systematic endeavor. Its fundamental principle is to respect the subjectivity of small-scale peasants and preserve their essential components, while simultaneously achieving a comprehensive enhancement of production methods, business models, and development concepts through the renewal of ideas, empowerment of factors, innovation of models, and improvement of institutional frameworks. Specifically, at the level of production methods, the introduction of advanced agricultural technologies and mechanized equipment to replace traditional manual labor facilitates the transformation of agricultural production to-

wards intensification, standardization, and sustainability. This shift enhances both the efficiency of agricultural production and the quality of agricultural products. At the business model level, the constraints associated with small-scale, dispersed peasant operations are addressed. Through diversified approaches such as cooperative operations, contract agriculture, and entrusted services, a linkage is established between small-scale peasants and larger markets, thereby improving organizational capacity and risk resilience among small-scale peasants. At the level of development concepts, small-scale peasants are encouraged to move away from the traditional self-sufficiency production mindset and to develop market awareness, brand consciousness, and an emphasis on green development, promoting a shift from survival-oriented to development-oriented production strategies.

It is important to clarify that the modernization transformation of small-scale peasant production does not entail replacing it with large-scale operations; rather, it involves the modernization of small-scale peasant production itself. This approach seeks to preserve the flexibility and adaptability inherent in small-scale peasant production while addressing its limitations, such as small scale and limited capacity for risk resistance. Ultimately, the goal is to establish an organic integration between small-scale peasant production and modern agriculture. Achieving this requires not only fully mobilizing the enthusiasm and creativity of small-scale peasants but also leveraging the supportive and facilitative roles of multiple stakeholders, including the government, the market, and social organizations, to foster a well-coordinated pattern of advancement.

**1.2 Theoretical foundations** The Marxist theory of small-scale peasant production serves as the fundamental theoretical framework for analyzing the modernization transformation of small-scale peasant production in China. Marx and Engels critiqued the fragmentation and underdevelopment inherent in the capitalist small-scale peasant economy, asserting that it would ultimately be supplanted by large-scale socialized production. In contrast, China's small-scale peasant production, leveraging the distinctive advantages of the socialist system, does not seek to eliminate small-scale peasants but rather aims to realize the socialization and modernization of small-scale peasant production through institutional innovation. Lenin's New Economic Policy underscores the importance of acknowledging the subjectivity of small-scale peasants and steering them toward socialized production via cooperative systems. This framework offers significant insights for the transformation of small-scale peasants in China. During this transformation, it is essential not only to leverage the guiding role of the government but also to fully respect the autonomy and intentions of small-scale peasants. By employing cooperative operations, factor empowerment, and related strategies, an effective linkage between small-scale peasants and modern agricultural development can be fostered.

The theory of agricultural modernization offers substantial support for the modernization transformation of small-scale peasant production. Its fundamental principle is to facilitate the shift from

extensive to intensive agricultural development through technological advancement, factor upgrading, and institutional innovation. The classical Western theory of agricultural modernization emphasizes achieving agricultural transformation by introducing modern production factors and improving farmers' quality. However, this theory is grounded in the context of large-scale farm operations prevalent in Western countries and does not adequately align with the fundamental national conditions characterized by small-scale, decentralized peasant production in China. Consequently, there is an urgent need to pursue theoretical innovation that integrates China's specific realities and to develop an agricultural modernization theoretical framework and practical approach tailored to the national conditions of small-scale peasant production.

The theory of collaborative governance serves as a critical framework for addressing challenges associated with the modernization transformation of small-scale peasant production. This theory posits that effective social governance necessitates the cooperative engagement of multiple stakeholders. By clearly delineating the responsibilities of each subject and establishing robust collaborative mechanisms, governance efficiency can be optimized. The modernization transformation of small-scale peasant production encompasses various subjects, including the government, the market, social organizations, and the peasants themselves. No single entity can adequately resolve all issues arising during the transformation process; the government struggles to balance policy precision with flexibility; the market is unable to effectively mitigate the disadvantaged status of small-scale peasants; social organizations often lack sufficient service capacity; and the peasants' own modernization capabilities and quality remain limited. Consequently, constructing a multi-stakeholder collaborative governance framework is essential to effectively integrate resources, reconcile conflicting interests, and facilitate the orderly advancement of the transformation process.

## 2 Theoretical challenges of the modernization transformation in small-scale peasant production

The theoretical challenges concerning the modernization transformation of small-scale peasant production in China stem from the limited applicability of classical agricultural modernization theories to the specific national conditions of small-scale peasant production in China, evident conflicts among various theoretical paradigms, and the lack of theories addressing the subjectivity of small-scale peasants. Consequently, there exists a significant gap between theoretical frameworks and practical needs. This issue can be examined from three distinct perspectives.

**2.1 Inadequacy of classical agricultural modernization theories in relation to the specific conditions of China's small-scale peasant production** The classical Western theory of agricultural modernization centers on scale expansion and intensification, deriving from the Western model of large-scale farm operations. It posits that increasing operational scale and achieving mechanization is the sole pathway to agricultural modernization. However, small-scale peasant production in China is characterized by unique

national conditions. The per capita cultivated land area is merely 867 m<sup>2</sup>, significantly below the global average. Consequently, decentralized operations continue to represent the predominant form of small-scale peasant production in China. The primary composition of small-scale peasants exhibits diverse characteristics. Traditional elderly small-scale peasants coexist alongside emerging professional farmers, with notable differences in production capacities and developmental perspectives among these groups. Small-scale peasant production is intricately intertwined with local culture and the familial security system, fulfilling roles in both production and daily life. Its social and emotional significance is difficult to replicate through large-scale agricultural operations.

The emphasis on the "large-scale replacement of small-scale peasants" in classical theories overlooks China's fundamental national conditions and the predominant role of small-scale peasants, thereby hindering effective guidance for transformation practices. For example, a significant contradiction exists between large-scale centralized operations and the reality of limited cultivated land resources and difficulties in land transfer in China. Additionally, some small-scale peasants lack both the capacity and willingness to engage in large-scale operations. An exclusive focus on large-scale operations often disregards the emotional needs and social values of small-scale peasants, resulting in their passive acceptance of transformation and a marked decline in their enthusiasm for such changes. The misalignment between theoretical frameworks and national conditions has led to inadequate, non-targeted guidance for transformation practices. In certain regions, the indiscriminate promotion of large-scale operations contradicts the actual production requirements of small-scale peasants and undermines the effectiveness of the transformation process.

**2.2 Conflicts among multiple theoretical paradigms and fragmentation of theoretical systems** Currently, theoretical research on the modernization transformation of small-scale peasant production in China is characterized by the coexistence of multiple paradigms. However, significant conflicts among these paradigms have led to a fragmented theoretical framework, thereby hindering the development of a systematic foundation to support transformation practices. Existing theoretical research predominantly identifies three conflicting paradigms. The scale-up paradigm, derived from the classical Western theory of agricultural modernization, advocates for scaling up and mechanization as the sole pathway for the transformation of small-scale peasants. This approach, however, neglects the subjectivity of small-scale peasants and the specific national conditions of cultivated land in China. The cooperative paradigm, grounded in Marxist theory concerning small-scale peasants, emphasizes the development of new types of agricultural business entities and encourages cooperative operations among small-scale peasants, while aiming to protect their primary status. Nonetheless, this paradigm struggles to effectively address the issue of aligning interests among subjects, resulting in insufficient stability of cooperation. The ecological paradigm, informed by the principles of green development, promotes the transition of small-scale peasants toward environmentally sustainable practices. Yet,

it encounters a significant tension between ecological conservation and the growth of farmers' incomes, thereby complicating the simultaneous enhancement of ecological and economic outcomes.

The conflict among theoretical paradigms results in the absence of a unified core orientation within the research field. The transformation pathways proposed by various regions and studies, grounded in distinct paradigms, exhibit considerable variation, thereby hindering the development of a systematic and comprehensive theoretical framework. Furthermore, most existing studies concentrate on isolated dimensions and lack a systematic integration of theoretical logic, practical paths, and institutional support. This fragmentation leads to a significant disconnect between theoretical research and practical transformation, impeding the effective guidance of the in-depth progression of transformation initiatives.

**2.3 Absence of the subjectivity theory of small-scale peasants and cognitive biases** The essence of the modernization transformation of small-scale peasant production lies in the modernization of the small-scale peasants themselves, with recognition of their dominant role being crucial to the success of this transformation. However, current theoretical research on the transformation of small-scale peasants in China exhibits a significant cognitive bias, "emphasizing external empowerment while neglecting the development of the peasants as main bodies". There is a notable deficiency in the theoretical framework addressing the subjectivity of small-scale peasants. Some studies regard small-scale peasants as passive recipients of transformation, overlooking their capacity for subjective initiative, and instead advocate for transformation driven primarily by external forces rather than fostering their intrinsic motivation.

This cognitive bias results in a disjunction between theoretical guidance and practical requirements. On the one hand, certain transformation policies overlook the preferences and needs of small-scale peasants, indiscriminately advocating for large-scale and mechanized operations, which diminishes their enthusiasm for transformation. On the other hand, theoretical research lacks a systematic examination of the cultivation of small-scale peasants' subjectivity, thereby hindering efforts to enhance their modern literacy and capabilities. Consequently, this leads to an insufficient internal impetus for transformation and impedes the achievement of sustainable development. In fact, the willingness, ability, and enthusiasm of small-scale peasants are critical determinants of the effectiveness of transformation. Only by fully acknowledging the central role of small-scale peasants and fostering their intrinsic motivation can the modernization transformation of small-scale peasant production be advanced in depth.

### 3 Realistic contradictions in the modernization transformation of small-scale peasant production

The theoretical challenges, combined with the unresolved urban-rural dual structure and imbalances in factor allocation alongside other practical considerations, have resulted in numerous complex contradictions confronting the modernization transforma-

tion of small-scale peasant production in China. These contradictions primarily manifest across three key dimensions: factor supply, business models, and the capacity of subjects, which collectively impede the progress of the transformation process.

**3.1 Imbalance in factor supply: shortcomings in the resource support for transformation** The rational allocation of land, capital, technology, and talent constitutes a fundamental prerequisite for the modernization transformation of small-scale peasant production. Currently, however, the transformation of small-scale peasant production in China faces a pronounced imbalance in the supply of these factors, which has become a significant bottleneck impeding progress. Specifically, regarding land factors, the decentralized operational model of small-scale peasants complicates land transfer processes. The land transfer market remains underdeveloped, and the price formation mechanism lacks standardization. Besides, the decline in cultivated land quality and the fragmentation of plots have severely constrained the advancement of agricultural mechanization and standardized production.

Regarding capital factors, small-scale peasants often lack adequate collateral. Financial institutions provide a limited array of financial products tailored to small-scale peasants and impose relatively high loan eligibility criteria. Also, fiscal funding for agriculture demonstrates a marked preference for larger-scale operators, favoring substantial business entities. Thus, small-scale peasants face significant challenges in accessing affordable financing and receive insufficient support for their development and transformation.

In terms of technological factors, current advanced agricultural technologies are predominantly designed for large-scale operations, characterized by high technical costs and complex operational procedures. These features are misaligned with the production scale and technical capabilities of small-scale peasants. Furthermore, the capacity for grassroots agricultural technology dissemination is limited, and the technology promotion system remains underdeveloped, hindering the effective transfer of advanced technologies to small-scale peasants and consequently diminishing the impact of technological empowerment.

In terms of talent factors, a substantial number of young and middle-aged rural laborers have migrated to urban areas. The remaining small-scale peasants predominantly consist of elderly individuals and women, who generally possess lower educational attainment and limited production capabilities. Furthermore, the rural talent development system is misaligned with the practical needs of small-scale peasants, and the training of new professional peasants is inadequate. Therefore, there is a deficiency of professional talent to support the transformation of small-scale peasant production.

**3.2 Lagging business model: unsmooth connection between small-scale peasants and large markets** The modernization of business models is a central link in the transformation process of small-scale peasant production. The critical factor is establishing an effective linkage between small-scale peasants and the broader

market. However, the existing business models employed by small-scale peasants in China remain relatively underdeveloped and are insufficient to satisfy the requirements of market-oriented development. The decentralized operational model characteristic of small-scale peasants results in relatively limited production scales, a narrow range of agricultural product varieties, and a low degree of standardization. Furthermore, small-scale peasants often lack effective channels for accessing market information, which impedes their ability to accurately assess market demands. Consequently, the phenomenon of increased production without corresponding income growth is prevalent, and their capacity to withstand market risks remains weak. The mechanisms linking the interests of emerging agricultural business entities and small-scale peasants are underdeveloped. Most cooperative arrangements remain informal and lack stable frameworks for equitable benefit and risk sharing. Certain new business entities engage in practices detrimental to the interests of small-scale peasants, significantly undermining their motivation to participate in cooperative efforts.

Furthermore, the innovation of business models among small-scale peasants remains inadequate. The majority of these peasants continue to focus primarily on traditional planting and breeding practices, with limited engagement in the deep processing and branding of agricultural products. This results in relatively low added value for their products. The adoption and promotion of new business models, such as contract agriculture, entrusted services, and e-commerce sales, are insufficient and have limited reach. As a result, this hinders the transition of small-scale peasants' operations from a production-oriented approach to a market-oriented one, thereby constraining the enhancement of their operational benefits.

**3.3 Weak capacity: urgent enhancement of the modernization literacy of small-scale peasants** As the central focus of transformation, the modern literacy of small-scale peasants directly influences the effectiveness of this process. However, currently, the capabilities of small-scale peasants in China remain relatively limited, making it challenging for them to meet the demands of contemporary production and management. Regarding business philosophy, some small-scale peasants continue to adhere to traditional self-sufficiency production concepts, exhibiting a lack of market awareness, brand consciousness, and commitment to sustainable development. During the production process, there is an emphasis on output quantity at the expense of quality, which impedes their ability to adapt to the evolving requirements of marketization, standardization, and environmental sustainability. In terms of technical skills, the educational attainment of small-scale peasants is generally low, and they often lack systematic training in agricultural technologies. In consequence, they struggle to master advanced production techniques and the operation of mechanical equipment, which hinders the adoption and application of innovative agricultural technologies and limits improvements in production efficiency.

Regarding organizational participation capacity, prolonged decentralized operations have resulted in a diminished sense of or-

ganizational awareness and cooperative spirit among small-scale peasants. Therefore, they occupy a disadvantaged position in market transactions and interest negotiations, possessing limited influence and facing challenges in effectively articulating their legitimate demands. The legitimate rights and interests of small-scale peasants are challenging to fully safeguard, which consequently diminishes their enthusiasm and participation in the transformation process.

#### **4 Collaborative governance paths for the modernization transformation of small-scale peasant production**

To address the theoretical challenges and practical contradictions inherent in the modernization transformation of small-scale peasant production, it is essential to consider the fundamental national conditions governing the development of small-scale peasants in China. Guided by the theory of collaborative governance, a multi-stakeholder collaborative governance framework encompassing the government, market, social organizations, and small-scale peasants should be established. This framework must clearly define the core responsibilities of each subject, develop and refine collaborative mechanisms, and foster cooperative efforts and complementary strengths among the various subjects, thereby generating a robust synergy to facilitate the transformation process.

**4.1 Strengthening government guidance and refining the system for institutional guarantee and policy support** As the principal entity in collaborative governance, the government's fundamental role is to enhance the institutional framework, optimize policy provision, and strengthen public services, thereby offering robust institutional and policy support for the transformation of small-scale peasants. Specifically, it is essential to improve the relevant institutional systems and refine laws and regulations concerning land transfer, financial support, agricultural insurance, and farmland protection. Additionally, overcoming institutional barriers related to element allocation and business model transformation, as well as standardizing the conduct of all stakeholders, is imperative.

Concurrently, efforts should be directed towards enhancing the provision of public services, strengthening the grassroots agricultural technology extension teams, improving the technology extension system, and facilitating the dissemination of advanced agricultural technologies to small-scale peasants. The rural logistics and market information systems should be improved to deliver precise market information services to small-scale peasants and assist them in establishing market connections. Targeted training in skills and business management should be implemented to improve the modern production techniques and management capabilities of small-scale peasants, thereby fostering the development of new types of professional peasants.

**4.2 Leveraging the role of the market to promote the optimal allocation of factors and innovation in business models** As a critical component of collaborative governance, the market must fully exercise its decisive role in resource allocation by facilitating the optimal distribution of factors and fostering innovation in business models. This approach aims to invigorate the transformation of small-scale peasants. To achieve this, it is essential to advance

the market-based allocation of factors, enhance the functioning of markets for land, capital, technology, and talent, and establish a robust mechanism for determining factor prices. Furthermore, efforts should be directed toward guiding various production factors to favor small-scale peasants and addressing the issue of imbalances in factor supply. It is essential to cultivate and expand new forms of agricultural business entities, promote the standardized development of family farms, farmers' professional cooperatives, and other related organizations, establish a robust mechanism linking the interests of new business entities with those of small-scale peasants, and encourage cooperative models such as "cooperative + small-scale peasants" and "enterprise + small-scale peasants" to facilitate the sharing of benefits and risks.

Furthermore, efforts should be directed towards fostering innovation in business models by actively promoting new approaches such as contract agriculture, entrusted services, and e-commerce sales. These initiatives aim to assist small-scale peasants in overcoming the constraints associated with decentralized operations and to enhance the level of organizational coordination in their activities. Additionally, it is crucial to strengthen the development of agricultural product branding by encouraging small-scale peasants to prioritize product quality, cultivate regionally distinctive agricultural brands, and thereby increase the added value of agricultural products. Strengthening market regulation is also imperative, including the improvement of traceability systems for agricultural product quality, rigorous enforcement against illegal practices such as false advertising and price manipulation, the standardization of market order, and the protection of the legitimate rights and interests of small-scale peasants.

**4.3 Activating social organizations to strengthen their role as service support and bridges and links** As a critical link of collaborative governance, social organizations should effectively fulfill their bridging function by integrating diverse resources, providing comprehensive service support for the transformation of small-scale peasants, and mediating the interests of various stakeholders. Specific strategies include strengthening the development of agricultural industry associations, maximizing the roles of self-regulation, coordination, and service provision within these associations, and offering services such as agricultural technology training, market research, and information consultation. These efforts aim to enhance the production and operational capacities of small-scale peasants and facilitate their connection to market resources. In addition, it is essential to regulate industry conduct, maintain orderly industry practices, and promote constructive interactions among small-scale peasants, emerging business entities, and the market.

Simultaneously, it is essential to develop rural public welfare organizations that address the specific needs of small-scale peasants by offering free technical guidance, skills training, legal assistance, and other supportive services. Priority should be given to aiding vulnerable groups, including elderly and impoverished small-scale peasants, to enhance their production capabilities and living standards. Furthermore, fostering in-depth collaboration among industry, academia, and research institutions is crucial to

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fied and the assembly procedures for both damage-prone and permanent components are specified. Through an engineering application, the technical feasibility is further verified, which enriches and promotes the design, assembly, and installation technologies of such novel prefabricated energy-dissipating components and provides a reference for similar projects.

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harness the technological expertise and human resources of these entities. Such cooperation should focus on research and development targeting key technical challenges in the transformation of small-scale peasants, thereby accelerating the application of scientific and technological advancements. By leveraging universities and research institutions, the cultivation of new professional farmers can be promoted to provide specialized talent necessary for the successful transformation of small-scale peasant production.

### 4.4 Cultivate small-scale peasants as the main body to stimulate their internal motivation and enthusiasm for transformation

As the central focus of collaborative governance, the intrinsic motivation of small-scale peasants is crucial for advancing continuous and profound transformation. Therefore, it is imperative to fully activate the enthusiasm and creativity of small-scale peasants by strengthening their subject consciousness, enhancing their capacity, and protecting their legitimate rights and interests. Specifically, it is essential to cultivate the subject consciousness of small-scale peasants. Through publicity, education, and exemplary demonstrations, small-scale peasants should be guided to abandon traditional production concepts and adopt modern business practices, market awareness, and green development perspectives. It is important to fully respect the will and demands of small-scale peasants, positioning them as active participants, decision-makers, and beneficiaries of the transformation process, thereby enhancing their sense of belonging and identity. Concurrently, channels for small-scale peasants to express their demands must be improved, and interest coordination mechanisms should be established and refined to promptly address the difficulties and challenges they encounter during the transformation. These measures will enhance their sense of gain and well-being, thereby stim-

ulating their intrinsic motivation for transformation.

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