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# Boosters, brokers, bureaucrats and businessmen: assembling Chinese capital with Brazilian agribusiness

Gustavo de L. T. Oliveira

## ABSTRACT

My purpose in this paper is to deepen the literature on Chinese foreign investments (particularly in Brazilian agribusiness), and the formation of a transnational capitalist class, by utilizing practices of global ethnography and the conceptual apparatus of ‘assemblages’ emerging in human geography. I trace the genealogy of the Chinese-owned Brazilian company BBKA Brazil and its agroindustrial project in Mato Grosso do Sul state, since it is illustrative of the conditions of possibility for Chinese direct investments in agribusiness in Brazil and Brazil–China agroindustrial partnerships more generally. I argue the central characters of this story aptly illustrate the transnational class of boosters, brokers, bureaucrats and businessmen who rise by assembling Chinese capital with Brazilian (agri)business expertise, labour and land. It is the particular work of assemblage and set of skills of these characters, especially those operating at the ‘middle levels’ of state and corporate governance, that both enables the successful implementation of transnational investments, and also explains why such projects propel them while marginalizing others, increasing social inequality, and aggravating environmental degradation.

## KEYWORDS

China; Brazil; foreign direct investments; globalization; transnational corporations; transnational capitalist class; global ethnography; assemblage


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## INTRODUCTION

Three days after the World Cup final in 2014, about 400 Chinese boosters, brokers, bureaucrats and businessmen (mostly men) flocked into the National Industry Confederation building in Brasília for a ‘Corporate Seminar’. The occasion was the celebration of the 40th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Brazil and the People’s Republic of China, for which president Xi Jinping extended his visit from the championship final to a very high-profile state visit. In hosting her counterpart, president Dilma Rousseff wanted to set the strategic direction for their economic relations, orienting Chinese investments from farmland and minerals to infrastructure and industry.

Despite pompous official speeches and pundit commentary about the commercial complementarity of Brazil and China, marked by Brazilian agricultural exports to China yielding in return a strong appetite for investments in the sector, it was not a good moment for direct Chinese investments in agribusiness. The negotiations for massive Chinese investments in farmland between

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2009 and 2011 had triggered a strident push-back against ‘foreignization’ of land in Brazil, and most bureaucrats and businessmen who actually knew the few direct Chinese agribusiness investments taking place were realizing they were *far* more limited and troubled than most imagined (Oliveira, 2015, *in press*). The BBCA Brazil agroindustrial project then underway in Mato Grosso do Sul (MS) state was a rare exception.

Among the Chinese executives there that day was a tall, soft-spoken man from Anhui province with a calm demeanour and slightly greying hair: Li Rongjie, president of the Anhui Fengyuan BBCA Co., known more commonly as the BBCA Group, and his vice-president for foreign affairs Cao Mengchen, a shorter man with a stern face. They were briefly introduced to the Brazilian president by their Brazilian business partner Ignácio de Moraes Jr. and his director of international relations José Augusto Rodrigues Gonçalves, known as Gonça. Ignácio smiled proudly in the brief photo-op with his not-so-new business partner and the Brazilian president, as this moment marked visually the inclusion of the agreement between the BBCA Group and his JLJ Group in the official roster of 45 agreements signed during the state visit. Li’s company proposed the installation of a maize processing and citric acid factory (a major chemical commodity destined for beverage, food and other industrial processing), so it was regarded not merely as an agribusiness project, but a *chemical industry* project that could ‘upgrade’ Brazilian agroindustrial processing technology and capacity, aggregating value to agricultural commodities and generating employment within Brazil itself. Thus, the BBCA Group and its Brazilian partners in the JLJ Group were able set themselves as an exemplar direction for Brazil–China agroindustrial partnerships.

The BBCA–JLJ agreement was largely eclipsed by higher-profile diplomatic declarations and financial, infrastructure and oil-sector agreements. However, it was now a public fact that could be, and *was* mobilized to demonstrate political support for the agroindustrial partnership – particularly with the China Development Bank and the China Export–Import Bank, the main financiers of the BBCA–JLJ partnership project in Brazil. Thus, it was a key moment in the *process* through which a Brazil–China agroindustrial assemblage emerges, a new set of linkages in transnational production networks and power relations through which new agroindustrial elites arise from these countries (cf. Hollander, 2010). Yet this process is largely overlooked in most literature on Chinese investments in Brazil (Brazil–China Business Council [CEBC], 2011, 2013; Faleiros et al., 2014; Ma & Tian, 2015; Wilkinson & Wesz, 2013), and on transnational capitalist class formation (Carroll, 2010; Sklair, 2001). My purpose is to deepen these literatures through the practices of global ethnography and the conceptual apparatus of ‘assemblages’ emerging in human geography (Anderson, Kearnes, McFarlane, & Swanton, 2012; Prince, 2014; Roy, 2012).

Rather than equating announcements with investments themselves, and postulating a somewhat coherent transnational capitalist class from the interconnections between elites across the highest echelons of state and corporate governance, I argue we must adopt theory-methods that enable us to focus on the *process* through which actors seek class ascendance and transnationalization by assembling transnational investments. Departing from anthropological studies of globalization that theorize ‘global assemblages’ as the way ‘global forms are articulated in specific situations’ (Collier & Ong, 2005, p. 4), and sociological studies focused on global production chains and actor-network theory for the investigation of transnational class formation (Carroll, 2010; cf. Roy, 2012), my approach focuses upon the *practice of assembling* – ‘the on-going labour of bringing disparate elements together and forging connections between them’ (Li, 2007, 263) – as the theory-method most suitable for investigating what it takes for transnational partnerships and agroindustrial investments like this to take place, and with what consequences for our empirical and theoretical understanding of this process.

By tracing the genealogy of the BBCA Brazil and its agroindustrial project in MS state, I illustrate the conditions of possibility for Chinese direct investments and Brazil–China agroindustrial partnerships more generally. This approach improves our understanding of transnational class formation by situating the indeterminate, contingent and contradictory structuring forces of Chinese

agribusiness investments in Brazil, and the ways in which they are converted into forms of affluence and influence (cf. Watts, 2012). Moreover, I argue it is the particular work and set of skills of certain key characters, especially middling and local level technocrats who actually ‘ground’ these transnational capital flows into specific places (cf. Prince, 2014; Roy, 2012), that both enables the successful implementation of transnational investments, and also explains why such projects propel them while marginalizing others, increasing social inequality and aggravating environmental degradation.

I first describe how the BBKA-JLJ partnership was established, then how the BBKA investigated multiple locations in Brazil and South America for their investments before finally settling in MS state due to the work of regional brokers, and finally how their project was assembled in the small town of Maracaju despite significant social and environmental complications: particularly the rushed environmental licencing, expropriation of neighbouring farmers, and marginalization of the indigenous Guarani-Kaiowá community.

My narrative is assembled from the triangulation of (1) dozens of extended interviews and informal conversations with key protagonists and numerous other actors who do not appear in this account (undertaken from January 2014 to February 2016), (2) government and company documents related to the projects discussed, (3) field site inspections and participant observation of the environmental licensing process, (4) extensive research of media sources and local archives and (5) the relevant secondary literature. My access to documents and informed consent from all interviewees were obtained according to the protocols established by UC Berkeley’s Office of Protection of Human Subjects (OPHS), including permission to identify government officials and agribusiness executives by personal name. Although I was given permission to use real names, with full informed consent, I have chosen to use pseudonyms for some government workers and local level appointed officials as added precaution in light of the sensitivity of some of the subject material. According to OPHS protocols, pseudonyms are also used for community members and vulnerable populations, even though all of these are already identified in public records and journalistic sources. I had no relation with the involved parties prior to seeking interviews for this research project.<sup>1</sup>

## EXCHANGING EXPERTISE AND JOINT-VENTURES

The BBKA and JLJ Groups first heard about each other in 2006 when BBKA representatives participated in a delegation from Anhui province that visited Brazil. Together with them were executives from the Chery auto company, which was courted as partner for the JLJ’s planned expansion of its auto sector through importing cheap Chinese cars. In 2009, the JLJ Group became Chery’s first importer and distributor in Brazil, and it was through this partnership that Ignácio and Gonça cultivated experience working with Chinese businessmen and bureaucrats. But it was not until two years later that the BBKA Group structured a JLJ Group subsidiary in China, and four years later that they launched the agroindustrial project in Brazil. Despite the possibility, this deal could have been brokered by the Anhui provincial government, my interviews with BBKA and JLJ executives revealed the connection was actually made through much more informal and serendipitous means.

Sometime in 2008, Ignácio and Gonça were in Chile dealing with a new subsidiary, so another senior JLJ executive went in their place to Buenos Aires to participate in an event about attracting foreign investments to Argentina, where the JLJ Group was seeking to expand their industrial-kitchen services business. There a common acquaintance introduced him to Zhang ‘Armando’ Kuo,<sup>2</sup> a native of Hefei, capital of Anhui, and long-time friend of Li Rongjie. Armando Zhang had moved to Argentina several years earlier, obtained Argentinian citizenship, and established himself as an informal broker for Chinese corporations seeking business with South American counterparts. He knew that the BBKA’s erstwhile attempt to form a business partnership with a sugar–ethanol conglomerate in Brazil had just collapsed (more on which below), and Li

was now looking for a new partner in South America. The JLJ Group fit the bill, as they were launching a collaboration with Chery and establishing companies not only in Brazil but also in other countries in South America, where the BBCA also considered locating their project. The desires of both groups were equivalent: they needed local partners who could broker political support, act as legally necessary counterparts for joint-ventures, and provide managerial expertise to *establish companies* in each other's countries. Operational experience and capacity for industrial-scale distribution of goods in each other's countries was certainly considered an important asset, but on the other hand, direct collaboration in operations was not necessary. So early in 2009, while Ignácio and Gonça were visiting their auto-sector partner in Anhui, Li invited them to a meeting and proposed the partnership.

The BBCA Group would not formally establish a subsidiary in Brazil until 2013, but the JLJ Group executives began to prepare their operations in China already in 2011, utilizing the BBCA Group's corporate structure – including, crucially, the transnational managerial experience embodied in their English-speaking team – to establish the Shanghai Nutriplus BBCA Co., an import-export company headquartered in Shanghai, with the JLJ Group owning 51% while the BBCA controls the remainder. Until 2015, their business was relatively limited to an assortment of relatively small-scale transactions: importing into China small volumes of wine, champagne, brandy and whisky from Chile, Argentina, Italy and the US, and exporting kitchen-ware, samples of small motorcycles, and other assorted items for JLJ's operations and partners in South America.<sup>3</sup>

The BBCA executive assigned to run the joint-venture declared part of their operations would involve exporting citric acid from China to Brazil, and importing distiller's dried grains with solubles (DDGS) in return, a key byproduct of their citric acid production used for animal feed. This would characterize important operational synergies between the JLJ-controlled export-import project in Shanghai, and the BBCA-controlled agroindustrial project in Brazil. However, this operational collaboration was apparently tentative and tenuous at best. When the BBCA-controlled subsidiary in Brazil actually began importing and distributing citric acid to start establishing a direct relationship with customers in anticipation of the agroindustrial operations in Brazil in 2016, the Shanghai joint-venture was not involved. The product was shipped instead from the newly constructed BBCA citric acid factory in Thailand, thereby bypassing anti-dumping measures Brazil had set against citric acid exports from China, and also the distribution within Brazil bypassed the warehouse network that the JLJ Group could put at the BBCA's disposal.<sup>4</sup> Despite apparent synergies and for reasons I could not identify, Cao's priority was to operationalize their branch in Brazil independently from their JLJ partners and the Shanghai subsidiary they controlled.

In turn, the JLJ executives told me back in Brazil their efforts to increase the volume and value of their export-import business focus especially on Brazilian food products and meat exports to China, rather than DDGS. But although they also pursue their own (agri)business projects and priorities towards China independently of the BBCA, the JLJ Group played an essential role in creating the business structure for the agroindustrial project in Brazil as well. Just as Li had assigned an English-speaking executive to open the Shanghai joint-venture under control of his Brazilian partners in 2011, the JLJ Group assigned their own legal staff to establish the BBCA subsidiary in Brazil and Gonça to oversee the process. Creating a new company in Brazil can take over a year, and it is particularly challenging to do so relying on foreign capital. So the JLJ executives transformed a subsidiary of their own conglomerate dedicated to environmental consultancy (previously established in 2007, and associated with their real estate development company) into an investment and holdings operation in March 2013, and renamed it BBCA Brazil.<sup>5</sup> Although the company was originally structured with only about 1 million USD as capital in July 2013 (out of the 350 million USD announced for the full project<sup>6</sup>), the substantially larger scale planned for the agroindustrial enterprise resulted in a far more uneven allocation of capital from each group: the BBCA controls 92.5% of the Brazilian subsidiary, while the significantly

smaller JLJ investment (to reach 26 million USD upon completion of the project) conceded merely 7.5% of the enterprise.

BBCA Brazil remained formally headquartered in Campinas, São Paulo state, until November 2013, when an independent lawyer was hired by Cao in Campo Grande, capital of MS, to transfer the company to their newly established office there and switch its operational categorization from ‘holding of non-financial institutions’ to engage in everything from processing agricultural commodities and producing chemical derivatives, to wholesale and retail of such products as well as unprocessed maize and soy, timber, fertilizer, seeds, machinery, and even farming soy and providing non-technical consultancy.<sup>7</sup> Until the time of my fieldwork in 2015 when I accessed documents submitted to the MS and Maracaju governments and interviewed company executives and lawyer, BBCA Brazil had no *de jure* corporate management, but simply Gonça as its official legal representative. This was because, for the company to be ‘Brazilian’ (even if controlled by transnational capital), it must not only be headquartered in Brazil, but also requires a Brazilian citizen legally responsible for it, or a foreigner with a permanent work visa. So until he could change his visa status, Cao was only nominally ‘vice-president’ of the company, even though he and not Gonça has been running it *de facto* since it came into existence in 2013. Afterwards, Cao would become president of BBCA Brazil (and continue as vice-president of the BBCA Group), while Gonça would be vice-president (and continue as director of international business of the JLJ Group). For the latter, the export-import business was the main motivation for establishing the partnership, while the agroindustrial project of the BBCA Brazil ‘was an opportunity that emerged’ for their Group.<sup>8</sup>

For the BBCA, however, the usefulness of the JLJ Group began to decrease after the establishment of the Chinese-controlled subsidiary in Brazil, and the claim of political legitimacy for their project before the Brazilian state and, thereby, the Chinese state-owned financing institutions as described above. The entire process of researching, elaborating and implementing the agroindustrial project in Brazil has been directed entirely by Cao with his subordinates, reporting to Li as the final decision maker. Once their subsidiary became established in Brazil, the BBCA executives started to consider their JLJ partners as little more than internal (and free) consultants, seeking their advice as merely point of reference alongside other consultants and legal or technical contractors. ‘The JLJ Group has their own work to take care of, someone at the BBCA subsidiary in Brazil explained to me, ‘they opened the company here, but they cannot assign someone to work for this project. Plus, Cao doesn’t trust anyone, he always gets a third and fourth opinion on everything, and wants to control how everything gets done.’<sup>9</sup> So I turn my focus to Cao and his team to reveal how they ultimately found and decided to ground their investment project in the small town of Maracaju, in the heart of a booming agroindustrial frontier that is entangled with the most extensive and violent conflicts with indigenous peoples in Brazil.

## THE LONG ROAD TO MARACAJU

The sleepy ranching and farming town of Maracaju, MS, was only defined as the location for the BBCA investment in 2013, seven years after they first sent a delegation to investigate investment possibilities in the country. During that time multiple BBCA delegations travelled to dozens of cities across at least six other states in a process that Cao described to me as ‘like dating: you meet someone *by chance*, if you like each other, you start to see if things work, and then either make a deal or move on to try with someone else’.<sup>10</sup>

The BBCA’s ‘dating’ in Brazil first ‘got serious’ in early 2007 with the Farias Group, a traditional family-owned sugar-mill-based conglomerate from Pernambuco, northeastern Brazil, that was seeking foreign investors to ramp up its sugarcane-ethanol business during the hike of commodity prices during the mid-2000s. In order to do so, they hired the Brazil-China Chamber of Industry and Commerce (CCIBC) to bring them to the attention of Chinese companies that



might be interested in a partnership. At that moment, the BBCA had also been developing its own subsidiary for ethanol production in China, and saw the possible partnership with the Farias Group as an opportunity not only to establish a citric acid factory alongside an existing or newly constructed sugarcane mill in Brazil, but also to acquire managerial/operational capacities and more advanced technology for their own burgeoning ethanol business in China itself. Eduardo Farias, head of the Brazilian group that takes his family name, bragged to the press in June that year that they would build two of the largest sugar–ethanol mills in the country, and he also expected his group would have control over the joint-venture and would ‘convince the Chinese government’ to lower import tariffs on Brazilian ethanol exports (Wetzel, 2007). But the timing for this would-be BBCA–Farias partnership could not have been worse, as rapidly shifting market and political conditions so altered the emergent global ethanol assemblage that the partnership was abandoned before it even formalized.

One week before Farias gave that enthusiastic interview, the Chinese government reversed its biofuel policies to prohibit the use of sugarcane, maize, and all other grain feedstocks for the production of ethanol. This was done to protect the country’s food security in response to an unprecedented spike in agricultural commodity prices that began the year before and would not stop until it became entangled with the global financial crisis the following year (Qiu, Sun, Huang, & Rozelle, 2012). Moreover, the negotiations between the US and Brazilian governments for the establishment of international standards and cutting US import tariffs to boost an international market in ethanol collapsed a few months earlier (Hollander, 2010). Consequently, the technological and strategic interests of the BBCA in the Farias Group were largely subdued, and simultaneously the projected growth of the sugarcane–ethanol sector in Brazil was starting to be questioned by financiers. In the next three years, projected expansion of sugarcane plantation and processing were deeply slashed all around the country, and capital flows shifted from the construction of new mills to the consolidation of the sector as larger conglomerates swallowed up smaller mills that could not service the debts they had taken on in times of spectacular growth projections (McKay, Sauer, Richardson, & Herre, 2016). Two weeks after that interview when Li was supposed to arrive in Brazil to close the deal, what instead came about was their ‘break up’. The uncertainties Li and his top advisors noticed in the sugarcane–ethanol sector at that time proved wise: that year Farias was forced to sell his ethanol below production cost, his group never recovered profitability, and filed for bankruptcy in May 2016, owing almost 2 million USD in late wages and over 250 million USD to its lenders (Goulart, 2016).

After the attempted partnership with the Farias Group collapsed, the BBCA began looking for new partners in South America (as discussed above), and as soon as an agreement was reached with the JLJ Group, the latter took BBCA delegations to meet possible partners and explore other locations for their investment. Sugarcane mills were still being considered, and so Ignácio brought a BBCA delegation to his friend José Carlos Bumlai, one of the largest landowners of MS and close friend of Lula, then president of Brazil, who facilitated cheap loans from the state-owned development bank BNDES for the construction of the São Fernando mill in Dourados, MS.<sup>11</sup> The mill was still under construction at the time, but the emergent crisis in the sugarcane–ethanol sector already forced Bumlai to search for additional investors to roll-over the debt acquired and operate profitably. Once again, BBCA executives dodged a bullet in not pursuing negotiations in MS at that moment. The São Fernando mill entered operation in 2010 and soon became embroiled in multiple scandals, beginning with illegal production of sugarcane in indigenous Guarani-Kaiowá territory and labour-rights violations in the sugarcane fields (MPE-MS, 2010). Scandals escalated in 2015 when Bumlai stopped making payments to his creditors, who requested the bankruptcy of the company, and then culminated when Bumlai himself was arrested on corruption charges (Carvalho, 2015).<sup>12</sup>

Back in 2010, after the BBCA decided not to pursue negotiations with Bumlai in MS, the JLJ executives started taking their Chinese partners to visit locations where they were already

proposing the establishment of an automobile assembly plant in cooperation with the also Anhui-based Chery. The sugar-mill city of Piracicaba in São Paulo state was briefly considered, but attention soon shifted to Uberaba in Minas Gerais state, which had just been slated by the federal government to receive one of twelve special Export Processing Zones in the country. Locating the intended agroindustrial enterprise there would exempt them from all federal taxes for 20 years, and the municipal government promised to cover the costs of paving the necessary roads and installing the necessary sewer and electric lines for the proposed agroindustrial processing industry, at an estimated cost of 5.7 million USD (Jornal da Manhã, 2013). However, as the sugarcane sector as a whole fell deeper into crisis, BBKA executives determined it would no longer be profitable to partner with sugar-mills, and shifted their attention to maize as a more profitable and useful feedstock, because they could replace its parallel interest in ethanol for the export of maize processing co-products (especially DDGS) for livestock feed in China. This required them to consider an entirely different geography of Brazil and South America, so the proposed location for the project in Uberaba was abandoned, and a new round of exploratory delegations were organized independently from their JIJ partners, expanding to states where maize production is far more abundant (and where the company might also partake in the highly profitable exports of Brazilian soy to China that were catching the attention of all Chinese agroindustrial processors and traders, particularly after the price spike of 2007–2008).

Over the course of 2010, BBKA delegations began to define the city of Ponta Grossa, Paraná state, as a suitable location for investment. The municipal government there actively boosted its town to the possible Chinese investors, and ‘even hired a local company to do the [preliminary] environmental survey and a dossier to showcase Ponta Grossa to China’ (Brick, 2010). These dossiers, project proposals, production cost and market calculations were all assembled by BBKA managers, but no executives with decision-making authority participated in these delegations: in the meantime, Cao was leading negotiations for a proposed investment in Europe. Li and his advisors concluded that there did not seem to be enough support from the governments (from the inability of the municipal government to donate land, and disinterest from the state and federal governments to offer comparable tax exemptions to Uberaba or MS) to warrant locating the project in Ponta Grossa. Instead, Cao moved from Europe to South America to lead a new round of investigation and negotiations. But this time the BBKA shifted focus to Uruguay and Argentina, where soy and maize production were also considered abundant and where they hoped to find even more favourable conditions from governments to ‘ground’ their proposed investment.

Cao’s personal engagement and physical presence is quite significant. Rather than relying on the slow exchange of reports and dossiers elaborated by delegations of subordinates who have no decision-making authority, when Cao himself moves to a place full-time it becomes possible to advance quickly from a fact-finding mission to reaching agreements and closing deals. ‘Whenever a situation is “hot”, I move there. And [if it’s not so already], when I get there, it gets “hot”’, Cao told me with a proud smile softening his stern face. First, he investigated Uruguay, and succeeded in convincing the country’s state-owned oil and ethanol company, ANCAP,<sup>13</sup> to sign a Memorandum of Understanding during Xi Jinping’s state visit to Uruguay in June 2011, for a joint-venture in ethanol and citric acid production. Commodity prices and other factors seemed favourable enough, but apparently the amount of feedstock available in local markets was insufficient for the large-scale they sought for their agroindustrial enterprise. So they shifted focus to Argentina, but after more than one year invested in negotiations, Cao ultimately abandoned Buenos Aires ‘when I recognized that Argentinian people seem welcoming, enjoying their barbeque, they talk a lot, but no one was being serious entrepreneurs’. In a subsequent interview, Cao also revealed that bureaucratic complications and requests for bribes also drove him out of Argentina. ‘If they are already asking for this now before you even start your business, how much more are you going to have to pay the rest of the time!?’ he exclaimed. ‘Before [2012], we thought that Brazil was too difficult for



business. But afterwards we saw Argentina is even more difficult, so decided to come back to try here again'.<sup>14</sup>

Upon his return to Brazil in late 2012, Cao revisited arrangements with the CCIBC, which had introduced a previous BBICA delegation to Farias back in 2006, and assisted in some meetings during the brief negotiations with Bumlai. But beyond initial contacts, both the state government officials and Cao himself were adamant that the CCIBC played no role in the advancement of their negotiations. In the next section, I discuss how key boosters and bureaucrats in the state government successfully turned the CCIBC's introduction into a concrete investment project situated in the particular region of their choosing to benefit their own political group.

## BRAZILIAN *CHUZHANG* AND 'THE BABYSITTER OF THE CHINESE'

As a way to introduce the characters I call Brazilian *chuzhang* and the 'babysitter of the Chinese', and argue they played key roles in the assemblage of the BBICA project in MS, I must first explain how I adapt the notion of such characters from Liu Xin's study of Chinese businessmen and their relation with government officials in China during the early 1990s (Liu, 2002). First of all, the business 'boss' (*laoban*, 老板) should be understood as a character rather than a simple descriptor: '*laoban* is not simply someone in the highest management position', they are also distinguished by 'a high taste in culture [with] emphasis on education' (Liu, 2002, pp. 38–39). In turn, *chuzhang* (处长) translates to 'office chief' in some sectors of Chinese bureaucracy, but we employ the term more loosely to designate a character that occupies a strategic location in any government (and government-related) bureaucracy: *chuzhang* are characters (1) strategically positioned between implementation-and-decision over government resources, and (2) whose relationship with the business 'boss' must be mediated by a third character who is employed specifically and instrumentally to articulate the exchange of personal, business, and political favours between them. In Liu's research, the mediator is a young woman (*xiaojie*, 小姐) employed by the 'boss' to provide entertainment and (sexual) favours that he cannot directly provide to the government officials (*chuzhang*) in exchange for political favours (Liu, 2002). In the case of the BBICA Group's story in Brazil, however, it is the *chuzhang* themselves who employ the mediator to serve the business 'boss' in a way they could not themselves, and rather than providing personal pleasure and entertainment, the 'xiaojie' provides personal assistance for business itself – especially translation – and other operational aid beyond the confines of 'proper' government services. I am not suggesting anything sexual or illegal about the nature of this work, only the necessity of intermediation and its instrumental informality.

The two key *chuzhang* who orchestrated the 'grounding' of BBICA's investment in their state were Tereza Cristina, the erstwhile state government's Secretary of Agrarian Development, Production, Industry, Trade, and Tourism (SEPROTUR), and Eduardo Riedel, then president of the Federation of Agriculture of Mato Grosso do Sul (FAMASUL) and vice-president for international affairs of the National Agriculture Confederation, the country's most powerful agribusiness lobby and landowner's association. A native of Maracaju who prioritized a career in agribusiness lobbying and government relations over his 2,000 hectares of soy and maize, Riedel welcomed me enthusiastically, hoping that my research could boost further Chinese investments in Brazil – and in his state and region in particular. Tereza Cristina hails from a 'traditional' large-scale ranching family in MS and became politically aligned with Eduardo Riedel and then-governor André Puccinelli. Similar to Riedel, she prioritized a political career over her family's *latifundia*, and also like Riedel, she highly values technical expertise, transnational experience, and the need to attract foreign investment to 'develop' their mostly agricultural state. So when she received me for an interview, she demonstrated just as much interest in learning about the BBICA and other Chinese agribusiness companies from me as I expressed interest in hearing about her role in 'capturing' this investment. Later Cao explained that he finally decided to invest there because these

Brazilian *chuzhang* were honest and proactive in their attempt to provide him with everything he needed, and he understood their interests were becoming intertwined with his own in the success of this project. In Cao's own words, the significance of Riedel and Tereza Cristina's efforts was clear: 'It's the dedication of the government people. Here they provide services, and don't charge. Here we have SEPROTUR, in Argentina nothing'.<sup>15</sup>

Eduardo Riedel's and Tereza Cristina's positionality as *chuzhang* is evident in the manner they convinced MS governor André Puccinelli to not only receive Cao and the BBCA delegations, but also provide extensive research on the agribusiness sector of their state, place substantial government resources at their disposal (including a full-time technocrat fluent in English, as discussed below), broker an agreement with a municipal government to donate the land on which the industry could be constructed, provide significant tax exemptions and subsidies for the foreign investors, and push through the environmental licensing process without proper technical evaluation. It is worth noting this was no simple feat, beginning with the fact that governor Puccinelli is famously known as a crude and unsophisticated man who, in my opinion, was likely to turn away 'the Chinese' because of prejudiced ignorance.<sup>16</sup> Tereza Cristina led all government negotiations on his behalf and secured agreement for tax exemptions on extremely favourable terms. Eduardo Riedel in turn placed the extensive information and research apparatus of his agribusiness association at the disposal of the BBCA for their feasibility studies free of charge, and introduced Cao to an environmental consultant that he knew could get the licenses approved and, on Riedel's recommendation, agreed to charge only one-third of the cost that was being presented to the BBCA by other competitors.<sup>17</sup> In other words, Eduardo and Tereza were strategically positioned to recognize the potential that the BBCA project would bring to their state's agribusiness sector (and themselves), convince the governor to make favourable decisions, and articulate for the implementation of several key procedures that were necessary to support the business 'boss' in his efforts to select a region for investment, secure significant government subsidies, undertake preliminary feasibility studies, and find key consultants that he could trust.

Yet all the work of these Brazilian *chuzhang* required mediation by a third character, primarily due to the need for communication coming into tension with challenges around language barriers. 'Capturing Chinese investment is a huge challenge', Tereza Cristina stated bluntly, 'because we have very serious communication problems. They speak English very poorly, and they *think* they can speak Portuguese [but can't at all]. In turn we don't speak Chinese, and English very poorly too'. The solution she arranged by the time the BBCA went back to her state the second time was hiring a staffer fluent in English and dedicated full-time to accompany possible foreign investors: a stocky and smiley economist who I will call Carlos Novak.<sup>18</sup>

Carlos quickly became the primary instrument through which the Brazilian *chuzhang* mediated their relationship with Cao. He not only translated all meetings between Eduardo Riedel, Tereza Cristina, and others in the government with Cao (and did so much more effectively than BBCA's own young and inexperienced staff who could barely communicate in broken Portuguese), but also accompanied Cao on all exploratory visits to multiple cities around the state, providing translation and technical support, personally followed-up on all government-related issues (e.g., moving the necessary paperwork to secure the promised tax exemptions and complete the environmental licensing process), and even helped on necessary but more mundane tasks such as renting residential apartments and acquiring furniture. The instrumental informality of Carlo's extensive services was expressed as 'favours' from the Brazilian *chuzhang* to the BBCA 'boss'. Moreover, the patriarchal power dynamics of this 'permissive impropriety' remain remarkably similar to those described by Liu (2002) despite the reversed genders of Tereza Cristina (a female *chuzhang*) and Carlos Novak (a male 'xiaojie'), as the former and many others who spoke about these dynamics often emasculated Carlos by calling him 'the babysitter of the Chinese'.<sup>19</sup> This instrumentality and assertion of uneven power relations was, naturally, deeply resented by Carlos, who constantly engaged me in our multiple interviews and informal conversations to argue that *he* was

the one who deserves credit for convincing Cao to settle in MS, rather than Tereza Cristina, who campaigned heavily on her success at bringing foreign investments in a successful bid to become elected congresswoman from her state, or Eduardo Riedel, who similarly drew on his clout as an effective president of the state's agribusiness association to become chief of staff to the next state governor in 2015.

But after Cao contracted a local lawyer (who he selected after months of 'dating', and esteemed especially because he studied briefly at Oxford<sup>20</sup>), an environmental consultant, civil engineers, and began hiring his own Brazilian staff, Carlos was no longer necessary. Except, of course, for the Brazilian *chuzhang*. Carlos knew that, and enlisted himself into every situation that could drive his own class and transnational ascendance, from joining the state government's delegations to China to reporting on their behalf to other business associations in the region. After Tereza Cristina left Campo Grande to begin her Congressional career in Brasília, Carlos lost his position in the state government but secured two overlapping appointments: first as chief economist of the Commercial and Industrial Association of Campo Grande, where he assists the organization's president in attracting foreign investments, and then additionally as International Relations Advisor to the departmental government of Canindeyú, across the border in Paraguay, where he is tasked with 'promoting integration ... with the neighboring state of Mato Grosso do Sul'.<sup>21</sup>

But once again it was ultimately by a conjunction of chance and personal politics that the BBCA Brazil project was located in Maracaju instead of other municipalities in MS. After visiting all regions of the state and making exhaustive studies with the data supplied by Riedel's and Tereza's bureaucracies, Cao contemplated locating his enterprise either in Maracaju or in the larger neighbouring city of Dourados. Both towns are merely 100 km apart and form the core of the soy/maize production zone of MS, and both have large enough rivers that could be tapped for industrial use. Ultimately for Cao, the decision would depend on where *chuzhang* could provide more favourable conditions to access land for construction. He even floated the idea of locating the maize crushing facility in Maracaju and the citric acid refinery in Dourados to make the municipalities compete against each other to offer more favourable terms and get the whole project for itself. In the end, the competition would not be resolved between the mayors, but by the governor himself.

Dourados was more expedient by all accounts since it already has an established industrial district, controlled by the state government rather than the municipality. But in early 2013, governor Puccinelli was reeling from a political break with his vice-governor, who had just switched to the opposition and become elected mayor of Dourados. More than one technocrat at the state government who participated in these negotiations related that the governor chose not to grant the BBCA access to the industrial park in Dourados in order to push the investment towards his political ally, the mayor of Maracaju. Dr Maurílio Azambuja, a medical doctor from Maracaju, had just become elected and taken office in the beginning of 2013 as a major political ally of governor Puccinelli and the Maracaju-centred faction of landowners and agribusinesses led by Eduardo Riedel. Less than three months after taking office, and drawing on resources from SEPROTUR and FAMASUL in the state capital, Maurílio's administration received Cao and presented a booster package, translated into English and Chinese, about the strategic location of the municipality in terms of maize production and trade logistics, water resources, etc. But most important of all, in a meeting called by governor Puccinelli in his office, mayor Maurílio gave Cao guarantee he would find a suitable plot with access to the Brilhante river and the (disabled) railroad, build an access road to the federal highway, and cover half the costs for purchasing the lot for the entire BBCA Brazil agroindustry. They shook hands and the deal was done. Only several weeks later, when these terms were more clearly defined and the search for an appropriate plot was already underway, Li, Ignácio, and Gonça went to Maracaju to formalize the agreement. That would become the standard division of labour from then on: the state and municipal governments would work directly with Cao to elaborate whatever was necessary for the implementation of

the project, then Gonça would fly in just to sign documents on behalf of the company, and Ignácio and/or Li would fly in on even more rare occasions when publicity was necessary to safeguard the project with government partners or international financiers.

## The executioner, the executed, (and the invisible): or, how Salerno defeated the Dolorini (and the Guarani-Kaiowá)

Maracaju sits on the northern portion of the territory of the indigenous Guarani-Kaiowá, which covered the whole southern half of MS (the area that now produces all the maize that the BBKA Brazil intends to process) and a similar area of Paraguay. They suffered two waves of displacement. The first began during the 1860s when the Brazilian government granted massive tracts of land to the officers who fought in the war against Paraguay, establishing the first *latifúndia* under the ownership of patriarchs of those families that call themselves ‘traditional’ in the region. It subsided by the mid-twentieth century when their pasture was becoming degraded, landholdings were gradually broken into smaller parcels by inheritance, and the extensive ranching regime of the region was falling into crisis (Brand, 1997; Ferreira & Rosa, 1988).

The next wave began in the early 1970s when the federal government encouraged the migration of commercial farmers from southern Brazil to the Center-West hinterlands (Oliveira, 2016). These were largely poor farmers of German and Italian descent who bought smaller plots from the failing *latifúndia* of the ranching elites. But with the boom of soy production and the integration of the region into transnational agroindustrial assemblages, some among these southern farmers increased their landholdings and propelled themselves into the local and regional elite. Among them are Eduardo Riedel’s family, and the family of Antonio Salerno,<sup>22</sup> the municipal attorney who directed the municipal government’s efforts to broker the BBKA Brazil investment there. Salerno’s father owns some of the last large-scale grain silos in Maracaju that have not been bought out by transnational trading companies or cooperatives from southern Brazil. Finally, among the southern families that moved to Maracaju in the 1970s were also the Lombardi<sup>23</sup> (who would sell their 290 ha farm to the Maracaju municipal government and BBKA Brazil), and their neighbours, the Dolorini<sup>24</sup> family, who would become embroiled in a bitter land dispute with the municipal government. This dispute reverberated with a palpable cultural tension between ‘traditional’ ranching families and ‘new’ southern farmers, underlined by resentment for the rise of the latter on the lands previously controlled by the former. But both are united in their disdain for the indigenous Kaiowá. Before elaborating on how these tensions unfolded with the efforts to provide an adequate location for the BBKA Brazil investment, it is important to describe the role and character of Antonio Salerno in more detail.

From the point of view of Tereza Cristina in the state government, Antonio Salerno may have been just another ‘babysitter of the Chinese’ who could host Cao in Maracaju and free up her own ‘babysitter’ to work on other projects. But from the point of view of the municipal government in Maracaju, Salerno was an essential and formidable *chuzbang*. When I first arrived to interview mayor Maurílio, he was enthusiastic about me and my research, and told me:

Here, speak with Antonio. Whatever he says, you can say that I said it too. Whatever information you can share with us about this company, the sector and such, please tell him. He is the person who knows all the information and makes the decision with me.

Mayor Maurílio was not exaggerating, nor was he simply shrugging me off to someone else. Over the course of several days, I was allowed to sit in Salerno’s office and review several public documents regarding the BBKA project, and I witnessed the dynamics in the municipal government hall: all questions, documents, demands, indeed everything related to the BBKA went through

Salerno. Above all, he led efforts to enable the municipal government to expropriate the Dolorini if they failed to reach an agreement to exchange parcels of their farms with BBKA Brazil.<sup>25</sup>

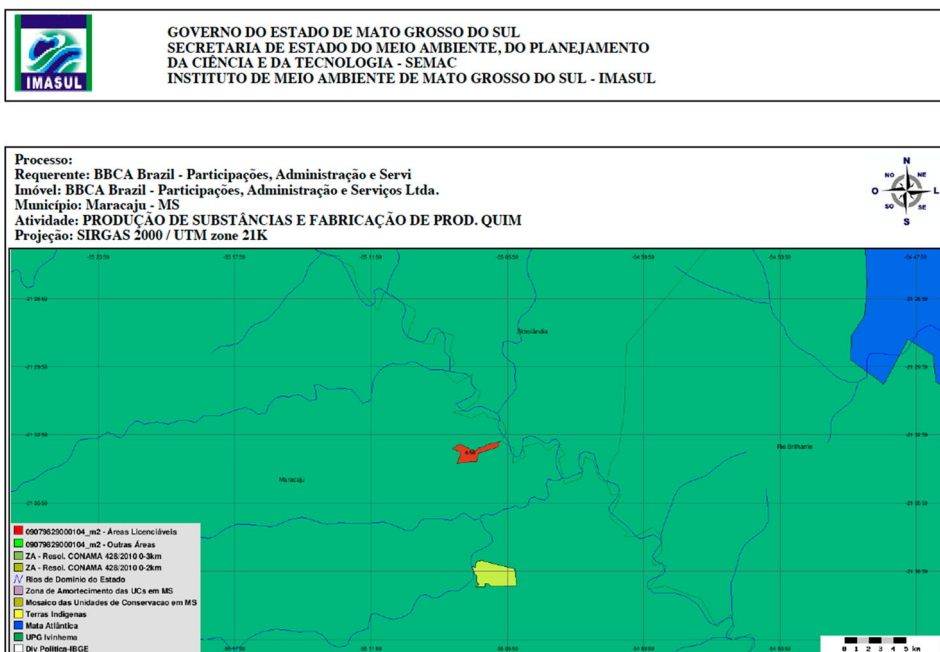
In addition to this free support from Salerno and the municipal government, Cao did not have to hire anyone to undertake the search for an adequate location within the region because a southern grain broker and agribusiness consultant working in the region volunteered his services in the hope of being subsequently hired or paid commission upon the purchase of the land. The place identified as ideal was located inside the estate of a very 'traditional' patriarch who fumed at the mere suggestion that a part of his property should be sold off. With family ties that stretch back over a century, mayor Maurílio wanted to avoid conflict with them and continued to search for a secondary but still adequate location. Luckily for them, Salerno identified that Mauro Lombardi was struggling to maintain their soy/maize production in Maracaju, and convinced him to sell his 290 ha farm. The plot was located a few hundred metres to the south of the ideal area originally identified, and even though it did not quite reach the railway or the river, it was close enough to consider negotiating access routes through the neighbouring farms in exchange for an unused portion of the Lombardi farm. Mayor Maurílio, Salerno, and the secretary of political affairs brokered the first negotiation with the neighbours, two brothers from the Dolorini family. At first, the Dolorini were told they would only need to exchange about 24 ha on the access to the railroad, and an 18-metre-wide corridor for access to the river, and they expressed willingness to make a deal. But unforeseen circumstances in the environmental licensing process soon derailed negotiations.<sup>26</sup>

Soon after BBKA Brazil purchased 190 ha of the Lombardi farm and the Maracaju municipal government purchased the remaining 100 ha, the BBKA Group sent a copy of their blueprints for the citric acid factory they were building in Thailand at that moment, and Cao hired an environmental consultant to translate it from English and adapt it for Brazilian environmental and engineering standards to request the Preliminary License for the project and its proposed location. At that moment, a twin problem emerged: the blueprints sent from BBKA Thailand did not include sufficient water treatment facilities to attend Brazilian environmental regulations, and adding those to the project would require it to expand further south and within the 8 km radius of a legally recognized indigenous territory named Sucuri'y (Figure 1).

If any part of the agroindustrial enterprise was located within that radius, the licensing process would need to be transferred from the state government's environmental agency (IMASUL) to the federal government, and the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI) would need to participate in the process to guarantee free, prior, and informed consent from the Kaiowá in Sucuri'y, and some compensation for them as well due to the negative environmental impact of the chemical industry in their region, particularly its water resources. At the very least, this would have delayed the environmental licensing process and increased its cost, and in the worst case this could even halt the project entirely, removing the process from the bureaucratic spaces where governor Puccinelli could safeguard the necessary environmental licenses. The solution Salerno designed with Cao and his environmental consultant was to seek the exchange of a far larger chunk of the Dolorini farm on the access to the river, where the necessary water treatment facilities could be installed and thereby maintain the entire agroindustrial area just outside the 8 km radius of the indigenous territory (Figures 2 and 3).

Engineering and environmental maps were altered, and the preliminary license was obtained on March 2014. But no agreement was forthcoming with the Dolorini, who were upset to hear that a much larger portion of their farm would need to be exchanged, and began to question whether mayor Maurílio was taking advantage of them. Mayor Maurílio, Salerno and Cao, on the other hand, felt the Dolorini thought they could pressure the BBKA to pay a significantly higher compensation, seeing them as 'a big Chinese company full of money'. I cannot know what their motivations were, but in our interviews and informal conversations it became clear that the complications with the preliminary environmental license led the Dolorini to realize





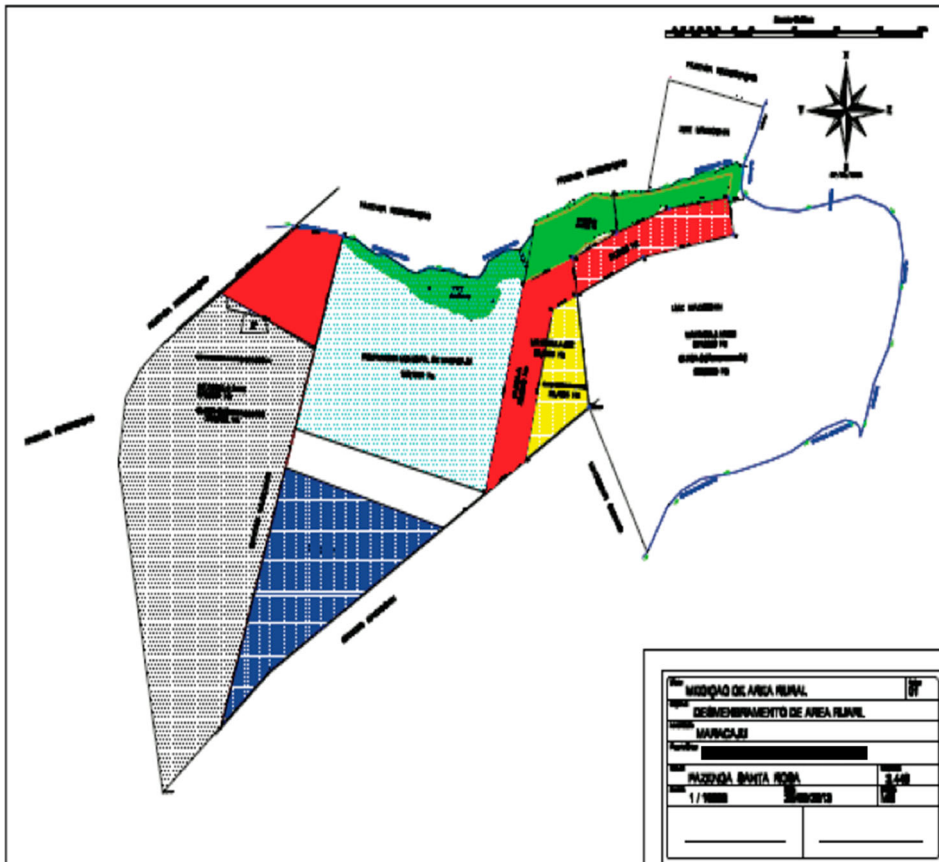
**Figure 1.** Relative location of the BCCA Brazil industry (red) and Sucuri'y Indigenous Territory (yellow) as identified in the installation license request process. Source: IMASUL. Please refer to the article online for colour version.

they should be much more careful: after all, this was not merely a maize processing facility, but a chemical factory that could bring significant environmental harm to the waters around their property,<sup>27</sup> and the area of the Lombardi farm they would receive in return for granting access to the railroad and river could not easily be re-sold for additional industrial enterprises that might follow the BCCA project 'because of the indians', as they framed it. But unsurprisingly, this 'indigenous question' was never even broached in municipal politics: the public hearing on the project took place in February 2014, without inviting the local Kaiowá. Afterwards, the leadership of the Sucuri'y territory told me their requests to meet with the mayor were repeatedly denied. Their lack of access stood in glaring contrast to multiple days that the mayor and Salerno dedicated to discussing the case with me. In these conversations, this 'indigenous question' would sometimes emerge as a limiting factor for the location of the project (or subsequent industries) in the southern half of the Lombardi farm, but whenever I asked directly about the Kaiowá, the question was quickly dismissed: 'they have nothing to do with this', I was told much to my dismay.

During 2014, a series of meetings took place with mayor Maurílio, Salerno, Cao, and his Oxford-trained lawyer on one side, and on the other the Dolorini brothers who owned the land and a third one who was also a lawyer, arguing over the proper terms of compensation for the larger-than-originally expected exchange. When negotiations stalled and Salerno first threatened that the municipality could force through the expropriation of their land, the Dolorini became infuriated. Their anger was compounded by the fact that mayor Maurílio refused to consider expropriation for the neighbouring farm of the other 'traditional' family whose land was most suitable for the project in the first place. The mayor responded that 'this will be a good thing for the development of our whole region', and argued that another 'traditional' family who had a 3.5 km stretch of their farm expropriated for the construction of the access road from the highway to the proposed construction site was 'happy and excited' about the project. But this only frustrated the Dolorini further, 'as the mayor's "people" get the benefit of the road', they explained, 'and we



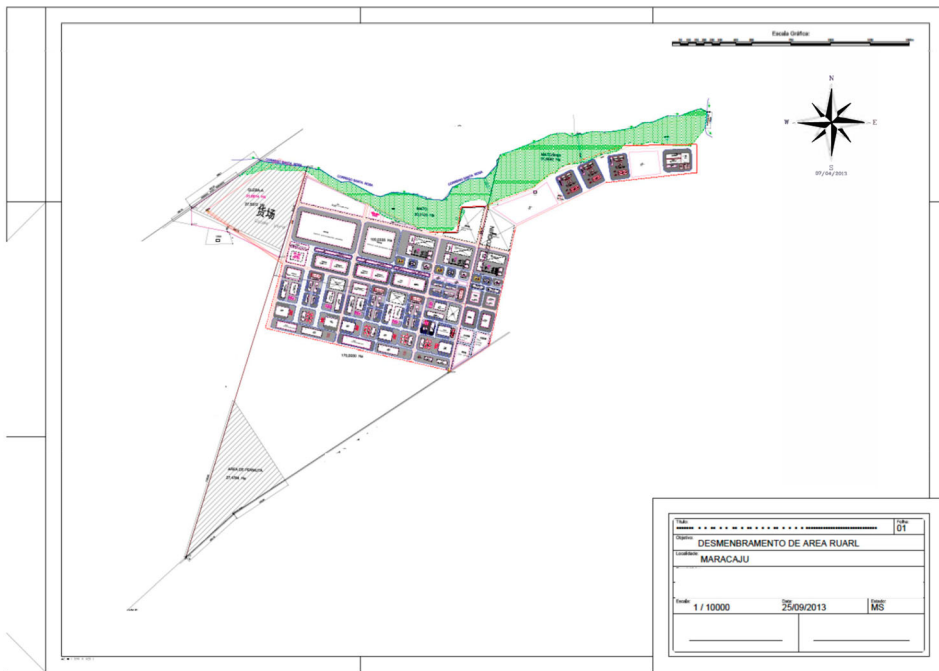
## ANEXO III DO DECRETO Nº 056/2014, DE 17 DE ABRIL DE 2014.



**Figure 2.** Land purchased and slated for exchange/expropriation for the BCCA project. Source: Official Diary of the Municipality of Maracaju, 17 April 2014. Appendix 3 to Decree 56/2014 that enabled the municipal government to purchase and donate the light blue area for the BCCA Brazil. The triangular remainder of that lot to the south was purchased by the BCCA Brazil itself, with the dark blue area slated for exchange (or later resale) for the areas in red, located on the neighbouring farms owned by the 'Dolorini' brothers (the remainder of one farm is in grey to the west, and the other in yellow-white to the east). Please refer to the article online for colour version.

get stuck with the part that has all those indian problems (sic)'. Without reaching any agreement, Maurílio and his team accused the Dolorini of being 'against the development of the municipality' for selfish reasons. To make matters worse, rumours were spreading that 'the Chinese are not really coming'. As 2014 rolled on, these rumours were gaining traction with news reports emerging that a similar investment announced by a Chinese company three years earlier to build a soybean crushing facility in Bahia state had been apparently abandoned (Oliveira, 2015, forthcoming). I arrived in Maracaju at the peak of these tensions and uncertainties, with the installation license application still under elaboration, Cao asking me as a favour to help convince the Dolorini to accept his last offer, and the mayor, his staff, and many large-scale farmers asking me whether I thought the BCCA Brazil would go through or pull out of the project entirely.

Instead of playing into either side of the local debate, I used the opportunity of a request to present an independent report to the municipal and state governments to raise additional considerations on the potential negative impacts of the citric acid industry, promote more rigorous



**Figure 3.** ‘Dismemberment of rural area’. Source: Maracaju Municipal Government Archives. The upper shaded area that gives access from the BBCA Brazil-owned farm to the railroad is marked for exchange with the lower shaded area (within the 8 km radius of the Sucuri’y indigenous territory). Note the water treatment facilities designed on the corridor on the right, running through the ‘Dolorini’ farm on the way to the river.

environmental regulations and a second public hearing on the project with active participation of the Kaiowá community in Maracaju, as well as the regional agents of FUNAI and the Federal Public Defendant, among other technical recommendations for the municipality to improve its healthcare, education, and urban planning in anticipation of any further industrialization. These reports were received with respect and apprehension by the Maracaju municipal government and the president of the state government’s environmental agency (IMASUL), who told me that they could indeed consider imposing greater restrictions for the installation license, but these independent recommendations ultimately went unheeded.

Two weeks later the BBCA Brazil presented their application for their installation license, and in less than a month, a few days before governor Puccinelli left office, the license was granted. From my interviews and informal conversations with IMASUL analysts and Federal Public Defendants in MS, it seems evident to me that the license was granted in far less time than needed by the environmental agency to undertake proper analysis, much less to consider additional recommendations for more rigorous regulations as I personally suggested. The installation license was granted on December 2014, and the following month Salerno filed the expropriation of the Dolorini farmland. With the completion of the land allocation for the project, the China Development Bank finally released the first installment of their loan for the project, and equipment for the installation of the facility began to arrive from China in Brazilian ports. Moreover, Salerno began negotiations with Cao to purchase a portion of the remaining Lombardi farm in order to relocate their silos. They plan to become the main intermediaries for the purchase of maize from the region to supply the BBCA Brazil agroindustry, and if successful, Salerno will be propelling himself from municipal *chuzhang* to transnational business entrepreneur.

In the meantime, the 600 individuals of the Kaiowá community in Maracaju continue living in poverty, exposed to pesticide drift from neighbouring farms, drinking water from wells contaminated with agrochemicals (Agência Brasil, 2016). 'If we were not made invisible' by the manner that Salerno expropriated the Dolorini and reconfigured the layout of the BBKA Brazil project to maintain the process of environmental licensing at the state level, the leadership of the Sucuri'y indigenous territory explained to me, 'we would be able to get some compensation from this project. We could install water and build better houses with that money'. But instead, the Maracaju municipal government (in a collaboration between Salerno and the secretary of infrastructure) framed the only demand for environmental compensation as the establishment of a municipal ecological park along the north side of the new industrial zone retroactively designated to legalize the expropriation of the Dolorini. Ironically, the area immediately to the south of the BBKA Brazil agroindustrial plant (i.e., just within the 8 km radius of the Sucuri'y indigenous territory) was designated for housing the construction workers and future employees of the factory – bypassing the law would have required consent from and attention to those most marginalized in the community, while it creates the precisely the residential infrastructure needed by the residents of the Sucuri'y indigenous territory. 'This project will benefit everyone here', Salerno exclaimed, but failed to elaborate on how it benefits some more than others, and does not seem to benefit the Kaiowá at all.

## CONCLUSION

This account of how the BBKA-JLJ partnership was established, and how their agroindustrial project was ultimately 'grounded' in Maracaju, illustrates how an ethnography of China–Brazil agroindustrial assemblages advances our understanding of the conditions of possibility of Chinese transnational investments, and reveals how a new transnational class of boosters, brokers, bureaucrats and businessmen emerges through the labour of assembling (Chinese) capital with (Brazilian) land, labour and expertise. While they might not constitute a transnational capitalist class in the traditional sense (Carroll, 2010; Sklair, 2001), their ability to convert transnational investments into forms of affluence and influence sets the emerging Brazil–China agroindustrial assemblage as its common terrain and most fitting object of investigation. Consequently, our empirical and theoretical understanding of Chinese foreign investments and the rise of transnational elites from the Global South benefits from ethnographically nuanced regard for the practices of assemblage undertaken by these characters, particularly those operating at the 'middle levels' of state and corporate governance. After all, it is their work and set of skills that enables the formation of partnerships and the successful implementation of transnational investments, and also explains why such projects propel them in transnational and class ascendance while marginalizing others, increasing social inequality, and aggravating environmental degradation even when legal restrictions and governance priorities exist to assure otherwise.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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## NOTES

1. Permissions to use information from exchanges with research subjects extended to both ‘formal and informal’ comments, but any quotation of ‘informal’ comments is anonymized (not merely through the use of pseudonym). Agreements to participate in the research did not involve commitment or expectation of approval/review. Permissions were gained from every individual interviewed, and explicitly addressed the inclusion of their names, in the case of agribusiness and government officials, and the fact that information would be used for academic publications related to my doctoral research project. I have chosen not to use pseudonyms for individuals elected to public office, given that they gave me informed consent to be identified in my research, and there is a public interest on information about their work. I have also chosen not to use pseudonyms for individuals who are already widely identified in the media, and who hold positions of high level authority in the companies described, given that they have also given me informed consent to be identified in my research, and they can easily be identified through public reports in the Brazilian press. I have chosen to use pseudonyms for other individuals, even when they are *not* identified as vulnerable subjects who require anonymity according to my protocol with the Office of Protection of Human Subjects (OPHS) at the University of California at Berkeley, and even when they did give me informed consent to be identified in my research, because of the complex set of ethically and legally sensitive issues involved in this case. Still, even if those individuals for whom I use pseudonyms are identified through their relationship with others mentioned in this research, public sources in the Brazilian press, or public documents related to the case discussed, that would still not present any violation of UC Berkeley’s OPHS protocols in general, or my specific informed consent agreements with those individuals in particular.
2. Pseudonym
3. Personal interviews with Shanghai Nutriplus BBKA executive director and Gonça, Shanghai and São Paulo, 2015.
4. Interview with trade manager of the BBKA Brazil, February 2016.
5. Official Diary of the São Paulo State Government, São Paulo State Board of Trade (DOSP/JUCESP), Alteration number: 84782/13-4 (March 19, 2013, p. 48).
6. Alteration of capital documented in DOSP/JUCESP (July 11, 2013, p. 88). Total investment of 320 million USD announced to multiple news outlets, and reported as ‘confirmed’ by the Brazilian government (RENAL, 2013) and the Brazil-China Business Council (CEBC, 2014).
7. Interview with BBKA Brazil attorney, Campo Grande, MS, November 7, 2015. Changes in the corporate structure documented in National Registry of Legal Entities of the Brazilian Federal Revenue Secretariat of the Ministry of Finance and DOSP/JUCESP (November 5, 2013, p. 80).
8. Personal interviews with senior JLJ executives, Salto, SP, February 2015.
9. Informal conversations like this with mid-level managers and other staffers in both corporate and government circles frequently yielded valuable information, but were usually undertaken only under condition of anonymity.
10. Personal interview, Campo Grande, MS, October 27, 2015.
11. BNDES issued a note to counter rumours of irregularity on the loans (BNDES, 2015).
12. At the time of writing, charges have not been reversed upon appeal, but Bumlai was released in April, 2017, due to health concerns (Pires and Moura, 2017).
13. Administración Nacional de Combustibles, Alcoholes y Portland (ANCAP).
14. Personal interview, Campo Grande, MS, November 5, 2015.
15. Personal interview, Campo Grande, MS, November 5, 2015.

16. Personal interviews with MS government technocrats on condition of anonymity. Puccinelli's crudeness and prejudiced ignorance are also evident in various cases widely documented in the Brazilian press. In 2009, for example, he called the Minister of the Environment a "pot-smoking faggot" for placing restrictions on a sugar mill planned for his state (G1, 2009), which evoked a formal condemnation from the Congressional Committee on Human Rights and Minorities (Federal Congress, 2009). Then in 2010, he publicly assaulted a young man who told him, during a march on the streets of Campo Grande, that he "heard he was a thief" (Naves, 2010). He slandered an electoral opponent in 2012 as "sociopath" and threatened to "cut off his own ball sack if he won more than 30 thousand votes" (Midiamax, 2014), and again made headlines in 2013, when promised to give "one medal for each criminal that [a police officer] sends to hell" (Bitencourt and Rocha, 2013). Puccinelli was arrested on November 14, 2017, on multiple corruption charges, then released the next day to await appeal in liberty, having paid back 22 million reais in stolen public funds (Agencia Brasil, 2017). The likelihood he might have "turned away 'the Chinese' because of prejudiced ignorance" is based upon multiple anonymous reports from mid-level bureaucrats in the Mato Grosso do Sul state government who expressed such sentiments.
17. Personal interviews with Can Mengchen, Campo Grande, MS, October 27 and November 5, 2014; Eduardo Riedel, Campo Grande, MS, October 23, 2014; Tereza Cristina, Campo Grande, MS, October 27, 2014; and the environmental consultant suggested to the BBKA by Eduardo Riedel, Campo Grande, MS, November 6, 2014.
18. Pseudonym
19. The sexist assumption that babysitting is female work is not being asserted by the author, but reflected from the sentiment of the ethnographic subjects, and the linguistic fact that the Portuguese word for babysitter (*babá*) is feminine.
20. The expression 'dating' (*namorar*) was used by the BBKA Brazil attorney himself (personal interview, Campo Grande, MS, November 7, 2015), and this educational background was among the few details Cao mentioned when answering why he selected this lawyer over others (Campo Grande, MS, November 4, 2015).
21. As reported on Carlos Novak's LinkedIn profile.
22. Pseudonym
23. Pseudonym
24. Pseudonym
25. This required changing the municipal zoning code after the original declaration of expropriation, to retroactively legalize the original act of expropriation. (Decree 56/2014, published in the Official Diary of the Municipality of Maracaju, 17 April 2014).
26. This narrative is drawn from multiple formal interviews and informal conversations with the Dolorini family, mayor Maurílio Azambuja, Antonio Salerno and others at the Maracaju municipal government, the BBKA Brazil attorney, Cao himself, and other individuals familiar with the situation in Campo Grande and Maracaju.
27. For further details on the political ecology of the citric acid industry, see chapter 5 of my dissertation at UC Berkeley.

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