

Grassroots perspectives on relocation: Threats and opportunities

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[ABSTRACT]

Literature on land disputes typically portrays villagers as victims unable to protect their interests. However, their perspectives on urbanisation, development and displacement are much more complex. This article provides some ethnographic context for the widely discussed related topics of land disputes and compensation. Based on fieldwork in rural Sichuan, it examines how the selection of previously agricultural areas for industrialisation and road building, entailing relocation of villagers, has been understood by local villagers. Rumors of possible relocation (and compensation for existing homes) have often translated into the speedy building of rather absurd house extensions to maximise compensation. In response, village officials and the county government have attempted to crack down on what they claim are illegal buildings. Some households have already been moved, conflicts loom large, and the village Party secretary has caused even more controversy by building himself a huge house hoping for a large compensation payment.

The article considers how villagers view relocation, the relative value of industry, development and land, and discourses where industrial development and tourism are concurrently developed. In the relative absence of a welfare state to protect them, rural residents regard land as the most fundamental guarantee of livelihood, and they are unwilling to surrender control over it. They resent the minimal compensation they are offered and suspect that local officials take bribes from investors and pocket a large share of the benefits. At the same time they welcome the development of infrastructure and of transport, which they regard as a step toward improving living conditions and employment opportunities. Through their participation in (and rejection of) building practices, and their calls on the local

state to offer better compensation, villagers are also reconfiguring their local moral universe. These negotiations are an instance when the legitimacy of the local government comes under scrutiny and tensions among villagers as well as between villagers and the local state come more visibly to the fore.

I. Introduction

In the relative absence of a welfare state to protect them, rural residents regard land as the most fundamental guarantee of livelihood, and they are unwilling to surrender it.¹ They resent the minimal compensation they are offered for it and suspect that local officials take bribes from investors and pocket a large share of the benefits. In the aftermath of recurrent food safety scandals, farmers who have been accustomed to rely largely on their own produce for subsistence are also fearful of becoming dependent on purchasing food whose origins and contents are beyond their control.² At the same time they welcome the development of infrastructure and of transport and regard them as a step towards improving living conditions and employment opportunities. This article outlines some local practices through which villagers engage with land expropriation and compensation. It shows that, stretching the limited parameters available to them, they attempt to extract as much compensation as possible from the local state, engaging in semi-legal building practices. In doing so, they are also reconfiguring their local moral universe. Those who do not participate in or endorse rushed building to maximise compensation see themselves as inhabiting a higher moral ground and regard those who do as con artists on a par with the officials they despise so much. These divergent practices channel existing tensions within the village and position villagers differently vis-à-vis various levels of the local state.

The case in view is Baoma, a village in North-East Sichuan, where I carried out roughly 20 months of fieldwork since 2004. Drawing especially on research conducted in

2011 when relocation came to the fore more prominently, it examines how the selection of previously agricultural areas for industrialisation and road building, therefore entailing relocation of villagers, has been received by local villagers. In particular, my focus is on villagers' views of infrastructural development and relocation, and the relative value they place on industry, tourism, development and farmland.

II. Urbanisation, development and land disputes

In her recent book on *The Great Urban Transformation* You-tien Hsing writes that land is at the centre of the triple movement to urbanisation, industrialisation and marketization, and essential for re-structuring state power and state-society relations.³ Indeed, urbanisation and industrialisation both entail a loss of farmland.⁴ Land conversion from agricultural to non-agricultural uses between 1987 and 2003 reduced China's cropland to one tenth of the country's total.⁵ As the incomes from land leases are extremely high, often higher than from industrial taxes, local governments have found themselves under pressure to seize land quickly and secure investments, regarding both as easy ways to boost their Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In a town in Yunnan, Xiaolin Guo found that land sales account for 20-30 % of the county government revenue and 80% of the township government extra-budgetary funds. The income however is unevenly distributed. Guo found that the share of income from land sales taken by county-township governments was 60-70 % of the total, the amount for village collective was 25-30 % while that for farmers was only 5-10%.⁶

Such uneven distribution is generated by the peculiar interconnection between state and market under reform whereby "local governments act as landlords, developers, city planners and urban boosters".⁷ Their position and ability to expropriate land and draw the largest share of the benefits is premised on the land tenure system. In 1988 China established a land leasehold market, separating land ownership from land-use rights. This set the stage

for massive urban expansion and fuelled rising land values. The division between land ownership and rights over land use intersects with another important pre-existing separation: that between state ownership and collective ownership of land.⁸ In the former case, typical of urban areas, the State Council exercises the right of ownership on behalf of the state and land can only be acquired after paying fees for its use. In the latter, typical of rural areas, collective organisations such as village or sub-village units own the land and allocate land use rights to farmers free of charge for 30-year leases. This use right cannot be transferred or rented for “non-agricultural construction” without the permission of the state.⁹ Conversely, as land is under collective ownership in the village, the county government is not in a position to lease the land to investors or access it for non-agricultural purposes.¹⁰

In order to be leased to investors, rural land first needs to be transformed into urban land and ownership accordingly is transferred from the collective to the state. While the collective has no right to transfer land for non-agricultural use, “The State may, in the public interest, lawfully requisition land owned by collectives”.¹¹ Ambiguous definitions of public interest facilitate land expropriation and substantially limit villagers’ ability to oppose these transfers. This dual track system whereby only state land can be leased to investors effectively turns villagers into second-class property rights holders and limits their opportunities to sell land or to benefit fully and directly from land sales. In a recent interview published by the Global Times, Zangchun Gan (deputy state land inspector-general with the Ministry of Land and Resources) was eager to point out that processes of expropriation, compensation and placement are the responsibility of different levels of government and therefore disputes over compensation and placement do not imply that expropriation itself was unlawful.¹² The State Council and provincial level governments are in charge of expropriation, while municipal or county governments are responsible for compensation (the

immediate funds paid) and placement (the long-term process of giving farmers a new residence registration or *hukou*).¹³

There is a further complexity in this arrangement that, as we shall see, holds implications for how villagers interact with state authorities. Responsibility for negotiating compensation for land sales lies with the collective. Yet, as Guo's case illustrates, it typically negotiates without consulting villagers. Given that land is one of the most vital forms of revenue creation for local governments, the collective tends to act in its own interests and those of the township and county rather than those of the villagers it supposedly represents. A further layer of ambiguity surrounds which collective level (subvillage units *zu*, or villages *cun*) actually holds the land titles. Peter Ho argues that the central government purposefully avoided systematic land registration and left collective ownership legally undefined. This "deliberate institutional ambiguity" with regard to ownership shifts of collective land was intended to avoid social conflict but in practice it legitimates robbing the natural village of its land ownership.¹⁴ The effects of this configuration are mixed. By allowing expropriation of land, the combination of these ambiguities and the current land tenure system have been the engine of China's economic success and have enabled rapid development for which it is famous.¹⁵ At the same time, institutional ambiguity has increased uncertainty, encouraged corruption, raised costs and potentially reduced the incentive to invest.¹⁶

The expropriation of rural land results in the displacement of those who previously lived and farmed there. It is estimated that between 1990 and 2007 farmland conversion and inner city redevelopment displaced 60 to 75 million people.¹⁷ Often, those relocated are offered a one-off compensation sum and the lion's share of land-use fees are invested in urban construction rather than on the long-term welfare of the landless farmers, for instance through purchasing basic old-age insurance for them.¹⁸ Dispossession has frequently triggered social unrest. Mass incidents are widely said to be above 90 thousand per year since

2007, and land disputes have spread, according to a recent survey of 1,700 households in six provinces published by Xinhua.¹⁹ Literature on land disputes typically portrays villagers as victims unable to protect their interests.²⁰ While they sometimes protest against land expropriation, their efforts are met with little success.²¹ Undoubtedly, villagers are in a position of relative powerlessness, unable as they are to secure any more than a tiny proportion of the commercial value of their land once it is converted to non-agricultural use and sold to investors. However, the perspectives of rural residents on urbanisation, development and displacement are complex. This article examines these diverse perspectives and grassroots' strategies for increasing compensation amounts as a lens through which to study relationships among villagers, and between them and the local state.

III. The onset of urbanisation in Baoma

When I settled in Baoma village for research in 2004, urbanisation could not seem further from everyday reality. Even the nearby county town of Langzhong showed few conventional signs of development. To the contrary, the town prided itself on its (genuinely) old city. Most high rise blocks in the county town seemed to date to the 1990s if not 1980s, and certainly did not exude the image of development that the Chinese government was so keen to produce. Indeed, my Chinese supervisor recommended Langzhong to me as a research site in 2004 precisely because it had “not developed yet”. By 2005 things had already begun to change. A new People's square was created, surrounded by shop units which, at that time, remained empty. By 2006, many of these shop units had filled, and unattractive buildings out of keep with the low rise traditional housing scattered across the old city were razed to the ground. Investors (mostly from richer, coastal areas) developed the riverfront with mock old buildings fashioned to look like traditional houses, but actually made of concrete. These hosted restaurants, teahouses, souvenir shops and karaoke bars.

Some in the city lamented what they jokingly called the ‘Lijiang-fication’ of the riverfront, while others noted that at least some of the old city had been spared from rampant commercialisation.²²

It was not until 2007 however that changes began to hit Baoma village. Under the auspices of the ‘building the new socialist countryside’ campaign, villagers who lived in poorly connected parts of Baoma were strongly encouraged to relocate to designated areas closer to the village road. Many took the offer on and built new homes in former paddyfields. Envisioning that these would be their homes for the rest of their lives, they invested substantial amounts of resources and energy in building concrete, externally-tiled houses which they did not have enough funds to decorate or furnish. Compensation was offered for relocation on the basis of the size of one’s original residence. Some however did not fully understand the process, and assumed that the compensation would rise proportionally with the size of their new residences, becoming heavily indebted to build 3 storey homes they could ill afford.

In 2008 rumours began to circulate in Baoma that a trainline would pass through the village. Then that a wide road would be built across the lower reaches of the village. In 2009 the latter rumours proved true and work began on a 6-lane wide road that required levelling part of a village hill and relocating a few households. This triggered a second wave of demolition and building in Baoma, though relatively few households were affected. Relocated households received a few thousand *yuan* as compensation for their homes. All of them built large new homes along the existing village road, which now joined the newly built 6-lane road. Some of these families also bought apartments in the nearby ‘development zone’, where their young sons and wives would live.

In early 2010 a further rumour circulated in Baoma: that the whole village would be relocated and the land would be sold to an investor to build an industrial park. While the

investor had not materialised yet (and still has not, as of January 2013), many villagers began to extend their old homes or to build new ones on their agricultural land. The rumour suggested that once investors were secured, villagers would be relocated to a residential area (yet to be built) and homes would be compensated on the basis of their size. The government would either provide a new residence of equal size to one's original home, or compensate financially for the square meters lost. In the wake of these rumours, the village was overcome by a third wave of building, this time in frenzy. Village homes built since the 1980s were typically made up of two rooms on the first floor, adjacent to a kitchen and the pigsty, where the toilet was also located. Some of them had two or three additional rooms on the second floor, not decorated and typically only used for storage. These rooms would look out onto a courtyard. The new extensions built following these rumours consisted of additional rooms occupying the courtyard. The effect was to deprive the original residence of any natural light. It would be obvious even to the non-architecturally trained mind not only that these additions were not functional, but that they rendered much of the original house rather impracticable (see figure 1). Typically, these extensions did not have properly fitted windows, which to villagers critical of these new buildings was further proof that they were not intended to be lived in but only as a way of securing additional compensation once a relocation deal was secured.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE: courtyard extensions

A few families built new extravagantly large homes by rural standards, occupying some of their own paddyfields. These were composed of six rooms on the first floor (three at the front and three at the back, including a kitchen and bathroom), and the same structure on the second floor, for a total of 12 rooms. These houses however were never completed (see figure

2). The plan, residents told me, was to build a third floor, but poor weather in 2010 slowed down construction work, which came to a halt by government directive later that year. In some cases, the second floor had only been half built, the walls coming up to about a meter in height (see figure 3). Building work was abruptly stopped and the building material was requisitioned. When I visited in September 2011, almost a year since the building ban, the bricks were still exposed and homes had no fitted windows or doors, leaving the rooms open to the elements. A few however managed to reach a further state of completion. Perhaps predictably, the village secretary built the most impressive abode. It was a four storey home, with eight rooms on each floor and a staircase at the centre. One villager joked begrudgingly: “what on earth does he want to build, a hotel? That dog!” Villagers whose building material had been requisitioned in 2010 after a blanket ban on any further building also alleged that the village secretary used it to build his own house. They commented that just as soon as their material was gone his house started to grow one and then another additional floor.

INSERT FIGURE 2 AND FIGURE 3 incomplete homes

Not all in Baoma embarked upon this building frenzy. Erjie’s family, my hosts during all my fieldtrips, were one of the few households to have passed on the potential opportunity for further compensation. Their family was composed of Erjie and her husband Taoge, both in their early forties, and their 19 year old daughter Lida. They still lived in their original one-storey brick-built house, adjacent to Taoge’s parents’ home, which was made partly of bricks and stones and partly of bamboo and mud. In the summer 2011 Erjie’s mother, Ganma, had also moved in with Erjie since her own house, in a neighbouring village, had already been selected for demolition.²³ While Erjie and her family despised those who opportunistically built extensions in the hope for higher compensation, those who did complained that they

were unable to complete the buildings, or to have the new area recognised as living quarters. What all agreed on however, was the unfairness of the expropriation of farmland without compensation. It is to this that I turn first.

III. The value of farmland

Whenever I have spoken to Baoma villagers over the past 8 years, they have always been keen to point out how meagre incomes from farming are. Erjie's comments may serve as an example. She remarked that the value of the main crops from her family's land (which she considered to be rice, rapeseed, maize and wheat) would be only a few hundred *yuan*. On this basis, one may be tempted to deduce that villagers do not value farmland. On the contrary, despite the low incomes derived from it, they still regard land as a vital guarantee of livelihood. Erjie remarked that it is still better to have land, because at least when you are old and sick you still have food.

“If you can't earn any money, at least you'll still have food. A bowl of noodles in the city costs 1 to 2 *yuan*, and then you pay extra for vegetables, but here I can just grab a few vegetables from my plot. Nowadays it is ok to be a farmer. We don't have to pay all those taxes anymore. To live in the city, you need at least 300 *yuan* per person each month. I didn't believe it at first, but my brother-in-law [who lives in Langzhong city with his wife] told me that's the minimum, and to try my luck if I don't believe him”.

Aunt Lin, a woman in her early 50s who lives alone and supplements her income by working as a builder, commented “they want us to move to high-rise blocks. That's not good, you have to buy everything there because you don't have your own produce. If they don't occupy your land at least you can still grow some food”.

Comments on the value of land as a guarantee of livelihood were often premises for complaints about the inadequate (or inexistent) compensation received to date. One man in his fifties lost most of his family's land through the building of the road in 2009. He explained that he could only grow a few hundred *jin* (500 grams) of rice on his remaining land, not enough to feed his family. Yet since losing their land, his family only received one season's worth of lost crops. All other families I spoke to who had lost farmland to the road were in the same position.²⁴ He complained: "this development is good but the state (*guojia*) has not solved the issue of land expropriation. They have only given us compensation for one season of lost crops. The county government (*shi zhengfu*) built the road, so they're the ones who need to solve this." Even those, like Erjie, who were damning towards the new extensions, were adamant that if land is expropriated compensation should be given promptly. Erjie explained: "if they have taken your land they need to sort out the compensation issue, otherwise you won't know who to demand it from".

Uncertainty and mistrust pervaded their accounts: when would they get the compensation? Who could they trust to make it happen? Would it be enough to live on? How long for? Concerns were phrased not just for the present but for the long-term future. As the village doctor put it: "the county government needs to solve the problem of how ordinary people (*laobaixing*) will find their food. Otherwise how is the next generation going to eat when they are old [i.e. unable to work]?" Local discourses on farmland highlighted its value and opposed it to the uncertainty and higher costs of a life without it. Implicit in these discourses is also a sense of unfairness of being deprived of land, particularly in the absence of adequate compensation. A shared moral universe premised on the value of farm land postulated that it would be the county government's responsibility to offer such compensation given that they had appropriated the land.

IV. The moral universe of compensation for demolished houses

While all agreed that lost land should be compensated, views were far more mixed on the compensation for lost houses, particularly when those houses had been newly expanded in view of potential compensation. I have argued that uncertainty characterised experiences of land loss and demands for compensation. Yet when it came to homes and extensions uncertainty was even more pervasive. In the case of land, complaints were about losses already incurred. By contrast, in the case of homes villagers attempted to double-guess whether they would be moved and speculated over whether to invest in enlarging their homes in advance of the uncertain possibility of relocation. Villagers were unsure when they would be relocated, or whether this would happen at all. Nothing conclusive had been officially communicated to villagers, other than a future plan to transform the entire township into an industrial zone, subject to attracting investment. According to some rumours the entire village would be relocated. In other scenarios, only those whose houses were close to the paddy fields by the village road and those with new but unfinished houses would be resettled. In yet another version, houses on the hill by the former village school would also be removed.²⁵

Paradoxically, as some attempted to take control of uncertainty and raise their potential compensation amounts by building extensions, the prevalence of the same strategy in particular areas of the village also made it less likely that they would be relocated (and compensated) after all. Accordingly, rumours changed in light of the volume of new buildings in areas most clearly faced with the threat (and opportunity) of relocation. The village Party secretary warned that certain parts of the village would no longer be attractive to investors because the extensive building made it too expensive to compensate them. Villagers' own building activities therefore ultimately increased uncertainty rather than mitigated it. This was particularly the case for the sub-village surrounding the former village school, where many "new countryside" homes were built and many older homes extended.

Aunt Lin fell in the latter category. She explained: “they said they were going to knock down all houses on the hill and then to dig away and flatten the hill, but apparently we’ve extended our houses too much. So now they say they cannot afford the compensation and that the new road will only cross the fields at the bottom, not our homes on the hill”. No doubt, the likely rumour that any further building would undermine their chances of receiving compensation was circulated by the village secretary, in an effort to curb any additional construction. These rumours channelled the mixed feelings towards relocation as both a threat and an opportunity, and towards those whose extension projects were seen to have jeopardised the chances of investors targeting the area to establish industries.

Predictably, views on house demolition, compensation and their morality depended on villagers’ relative positions. In areas where rumours of relocation were more acute (the sub-village by the former school and by the road) large houses and extensions were ubiquitous. A small number of villagers who lost their original home to the building of the road in 2009 had built large new homes but were ordered to stop in the Summer 2010. Since then, they had lived in make-shift homes with no windows or doors. Ge Song, a young man whose family was relocated to make way for the new road, consulted a lawyer and was told that villagers had no legal right to demand compensation for these buildings because they were not certified as houses by the local government. “They can give us what they want in compensation”, he claimed. His mother resented the prospect of having to move to the city because of the increased costs: “we don’t want to move. It’s more expensive in the city: there is a waste collection fee, you have to pay for the water, you have to use gas instead of wood. Here you can still save some money”. Her concerns about livelihood and additional costs in the city seamlessly led to her explanation of why they had not been moved yet: “Villagers don’t agree. Otherwise they would have demolished our homes a while ago. We still have to live on something! They haven’t even compensated us properly for this house or built the

new houses. We don't want to move". Through this statement, she implicitly denied building a large house with compensation in mind. Rather, she turned accusations of building to extract more compensation on their heads, and claimed that they had not been offered adequate compensation for neither their old house, nor the current one. In this case, the local state is seen as failing to fulfil its responsibilities, and villagers as rightfully resisting unjust practices.

Neighbours who had not been relocated by the new road but suspected they might be relocated in the near future extended their original houses. Most of them were quite open with me about the motive behind these extensions. They explained that they heard they may be moved to make space for an industrial park, and saw neighbours building additional rooms and therefore did the same. Their views on relocation however were mixed. Aunt Lin, who lived alone and whose 30 year old son works in Chengdu, explained that she was hoping for additional compensation, but she also said she would rather not move. Like her neighbour, she worried about the higher costs of living in the city and without the option of relying on farming. Her views suggest that the building of extensions may in fact be a result of preoccupations about securing a living without farmland. Faced with an uncertainty that they had never confronted before – landlessness – villagers tried to maximise their compensation so that they would have more capital to rely on in the absence of land. In doing so, they also reclaimed some moral connotations for their seemingly immoral and selfish practices. Extensions and large new homes are reconfigured not as self-interested and self-maximising activities that exploit and extort state resources, but as morally legitimate attempts to decrease the insecurity presented by losing the main long-term guarantee of subsistence villagers had known until then: land.

Morality was also reclaimed by eschewing economic reasoning behind building projects and justifying them on aesthetic grounds. The village doctor's family expanded their

already large house in width and in height, adding a third floor. They were relatively well-off by village standards, of high enough status, and so close to the village secretary that they were able to complete a 3 storey home including concrete rendering on the outside walls. Each floor had roughly 8 rooms. The doctor explained that he paid for the first floor, and the other two floors were built by his two daughters. Many villagers alleged that the doctor built a large house for compensation purposes. He defended himself against these accusations by claiming: “I hope they don’t relocate me. I quite like this spot”. In the course of conversations with me and another villager, the doctor had emphasised the danger of losing land as it subtracted a very important means of livelihood. Yet, as the village doctor, he also had a reliable income from his practice, and his arguments against relocation were also premised on the aesthetic value of his current residence and its location.

If those facing relocation portrayed their own situation as undesirable, villagers who had not extended their current homes in the hope of compensation regarded those who had as opportunists at best, and con artists at worst. Upon returning to Erjie’s house after a day in the lower reaches of the village – where most of the extensions were built and where relocation rumours loomed large – I commented that some of the people I spoke to seemed distressed about the prospect of losing their newly built homes. In some cases, they had only been built in 2009 after having to relocate for the building of the 6-lane road. Erjie harboured little sympathy for them. She sniggered: “the more they demolish, the richer they get (*yue chai yue facai*)!” Erjie’s mother, Ganma, whose village unit had been relocated a few months earlier, put it very plainly: “They know they will be relocated, so they just build, build, build. What they do is build a big extension but of low standard. To get the job done fast and keep it quiet, they’ll build through the night. When officials [who measure the area to be compensated] don’t count the extension, the owners refuse to move. These buildings are not the same as the ‘new countryside’ houses, those were well-built and more convenient for the

city. These are different. If you want to develop you shouldn't do this". Intrigued by their comments and their obvious annoyance, I described some of the houses where the original building has no natural light because of the extension in front of it.

Anna: Is it for compensation?

Erjie: Of course! Do they even live in the new part? Have they built it properly? Do they have proper windows? No, you see, they just want compensation.

A: I suppose they shouldn't have been allowed to do it.

E: They do it secretly, when officials come to check they tell them to take the new windows out and to knock down the new walls. But officials can't sit here watching every day, so once officials leave they just build them back up again. Some do it at night.

A: What do you think of people who build these extensions?

E: I don't really have a view. Do they have nothing to do? They already have a house, why do they want to build more? It's just a con (*jiushi pian ren de*)! If we built a second floor on our house, we would still get the same area in the new house [because of a limit on the size of the new homes], and I would have to spend over a hundred thousand yuan. It's not worth it. We already have over 100 square meters, we don't need any more. Now we are allowed only one child, if you spend your money on the house and they don't settle in it, it's a waste. I'm happy to live in this house. What would you build such a big house for? This one is fine to live in. If they relocate us, we'll take the compensation. Otherwise we'll stay here. We don't extort money from the state (*bu pian guojia de qian*)".

A: That sounds patriotic.

E: (laughing). No, it's a lack of skills (*mei benshi*). If investors come and see the houses are so big they won't invest in that area. I guess you can say that. I think

officials are a bit worried about it. Otherwise they can't act as officials do (*ganbu jiu mei gaotou*)!

Another couple in their early sixties who had not extended their house (nor moved as part of the new countryside initiative) voiced a similar resentment about the new houses and extensions. Aunt Du said “those people built houses in a messy way, then they were stopped. They'll be the first in line for relocation. It's corrupt. Some people built several hundred square meters only to get compensation. You can't even live there because there are no windows or doors”. To reinforce their comments they added that the county Party Secretary, widely regarded as a fearless and authoritarian man, came to inspect the new road that passes through the village in the late Summer 2010. Upon seeing some large new homes adjacent to the new road, he stepped out of his car and commented: “What the hell have they built? That's really ugly (*Tamen xiude ta ma ge shazi pi? Guai bu hao kan!*) ”! Soon after, they were all ordered to stop any further construction work.

V. Levels of responsibility: planning and compensation between county, township, village and families

The question of which level of government was responsible for planning local development, communicating those plans and dealing with compensation was extremely vexed, as was the amount of trust reserved to each respective level of government. Starting at the top, so to speak, views were mixed as to the benefits and drawbacks of state-ownership of land. When I discussed land ownership and compensation with Erjie, she reflected on my account of land ownership in the UK. “The state doesn't own all the land? Your country's bad (*yaobude*)! Here, if our land is leased to an industry, then the company is responsible for providing compensation”. Then she quickly revised her claim. “The company gives money to the state, and it is the state's responsibility to give us compensation. The company needs to

write an agreement. Locals have to agree with the compensation package. People here know this, you have to be careful that the company doesn't just take the land and give no compensation". In her account, responsibility is shared between villagers, investors and the state: villagers need to review the compensation proposals, investors are required to deliver on their promises, and the state is responsible for distributing the compensation. In this model, the state acts as a mediator with investors and a guarantor of compensation, and is seen as a protective presence.

The village doctor was less optimistic about state ownership of land and did not see it as beneficial to villagers, or as a guarantee of fair compensation. In fact, quite the opposite: "in our country, land belongs to the state (*guojia*), if they want to build a road or a bridge, they can just take it!" This sentiment was echoed by Ge Song, whose family was moved twice without adequate compensation. "We can't go to trial. Who would be the defendant? The government? That's impossible. I asked a lawyer friend of mine for some advice. He said our house has not been certified as a residence, so we have no legal right to demand compensation. The state can give us as much or as little as it wants. We don't have any rights." In this view, responsibility for compensation lies more squarely in the hands of the state, but rather than protecting villagers' interest, it is seen as a repressive force, which freely takes resources from villagers who cannot hold it to account. It is of course no coincidence that those critical of state ownership of land were also those immediately facing relocation. Erjie, for whom this was a more remote possibility, and who was not caught in the process of demanding compensation, could be more optimistic about the guarantee state ownership of land would offer. Her view of the state as a safeguard of land rights also predisposed her to being critical of those who tried to take advantage of the system for individual gain.

Villagers regarded the province as the level at which an increase in industrial parks was proposed, and each county's government as the seat of planning decisions. County

governments were also seen to be responsible for arranging and funding the building of new accommodation in high-rise residential quarters (*xiaoqu*). This should indeed be the case given that farmland can only be expropriated for non-agricultural development once it has been turned into state-owned land and acquired by the county government. Therefore, the county government was most commonly held to be responsible for providing compensation or, as villagers put it, “solving our food problem (*jiejue women chifan de wenti*)”. Those who had already lost land to the building of the road argued that “the road was built by the county government, so *they* need to figure out how we will make a living”. The authority of the county government over relocation had been most acutely felt when it issued a ban on further residential building in October 2010, on the grounds that villagers would be resettled in high-rise blocks to make space for industry. After the moratorium on further construction, their building material was confiscated and they were relegated to living in semi-built accommodation without doors, windows or floors, fearing that they would receive no compensation when their new houses would be demolished, as they had not been registered as residences. The township cadres sent a car fitted with a loudspeaker to propagate the message across the village. Those directly affected by the county’s ban regarded it as an oppressive measure that limited villagers’ capacity to benefit from development and confined them to an uncertain future as they waited to be relocated and received little compensation for their losses. Overall, the county government was seen as uncaring and neglectful of its responsibilities at best, oppressive at worst.

Villagers regarded the township government with the same degree of disdain and distrust. Both county and township were said to be the levels at which most mismanagement happened. Even villagers who were pervasively critical of the village Party secretary argued that the lack of compensation for lost land beyond the first crop season was not his fault but a consequence of the higher levels not sending the money “down”. They were confident that

the money had been released by the province, but said it would be impossible to know whether the money was retained by the county or the township. Because of this uncertainty, they argued that neither they nor the village secretary could query where the money was. This would amount to accusing either level of corruption and at any rate they could always lie. As one woman faced with relocation put it: “village cadres can’t ask their superiors about this. The township cadres can say that they haven’t received the money. Some people suspect they received it but they don’t want to pass it down. But nobody dares go upwards [to the county] in case it is the county who are holding up the money”.

The stagnation in funding flows between upper and lower levels of government was seen to be paralleled by failures in communication. The latter was phrased through the common complaint that “the higher levels [county or township] don’t inform the lower ones [the village] (*shangmian bu gaosu xiamian*)”. The most obvious example was the moratorium on additional building by the county government when villagers had already started building new homes or extensions. Those affected claimed that as a result of miscommunication they built homes that the county government now refused to approve and compensate for. Conversely, those who disapproved of the additional buildings also complained about the unclear planning and communication regarding it as an opportunity for some to take advantage. Erjie stressed that, as a result of failures of both planning and communication, uncertainty would continue for some time still: “They just haven’t planned it well (*tamen jiushi mei guihua hao*). We have to wait for the railway to be built, it will take 2 to 3 years, only then will we know whether there is investment. If nobody invests then nobody will be relocated! Only village party members have a clue about what’s being planned, but nobody really knows if we will be relocated”.

While the village Party secretary was seen to have no authority over the planning or timescale of compensation, he was regarded as the main port of call to learn about planning

decisions made higher up the hierarchy. But amounts of trust placed on him were extremely variable. Some argued that the village secretary “helped the villagers to speak up,” otherwise their extensions would have already been demolished without compensation. This allegedly happened in other villages. Aunt Lin argued that the village secretary did not cheat villagers, nor was he hiding plans – he simply was not informed clearly by the higher levels of government: “policies have not been sent down yet, how can he inform us?” At the same time, she reflected that cadres cannot inform villagers on exactly which households will be relocated because those households will build extensions and they will become too expensive to compensate.

Others were less sympathetic toward him. One 60 year old woman living in a half-built home by the new road argued:

“He’s a corrupt official. Have you seen his house?! It’s 4 floors high, he hasn’t farmed the land, raised pigs or chickens; he put two children through education and still built such a house. What is he, if not a corrupt official? He took our building material, the sand, concrete, brick and stones. He stopped us from building and then built his house higher and higher. He started last year with the first floor, then this year he built 2 more.”

Erjie did not trust him to look out for the welfare of the village and was convinced he would take bribes from investors. “That is how cadres get rich”, she argued. Hearing her comments, her husband launched a tirade against the village secretary which drew on examples from the past several years:

“He won’t let us build and he builds himself such a big house. He uses our money to build it. He held all of our accounts for reforestation (*tuigen huanlin de benben*), filled them in and took the money which we were owed. He told us he would use it to pay for something else, he kept all the money and we never even saw the

documents. He kept over 3 thousand *yuan* from our family alone. We only get the leftovers. He eats [money] until he can't eat any more, and only then will he give you something! You just can't understand what money he is keeping from you. He did the same with money for the village road. He took two hundred thousand *yuan* from villagers to build it, and it's still unfinished."

Mismanagement of funds and miscommunication stood in a viciously productive relationship. Cadres in the village, township and county orchestrated uncertainty and miscommunication to their benefit, covering each other's backs by either pleading ignorance as to where the money was, or claiming that their structural position within the institutional hierarchy prevented them from investigating further. This opened a space for embezzling compensation funds. On their part, villagers played the same lack of clarity to their advantage, and acted on rumours of potential future compensation before clearer guidelines on building were issued. They attempted to exploit institutional miscommunication and to maximise their individual benefits in the event that the rumoured relocation should take place. Uncertainty became at once a tool of oppression and an opportunity for maximising compensation. Villagers felt unable to identify which level of the local government (county and below) was responsible for withholding the compensation funds for land already lost. But they embraced this limited window of opportunity to improve their own chances of securing a larger compensation sum should their houses be demolished. They exerted a limited amount of agency in a context of deep uncertainty: over whether investors will indeed select their area to build industries, when this would happen, how much they may receive in compensation, whether they would be moved at all or only lose their farmland, and when the new high-rise blocks to accommodate them would be completed.

These accounts create a picture of intersecting responsibilities, uncertainty and mixed levels of trust. The state is seen as both a protector of land rights and as a wilful expropriator.

The county is regarded as oppressive and unsupportive, producing uncertainty and limiting benefits to villagers. The township is equally a layer of the local state that disrupts the downward flow of both funds and information. Finally, the village secretary is seen to have little authority and to be at the mercy of higher levels for plans and funding. He sometimes acts on behalf of villagers, but he most of all acts in his own interest. Villagers themselves are also seen to have responsibilities to the state and needing to play their part in furthering development. As Ganma put it, “if you want to develop, you shouldn’t do this”. Officials cannot keep a constant check on illegal buildings, and therefore villagers need to discipline themselves. They need to limit their construction efforts so that compensation still remains feasible. All levels of the local state, including villagers, are implicated in the co-production of uncertainty. They each attempt to draw benefits from the prospect and materialisation of development.

VI. Rethinking the value of hills and water: tourism-cum-industrialisation

As many relatively under-developed and under-industrialised rural areas, Langzhong has been an area of high out-migration for around two decades. When I first settled in the area in 2004, almost all young adults had left their natal villages in search for waged occupations in Guangdong, Beijing and Shanghai. Those who stayed behind reasoned that their region could never develop because it was hilly (*you shan*), and this is detrimental to mechanised agriculture and to the development of industry. In 2004, Langzhong had made considerable progress in building its “development district (*kaifa qu*)”, in a township bordering Mulan town. The area selected was predominantly flat paddy land, where a new coach station, businesses, industries and residential blocks were built. This seemed to confirm the widespread view that development would only prosper in relatively flat areas. But in 2011, it seemed that hillside land was also beginning to attract interest and its value was re-

examined. Uncle Wang, a very talkative and confident villager in his early 60s explained the rationale as follows:

“Mulan town is the new development district (*fazhan qu*) for Langzhong county. They’ll build a train line [connecting Nanchong with Guangyuan] with a station here. In 10 years’ time, it will have massively changed. It will have become a city. They [the county government] want to build an industrial park here, which means demolishing all the houses. That’s why they don’t let us build now. This road [the newly built six-lane carriageway] will be the entrance to the industrial park. They will urbanise the countryside, especially Mulan township. Why do they want to develop this township? Hilly land is hardly worth much, but if you flatten it out you’ll have a large area of more usable land. The rationale is: develop the hills (*kaifa shan*) and you’ll provide for local people (*yang zhe ge difang de ren*). The land here is not as expensive as in *kaifa qu*. It is cheaper to invest in hilly areas because it is cheaper to compensate for *di* (dry mountain land) than for *tian* (paddy land). You just have to level it out. We have hills, we have water, so we can develop tourism. The plan is to develop industry and tourism”. Will there be tourism if there are lots of industries, I ask? “Of course, they’ll build an old town to attract tourism in the township centre and put the industry here”.

This account highlights a re-valuing of hillside land. Where until then it had been construed as an obstacle to development and as financially less valuable, its low cost has come to be an advantage. The idea that hills present a development asset because they can be obliterated resonates more with the Maoist attitude of conquering nature than with current discourses of sustainable development. Uncle Wang conceptualised the relationship between industry and tourism in a cause-effect fashion: industry would bring investment in tourism. The conception of industry as a productive force for developing tourism – rather than as a

source of pollution that would undermine it – construes industry as a development and modernisation force. Conversely, this discourse frames industry as a pre-requisite for development and implies that only developed areas may attract tourism. In this framework, tourism and industry both subdue nature for the benefit of humans, but capitalise on it in different ways. For tourism, “hills and water” are an attraction for their natural beauty. For industry, they are an attraction because hills are cheaper to compensate, and water is a prerequisite for many processing plants. Both tourism and industry depend on the input of outside investors. Local resources acquire value, in other words, according to their capacity to attract outside interest.

The development of infrastructure in the hope of attracting tourism to the township was already well under way in 2011, in the hope of increasing the current 3A rating to a 5A, and that this will attract further investors. Extensive amounts of funding were put towards expanding the Red Army Memorial Hall and turning it into a large park and destination for “red tourism”, said to have cost 900 million *yuan*. Two further parks are currently under construction in the township: the Panda Paradise and the Spring Festival Theme park. The former covers 270 thousand square meters and required 340 million *yuan*. The latter covers 125 thousand squares meters and required 170 million *yuan*. A riverside development in the centre of the township is also spearheaded by outside investors. Following the destructive earthquake in Wenchuan in 2008, many of the old buildings in that area of the township had become unsafe. By 2011, developers levelled previous buildings and began work on a series of hotels.

Baoma villagers spoke proudly of the increase of tourism in Langzhong and of its embryonic development in their township. They regarded the growth in industry in a positive light as an opportunity to find employment. Almost without exception, even when they started their conversation with me by complaining about the lack of compensation, villagers

spontaneously remarked on how well the new road had been built, and how much more convenient it was to go to the market to buy and sell produce. The road was regarded as a development opportunity. Paradoxically, even those who faced relocation noted that they would have been able to complete their houses much faster in 2010 had the road been completed at the time. Their experiences of infrastructural developments in the county and in the village elicited feelings of pride, convenience and a revaluing of their own locality. At the same time, they triggered resentment that profits were not fairly distributed, and attempts by families as well as by various levels of the local government to draw more benefits from development. Rather than being passive spectators, villagers seek to make best use of the opportunities available, exploiting moments of uncertainty to secure a better future.

VII. Conclusion

You-tien Hsing has argued that “massive displacement and dispossession go hand in hand with the abrupt retreat of the state from social welfare provision. The destruction both of homes and social protection leads to intensified social contestation, thus challenging the legitimacy of the state”.²⁶ Hsing’s findings partly resonate in the Langzhong case. Social contestation has indeed intensified, both between villagers and various levels of the local government, and within the village itself. Yet, this study shows that those faced with displacement in rural Langzhong have reacted in a rather different way. Most villagers have engaged with uncertainty head on and tried to secure advantages for their families. A limited number, like Erjie, regarded the behaviour by their fellow villagers who endeavoured to extract additional resources from the local state as illegitimate. Crucially, however, few questioned the legitimacy of the state itself, as Hsing would have it. While some voiced discontent over the state ownership of land and the limited rights that this endowed them with, they felt that relocation was a legitimate practice, provided that compensation for land lost

was given in a timely and fair fashion. Overall, villagers did not oppose development. They were pleased that bigger roads, a railway, and more tourist attractions were being built locally, hoping this would result in better employment opportunities. Teenagers seeking employment in 2004 would most likely have left Baoma for factories in Shenzhen. By 2011, in the course of local infrastructural development, many could find work in Langzhong.

Studies of urbanisation and land disputes have tended to either treat local populations as passive or as contentious citizens who stage protests. By contrast, villagers in Baoma manifested their agency in other ways. Rather than opting for petitioning or violent protests, they have attempted to maximise their interests by other illegal means. Hsing suggested that relocation deprives villagers of economic opportunities and income sources and undermines effective collective mobilisation by opening rifts among them.²⁷ While the latter point clearly applies to Baoma, villagers displayed far more mixed attitudes to relocation. They perceived it as a threat: the loss of a familiar means of livelihood. But they also regarded it as an opportunity for compensation and for development which in turn would bring employment. The prospect of relocation has pushed them to rethink the value of their hillside land as it has become potentially attractive to investors and the local government. Their approach was rather matter of fact. Erjie, for instance, noted that if her family was to be relocated closer to the city, where her husband and daughter were working, it would be a positive change. Still, she was hesitant about leaving the farmland behind. Having worked for years in a brick factory in the village, and spending months without receiving payment, she was wary of relying solely on waged employment.

It is understandable why villagers may feel ambivalent about abandoning their rural registration given recent improvements in the central government's provisions for rural residents. Villagers have long regarded urban residents as wealthier and as having better entitlements to welfare. Until only a decade ago, Jiang Zemin's China had little to offer to

peasants: they paid high taxes and were entitled to few if any subsidies. Villagers at this time were keen to become urbanites. Indeed, levies were so high that in the 1990s some in Baoma purchased a township residence registration to avoid rural taxes. As subsidies to villagers rolled in under the Hu-Wen leadership, and levies were lifted, holding a rural registration has taken on a different connotation. Conversely, the economic crisis since 2008 highlighted the acute vulnerability of the labour market, undermined villagers' ability and willingness to rely solely on it for income, and made them less eager to abandon their land. The threat of relocation has also made them reflect more closely on the value of the life they have. The outside interest in their land (from the county government and from rumoured investors), has alerted them to the opportunities to capitalise more on it before handing it over and embarking on an uncertain urban existence.

A tension is discernible in villagers' attitudes and practices surrounding land expropriation and compensation. While they despised the corruption of local cadres who drew personal benefits from expropriating rural land, they also attempted to take advantage of the very same opportunities for financial reward – despite being in a structurally much weaker position to gain benefits. Those, like Erjie, who abstained from building extensions pointed to exactly this inconsistency: villagers accused the local government of mismanagement and miscommunication, but were quite prepared to exploit them and engage in equally illegal practices while the local government looked (or pretended to look) the other way. Hans Steinmuller describes these relationships as “communities of complicity” – networks that tie local people and officials through practices they both accept as appropriate but that they would publicly denounce as inappropriate.²⁸ While Baoma villagers complained about the uncertainty surrounding their experience of land loss, compensation and potential relocation, they also used it as an excuse to engage in illegal building practices. What they had with local cadres however was not a reliable community of complicity, but rather

sporadic moments of it. Local cadres swung between implicit support of these activities and outright oppression. Eventually, the county Party secretary ordered them to stop building extensions at once. In the meantime, moments of complicity allowed them to embark on these building practices while they publicly denounced land grabs without adequate compensation.

Through their attitudes to relocation, villagers put forth divergent claims to moral behaviour. Those who built extensions construed their efforts as legitimate attempts to secure more compensation in the face of an uncertain future. Their experience of not having been offered adequate compensation for their former homes or for lost land served as moral leverage to justify their unlawful and seemingly selfish practices. Doubtful of when and whether they would receive compensation from an unresponsive county government, they attempted to maximise their benefits. In addition, the higher costs of living in the city and the inability to rely on farming – were they to move there – served as a justification for demanding more compensation. Some, like the local doctor, claimed the moral high ground by avoiding the economic argument altogether and stressing instead the aesthetic desirability of their current home. Those who did not build extensions felt they were morally superior because they did not act as supplicants to the state nor attempt to extract further resources beyond their existing entitlements. Conversely, they argued that the efforts by some to access more funds would jeopardise the likelihood of the village as a whole receiving compensation. These contending claims to moral behaviour outline diverse attitudes to the local state as a provider and of villagers as agents. They articulated different models of where responsibility for planning development, providing compensation and ensuring a sustainable livelihood would lie.

¹ Yongshun Cai “Collective ownership or Cadres- Ownership? The non-agricultural use of farmland in China”, *The China Quarterly* (2003), 662-680

² Anna Lora-Wainwright “Of farming chemicals and pollution deaths: the politics of health in contemporary China”, *Social Anthropology* 17(1): 56-73.

³ You-tien Hsing, *The Great Urban Transformation: Politics of Land and Property in China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). See also Samuel Ho and George Lin “Emerging land markets in rural and urban China: Policies and Practices” *The China Quarterly*. No. 175 (Sept 2003), pp. 681-707

⁴ Erik Lichtenberg and Chengri Ding, “Assessing Farmland Protection Policy in China”, *Land Use Policy* 25, (2008) pp. 59-68

⁵ Hsing, *The Great Urban Transformation*, p.2

⁶ Xiaolin Guo “Land expropriation and rural conflicts in China” *The China Quarterly* (2001), p. 428.

⁷ Hsing *The Great Urban Transformation*, p.2

⁸ “Land Administration Law of the People’s Republic of China”, revised version, article 2. Available at http://www.mlr.gov.cn/mlrenglish/laws/200710/t20071011_656321.htm

⁹ Ibid., chapter three.

¹⁰ Guo “Land expropriation “ p. 425.

¹¹ Article 2, “Land Administration Law”

¹² *Global Times* “Retraining chances key for displaced farmers” (People’s Daily interview with Zangchun Gan), (8 Nov 2011), available at <http://www.globaltimes.cn/NEWS/tabid/99/ID/682975/Retraining-chances-key-for-displaced-farmers.aspx>

¹³ According to article 47 “Land Administration Law of the People’s Republic of China”, the compensation for land loss is set at 6 to 10 times the average annual output in the previous 3 years (3 to 6 times before 1999) and resettlement is set at 4 to 6 times the average annual output in the previous 3 years. Relocation compensation is based on the size of the affected

household, and the property compensation standard is set by local governments and covers collective owned and private owned structures and farming facilities such as fishponds, and irrigation projects. However, the highest resettlement subsidies for each hectare of the requisitioned cultivated land shall not exceed fifteen times its average annual output value for the three years preceding requisition.

¹⁴ Peter Ho “Who owns China’s land? Policies, property rights and deliberate institutional ambiguity”, *The China Quarterly*, No. 166 (Jun 2001), pp. 394-421

¹⁵ Hsing, *The Great Urban Transformation*

¹⁶ Li Tian “The *chengzhongcun* land market in China: boon or bane? A perspective on property rights” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* Vol. 32 No 2 (Jun 2008), p 284.

¹⁷ Hsing, *The Great Urban Transformation*, p. 2.

¹⁸ Hualou Long, Yurui Li, Yansui Liu, Michael Woods, and Jian Zou “Accelerated restructuring in rural China fuelled by ‘increasing vs. decreasing balance’ land-use policy for dealing with hollowed villages”, *Land Use Policy* Vol. 29 No. 1 (2012), pp. 11-22

¹⁹ Reuters “China land grab disputes spread west, hit new high” (30 Oct 2011)
<http://ca.reuters.com/article/idCATRE79U0B620111031>

²⁰ Yongshun Cai “Collective ownership or Cadres- Ownership? The non-agricultural use of farmland in China”, *The China Quarterly* (2003), 662-680

²¹ Guo “Land expropriation”

²² This term (*Lijianghua*) refers to “Lijiang Ancient Town”, a major tourist destination originally built 800 years ago, and recognised as World Heritage Site in 1997 by UNESCO. While the buildings resemble ‘ancient’ forms, they are recent and the town is pervasively commercialised. See Xiaobo Su “Urban conservation in Lijiang, China: Power Structure and Funding Systems”, *Cities*, 27 (2010), pp. 164-171.

²³ Since being removed from her home, Ganma received a monthly compensation fee towards the cost of rent while she waited for the residential area designated to relocate her and her neighbours to be completed. Her three sons are jointly responsible to care for her in her old age, as they did for their father, who died of cancer in 2005 (see Lora-Wainwright, 2013). Between them, they gave her 600 yuan per month. Erjie pointed out that this is hardly enough for her mother to live on (a meagre 50 yuan per day), but that with the compensation from the state she could live comfortably.

²⁴ This is out of step with Article 47 of the Land Administration law, whereby farmers are entitled to compensation equivalent to 6-10 times the annual output for the last 3 years. See note 15.

²⁵ This latter rumour proved true in January 2012, as most residents of the subvillage unit surrounding the former school were ordered to leave. I have no reliable information regarding the compensation rates secured and whether they include the new extensions.

²⁶ Hsing, *The Great Urban Transformation*, p. 3.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

²⁸ Han Steinmuller "Communities of complicity: Notes on state formation and local sociality in rural China", *American Ethnologist* Vol 37 No 3 (2010) pp. 539-49.