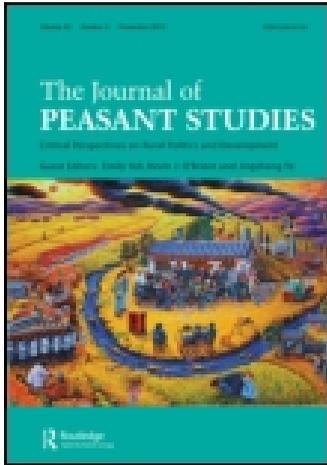


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Urbanization through dispossession: survival and stratification in China's new townships

Julia Chuang

Rural land dispossession has become a dominant mechanism of capital accumulation in the Chinese economy. However, the Chinese economy continues to rely on a migrant labor system that enables enterprises to accumulate capital precisely by *not* dispossessing laborers, but instead enlisting rural communities in absorbing costs of workforce maintenance. These dual and contradictory mechanisms are particularly visible in China's urban construction sector, where enterprises require both low-cost labor and low-cost land for profitability. This contribution draws on long-term ethnographic research in Lan-ding Village, a labor-sending community undergoing land expropriations in Sichuan Province, to document a new system of class stratification resulting from these dual accumulation mechanisms.

Keywords: labor; land politics; accumulation by dispossession; China

In the past three decades, a globally low-cost labor force has fueled China's stratospheric economic rise. The bulk of this workforce, 400 million laborers in total, originates in the Chinese countryside, where their births and marriages have been registered in the hukou system, the nation-wide household registrar that is the basis for social provisions administration. As rural hukou registrants, laborers receive access to noncontiguous plots of village land, each averaging 1.7 mu in size.¹ There, they are housed for successive generations and can engage in subsistence farming and local networks of labor recruitment. This arrangement has become immensely profitable for enterprises. Because laborers leave their families to subsist via farming in villages, enterprises can pay them below 'family wage' levels – wages in Chinese auto, manufacturing, mining and construction remain one-eleventh of US wage levels and one-third of Brazil's (ILO 2013) – while passing on to villages the hidden costs of housing, educating and feeding future and potential members of their workforce. Today, enterprises in every sector of the Chinese economy employ rural labor, and thus produce low-cost commodities by passing on the full social cost of workforce maintenance to rural governments (Wolpe 1988; Burawoy 1976; Hart 2007; Alexander and Chan 2004; Lee 2007, 204). This is a precondition for Chinese economic growth which Giovanni Arrighi has labeled 'accumulation without dispossession' (Arrighi 2007), referring to the profitable employment of laborers who are not dispossessed of land.

¹One mu equals one sixth of an acre.

In the past two decades, these foundations of China's low-cost labor force have begun to crumble, due to a wave of rural land expropriations sweeping the countryside. By 2006, at least 66 million rural residents had lost access to land (Wang 2007), and scholars estimate that approximately 3 million more are dispossessed every year (Hsing 2010, 183). Local governments dispossess rural residents of land in order to underwrite land-backed mortgages and sell land-use contracts to enterprises, yielding profits that now constitute 77.7 percent of local government revenues (Cai 2012; Zhou 2007, 2009). Once dispossessed, rural residents are granted urban hukou status, then offered state-subsidized high-rise apartments for purchase in townships. This process facilitates an urban construction boom which David Harvey has described as a form of 'accumulation by dispossession' (2003, 140, 2005), referring to the production of revenues through the transformation of land from subsistence use to market-oriented redevelopment.

China's economy continues to utilize a migrant labor force, profitable thanks to mechanisms of accumulation without dispossession. Yet today, economic growth is increasingly powered by rural land expropriation, a form of accumulation by dispossession. At the center of this transformation is China's construction industry, where enterprises require both low-cost labor and low-cost land for profitability. This contribution reveals particular outcomes at this nexus in Lan-ding Village, a construction labor-sending site undergoing land expropriation for urban construction. There, dispossession produces a new structure of class stratification. Rural labor brokers survive dispossession by shifting recruitment to other sites where laborers hold land and are better able to withstand precarious employment. Some laborers can cling to land plots in other villages. Other laborers continue to work construction but take on debts to survive as they await wages. These three class trajectories, specific to Chinese construction, reflect the new character of Chinese accumulation, driven by dual mechanisms of land expropriation and low-cost, labor-intensive production.

Dispossession in China

Harvey describes land expropriation as a mechanism of accumulation by dispossession, involving 'the commodification and privatization of land and the forceful expulsion of peasant populations ... [to facilitate] the monetization of exchange and taxation ... of land' (Harvey 2003, 145). This is an update of Marx's concept of primitive accumulation, which suggests that dispossession leads to the 'historical separation of producers from the means of production' (Marx 1976, 875). Marx originally assumed that primitive accumulation jumpstarts capital accumulation by creating a formally free labor market, in which laborers rely solely on the sale of labor for livelihood. But Arrighi offers a counterpoint, arguing that labor markets can sustain growth without dispossession, by retaining a non-market periphery where laborers continue to draw subsistence from landholdings (Arrighi 2007, 364). Arrighi characterizes China's current migrant labor regime as a prime example of accumulation *without* dispossession.

In China's migrant labor regime, rural laborers withstand low-waged employment in cities, while their families farm for partial subsistence in villages. This arrangement is generated through state manipulation of the hukou system, a bureaucratic registrar which since 1952 has assigned and restricted access to social provisions to local residential status registered upon birth or marriage. Under socialism, this system directly perpetuated socio-economic inequality, by guaranteeing urban residents full employment and heritable housing while relegating rural residents to agricultural labor on collective farms (Guang 2001). After socialism, the Chinese state gradually yielded employment to market mechanisms, but continued to administer public goods access – schools, health care and welfare – via fiscally decentralized

local governments, well-funded in urban regions but so underfunded in rural regions that residents, in lieu of unemployment benefits or pensions, are expected to farm for subsistence during unemployment and retirement (Guang 2001, 476; Solinger 1999). Since 1981, use rights to rural land plots have remained attached to rural hukou in order to maintain the viability of a rural social safety net that suffers from perennially low funding.

Today, local governments recover from widespread fiscal deficits by drawing revenues from land expropriation, making dispossession a growing driver of capital accumulation. But enterprises continue to utilize low-cost rural labor, a product of accumulation without dispossession. In today's Chinese economy, dual mechanisms of accumulation both by dispossession and without dispossession are ongoing. In construction, this duality is rendered particularly visible: enterprises build on expropriated rural land using low-cost rural labor.

The consequences of this duality are as follows. Chinese construction workers withstand low wages and employment arrangements that provide wages only at the end of each contract year, by farming their land plots in villages. After they lose this land to urban construction, workers face new costs of housing and food in townships. Because the construction wage does not meet these costs, those who continue to work construction fall into cycles of debt. Others secure informal sector work or retain ties to land elsewhere in order to continue subsidizing their wages in cities. In the meantime, construction labor brokers, local middlemen who traditionally recruit local villagers, began to shift recruitment to other villages where laborers' families can still rely on land plots for subsistence. Thus, as China's current urban construction boom terminates land rights among rural laborers, it fails to create new jobs for them. A new class structure, differentiating rural residents by their different strategies for survival and subsistence without land, emerges.² As it does, it reveals the hidden basis for the unusually low-cost character of Chinese labor, embedded in an economy that outsources costs of workforce maintenance to the countryside.

China's wave of rural land expropriation

In China's current economic landscape, urban construction occupies a particularly dynamic market nexus, fueled by an ample supply of land and labor, met with a healthy demand for real estate among a ballooning Chinese middle class. Since 1979, the Chinese gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate has closely paralleled the rate at which rural land is expropriated for urban construction (Cai 2012). Moreover, rural land expropriation is propelled by local governments recovering from a nation-wide state fiscal crisis, with deficits totaling 1 trillion RMB, an amount equivalent to 8.3 percent of China's total GDP (Ong 2012, 381).³ Because rural land expropriation generates state revenues, both through land-backed mortgages (yielding credit channeled to local governments through the false cover of 'local financing platforms') and through land-use contract sales (yielding profits channeled to local governments via land transfer fees),⁴ state officials have expropriated

²I follow Gillian Hart's (2007) argument that class formation is affected by the political systems like citizenship, which serve as the basis for economic classes. In China, the incorporation of rural laborers into urban citizenship changes their rights to land and therefore their economic basis as a class.

³The current price of USD 1 in Chinese RMB is 6.2276. These figures are from 2003, before the acceleration of rural land expropriation.

⁴Provinces and prefecture-level cities generally receive 20 percent of total land transfer fees; county-level governments receive 30 percent and township shares of fees, negotiated by county-level governments, are usually squeezed down to 5–10 percent of the total (Hsing 2010, 158).

land for urban construction at accelerated rates. Since 2006, vast increases to the rate of land expropriation have been authorized through the ‘building a new socialist countryside’ campaign (NSCC), which widens the range of developmental projects for which collectively owned rural land can be legally expropriated (He 2010; Zhou 2014). In 2009, 210,000 mu of arable land in Hebei Province, directly encircling Beijing, was converted for urban construction, far exceeding the Beijing Ministry of Land Management’s (BMLM) usual provincial quota of 170,000 mu in annual rural–urban land conversions (He 2010).

Urban construction, however, is excluded, per central state law, from formal credit from state-backed banks (Pun and Lu 2010; Lu and Fox 2001). Therefore, property developers and construction enterprises have created a complex subcontracting system which allows them to offload costs of labor and materials onto contractors, then pay these costs later, after properties have been sold. Developers pay for land-use contracts with past earnings from previous property sales. Enterprises absorb materials costs, then enlist a long chain of labor contractors and rural intermediaries to employ teams of rural laborers; none of these parties is paid until year-end when earnings from project sales trickle down. An industry-wide norm of delayed wage payment allows enterprises to build quickly and sell during price peaks in the real estate market (Figure 1).

In many regions where rural land is expropriated for redevelopment, state law now requires the building of ‘new socialist townships’, where dispossessed residents can be rehabilitated. In these townships, local governments must meet required parameters for evictee rehabilitation and public works projects (Ahlers and Schubert 2009), but can channel remaining resources toward real estate, hotel and commercial development. Evictee rehabilitation includes the option of ‘conversion from agricultural to urban residency’ (*nong zhuan ju*), a change in hukou status that nullifies land rights and replaces it with eligibility for welfare support. As compensation for lost land, county governments pay residents one-time monetary payments in amounts determined by the land-use. Then, per ‘new socialist township’ guidelines, they offer them state-subsidized public

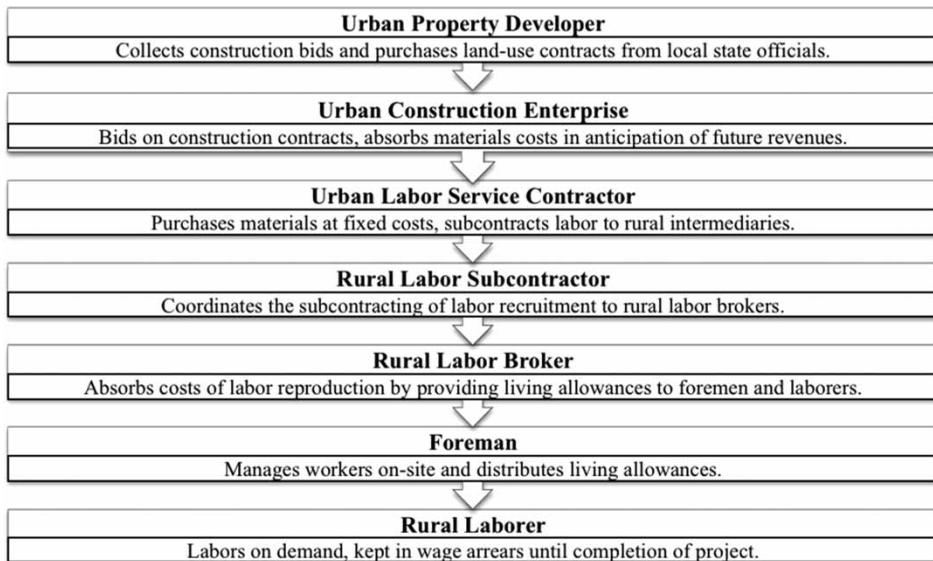


Figure 1. Construction subcontracting structure (adapted from Pun and Lu 2010, 148).

housing, available for purchase at rates ranging from 70,000 RMB to 120,000 RMB per unit.

Site and methods

I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in New Land Township,⁵ a designated new socialist township in Sichuan Province, one of China's two dominant land-sending provinces. New Land Township was built on land formerly belonging to residents of Lan-ding Village. New Land Township, formerly Lan-ding Village, lies within the jurisdiction of Anfeng County, a rural county located on the southern edge of Chongqing City, China's third most populous municipality.

Anfeng County suffered fiscal deficits since the mid-1990s. The county's peri-urban location subjected it to unsuccessful competition with its neighboring, higher-priority urban districts for central state subsidies. Furthermore, Anfeng developed little rural industry of its own, since much of its territory is rocky and mountainous. Today, however, the county is recovering from its debts by capitalizing on its proximity to Chongqing by developing its real estate and tourism sectors.

This developmental landscape forced Lan-ding villagers into labor migration, beginning in the 1980s. Two labor brokers, Boss Bo and Boss Zeng, began bringing villagers to Chongqing to work construction. They coordinated employment arrangements with construction subcontractors, then expanded their recruitment to encompass several villages near Lan-ding, including Fa-ming Village, 500 km away. In 2011, nearly 300 households were registered to Lan-ding Village, and nearly 80 percent of them had members who were presently or formerly engaged in construction work. Many households also retained members, mainly women, the elderly and the unemployed, who engaged in subsistence-oriented rice, wheat and pig farming in the village.

This paper is based on extensive and circuitous fieldwork. In 2007, I spent 3 months following Boss Bo and Boss Zeng as they managed one of their construction sites in Beijing.⁶ In 2009, I spent 2 months accompanying another construction worker in his village home. Finally from May 2010 to November 2011, I rented a room in Boss Bo's household in Lan-ding Village and in his brother-in-law's household in Fa-ming Village. This co-habitation arrangement allowed me to closely observe household economies and changing dynamics of labor brokerage.⁷

What follows is organized in three sections. The first describes labor brokerage before dispossession, the second describes the process of dispossession and the last analyzes outcomes of dispossession. In this last section, I present post-dispossession trajectories of 12 Lan-ding residents, selected to maximize variation in class, livelihood strategies, gender and age. These trajectories adhere to three dominant outcomes of dispossession. In one, labor brokers and their kin reinvest earnings from labor recruitment in the township's growing informal sector, and maintain livelihoods by opening small businesses. In the second, a semi-proletarianized class continues to retain ties to land elsewhere and seek construction or factory work. In the third, a fully proletarianized class continues to seek

⁵All names of people and sub-municipal places are pseudonyms.

⁶I conducted this fieldwork alongside Qi Xin, statistician and ethnographer at Beijing's Capital University of Economics and Business. Qi Xin then helped me carry out later stages of fieldwork by maintaining long-term ties with construction workers and relaying to them my requests to visit their village homes.

⁷Fieldwork was conducted in Mandarin Chinese and Sichuan dialect.



Figure 2. Map of New Land Township.

construction work, but falls into debt trying to manage new costs of housing and food in New Land Township (Figure 2).

Before dispossession

Beginning in 1983, Boss Bo and Boss Zeng began working construction. They cultivated relations with several construction subcontractors in Chongqing, and offered their services as middlemen, returning to Lan-ding every year with news of how many workers were needed by these subcontractors, and at which sites, starting when. Their promotion to labor brokerage was difficult. In order to secure regular brokerage arrangements with subcontractors, Bo and Zeng had to provide the villagers with upfront cash for travel costs and weekly living allowances.⁸ Subcontractors provided dormitories for housing, and for meals, Bo, Zeng and the villagers could eat in canteens paid for by the subcontractors, though these

⁸In 2011, these living allowances averaged 100 RMB provided every 10 days to each laborer.

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meal costs would later be deducted from their pay. Wages were paid at the end of the year, but not until after a long line of deductions: first subcontractors took their cut, then from what was left, brokers paid laborers their wages, minus the upfront cash laborers had received for travel costs and living allowances. These costs brokers pocketed themselves, as reimbursement for their upfront investment. Bo and Zeng spent many early years of brokerage in arrears or just breaking even, so high were these upfront costs. Moreover, they could not stiff their laborers, who would not return to staff their contracts in successive years if they did not receive their promised wages.

By the 2000s, Bo and Zeng had, between them, nearly 70 Lan-ding laborers working their contracts at construction sites in Chongqing, Beijing and Xi'an. They managed these laborers by hiring foremen who managed day-to-day production, while they spent their time currying favor with new subcontractors and scouting new sites of labor recruitment. Only when laborers threatened to quit did they intervene on site. In 2007, when a worker in Beijing threatened to quit a contract, Boss Zeng came around in his 12-year-old Volkswagen Jetta. The man, Wang Jia, had not shown up for work for several days, and Zeng found him lying on his assigned bunk in the dormitory. At mealtime, Wang refused to take his metal bowl and spoon to the canteen line – 'I'm not eating the boss's food today,' he said quietly – and so Boss Zeng bought him lunch at a nearby restaurant. When Wang broached the topic of his employment, Zeng offered to increase Wang's wages from 90 RMB to 100 RMB daily, and to reimburse him for a week-long visit home during autumn harvest.

Zeng also told Wang he was considering promoting him to a position as foreman in the following year. Wang Jia agreed to stay. As he later admitted, the possibility of upward advancement was the sole reason he worked construction. If he could only get a job as a broker, he often mused during off-hours, he might be able to afford to enroll his son in a migrant school in Chongqing.⁹ The promotion to foreman would not come for several more years, but Wang stuck around until it did.

Truthfully, even without the promise of promotion, Wang would probably not have quit. Per industry-wide norm, brokers rarely paid owed back-wages to laborers who quit contracts. Furthermore, Wang feared that he would lose job opportunities if he ran afoul of Boss Zeng. He often bragged about the many brokers he knew, sighing pointedly after fielding cell phone calls from other brokers he claimed were looking to poach him from his current contract. Still, many of these brokers, he knew, could employ a worker like him and then abscond with his wages without facing sanction. Only Boss Zeng, who relied on him for long-term employment, would likely not stiff him on year-end wages.

Construction was not the only job opportunity available to Lan-ding villagers, but it provided a primary source of livelihood for most households. Despite the high frequency of wage arrears, construction offered wages higher than those available in factory or service jobs: in 2011, the average monthly wage in construction work was 2300 RMB, while the average monthly wage in manufacturing and service work was 1250 RMB and 1000 RMB, respectively. Also, hiring in construction, unlike the manufacturing and service sectors, imposed few age limits. Whereas women working factories or service jobs were often laid off after they reached middle age, men working in construction could continue until their fifties or sixties. As a result, most households eventually sent

⁹Though welfare access remains attached to place of hukou registration, rural migrants now have access, in most cities, to migrant schools and health care. Prices for these public goods in cities remain prohibitively high. See Kwong (2011); Li and Wu (2010); Zhang (2012).

at least one member into construction work, while other working-age adults engaged in other forms of employment (Jacka 2012; Fan 2011).¹⁰ Meanwhile, children, the elderly and the unemployed usually planted a crop back in the village (Fan and Wang 2008; Fan, Sun, and Zheng 2011). This crop allowed them to subsist through the year. It also sustained household members returning to the village during the Lunar New Year, when work-sites in cities shut down. In other households, left-behind villagers raised pigs to sell at township markets, yielding small profits that could insulate households from risks of wage arrears. Finally, some households abstained from agricultural activity, leaving their village land fallow. Still, these usually lent their land to kin and neighbors to farm, and received a portion of the crop when they returned to the village to seek work.

The possibility of upward promotion kept laborers loyal to Bo and Zeng as their employers. Most of them returned to the village at Lunar New Year in order to secure work for the following year. This arrangement was beneficial to brokers, who could draw on a ready supply of laborers seeking protection from wage arrears in Lan-ding Village. Most importantly, it significantly reduced labor and recruitment costs for subcontractors (Qi 2011). In a typical year, a laborer paid a 2300 RMB monthly wage received, minus meal costs and living allowance deductions, only 14,000 RMB for 10 months of work. Brokers collected reimbursement for these living allowance and travel costs, which totaled approximately 9000 RMB for each laborer recruited, and also paid a small recruitment fee, about 1000 per laborer. A broker recruiting a team of 15 villagers, therefore, netted annual earnings of only 15,000 RMB, only marginally more than the average laborer.¹¹ It is for this reason that brokers must expand recruitment activities, managing several teams at once, in order to remain profitable. For example, Boss Bo managed four teams of laborers scattered across three cities at the height of his career; in 2010, he earned 60,000 RMB, after reimbursement for upfront costs.

In this system, brokers, laborers and their families all share costs of workforce maintenance – costs incurred by laborers and families for housing and food during periods of employment. Brokers pay travel and living expenses for the villagers they recruit, but later deduct these expenses from villagers' pay. Meals are provided by subcontractors, but later charged to villagers via wage deductions. Meanwhile, laborers' families survive by farming village land, which obviates food and housing costs for laborers' families. The 14,000-RMB annual salary of the average laborer, therefore, is not calibrated to cover the living costs of laborers' families.¹² Paid only after labor is delivered, it allows enterprises to begin construction whether or not they have the funds to cover incurred labor costs. Frequently, when property sales fail to pan out as expected, subcontractors simply do not pay up, and brokers and laborers alike return home empty-handed (Qi 2011).

During dispossession

In 2009, the Anfeng County government rolled out a plan centered on the profitable conversion of much of its jurisdictional rural land for urban construction. Such land conversions are regulated by the nation-level Beijing Ministry of Land Management, which

¹⁰Nationwide, 30 percent of all rural laborers in China today are employed in construction (Shen 2007).

¹¹This data was collected by Qi Xin.

¹²I learned this fact from reading Qi Xin (2011)'s magisterial survey and ethnography of Chinese construction workers, *Qianxin yu Taixin* [Wage arrears].

imposes upper limits on the amount of arable land that can be diverted toward urban construction each year. Each province receives an annual quota of arable land which must be preserved for agricultural use in order to maintain national food security.

To skirt these upper limits, officials planned to enclose large swaths of land for agricultural use or environmental protection, which would leave Anfeng's urban construction land quota untouched. Only in designated 'new socialist' townships, where real estate development was to be concentrated, would land enclosures be explicitly registered for urban construction use. Agricultural and environmental land enclosures would be used for agribusiness development and forest park plans, and forest parks, for aesthetic reasons, would be strategically located near urban construction land, to boost the values of nearby real estate property. As scholars have documented, land recorded in BMLM books as arable-use land can sometimes later be sub-legally diverted to real estate and commercial use, long after the annual arable land quota is met (Hsing 2010).¹³

Per central state law, local governments could forcibly expropriate land from rural residents,¹⁴ but had to compensate them for their lost plots. However, compensation rates for lost land varied greatly, based on the central state subsidies that reimbursed local governments for these payouts. When rural land was expropriated for urban construction, local governments received funds from the provincial Ministry of Land Management (MLM) to fund compensation to villagers. Thus, in Anfeng, villagers received compensation monies of 80,000 RMB per mu if they inhabited land earmarked for urban construction. When rural land was expropriated for agricultural enclosure, local governments received 'matched funds' subsidies from the central government, per parameters of the 'building a new socialist countryside' campaign.¹⁵ In Anfeng, villagers received 10,900 RMB per mu if they inhabited land earmarked for agricultural enclosure. When rural land was expropriated for environmental enclosure, however, local governments did not receive any funds for villager compensation.¹⁶ In Anfeng, villagers received only 240 RMB per mu annually if they inhabited environmentally protected land.

When New Land Township began to undergo construction in 2010, the township's Communist Party Secretary Zhang began working with Anfeng officials to implement a two-stage evictions process. In the first phase, villagers were told that if their land plots had been earmarked for enclosure, they could receive their compensation payments. After relinquishing land, villagers could then relocate to New Land Township, where they could use their land compensation money to put down payments on state-subsidized apartment units.

When he heard the news, Boss Zeng quickly dispatched one of his brothers to the Anfeng MLM to collect his compensation. At the Anfeng MLM, officials looked up the five land plots registered to his household. Two of Zeng's five plots were earmarked for agricultural enclosure. The remaining three had been earmarked for environmental protection via the Sloping Land Conversion Program (*tui geng huanlin huancao*). Therefore, Boss

¹³You-tien Hsing documents several mechanisms for this sub-legal land-redevelopment. One is the sale of sub-legal county-authorized land contracts to developers (*xiangchan quan*; Hsing 2010, 175).

¹⁴This involved a transfer of land ownership rights from the village collectives to the state. As ownership rights are consolidated by the state, household land-use rights, granted by village collectives, are terminated.

¹⁵See Ahlers and Schubert (2009, 2013) for more on this program.

¹⁶Environmental land enclosures are administered through the central state's 'Open Up the West' campaign, which, unlike the NSCC, does not provide matched funds subsidies for land compensation (Yeh 2005).

Zeng received 21,800 RMB for relinquishing his two agricultural plots, plus a receipt promising him 240 RMB annually for the remaining three plots.

In the second phase of changes, officials offered villagers the option of transferring their rural, agricultural hukou registration to urban, non-agricultural status.¹⁷ This would make residents immediately eligible for access to township schools, health care and private pension funds. It would also terminate their rights to rural land, but only after a grace period of 3 years. After this 3-year period, residents would lose their land and receive their compensation payments. This option was offered as a compromise to villagers who could not immediately give up their land for compensation, as Boss Zeng did. Many laborers, unsure of their next livelihood source, chose to transfer their hukou in order to buy 3 years of time for deliberation.¹⁸

Sometimes, residents who relinquished their land for compensation chose not to transfer to urban hukou.¹⁹ Boss Zeng, for example, kept his rural hukou despite giving up his rural land. On the other hand, many elderly farmers knew that the Anfeng County's primary welfare program for low-income social insurance (*dibao*) had in previous years automatically provided monthly subsidies to all urban residents above the age of 60, and they submitted their paperwork for urban hukou in order to qualify for welfare support. In previous years, the *dibao* welfare subsidy had been set at county-wide rate of 240 yuan per month, enough to ease burdens on adult children as the elderly became infirm and unable to farm. However, after these elders submitted the required paperwork, and collected an incentive payment of 500 RMB per hukou-transferring household member offered in New Land Township, they learned that they had signed away household-wide rights to land.

More unpleasant surprises were in store for those who signed away their rural hukou. Even after elderly farmers signed away their land rights, they found themselves ineligible for the *dibao* program, which narrowed its requirements to exclude any applicant registered to a household that included wage-earning adult members. In the end, of Landing's 300 households, only 18 finally qualified for welfare subsidies.

Meanwhile, state-subsidized public housing sold out by August 2011, and no plans were made for additional housing provisions. In the end, only those who could quickly raise funds to cover down payments were guaranteed subsidized public housing. Usually these were brokers like Boss Zeng. Many laborers, who had opted to transfer their hukou and delay land loss and land compensation for 3 years, missed out on public housing. After subsidized public housing units ran out, these residents were instructed to consider purchasing market-value commodity housing, priced at 400,000 RMB and above, with prices rapidly ascending as a result of nearby real estate speculation. Only the most wealthy brokers, and lucky villagers who received the largest land compensation payments, could afford to purchase market-value commodity housing. The rest had to find other informal arrangements.

After dispossession

Before evictions, access to land plots 'hid' costs of food and housing that would otherwise be incurred by villagers. Even those villagers who worked in cities every year still relied on

¹⁷Since 1952, the hukou registrar has recorded China's population according to their residential (rural or urban) and occupational (agricultural or non-agricultural) status, creating four categories of citizenship: urban non-agricultural (urban workers), urban agricultural (suburban peasants), rural non-agricultural (workers in state or collective enterprises in rural areas) and rural agricultural (rural peasants).

¹⁸See Chuang (2014) for more on villagers' confusion resulting from this process.

¹⁹Hsing also reports the same: in many demolished villages, some evictees relocate to townships yet insist on retaining their agricultural residency and land rights (Hsing 2010, 195).

Table 1. Post-dispossession class stratification.

Brokers and entrepreneurs	Semi-proletarianized laborers	Full proletariat
(Those surviving via informal sector activity)	(Those surviving via rural-rural relocation)	(Those attempting to survive without land)
Boss Bo (male), age 52, labor broker	[†] Liu Jing (female), age 53, farmer	Deng Guang (male), age 33, construction worker
Boss Zeng (male), age 49, labor broker	[†] Zhou Kai (male), age 53, construction worker	*Yuan Feng (male), age 55, construction worker
Manager Wu (female), age 45, auto repair shop owner	[‡] Wu Minwu (male), age 49, farmer	*Yuan Gui (male), age 57, construction worker
Liu Yi (male), age 33, subcontracted truck driver	[‡] Zhou Zisu (female), age 52, factory worker	Wang Sanmu (male), age 55, construction worker

Note: Identical symbols next to names indicate respondents are registered to the same household, whether by birth or marriage.

rural land plots for sustenance and housing during the end-of-year period when they returned to Landing Village to seek new jobs. After evictions, residents no longer had land to provide for food and housing, so these became cash expenses. However, incoming wages remained the same. In what follows, I document how three groups of Lan-ding Villagers dealt with this transition.

The first group of villagers consisted of labor brokers and entrepreneurs. These individuals weathered land loss by engaging in an informal, transactional economy emerging in urbanizing townships. Some diverted labor recruitment to new sites, and others opened small businesses catering to the township's new urban population. The second group consisted of semi-proletarianized laborers, who weathered the transition by reproducing their old conditions of livelihood. They did this by relocating to the households of extended kin relations who still held land plots in other villages. The third group consisted of landless, fully proletarianized laborers who continued seeking construction work despite difficulties withstanding delayed wage payment (Table 1).

Brokers and entrepreneurs

Boss Bo and Boss Zeng first felt the repercussions of eviction through their laborers. In 2011, coinciding with the first phase of evictions back in Lan-ding Village, members of Boss Bo's teams began to launch grievances. Some made requests for time off to return home, others requests for loans and advance cash to send back to kin. All stemmed directly from anticipation of land loss and new attempts to acquire subsidized housing in the New Land Township.

But earlier, in 2007, Boss Bo had begun making occasional journeys to Fa-ming Village, 500 km away from Lan-ding. His brother-in-law had relocated there after marrying a Fa-ming woman, and there, Bo found a labor pool where laborers could be paid wage levels less than rates then standard in Lan-ding Village:

[In 2007] I started going to Fa-ming to find workers ... I brought about 10 men from Lan-ding to Fa-ming and then I hired about 20 from Fa-ming. The Lan-ding men, we all earned about 80, 90 RMB per day. Back then that was a lot. But the Fa-ming men, they were satisfied with 20 or 30 RMB.²⁰ I know now that if I ever need to find some men who will work for cheap, I just have to go to Fa-ming.

²⁰These figures denote 2007 wage levels.

So, in 2011, Boss Bo began to select laborers in Fa-ming to replace these Lan-ding laborers. These Fa-ming laborers were cheaper than Lan-ding laborers,²¹ and, importantly, they also still held land plots which allowed them to withstand delayed wage payment without complaint.

Bo's initial attempts to broker Fa-ming labor were met with difficulty. After Boss Bo dispatched a team of laborers, half from Lan-ding and half from Fa-ming, to a construction site in Beijing, the Fa-ming villagers became aware of the considerable wage differential between Fa-ming and Lan-ding laborers. One man even overheard a cell phone conversation between Boss Bo and his wife, and learned of a sizeable mortgage Boss Bo had recently taken on in the purchase of real estate back in New Land Township. This man began a rumor among the other Fa-ming replacements linking Boss Bo's financial situation with their lowered wages:

[I could tell that Boss Bo] had just spent a lot of money in 2011. He was only interested in keeping costs to a minimum He made excuses, he told us we were inexperienced workers and had to work a year before we could get a raise. But actually we found out later he was just shortchanging us because he didn't have the money.

The knowledge emboldened some Fa-ming laborers to shirk work on the construction site. The rumor caught fire rapidly, and soon the entire Fa-ming half of the team began refusing to work, idling in the dormitory during their work shifts to protest their unequal pay arrangements.

Eventually Boss Zeng stepped in to manage the situation. His first task was to fire the rest of the Lan-ding laborers, eliminating any future dissatisfaction stemming from relative wage differentials. To ameliorate the grievances of the Fa-ming laborers, he lent funds to raise their living allowances, allowing them greater spending capacity during the length of their employment. Yet greater living allowances, which were to be later deducted from workers' wages, did not equate to overall wage increases. The Fa-ming scab laborers knew this, but as new migrants they had trouble finding other jobs. Moreover, they had just seen Zeng fire the Lan-ding laborers, an act that reminded them of their ultimate fungibility. They went back to work. Meanwhile, Boss Bo resolved to stop employing Lan-ding labor at all:

I'm through with Lan-ding workers. They were too expensive in the first place, and now they want personal loans on top of everything. If I am short 15 men, it's very easy. I just call a couple guys back in Fa-ming Village and tell them to get on a bus. No problem. Right away they all know where I am.

And so Bo and Zeng managed the difficulties incumbent with opening new channels of labor recruitment. In 2011, the year of the evictions, Boss Bo still earned an income of 50,000 RMB, just 10,000 RMB less than the previous year due to managerial troubles. That same year, he leveraged his earnings to gain entry into Anfeng County's real estate market, taking out a mortgage to purchase a commercially developed (non-public housing) apartment unit priced at 544,000 RMB in a central location where speculative property price increases were highly anticipated.²² Real estate speculation was a lucrative

²¹In Fa-ming, villagers were predominantly employed in the local and booming mining industry during the 1980s. Only after this mining industry crashed in the early 1990s did Fa-ming laborers begin to seek work outside the village. This accounts for their consenting to low wages.

enterprise for those who could afford it. In 2008, Boss Zeng too had purchased an apartment priced at 514,000 RMB; by late 2011 the property's value had grown to 691,752 RMB. In the meantime, he and Boss Bo continued accumulating earnings via labor brokerage.

This expansion of labor recruitment required Bo and Zeng to manage often-tenuous social relationships in new sites of recruitment. Also, they had to maintain relationships with subcontractors in cities, often a costly business. Boss Bo frequently expressed consternation at the high costs of maintaining his social connections with subcontractors:

Last night I [took my subcontractors out] to eat at a hot pot place in Chongqing. I had a headache on the bus all the way over here! I slept maybe only 5 hours last night. And last night! I treated 10 guys to hot pot. Spent 500 RMB in one night! That wasn't even including liquor; another guy bought the liquor. In the city money goes fast. You can say I earn 5000 RMB a month, but it goes very fast, I can only save maybe 1000 or 2000 RMB every month. People like us, we make 50,000, 60,000 RMB in the city every year, but it still goes very fast. We have an apartment in [Anfeng County], and everything needs money. I have to pay 300 RMB a month to keep the place going, for water and garbage pickup, these 'community fees' that the apartment complex requires. That's not even mentioning the loans for buying the place! Money goes fast for us.

By late 2011, Boss Bo still owed 225,000 RMB on his mortgage in Anfeng County. He calculated that he would need to keep brokering labor for 15 additional years to pay down this debt. But at his age of 52 years, Bo worried he might not last that long. Anxious about his ability to pay down the house, he soon found a salve for his worries: when two nephews approached him with a proposal to open a noodle shop in the New Land Township, he agreed. Bo provided a seed loan of 50,000 RMB to the nephews, under the condition that after the noodle shop began to turn a profit, he could begin expecting a regular cut of profits in later years. Should his labor brokerage activities fail or in case he needed to retire early, he could rely on this investment for livelihood.

Similar calculations among brokers became the basis for the emergence of a small class of entrepreneurs. These were kin of brokers, who survived land loss by launching supply stores, restaurants, automotive repair shops and lithium battery replacement shops. They concentrated their activities on the edges of Anfeng or New Land Township, where rents were lower and urban tourists often stopped for meals and repairs. They made back their monthly rents and accumulated earnings. With their profits, many took out high-interest bank loans to acquire state-subsidized housing units. Moreover, they relied all along on close relationships with brokers, who helped them grease the palms of local Party Secretaries and other political figures responsible for procuring their necessary business permits and licenses. Manager Wu, a 45-year-old woman in Lan-ding, who had long worked as an apprentice in an automotive repair shop before land expropriations, received financial sponsorship from her cousin Boss Zeng to cover rent, materials and machinery when she opened her own auto repair shop in 2008. For three consecutive years, her auto shop failed to turn a profit. Boss Zeng, whose assets were heavily leveraged in real estate by then, was tempted to stop paying her rent. But he nevertheless persisted in making her rent payments, though it meant missing payments on his mortgage on his

²²Formal bank-backed housing loans still inflicted usuriously high interest rates on newly urbanized homebuyers like Boss Bo. Low-interest lending and credit lines remain available only to urban hukou-holders who can show proof of formal employment. Brokers like Boss Bo lacked formal employment and were thus ineligible.

own Anfeng high-rise apartment – such was the importance, for aging labor brokers, of maintaining an ownership stake in township businesses.

Usually, only residents with support from brokers were able to gain a foothold into this entrepreneurial economy. In one rare exception, one 33-year-old evictee, Liu Yi, received an unusually large, one-time land compensation payment of 83,500 RMB for his household's land plots, which were expropriated for urban construction. He used a portion of his land compensation payment to purchase a large truck, and with the truck he began peddling services of materials delivery to the very construction subcontractors who were building the highway through his land. After construction was complete, he went on to transport crops for the agribusiness subcontractors operating on the edges of the township.

Even for brokers and entrepreneurs, the loss of land created a considerable hindrance. Bo and Zeng faced heightened challenges of delivering laborers from distant villages like Fa-ming, and they had to quell small grievances from discontented laborers. When Bo had recruited local Lan-ding labor, he had relied on his wife, Deng Qi, to leverage her village relationship with Lan-ding laborers' wives to smooth over disagreements with his laborers. But after he began to hire Fa-ming laborers, he could no longer leverage village ties for labor mediation. Meanwhile, entrepreneurs lacking brokerage ties, like Liu Yi, found it even more difficult to sever their ties to land. With what remained of their land compensation payment after Liu Yi's truck purchase, Liu Yi's parents had paid a down payment for a mortgage on a 90,000-RMB, state-subsidized apartment in the township, sharing the cost with two siblings. But after they dissipated the entirety of their land compensation payment on the down payment, they later found it difficult to keep up with mortgage payments and food costs in the town market.

Semi-proletarianized laborers

Brokers and entrepreneurs bought state-subsidized public housing units in early-round sales, but laborers were usually unable to provide enough liquid capital for down payments on state-subsidized housing. After state-subsidized units ran out, these laborers were priced out of the township housing market. Many instead sought alternate means of rural residence: they turned to distant kin in other villages where land rights remained intact.²³

When Zhou Kai, a construction worker, and his wife Liu Jing learned of their pending eviction, they had different ideas of what was to be done. The couple had spent the last decade dutifully saving Zhou Kai's construction wages, but their savings ran short of a down payment for state-subsidized housing in New Land Township. The couple was told they would lose their land in 3 years, and they began making plans. Zhou Kai's solution was to return to Lan-ding to make an appeal to Boss Bo for a spot on his Chongqing construction team. He knew that working for a non-local broker posed risks of wage arrears, and he preferred to stick with Boss Bo if he could. But Boss Bo rebuffed Zhou's queries for work.

Meanwhile, Liu Jing made plans of her own. Zhou Kai had already begun seeking work with non-local labor brokers, and Liu Jing worried these brokers would stiff him on wages. She knew there was no way he would make enough for a housing down payment. They had to relocate somewhere cheaper. Luckily, Liu Jing had married into Lan-ding Village, years ago, from another village in neighboring Guizhou Province. Upon marriage, she had neglected to re-register her hukou in Lan-ding. Now, Liu Jing was thankful for the oversight,

²³Liu and Murphy (2006) note that these relocations are rare.

which meant she still held rights to a small plot of land in her natal village. Liu Jing bought two one-way train tickets to her natal home, one for herself and one for their daughter. Zhou Kai would be upset about the move, she explained to me, but relocation to her natal home meant they need no longer worry about housing costs, and should he face wage arrears with a non-local broker, the family would still have grain to eat.

Liu Jing's decision to relocate was necessary because urban hukou status in New Land Township provides little assistance to evicted residents seeking rehabilitation. Early on, Liu Jing and Zhou Kai had considered participating in the hukou transfer program. But they decided against it once they realized their land plots had been earmarked only for environmental enclosure, and would yield nearly nothing by way of monetary compensation. With urban hukou, they would face higher housing and food costs, yet still not qualify for welfare support in the township. Many villagers were in the same boat as Liu Jing and Zhou Kai: they could see no benefits to hukou transfer. Still others had already relinquished their rural hukou, but realized, too late, that even with urban hukou they would not qualify for welfare support. Most of the elderly farmers who had mistakenly signed away their land in order to qualify for welfare later found themselves living with the very adult children they had earlier hoped not to burden.

It helped to have kin connections and strong ties outside of the village. Farmer Wu Minwu and his factory worker wife, Zhou Zisu,²⁴ had signed away their rural hukou, and along with it their rural land, before they realized they could not qualify for welfare. Luckily, their eldest son had married a woman from a remote farming village, two provinces away. At the time of their marriage, Wu Minwu and Zhou Zisu were disappointed that their son had consented to relocate to her household, a breach of still-current patriarchal norms. But now the younger couple, who worked in factories, offered to take them in, and they were grateful for his decision. Wu and Zhou moved to their daughter-in-law's household, where they cared for their grandchildren and tended her land.

Fully proletarianized laborers

Laborers who could retain access to land ensured that they could avoid new and rising costs of township housing and food. But laborers unable to access land plots fared far differently. Unlike Zhou Kai, they could not retreat to their rural land plot when work ended. Their families had no way to subsist while they waited for end-of-year wage payments. Furthermore, Bo and Zeng would not employ them. As a result, their search for work grew increasingly desperate.

Land loss therefore initiated trajectories of steep downward mobility. For years, Deng Guang, a 33-year-old construction worker, had worked for his uncle-in-law Boss Bo. But after Bo began recruiting in Fa-ming Village, Deng Guang found himself left out in the cold. Deng next hoped to marry his girlfriend, a young woman from Fa-ming Village who still held land rights there. In early 2011, he proposed to his Fa-ming girlfriend, and she accepted. The marriage was a carefully arranged exchange: Deng would submit a portion of his wage remittances to her farming parents, and in exchange they would provide him with a land plot in Fa-ming Village. In preparation for the marriage, he spent the entirety of his savings from migrant labor – 58,600 RMB in total – to upgrade and refurbish her family house in Fa-ming, where they would reside. Yet just as

²⁴It was rare for an older woman like Zhou Zisu, 52, to continue to find factory jobs. But Zhou Zisu got her factory job through her daughter-in-law, whose wealthy uncle worked as a factory manager.

the house was completed, his betrothed, suddenly commitment-phobic, fled the marriage: she absconded to work in a factory in the south. Her parents, unable to repay Deng Guang's savings, offered to him the option of marrying his ex-fiancee's younger sister; but Deng Guang recoiled at the idea. He returned to Lan-ding Village, where he found his circumstances severely reduced. Now Deng Guang had no land, no savings and no access to a land plot.

Landless and with no other alternative at hand, Deng Guang now turned to wage-labor. He heard word from a middle school friend of an empty contract on a construction site in Inner Mongolia. After making some calls, he decided he could fill that contract by bringing along his brother and their mother, who would work as a team cook at the site, and five other middle-school classmates he would bring along as recruits. An old acquaintance from his working days in Beijing, now a subcontractor, promised each of them a daily wage of 100 RMB, a heated dormitory, daily meals whose cost would not be deducted from their year-end wages, and a weekly living allowance of 90 RMB. But on the eve of their departure, Deng Guang heard a rumor from other Lan-ding migrants stiffed on backwages by that same subcontractor:

That boss, if he comes up short, he just pays everyone less money than agreed on in the beginning. The year the other villagers were there, they were paid 1000 RMB less monthly than what they agreed on in the beginning.

Deng Guang was in the habit of taking such rumors seriously, so he backed out.

The Deng household had already transferred their hukou to urban township status: in 3 years, they would receive a one-time payment totaling 43,600 RMB for their land, some earmarked for agricultural enclosure, some earmarked for environmental protection. The household had no savings of any kind. Now time was running short: it was late March, a full month after the end of the Lunar New Year, and most subcontractors and brokers had already determined their team rosters. Deng knew that before long, the best he could do would be to fill in as a substitute for a fired worker on an existing contract. Luck found him soon enough, though: 1 week later, Deng Guang was back to calling old school-mates to ask for job referrals, and he eventually secured work on a construction site in a nearby township for himself and his brother: a relatively low-paying job, paying 60 RMB per day, but secure, with wages paid by the month.

Deng Guang had the advantage of social capital: through long-time labor migration, he had acquired substantial social connections through which he could seek work. Other laborers with less work experience suffered from a lack of such connections. After Deng Guang and his brother gave up their spots on the Inner Mongolia work team, two elderly farming brothers, Yuan Feng and Yuan Gui, quickly took up the vacated spots, a desperate decision which Deng Guang registered with recognition:

The truth is, the Yuan brothers do not have much experience working. They are usually just doing farm work at home. So they do not have many connections [outside the village]. They must take what they can get. For most of us younger people, we work construction on local jobs every year so we all know each other. It's easier for us to find jobs because we know people and we know their reputations.

The Yuan brothers were farmers facing pending evictions. They too had heard the rumors circulating about the unreliable Mongolian subcontractor, but they could find no other work. They went to Inner Mongolia, and returned, 5 months later, clothes tattered and both considerably aged and thinner. The rumors had been true: the subcontractor had

absconded with most of their wages. Yuan Gui described the year: 'It was too cold. I was sick all the time and freezing. I couldn't take it! No person should have to survive that kind of life'. Together the Yuan brothers brought home 800 RMB.

The brothers had an entrepreneurial older brother-in-law in the New Land Township, and he had purchased a state-subsidized apartment. For a time, they lived with him, but 12 others also lived there, and the one-bedroom apartment soon became cramped. Yuan Gui, dispositionally delicate almost to the point of unease since childhood, grew uncomfortable with his perceived freeloader status under the roof of an openly disapproving brother-in-law. Having quickly exhausted his 400 RMB earnings on township food costs, he returned alone to his former mud-and-brick house in Lan-ding Village, still erect though it had long been marked for demolition. By then, few but the most desperate villagers remained; perhaps it was social isolation or perhaps it was economic destitution that led Yuan Gui to walk off the side of a cliff one evening, but those still remaining in Lan-ding would later describe his death as an accidental event.

The Yuan brothers had foolhardily embarked on long-distance migration, but Wang Sanmu, a 55-year-old bachelor, knew better. He had worked construction for many years, and through connections he secured a job on a construction site near New Land Township under a state-appointed subcontractor. But the job was a short-term, temporary contract: interior renovations on properties after major construction was complete. The other workers on the job, moreover, were local commuters, mainly well-connected new township residents looking for extra side money. Wang was the only laborer there fully dependent on this job for livelihood. When he arrived, he found that the worksite dormitory and cafeteria, which had previously accommodated the migrant workforce carrying out major construction, had been dismantled. Wang found himself in an awkward position: his wages, as usual, were not to be paid until year end, yet his house in Lan-ding had already been demolished, and in the meantime he had no access to food or shelter. In desperation, he approached distant kin and other villagers for small loans to cover the costs of renting a month-by-month bunk bed in a group shelter for migrant workers in Anfeng County. At the end of the year he collected his wages but remained in arrears, still owing 3900 RMB to relatives for his room and board for the year. Debt inflicted a high psychological cost on Wang Sanmu: in mid 2012, still deep in debt, he, like Yuan Gui before him, ended his own life.

Conclusion

Rural land dispossession has become a new mechanism of capital accumulation in the Chinese economy. However, the Chinese economy continues to utilize a migrant labor system, which has enabled enterprises to accumulate capital precisely by *not* dispossessing laborers, but instead enlisting rural communities in absorbing costs of workforce maintenance. Today, accumulation by dispossession, in the form of rural land expropriations, is increasingly eroding the capacity of rural communities, the bedrock of accumulation without dispossession, to absorb workforce maintenance costs.

China's estimated 66 million landless rural laborers have fallen victim to this developmental shift. After leaving their land, rural residents relocate to townships where they face rising housing and food costs. However, no formal employment awaits them there. Therefore, many continue to seek work in construction, where rural labor brokers recruit laborers, and underwrite costs of transportation and living for these laborers during periods of employment. Laborers, in the meantime, must survive until the end of the fiscal year when wages are paid. Without land, however, brokers and laborers alike face new financial

pressures. Brokers must shift recruitment to other sites where laborers hold land and are better able to withstand precarious employment. Some laborers can cling to land plots in other villages. The rest continue to work construction but take on debts to survive as they await wages. These three outcomes form a new structure of class stratification in sites of land dispossession.

This is what full proletarianization looks like in China, where a migrant labor force of exceptionally low-cost character is reproduced by generalized rural land rights in the countryside. Thanks to China's migrant labor system, the cheapest laborer in China is still a land-holding rural laborer. Therefore, landless rural laborers now find it difficult to secure employment. When they do find work, they face wage levels insufficient to meet costs of food and housing. This outcome is a result of the fact that enterprises continue to seek labor and land at the lowest costs possible. Land is cheapest in rural regions on the edges of large municipalities, where rural residents can be cheaply dispossessed. Labor, however, is cheapest in rural regions where residents are not dispossessed, and continue to subsist through farming. The rural dispossessed, less valuable than the land they inhabited and less employable than land-holding laborers elsewhere, increasingly find themselves outside of mechanisms of capital accumulation.

This paper, based on research conducted in 2011, documents preliminary transformations in the Chinese countryside which have only accelerated in recent years, bolstered by a new Xi Jinping-led administration which has begun strongly promoting rapid urbanization. Meanwhile, scholars continue to uncover new mechanisms through which local governments expropriate rural land for profitable urban construction. Meina Cai has found that local governments, seeking to expropriate rural land beyond their arable land quota, often pay exorbitant sums to other governments willing to save them from penalization by preserving their share of arable land (Cai 2012). Emily Yeh has documented the central state's use of 'rural modernization' initiatives to gradually wrest control over rural land from rural residents in Tibet (Yeh 2013). Still, processes of dispossession, proletarianization and class differentiation vary across China. In Guangdong Province, You-tien Hsing has documented villagers retaining collective possession of urbanized land, yielding them with rights to land rents and profits from land sales (Hsing 2010). There, residents have transitioned from rural to urban livelihoods without experiencing the dislocation documented here. As rural land expropriation continues to drive accumulation, more research is needed to uncover further variation in its effects on China's developmental landscape.

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Julia Chuang is a postdoctoral fellow at the Watson Institute for International Studies at Brown University. Email: julia.chuang@gmail.com.