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The China Quarterly / Volume 219 / September 2014, pp 649 - 669

DOI: 10.1017/S030574101400068X, Published online: 18 July 2014

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### How to cite this article:

Julia Chuang (2014). China's Rural Land Politics: Bureaucratic Absorption and the Muting of Rightful Resistance. *The China Quarterly*, 219, pp 649-669 doi:10.1017/S030574101400068X

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# China's Rural Land Politics: Bureaucratic Absorption and the Muting of Rightful Resistance\*

Julia Chuang<sup>†</sup>

## Abstract

In recent years, the Chinese central state has launched the “new socialist countryside” campaign (NSCC), which authorizes the local state expropriation of rural land from farmers, and then incorporates evicted farmers into township residence and urban citizenship. In affected regions, this campaign enables local state officials to enact practices of bureaucratic absorption that undermine potential resistance by bringing resisters into formal channels of bargaining through both juridical and ideological means. Based on ethnographic data from Sichuan province, this article reveals an in situ process of bureaucratic absorption in “Lan-ding village,” where the incorporation of rural residents into urban citizenship enables the depoliticization of resistance to land expropriation, first by changing the citizenship-based grounds on which legitimate claims to land can be made, then by discursively reframing eviction as a normative shift towards modern wage dependence.

**Keywords:** land rights; rightful resistance; *hukou*; urbanization; new socialist countryside campaign

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In recent years, incidents of rural land expropriation have become endemic across China. In peri-urban areas, state officials at the rural county and township levels, squeezed by hard budgetary constraints and cut off from tax revenues since the abolition of the rural household tax in 2006, have increasingly turned towards profitable real estate and agribusiness development as a source of revenue.<sup>1</sup> The first step in this process is the wholesale eviction of rural farmers from household farming plots. However, instead of generating widespread resistance, these evictions have been sanctioned under the central state's recent “constructing a new

\* The author acknowledges funding support from the Social Science Research Council, the Wenner-Gren Foundation, and the Bucerius Foundation for Migration Studies. She owes special thanks to Michael Burawoy for guidance and comments on earlier drafts. She also thanks John Lie, Michael Levien, Albert Wu, Ching Kwan Lee, members of the 2012–2013 Haas Junior Scholars Program, and two anonymous reviewers for comments.

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<sup>1</sup> Hsing 2010.

socialist countryside” campaign (*shehuizhuyi xin nongcun jianshe* 社会主义新农村建设) (hereafter NSCC).

The NSCC has recast land expropriation as a condition of “rural–urban integration” (*chengxiang yitihua* 城乡一体化). The concept of rural–urban integration, first introduced in the Chinese State Council’s 11th Five-Year Plan in 2006, has since pervaded central state rhetoric, purporting to “let rural farmers upstairs” (*rang nongmin shanglou* 让农民上楼) by incorporating them into urban citizenship and township residence.<sup>2</sup> After evicting rural residents and resettling them in townships, officials convert rural land from collective to state ownership, then resell land-use contracts to developers via public auction.

To date, fifty million rural people have been displaced from their farming plots, and each year three to four million more lose access to farmland owing to local state land deals.<sup>3</sup> Since 2005, land loss has become the leading cause of protest in rural China.<sup>4</sup> Scholars increasingly look to rising rates of land expropriation as a potential fault line for future social and political upheaval.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, by withdrawing the guarantee of universal rural land-use rights, an entitlement once attached to rural residence and agricultural household registration (*hukou* 户口) status, land expropriation fundamentally alters the foundation of the rural political economy.

In 2006, Kevin O’Brien and Lianjiang Li, responding to the rising number of protests in the Chinese countryside, identified the emergence of “rightful resistance,” a strategy used by the aggrieved which exploits gaps between central state rights rhetoric and local state implementation to demand redress for unfulfilled rights.<sup>6</sup> In 2011, when evicted farmers in Wukan 乌坎 village in Guangdong province publicized the illegality of land sales orchestrated by township officials without central state approval,<sup>7</sup> considerable media attention hinged on their rhetorical framing of land expropriation as “a fundamental breach of contract”<sup>8</sup> between rural people and the state. Moreover, the increasing prominence of “nail-like” households (*dingzi hu* 钉子户) resisting eviction by physically obstructing local state development plans has led some scholars to discern strategic framing and rights-based appeals among resisters subject to land expropriation.<sup>9</sup>

New evidence indicates a gradual muting of rightful resistance. In a 2013 *American Journal of Sociology* article, Ching Kwan Lee and Yong Hong Zhang identify local state strategies of grassroots intervention, concurrent with

2 He 2010; Perry 2011, 41.

3 Hsing 2010, 183; Wang 2007.

4 Yu 2005.

5 Andreas 2012.

6 O’Brien and Li 2006.

7 Jacobs, Andrew. 2011. “Village revolts over inequities of Chinese life,” *New York Times*, 14 December; Buckley, Chris. 2011. “Chinese official says Wukan protest shows rights demands on rise,” *Reuters*, 26 December.

8 Hurst and O’Brien 2002, 351.

9 Hess 2010; Eric 2012.

the ascent of “stability maintenance” (*weiwen* 维稳) on the central state agenda, which increasingly erode the social bases for resistance.<sup>10</sup> Lee and Zhang highlight the role of existing legal bureaucratic institutions in co-opting contention by absorbing the aggrieved into state–society interactions calibrated to supplant talk of rights with negotiations over economic concessions. They identify deliberate practices within various state bureaucracies — the petitioning system, legal arbitration and village elections — which plunge would-be protesters, with full consent, into protracted procedures for formal mediation or litigation that defer their demands and subtly shift them from supplicatory modes to bargaining-based exchanges.

This article, based on an in situ ethnographic account of eviction, provides empirical support for Lee and Zhang’s intervention by documenting the pre-emption of resistance to land expropriation in “Lan-ding village,”<sup>11</sup> Sichuan province, over ten months in 2011. By embedding the process of expropriation in time and space, this ethnography reveals juridical and ideological processes of depoliticization that have been occluded from previous studies of land politics which are reliant largely on interviews and post hoc narrative reconstructions of past events.<sup>12</sup> In the following section, I first discuss bureaucratic absorption as a shift away from rightful resistance, and then outline research methods. I continue with a narration of the local state tactics of bureaucratic absorption in the form of practices of *hukou* incorporation during the clearing of the population from land in Lan-ding village. Processes of expropriation and absorption are presented in chronological fashion in order to convey the gradual production of uncertainty, social division, and finally consent, over time.

### From Rightful Resistance to Bureaucratic Absorption

In their foundational work *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*, Kevin O’Brien and Lianjiang Li describe rightful resistance as a way of seeking redress for collective grievances by drawing on the laws, policies and rhetoric of the central state to “hold the (local) state accountable” for rights and entitlements once promised.<sup>13</sup> As a repertoire of protest, rightful resistance is particularly accessible to those whose entitlements and privileges, once granted by the socialist state, are now being systematically dismantled by market reforms. By calling upon distinct rubrics of “who is what” and therefore “who gets what” to organize claims, aggrieved groups deliberately adopt particular rhetorical idioms in order to establish grounds for entitlement.<sup>14</sup> Laid-off state workers, for example, invoke their betrayal by the state as they mobilize around lost pensions and social welfare

10 Lee and Zhang 2013.

11 Pseudonyms are used throughout for names of places and people.

12 Hsing 2010; Guo 2001; Cai 2003; O’Brien and Li 2006.

13 O’Brien and Li 2006.

14 Lee 2007, 2000; Chen 2008.

benefits.<sup>15</sup> Rural migrant workers, on the other hand, couch their grievances over lost wages around discrimination stemming from their subaltern status in cities.<sup>16</sup>

Particularly in rural land politics, however, state adaptations to a rights-conscious populace are already apparent. In a Hebei Village, You-tien Hsing documents the demobilizing effects of administrative changes in *hukou* status among evicted rural residents. In preparation for planned land enclosures, county and township officials deliberately incentivized, through gifts and financial rewards, voluntary *hukou* transfers from agricultural to non-agricultural status, targeting prominent village leaders in order to initiate widespread compliance. Only after transfers were complete did state officials begin forcibly to expropriate land. Prior *hukou* incorporation delegitimized claims to lost land, an entitlement attached specifically to agricultural *hukou* status, and amplified juridical divisions among evictees, some of whom had already relocated to townships while still holding agricultural *hukou*, while others remained in villages yet held non-agricultural *hukou* status.<sup>17</sup> Such processes can be understood as a form of bureaucratic absorption, which I define as a state strategy of pre-emption characterized by the incorporation of potential resisters into formal channels of membership.<sup>18</sup>

The cunning behind such bureaucratic practices is to shift resisters between juridical categories of “who is what,” thus allowing shrinkage in ideological expectations for “who gets what.” As rural citizenship is terminated as a basis for land rights, issues of public goods distribution are increasingly resolved through market mechanisms rather than state channels.<sup>19</sup> Land rights are replaced by one-time monetary land compensation payments, and subsistence becomes an individual concern to be resolved through market engagement. Evicted residents, for example, are instructed to use their compensation payments to purchase pensions and state-subsidized but commodity-priced housing units. Meanwhile, long-term livelihood issues, like problems of re-employment among evicted farmers, are recast as individual issues. The transformation of “who gets what” from a question of rights to an issue of compensation, moreover, is subsumed under an ideological frame which assumes the desirability of a social order organized according to market principles.

This shift deforms the linear relationship between questions of recognition (“who is what”) and questions of redistribution (“who gets what”) that once activated rightful resistance. While rightful resistance names injustice in its dual form, at once a problem of recognition and redistribution, absorption through

15 Lee 2007, 2000; Hurst and O’Brien 2002; Thireau and Hua 2003; Solinger 2002; Hurst 2008.

16 Lee 2007.

17 Hsing 2010, 195.

18 My definition of bureaucratic absorption is narrower than Lee and Zhang’s, which refers to the consenting incorporation of the aggrieved into semi-legal, bureaucratic institutions, such as petitioning, mediation or legal arbitration, explicitly tasked with resolving social conflicts (Lee and Zhang 2013). As a bureaucratic institution, *hukou* registration has only recently, under the NSCC, functioned as a channel for co-optation.

19 Lee and Zhang 2013; Su and He 2010.

*hukou* incorporation upgrades “who is what” while severely reducing the scope of what they get. It “upgrades” farmers, formerly excluded from the urban welfare regime, into a form of citizenship that is increasingly becoming contractualized as its attendant rights, entitlements and social provisions are being replaced by market exchange.<sup>20</sup> It terminates their right to land only to replace it with an expectation of full wage dependence. Whereas O’Brien and Li once interpreted storefront graffiti declaring: “We are citizens, return us our citizenship rights” (*women shi gongmin, huan wo gongmin quan* 我们是公民, 还我公民权) in a Hebei village as evidence of rural resisters “acting like citizens before they are citizens,”<sup>21</sup> today the state increasingly violates the connection between citizenship and rights, and, through bureaucratic absorption, simultaneously eliminates any unrest this breakage might otherwise generate. The ethnographic account that follows reveals the manner in which this is done. By constructing social divisions and temporal uncertainty, and by committing deception with the deliberate provision of misinformation, local state officials in Lan-ding village gradually, over a period of a year, cleared the resident population from their land and bureaucratically absorbed potential objectors by transforming them, with full consent, into urban citizens and market actors.

## Data and Methods

“Anfeng county” in Sichuan province is a peri-urban locality in inland China. Its location, as a rural county located on the southern edge of China’s third most populous municipality, Chongqing city, has meant that county officials have had to compete with nearby urban prefectures for municipal attention and resources. Throughout the 2000s, Anfeng’s officials were outcompeted in the bid for municipal fiscal support by prefectural officials in neighbouring urban prefectures. However, in 2009, Anfeng’s officials began to adopt NSCC reforms, and by 2011, successful implementation of the NSCC programme had won the county an administrative promotion from rural county to urban prefectural status.

NSCC-authorized land expropriations are the fastest growing form of land expropriation in China, surpassing limits on the rate of rural land conversion set by the Beijing Ministry of Land Management (BMLM). First introduced in the State Council’s 2006 11th Five-Year Plan under a set of comprehensive reforms for rural–urban integration,<sup>22</sup> the NSCC has been expanded to all of China’s 20 provinces and four direct municipalities. Moreover, because the NSCC has been framed as a form of state-led urbanization, the BMLM has allowed NSCC land enclosures to bypass central state limits usually imposed

20 Somers 2008.

21 O’Brien and Li 2006, 117.

22 Perry 2011; Ahlers and Schubert 2009; Day 2008.

on agricultural to non-agricultural land conversions.<sup>23</sup> In some provinces, the rate of NSCC-authorized land expropriation has grown disproportionately. By 2009, the NSCC enabled the state-authorized expropriation of 210,000 *mu* (35,000 acres) of land from rural populations in Hebei province, far exceeding the BMLM's provincial quota of 170,000 *mu* of annual collective-to-state land transfers.<sup>24</sup>

From 2009 to 2011, the NSCC programme authorized Anfeng county and township officials to demolish villages within county jurisdiction and construct consolidated “new countryside” townships, to which displaced villagers were to be relocated. From February to November 2011, I rented a room and cohabited with a soon-to-be-evicted family in “Lan-ding village,” a now-demolished village under the jurisdiction of “New Land township.” New Land township, a designated “new countryside” township, was to absorb displaced residents from the former administrative jurisdictions of eight nearby villages. My accommodation arrangements allowed me to observe ongoing negotiations and interactions between township and county officials and village residents as evictions progressed.

During the period of research, I conducted unstructured interviews with villagers and accompanied them in their daily routines, frequenting common places of congregation such as the village store, the town market and the private homes of various local leaders. In informal village gathering places, I observed and recorded the spread of misinformation among villagers about the evictions to which they would soon be subject. I also attended town meetings where state officials engaged in the “ideological re-education” of residents in order to gain their consent to their own evictions. I made written notes, recorded in real-time in English in a private notebook, during all of these interactions, which I later transcribed into fieldnotes.

In addition, I conducted ten formal interviews with nine township and county-level state officials in various state bureaus. I met with multiple officials from the ministries of Land Management (MLM) and Public Administration (MPA) of Anfeng county on seven separate occasions as eviction procedures and township relocation commenced. I also had two meetings with officials from the MLM in a neighbouring rural county, also undergoing NSCC reforms, in order to confirm the relative representativeness of the reform procedures that I observed in Anfeng county. Finally, I followed the proceedings over two days of government meetings in this neighbouring rural county as they approved the land transfers and building permits for the construction of a new countryside township in their

23 The NSCC bypasses quotas on land expropriation, established by the BMLM to preserve food security, by transferring collective land to state ownership yet preserving its allocation for agricultural use. See Ho 2001; Cartier 2001; Chin 2005.

24 The NSCC transfers affected land from collective to state ownership whilst ostensibly preserving its agricultural use. However, the misappropriation and diversion of NSCC-authorized land enclosures for real estate development, tourism-related construction and other revenue-generating projects is particularly widespread. See He 2010; Hsing 2006; Hsing 2010, 161.

jurisdiction. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese or Sichuan dialect, and all people and places have been given pseudonyms.

### Concessions and *Hukou* Transfer

As is typical among the dispossessed, Lan-ding villagers learned the details of their upcoming eviction in a painfully slow fashion. In August 2010, farmers halted work in the fields to take note of the arrival of land surveyors, dispatched by county-level officials, in the village. Villagers interpreted their presence in various ways: some welcomed the surveyors' arrival as a sign of a pending windfall; others speculated that the entire resident population would be reissued replacement land plots in another village. Few could have guessed that within two years all would be summarily evicted.

In Lan-ding village, county and township officials implemented a phase-by-phase eviction process, carried out in three stages between 2010 and 2011. In the first phase, officials offered monetary incentives to farmers willing to relinquish their land, generating a new and inflated awareness of land as an asset for exchange. In March 2011, two township officials and Lan-ding village's Communist Party secretary, Zhang, called a town meeting to announce the commencement of voluntary "land transfers"<sup>25</sup> authorized under the NSCC programme. In exchange for a one-off compensation payment of 10,900 yuan (\$1,816) per *mu*<sup>26</sup> of land, volunteers could choose to relinquish their land-use rights permanently to the state. These volunteers could then relocate to townships, where their compensation could be reinvested as down payments on state-subsidized apartment units.

The offer generated a great deal of speculation and excitement among the Lan-ding villagers. Many, eager to obtain economic concessions, immediately began devising plans to "trade in" their fallow, non-arable and inconveniently located land plots whilst retaining their best plots for continued family farming. One villager, living on steep land located on the ridges of a valley, hoped to relinquish his undesirable land, then squat in a vacated house on a more desirable plot registered to a long-absent migrant worker. Another set of households hoped they could give up their land but also set aside a hidden remaining plot on which to rebuild a new house for joint residence. However, township officials vetoed these requests, explaining that all household land plots must be relinquished in their entirety, and houses summarily demolished, in order to qualify for compensation monies. The news was distressing, as most villagers had seen land transfer as a financial opportunity and had not envisaged vacating their homes. Only several households, mainly those of wealthy entrepreneurs, participated in the first phase of land transfers.

25 The terminology of "land transfers" refers obliquely to the 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.

26 One *mu* is equal to one sixth of an acre.

Villagers assumed that this would be the last they would hear of the land transfers. However, unbeknownst to them, a more insidious mode of expropriation was underway. At the March 2011 town meeting, Secretary Zhang had distributed glossy pamphlets, printed by the Anfeng county public security bureau, advertising voluntary *hukou* transfers to Lan-ding residents. The pamphlets illustrated, on successive pages, sanitized images of newly urbanized lives: an elderly retired farmer seated in a well-lit modern apartment, a young family walking hand-in-hand through well-clipped green hedges. They advertised township welfare eligibility as one of the many benefits of *hukou* transfer, along with access to township schools, health care and private pension funds.

What was implicit but not stated in the *hukou* transfer pamphlets was that transfers of *hukou* changed residents' rights and entitlements as citizens. Since 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).<sup>27</sup> In most regions, rural residents of both non-agricultural and agricultural occupation<sup>28</sup> were given land plots under decollectivization in the early 1980s, in quantities determined by the number of *hukou*-registered members per household, averaging 1.7 *mu* per member.<sup>29</sup> Urban residents, on the other hand, were given access to urban public welfare regimes, locally administered by municipal governments.<sup>30</sup>

*Hukou* transfers, or “conversions from agricultural to urban residency” (*nong zhuan ju* 农转居), allowed residents to transfer first their residential status from rural to urban, then their occupational status from agricultural to non-agricultural. Under nationwide NSCC policy, those who relinquish their land are then entitled to *hukou* transfer, which facilitates their resettlement in nearby townships by providing eligibility for welfare benefits and access to schools and other public services.<sup>31</sup> In Anfeng county, however, municipal officials implemented a *hukou* transfer policy which imposed a condition of land-rights termination after a three-year grace period. For a three-year period after signing papers

27 As Lei Guang (2001, 480) notes, the urban non-agricultural and rural agricultural categories of *hukou* registration are most common, and constitutive of the binary urban/rural divide that scholars and laymen alike associate with Chinese society. See also Cheng, Tiejun, and Selden 1994; Wu 1994.

28 Smallholdings were also allocated to rural residents engaged in non-agricultural employment in state or collective enterprises located in rural regions, on the basis of their rural residence. This was initially done in the early 1980s, when rural town and village enterprises were emerging and some former farmers were in state employment, while other state workers who were formerly rural residents lost their employment and returned to farming.

29 Kelliher 1992; Guang 2001; Cheng, Tiejun, and Selden 1994.

30 Solinger 1999; Chan and Zhang 1999; Wu 1994.

31 In all peri-urban areas, non-agricultural *hukou* transfer is a voluntary option, even for those who have already lost their land. Thus, Hsing (2010, 195) reports that in many demolished villages, some evictees relocate to townships but still insist on retaining their agricultural residency and land rights. Others, however, convert to urban residency but do not want to leave the village.

for non-agricultural *hukou* transfer, participants could continue to reside in village housing plots and cultivate rural land. However, after that time, participants would automatically lose all land-use rights and be evicted from their homes.

This clause made the *hukou* transfer programme an expedient guise in order to gain the unknowing consent of participants to eviction.<sup>32</sup> Most villagers were too risk-averse to consent automatically to the *hukou*-transfer programme. At the beginning, only those villagers who had already secured off-farm employment and township housing participated in the programme. Those with no means of relocation retained their rural *hukou* in the hope that it might later help them to retain their land. For example, elderly farmer Zhou Wenbing, owing to fears over losing his land, declined to participate in the *hukou*-transfer programme. He relied on his land for subsistence, and because none of his four sons had accumulated enough earnings to secure housing in the township for their own families, let alone relocate an evicted father, Zhou Wenbing remained wary of *hukou* transfer:

Some old people, you see they are eager to ... transfer their rural *hukou* to urban *hukou*. But what will they do if they have already changed their *hukou* and then their house gets demolished? They become homeless; who has the money to buy one of those apartments in New Land township?

There were also villagers who relinquished their land and relocated to the township, yet kept their *hukou* registered to their former village residence. One explained his rationale: land policy seemed to “change every year or so, first they announce this rule, then later it will change and they’ll announce another,” and in the event that the NSCC was reversed, he hoped he might reclaim rights to his relinquished land.

### Muting Rightful Resistance

*Hukou* transfer was offered concurrently with the land transfer programme. Yet, because each programme was administered separately by different state bureaux,<sup>33</sup> local officials presented the two as unrelated initiatives. This was a distinct misrepresentation of NSCC policy, which authorized both land and *hukou* transfers in a dual-pronged strategy designed to clear rural land precisely by incorporating its inhabitants into urban citizenship. By the time of a June 2011 township meeting, villagers had wised up to the complementary relationship between the two. When one villager asked Secretary Zhang at the meeting why officials had chosen to implement both land and *hukou* transfers simultaneously, Zhang responded by quoting directly from central state NSCC announcements:

We are building a “new socialist countryside” to rationalize the management of rural land use, to upgrade rural farmers to urban citizenship, and to gradually implement a comprehensive plan for town-and-country development (*chengxiang tongzhou fazhan* 城乡统筹发展).

32 Specific policies and conditions for *nong zhuan ju* vary by municipality.

33 Land transfers were handled by the Anfeng county ministry of land management, while *hukou* transfers were handled by the Anfeng county public security bureau.

By quoting the official policy phrasing of “comprehensive town-and-country development,” Zhang framed both land and population as improvable objects, tied to a common project of modernization. Moreover, by subsuming land and *hukou* policy under the same rubric of improvement and locally mobilizing central state discourse, he closed any discursive space between local policy implementation and central state rhetoric.

After this series of changes, Lan-ding villagers began meeting in private to discuss the meaning of the land and *hukou* transfers. In August 2011, one elderly farmer, Zhou Changkui, cynical of the motives of local state officials, began boycotting Secretary Zhang’s bimonthly township meetings. Instead, he led private “resistance” meetings in his dilapidated brick home to coincide with the township meetings, which he believed to be platforms for propaganda and occasions for township officials to win the consent of residents for demolition and eviction:

The officials are just going to tell everyone to try to move in with their children in the city so they can demolish their houses. That is the purpose of these meetings. They are worried that we rural people will have problems if we stay in the village, because they are forcing everyone to move out. But they do not actually want to solve the problem of rural subsistence. They want us to rely on our children, put the burden on our own families, and move out. This way the farming population will not be a problem they have to use state funds to solve.

Zhou Changkui, an informal village leader during the old days of commune production, often compared the ongoing changes with his memories of the socialist period: “You see how the state has turned its backs on us since the reform? But ... we know what it was like back when the state kept its promises to us.” Attendance at his resistance meetings was strong to being with, as 20 or so residents gathered around his hearth periodically to discuss the implications of, and motives behind, the “new socialist countryside” programme to which they would be soon subject.

At the meetings in Zhou’s house, it soon became clear that none of the attendees had knowledge of the NSCC outside of what the township officials had told them. In fact, only one village woman, Wang Deihua, whose daughter worked at the Anfeng county MLM, had inside knowledge of what the NSCC entailed. Wang Deihua’s daughter had procured for her a township apartment and pension at special subsidized rates only available to state employees, a fact which she shared proudly with other villagers:

When we all get to the township, you’ll see. There will be very few people who will qualify for welfare aid, and the welfare payments will be ... so small! [My daughter] told me, “Don’t fight over the scraps and leftovers with the rest of those villagers, just wait,” she said. Anyway, my daughters will buy pensions for us anyway, so there is no need to worry about such little money.

But Wang Deihua’s disclosure only increased the resentment among the other villagers. “Let other people fight over the leftovers?” one villager commented later on. “Is she so much better than the rest of us that she doesn’t have to worry about livelihood?” Village life, saturated with misinformation and confusion, had elevated mutual resentments into real social divisions. Rather than pump Wang Deihua for privileged information, villagers brooded over the coming changes in isolation.

Pervasive suspicion over the terms of *hukou* and land transfers was undercut by internal social divisions among residents. Meanwhile, as official NSCC rhetoric fused together central and local state objectives in a common project of comprehensive modernization, scattered expressions of discontent persisted, but lacked a coherent frame of rightfulness. However, the real change had yet to come. By October 2011, state strategies of bureaucratic absorption had stifled attendance at Zhou Changkui's resistance meetings to such an extent that he ceased to hold them altogether.

### *Juridical divisions*

Until August 2011, all land and *hukou* transfers had been conducted on a voluntary basis. This would soon change. In late August, township officials posted on the wall of a Lan-ding village storefront a long list of households whose houses would be demolished and land-use rights forcibly terminated in September. Secretary Zhang spread the word among the villagers. This marked the beginning of the second phase of evictions; these evictions would all be forcible.

This round of evictions created further division and confusion among villagers as land was expropriated for different purposes and villagers were compensated at different monetary rates.<sup>34</sup> The compensation offered for land confiscated for environmental preservation purposes was at low annual rates.<sup>35</sup> Land deemed subject to degradation via over-cultivation would be requisitioned under the authorization of two environmental protection programmes. The Sloping Land Conversion Programme (*tuigeng huanlin huancao* 退耕还林还草, hereafter SLCP) authorized land to be forcibly "returned" from agricultural cultivation to pastureland or forestland for purposes of environmental preservation.<sup>36</sup> The National Forest Protection Programme (*tianranlin baohu gongcheng* 天然林保护工程, hereafter NFPP) authorized former farmland to be requisitioned for forest preservation.<sup>37</sup> The one-off compensation payment offered for land plots seized for infrastructure development projects such as highway, dam and township construction was much higher in comparison.<sup>38</sup> While those villagers

34 Although the Land Administration Law pegs compensation for land and resettlement to the production value of the land over the previous three years, municipal governments have long paid higher amounts for land within the urban perimeter.

35 Land expropriated for environmental preservation was not transferred to state ownership. Instead, it remained collectively owned. Household land-use contracts were considered nullified for the period that annual compensation payments were issued.

36 Yeh 2005, 2009.

37 Unlike the NSCC, which terminates rural land-use contracts in order to transfer land from collective to state ownership, the SLCP and NFPP merely annul land-use contracts indefinitely, while at the same time preserving the collective ownership of affected land. Affected populations were required to relinquish their land-use contracts indefinitely. Although households losing access to land were compensated with annual payments during the period of suspension, SLCP compensation rates, at 240 yuan (US\$40) per *mu* annually, were miniscule.

38 Land transfers for direct developmental purposes are administered by provincial (rather than county-level), land ministries, and funded by provincial revenues. As a result, the Lan-ding villagers affected by direct land requisitions received lucrative compensation payouts at rates sufficient to cover the

receiving windfall payments for land expropriated for infrastructure development happily accepted their terms and began shopping for apartments in nearby townships and cities, those who lost their land to environmental enclosure remained discontent.

Not long after the list was posted, Secretary Zhang began making personal calls to households, whether or not they were affected by phase-two evictions. His visits had two objectives: first, to offer affected households the option of *hukou* transfer as a way to secure a three-year eviction postponement while they made arrangements for relocation; and second, to offer all households a new monetary incentive of 500 yuan for each household member transferring to non-agricultural *hukou*. This had the effect of pressuring many households unaffected by the eviction notice to give up their land. In this way, Secretary Zhang pushed rural households, one by one, to sign away their agricultural *hukou* status, and along with it their legal grounds for claiming future rights to land and other village collective assets. Once they re-registered their *hukou* under non-agricultural occupation and township residence, residents dissipated their grounds for legitimacy in claiming rights to rural land. In addition, *hukou* transfers gave greater emphasis to the already existing social divisions between evictees with township *hukou* and more resistant holdouts retaining rural *hukou*. These divisions tended to separate villagers by age, as younger residents were often early participants in *hukou* transfer programmes, owing to their greater labour market viability.<sup>39</sup>

*Hukou* transfers thus became a juridical tool facilitating coercive expropriations. Local state officials began to target households as yet unaffected by evictions and encouraged them to consider *hukou* transfer. Secretary Zhang, hinting to unaffected households that they were likely to find their names on an evictions list in the near future, suggested that they might consider signing paperwork allowing them a three-year grace period so that they might “protect” their land rights for a guaranteed three years. When Secretary Zhang suggested to one bachelor farmer and his father that their land, located on a hill, was likely to be confiscated and “returned” to forestland in the near future due to a high risk of landslides, the men were so flustered, and so relieved to hear that they could safely continue using their land for three more years, that they signed away their rural *hukou* on the spot. Only after they had completed the necessary paperwork did they realize they had signed away rights to their land after three years:

They only told me, when I asked, that I could keep farming the land. I did not ask for how long. I thought that it was better not to ask too many questions. I cannot afford to relocate, so I want to avoid drawing attention to my household. Secretary Zhang told me the land was susceptible to landslides but I did not have to relocate yet. I don't know what that means but I collected my money and I went home.

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footnote continued

purchase of non-subsidized commodity housing in the township, at prices ranging from 160,000 yuan (US\$26,666) to 250,000 yuan (US\$41,666).

39 Hsing 2010, 195.

On the other hand, other villagers were insulted by the suggestion that residents could be bought off. Zhou Wenbing, for example, sneered at the cynical notion of offering financial incentives for *hukou* transfer: “They think we village people are too easy to fool. Dangle 500 yuan in front of our faces and we will reach for it.” Finally, many households also retained their rural *hukou* status in an attempt to retain their rural land rights as a form of security. One farmer, upon forced eviction, vacated his land, yet professed his lack of trust in the township welfare regime and kept his rural *hukou* in the hope of one day reclaiming his land: “I will try to keep my rural *hukou* and my rural house. I think nothing has changed. The township welfare provisions are very low, not much higher than those of the village, and this way one day I might be able to make a claim for my land again.”

### *Ideological absorption*

Many evictees voluntarily transferred their *hukou* and vacated their land in exchange for promises of access to township welfare provisions and public infrastructure. In late 2010, officials revealed new plans for the construction of the unified New Land New Countryside Township, which would accommodate the evicted populations of the six villages within New Land township's administrative jurisdiction. State-subsidized commodity housing was under construction, the existing township elementary and middle schools expanded and refurbished, and a street market established. However, commodity housing units, available initially at government-subsidized rates ranging from 70,000 yuan to 120,000 yuan per unit, quickly sold out. Plans for a re-employment centre, where farmers could retrain for non-agricultural occupations and find new job opportunities in the township, soon fell into gridlock after it was discovered that township officials had diverted the allocated funds towards sub-legal luxury real estate development.

Lan-ding villagers arrived in New Land township to find none of the support and infrastructure that officials had promised. As evicted villagers were welcomed as urban citizens and new township residents, they were also urged by officials to purchase commodity housing units, the costs of which far exceeded their land compensation payments. One official spoke of the lack of state support for evictees transitioning from farms to townships as an unfortunate but momentary deprivation in a larger transition towards greater rural–urban equality:

This is the nature of development in China's transitional period ... Sometimes there are disadvantaged groups, like ... farmers or the elderly, who fall through the cracks. At the municipal and township level, we can try to take care of those people. But they must also help themselves in the meantime. Everyone must make sacrifices ... to close the gap between rural and urban societies.

Township fiscal cuts meant that evicted residents were expected to rely on private pension funds rather than on state welfare support. Anfeng county's primary welfare programme for low-income social insurance (*zui di shenghuo baoxian* 最低生活保障, hereafter *dibao*) had in previous years automatically provided monthly

subsidies to all villagers above the age of 60. Yet, at a September 2011 township meeting, county welfare officials introduced a new stipulation disqualifying all those cohabiting with employable adult children:

Age is no longer a sufficient precondition to qualify to receive old-age welfare provisions ... We must select ... recipients on the basis of need – depending on how many of their children support them, how many family members are still capable of earning in cities ... This means ... that you must report ... all children that are listed as household dependents in the *hukou* register. Each person registered to your household must be accounted for. Where are they? What do they earn? You say your son is not a filial son? ... You still must report his occupation and his income. You say you have not seen your son for five years? Your son has not returned home for ten years? You still must report his income.

Many elderly evictees, having transferred to non-agricultural *hukou* and relocated to shared township residence with adult children, found themselves disqualified for welfare eligibility on the basis of being registered to households containing employable adult members.

Initially, some villagers were indignant over the lack of state support. At a meeting where county officials announced the welfare cutbacks, villagers launched invectives at the local officials in attendance. “What money will we use to buy pensions?” one woman asked. “You haven’t fixed our roads or built housing for us, and you want us to spend our money on pensions?” But, the officials did not apologize for the lack of state support. One county-level welfare official stepped forward to explain the cutbacks in *dibao* support as a logistical funding problem. He explained that *dibao* welfare subsidies are funded through provincial expenditures determined on the basis of population census data collected in previous years. During the previous year, the township census had simply failed to take into account the recent increase in the number of township residents, owing largely to the unexpected success of the *hukou*-transfer programme. Hard budget constraints and growing numbers of unanticipated supplicants, he argued, had forced the Anfeng county officials to narrow the low-income social insurance programme’s eligibility requirements.

As bureaucratic measures and explanations dominated the village discourse on township relocation, talk of “subsistence rights” (*shengcun quan* 生存权), otherwise well-documented in protests over redistribution,<sup>40</sup> was gradually effaced from public discourse. Explanations for welfare cutbacks, land expropriation, and the difficulties faced by evictees in the relocation from village to township instead stressed the necessity of transition as a condition of rural modernization. One county-level land official explained expropriation as a simple process of trading in land for money, which residents could then use to buy food and grain rather than growing it themselves:

[Converting farmland to] forestland will prevent landslides. Fallow land is simply a waste of public resources. We are not taking land-use rights from villagers when we request that they return their fallow land to forest state. We simply offer them an annual compensation payment

40 Perry 2008, 43; Lee 2000, 2003, 80; Chen 2000; Hurst and O’Brien 2002; Hurst 2008.

in exchange for their promise not to farm the land. They can use this payment to buy the food and rice they need, instead of growing it themselves.

By prioritizing the “efficient” use of land over the needs of its inhabitants, the official subsumes subsistence as a secondary priority in a larger project of rationalized land use. By suggesting that evictees can simply “use [compensation payments] to buy the food and rice they need instead of growing it themselves,” he recasts the issue of subsistence rights wholly in market terms. As a whole, the comment frames the transition from peasant production to a market-oriented economy as a shift from principles of “subsistence” towards virtues of “efficiency,” and prioritizes the land’s exchange value over its use value precisely by discursively erasing the needs of those who rely on it for subsistence.

Rather than speaking of issues of subsistence, local officials talked instead of “lifestyle” changes as residents moved from village to township. Township officials began holding meetings for “ideological re-education” (*sixiang jiaoyu* 思想教育), which aimed to introduce recalcitrant evictees to the modern conveniences of township life. During these ideological meetings, township officials portrayed the modern township lifestyle as one of self-responsibility, juxtaposed implicitly against the backwardness of land dependence. Secretary Zhang, for example, complained after one township ideological meeting of elderly farmers with intractable ties to land:

Many old farmers are reluctant to give up farming ... some of them relocate to [the township], but they remain backward in their thinking, and try to re-create their old lifestyle, planting vegetables on any available piece of land in town. We ... [must] re-educate them about proper forms of land use.

Another county welfare official took a long-term perspective of the NSCC as a natural transition, “matching” the evolving lifestyle choices of younger, increasingly urbanized villagers:

Of course, some older villagers will not be willing to move. They have lived their entire lives in the villages ... but they are the last generation to farm the land. The younger generations, they are not accustomed to living in the countryside. So, of course, this reform is slow and gradual, but it is designed to complement the natural desires of rural people. As older people become too old to farm, they can move to the towns to rest. And this way, younger migrants who go to work in the city can live in the city as well.

Finally, another New Land township official framed those resisting township relocation as “lazy” subjects unwilling to adapt to the demands of a market economy: “Before the transition, you still saw a lot of younger people stuck in the village. These are the people who have trouble transitioning. Most of them were in the village because they are lazy ... They don’t know how to think, how to find money in the city.”

### Depoliticization and Consent

This ideological shift had a depoliticizing effect on evicted residents, who turned quickly from talk of lost land to discussions of market rates for compensation and housing prices. Both privately and publicly, conversations began to focus disproportionately on monetary rates of land compensation and commodity housing

prices in New Land township as well as other nearby cities. Soon after economic concession rates for relinquished land and demolished houses were announced, many farmers began to discuss housing prices in the township. Chen Yi, an elderly farmer with little experience in wage-labour, became agitated when he heard that his neighbour, Xia Sihua, another elderly farmer, had already registered for demolition.

I heard that a lot of people have already started to register their names to have their houses demolished. The compensation money is 260 yuan per square metre for a brick house to be demolished. So, maybe on average most people get around 20,000 yuan total to demolish their house. At market today, I heard that Xia Sihua has already registered to have his house demolished. He already bought a government-subsidized apartment in New Land town! Someone said the apartments are going fast. There is a lot of competition for them.

Existing analyses of nail households have focused on the shunning of economic concessions as a coherent strategy for resisting eviction,<sup>41</sup> but in New Land township, early surrender of land for money became an advantageous strategy, allowing residents to purchase scarce urban apartments before government subsidies ran out. This strategy favoured younger migrants who had accumulated wages in off-farm employment, leaving bereft those old farmers who relied solely on the land for their livelihoods. When Fu Min, a young entrepreneur, bought an apartment in a nearby city to share with his farming parents, Chen Sifang, an elderly neighbour, asked him how much he had spent on the apartment:

CSF: How much was this apartment when you bought it?

FM: 5,000 yuan per square metre. But the prices have gone up. Have you seen the apartments near the Japanese factory and the mall? Those are 10,000 per square metre, I heard.

CSF: What rate did you get for your land?

FM: I traded in my and my parents' land during the first wave of transfers. So we got the highest rate for the land. We also had another land plot obstructing the highway. So we received a very large compensation payment for that land.

The exchange, taut with tension, is notable more for what it conceals than what it reveals: Fu Min, although asked directly, refrains from specifying the actual amount he received in compensation for the land, and Chen Sifang, acutely aware of their different fates and fortunes, does not press the issue. Visible differences between the eviction outcomes for the early adapters to land requisition and the older farmers reluctant to part with land has created social cleavages between villagers, thereby forestalling further attempts at coordinated resistance.

As processes of land expropriation and *hukou* incorporation continued, villagers, who lost their land at different rates and transferred to urban *hukou* at different times, began to understand subsistence as an individual rather than collective concern. Even incidents of spontaneous eruption, often described as “anger-venting,”<sup>42</sup> were absent. Instead, in the race to maximize land compensation payments and secure housing in nearby townships and cities, many turned entrepreneurial. One young man, Li Bing, used his land compensation money

41 Erie 2012; Hess 2010.

42 Yu 2009.

to buy a large truck, which he used to deliver building supplies and materials to and from various construction sites around the township for a generous fee. A former electrician, Zhou Changwei, supplemented his income by lending his services to private businesses in the township. Nearly all households dispatched selected members, usually men, to engage in migrant labour in coastal cities to support kin left behind in the township. Elderly farmers joined the households of their adult children.

Competition for employment widened existing inequalities between evicted villagers. Many wealthy migrant workers and local entrepreneurs spent their savings as seed capital for small businesses such as motorcycle repair shops and food stands in New Land township. They hired relatives to maintain and run these small businesses, which often generated income supporting their entire clans. Other farmers without such beneficial family connections, however, struggled to find work in the new township. Complaints from those who failed to find stable work were met with blame. Secretary Zhang held up Li Bing and Zhou Changwei as model examples of entrepreneurial and striving individuals, whose “successful” modifications to their livelihoods eased their relocation to New Land township and undermined grievances regarding insufficient state support for relocation.

Farmers who lost their rural homes to demolition but who could not afford township housing often became migrant workers. They worked in cities for the majority of the year and made informal arrangements to live with close relatives during periods of unemployment. One landless migrant, Wang Sanmu, appealed to neighbours and distant kin for a personal loan to help him cover expenses incurred during the transition. As he made his rounds asking for assistance, other villagers began to spread wild rumours about the possible causes for his sudden destitution. One woman suggested that he had spent his savings irresponsibly and immorally while working in the city, and any loans extended to him would be similarly squandered. Wang Sanmu's neighbour Mrs Liu quickly came to his defence: “Mrs Tan spreads bad rumours. Actually, Wang Sanmu is a good person, a very good person. He is very honest and he would never do the things that Mrs Tan says he does. He is a moral person.” Villagers alternated between blame and sympathy for the needy and landless villagers.

Gradually, market woes and subsistence issues had become fully private, not political, concerns. When Yuan Yingui, an elderly bachelor and farmer facing eviction with no employment prospects and no kin willing and able to provide support, threw himself off the edge of a cliff one afternoon in August 2011, many villagers described his death as an accidental fall rather than as a suicide. At his wake, villagers acknowledged Yuan Yingui's reduced economic circumstances. However, rather than attribute his destitution to his eviction and loss of land, they blamed it on his failure to marry many years before: “Years ago, Yuan built a house for a woman he wanted to marry, but she left and married someone else; that is when his troubles started.” Several months later, when Zhou Changkui, the former leader of the early resistance meetings, hanged himself from the rafters of his own home on the eve of its scheduled demolition,

villagers acknowledged that his suicide was a result of land expropriation. But, most villagers were too busy securing their own arrangements for re-employment and relocation to do more than pause and reflect at Old Zhou's wake.

## Discussion

Although specific features of its implementation vary across provinces, the NSCC has, by fundamentally altering the social contract of rural citizenship, removed preconditions for the possibility of rightful resistance to land expropriation. First, by undermining residents' *hukou*-based grounds for land entitlement, and then by discursively reframing citizenship in terms of market exchange, local state officials generated social divisions among evictees, undermined the legitimacy of land as a right, and recast failures to carve new livelihoods as individual woes. This finding challenges O'Brien and Li's suggestion that rural people can call upon a monolithic and universally available notion of citizenship to make legitimate claims to lost land. Instead, it reveals a new state strategy of bureaucratically absorbing potential unrest among rising numbers of landless rural people through economic concessions and *hukou* incorporation.

Bureaucratic absorption, like rightful resistance before it, operates at the boundary of state–society confrontations. There, the muting of rightful resistance via bureaucratic practices indicates a signal shift in state strategy. While O'Brien highlighted the “boundary-spanning” character of rightful resistance, which often exploits a multi-layered state structure to usurp official rhetoric to “make authorities work for them rather than against them,”<sup>43</sup> this article demonstrates the precariousness of power at this state–society boundary, currently being forcefully reclaimed by the state through bureaucratic penetration. As the case of NSCC-authorized land expropriation demonstrates, it is this bureaucratic penetration, rather than closure of the gap between central state rhetoric and local state implementation, that accounts for the muting of rightful resistance.

Practices of bureaucratic absorption have been widely documented in the current Chinese political landscape, spanning labour protests,<sup>44</sup> property disputes<sup>45</sup> and legal arbitration.<sup>46</sup> Xiuying Cheng has documented local state implementation of deliberately protracted legal arbitration processes to demobilize labour protestors in Wuhan.<sup>47</sup> Lee and Zhang have documented the co-optation of village elections to ensure the elevation of protest leaders to formal leadership roles, where they can be bought off with rewards and incentives.<sup>48</sup> In a similar vein, Yang Su and Xin He describe court actions in labour arbitration cases which pursue stability through extraordinary means, utilizing seemingly unlimited “stability maintenance” state

43 O'Brien 2003, 52.

44 Lee and Zhang 2013; Deng and O'Brien 2013; Cheng, Xiuying 2012.

45 Lee and Zhang 2013; Erie 2012; Hess 2010.

46 Lee and Zhang 2013; Lee 2007; Su and He 2010.

47 Cheng, Xiuying 2012.

48 Lee and Zhang 2013.

funds to pay off protestors.<sup>49</sup> However, the long-term effects of bureaucratic absorption remain to be seen. While Lee and Zhang argue that state practices of bureaucratic absorption only superficially contain unrest,<sup>50</sup> my data shows that *hukou*-based bureaucratic absorption ideologically reconfigures the grounds for grievances, thus suppressing the potential for unrest long after eviction.

While existing studies have focused on the bureaucratic institutions like petitioning, mediation or legal arbitration that are explicitly tasked with resolving social conflicts, I have presented citizenship as an additional terrain for bureaucratic absorption, where protestors are demobilized through internal ranking and division even as they are accorded new rights. This finding dispels any notion of *hukou*-based “incorporation” as a straightforward process of inclusion. While conversion from rural to urban *hukou* entitles rural converts to access urban public goods regimes, it does so in fiscally challenged townships where these regimes are becoming increasingly administered through market mechanisms rather than through state channels. This turn, from reliance on the rural land to reliance on commodified public goods in bankrupt townships, creates real crises of subsistence among evicted residents, yet recasts these crises as private woes rather than public grievances.

Finally, I close on an empirical note. This study highlights dynamics of expropriation and co-optation in townships where urbanization is quickly supplanting industrialization as the guiding template for local processes of capital accumulation.<sup>51</sup> As this shift remakes rural farmland into an object of speculative value, townships, plagued by widespread fiscal shortages<sup>52</sup> but still accorded ample political autonomy,<sup>53</sup> have moved to the centre of China's explosive rural land politics.<sup>54</sup> Further research might work towards theorizing changes in a rural Chinese political economy increasingly organized around the valuation of land, the expansion of market ideologies, and the devaluation of subsistence.

**摘要:** 近年来, 中国开展了“社会主义新农村”运动, 有些地方授权当地政府征用农民的土地, 并将失去土地的农民纳入乡镇居住, 成为城镇居民。在这场运动中, 地方官员用政府化解的方法, 通过正规司法渠道和意识形态手段与反对者进行谈判, 以便化解可能的抵抗。在四川以人类学研究方法所收集的资料的基础上, 本文揭示了在兰定村征地过程中, 对征地的反抗是如何通过变农村居民为城镇居民而被非政治化的。首先通过更改居民身份, 取消了农民对土地的合法要求, 然后再把征地说成是向现代的, 依赖工资收入的规范性转变。

**关键词:** 土地权利; 正当反抗; 户口; 城市化; 社会主义新农村运动

49 Su and He 2010.

50 Lee and Zhang 2013.

51 Hsing 2010.

52 Zhou 2012.

53 Hsing 2006.

54 Wen and Zhu 1996.

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