

# Rural China in ruins

The rush to urbanize China's countryside is opening a moral battleground

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**Fig. 1.** A recently renovated building which has been repeatedly damaged by staff from the township's demolition office.

China has officially become a predominantly urban country, with over 50% of the population now registered as urban residents. Urbanization is not only moving at an unprecedented and unparalleled speed, but it is also the most managed process of its kind in human history. The Chinese government manages the building of new cities, regulates the housing of displaced people and controls squatters. Li Keqiang, who is expected to become China's next premier, has suggested that urbanization should be a strategic focus for the future, helping to build an economy less reliant on foreign export and centred on domestic consumption. In combination with economic development, it is intended to 'pull up' the countryside and raise living standards.

Describing urbanization as managed however, masks the conflicts and contradictions involved in a process which is far from smooth. Well-documented ambiguities regarding land tenure and the co-existence of systems of collective tenure for rural areas and state ownership for urban ones, have allowed local governments to expropriate land in the 'public interest' and provide minimal compensation while securing lucrative land deals with outside investors. Indeed, land grabs have been instrumental to China's economic miracle. This has often led to land disputes. Local governments' efforts to open land occupied by hollowed villages for expropriation and to demolish residences, has resulted in widespread discontent. The number of protests in China is said to have reached over 90 thousand per year since 2007. Land disputes form a large portion of these protests, and they have recently spread according to a survey of 1,700 households in six provinces published by Xinhua (China's official News Agency). Though premised on land expropriation for development and investment rather than for urbanization, recent events in the fishing village of Wukan in south China, are a telling example

of the potential severity of conflicts. Protests in Wukan against alleged land grabs by local officials and local corruption, unfolded over several months and escalated further after the police allegedly beat 42-year-old Xue Jinbo (one of the village negotiators) to death.<sup>1</sup>

## Urbanizing western China

As an historically poorer area, the west of China has been the target of on-going efforts at development. These efforts are intended to both unleash the potential of the region and to decrease migration flows towards the richer coastal areas which put a strain on the services and infrastructure of China's megacities. Urbanization forms a crucial part of these efforts.

I have witnessed first-hand what happens to formerly agricultural areas earmarked for urban development. A village in southwest China where I lived in 2004-5 and have visited regularly since, has been radically transformed by infrastructure building and urbanization processes in the past couple of years. The neighbouring township has already been almost completely urbanized and accommodates the administrative district (housing most county government offices) as well as an industrial park where many pre-existing local industries in the county have been moved and new ones opened. A railway line is being built across Mulan township (a pseudonym for the township where I lived), connecting Lanzhou in the northwest with Chongqing in the southwest. A six-lane road built in 2010 cuts the village in two halves, taking a sizable portion of former paddyfields and demanding the demolition of several homes which stood in its way. An additional road is planned for construction this year, requiring the demolition of dozens more homes in this village alone, and occupying most of the village's remaining paddy land which is vital for growing the main staple food: rice. Work on the

road was scheduled to begin in early 2012 but has been temporarily halted by a number of households who refuse to sign resettlement agreements. Residential quarters made of six-storey blocks to resettle those who lost their homes are due to be completed in 2013.

### **Building extensions and waiting for compensation**

Villagers' experiences in this area are typical of the vast number of people currently being asked to abandon their land and resettle in newly-built urban developments to make way for new infrastructure. They provide some insights into how complex the process of relocation can be, and how mixed its effects. While villagers are usually seen to be largely the powerless victims of these initiatives, it is clear that many try to take advantage of the situation. In early 2010, rumours circulated that the whole village would be relocated and relocatees compensated on the basis of the size of their existing house. Having witnessed similar processes in nearby towns, many villagers embarked on a wave of frantic building, adding extensions to their existing homes. As a blanket ban on further building in the area was announced in October 2010, villagers took this as confirmation that they would indeed be relocated and construction work escalated in the hope of securing a larger compensation package. Speaking to me during my most recent visit in March 2012, a young local man justified this behaviour: 'of course we should build illegal extensions. We will only get this one chance in our lives to receive money from the state, and we should take it'.

To complicate matters, virtually every family is in a different position: some have lost their home but not their land; some have lost much or all of their land but not their home; and some still have both their home and their land, but they predict they will be moved in the near future.

Houses selected for demolition are themselves very diverse. Some were built, at great expense, during the recent wave of 'new socialist countryside construction', when villagers were encouraged to build three-storey homes – and residents therefore require (and are entitled to) high compensation (Fig. 5). Others were built after the construction of the new road in 2010 and, though built according to the law, they had no deeds which limited the possibilities open to residents for negotiating compensation. Some of these homes were demolished by their owners, to salvage and re-sell some of the building material (Figs 2, 3, and 4). Others were demolished in March by a company contracted by the township. This left a large reservoir of bricks that locals are foraging and storing to build further extensions once officials look the other way (Figs 10 and 11). One villager clearly articulated their resilience: 'they knock it down, and we rebuild it'. In the meantime, whole areas of the village have turned into something of a boneyard – leftover pieces of wood from old houses and scrap metal are scattered across courtyards (Fig. 6), roof tiles and bricks are neatly piled, all waiting for an opportune moment.

Finally, most homes were built in the 1980s or earlier, but were extended recently in the wake of relocation rumours. Those villagers with good connections to the local leaders were able to secure compensation for extensions not originally included in the deeds. Those less able to draw on connections have been targeted by the township office for illegal construction. Personnel routinely carry out investigations across the township, and tear holes in illegal extensions. The purpose seems to be more pedagogic than to cause substantial damage. It has little more effect however than sending a signal. The owners typically wait for inspectors to leave, and patch up the holes, often with the very same bricks. In what seems to be a living

limbo of uncertainty over whether one's house will be demolished, and a perpetual cycle of building and demolition, some houses have been damaged and rebuilt five times (Fig. 1).

Several families have already vacated their homes, but replacement homes are not yet complete. As a consequence, many have moved in with relatives in nearby villages, with acquaintances in other parts of the village which have not been targeted for relocation, or they have gone to the township. Until the new homes are completed, families are entitled to receive monthly compensation to help towards the costs of rent. The extent to which they have been able to do so is however uneven.

To minimize the potential that villagers might coordinate their requests for compensation, the village secretary took family heads one-by-one to a local hotel where, accompanied by township and county officials, they signed compensation agreements. This exacerbated feelings of mistrust towards the village cadres and between villagers themselves, as many assumed that it would allow those with close connections to the village cadres to secure better deals. It doubled as a divide and rule strategy, undermining any potential efforts to collectively oppose unfair and unequal distribution of benefits while marginalizing those who refused to sign. These negotiation processes expose and channel existing tensions within the local community, and sometimes within families themselves.

Indeed, not all are equally positioned to profit from relocation. One villager explained: 'how could we oppose it? They compensate you on the basis of the size of your house with the equivalent area in new flats. I have been promised eight flats. And they compensate for windows, doors, floor tiles and any work on your current house. Then of course I am willing to demolish! Those who built sub-standard extensions also get compensated for every square metre. They only built them for money. But you need good connections. With those, you will be compensated for 300 square metres even if the deeds say your house is 100'. This highlights an obvious mismanagement of compensation and a failure to adhere to overall standards. As another villager commented: 'in the past honest people didn't lose out; but now it is precisely honest people who lose out'. Ge Song's family undoubtedly belongs to the latter category.

### **Ge Song's story**

Ge Song is an outspoken, well-informed and disarmingly honest man in his early thirties, with a contagious smile and a piercing sense of humour in the face of adversity. For several years, he lived and worked in one of China's megacities, as many young men and women from rural areas do. In 2009, his parents were told that their family home was in the way of a planned public road. Local officials measured their house and compensated for it based on its size. While they felt that the compensation they received was inadequate, they accepted. In early 2010 his parents demolished their own home and began to build a new one, barely 100 metres away. The location of the new house and its size were agreed with local officials. However, only months later, they were informed that their current house – which was unfinished and for which they had no deeds yet – would also have to be demolished to make way for yet another road. In March 2011, Ge Song's father signed the agreement, despite being offered a much lower compensation deal than their new home deserved.

When I visited the village in September 2011, Ge Song had just returned to his hometown, as his parents faced imminent relocation. In the course of a characteristically frank and heated conversation, I began to understand how informed and attentive to the law he was. He explained that he sought advice from a university professor, and was told that without the deeds, his family had no legal grounds



upon which to contest compensation for their new house. The government could give them whatever they liked. 'Who would you take to court anyway? The government? That's impossible'. As his father had already signed the agreement, they were also in no position to dispute it.

Ge Song's sense of injustice came into sharper focus during my following visit. On the evening of Thursday 15 March, as the first set of houses was targeted by a demolition company, Ge Song expected his house would be demolished the following day in the same fashion. He brought a copy of a letter he prepared for his mother to show to the demolition company and local officials, should they come while he and his father were at work. The letter explained that their house was built according to the requirements stipulated in the first relocation agreement. He was quite clear that this would not change things. But he stressed 'I just want them to realize that I know this is not right'.

The following day, the demolition company did not materialize. On Saturday, the village Party Secretary told Ge Song's father their house would not be demolished immediately since one of the nearby households, also up for demolition, had yet to find a place to relocate their livestock. After lunch, I joined Ge Song and his family as they tried to decide whether to demolish their own house. Doing so would mean they could sell the bricks and the steel rods; those same bricks and steel rods they had bought just a year previously. Employing workers to help would cost 150 yuan per day, so they concluded they would do it themselves. Ge Song's son, with all the enthusiasm of a five-year-old, said 'I'll help them to demolish the house', and made a rhythmical gesture with his hand, mimicking the use of a hammer. Seconds later, having found one, he began to hit the planks of a wooden hut which stood in the backyard. After urging him to stop, Ge Song walked around the house taking pictures on his phone to document its size. He did the same for their neighbour's house. I followed him with my own camera. The unease and tension in the air was palpable. Once he finished, he sat on a low cabinet, in silence. I sat next to him, unsettled and helpless, trying to fathom how he must be feeling.

Imagine building your own home. Then imagine having to demolish it with your own hands to make way for a road. Now imagine building a new one. And then having to demolish that one too. The inadequacy of compensation is only a small part of the equation. Building your own home entails huge emotional and physical investment. Ge Song expressed this quite lucidly: 'it is not about the money. It is that I feel my mum and dad have been harassed. Building a house is tough. You have to carry bricks, steel rods, sacks of concrete. It's a lot of hard work'.

They all paced the roof terrace and Ge Song's mother decided to break the ice. As if to relieve the tension, or exorcise the anxiety over their home's seemingly inevitable fate, she walked towards the roof tiles and began to throw some into the backyard. Demolition had begun. Ge Song and his father stood by, watching. His son was keen to step forward and help. He grabbed one tile and threw it off the edge, before he was told to step away. Soon after, his father started to tear down the wooden hut and his mother carried away the beams and planks. By the end of the afternoon, the hut was gone (Fig. 2).

Of the many enduring images from that day, two stand out. The first is Ge Song's son hitting the wooden out-house. The second is this young boy standing in front of a small blackboard, hanging in what was to be their living room. He had drawn a house on it – an ill-fated house as it turned out. Barely days later, the same blackboard still stood on the wall, the sun now shining on it through the steel rods – all that remained of the hollowed ceiling. In front of it, no longer a child, but a pile of rubble (Fig. 4).

## Contradictions and vicious cycles

Admittedly, local officials have a tough job on their hands. The seemingly exasperated Party Secretary of Mulan township emphasized: 'the township government doesn't earn any money from this', as if to avert any allegations he assumed villagers would voice against them. He complained that they simply do not have the manpower to spend months negotiating with each household over their compensation rates. Officials from the neighbouring recently urbanized township, cited the famous 'nail household' of Wu Ping (in nearby Chongqing) which stood untouched while everything else around it was demolished, as an example of residents' unreasonable behaviour. 'No matter how sensible our reasoning', one official said, 'they just don't listen'. County and township officials almost invariably depict villagers as lacking 'quality' and legal awareness; as uncollaborative and stuck in their ways; as selfish and unable to put the national good before their own. One recurrent refrain is that villagers like to complain because 'the child who cries gets the milk'. They portray villagers as opportunistic supplicants to the state, unable and unwilling to rely on themselves.

In contrast to the villagers, officials present themselves as champions of 'national benefit', and argue that protecting it will always entail conflicts. But if they are frustrated by what they see as irrational and selfish villagers, they feel equally hindered by the current emphasis on maintaining social harmony. They describe the petitioning system as particularly threatening, placing them in an impossible position. When discussing compensation that was yet to be distributed, the head of the county's urban planning bureau reassured me: 'don't worry, they will be compensated. Now we protect social harmony, we fear petitions, we are the weak party'.

The combination of the petition system and the emphasis on harmony and stability creates a vicious cycle: villagers dissatisfied with compensation deals visit the petition office; the petition office puts pressure on the relevant bureaus and officials to discourage petitions; as petitions can cost officials their jobs, they give some villagers higher compensation than is stipulated by law (what they call 'buying stability'); this creates uneven standards; villagers are unhappy about the uneven standards, so they visit the petition office; and round and round it goes. The result is that the petition system ends up sustaining illegal behaviour (compensation for illegal buildings) in the name of stability, rather than undermining it. If newly secured compensation was evenly distributed, this might ultimately secure harmony and put an end to the cycle. But not all are in a position to obtain it. As the ensuing inequalities unsettle villagers, they also haunt officials and their efforts to maintain stability. Officials are effectively stuck between the contending demands made by villagers and tensions generated by the potentially conflicting priorities of economic development and social harmony.

The speed of change – that same speed that lies at the core of China's GDP miracle and frightens and delights many Western observers – has created contradictions and conflicts. Policies are rolled out at such a pace as to be incongruous. These tensions are not generated by uncollaborative villagers, or even by corrupt local officials, but by the very content of the policies themselves. One example is the new socialist countryside initiative launched in 2007 and the current plans for relocation. The former encouraged villagers to build new, three-storey homes adjacent to the village road, resulting in many families becoming heavily indebted. Only four years later, many of these homes are up for demolition to make way for infrastructural development. This is both a waste of funds and energy on the part of villagers, and a waste of government funds required to compensate large, expen-





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**Captions to figures, from top to bottom and left to right:**  
 Fig. 2. Ge Song's father demolishes the wooden backhouse in March 2012.  
 Fig. 3. Ge Song's mother starts demolition work on the roof of their home.  
 Fig. 4. The first floor of Ge Song's home stands open to the elements, the blackboard remains as the only reminder of what was to be the central room in their new home.  
 Fig. 5. Homes built at great expense as part of the 'new countryside' initiative in 2007 and partly demolished by their owners after signing relocation agreements.  
 Fig. 6. Building materials and wood salvaged from demolished houses sits outside a newly built house.  
 Fig. 7. Concrete fruit at the Panda paradise park, part of a recent development which involved occupying agricultural land, some of which (ironically) was planted with fruit trees.  
 Fig. 8. Concrete support for a railway line to be built later this year.





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**Fig. 9.** Buildings begun in early 2010, halted by county directive in October 2010, and demolished in March 2012.  
**Fig. 10.** Villagers reclaiming bricks in March 2012 from homes built in 2010 and demolished only days previously.  
**Fig. 11.** Reclaimed bricks are carried home by motorbike to be re-used in new buildings.

sive new homes. Ge Song's family experienced an extreme example of this lack of coordination in long-term planning. Officials themselves concede that the speed of development and proliferation of sometimes conflicting plans has created difficulties. One of them aptly used a simile to describe these processes: 'development is like a peacock: if you see it from the front it's pretty, but from the back it's ugly. You have to look at both sides'.

### Who has 'low legal awareness'? Uneven standards and unclear processes

While some villagers may indeed lack a solid grasp of laws and regulation, this is hardly surprising. The standards and processes for compensation not only seemed to vary from township to township, and to have changed over the past few years, but the accounts I gathered from officials sometimes changed in the course of a single conversation. Their failure to uphold a single standard even across one village further confused matters. Ge Song remarked: 'If you only have a document but do not abide by it, what's the point?' He explained that the village secretary was now stating that extensions are illegal and that homes need to be forcibly demolished, but that when they were being built in 2010 it was not made clear enough that they were illegal. The fact that at the very same time the secretary himself was building the biggest house (and continued to do so after the ban in 2010) put him in an awkward position to prevent others from doing the same. When he ordered villagers to stop, they sarcastically replied: 'on what basis can you build such a big house and tell us not to build?'

This mismanagement translates into a lack of trust in officials actually following procedures. When I shared with my village host the comments made by county officials that compensation for lost land was a complex and lengthy process, she could but reply with characteristic cynicism: 'It needs to go through a process? Yes, the process of the money going from one government department to another, and each of them taking some, so by the time it reaches us there is hardly any left'.

Allegations that villagers have little awareness of the law were met with similar sarcasm. Ge Song sniggered, 'they don't even follow one standard of compensation. You tell me, who lacks legal awareness?' Considering how his family fared in the relocation and compensation saga, he could be forgiven for speaking impulsively. But this is not the voice of a bitter man who wants higher compensation. It is a comment on the lack of transparency and the unfairness of the process itself. 'I don't judge those who build illegal extensions. That's their choice. But why do they compensate them and not us? We built where we were told, according to the rules, not exceeding the size stipulated, but still did not get the compensation we should have been entitled to'.

Some may be silenced by higher compensation rates, but not all. One villager claimed that the local government offered him a very high compensation package for his new house, but he refused because he felt that his elderly parents, infirm mother and disabled brother have not been cared for by the state. As for Ge Song, this was not a matter of money; it was a matter of principle. 'Why is it that the economy is getting better, but people are less happy?' asked Ge Song rhetorically. Answering his own question, he continued: 'The problem is fairness, not wealth'.

### The moral battleground of land loss, compensation and social insurance

While fairness is a major cause for concern with regard to compensating for homes, long-term subsistence remains uncertain for those who have lost their land through urbanization and development. Officials tend to blame villagers for being unable to adjust to an urban life. The Party





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**Fig. 12.** Uncle Ge making a bamboo basket – increasingly in high demand for transporting reclaimed bricks.

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1. See for instance Peter Simpson ‘Wukan forces Chinese officials to release three villagers’, 21 December 2011, online at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/8969702/Wukan-forces-Chinese-officials-to-release-three-villagers.html>

2. Small farming households solely reliant on agriculture only make two to three thousand yuan per year.

Secretary of Mulan township stated: ‘the transition from villager to urban-dweller is a challenge for people; habits are hard to change, people still want to farm’. True, many of those uprooted from their village home farm every scrap of land available in the township – growing beans and rapeseed by the roadside. This is not a stubborn habit however; it is how they know to guarantee their own subsistence – an attempt to claim back a measure of security in the midst of the confusion and uncertainty brought by relocation and loss of land. Their efforts are also evidence that villagers are not supplicants to the state; they have had to manage by themselves for most of their existence, and by and large continue to do so. Beneficial policies to improve access to welfare are only a very recent innovation.

Villagers are administratively defined by their entitlement to land as a means of livelihood. When they lose their land, many feel an existential insecurity surrounding how they will survive. Officials often have little patience for this. One stated: ‘farmers like to complain that when they lose their land, they have nothing to eat. I say to them, “you have no food? Go home and make some! You can buy social insurance, and you can get a job, or start a business”’. The costs of social insurance grow every year, and in 2011 reached 59,000 yuan. In the case of so-called landless peasants, the government pays approximately 28,000 yuan towards it. This leaves a shortfall of 21,000 yuan to be met by individuals; a sum that many cannot or are unwilling to afford.<sup>2</sup> Elderly villagers argue that the cost is too high, given that they are not likely to live much longer. Others are unsure whether they would indeed receive the payments. For many it was, again, a matter of principle. The standard reaction was: ‘Why would we surrender

our land, and pay over 20,000 yuan to join this insurance scheme? The land was our guarantee of subsistence. If the state takes it, it should be responsible for providing a new one’.

This is a difficult time to ask villagers to relinquish their rural registration for two reasons. The first is that they have just received benefits for the first time in history. Farmers have long been second-class citizens, required to pay agricultural taxes, yet not entitled to many of the benefits which those with an urban registration and a job in a good work unit enjoyed. Only recently, and in an effort to maintain stability and tackle inequality, have they been the recipients of welfare schemes such as nine years of free education and new rural healthcare cooperatives schemes. It seems unfair to many that just when these benefits are put in place, they should be asked to become urbanites.

The second is that they are increasingly aware of the value of their land should it be given to investors, and have heard of cases where collective ownership of the land is retained, entitling locals to claim benefits from investors. As a man in his sixties put it, ‘if you buy the insurance you are no longer a villager, and you lose entitlement to benefits should investments on collective land become profitable’.

Officials typically accused villagers of being individualistic, of only thinking of their own good. Unfailingly however, when I asked about road construction – the main reason for relocation – villagers were in favour of it, arguing that it benefits locals, improves travel, and that it should be supported as part of national development. What they did object to was having received compensation only for one season of lost crops since losing their fields in 2010. This is well below the compensation stipulated in China’s Land Administration Law, according to which, the compensation for land loss is set at six to ten times the average annual output in the previous three years. This lack of compensation for land puts attempts to maximize personal benefit from being relocated in a different light. They are motivated by insecurity, by being propelled into a new, unfamiliar way of making a living.

In early March, several villagers visited the county’s petition office and were told they would receive the compensation by the end of April. Should the relevant bureaus not deliver on this promise within two months, villagers would be legally entitled to take their petition one step up the administrative ladder. At the end of March, several villagers told me that should compensation not be distributed, they would blockade the road. As of June, they still had not received compensation.

Urbanization is no easy process for anyone involved. It was a humbling experience indeed to witness Ge Song’s calm determination, clarity of mind, and adherence to the rules even where many around him – including those who should implement them – have forsaken them. In a fashion that political scientists would recognize as ‘rightful resistance’, Ge Song pointed out: ‘according to the constitution, the people are the masters of the nation’. These are not the kinds of citizens that the state would want to disenfranchise. In the midst of mismanagement, lack of transparency and uneven standards, the real miracle is that some should still be willing to play by the rules. Ultimately, this begs a troubling question. What is the effect of alienating those who are informed, and law-abiding? If these citizens feel they lack an effective legal and administrative path to appeal decisions, and that their views on major local developments are ignored, they are likely to gradually lose faith in the system itself and its legitimacy. References to the constitution, resignation and obedience to the rules may turn to hostility or resort to more contentious action. This is surely a scenario that citizens and officials alike would rather avoid. ●