

Village Reconstruction in Rural China: The Importance of Being Urban

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Abstract

Using examples from village reconstruction programmes in rural China, we show that local cadres often prioritize project visibility over publicized policy goals. While central policies and the academic literature emphasized land reclamation or rural welfare, local cadres – and the projects they designed – tended instead to focus on projecting an image of urban, wealthy villagers. Where such image-driven behaviour is most deleterious to villagers, it can evince opposition. We observe that some areas avoid conflict by making these projects voluntary or adjusting projects to local conditions. However, we provide a case study of a village with strong village leadership, showing that contrary to recent claims that village cadres are increasingly impotent, some maintain the authority to override widespread objections from villagers.

Keywords: village reconstruction; rural politics; village cadre power; image building

In the past decade, Chinese rural reconstruction policies have emphasized improved public services and housing in rural areas, with urban-style planning now encouraged for villages. Meanwhile, aiming to preserve farmland, the national government has allowed some jurisdictions to reclaim rural housing land as farmland in exchange for the right to construct houses on farmland at the urban fringe. These programmes have led to the reconstruction of thousands of villages as more densely populated settlements, relocating millions of villagers.¹

As a highly visible development project, village reconstruction caters well to “image building,” whereby local leaders seek particularly visible political accomplishments: indeed, through design and siting they often seek to broadcast the spectacle of urban or wealthy villagers. It is this focus on visible form over function, underplayed in previous research on village reconstruction, that leads to new villages that are highly decorative and often unsuited to villager lifestyles. In so

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1 “Tuozhan xinxing chengzhenhua: Shandong xin zeng jin 2 wan mu jianshe yongdi” (Expanding new style urbanization: Shandong adds 20,000 *mu* of urban land). *Dazhong ribao* 10 May 2014, http://fj.sdnews.com.cn/sdcj/201405/t20140510_1606694.htm. Accessed 12 May 2014; Xiao 2014.

doing, it undermines official rural development and land reclamation policies, although not as catastrophically as the limited work on other types of image building would suggest. Where most disruptive to villagers' livelihoods, village reconstruction has elicited significant opposition, which in some cases has led to project modifications. In other areas, however, village leadership has pushed projects through over villager objections, showing that, contrary to recent research, village leaders continue to wield substantial power.

We begin by placing our contribution in the context of the existing literature on village reconstruction, image building and rural power. After introducing our field sites, we focus on the ways in which housing design, land use and village siting were used for image building rather than practical ends. Lastly, we discuss how some projects were changed in light of villager objections, while focusing on a case where village cadres insisted on implementation despite opposition.

Literature Review

Grand "schemes to improve the human condition" have attracted considerable research, not least from James Scott, who argues that they often fail because they emphasize order, legibility to the state, and "scientific" planning over local knowledge.² China, where "scientific development" was the slogan of the past decade, is fertile ground for examining his arguments.

In particular, Scott reviews villagization schemes in Tanzania that resemble village reconstruction in China; in addition to their developmental goals, he argues that they sought to make the countryside easier for the state to govern and comprehend. Indeed, Scott argues that a secondary purpose of Tanzanian villagization was the extension of state power into the countryside.³ Meanwhile, the developmental goals of African villagization projects – better public services for more accessible, denser villages – frequently failed and sometimes even resulted in significant agricultural reversals.⁴

Although state building aims of Chinese village reconstruction projects have come to light on the geographic and political fringes of China, they have been more modest in its agricultural heartland. Looking at village reconstruction and nomad settlement projects in Tibet, Emily Yeh sees a pattern of state building in which the government "engineer[s the] indebtedness" of villagers.⁵ We do not find the same to have occurred at our Han field sites, as party-state penetration in rural China is already impressive; on matters of land, villagers just as often suggested that the state was indebted to them for adjusting their land rights. Lior Rosenberg and David Bray sense a subtler extension of state power, emphasizing the role central government policy plays in shaping the planning and design of

2 Scott 1998.

3 Ibid., 224.

4 Ibid., 247–52; Daley 2005, 388–89; Thiele 1986, 243–44, 249.

5 Yeh 2013.

new villages.⁶ Overall, we do not see state building as a driving force behind village reconstruction; we see it rather as a side-effect of the developmental and image-building undertakings of the local state.

Much research has focused on evaluating village reconstruction as a developmental programme. Scholars' tendency to emphasize developmental aims rests in part on the relative success of the campaign to Build a New Socialist Countryside (*shehui zhuyi xin nongcun jianshe* 社会主义新农村建设), under which rural *hukou* 户口 bearers have gone from heavily taxed to subsidized in little more than a decade. Even when village reconstruction is seen through the lens of land reclamation and land use rights trading, as in Yuan Xiao's work, village reconstruction has been found to serve as a developmental subsidy to rural areas.⁷

Others emphasize the negative developmental consequences for the poorest villagers. Lynette Ong and Kan Liu focus on cases of village reconstruction that coincided with land expropriation, underscoring the economic hardship this wrought on peasants.⁸ Rosenberg (like us) focuses on cases where villagers kept at least some land, finding that better-off villagers appreciated their new houses, while poorer villagers experienced hardships. Ong, Liu, and Rosenberg all identify the economic ramifications of bad housing design – often architecture that rules out the self-sufficiency to which Chinese villagers are accustomed. These authors attribute poor design to attempts to save land and comply with national policies.

We, too, qualify the success of village reconstruction as a development project: it unquestionably improves public services, but new housing and expanded public services actually increase economic strain on the poorest villagers. We argue that unsuitable designs are not only about saving land or complying with national policies, as previous literature suggests; rather, we contend, housing design, project siting, and even land use are often driven by local cadres' desire to display to visitors or mere passers-by the wealth or urbanization of the rebuilt village. In thus emphasizing the role of China's fascination with urbanization, we show that work by You-tien Hsing, who highlights local governments' fanatical dedication to urban development,⁹ and by Luigi Tomba, who finds a tendency to regard the urban middle class as an "exemplar," is applicable to rural as well as urban development.¹⁰ Localities seek to portray villagers as urban and wealthy, often overlooking the actual needs of those rural and poor villagers.

Instead of James Scott's focus on legibility to the state, we see the visibility of projects – in effect, their propaganda value – as essential to understanding how village reconstruction is implemented. In so arguing, we draw on the widely noted concept of "image building" by Chinese officials. The Chinese cadre evaluation system makes local government officials responsible primarily to their

6 Rosenberg 2013; Bray 2013.

7 Xiao 2014.

8 Ong 2014; Liu 2013.

9 Hsing 2010.

10 Tomba 2014.

superiors, and economic performance is a primary factor.¹¹ These economic targets tend to trickle down the hierarchy. As Kyle Jaros notes, this has geographic implications for investment patterns, contributing to metropolitan bias due to the higher visibility of major cities for political superiors and tourists.¹² Village leaders, who are not formally government officials, are not placed under the same strict evaluation system; this is particularly true for Village Heads, who are directly elected. Nonetheless, most Village Heads are tied to higher authorities through their Party membership and many hope to become a Village Party Secretary, an upwardly responsible position.

Yongshun Cai argues that the focus officials place on pleasing their superiors leads them to undertake ludicrous but spectacular projects, often to the detriment of their subjects – a pattern he labels as an “irresponsible state.”¹³ Christian Sorace, researching post-earthquake reconstruction of Wenchuan County, Sichuan, observes similarly extravagant efforts to hoodwink higher-level officials with elegant but dysfunctional infrastructure and housing; he notes a resulting rift in state-society relations.¹⁴ While image building in the village reconstruction projects we researched had significant deleterious impacts, unlike the image building Cai and Sorace discuss, the projects tended to retain their developmental orientation – but development was conceptualized in a highly visual manner.

The resistance that villagers sometimes show to these image-oriented development projects leads us to explore implementation of the campaign to Build a New Socialist Countryside. Elizabeth Perry uses the campaign as an example of a latter-day “managed” campaign, ascribing some of the disinterest in actual rural needs to such top-down campaigning.¹⁵ In her review of policy implementation across four rural counties, Anna Ahlers finds that county cadres, allied with township officials, were at the vanguard of the campaign; village cadres served to legitimate decisions from above by carrying them through democratic consultations.¹⁶ Kristen Looney finds a similarly limited role for villagers, albeit in the unique “peasant council” pioneered by Ganzhou, Jiangxi.¹⁷ Stig Thøgersen, on the other hand, sees the campaign providing an opening for NGOs and local entrepreneurs to collaborate with government for rural development.¹⁸ While policy implementation in our Sichuan field sites was similar to that which Looney and particularly Ahlers describe, the entire project at our Shandong field site was led by village cadres, one of whom was himself a local entrepreneur.

The dominant role the Village Head played in this case suggests that some village cadres have maintained significant authority. In presenting this observation,

11 Landry 2008, 85.

12 Jaros 2014, 33.

13 Cai 2004.

14 Sorace 2014.

15 Perry 2011.

16 Ahlers 2014, ch. 5.

17 Looney 2015, 920–24.

18 Thøgersen 2011.

we join a debate on their relevance in the aftermath of decollectivization and the string of centralizing tax reforms culminating with the abolition of the agricultural tax in the mid-2000s. As the household responsibility system dispersed authority to the households in the late 1970s and early 1980s, village cadres were seen to be losing power.¹⁹ The taxes and fees that proliferated in the 1980s and 1990s gave village cadres both some resources and leverage vis-à-vis the townships on whose behalf they collected the fees. But with the abolition of these taxes and fees, Jean Oi and colleagues argue that village cadres have lost financial and administrative autonomy,²⁰ and An Chen finds that villagers rarely interact with village cadres who are increasingly irrelevant to their daily lives.²¹

Diverging from this recent literature on impotent village leaders, our case study aligns more closely with earlier research showing the impressive power of village leaders over rural land rights. Indeed, before the tax reforms were concluded, Yongshun Cai observed that village cadres had primary say over land use.²² In particular, our findings resemble a case that Xiaolin Guo encountered in 1999, where villagers did not resist land takings they opposed for fear of offending village leaders.²³ In thus emphasizing the residual power of village cadres over land, our findings fit with pre-tax reform studies by Peter Ho, and Scott Rozelle and Guo Li, which emphasized village-level variation in rural property rights.²⁴ More recently, Daniel Mattingly has argued that village cadres who are also lineage leaders have and use particularly significant power during land takings,²⁵ a finding we expand to a village without major lineages. While we emphasize that our research in other villages has found village cadres who take less initiative, we aim to show that, contrary to the prevailing academic wisdom, village cadres do *sometimes* retain significant authority, even after the implementation of the centralizing tax-reforms. Even where they are less entrepreneurial, village cadres are routinely tasked by government and investors alike with convincing villagers to cooperate with the land schemes of outside investors or leaders.

In summary, we draw on literature on village reconstruction both in China and Africa, which emphasizes the state-building and developmental aspects of village reconstruction. Village reconstruction at our sites had some positive developmental impacts, but not for the poorest villagers, and we attribute negative outcomes for these villagers to the housing designs promoted by local governments. Indeed, we argue that localities sought to create villages that *looked* urban and wealthy, sometimes at the expense of usefulness to villagers. In this regard, we fill a gap in the literature on Chinese rural development, which has largely overlooked the

19 Latham 1985.

20 Oi et al. 2012.

21 Chen 2014.

22 Cai 2003.

23 Guo 2001.

24 Ho 2005; Rozelle and Li 1998.

25 Mattingly 2016.

role of image building and, when addressing it, tends to present it in unduly dire terms. Contrary to those who see the power of village leaders waning as a result of the centralizing tax-reforms, we contend that some village leaders remain powerful and able to stifle opposition to village reconstruction.

Field Sites and Methods

This study is based on fieldwork in Shandong and Sichuan (see Table 1). We draw on their similarities to highlight patterns in village reconstruction that transcend the large differences between these locales, and we use differences between these projects to avoid overgeneralizations.

We conducted several weeks of interviews with over seventy villagers in January and August 2014²⁶ in Old Spring Village, Shandong. A local government official chose the 200-household village as our field site, and district officials consider it one of their most successful projects.²⁷ In selecting villagers to interview, we sought a balanced geographic and demographic sample.²⁸

Old Spring Village is located in a mountainous, wheat- and corn-growing portion of a peripheral district (*qu* 区) of a Shandong city. Its ten natural villages²⁹ form several clusters falling along a three-kilometre stretch of valley encircled by paved roads. Just past Old Spring Village's boundary lies a popular tourist site, which underpins much of the economic success of the northern natural villages. Old Spring Village has over twenty restaurants (*nongjiale* 农家乐), although supply far outpaces demand, particularly in the wake of recent campaigns against the dining habits of officials. Several, generally unsuccessful, attempts at commercial housing mark the landscape.³⁰ Nevertheless, proximity to a tourist site provides both entrepreneurial opportunities and a source of (often low-wage) employment. For most younger and middle-aged villagers, however, the primary source of income was migrant labour in the nearby city.

In Vanguard County, eastern Sichuan, Wilson conducted one week of relatively restricted research in August 2014. He visited several villages across the county: one with no plans for village reconstruction, one at the early stages of planning, and four that were under construction or completed. While he was able to select villages for research, in some villages he was only able to interview

26 We were sometimes joined by a student translator. In August 2014, Wilson conducted the interviews. The authors returned to Old Spring Village in January 2017 for another research project.

27 Although this may bias some of our findings in favour of a successful "image project," other projects in the same district were also near tourist sites. Moreover, Old Spring Village was noted for smooth project implementation and the relative passivity of intra-village politics, which suggests our findings regarding villager opposition to reconstruction may understate matters.

28 Most interviews were with villagers, although we spoke with various village leaders, the developer stationed in the village, town and district officials, and one of the architects.

29 Natural villages in Old Spring Village were coherent geographic settlements. Villages and natural villages in Vanguard County were sprawling, with villagers often unaware of what was going on or who lived in neighbouring natural villages.

30 The attempted housing developments seized some agricultural land. It appears that there had been very few takings of construction land in the recent past.

Table 1: **Field Sites at a Glance**

	Old Spring Village, Shandong	Vanguard County, Sichuan	Clear Water Town, Sichuan
Economy	Tourism, within municipality migration, farming	Nationwide migration, farming	Natural resource extraction, nationwide migration, farming
Housing design	Townhomes	Suburban	Suburban/rural
Location of project	Visible to tourists	Often along highways, at (would-be) tourist sites	Obscure
Participation in reconstruction	Mandatory	Optional	Optional

village leaders; the village leadership sometimes selected the villagers he interviewed and often joined his translator and him at interviews, sometimes along with a township official.³¹

Vanguard County is a hilly area primarily producing rice and corn, although its economy and recent growth are more closely tied to the coastal manufacturing centres of the southeast. Indeed, the countryside is dotted with modern three-to-four-storey houses paid for by generous remittances; away from the main roads, often in poor condition themselves, and farther from the county seat, the quality of housing can deteriorate to wood houses with thatched roofs.

We conducted a further several days of interviews with villagers and village leaders in Clear Water Town, located in a different eastern Sichuan prefectural-level city from Vanguard County. We chose our interview subjects and were then introduced by nearby villagers; we visited one village with a small, nearly complete village reconstruction project (Back Road Village) and one with a long-term plan that included some village reconstruction. While similar to areas of Vanguard County, Clear Water Town also has extensive natural resource wealth.

Building a Spectacle

The design, land use and siting of village reconstruction projects were intended to broadcast an image of rebuilt villages as wealthy and urbanized, although villagers themselves were often neither. We begin by discussing both nationally and locally determined aspects of housing design in rebuilt villages, showing that new utilities and designs meant to make the countryside more urban were unsuited to rural lifestyles. Next, we examine how despite national efforts to use village reconstruction to increase arable land, projects sometimes sacrificed farmland to appear more suburban or simply to finance reconstruction itself.

31 The presence of village officials definitely inhibited interviewees. The township escort sometimes actually put subjects at ease.

Lastly, we briefly reference the tendency to locate village reconstruction projects in particularly visible locations.

Housing design

Rural housing – both new and old – varies substantially between Shandong and Sichuan, with rebuilt villages taking the form of urban apartments or townhomes in Shandong and suburban housing developments in Sichuan. In the former case, design was meant to make the village look urban – and to make the villagers themselves urban; in the latter case, it sought to portray an aura of wealth. Beyond these aesthetic goals, architecture also served policy purposes, extending utilities and public services to the countryside. Such efforts to convert villagers to urbanites drew scepticism and outright opposition, particularly from poorer villagers who identified as farmers. For some, the problems with these new housing designs were technical, while for others the whole concept of more urban housing was flawed. Many concerns were rooted in the economics of rural life and the lifestyles to which villagers were accustomed.

Although the central government has sometimes tried to discourage overzealous village reconstruction, new housing has come to define the campaign to Build a New Socialist Countryside in the eyes of many. In the process, national policy sought to extend urban legibility and infrastructure to rural China. In 2007, the national Urban (now Urban-Rural) Planning Law was revised to incorporate rural areas, encouraging each village to prepare a long-range plan, which was to include land use and roads, as well as utilities and services often new to villages, including running water, sewerage and garbage collection. Such plans, moreover, were to protect arable land and separate residences from livestock – all while abiding by the oft-repeated national policy to “honour local conditions” (*yindizhiyi* 因地制宜).³² As David Bray observes, this urban-cum-rural planning is a grand project in social engineering; he describes a village’s plan as a “coordinated and comprehensive program for urbanizing the village and transforming its residents” guided by “highly centralized [...] detailed standards and specifications for design and construction.”³³ This extends beyond mere legibility.

In Old Spring Village, some of the most contentious aspects of the relocation housing were the product of conscious design and in keeping with these national policies. Policy tended to run counter to village lifestyles. As one villager put it, the relocation houses “do not suit the countryside” (*bu shihe nongcun* 不适合农村).³⁴ But this was precisely the goal of the Old Spring Village architects, one of whom

32 “Zhonghua renmin gongheguo chengxiang guihua fa” (Urban and Rural Planning Law of the People’s Republic of China), 2007, sect. 18, 29, http://www.gov.cn/jfjg/2007-10/28/content_788494.htm. Accessed 27 March 2014.

33 Bray 2013, 54, 62.

34 Interview #107.

explained that his design followed national policy³⁵ by not accommodating farm animals, since they were trying to turn the villagers into urbanites (*chengshi jumin* 城市居民).³⁶ Thus traditional homes with their gated, walled compounds were not only infeasible because of their large footprint but also contrary to the design's purpose. However, villagers were accustomed to a courtyard that could be used for parking vehicles, storing agricultural supplies, stockpiling firewood and raising chickens or goats. The relocation housing provided an urban substitute: an in-unit garage.

As Ong and Rosenberg also identify, peasants find particularly troubling the loss of traditional courtyards that comes with new urban and suburban forms of housing.³⁷ In new urban housing, villagers could not carry on the rural lifestyle and economic activities to which they were accustomed. Without courtyards, villagers did not know where they would put their farming instruments, let alone plant income-generating trees. Another concern was where to put animals. Those with a sizeable flock expected to have land allocated for the purpose. But both in Shandong and Sichuan, those who raised a mere handful of chickens or pigs were more troubled: it was more important to them that their animals be located near their houses. However, at least in Old Spring Village, this problem had not been too acute for those who had already moved: they adjusted their urban surroundings to rural use, putting their chickens in cramped cages along the new village's alleys.

Seeking to close the yawning gap between urban and rural areas, the new housing came with utilities previously foreign to the countryside – tap water, natural gas, and so forth. Again, while welcomed by wealthier villagers, such urban amenities were a burden for the poor. (Relatively poor villagers were the primary targets of the reconstruction programme in our Sichuan field sites – wealthier ones had generally already rebuilt their houses and often refused to move again.) The transition to the relocation homes was associated with using electricity or gas, both significantly more costly than free firewood, and also more environmentally friendly.³⁸ But again, many villagers insisted on maintaining a rural life even in their new urban environment and simply continued to use firewood. For these poorer villagers, whose economic life remains rural even after moving to more urban housing, an urbanized abode reduces access to productive assets (trees and livestock), while increasing costs (utility bills), a potentially disastrous combination. It is unsurprising, then, that Old Spring villagers' attitudes towards the project divided along economic lines.

35 “Guanyu tuijin xianyu cunzhuang zhengzhi lianxi dian gongzuo de zhidao yijian” (Guiding opinion on pushing forward work at county-area village reconstruction points), 2008, policy document, sect. 2.3, http://www.mohurd.gov.cn/wjfb/200808/t20080826_176666.html. Accessed 8 July 2014.

36 Interview #119.

37 Ong 2014, 169–70; Rosenberg 2013, 67.

38 National policy calls for reduced firewood use. “Guomin jingji he shehui fazhan di shi'er ge wu nian guihua gangyao” (Outline of the 12th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development), 2011, sect. 7.2, http://www.gov.cn/2011/11/content_1825838.htm. Accessed 4 April 2014.

While the architect and national policy sought to use urban design and utilities to engineer a more urban village, and while villagers saw these aspects as an essential shortcoming of the project, local and village officials in Old Spring Village neither were personally interested nor sought the involvement of villagers in designing the details of their new homes. Despite much emphasis in the architect's plans on "respecting villager's opinions,"³⁹ no one in the village seemed to have been involved in designing the homes.⁴⁰ The Village Head appeared to consider detailed design to be of minimal import, and his superiors up to the district level were befuddled that we were asking questions about architecture. Yet villager concerns about the project repeatedly returned to housing design, and not only because of its overt, policy-driven urbanization agenda. In particular, all housing units had stairs. Old Spring Village is disproportionately populated by the elderly and crippled – that is, those who can no longer work as migrant labourers – and hence the multi-storey relocation houses were poorly received. For them, going up stairs was simply not possible; they often wound up isolated on the first floor.

We learned in Sichuan that multi-storey homes were often of particular import to village reconstruction projects as a symbol of wealth. In one Vanguard County village where several households were displaced by a highway, local officials were unable to find enough displaced households willing to build (more expensive) two-storey houses, so had to recruit otherwise unaffected neighbours.⁴¹ Indeed, aspects of housing design that could be seen from a distance were the focus of government attention in Sichuan. In Back Road Village, Sichuan, which also required two-storey houses, villagers were given exterior designs by the government but permitted to design their own interior.⁴² In another Vanguard County village that had undertaken village reconstruction much earlier, villagers had been given the choice of several designs for their homes – provided all houses used the same design.⁴³

Still, as these examples suggest, more flexibility was evident in the Sichuan village reconstruction projects we studied than in Old Spring Village, Shandong. Whereas villagers in Old Spring Village were given one or two housing units designed with little care and built by outside developers, villagers in Sichuan often built their own new houses or personally hired nearby construction teams to help them. Moreover, in Sichuan, villagers were able to tweak the internal design, although external design was subject to state control. Villagers were even consulted on design details for their new housing, and their suggestions

39 "Old Spring Village jiucun anzhi fang jianzhu danti sheji fang'an" (Project design for Old Spring Village's old village relocation housing), 2010.

40 The architect claimed to have received written feedback from the village representatives' meeting. Interview #119.

41 Interview #135.

42 Interview #209.

43 Interviews #137, 138.

were sometimes heeded.⁴⁴ Hence, while emphasizing similar design goals and complying with the same policy prescriptions, villagers' suggestions were accommodated more in the design process in Sichuan, and villagers there were more optimistic about their new houses than in Old Spring Village. Accommodations on details aside, however, external design was expected to emphasize the wealth or urbanization of the villagers. This stemmed from local focus on visibility while implementing state policies that emphasized an urban conception of development and legibility.

Land use

Because village reconstruction projects are often financed by land reclamation, they are frequently assumed to be punctilious in their use of land. Although this is true in some projects, we found that the emphasis on building an attractive, suburban village sometimes outweighed land savings. In another case, land reclamation was merely part of a broader financing package, all resting on land use rights. Indeed, although construction land quota plays a role in financing and motivating village reconstruction, in our case studies it was consistently inadequate to fully fund village reconstruction, and returns on reclaimed land were low enough that projects did not maximize land reclamation.

The Programme to Link Urban and Rural Construction Land (*chengxiang jiansheyongdi zengjian guagou* 城乡建设用地增减挂钩) has helped finance many (although not all) village reconstruction efforts. This policy seeks to facilitate continued urban expansion by shrinking the rural built-up area. Land can be labelled construction land (*jiansheyongdi* 建设用地) or farming land (*gengdi* 耕地), among other things. Houses, factories and the like can be built legally only on construction land, although illegal constructions on farming land are common. The national government, concerned about food security, has placed annual quotas on the conversion of farmland to construction land. The Linking Programme permits villages to relocate housing to smaller plots of land, thereby minimizing their use of construction land. The resulting surplus construction land can then be converted to farmland, and the increase in farmland can be used to offset an increase in construction land elsewhere. Since rural land is collectively owned, the village is paid for the transfer of the construction land quota, and these payments finance the relocation project. When urban real estate is in demand, the programme permits urban growth while transferring funds from wealthier urban areas to the countryside.⁴⁵

Although several of the projects we examined were part of the Linking Programme, leaders and villagers in Old Spring Village were the most conscious of this. Indeed, the new housing under construction was the densest of the projects we visited, with 216 nearly identical three-to-four-storey townhomes

44 Interviews #131, 132.

45 Xiao 2014.

crowded in blocks of eight townhomes each. According to plans, adjacent to the townhomes were to be a kindergarten, a government service centre (*shequ fuwu zhongxin* 社区服务中心) and senior housing, although it was unclear if these would actually be built. But the Linking Programme was inadequate to finance these new homes and public facilities. Hence, the village planned to leverage both the quantity and locational quality of its construction land. The village had partnered with a succession of developers – two of which had failed, halting construction and delaying the project substantially – who were to construct villas on some of the land vacated by villagers moving to the new village. The 80 *mu*⁴⁶ of housing land that would not be used for villas would be reclaimed under the Linking Programme, revenue from which would constitute the village's subsidy to the developer.⁴⁷ This allowed the village to depend upon the upfront investment of a developer and provide new housing for free to villagers. Some commercial housing had been completed and was on the market by 2017. (The larger developer's commercial housing plans were on hold, however, as the district planning office had rejected them for undermining the atmosphere of the village.⁴⁸ This seemed a significant hurdle, but no one in the village mentioned it.) In making this financial arrangement, the village did not increase its use of construction land but also reclaimed far less than it could have.

The projects we visited in Sichuan did not undertake such creative financing, but also did not maximize land reclamation – in their case, mostly for purely aesthetic reasons. Unlike the townhomes of Old Spring Village, Vanguard County's new villages had a suburban look, with detached or semi-detached houses amid a surfeit of green, landscaped space. Although green, this space was decorative and not intended to serve agricultural purposes. That the aesthetic of landscaped space trumped saving agricultural land suggests the project was more about projecting an image of wealth; indeed, media accounts cite some of the villages for their beauty, and that villages planning their own reconstruction programmes come to inspect.

This lack of emphasis on land reclamation, even among projects that were part of the Linking Programme, again coincided with inadequate Linking Programme financing to fully fund new housing construction. So although Vanguard County demanded rapid project completion for the sake of political evaluation (*kaohe* 考核) and land quota,⁴⁹ land quota was not particularly lucrative for villages. Government subsidies would cover improved public facilities such as (sometimes quite plush) village offices, a library or clinic, a public square, and vastly improved internal roads. But in Vanguard County, villagers were expected to pay for their new houses with subsidies of less than 40 per cent.

46 One *mu* is one-fifteenth of a hectare.

47 "Old Spring Village tudi zeng jian guagou xiangmu gongzuo hui" (Project work summary on the programme to link urban and rural construction land in Old Spring Village), 2012. Interview #99.

48 Interview #118.

49 Regarding work on the programme to link urban and rural construction land in Vanguard County, 2014.

Projects that were not part of the Linking Programme could be egregious in their disregard for agricultural land. Over the objections of some villagers, one Vanguard County village actually increased construction land to accommodate new residents from another town, needed to attain the minimum number of households to form a new village. (The out-of-town villagers had not moved in over a year after construction was complete.) In another village where village reconstruction had been undertaken in the mid-2000s, farmland was flooded for a large new pond, meant to attract tourists from the nearby county seat. Furthermore, villagers were loath to demolish old houses, hoping these would ultimately be taken by the government for infrastructure improvements, entitling them to compensation.⁵⁰

That several of the projects clearly placed little emphasis on minimizing construction land suggests that these projects are not, at heart, about “quota generation.” This is only reinforced by the inadequacy of land quota revenue to cover reconstruction costs. Combined with Yuan Xiao’s finding that the Chengdu Linking Programme has not used its newly generated construction land quota and treats the programme as a redistributive tax,⁵¹ it may be that the programme is really a subsidy for rural development. During implementation, however, local officials manipulate land use both to finance projects and to create an image of wealthy villagers. Projecting an image of wealth, in turn, requires relatively low-density, inefficient land use.

Village siting

While a variety of financial and political factors contributed to the selection of villages for reconstruction, visibility played a significant role in site selection. This sometimes revealed itself in the sites’ proximity to highways, from which travellers would be able to see the wealth of local peasants.⁵² Other projects were associated with sightseeing, a growing industry in rural China, and again an opportunity to put on public display villagers’ new houses.

Two villages we visited had sought to build next to highways. In one case, in Vanguard County, several homes had been taken for construction of the highway, and the project was intended to provide new housing for those displaced. The government had ordered the village to construct a new village at a location that would show off to drivers on the road. When several displaced villagers refused to participate and decided to build their own less visually pleasing houses, the government sought other participants so as to attain the minimum participation required to undertake the project.⁵³ Although not part of highway construction itself, Back Road Village’s new “congregation point” was also to be built

50 Interviews #209, 215, 222.

51 Xiao 2014, 103–48.

52 Rarely did villagers have access ramps to these highways.

53 Interviews #134–136.

near a main road and within sight of a highway, thereby projecting an image of development. (Ultimately, villager objections forced an adjustment in this project, as discussed later in this paper).

Old Spring Village and one case in Vanguard County also highlighted the importance of tourism. Old Spring Village's complicated financing mechanism, described above, was feasible only because of its proximity to a tourist site; the district looked kindly on projects that could finance themselves, and hence Old Spring Village was favoured. Proximity to a tourist site led to contesting agendas for the image of the countryside tourists ought to see. The Scenic Area Management Commission refused to permit reconstruction of natural villages near the site itself. A Planning Bureau employee considered the proposed real estate development out of keeping with village design. And the architects for the new village contended that the existing (rather typical) village layout was "a disorderly mess [...] impacting the overall environment of the tourist site."⁵⁴

One Vanguard County village was chosen for reconstruction in the hope of creating a tourist site. As mentioned above, farmland was flooded to create a scenic pond, and the village hoped to leverage its proximity to the county seat and its fruit trees to attract tourists. While successful after the village was rebuilt in 2005, few tourists had been seen in recent years.

Village selection involved a variety of factors: wealthier areas that could cobble together financing packages or where villagers could afford to rebuild on their own were preferred over poorer ones; an ambitious village leader or adoption by a powerful official (*baocun* 包村) could also help. But villages or siting within villages were often chosen for explicitly aesthetic reasons, aiming to impress passers-by or leverage tourist potential. And this investment pattern is neither accidental nor rare: elsewhere in China, urban planning regulations require that villages near major transportation facilities and tourist sites be incorporated into the planning system first.⁵⁵

Implementing Image Projects: Adjusting to, or Ignoring, Opposition

The focus on creating a visible spectacle of wealthy or urbanized villagers rather than addressing the developmental needs of residents led to discontent among those for whom the new housing was most inconvenient. Whereas the new housing constituted an improvement for better-off villagers, it was a burden for poorer or older villagers accustomed to a largely self-sufficient lifestyle. Several of the Sichuan villages we visited sidestepped this problem by making participation voluntary. In Old Spring Village, where relocation was essentially mandatory and new housing was the most unlike that which it was replacing, villagers were

54 "Old Spring Village jiucun anzhi fang jianzhu danti sheji fang'an" (Project design for Old Spring Village's old village relocation housing), 2010.

55 "Huhehaote shi chengxiang gui hua tiaoli" (Huhehaote Municipal Urban and Rural Planning Statute), 2017, <http://ghj.huhhot.gov.cn/shownews.asp?id=155>. Accessed 4 February 2019.

generally displeased with the village reconstruction project. Yet village leaders were able to push through implementation nonetheless.

Old Spring Village was exceptional among the villages we studied in that the Village Head had instigated the project, citing the benefits of new housing and increased farmland.⁵⁶ Many villagers believed he was sincerely motivated to better the village,⁵⁷ although some others suspected corruption or at least that his own businesses stood to gain from the project.⁵⁸ Village leaders championing projects appeared to be the local norm, with neighbouring villages competing for approval from the local government to rebuild and only some getting approval. In Vanguard County, villages were selected and instructed to apply for projects; in Clear Water Town, Back Road Village's project was implemented under the guidance of a prefectural Party official who had adopted the village. Furthermore, Old Spring Village was unique in effectively requiring a majority of the village to relocate. In our Sichuan field sites, participation was more likely to be truly optional, and participants were generally a small fraction of the total village. On the one hand, this shows how the opposition that image-based development projects engender can either be accommodated or ignored; on the other hand, it reflects on variations in the power village cadres hold and use. This section focuses on Old Spring Village, where the politics of project implementation was particularly fraught and where we have a better sense of that politics.

In Old Spring Village, deliberations were limited to a small clutch of village leaders. Decision-making within Old Spring Village was the subject of a great deal of obfuscation by the village leaders, who sought to make it sound more democratic than it was. The village leaders did go from house to house to request signatures from residents confirming their approval of the plan. The Village Head claimed to have amassed 90 per cent approval at that stage, with the remaining 10 per cent eventually coming on board,⁵⁹ a figure wholly inconsistent with our interview data. In Vanguard County, village reconstruction projects were subject to extensive discussion by the Villager Representatives Council (*cunmin daibiao dahui* 村民代表大会), but this served more as a venue to sell plans to the community and refine details than an opportunity to actually reject the project. While village leaders intended to maintain firm control over decision-making, describing democratic *process* (but not substantive democratic give-and-take) was important to them; indeed, in Old Spring Village, the district would not allow project implementation unless village leaders had ascertained popular support and could promise a low rate of villager resistance. This fits with Ahlers' finding

56 The Village Head attributed the idea of village reconstruction to the Construction Bureau but emphasized that he had brought it to fruition through an exhaustive application process. A district official concurred that the Village Head had taken the lead. Interviews #48, 85, 202.

57 Interviews #68, 102.

58 Interviews #88, 97.

59 Interview #48.

that democratic process was often limited to slogans or used to smooth policy implementation.⁶⁰

These efforts to coalesce support for the project notwithstanding, our best estimate is that about two-thirds of Old Spring's villagers did not want to move; our smaller sample of villagers in Sichuan was more, but not uniformly, enthusiastic. Except in Back Road Village, villagers only agreed to move after extensive negotiations with the village leadership. This process was procedurally sophisticated. And in Old Spring Village, villagers felt they had little choice but to relocate.

While Old Spring Village sought to minimize compensation payments, they were nonetheless used widely to convince villagers to participate. Since rural houses cannot legally be sold, it is hard to establish their market value. In Sichuan, villagers were sometimes offered minimal compensation for their old houses, and partial subsidies were provided for constructing new houses. Compensation in Old Spring Village was, by comparison, extremely generous. The primary compensation was in-kind: as many townhomes as necessary to provide the same floor area as in the villager's old house. Hence families often received two adjacent townhomes.

In Old Spring Village and at least one of Vanguard County's villages, the largest financial component of the compensation packages was a negotiated payment – sometimes tens of thousands of yuan – intended as compensation for newly rebuilt homes. Yet promises of compensation packages are only as valuable as they are trusted. Several Old Spring villagers complained that their subsidies were late or undelivered.⁶¹ As a result, even tempting compensation deals might be turned down. One villager, offered a compensation package that rose in value from 10,000 to 100,000 yuan during negotiations, still refused it because he did not believe the developer would actually pay him that much.⁶²

In Old Spring Village, where near universal participation was sought, the process of convincing villagers to move went far beyond financial inducements. As is often the case in China, in a tangible and yet very technical sense, villagers' decisions to move in Old Spring Village were voluntary. The village studiously collected a battery of signatures from each household before relocation, and even the most distraught household did not allege that it had not signed to move. Yet many of the signatures were not freely given. The developer arranged with the village leadership to procure signatures. Money tended to play a role, and the developer remarked that when villagers refused to sign, it was “a money question,” but he “avoids giving too much, and first sends the village to work on the matter.”⁶³

In both Shandong and Sichuan, the “work” the village set about doing was referred to as *sixiang gongzuo* (思想工作), which loosely translates to “thought

60 Ahlers 2014, 147.

61 Interviews #56, 87.

62 Interview #68.

63 Interview #64.

work”; it spanned from marketing the project to threatening villagers. At its best, the thought work consisted of expounding the benefits of the relocation housing. In some cases, this was quite successful – although some villagers later came to view the new houses as decidedly inferior. Indeed, for some, the prospect of a new, more modern house was a draw. Another motivation for moving was the dispersed nature of the village. Just as this motivated the leadership and planners to propose village reconstruction, it likewise motivated villagers who felt they would benefit from the improved transportation access and proximity to neighbours, not to mention new public facilities. In fact, villagers had been voluntarily moving towards natural villages (in Shandong) and townships (in Sichuan) with better infrastructure for at least a decade.

But not all villagers were willing to part with their old homes. Across all of our cases, a consistent impediment to moving was the financial and emotional investment villagers had made in their current housing. Seeking more space than had been available in their often one-room mud brick houses, many villagers had built relatively large, multi-room concrete and brick houses in the past decade. For them, the significant sunk costs associated with a new house – several hundred thousand yuan – made moving unappealing, particularly where reimbursement was not tied to the age or valuation of one’s house. Furthermore, most villagers with new houses had designed them personally; they felt their design far superior and more suitable to their lifestyle, and had a strong personal connection to their homes.

In Sichuan, this problem of villagers who preferred their existing housing was generally avoided by allowing villagers to opt out. This also reduced pressure on the village to provide compensation for old housing. Thought work thus had a relatively light touch. Back Road Village provides an interesting illustration of how villager objections to image-building could reshape a project. As noted above, Back Road Village initially planned to construct a new settlement within sight of a major highway. But villagers refused to participate because those near the main road were wealthy enough to have already built new houses and were not willing to invest in another round of housing construction. The government, as well, refused to pay for the new houses, so with some bitterness local cadres adjusted the project to target the poorest and most remote villagers, who seemed happy to move to a slightly less remote part of the village with better access to transport.⁶⁴ The project was then reformulated as poverty alleviation.

In Old Spring Village, however, what adjustments were made to the project were not to accommodate villager objections, and the thought work entailed thinly veiled threats. The Village Head explained that, after remarking that relocating to more dense settlements is a national trend, the village committee discusses utilities: if a villager does not move and becomes geographically isolated, his water and electric costs will rise; if he moves, he will have access to

64 Interviews #212, 213, 215.

gas.⁶⁵ At least one household heard instead that its electricity would be turned off if it did not move – a tactic used elsewhere in the same district and that Liu observed in her case study.⁶⁶ And in the most remote natural village, the village refused to maintain a mechanized well, forcing those who wanted water to relocate.⁶⁷

But threats about utilities were clearly not the most frightening aspect of a village leadership request in Old Spring Village. Villagers rely on the village leadership for a great many things, particularly land for household division and practical permission to rebuild their houses; hence staying put would likely mean indefinite stasis in terms of housing.⁶⁸ The village leadership also can muster other forms of retribution, since, as one villager put it, there will come a day when one needs their assistance.⁶⁹ While 5 to 20 per cent had refused to move, and the village leadership appeared to have at least temporarily given up on relocating two entire natural villages, the general attitude among many – although not all – was that they had little choice but to comply with the will of the leadership. Even in Sichuan, where villagers appeared under much less pressure to participate in reconstruction, a former cadre in Back Road Village described villagers who had refused to move as having poor “political consciousness” (*sixiangjuewu* 思想觉悟).⁷⁰

While the Old Spring Village Head insisted villagers were happy with the project, some felt fooled by promises of vastly better housing, and others suspected the village leaders of corruption.⁷¹ Although everyone from district officials to villagers associated the project with the Village Head personally,⁷² villagers did not see much use for the village election in resolving the matter. Not only was there a dearth of effective challengers, but the Village Head’s successful private businesses in the village (and their associated patronage opportunities) earned him the support and respect of even some who disliked the village reconstruction project. And one member of the leadership explained that he had no electoral fears, since the villagers are all selfish and do not care about the “general situation” (*daju* 大局). (Indeed, in the past, votes had been exchanged for small gifts, although the continued feasibility or necessity of this was debated.) Ultimately, while the Village Head won promotion to Village Party Secretary, the 2014 autumn election for Village Head was initially inconclusive, with a quorum of villagers failing to cast votes.

While villagers did not speak to us of the election as a way to censure the village leadership, two did point to a more traditional route: petitioning higher levels of

65 Interview #85.

66 Interview #90; Liu 2013, 14.

67 Interview #114.

68 Interviews #68, 103.

69 Interview #93.

70 Interview #213.

71 Interviews #51, 52, 68, 107.

72 Township and district officials routinely referred questions to the Village Head, in one case calling him directly. Villagers never spoke of the project as a township or district project, and indeed several considered the township as protection for their interests vis-à-vis the Village Head. Interviews #103, 106, etc.

government.⁷³ But here they returned to their original problem: they would be identifiable and hence, they feared, in the words of one older woman, that the leaders would “make [them] wear small shoes” (*gei wo chuan xiao xie* 给我穿小鞋).⁷⁴ In sum, villagers felt that any means they could use to resist or criticize village relocation were risky, as the village leadership would find them out. In an environment where the village leadership could arrange painful retribution and villagers cannot easily change their legal place of residence, compliance seemed safer.

That Old Spring Village let the project rest upon the signatures of each household suggests immense respect for the paperwork of property rights – or at least pressure from the bureaucracy. Yet the pressure placed on villagers shows that the village leadership lacked the self-restraint to give these rights substance. On the other hand, property rights amount to little if their bearers choose not to exercise them, such as the villagers who, seeing that the village leadership supported relocation, immediately conceded that they would have to move. There is no reason to believe that tweaking formal rural property rights will change this power relationship substantively.

The fear village leaders inspired in Old Spring Village runs counter to the literature arguing that village cadres are becoming weaker. In Sichuan, village cadres played a major role as intermediaries in village land dealings, facilitating interaction between outsiders and villagers; however, they were not able to (or perhaps were not interested in) exercising the degree of personal power we observed in Old Spring Village. This was likely in part because the local authorities in Sichuan did not have the funds to give villagers new housing. Indeed, at least from local leaders’ perspectives, the underlying property right may be the right to housing, be it relocation housing or the original housing. Old Spring Village, with far more resources at its disposal, could provide relocation housing, and hence property rights to original housing were more malleable. The structure of village government may also play a role: where the Villager Representatives Council (VRC) was larger and more inclusive, the projects we studied were more likely to be voluntary. Indeed, the Old Spring Village VRC consisted of only the natural village leaders, a small, elite membership. In most Sichuan cases, in contrast, every family or cluster of households was represented. While the VRC did not lead the decision-making process, the village leaders did consult it far more extensively than the village as a whole, convening many meetings to seek its endorsement. Another potential explanation is the willingness of villagers to emigrate: Shandong villagers are less willing to attempt an exit from the village, giving village leaders more leverage. Village leader power may also be undermined by more hands-on township or county management, as was evident in at least some of our Sichuan field sites.⁷⁵ Given our small and unrepresentative sample of villages, these explanations are mere hypotheses, and it is hard to be

73 Interviews #93, 103.

74 Interview #93.

75 Thanks to Daniel Mattingly for suggesting this explanation.

sure that variation is not driven as much by the idiosyncrasies of individual leaders as the village's environment. However, in light of the concentrated power village cadres can evidently wield, the extent of their power and the causes of its variation between villages are worthy of more research.

Conclusion

Developmental schemes – and indeed all large government investments – are tempting vehicles for a variety of political ends and are in turn reshaped by these political agendas. Whereas James Scott emphasizes how states seek to make their constituents and territory more legible through development, we focus on how the local Chinese state seeks to make its development projects visible. We find that the design of new housing, land use decisions, and the siting of village reconstruction projects are all used, to varying extents, to construct a spectacle of wealthy or urbanized villagers. Indeed, the preference for certain village layouts that Scott observes persists – but is more an advertisement of local success than a tool to make the countryside legible to the state.

Still, local knowledge is ignored in these efforts to improve rural life, just as in the “high modernist” undertakings Scott studies. While village reconstruction in rural China has not been as disastrous as some of those projects, it is unlikely to produce genuinely urban communities, let alone single-handedly make villagers “relatively well-off.” For a small handful of villagers with the most urbanized lifestyles, the new homes seemed appropriate; indeed, they often welcomed the project and invested heavily in their new abodes. But years of out-migration have made villages something between a legal address, a vacation home, a convalescent home and a retirement home for many nominal villagers. Hence villages are dominated by the poor and elderly. For the most part, in Old Spring Village, villagers did not embrace urban life, objecting to the design of their new settlement and circumventing its urbanizing agenda. They kept their chickens and their firewood; they complained about the loss of their rural lifestyle; some even fetched water from the well. One elderly woman reached for Cultural Revolution vocabulary, alleging that the purpose of the project was to “destroy the Four Olds” (*qu siji* 去四旧).⁷⁶ With some exceptions, villagers in our Sichuan field sites were much more enthusiastic about urbanization, suggesting potential regional differences in attitudes towards urban life; still, the investment in new housing often put them in substantial debt. Indebted villagers or those struggling with a loss of self-sufficiency are not wealthy, and those persisting in rural lifestyles are not urban – but from a distance, rebuilt villages suggest a wealthier, more urban landscape. Hence these projects serve as something of a compromise: while performing as image-building projects, they avoid the extravagant waste Cai and Sorace identify.

In designing new villages to portray an image of wealth and urbanization rather than satisfy local needs, local officials undermined public support for these

76 Interview #65.

projects. This was particularly pronounced in our Shandong case study, where relocation was essentially mandatory, and the new housing was a radical departure from local norms. However, since villagers are aware of the power village leaders can wield, villager compliance can be arranged, albeit after extensive deliberations. The ability of the village leadership to tamp down resistance – be it a refusal to sign away one's house, a wayward vote, or a petition to above – reflects on the significant retaliatory powers at its disposal. Village cadres in Sichuan appeared less powerful, and indeed projects there were generally designed to be less invasive to villager lifestyles and sometimes modified when opposition arose. Although we speculate that project finances, village government structure, villager exit options, and the extent of management by higher-level authorities may all contribute to variation in the extent of village cadre power, further research is warranted to explore both how widespread powerful village cadres remain today and what causes variation in their power, as well as what impact the anti-corruption campaign may have had on village cadre power.

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摘要: 本文对中国农村的旧村改造项目进行了案例研究。研究发现,在实施旧村改造项目前,村干部更多的是考虑项目实施的可行性,而非项目的最终效果;项目实施过程中,村干部及项目设计目标倾向于突出城市化的小康农民形象,而非政策及学术所强调的土地复垦或农村福利。以这种动机实施项目将不利于村民,并且会引起村民的反对,因而村干部通过村民自主选择或调整项目的方式避免这类冲突。本文采用村干部领导力较强的村庄案例,得出与上述村干部行为相反的结果,即在村民持反对意见的情况下村干部使用其权力来实施旧村改造项目。

关键词: 旧村改造; 农村治理; 村干部权利; 面子工程

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