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BIFENG GORGE NATURE PARK: THE OWNERSHIP OF LANDSCAPE IN POSTSOCIALIST CHINA

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Bifeng Gorge Nature Park: the ownership of landscape in postsocialist China

John Flower and Pamela Leonard[1]

Abstract

Property rights are widely viewed as a key element in China's ongoing transition from a socialist to a market economy. This article examines recent changes in land use and conflicts over property rights at the grassroots level, through a case study of the experience of Chinese farmers in Ya'an, western Sichuan Province, who are giving up agriculture under new policies that redefine their landscape as an "ecological zone." The study highlights both the diversity of land use strategies at the local level, and the broader regional interactions that underpin land use practices within that local framing. Two approaches to ecological development are being implemented in Ya'an: a reforestation project that converts steep cropland to forest, and the development of a local natural feature as an ecotourism site. The state-directed reforestation project keeps farmers on the land and buffers the transition away from agriculture with grain subsidies, while the ecotourism site uses the complicated and controversial practice of land expropriation (*zhandi*) in which the township government evicts farmers from their land holdings and pays them compensation for their land rights. In the ethnography of this changing landscape that follows, the focus is on the management of property rights from the perspective of local farmers, and their experience of the two approaches to local development exemplified in the reforestation and ecotourism projects, respectively. The ethnography suggests that modernization and individuated privatisation are not synonymous, and highlights the need to maintain policies that give consideration to the long-term subsistence concerns of people whom state policies are moving away from farming.

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Introduction

Property rights are widely viewed as a key element in China's ongoing transition from a socialist to a market economy. Yet the great diversity of local conditions in China makes it extremely problematic for the state to impose a "one size fits all" policy on property rights, especially policy relating to rural land use.[2] The ambiguity of rights and use of the land arising from regional differences is largely ignored in representations of China in the Western popular media, representations that tend to reiterate the neo-liberal master narrative of development, e.g.:

> China's land crisis is rapidly reaching a climax. With foreign agricultural imports about to storm the gates following the country's entry into the World Trade Organization, China must drastically reform its land-holding system. At present, much of the country's food is produced by about 330 million peasants tilling tiny plots of land. It's all grossly inefficient, and has prompted some Chinese economists to call for the full privatisation of land as the next logical step in economic reform (Jiang, 2002).

This master narrative provides the biggest and clearest picture, where stable property rights are seen as the condition for the possibility of China's integration with the global capitalist system. For more than twenty years, China has been following the path of a modernising developmental state, under the guiding principles of free markets and privatisation. In this representation, China is sited in an immature stage along a pre-determined path of development; the Chinese are becoming "just like us, but they are not quite there yet" (Gupta 1998, 48). The aim of efficient production is at the core of a vision of the global economy that sees the Chinese peasantry as obsolete. Small-scale farming in China will be unable to compete with the cheap grain produced in more mechanized economies like the United States.[3] While such declarations of the end of the peasantry are common enough, less speculation seems to go into the details of the process of transformation here anticipated. It would seem

[2] Peter Ho (2001) argues that the ambiguity in national laws on property rights in China is an intentional effort by the central state to negotiate the fundamental contradiction between market-driven economic policies and enduring Marxist-Leninist ideology, and to manage the conflicting needs of rapidly developing urban areas, on the one hand, and rural agricultural interests, on the other.

[3] As Frank Pieke (2002) points out, Chinese policy at the national level has maintained the goal of grain self-sufficiency; nevertheless, the emphasis on grain production does not necessitate any special commitment to the subsistence farmer, and the characterisation of the Chinese peasant as obsolete is commonplace in Chinese government and intellectual circles. Peasants are widely perceived as obstacles to the introduction of economies of scale based on Western models of industrialised agriculture.

that privatisation can provide a successful mechanism for separating the peasant from his inefficient small-holding, but what happens to him then?

This article will address this process of transformation by examining recent changes in land use and conflicts over property rights at the grassroots level. The case study presented explores the lived experience of Chinese farmers in western Sichuan province who are giving up agriculture under new policies that redefine their landscape as an "ecological zone". The study highlights both the diversity of land use strategies on the local level, and the broader regional interactions that underpin land use practices within that local framing. In terms of the latter focus of inquiry, the area of ethnographic study – situated in the "remote" interior of China – is particularly important because it serves to qualify representations of property relations in China that are largely drawn from more prosperous coastal areas. Indeed, the characterisation of the Chinese interior as "remote" suggests an implicit positioning and corresponding set of assumptions that need to be made explicit in order to better understand the full complexity of property issues in contemporary China.

In the western popular media and in scholarly circles, most attention on issues of property in China has focused on the rapid development of "Township Village Enterprises" (*xiangzhen qiye,* TVEs), commonly cited as the engine of China's economic miracle of the 1980s and 1990s. TVEs now account for more than half of China's industrial production, and are organised around a variety of different hybrid arrangements of property rights, from fully state-owned to fully private.[4] The scholarly consensus on property rights in China is that there is "tremendous variation" in the particular hybridity of local arrangements, i.e. the degree of public or private ownership of enterprises, the nature of state involvement ("predatory" or "developmental"), and the uneven application of law to the guarantee of property rights. Still, the pattern of privatised industrial development is widely touted as the inevitable future of rural China, an assumption that narrows the positional and regional focus of inquiry into rural property relations.

In terms of position in an unfolding process of reform, increasingly privatised TVEs are the future; they spring from a past, primitive stage of reform that is now

[4] Oi and Walder (1999) provide a typology of property rights, covering a spectrum from full state or collective ownership, "reformed state" or collective firm management using incentive contracts, "contracted public asset" arrangements of partnership between government and private management, "leased public asset" under private control, and full privatisation. Since the late 1990s, the economic crisis of collectively managed TVEs and the subsequent wave of failures has significantly accelerated the process of privatisation in coastal areas. (Pieke 2002).

largely assumed and ignored, the decollectivisation of agriculture in the early 1980s. From this point of view, agriculture in general, and subsistence agriculture in particular, are obsolete.[5] This assumption engenders a positional bias toward the "individuated entrepreneurs" and anecdotes of individual success favoured by the popular media, counterpoised to images of peasant masses and "mass unrest". In scholarly literature, the positional focus tends to be on officials, who are either the institutional interface with private entrepreneurs or managers themselves in these cutting-edge, emerging property relations surrounding TVEs.

Focus on TVEs as developmental models gives rise to a regional bias, since the most successful (and most fully privatised) TVEs are typically sited in the well-developed and policy-advantaged East Coast provinces – or "littoral" China – counterpoised to the "backward hinterland" (*neidi*), now considered "remote" from the new littoral centre.[6] This important regional inequality is naturalised as the downstream "flood" of migrant labour to the littoral regions, labour drawn to the opportunities created by the "free market" and greater wealth created by deeper privatisation. In fact, one could argue that it is precisely the availability of abundant cheap migrant labour that continues to feed the prosperity in developed littoral China, and that reinforces the macro-processes of increased privatisation and higher valuation of property in that developed region.[7]

The hydraulic metaphor extends to the reverse flow of littoral development "trickling down" to less developed regions, or as the "tide" of reform rising on the coast and sweeping westward across the hinterland, to the point where the "ripples" are felt as far away as the remote Tibetan plateau (Guldin 1997, 6-7). This master metaphor of Chinese development is the vision driving the postsocialist reform policy, where special economic zones opened in littoral China in the 1980s served as first experiments, then models of economic transformation. The strategy of letting coastal

[5] In historical perspective, the decollectivisation of the early 1980s in many ways serves as a reprise of Land Reform in the early 1950s: both movements created egalitarian, family-based inalienable land tenure as a base for more revolutionary economic development: collectivisation in the first instance; market incentives in the latter.

[6] This regional focus also shifts attention to rural urbanisation, looking at the processes underlying the transformation of countryside into city. Recent studies of rural urbanisation are Guldin (1997; 2001).

[7] Evidence from Wenzhou, for example, suggests the degree to which foreign and overseas Chinese investment has given rise to a thriving market in real estate (Mayfair Yang, personal communication). In this context, agricultural and menial labour is given over to migrant labourers, commonly referred to by the people of Wenzhou as "Sichuan rats". Solinger (1999) and Li (2001) discuss issues relating to the "floating population" of migrant labourers, including the pervasive discrimination and second-class citizenship endured by this population.

areas "get rich first" was based on their advantaged position (geographically and historically) of access to foreign investment and overseas markets. But sanguine predictions of rural industrialisation through privatisation that will transform rural China into "Village Inc." simply erase a large portion of China's contemporary social reality. What about the people of the hinterland who are left out of the Chinese "economic miracle" and who are on the short end of the regionally structured inequalities produced by market reforms?

The "Western Development Policy"

The widening rural-urban gap and growing regional inequalities during the reform period (both of which accelerated significantly over the 1990s) has not escaped the notice of scholars and state planners within China. *The Poverty of Plenty* (*Furao de Pingkun*) by Wang Xiaoqiang and Bai Nanfeng published in 1989 highlighted the problems faced by those left outside littoral China's "economic miracle".[8] State planners have responded to the issue of regional inequality with the establishment in June 1999 of the "Western Development Policy" (*xibu da kaifa*) designed to develop the poorest hinterland of China's western regions through the construction of infrastructure and the exploitation of natural resources.[9] In effect, the Western Development policy operates within the hydraulic metaphor of development, defining the hinterland as "upstream" to littoral China, as a source of raw materials, the exploitation of which will provide local employment (stemming the flood of migrant labor), rising incomes, and increased stability.[10]

The hinterland is also "upstream" in ecological terms, as the watershed for the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers, and as a natural region with sites for the development of "ecotourism". Destructive flooding on the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River in 1998-1999 was clearly a catalyst for "environmental protection"

[8] Wang, Bai, and Knox (1991). Western scholars also raised the issue of unequal reforms, see Unger and Xiong (1990), and challenged the fundamental premises of reform policies from a collectivist perspective (Hinton, 1990).

[9] For an overview of the regional interactions underlying the Western Development Policy see Sims and Schiff (2000). For a discussion of road construction as part of the Western Development policy, see Flower (forthcoming).

[10] Note also that the Western Development policy is viewed by some minority nationalities (especially Tibetans and Uighurs in Xinjiang) as an attempt to exert more efficient political control over them. See for example Tibet Information Network's publication, *China's Great Leap West*.

development projects upstream.[11] As part of watershed protection, new policy guidelines limited the cultivation of steep slopes, and mandated the transformation of mountain cropland into forest land. At the same time, "nature" becomes a valuable local commodity that can be marketed to tourists, in keeping with the Western Development policy's environmental protection goals, and effecting a transfer of wealth from city to countryside.

Figure 1. Upstream provinces affected by the Western Development Policy
credit: http://www.chinagate.com.cn/english/877.htm

This new constellation of policies has had direct and dramatic impact on the area of our fieldwork, the village of Xiakou and its surroundings, located in a mountainous region (*shanqu*) of Ya'an City in western Sichuan province.[12] Overall, the policies have redefined the local landscape as an ecological zone, and expropriated the land from its traditional agricultural use. This transformation of the landscape is designed to move local farmers away from stagnant subsistence agriculture even as it furthers the national (inter-regional) goal of environmental protection. Within this common framework, two approaches to ecological development are being implemented in Ya'an: a reforestation project that converts steep cropland to forest, and the development of a local natural feature as an eco-tourism site.

[11] Pieke (2002) notes the effects of flooding on the 1998 Land Use Policy.
[12] Ya'an was designated a "city" administrative unit in the 1980s; the population is primarily engaged in agriculture. Fieldwork for this article was conducted between 1991-1993 when we lived with a village family, and over the summers of 1997, 1998, 2000 and the winter of 1998-99.

These dramatic changes in land use have raised issues of property rights and the ownership of the local landscape. The reforestation project keeps farmers on the land, but requires negotiating compensation for the transition away from subsistence agriculture. The eco-tourism development uses the controversial and complicated practice of land expropriation (*zhandi* literally, "to occupy, to appropriate, to seize"), in which the township government evicts farmers from their land holdings and pays them compensation for their land rights. In the ethnography of this changing landscape that follows, the focus is on the management of property rights from the perspective of local farmers, and their experience of the two approaches to local development exemplified in the reforestation and eco-tourism projects, respectively.

The local stories of these projects have unfolded over the past decade, but they are rooted in much deeper historical experiences and local knowledge that shape farmers' reactions to the new policies. In order to get a deeper sense of how local farmers perceive their relationship to the land and to subsistence farming, we begin with an account of the historical evolution of property in the village up to 1992, the time of our initial fieldwork, then turn to a narrative describing the stages through which the two projects, eco-tourism and reforestation, developed over the course of the 1990s, and conclude with some reflections on the problems, prospects, and lessons associated with the ongoing process of redefining ownership of and power over the local landscape.

Land Ownership in Traditional and Socialist Contexts

A 1981 government report classified Ya'an (county) as 82 percent mountain land with 40 percent farmland and 50 percent forest land. Much of the forest land is located on steep upper slopes and consists more of grass and scrub than actual forest. Agricultural land is at the most basic level divided into paddy land and dryland, and most of the villages affected by the development projects are primarily involved in the dryland farming of corn. Grain production is low in this region, with families in our village producing about 370 kilos per capita (depending on relative amounts of paddy land). These amounts, they say, are similar to the per capita production levels from before the socialist period, but yields are now achieved with less land and labour invested in production.

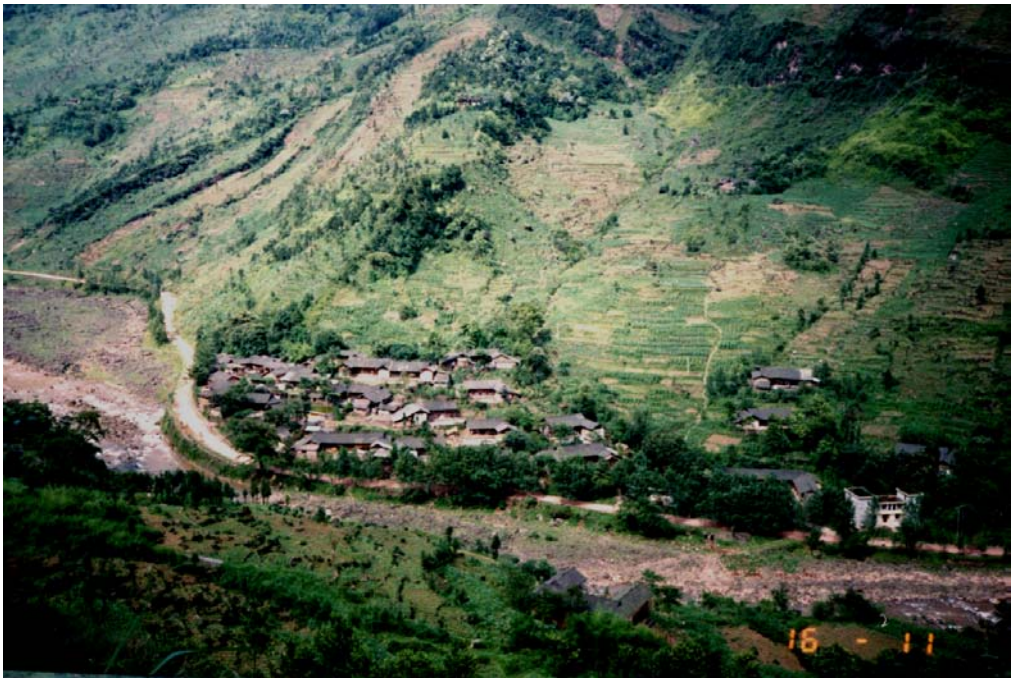

Figure 2. Dryland agriculture on steep slopes. ***Photo: Pamela Leonard 1993***

In the first half of the twentieth century, before the socialist revolution, agriculture was the main source of livelihood in these villages, with indigo, opium, and tea the most significant cash crops. According to local people, the area was heavily forested with Chinese fir, but timber was lightly harvested, used mostly for furniture and coffins. Low market demand and difficult transportation also limited the harvesting of timber. Families cooperated in agricultural production, especially through the practice of trading labour, and most families owned some cropland as well as forest land. Landholdings in the "old society" were generally equal, with relatively little difference among the majority of the village families, although a few wealthy landlords and some landless poor did exist, especially as opium became an important commodity in the chaos of warlords and banditry that dominated the 1920s - 1940s.[13] We were told that there were many property disputes in those times, most of them involving inheritance, but these were settled in local tea-house courts through the

[13] Land ownership in Ya'an was primarily family-based, with relatively little of the corporate ownership by clans or temples typically found in Southeast China.

arbitration of village elders.[14] Interaction with the state in late imperial and Republican periods was brokered by local elites; direct official intervention in village affairs was extremely rare until the socialist revolution and Land Reform campaign reached Ya'an in 1950.

Land reform was carried out by outside work teams who were assigned to each village to study the situation at the grassroots, and to mobilise the poorest villagers to re-divide local wealth along more equitable patterns. While locals played down the importance of class struggle against landlords in the movement, Land Reform was appreciated for how it gave a share of land to the poorest families and for the careful way in which it was carried out; that is, the work teams were remembered for how they earnestly studied local conditions, consulted with the masses, and returned after a period to review and adjust the decisions they had made.

During the first half of the 1950s, the family remained the essential unit of production, and maintained possession of individuated plots of land, but this was to change in a series of gradual consolidations that resulted in the creation of the higher-level People's Communes in 1958. At first the families who had been designated poor and lower-middle peasants were encouraged to trade labour in mutual-aid teams and to leave out the former landlords (not measured by absolute wealth but by relative amounts of land owned irrespective of quality). Mutual-aid teams are appreciated in local memory as an extension of their older cooperative practice of trading labour. In 1956, agricultural production was collectivised using a workpoint system, and the groupings were more inclusive and ever larger. The former team head of that period related that initially collectivisation worked relatively well because the spirit of cooperation and support for the leadership was good, and the intervention of the state was a welcome contrast to the local chaos of the warlord and Republican periods. People worked hard although even then some began to complain about the workpoint system that rewarded people based on the number of people in their family (i.e. their adjusted land holdings) as well as the amount of labour they actually provided.

The good faith given to the leadership was destroyed in the Great Leap Forward, during which all property was made communal and the township became responsible

[14] Like most Han Chinese, people in Ya'an practice partible inheritance. A son can separate his share of land from his natal family at any time he desires, although the "old rules" also indicated that parents should ideally be co-joined with at least one son at any given time. The old rules further specified that young men should respect their elders, that sons equally shared the responsibility for caring for parents in their old age, and that a misbehaved son could be sent away from the family and effectively disinherited from the family property.

for organizing labour and distributing grain. The Great Leap was intended to bring the benefits of science to backward peasants, and in one daring act of will send production "up like a satellite". As part of this great transformation, the over 6,000 inhabitants of all eight villages in the township were joined together to form Taiping People's Commune. Based on inflated estimates of agricultural production, grain was taken from the villages. Crops were not harvested because villagers were kept busy at jobs related to steel production. The result was a disastrous famine and unprecedented ecological destruction. The valley was stripped of its forest cover, as trees were cut to fuel the iron furnaces and the communal canteens. In the hamlet where we carried out fieldwork, half of the population died.[15]

In the wake of this unprecedented disaster, the government allowed production to return to the families for a brief respite in 1962 to 1963. It was at this time that families were allocated "private plots" for vegetable gardens, a category of land that persists to this day. Also at this time, private production on unused mountain land was tolerated. Nevertheless, the emphasis on collective production returned after 1963, under the aegis of the smaller unit of the production team rather than the commune. The people during this later collective period, however, were preoccupied with political campaigns, and bothered by what they perceived as the lack of just reward for individual effort, and so crops were not tended in a timely manner and production suffered.

The experiences of the socialist revolution are critical to understanding how especially the older people view the issues of food security, their relationship to the state, and to the land itself. In the 1950s, as long as the state worked within the natural village and presented itself as the guarantor of local security and subsistence, villagers accepted policies of collective land ownership and production. But the high collectivism of the Great Leap Forward threatened the very base of subsistence on which local farmers depended, leaving a legacy of mistrust toward state land policies based not on a primordial connection to the land, but on the bitter experience of starvation and broken promises.

[15] According to local informants, of the 158 inhabitants of production team 2 in Xiakou village in 1958, only 78 were still alive in 1962.

Post-Socialist Land Reform

The communes were finally abandoned in 1982 as formal recognition of the fact that farmers were "voting with their feet" for the de-collectivisation of agricultural production, and pursuing new wage opportunities that appeared with the expansion of construction projects in the urban and industrial spheres.[16] In this second land reform movement the state and the collectives retained title to the land, but farmers were leased production rights according to the number of people in their family. Initially farmers were expected to meet grain quotas, and were simply allowed to keep any production above quota. These quotas have since given way to cash payments (or a land tax) and initial ten year contracts have now been extended to thirty years. Under the new "household responsibility system" policy, land was distributed by lottery after being divided into four grades, a system which one man in Xiakou village described as "fair but not equal". At two different times, land holdings were adjusted for the growth and decline of households, but now it is understood, for the sake of security of tenure, that the existing allotments will remain in a system of "do not add and do not take away".[17] As a result, families at times have more or less land than they can work according to the stage of their domestic cycle.

[16] Kelliher (1992) and Zhou (1996) both emphasize the degree to which decollectivisation was a spontaneous movement co-opted by the official Household Responsibility System policy in the early reform era.

[17] In fact, the system of adjustment of landholdings does not necessarily undermine people's sense of security, especially where villages tend to make small adjustments rather than wholesale redistributions. Kung (2000) discusses this issue.

Figure 3. Large family of the baby-boom with mostly daughters. *Photo: Pamela Leonard 1993*

Because families at the time of the initial division were the large families of the baby boom, and because of the patrilocal marriage pattern, the numbers of daughters versus sons had a lingering effect on the size of household landholdings. A family with many daughters who then moved away would have more land per person than a family with many sons who then had to accommodate daughters-in-laws moving in. Villagers have contended with such fluctuations by allowing others within the village to farm plots that they lack the labour to farm themselves, or by opening fallow land on the mountain. When we asked what the rent payments were for grain plots on her surplus land, one older woman, sensitised by decades of class struggle and the intimacy of village social relations, was taken aback at the suggestion that she might "rent" that land to fellow villagers. The person who uses the land of a fellow villager does so by private arrangement, and is simply responsible for paying the tax on the land. If problems arise, the mediation of the senior men in the lineage or the village head (*duizhan*) may be sought.

Wage opportunities have continued to expand in the post-socialist period, albeit unevenly, and have had an important influence on agricultural practices. Agricultural production is increasingly dependent on cash inputs and this dependence, along with

the low prices paid for agricultural products, has led to declining importance of income from farming. Because wage opportunities are more available to men than to women, and to the young more than the old, agriculture has become increasingly feminised (and elderised) and there are new pressures dividing the family. Young people now tend to be more economically powerfully than their elders, upsetting older notions of propriety and order and leading to a more atomised family structure.

Given the increased importance of market transactions, and the availability of wage opportunities in the urban areas, people have been leaving mountain villages in the reform period. This has in part been achieved through the increased importance of *shangmen* uxorilocal marriage patterns. While *shangmen* has a long history as a minor form of marriage, in this period it offered a set of rules by which a man could marry out of his natal village and become resident in the lower villages along the main roads, sharing in the property of his wife's family. Older people sometimes were able to follow their sons or even their daughters; in other instances they found their own independent means of moving down. To some degree those who remained in the more distant villages were helped by the larger per capita land holdings that resulted.

Besides the informal lending of land between kin and neighbours, sometimes land is transacted through the system of *chengbao* or sub-contracting. In these cases a section of land from several individual holdings (although it might be communally held land retained by the village, township, or even national land) is consolidated to grow a specialty crop such as medicinal trees, tea, or even to raise dairy cows. Typically these plots are put under the control of a contractor who then makes payments to those who hold the rights to the land. Such an entrepreneur might be a fellow villager or it could be a businessperson from outside the area. The price paid varied but a typical standard was the annual grain that might have been produced on the land, or smaller payments if it was forest land. These arrangements were popular for the more extensive forest landholdings.

Thus in the reform period of the socialist market economy, land returned to the natural village, was divided among village families, and used primarily as a means of subsistence. Dryland farming has not been rewarding enough to create intense competition for land resources and thus most people have been able to access the land they need for subsistence purposes. Given over to older people and women, with occasional help of young men, the land provides the grain on which the family depends for their own food needs, and sometimes yields a small cash supplement

from sideline activities (forestry, dairy goats, pork). This subsistence base has allowed local families some flexibility in pursuing new wage opportunities that tend to be relatively lucrative but wholly unreliable sources of income.

In addition to individual plots, some villages have cooperative holdings in *chengbao* arrangements under the supervision of a specialised manager. Lastly, the township government possesses the right to expropriate land (*zhandi)* it needs for infrastructure development. The practice of *zhandi* was relatively uncommon in the period of our initial fieldwork in Ya'an (1991-3), and used only for projects directly managed by the township authorities such as schools and factories. But over the course of the past decade the township has increasingly become a broker of land, acting as a middle person in arrangements between local farmers and private companies with more varied interests.

The process of *zhandi* is complicated and controversial because the property rights to land do not unequivocally belong to the farmers. Farmers have contracted the right to farm the land, but rights to transfer land to other interests and purposes is often ambiguous, and involves the prerogatives of local officials.[18] Usually *zhandi* is carried out through negotiated settlements with the farmers, where township officials act as middlemen in determining and managing compensation. In our experience, many farmers see such arrangements as desirable, but they are also well aware of the risk of empty promises. Moreover, there are reports from elsewhere of farmers being evicted from their land and offered no compensation whatsoever.[19]

One reason it has been difficult to establish a simple standard for compensating farmers for their land is that providing farmers with permanent jobs in the new enterprise in exchange for land given up for that enterprise has been a popular model. Making the transition from peasant to worker is a common ideal for farmers in this region, but the jobs offered are highly variable in quality, not necessarily available to all family members, and sometimes fail to materialize if the planned developments turn out to be failures.

Grain payments have been yet another standard for paying farmers. Here the state promises the farmer so many years of grain based on the production potential of the

[18] For a more specific discussion of legal ownership and powers of expropriation, see Guo (1999 and 2001) and Ho (2001).

[19] Stories of un-compensated land expropriation are represented in the Western press, as well; see Jiang (2002). The issue has also been linked to arbitrary exercise of power and human rights abuses on the local level (Rosenthal, 2002).

land being taken away. Farmers prefer a price set in pounds of grain as opposed to cash as a hedge against inflationary risks.

A third arrangement offers farmers a simple one-time cash payment for transfer of land rights. These have become increasingly popular as the payments can be quite substantial, but more specifically they are preferred because the up-front payment is more reliable than counting on future administrators to honour promises made by their predecessors. A high-profile example of *zhandi* in Ya'an in the early 1990s demonstrates these processes and preferences.

A few kilometres distant from our village the Sichuan provincial government entered into a joint-venture with a Canadian company in the early 1990s to build a state-of-the-art paper mill on paddy land at what was then the outskirts of Ya'an. This paper mill was constructed despite what every local person anticipated was a dearth of raw materials for its operation. An escrow account was set up for the farmers who had their land expropriated, and their compensation package also included jobs in the future mill. In 1993 villagers who had their land expropriated began to mistrust the township, as reports of a wave of speculative investing on the part of corrupt officials, and rumours of empty bank accounts spread across the province. Mistrust was so high that residents demanding their money laid siege to the government building late that summer, trapping staff and a visiting vice-mayor inside for twelve hours. Now, some nine years later, the factory has still failed to begin production. If some of the escrow payments have been forthcoming the jobs have not, but, as farmers in our village point out, the local farmers are unable to re-claim their land because it is paved over.

Figure 4. Photo of the Ya'an paper mill from the city's official literature. *Photo from the publication: Beautiful and Fertile Ya'an City (Meilie furao de Ya'an shi) 1993, p.40*

The paper mill incident took place during our initial fieldwork in the Ya'an area, between the fall of 1991 and the end of 1993. It was a time of deepening market reforms that changed the role of government officials, especially those at the county and township levels. These officials were now encouraged to be more self-supporting by developing local sources of revenue instead of depending solely on funding from higher levels. Local villagers began to express apprehension about what they perceived as economic and social instability accompanying this policy shift, to the point of questioning the legitimacy of the township government leadership. Many villagers complained that the township officials no longer fulfilled their moral obligation to serve the people, and that they had become parasitic, caring only about making money. In this climate of suspicion and apprehension, the issue of *zhandi* was symbolically charged beyond its immediate economic effects. Over the last ten years, the frequency and intensity of conflicts surrounding *zhandi* have only increased.

The following story of Bifeng Gorge nature park is a case of *zhandi* that offers a glimpse into one way property rights are being re-negotiated in this region based on an economic model that anticipates the end of subsistence farming and a transformation of the landscape into an ecological zone. By contrast, the reforestation project achieves the aims of environmental conservation and the transformation of the subsistence farmer in a very different way. These two efforts of transformation will be described as we have encountered them; chronologically in the punctuated and disjointed encounters of ten years of discontinuous fieldwork. We choose this ethnographic, narrative approach to emphasize the messy process of central policies being implemented on the local level, and to convey the inseparability of the reforestation and eco-tourism projects. For while the two projects can be conceptually contrasted, in fact they are both predicated on an ecological redefinition of the landscape, and our own encounter with them began in one place: a temple called Bifeng.

The Impostor Monk

Bifeng is a Buddhist temple dating to the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) located on top of a mountain a few miles from the village where we lived. We first came to it in 1992 as we searched for what remained of the valley's forest resources. The temple itself was empty, just a small shell left of its central hall, but one could see it had once covered quite an expansive area. We were reasonably impressed by the forest around and especially behind the temple. One could see a few big stumps from the primeval forest still remaining, and the regenerated woodland was a rich mixed deciduous forest. We learned that the main forest behind the temple was national land, but the area immediately around the temple was interspersed with farmland and forestland leased to families. People here lived far from the road, but were able to get by on subsistence farming and selling forest products, which they carried down the mountain on their backs.

Figure 5. Bifeng Temple in 1992. *Photo: Pamela Leonard 1992*

When we next returned to the area, we discovered that a World Bank-funded reforestation project was underway in the national forest behind the temple. Contract workers from the south of the prefecture were cutting and burning the mixed deciduous woods to make way for mono-crop replanting in Chinese fir.[20] In general, local people said they were not concerned, that it was national land and they did not use it for much.[21] Nevertheless, there were some critical voices besides our own in that location, and this came out when we went into the temple.

At this time the first Buddhist statues had been (re) placed in the temple shell, and the first signs of revitalization were underway. We met a young monk and his novice, both outsiders to the region who had arrived to help with the re-building of the temple. As we sat and ate our picnic lunch with the monk, our research assistant began to question the forest contractor, probably with a detectable edge to his

[20] We later learned that the World Bank project guidelines specifically forbade destroying mixed forests, and rumour had it that the contractor, in collusion with the forestry bureau, was increasing his profit by selling off the cleared-off timber. Such things happen where, as a local saying puts it, "the mountains are high and the emperor far away".

[21] Other interviews, however, indicated that they did in fact use the old forest for a variety of wildfoods – kiwi, bamboo shoots, chestnuts, wild pig, bear – and for stolen timber. They were certainly quite upset when the homeless wild pigs started to run rampant in their crops. Perhaps their expression of unconcern reflected caution in criticising a government plan to foreigners.

questions, as he shared our feeling of dismay at the deforestation. Whatever the cue, the young monk jumped into the conversation and took the discussion to new depths. He criticized the contractor for the kickbacks that won the "reforestation" contract, and said that he had seen the contractor's father in a fancy car taking the township head out for lunch. He made wild, exaggerated guesses at how much the lunch had cost. And then, with humour, he led everyone in singing a happy round of a ditty from the communist land reform period, "overthrow the landlords" (to the tune of *Frere Jacques*).

We stayed that night at a local house and the monk joined us. We noticed that the monk ate meat, drank alcohol, smoked cigarettes, and that he and the host stayed up late playing cards. He explained these irregularities as a relaxation of the rules of monastic discipline extended to monks in remote mountain locations. Much later we learned he was an impostor, not a real monk at all, but a trickster who made off with the contributions for rebuilding the temple.

The impostor monk and the deforesting reforestation project were both examples of "grabbing fish in muddy waters" that is, taking advantage of unclear policies and exploring the possibilities offered in the murkiness of rapid change. The period of 1991-1993 was a time of confusion: it was clear that market reforms were going forward under the slogan of "insisting on reform" and that those reforms were to accelerate, under the slogan "a little faster; a little bolder" – advice certainly followed by the bold monk. But most local people were very unclear as to how the reforms would benefit them, and quite concerned about the local government's neglect of their responsibility to maintain order.

The Nature Park

We did not return to the area around Bifeng temple until 1997. Many changes had occurred in the intervening three and a half years, most of them in the beautiful gorge that ran below the temple down to the foot of the mountain. The gorge was not suitable for agriculture, but was a place where local people would cut grasses to feed their goats, and collect wild medicines and orchids to sell to urban markets, hence its local name, "Orchid Gulch". Its many cliffs, waterfalls and swimming holes had also provided us with a lovely retreat from the rigors of fieldwork. Now Orchid Gulch had become a tourist development site, renamed Bifeng Gorge.

The provincial and county governments were working with Xiali township to develop the site into a scenic park to attract urban tourists. This venture was promising, as a new highway was under construction that would reduce the six-hour trip to the provincial capital to less than an hour. In the gorge itself, extensive stone paths were being built to make the walk up more accessible, and new tourist literature had been produced that assigned names to the different outcrops, waterfalls and pools. The change on the mountain above the gorge was startling. The local people had been encouraged to open teahouses on the mountain, and many had borrowed money for this purpose. The architecture they chose was basically the same as their older timber frame wooden houses, with additional bamboo structures built in what can only be described as very tacky, generic, tropical resort style. Most startling to us was the appearance of children following us and begging for money or candy. This was completely new to our experience of this area, and combined with the crass commercialism of the hawkers and the tropical huts, it made us feel a little sad.

The park was now officially off-limits to foragers and collectors of "woodland treasures", and the ticket price was too high for villagers in the area surrounding the park. Residents within the park's boundaries continued to farm, and they now had the opportunity to start small vending businesses and teahouses. Some local men got jobs working on the park's construction, which kept stonemasons busy for a time, although there were frequent complaints about wages and payments owed to them for this work – a recurring problem by no means unique to the park. Overall, people were optimistic about the changes; something was happening, and that was good. They approved of the township government's responsible involvement in local affairs, manifest not only in the park, but in the basic infrastructure in the surrounding area: roads, irrigation canals, and retaining walls along the river running through the valley had been prone to flood damage and collapse in 1991-93, and the deteriorating landscape was widely blamed on official neglect and corruption. By 1997, the main road was paved and the hydraulic infrastructure repaired, signs of good government placed in an ordered landscape.

The connection between governance and flood control has deep historical roots in China, a theme that was brought to our attention again during a tour of some of the cities on the upper reaches of the Yangtze River in the winter of 1998-99. The flooding that year was particularly bad; it threatened the city of Wuhan and inundated many smaller towns, resulting in significant loss of life and property. The evening

news showed nightly pictures of heroic people's liberation army soldiers chest deep and arms linked in the swollen river, risking life and limb to shore up the dikes. Given the historical connection between political legitimacy and flood control, it was easy to anticipate that the floods would be a "wake-up call" to the Chinese government.

State planners did in fact connect the floods to the politics and problems of resource management on the upper reaches of the river. In Ya'an we had long watched the daily parade of army trucks carrying virgin pine trees from Tibetan areas to market in Chengdu. In many cases the trees they were cutting were so big, it was one log to a truck. In Xiakou we had researched the obstacles to reforestation efforts – farmers planted trees but they were stolen from their fields before they reached any significant size. On the forestry question there was a quick connection and fast response on the part of the leadership: a total ban on logging the natural forests of Sichuan was put into effect. This logging ban was just the first step in creating an ecological buffer zone protecting the Yangtze River watershed, a national priority that made reforestation and eco-tourism at the local level move "a little faster, a little bolder".

The Privatisation of Nature

Six months later, in the summer of 1999, we returned to the Bifeng Gorge tourist site. Things had changed again. The township government had sold the park development to the Chengdu Wanguan Group, a private company whose primary business is commercial and residential real estate development. As local people told the story, when the company leader was given a tour of the site as a prospective investor, he discovered his company's name on a Ming dynasty stone inscription at the entrance to Bifeng temple. This coincidence was seen by him, they said, as a sign that the marriage between his company and the tourist site was meant to be.

The company gave the park a new thematic twist; it was to be a safari and nature park. The intention was to build a zoo that would entertain visitors and perhaps even provide an opportunity for some to hunt exotic game. The park was also portrayed as

a “back to nature” retreat from the crowded, noisy urban environment[22] and as a key project preserving the natural environment through eco-tourism.

Figure 6. Bifeng Gorge Zoo in 2002. *Photo: Chen Naxin 2002*

We learned that men from our village had been employed for a period quarrying and transporting the rock for the extensive stone-lined trails that now looped through the gorge, with new names for all the places along its track. On the one hand, villagers appreciated the opportunity for some local work in their specialty – rock quarrying. On the other hand, breaking rock was illegal at least since the time of our initial fieldwork, due to the fact that it destabilized the river that ran parallel to the main road. Without substantial boulders in the river bottom, the annual floods would rip away the riverbanks taking out roads, houses, businesses, and agricultural land. The

[22] As described in pandaholiday.com promotional literature: “Friends, BiFeng Gorge welcomes you with her unique beautiful scenery. Do not miss the chance of sensing her serene and exquisite charm. Please fulfil your dream of returning to nature with your eyes and heart, which are sensitive to beauty!”

township government had been able to arrange an exception to the ban as part of their agreement with Wanguan.[23]

Figure 7. Quarrying rock in the riverbed below Bifeng gorge. *Photo: Pamela Leonard 1993*

At the top of the mountain, the new teahouse buildings constructed by local people now lay in ruins. We met a man who explained what had happened. When the township made the arrangement with Wanguan, they had agreed to remove all local inhabitants from within the park boundaries. It is worth noting here that the people who live on this mountain, in general, do not have a principled objection to leaving. They are unemotional about their attachment to the place and indeed, for at least a decade prior, many of the young men had taken to uxorilocal marriage arrangements in order to live closer to the road. Thus what the man objected to was not that they had been moved out, but that he and others had borrowed money and invested considerable funds in the building of their tea houses, and the money offered by the township acting for the company in compensation for these buildings was inadequate.

[23] In the year 2000, we were told the very last of the locally available (surface) rock had been quarried, such was the park's appetite for this resource. In 2002 they had begun mining the river bottom.

The villagers, he said, refused to move and township officials came early one morning and tore down their houses. The other villagers were now relocated to apartments down in the valley, but he was hanging firm and mounting a lawsuit.

The eviction of villagers sanitized the nature park of their inconvenient presence – an old story that has many precedents in many places.[24] It highlights the degree to which *zhandi* can serve state and private interests at the expense of local communities and individual farmers. The erasure of people from the naturalized landscape also suggests the elitist convictions underlying the project: backward subsistence farmers were clearly incapable stewards, lacking both the foresight and requisite appreciation of the environment necessary for successful ecological development – qualities found only in the lofty perspective of the private corporation's long-term enlightened self-interest.[25] With such a rationalization, and with easy profit to the township government from the sale of land use rights as opposed to investment costs in developing the park themselves, the eviction of local residents was a small obstacle to progress.

Reforestation: ecological development and local subsistence

On a return visit to Ya'an in the summer of 2000, we were happy to learn that the ban on cutting timber in western Sichuan was being enforced. Although this ban was causing some hardship for those who worked in forestry – for example those villagers who lived on top of the mountain near Bifeng temple and had cut timber from their private plots – there were also new opportunities in tree planting work that were now being pursued by the government with sincere vigour.

Local people recognised the importance of reforestation, and viewed it as a development strategy serving their interests. From the time of our initial fieldwork in the early 1990s, villagers expressed keen interest in forestry, which was thought to have potentially good returns, whether from fruit trees, medicinal trees, or trees for lumber. But as noted earlier, reforestation was hindered by the prevalence of tree theft. If someone went to the trouble of planting trees on their private plots, and the

[24] Becker (1998) describes the establishment of Great Smoky Mountain national park in the Appalachian region of the U.S.A. as one prominent example of the ironic "sanitization of nature" through eviction.

[25] In another parallel to the American case, Hays (1969) analyses the corporate origins of the American environmental conservation movement, with similar claims against the short-sighted exploitation of resources by smallhold farmers.

location was near the road, the saplings would not grow more than four inches in diameter before they would be cut and stolen. At the higher elevations, more mature forests were divided up among local households, and income from wood products was their primary livelihood. Even within these villages, however, people did not heed the boundaries laid out for individual plots but rather followed a system described to us as "we steal from each other".

The problem, as they saw it, was not one of secure land tenure but rather of good government. Local people felt that the township needed to take seriously the problem of catching and punishing thieves, and to organize better management and coordinated planting. As one man said, "the collective (*jiti*) was able to organize the cutting of trees, why can't they organize tree planting?" At that time, *chengbao* contracting was one way the system could respond to this problem. By assigning larger plots to a single party, making significant rather than sideline investment in the trees, that person (or group of persons) would (at least in theory) make the necessary effort to guard against theft.

By 2000, in Ya'an and in Xiakou there was much talk about the new government plan to take all steep slopes out of annual cultivation and plant them in trees. The project worked by giving villages targets for the amount of land that would be subsidized for tree planting. Farmers would be compensated with grain payments equal to what their land would have produced, for a period of eight years for "ecological trees" (ultimately destined for pulp to supply the paper mill in Ya'an), and five years for "economic trees" such as medicinal or fruit trees. Individuals were compensated at the rate of 126 kg of grain per *mu* per year, for a total not exceeding 3 *mu* of land (or 378 kg).

In exchange for the grain compensation, farmers would be responsible for planting the land in trees, and they would receive the income that those trees would produce in the long run. Of course there were the stories of villages that had distorted the project for personal profit – where even the paddy land had been planted in trees in order to get the government subsidies. Some observed that villages that got in on the plan early were able to get large targets, while now the project was seeking more of a balance between trees and grain production. But in general, the mood about this project was quite positive all around.

One villager said that he hoped they would continue to hold some land for annual crop farming, as he was somewhat at a loss as to what he would do with his time –

become a bandit and rob people? Or just sit in the teahouse? There was a degree of pragmatic forethought going on too – if the government failed to come through with the payments they could always rip up the trees and grow their corn. This was more than a casual calculation. This village had suffered greatly in the famine of 1960-61, and for the older people the connection between holding on to production rights to the land and a sense of security was more than a theoretical issue.

For many local people, land meant security and subsistence agriculture meant independence. Farmers frequently compared themselves favourably to the urban poor, who had to pay for everything, and who risked not having enough to eat since they lacked the subsistence safety net. Migrant labourers who returned to the village had the option of food from home and cash from the outside; the former was especially important when they did not receive their wages. For older people, the opportunity to stay on the land was particularly important, and the new policy gave them a significant role to play as stewards of the growing trees. These issues were addressed by the forestry project's grain subsidy that allowed a transition to take place, and that enabled the people to stay in place.

Eco-tourism: privatisation and dislocation

In the summer of 2000 there was also a lot of talk in the village about the Bifeng gorge nature park. It had become a premiere tourist site with hordes of visitors causing weekend traffic jams. Despite the park's success, the economic impact on people in the neighbouring villages was negligible. For local people, the park had become more of a spectacle than anything else, and rumours abounded: a tiger had eaten one of the keepers, but the company was keeping it hushed; some local youth had demanded entrance to the attractions free of charge, and a brawl broke out when they were denied; along with all sorts of speculation concerning how much the tourists would spend in a day, what with tickets, a meal, a hotel, photographs etc. People also noted the percentage of security bureau cars borrowed from their work units for a privileged outing, and complained about the plastic garbage in the river in front of the village. Now with the road paved, the cars travelled much faster, making the road through the village much more dangerous.

The sense of spectacle and alienation engendered by the park worked both ways. One local family had attempted to start a *nongjia le* ("peasant family happiness") – a

newly invented kind of entertainment for urban people where they could spend hours sitting in a peasant courtyard enjoying the special foods of the rural people and partaking of peasant simplicity. The *nongjia le* venture failed however, because there was nowhere for the customers to park their cars on this narrow road. Nevertheless, we heard the villagers in Xiakou say they were glad the park was there. It was "entertaining" (*hao shua*).

The park itself had grown. A new road brought traffic directly to the top of the gorge. At the parking lot (itself a new phenomenon in China where every square inch has always been valued for its agricultural potential), swarms of people piled off tour buses and out of cars. A giant plastic tree had been constructed as a playground for children. The reception hall was a state of the art building reminiscent of an airport terminal. Its great hall featured a cathedral ceiling several stories high, with long reception counters on several sides and an arcade of shops selling objects playing on natural themes—rocks, gnarled tree stumps, carvings, jewellery, stuffed panda toys. Out the back of this building, a series of large stone pavilions cascaded for several levels down to overlook the gorge. In the gorge itself a new tower gave elevator access to the bottom, and bungee jumping from the top. The park was also an exclusive resort, featuring a number of private villas that could be rented for 4,800, 6000, or 8,000 RMB per night (670, 838, 1,117 Euro respectively; the 8,000 per night villa came with its own Russian "welcome girls"). We never even made it to the zoo.

Figure 8. (above) Reception hall at Bifeng Gorge 2002. (below) Model of the same. *Photo: Chen Naxin 2002*

While touring the expanded park, we ran into some old friends who lived in a neighbouring village that, although on top of the mountain, had not been displaced by the park. We went home with them after their long day's work vending corn on the cob and porcupine quills. They were having hard times. They had to pay only a small fee to be allowed to do this private vending work, but it paid hardly anything. Nevertheless, unable to cut the trees they had once relied on, they did it for what they could get. Many people had left their village too in the past year. They could subsist on their land, but it was not a convenient location from which to find day labour. We learned from one of the prominent members of the village that the Wanguan company had been interested in expropriating their land, but that when they discovered that the village was not in the same township they had already been dealing with, they gave up. He said the company felt they had already paid enough for such relocations and did not want to meet the cost of paying off another set of township officials. He said this demonstrated that their township officials did not have the interests of the people at heart.

From these people we also learned that the man who filed the lawsuit won the case, and he and the others who had been displaced received additional compensation. The standard rate for *zhandi* compensation is 6000RMB (838 Euro) per *mu* of land, along with money for houses, all disbursed in one lump payment. For some the move had gone well. An old couple was able to use their settlement money to go join their son/daughter down in the valley, where they were treated well because of the contribution they made to the family finances.

Others fared badly: A pair of brothers had quickly squandered their money drinking and gambling. Most of the villagers were first moved into a factory that had been closed down in the valley, half way to Ya'an, and then to the housing arranged for them in the local market town of Xiali. This new location proved too wet, however, and it would have cost too much money to make the land suitable for building. At this point they packed up all their furniture and arrived back at the park entrance – a form of protest against the raw land deal.

They were then helped to find old houses to buy along a tractor path lower down in the valley that had also experienced much out-migration. They were finding it somewhat difficult there, however, as they had no land. At some point they realized that they had never finalized any contract to hand over their agricultural land in the park, but had only signed off on their house plots. They started returning to cultivate

their lands within the park, and wanted permission to set up shelters where they could stay when working their crops. Apparently this protest strategy was relatively successful, as the latest reports indicate that the company found employment in the park for at least some of these displaced people. But no matter the outcome of this particular case, the problems surrounding *zhandi* and the transition away from subsistence agriculture are ongoing and have yet to be clearly resolved.

Conclusion

Farmers are being displaced by urbanization at a rapid rate all over China.[26] Rural land is being swallowed up by various developments - everything from new roads, schools, factories and apartment houses, to the more expansive demands of golfing clubs, suburban villas and resort development, such as Bifeng Gorge.[27] At the same time, from the other end of the developmental spectrum, ecological concerns are also displacing farmers from the agricultural use of land, as seen in the reforestation project. This paper has looked at how the redefinition of the landscape unfolds at the local level, focusing on the process and problems of *zhandi*, the administrative mechanism of development and the flashpoint of conflict in the Chinese countryside.[28] *Zhandi* discloses the latent contradictions within property rights in China, it forces the issue of ownership that otherwise remains ambiguous, and highlights the relationships of power among individuals, their communities, and different levels of the state.[29]

Zhandi is a process that frequently moves people out of an economy where very little cash can sustain life, and as such, challenges farmers to figure out fair compensation for embarking on a new life where purchased items (food, housing, tea, tobacco) will have to replace those that have been self-generated or handed down.

From the perspective of local people, the expropriation of land also raises a whole range of issues beyond the calculus of economic benefit. The effects of *zhandi* are

[26] According to recent reports based on Xinhua news agency estimates, over the next decade, across China 1.3 million hectares of arable land will be expropriated by urbanization, resulting in 12 million peasants losing their landholdings. (Jiang, 2002).

[27] We have not addressed one of the most significant catalysts of land expropriation in contemporary China – dam construction – since it invokes the direct prerogatives of the central state. Jun Jing (1997) is a good source for understanding the dynamics of expropriation related to dams.

[28] Further accounts of farmer's opposition to *zhandi* can be found in Jiang (2002), Rosenthal (2002), and Guo (2001).

[29] The contrasting role of different levels of the state in this process is the focus of Guo (2001).

variable, with different impacts on different groups. Large cash settlements happily solve the minimal subsistence needs of older people nearing the end of their lives, but what happens to the younger people when the money runs out, let alone the next generation? Once people are displaced from the land, wage opportunities in this region are more open to men than to women, and to the young than the old, but wages frequently go unpaid, and loss of land can mean loss of security. The experience of the Great Leap Forward and ensuing famine has taught people to value their access to land, and working that land gave coherence to the family structure, providing a means by which young and old could help each other. Taking people off the land, then, has deep social as well as economic ramifications.

The role of the township officials is critical in the process of redefining the landscape in the cases we have presented, but the nature of their role is a matter of controversy. In her study of land expropriation in Yunnan province, Guo (2001) emphasizes the predatory nature of township officials, describing how they dominate village politics and run roughshod over villagers' sense of moral propriety. Township officials, in contrast to the fair arbitrations of the national government, coerce local people and use the ambiguity of land policy for their own interests[30]; thus for Guo the state has bifurcated along moral lines into a "malign" local state and a "benign" central state (2001, 435). Pieke (2002) on the other hand, has stressed the difficult position in which township officials are now placed – their sources of revenue have withered and at the same time they are subject to rising expectations for continued economic development. Serving in their role as foot soldiers of the developmental state, these local officials are squeezed between the need to use rational land management to generate the resources to improve conditions at the grassroots, and the central state policy mandating grain production even in the exceptionally developed coastal areas. Whether township officials are seen as rational actors or malignant predators, we would stress that they are located on a difficult border, structurally positioned between two competing frameworks for understanding the value of property – one which has stressed a teleological movement toward privatisation and

[30] As Peter Ho (2001) observes, the ambiguity of ownership in Chinese land policy serves the interests of the central state in maintaining flexibility to address different particular economic conditions, but it also leaves open the possibility of abuses at the local level. In the interplay of different levels of government administration, Ho argues that the key historical moment that most disadvantaged local interests was the shift in land ownership from the natural village to the township.

markets, and another that sees land as a means to subsistence, self-reliance, and security.[31]

While we have set up this opposition as a contrast between an alliance of state and private investors on the one hand, and local farmers on the other, Susanne Brandtstadter (personal communication) points out that the emphasis on self-reliance and security was also a critical ingredient defining the agenda of the communist party during the revolutionary period (with lingering advocates). She points out that security as a national ideology likewise resulted in a set of policies that tended to ignore local interests, although, unlike the modern opposition that tends to see peasants as something "to be gotten rid of", the older ideology at least incorportated notions of peasant worth. Looking at the modern opposition as part of this historical framework, one can see local resistance to privatisation as a way of saying, "what about us?".

Could full privatisation of land holdings serve to protect farmers from the exploitative practises associated with *zhandi*? In this argument, clear, individuated private ownership would ensure that farmers' economic concerns are addressed, that is, that they will get adequate compensation for their land. Looking at how farmers have talked about their position, we think privatisation redefines their options along a narrow framework that artificially curtails the expression of their interests. Although the Household Responsibility System provided them with individuated land holdings, there is an important sense in which villagers see village land as a communal resource.[32] Each village tends to have a group scheme for developing sideline economies, and villagers emphasize the need for community coordination for economic success, for example in their discussion of the former obstacles to reforestation, or even in getting a good settlement for the expropriation of their land.

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[31] In a parallel point, as salaried employees of the state, officials live under a very different economic framework from farmers. Leonard (2002) details the contrasting perspectives of local farmers and township officials in this region on issues related to agriculture. Guo (1999) contrasts the relationship between officials and villagers in minority and Han villages in Yunnan.

[32] Such a position is given statistical backing by Kung's (2000) and Kung and Liu's (1997) findings based on a survey of 800 households in eight counties of different socio-economic conditions. The survey found that "an overwhelming majority of the farmers do not hold a strong preference for private ownership" (1997, 1) and that the majority (90%) of villages surveyed had adjusted individual land holdings since implementation of the household responsibility system. Kung and Liu attribute these findings to the social insurance function served by the land tenure system. Communal tenure and reallocations ensure that if a family grows or if family members fail to find adequate wage labour, there will be land available to support them. Kung further concludes that the reallocations reflected farmer's social values, that is "the strengths of the egalitarian spirit that underpins China's otherwise highly individuated farming system" (2000, 704).

Rather than advocate privatisation, we think legal protection for the communal rights of democratic village institutions is critical.[33] As many observers have noted, and as the story of Bifeng Gorge demonstrates, an independent legal system is the only protection farmers have against the potential abuses of state agents acting as brokers for private interests (including their own) – farmers themselves are keenly aware of this dynamic.

The ethnography suggests that modernization and individuated privatisation are not synonymous. Redefining property relations means redefining social relationships (Hann 1998; Verdery 1999) and the move toward privatisation of land in China clearly has critical implications for relationships among people. Local notions of communal property in China are not the lingering remnants of socialism, nor are they expressions of a primitive peasant consciousness; rather, we believe that such communal expressions are revitalized ideas that gain salience from the post-socialist context in which markets have presented new challenges to issues of security and the structure and role of the family. Reflecting on rural Romanians' resistance to privatisation, Verdery argues that the postsocialist transition to capitalism is "a project of cultural engineering in which fundamental social ideas are resignified" (1999, 54). Thus the challenge of 'private property' "created new fields of action in which socialism's 'legacies' – such as forms of collectivism – are not simply reproduced but are revalorised within struggles that mobilize them" (1999, 76). In Romania, resisting privatisation meant that communal property became an expression of communal identity.[34] In China, farmers' views of land as a communal resource that ensures subsistence security can be seen in a similar light as a revalorization to address the new challenges of a market economy.

Postsocialism in China also has a critical regional structuring. People are not simply leaving the rural mountain areas in pursuit of abundant coastal opportunities, but are being pushed out by a scripted transformation. The hinterland-littoral spatial duality of China's modernization project has Ya'an clearly located in the zone of unsustainability – both by dint of its inaccessibility to mechanized agriculture and due to its upstream position to downstream environmental problems. Looking at how

[33] Guo (2001, 438) highlights the potential for village elections to help counterweight the manipulations of the township government on village elections. Peter Ho (2001) emphasizes legal protections for communal village institutions.

[34] The revalorisation of communal property and identity appears to be a widespread phenomenon in post-socialist contexts. Kaneff (2002) details an example of this phenomenon as it pertains to a village cooperative in Bulgaria.

property rights in this region are managed, and the values placed on access to land, reveals more than one strategy for addressing the problems of weak competitive position and ecological concerns. The choices between these various strategies are political rather than teleological.

In the ecotourism development of Bifeng Gorge, the displacements of *zhandi* are justified by concepts of modernization in which the peasant way of life is constructed as obsolete. The overarching logic of privatisation favoured by entrepreneurial state brokers cannot, however, solve the messy social problems associated with such resettlements. In contrast, the forestry project under state management recognizes that farmers value their access to land for multiple reasons. Most importantly perhaps, land is security, and our findings suggest the moral framework in which villagers see land as ensuring their right to subsistence.[35] Having land on which to produce their own food provides a hedge against inflationary market prices, a bulwark against the instability and exploitation of the state and market, and a degree of pride in what they do.

Was the *zhandi* of the Bifeng Gorge nature park ultimately for the greatest common good – ecological development in the interest of China as a whole and the global environment – or was it an eco-enclosure, a land grab benefiting only a private corporation and the township government? To the extent that the ecological redefinition of the landscape cleansed it of its people, the answer appears to be the latter, but the park's development is ongoing, and the question finally hinges on whether the local common good will be addressed. While we clearly have to view the local situations described in this article in terms of national priorities and global processes, we should also allow the messiness of local experiences to qualify the master narratives of progress. The "gospel of efficiency" has tended to guide analysis of property at the macro level, but looking at the micro level reveals that the palette generated by the sole concern of economic efficiency is, in the end, rather thin. We hope the cases of Bifeng Gorge and the reforestation project have raised important qualitative concerns worth considering when analysing China's script for modernization; perhaps we should think a bit more about the people written out of that script before we finally say farewell to peasant China.

[35] For additional references to farmers' perception of land as providing subsistence security in an environment of unstable wage opportunities, see Pieke (2002, 5, 19), Kung (1997; 2000, 703) and Guo (2001, 430-31).

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