

## How grassroots cadres broker land taking in urbanizing China

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### ABSTRACT

Grassroots leaders in peri-urban China are increasingly integrated into the bureaucracy but maintain their community ties, and for that reason are often recruited to broker land taking. Incomplete bureaucratization allows frontline cadres to act as both state agents and community members and can expedite “demolition and relocation” (*chaiqian*). Strategic favouritism and collective pressure are frequently employed to make evictions happen. Although these strategies accelerate expropriation, they do so by dividing a community, and typically leave relocation facilitators feeling exhausted, anxious and mistreated. Compared to land brokers in India, Chinese mediators of dispossession are usually less profit-oriented, and land taking in urbanizing China, though routinely manipulative, sometimes harsh, and almost always “successful,” tends to be more inclusive, collective and negotiated than it is in India.

**Keywords:** incomplete bureaucratization; social ties; community knowledge; strategic favouritism; collective pressure; land expropriation

## **How grassroots cadres broker land taking in urbanizing China**

Rural people in China have experienced an extraordinary amount of land taking over the last 40 years. In one “conservative” estimate (Zhang 2015), around 4 million hectares of farmland was transferred between 1991 and 2013 alone. And the pace of appropriation has not shown any signs of letting up. From 2007 to 2015, according to the national statistical yearbook, expropriation of collectively-owned land for the expansion of cities and towns grew from about 300,000 hectares to over 370,000 hectares each year (Bao et al. 2019) compared to 74,500 hectares annually in the 1980s and 83,000 hectares in the 1990s (Zhang and Feng 2015). Sometimes dispossession also proceeds quite rapidly. In one district in Hebei province, for example, local authorities in 2018 requisitioned over 650 hectares of farmland in just 20 days (Zhongguo Zhisheng 2019).

This surge of land taking has sparked considerable opposition, including acts of individual resistance (Hess 2010; Erie 2012; Deng 2017), collective petitioning (Cai 2003; Hurst et al. 2014; Gui 2017; Heurlin 2020), and popular protest (Guo 2001; He 2014; He and Xue 2014; Heurlin 2016; Sun 2019). Meanwhile, local authorities have developed a range of methods to head off contention and complete evictions without resorting to the use of force (on violent land taking, see Sargeson 2013; Ong 2018). These techniques include: relying on professional relocation companies to negotiate with homeowners (Ho 2013a); deploying relatives to apply pressure on reluctant evictees (Deng and O’Brien 2013; O’Brien and Deng 2015, 2017; Luo et al. 2017, Luo and Andreas, this issue); depending on religious leaders and lineage elites to get

their members to accept requisition offers (Mattingly 2016, 2020); turning to neighbours to prod holdouts into relenting (Deng 2017); using one-on-one bargaining in government offices and the promise of urban residence to pre-empt group resistance (Hsing 2010; Lee and Zhang 2013; Chuang 2014); and channelling disputes into more readily-controlled courts (He 2014).

Adding to this stream of research, this article examines the role that frontline leaders, perched between state and society, play in facilitating “demolition and relocation” (*chaiqian*). In particular, we home in on grassroots cadres in peri-urban areas who, as a result of incomplete bureaucratization, act as both state agents and community members when expediting land taking. We focus on two strategies (strategic favouritism and collective pressure) that frontline leaders use to accelerate eviction by exploiting (and creating) divisions within a community and drawing villagers into negotiating the terms of their relocation. Acting as not-so-disinterested intermediaries between the authorities and a community, these land brokers help demolition and relocation offices cut deals with those hardest to persuade and socialize state aims by encouraging villagers who are willing to relocate to goad their neighbours into giving in. This use of grassroots cadres to broker land dispossession, and reliance on their deep knowledge of a community and social ties to villagers, can help get people off their land and be quite lucrative for some relocatees, though it often exacts a personal toll on the cadres who participate in it. In line with the aims of this special issue, we conclude by venturing some comparisons with private brokers and land acquisition in India, and suggest that while rural Indians are more likely than

peri-urban Chinese to keep their land, the removal and compensation process in China tends to be more inclusive, collective and negotiated.

### **Compulsion without force**

In China, and also elsewhere, violence is sometimes used to evict smallholders and seize their land (Kay 2001; Grajales 2011; Borrás et al. 2012; Sargeson 2013). Heavy equipment appears to tear down a home (or neighbourhood) and villagers are dragged from the site. But relying on force, including the use of hired thugs to clear rural land (Ong 2018), is an unmistakable sign of failure by Chinese “demolition offices” (*chaiqianban*) and grassroots cadres who are charged with completing appropriation expeditiously, smoothly and peaceably. It means that efforts to compensate relocatees to their satisfaction have not worked, and also that other more “high-pressure methods” (Luo and Andreas, this issue) used to facilitate land taking have been unsuccessful. These techniques typically involve the strategic use of economic incentives and disincentives and the creation of social costs. Economic squeezes include tactics such as manoeuvring reluctant households into accepting compensation offers by depriving them of access to irrigation or “minimum livelihood guarantees” (*dibao*) or allocating evictees less fertile, convenient or farmable land, while social costs often involve manipulating hierarchical and kinship ties to generate pressure on holdouts (Deng and O’Brien 2013; Gong and Zhang 2017; Luo and Andreas, this issue).

In this article, we further explore ways to get smallholders off their land that are not entirely voluntary (Luo et al. 2017; Gong and Zhang 2017; O'Brien and Deng 2015, 2017; Luo and Andreas, this issue). In particular, we identify two types of “compulsion without force”<sup>1</sup> that are used in China’s urbanizing areas to facilitate demolition and relocation. Our focus is on frontline leaders themselves and the way they employ strategic favouritism as an economic incentive and collective pressure as a social cost to convince both early accepters and holdouts to vacate their land. These strategies do not rely on violence or simply paying the market price to willing sellers, but are in-between techniques that entail negotiating, wheedling, and often a considerable amount of coercion to get eviction done.

Our research took place in “communities” (*shequ*) in peri-urban Chengdu. These so-called “villages-turned-communities” (*cungaiju*) are transitional spaces that are not fully urban or fully rural. Some of their institutions resemble those found in rural villages, including conducting relatively open elections for grassroots leaders, retaining collective land ownership and other collective assets, and keeping former “team leaders” (*duizhang*) at the head of small groups of households. Cadres in “villages-turned-communities” tend to have closer social ties with residents than most urban cadres and feel more responsibilities based on family or lineage ties, friendship, and community membership. At the same time, frontline leaders in

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<sup>1</sup> There are conceptual questions related to what “coercion” includes and whether it should be limited to physical force (Andreas and Luo, this issue). We have resisted Gong and Zhang’s (2017) appealing term “compulsion without coercion,” not least because we have used “soft coercion” and “psychological coercion” to characterize techniques that rest on social pressure (Deng and O’Brien 2013; O’Brien and Deng 2017), but also because we agree with Luo and Andreas (this issue) that the “high-pressure methods” they describe are, at root, coercive.

“villages-turned-communities” possess a growing number of traits commonly found in urban cadres. More than village leaders, they are expected to loyally help execute state policies and other tasks for local authorities, including redevelopment plans that involve land taking.

Cadres who lead “villages-turned-communities” are, in short, incompletely bureaucratized: still embedded in their communities yet also faced with a wide array of duties assigned from above. They are semi-bureaucratized state agents who must hold more regular office hours, cope with ever more frequent inspections and supervision, and answer to local officials; but they still have intimate knowledge of their community and its needs, often feel obligations to it, and do not have to toe every line on every state policy, and can so exercise more discretion than their urban colleagues in deciding how policies are carried out.

Incomplete bureaucratization has left grassroots cadres, the frontline brokers of dispossession in peri-urban China, well-placed to play a Janus-faced role (Shue 1988; Duara 1988) and to use both economic incentives and social costs to convince smallholders to vacate their land. Although our cases do not enable us to lay out the full range of high pressure, low pressure, and no pressure strategies used to get land taking done in China, peri-urban Chengdu is an ideal location to explore “compulsion without force”: strategies grassroots cadres employ to complete evictions that often offer community members some economic benefits, but still involve more than a little manipulation, pressure, division and unfairness.

## **Facilitating demolition and relocation in peri-urban Chengdu**

To explore the participation of grassroots leaders in demolition and relocation, we conducted fieldwork and participant observation in Wanli town,<sup>2</sup> Chengdu municipality, Sichuan province, every August from 2017 to 2019. We also interviewed informants off and on by telephone, in person and online. Our findings are derived mainly from Spring community, a “village-turned-community” established in 2007, but we also interviewed frontline cadres in nearby locations (for instance, from the Stone neighbourhood committee). All the communities we studied are situated in Chengdu’s peri-urban perimeter. In total, we spoke with 51 informants,<sup>3</sup> including ordinary residents, community cadres, and town officials. Beyond interviews, we collected written materials, including official documents and media reports, which helped us better understand urbanization and relocation in Chengdu.

Wanli is a suburban town, whose population was around 25,000 in 2019. Located in Wenjiang, a district close to the “old town” (*lao chengqu*) of Chengdu,<sup>4</sup> Wanli has been undergoing rapid urbanization. In particular, it sits at the centre of the Chengdu International Medical Town, which is planned to grow to more than 35 square kilometres and is already home to over 1500 enterprises. Five of the eight communities in Wanli have land slated for demolition, with Spring community

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<sup>2</sup> Pseudonyms are used throughout for personal names and jurisdictions below the county level.

<sup>3</sup> Some key informants were interviewed several times and in total we conducted 62 interviews.

<sup>4</sup> Wenjiang was formally established in 2002, when a county with the same name was reclassified as a district.

scheduled to be relocated entirely. Over the last 15 years, more and more of Spring community's 805 households have been moving into resettlement neighbourhoods,<sup>5</sup> as the village's 300 hectares have been rezoned for factory construction and medical facilities, and homes have been vacated and demolished.<sup>6</sup>

Since most of the communities in Wanli town had land designated for relocation, the workload for the under-staffed town government was extremely heavy. In Spring community, for example, where the whole village was to be given over to the medical town, there were only three or four town cadres assigned to each relocation project, and most projects entailed taking land owned by several "teams" (*zu*).<sup>7</sup> To lessen the burden and ensure that the entire town's "central task" (*zhongxin renwu*) was completed, the town government decided to mobilize virtually all community cadres, team leaders and villagers' representatives into relocation work.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to being much-needed helping hands, grassroots leaders have real advantages over government officials when serving as land brokers. Their "in-between" status enables them to facilitate evictions better than outsiders working alone. Relocation involves issues like measuring a home's floor space, allocating

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<sup>5</sup> As of November 2019, there were less than 100 households left in Spring community.

<sup>6</sup> This is based on the policy called "linking up increases in urban construction land with decreases in rural construction land" (*zeng jian gua gou*). See Zhang and Wu (2017).

<sup>7</sup> There are 12 teams in Spring community.

<sup>8</sup> On all-hands mobilization into demolition and relocation work, see O'Brien and Deng (2015, 4-6). Since Spring community was still considered a village during most of our field research, we use "village cadres," "grassroots cadres" and "community cadres" interchangeably. We also sometimes refer to community residents as villagers. This appears most often in interviews, where informants were still accustomed to using the terms "village," "villagers," and "village cadres."

quotas for social welfare programs, and distributing resettlement apartments. To accomplish this work, participation by grassroots cadres is highly desirable, since they usually have in-depth knowledge about a neighbourhood (and even individual families) and are generally well-connected to villagers. As the vice director of Spring community explained: “Town officials . . . are not familiar with the structure of a community, and they don’t have a broad mass base. We community cadres have emotional connections to the villagers. Village work is all about ‘human feelings’ (*renqing*). It’s quite different than government work, which has more to do with orders and implementation. We were born and bred in the community, and villagers are our seniors, peers or juniors . . . We know each other well . . . We can yell at each other and that doesn’t hurt too much. For government officials, villagers may pay them no heed and might even refuse to open their door to receive them, but this would never happen to us.”<sup>9</sup>

Owing to the ties and community knowledge they have, and their incomplete bureaucratization, grassroots leaders are often turned into the main implementers of relocation, though on paper they are only supposed to help their superiors. Fu, the Party secretary in Stone Community, complained about his role and responsibilities in relation to the town relocation office: “They just give you deadlines, and you get punished if you can’t achieve relocation goals. They criticize you as if you aren’t working hard enough, and discipline you according to various regulations . . . They assign relocation tasks to us, as if we are the primary unit to carry out land requisition

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<sup>9</sup> Interview 5 with the Party secretary of Stone community, 27 December 2018.

while the relocation office is only an assistant.”<sup>10</sup> In short, for frontline leaders in Wanli, demolition and relocation during the 2010s had become what is called a “hard target” (*ying zhibiao*) (O’Brien and Li 1999; Edin 2003; Whiting 2004; Gong and Zhang 2017), which means that even if cadres do all their other work perfectly, they will score poorly on their annual evaluation, should they fail to carry it out well.<sup>11</sup>

### **Two strategies land brokers use**

How do grassroots cadres, acting as both state agents and community members, facilitate demolition and relocation work? What tactics do they employ to deal with relocatees, some of whom are reluctant to leave, others of whom are hopeful they might make a financial killing or at least do tolerably well? From our fieldwork, we find two main strategies frontline leaders employ while brokering land taking: strategic favouritism and collective pressure. Strategic favouritism hinges on the use of economic incentives and collective pressure the imposition of social costs. Both are varieties of “compulsion without force” that are facilitated by incomplete bureaucratization and the dual role grassroots leaders play, and both rely on exploiting (and enhancing) divisions within a community in order to get evictions done.

### ***Strategic favouritism***

Strategic favouritism is frequently employed in Chengdu’s peri-urban communities, as well as elsewhere in China (Han 2014, Luo and Andreas, this issue).

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Interview 30 with a Party branch member in Spring community, 26 May 2018.

During removal, grassroots leaders, taking advantage of the emotional connections they have with other villagers,<sup>12</sup> often act quite differently than relocation staff sent from Wanli town. Compared to government officials, community cadres are less likely to take a “business is business” (*gongshi gongban*) approach and more willing to be attuned to the needs and expectations of their relatives, friends, and acquaintances. The Party secretary of Stone community explained: “Town officials in charge of relocation might only stay here for two to three years and then move elsewhere. But we are different. Though I can quit my job this year, I have to face these villagers for all my life. And perhaps my children and their children also have to come into contact with them. Doing relocation work badly would ruin my relations with fellow villagers, which might even turn into a feud . . . Owing to this possibility, we have to take into account villagers’ interests . . . I feel most satisfied when I go out and my fellow villagers invite me for a cup of tea. . . But if I am walking down the street and my people turn their back on me, don’t greet me, or even point fingers at me. That would be my biggest failure.”<sup>13</sup> With these relational and emotional concerns in mind, frontline cadres, in contrast to government officials, are more likely to assist their fellow villagers during the prolonged negotiating that surrounds demolition and relocation work.

But grassroots land brokers do not aid all villagers equally. Strategic favouritism hinges on the “practice of discretion” (Ho 2013b, 147), both regarding who cadres

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<sup>12</sup> On handling petitions and “emotion work,” see Liao and Tsai (2019) and Hou (forthcoming).

<sup>13</sup> Interview 5 with the Party secretary of Stone community, 27 December 2018.

help and how much they help them. As Han (2014) has pointed out, village leaders can adjust compensation up or down by deciding whether to compensate “illegal construction” (*weizhang jianzhu*) that enlarged a home (sometimes even new buildings constructed after a demolition order) and whether to hold a tape measure loosely or tightly when measuring square footage. Strategic favouritism is possible because of the flexibility and vagueness of many compensation regulations. Fu, the Party secretary of Stone community, explained how and why he exercised discretion: “We try to help our fellow villagers take advantage of ambiguous regulations. For example, there are three rates of compensation to demolish makeshift additions to homes: 90, 185, or 300 yuan per square meter. On one occasion, the property evaluation staff we accompanied were about to apply the rate of 90 yuan to a new wing that was poorly built. But I emphasized the height of the structure and managed to persuade the staff to adopt the 185-yuan rate. See? We try to help our people this way, and it’s not against regulations. For such an ambiguous situation, if you have the discretion to recommend 90 or 185, why would I say 90? I will definitely stand by the villagers and help them get some benefits.”<sup>14</sup>

Though grassroots cadres often claim they look out for everyone in the community, in fact they tend to assist some villagers more than others. In particular, strategic favouritism is most likely to appear when evictees are especially cooperative and supportive or when they are almost impossible to convince to go along with the standard relocation amount. The first situation does not happen too often with respect

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

to ordinary villagers but occurs frequently with community cadres themselves. The director of Spring community, for instance, said that he would “loosen the tape measure” when measuring footage owned by those who served on the neighbourhood committee, team leaders, and community council members who had taken the lead in accepting eviction. The second situation is more common. Strategic favouritism can be an effective tactic when cadres run into the most recalcitrant evictees, colloquially called “nail households” (*dingzihu*) (Li and O’Brien 1996; Hess 2010; Erie 2012). The Fengs, for instance, were the last holdout during the relocation of Team Nine in Spring community. The family was poor and their house was in terrible condition. They demanded a huge amount of compensation, which led to a deadlock in their negotiations with the government. Community cadres and town leaders had reached out to them many times to conduct “thought work,” (i.e. persuasion, *sixiang gongzuo*) but they still refused to sign an agreement to move. One team leader explained his efforts to get them to give in as follows: “I said a lot of nice words to the Feng family . . . I told them that the highest compensation rate in our community was 180,000 yuan per person, and according to the condition of their house, 170,000 was the most they could possibly hope for. But I told them that I would assist them to get compensation according to the highest rate, and I would also try to help them get more<sup>15</sup>. . . In the end, the compensation would add up to about 210,000 yuan per

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<sup>15</sup> Compensation for relocation during our research period was dictated by a document issued by the Sichuan provincial government in 2012. Owing to inflation and the rising price of housing, local authorities were allowed to adjust levels somewhat, though exactly how and how much was not made public. Informal rules and tacit expectations provided relocation staff grounds for flexibility when negotiating with homeowners. On negotiating producing higher levels of

person.”<sup>16</sup> Grassroots leaders even went so far as to try to help the Fengs negotiate with the demolition and relocation office to receive two apartments as in-kind compensation, which was unprecedented in Spring community. The team leader justified this “allocation by need” (Ho 2013b) like this: “We’ve been helping them, arguing that the Feng family is a special case, since they have a son and a daughter. If there was only one apartment, how would they decide who should get it?”<sup>17</sup> This favouritism, however, went well beyond anything imagined in the official regulations. Strategic as it might have been, in potentially putting an end to a difficult case, the authorities ultimately were unwilling to make an exception for the Fengs, since doing so would have generated feelings of unfairness and left those who cooperated earlier believing that they had been cheated.

When negotiating with nail households such as the Fengs, community leaders often point out how good a deal they are offering compared to the by-the-book compensation dictated by district or county rules on “judicial demolition and relocation” (*sifa chaiqian*). The Party secretary of Stone community reminded one reluctant evictee: “[If you don’t agree] a professional company will be invited to evaluate your property according to its location and the condition of your house. All this will be processed in line with relocation regulations, which are rigid and do not provide any leeway. The staff of those evaluation companies, unlike us, won’t give you any favours . . . When we suggest you accept a certain amount of compensation

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compensation, see Wang et al. (2017)

<sup>16</sup> Interview 18 with the head of Team Nine in Spring community, 17 August 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

you can turn the offer down if you're not satisfied. But if the 'judicial demolition and relocation' process is set in motion and the evaluation company arrives at a certain amount of compensation, there's no way around it . . . You have to swallow whatever you're offered."<sup>18</sup> This was not entirely accurate, insofar as compensation regulations do provide considerable leeway and community leaders are rarely eager to trigger "judicial demolition and relocation," not out of worries about the outcome, but because they are racing against time and cannot afford to go through a lengthy eviction and compensation process. To prevent the proceedings from even beginning, grassroots land brokers are often encouraged to ask nail households to imagine what would happen if "judicial demolition and relocation" was set in motion. In other words, the threat of paying strict attention to regulations is often used to soften up nail households and makes them more willing to accept the "excellent" (*bashi*, in Sichuan dialect) offer that a demolition and relocation office has proposed.

### ***Collective pressure***

Strategic favouritism is mainly a "carrot" that comes packaged with an expectation. But it is never solely a positive incentive, not least because there is a threat lying behind it that harsher treatment is on tap if a holdout is "unreasonable" and refuses to leave. In other words, grassroots cadres are also ready and willing to rely on "sticks" to get people off their land. In an era when using force is to be avoided if at all possible, the most important openly coercive technique deployed

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<sup>18</sup> Interview 5 with the Party secretary of Stone community, 27 December 2018.

during land taking in peri-urban Chengdu is collective pressure.

Relocation is often proactive in today's China, which means that it happens before the next land use is determined or scheduled to occur. Taking away a home and a villager's property without a specified replacement project is considered unlawful requisitioning of agricultural land, which runs counter to prevailing regulations and central directives designed to protect the country's ability to feed itself. Still, local authorities are often keen to push requisition and relocation proactively. On the one hand, as explained by a Party secretary in Xing community, new enterprises will not come if the land is not empty. They want "clean land" (*jingdi*), because they are worried that some households might resist relocation for an extended period.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, pre-emptive relocation can reduce the number of holdouts. The Party secretary in Stone community described the logic of early requisition this way: "Ordinary villagers tend to think 'now that there's a project eager for my land, if I hold on for a while more, I'll be able to extract more compensation . . . This mind set could prolong relocation indefinitely.'"<sup>20</sup>

In Chengdu, a practice called "autonomous relocation" (*zizhu chaiqian*) was introduced in the early 2010s to reap the benefits of pre-emption and to wriggle out of blame for high-pressure tactics used during land taking. Contrary to the freedom of choice suggested by its name, autonomous relocation refers to an approach where neighbours, rather than the government or developers, are used to prod reluctant evictees to vacate their homes (see Deng 2017). A Party secretary explained how he

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<sup>19</sup> Interview 6 with the Party secretary of Xing community, 24 December 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Interview 5 with the Party secretary of Stone community, 27 December 2018.

planned to roll out autonomous relocation in Stone community: “At the beginning of next year [2019], I’ll canvass public opinion and see whether 90 percent of villagers will agree to leave. If that’s the case, I’ll apply to higher levels for a relocation fund and move those willing to relocate first. Once new projects arrive, we’ll face fewer difficulties after there are only a few households left.”<sup>21</sup> When autonomous relocation proceeds smoothly, collective goading of holdouts by neighbours anxious to receive their compensation (and access to social welfare benefits) diminishes the need for direct government intervention. Another advantage of this approach is that it shifts responsibility for relocation and disguises, at least to a degree, who is behind the requisitioning. As the director of Spring community put it: “If villagers voluntarily agree to be relocated to a new place, no one can blame us.”<sup>22</sup>

Not all residents, of course, embrace autonomous relocation, even though a reasonably large number of villagers in urbanizing communities anticipate profiting from being pushed off their land (Paik 2011; Chen 2020). Autonomous relocation in Chengdu’s peri-urban districts adheres to the rule of “the minority follows the majority” (*shaoshu fucong duoshu*). If most residents of a village (or production team) agree to leave, the relocation plan is considered passed. Village cadres usually favour this “majority principle,” since they believe that with sufficient compensation relocation will proceed and recognize that even a few holdouts can make their life difficult and “no decision can satisfy everyone.”<sup>23</sup> The large amount of collective

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Interview 11 with the director of Spring community’s neighbourhood committee, 30 August 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Interview 17 with the head of Spring community’s Team Six, 22 August 2018.

land found in some of our field sites makes it even easier to pass a relocation plan, insofar as cadres from the neighbourhood committee, team leaders and members of the village council can collectively sign on behalf of villagers, even if not everyone they represent favours the relocation plan.

Collective pressure is also used to determine how and when to divide the compensation villagers receive. In Spring community's Team Six, members at first disagreed about taking the millions of yuan they were slotted to get for their land. When the compensation scheme was proposed, about 70 percent of the team members accepted it and took their share of the funds immediately. The other 30 per cent rejected the plan, but ultimately gave in one-by-one over the next year and accepted the money, usually grudgingly, because the distribution had been approved by a collective vote, and the plan could not be changed after some of the relocation funds had already been distributed.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, inflation was eroding the value of their compensation daily, which further drove the holdouts to claim their share sooner rather than later.

Collective pressure also comes into play over access to social welfare programs in the wake of demolition and relocation. Unlike some places where evictees doubt they will ever receive the benefits they are due (Ong 2014; Qian and Xue 2017), many residents in peri-urban Chengdu, particularly those around retirement age, are eager to secure special pensions and medical benefits that are offered to people who have lost their land.<sup>25</sup> The prospect of "buying social insurance" (*mai shebao*) in advance of

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Interview 5 with the Party secretary of Stone community, 27 December 2018.

annual cost increases<sup>26</sup> is used by grassroots cadres to encourage older villagers (and their families) to surrender their land as soon as possible. But in Wanli, contrary to national policy, accepting demolition and relocation does not automatically qualify a family for benefits. Instead, only after every one of the households that are scheduled to be moved at the same time agree to leave, can anyone buy into the program. With applications bundled and processed together, those ready to go often become resentful and put pressure on holdouts to change their minds. Spring community experienced this. Several villagers had rented their land to two businessmen who opened a nursery for landscaping trees, but when the time for demolition and relocation arrived, the businessman refused to close the nursery because they felt the compensation offered was too low. Then, at the urging of community members who wanted to get into the urban social insurance and pension system, neighbourhood committee cadres mobilized the villagers who had leased the land to terminate their contracts with the businessmen. After the leases were cancelled, community leaders coordinated a successful, week-long effort by 60 villagers to remove the trees and clear the land.<sup>27</sup>

Effective as it can be, mobilizing collective pressure does not always work. The nail-like Feng family, discussed above, is an example. In 2018, the Fengs stopped all the villagers in one group of relocatees from Spring Community's Team Nine from getting into the social welfare system. Team members who had accepted relocation were infuriated by the Fengs' resolve. They sent 11 representatives to the neighbourhood committee and persuaded the Party secretary to conduct "thought

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<sup>26</sup> Interview 17 with the head of Spring community's Team Six, 22 August 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Interview 8 with a Party branch member in Spring community, 21 December 2018.

work” on the Fengs.<sup>28</sup> The Party secretary then sought to shame the Fengs into relenting. He reminded them that two older members of the Feng family had gained access to social insurance and pensions a few years before when there were extra quotas allotted as a result of the relocation of another team: “Now it’s your team’s turn to go through demolition. If you don’t sign the papers, you’ll stand in the way of more than 20 fellow villagers getting social welfare. Now you have to be supportive instead of harming the collective interest.”<sup>29</sup> Despite numerous rounds of “thought work,” the Fengs did not give in and their house was still standing by itself in a large field as of May 2020, though the commencement of legal procedures by the authorities means that, in the end, it will almost certainly be torn down.

### **The price of being a broker**

Although strategic favouritism sometimes generates gratitude from relocatees who benefit from it, most evictees are dissatisfied with their compensation because they believe they should have been given more and because demolition and relocation regulations are seen to be unfair. For instance, in 2019, villagers in peri-urban Chengdu were still compensated according to rates set in 2012, even though housing prices had tripled in the previous seven years. Moreover, strategic favouritism, though limited to an extent by prevailing regulations, is by its nature inequitable, divisive and produces resentment. Collective pressure provokes even more discontent, both because of its strong element of coercion and because nail households may stand in

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<sup>28</sup> Participant observation, 22 August 2018.

<sup>29</sup> Interview 15 with the Party secretary of Spring community, 23 August 2018.

the way of others receiving what they want. In short, after demolition and relocation comes to a community, grassroots cadres who facilitate it typically end up feeling that their relationship with fellow villagers has been damaged and that their authority has declined. Our informants in Wanli also emphasized the personal toll demolition and relocation work took; they described themselves as feeling exhausted, anxious, and mistreated.

Grassroots land brokers often grumble about how much work relocation entails. They complain that the demolition and relocation office takes pressure off itself by shifting it onto them, and acts as if it can boss around and issue orders to frontline cadres. During demolition and relocation in Spring community, town officials frequently camped out in a neighbourhood committee office all day and sometimes stayed the night. As a result, community cadres could not return home at the end of their shift and often did not leave the office until after 11 pm.<sup>30</sup> They were frequently “phoned by this leader or dispatched by that one to conduct ‘thought work’ on a relocatee” and if they did not deliver results immediately, were criticized and sometimes even called “incapable morons.” Spring community’s director and Party secretary had to maintain an especially gruelling schedule and, according to a local social worker, “if I was him [the Party secretary] I would have collapsed.”<sup>31</sup>

Beyond nearly overwhelming demands to complete relocation swiftly and without incident, grassroots cadres who participated in it reported high levels of

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<sup>30</sup> Interview 24 with a community social worker serving in Spring community, 15 August 2018.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

anxiety, arising in large part from the cross-pressures they faced. Party secretary Fu described the agony he experienced as a result of being caught between the local government and his community: “We should side with fellow villagers, since we were elected by them to speak for them. The higher-ups chose us, because they believed we could do a good job. We have to strike a balance between the two parties. In other words, we have to safeguard the interests of ordinary people as well as acting as good agents of the government. But this is very hard to do.”<sup>32</sup> A team leader expressed similar distress about being stuck in-between: “Though we are elected by community members and have to look out for their interests, the town government would say that we are paid to do what the authorities ask us to do. As grassroots cadres, we don’t have a say but we have to do a lot of work. In the end, we can’t satisfy either side. The town government often reminds us of the punishments that we’ll get for not achieving relocation targets. I often feel very uneasy about this.”<sup>33</sup>

Grassroots leaders have good reasons to worry that evictions alienate community members and that they have been left on their own to deal with the fallout. As the director of a neighbourhood committee put it: “I told the higher-ups: ‘You’ve offended many residents, but you can leave and drive home at 5 pm. Villagers don’t know where you live, and you can still pass time with your friends at a tea house, chatting and laughing. But what about us? We’ve offended our fellow villagers, but we still live in Spring community. It’s very likely we’ll bump into them while taking a walk. If we’re not careful, a casual meeting can turn into a quarrel. Please teach me

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<sup>32</sup> Interview 5 with the Party secretary of Stone Community, 27 December 2018.

<sup>33</sup> Interview 17 with the head of Team Six in Spring community, 22 August 2018.

how to face the people. I'll live in this community all my life. How can I get along?"

The leaders told me that it would get better after some time passed. I told them that I had already created lifelong hatreds."<sup>34</sup>

Frontline leaders also experience the "liability of being loyal" (Ho 2013a, 424). Because they are cadres, they are often expected to sign their relocation agreements first, to set an example for fellow residents. But this means they may suffer a "first-mover disadvantage" (Ho 2013a, 421) and receive less than others who play harder to get. One Spring community cadre complained: "As a team leader, I took the lead in signing the relocation papers, but I received less compensation than a family with a smaller home. I didn't get much benefit at all."<sup>35</sup> The brokers of dispossession are also required to mobilize their brothers, sisters, and other relatives to accept relocation before others (see Hsing 2010, 193). When their loved ones discover that they have received less than others who signed later, they often chastise their relative for pushing them to make concessions they did not need to make.<sup>36</sup> Other villagers who agree to accept an early offer may also blame the cadres who urged them to do it, and this can diminish a demolition facilitator's authority in the future.<sup>37</sup>

Acting as a land broker can also lead to feelings of mistreatment and even legal jeopardy when an eviction spirals out of control. If an agreement cannot be reached, and a homeowner rejects the results of "judicial demolition and relocation," outright

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<sup>34</sup> Interview 11 with the director of Spring neighbourhood committee, 30 August 2018.

<sup>35</sup> Interview 17 with the head of Team Six in Spring community, 22 August 2018.

<sup>36</sup> Interview 23 with a Party branch member in Spring community, 15 August 2018.

<sup>37</sup> Interview 5 with the Party secretary of Stone community, 27 December 2018.

force may be used. Violent removal and watching a bulldozer destroy one's home can produce an outraged and desperate response. Whatever ensues from this point forward is not a desirable outcome for a demolition facilitator. As the vice Party secretary in Wanli town explained, with reference to the tree nursery shutdown in Spring community: "Carrying out forced relocation is very risky for us. If demolition is successful, we at best get a little praise. If it results in something horrible happening, we might be put in prison. We're always worried about relocatees getting injured."<sup>38</sup> This is why, for example, town officials avoided being present when the trees were uprooted. The Party secretary of a neighbouring community noted that "there have been cases of self-immolation (in other places), creating a life-or-death atmosphere. That's a rare and extreme act, but if a similar situation arose, we'd be held responsible. Even though we've followed every legal procedure, it's still risky for us. The authorities are very worried that events like this could lead to social instability."<sup>39</sup> The director of the Spring neighbourhood committee noted that he had received a subpoena, after one of the nursery owners sued the town and county government after the expropriation of his land. He told one of his colleagues that they were "always walking a tightrope when engaging in relocation."<sup>40</sup>

### **Land acquisition and private brokers in India: a brief comparison**

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<sup>38</sup> Interview 33 with the deputy Party secretary of Wanli town, 29 August 2017.

<sup>39</sup> Interview 5 with the Party secretary of Stone community, 27 December 2018.

<sup>40</sup> Interview 11 with the director of the Spring neighbourhood committee, 30 August 2018.

With reference to the comparison of land dispossession in China and India that motivated this special issue, expropriation in China looks less violent and more negotiated than it appears when considered alone. Though contentious, land taking in China is generally not as contentious as it can be in India, where militant counter-movements and Maoist insurgencies have emerged (Borooah 2008; Chakravorty 2013). Though riven with favouritism and pressure, Chinese dispossession also exhibits an irreducible element of inclusiveness and collectivism, as evictees are drawn into negotiating their removal, mobilized as agents in the relocation project, and compensated (sometimes handsomely)<sup>41</sup> when all is said and done. In India, it is more common for land acquisition to produce relatively small amounts of compensation (Levien 2015) and to proceed top-down with limited participation by the dispossessed (Narain 2009).

The role of “middlemen” (Sud 2014) also differs in the two countries. Grassroots cadres who participate in land appropriation in China still represent the public interest (as defined by the state), generally do what they are told, and work hard to complete the tasks they are assigned. India’s private brokers are more likely to be go-betweens and fixers, mainly looking out for their own interests (Levien 2011), who collude with elected officials to benefit themselves monetarily, politically and to gain social status (Levien 2015; Baka 2013). Frontline land brokers in China’s peri-urban areas are administrators, if only partly bureaucratized ones who still have dual loyalties. During

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<sup>41</sup> For a careful examination of different kinds of land taking, and which villagers benefit and how much, see Chen (2020). Mattingly (2020, 71-75) argues, against the conventional wisdom on peri-urban areas, that compensation nationwide remains low, though he notes that it has increased since 2007.

the requisition process, they remain appended to the lowest reaches of the state and embedded in their neighbourhoods, and often feel like they too are victims, engaged in a constant struggle to keep officials above them happy and villagers not too unhappy, while avoiding criticism and punishment.

In a comprehensive, side-by-side comparison of the role land brokers play in the two countries, it would be instructive to explore the origins of these and other differences.<sup>42</sup> Our hunch is that, compared to India, the strength of the Chinese state and its penetration down to the community level is crucial. That the land being requisitioned is collectively-owned and is being taken for public purposes also puts China's frontline cadres squarely in the middle of the dispossession process. In India, land is of course private and alienable, and although local elites are sometimes called on to be government brokers and use inducements to persuade people to accept the government's compensation package (Levien 2013: 363), brokers more often play the role of getting villagers to sell their land directly to a company or to accept (and then typically sell) a replacement plot (Levien 2015: 82).

Furthermore, in China, a deep fear of instability<sup>43</sup> and time-tested approaches to grassroots governance, some reaching back to the Maoist era, still matter (Heilmann and Perry 2011). The tradition of "mass line" involvement in local decision making (Mao 1967 [1943]), in particular, may make it more difficult to ignore the interests of

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<sup>42</sup> It would also be beneficial to widen our lens to consider middlemen closer to the state in India (Sud 2014, 602-603) and profit-seeking private brokers who help negotiate compensation deals in some of China's most-developed cities (Ong 2019).

<sup>43</sup> The risks of being a failed broker of dispossession in India are generally much lower than those in China, where the government's concern with maintaining social order and completing a project can easily lead to loss of position or administrative punishment.

those who are paying the price of development, in a society where the developmental imperative has been paramount for decades, national wealth has grown rapidly, and all cadres are expected to help lift people out of poverty. That land taking is often launched in various parts of a town or county at once and is swathed in the language of progress, modernization and uplift also makes it harder to roll over evictees and neglect their “legal rights and interests” (*hefa quanyi*). All of these factors together make dispossession in peri-urban China, as manipulative and harsh as it often is, more inclusive, collective, and negotiated than it typically is in India.

But spirited bargaining over the amount of compensation in China should not be confused with keeping one’s land, as sometimes happens in India, when a project is derailed. Holding firm can at times generate a sizable payoff in China, but seldom leads the authorities to revise a (re)development plan. Chinese evictees may contest the terms of their dispossession, and use protests to back up their claims, but the regulations governing demolition and relocation are stacked against them (Pils 2010) and even the most determined nail-like villagers, whose homes end up pictured on the front page of the *New York Times* (3 April 2007; French 2007), and the largest, most persistent demonstrations, covered by the world press on-site (He and Xue 2014; Sun 2019), rarely stop land from being taken for long. Here, as Lynette Ong (2020) has argued, regime type is important. Democratic India provides more opportunities than authoritarian China to mobilize and sustain a protest movement, stronger civil society organizations to assist land holders, and politicians who, for their own electoral reasons, may oppose projects that involve land acquisition (Ong 2020).

We should also avoid overstating the differences between China's partially bureaucratized brokers and India's private brokers. Though caught between state and community *during* relocation, Chinese frontline leaders can be as profit-oriented as India's private brokers if they sense (and are provided) an opportunity to make a bundle from participating in land taking. In peri-urban Chengdu, relocation facilitators received a 12,000 yuan (US\$1935) "work fee" (*gongzuo jingfei*) for every hectare they successfully requisitioned. In other places, grassroots brokers fare much better, receiving a substantial share of the "rent" generated after the authorities or developers pay evictees only a small portion of what their land is worth (on widely different compensation levels, see Chen 2020; Heurlin 2020). And for all their complaints about how they are mistreated during land taking and their relations with fellow villagers are irreparably harmed, in large projects, the community may cease to exist when relocation is complete, and according to Daniel Mattingly (2016, 2020, 46-47), some local elites treat land taking as a "one-shot game" and are willing to betray their community, share in the spoils of expropriation,<sup>44</sup> and then depart for another town, city or even a foreign country.<sup>45</sup>

## Conclusion

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<sup>44</sup> In this regard, Chinese land brokers are perhaps not so different than their Indian counterparts. Grassroots cadres in China, despite the expectation that they will be models in accepting the amount they are offered, have many ways to skim off some of the difference between the ultimate value of a community's land and the compensation paid to relocatees.

<sup>45</sup> We thank the journal's referees and the editors of the special issue for suggesting many of the points developed in this section.

Grassroots leaders in peri-urban China are well-situated to broker land taking. With one foot in the state and one foot in their community, they have responsibilities up and ties down that give them levers to expedite demolition and relocation. Strategic favouritism and collective pressure are two strategies frontline cadres use to get reluctant villagers off their land. By manipulating economic incentives (and disincentives) and creating social costs, grassroots leaders help local authorities prod and cut deals with holdouts, and facilitate “compulsion without force.”

The strategies Chinese cadres use to broker land taking invite us to think more about duress and consent. Collective pressure obviously involves coercion, imposed by villagers eager to help the state achieve its aims. But even strategic favouritism divides a community and is backed up with the threat of recourse to “high-pressure methods” if an evictee refuses to sign a relocation agreement. When land taking proceeds according to plan, force is not used, some villagers are willing to accept the compensation package they are offered, and others hold out, bargain hard and receive somewhat more for their land. Applying pressure and offering strategic favours to elicit acquiescence lie at the heart of a land broker’s job description in urbanizing China.

Strategic favouritism and collective pressure are also employed in land transfers in more rural areas (Luo and Andreas, this issue). This suggests that deep in the countryside less-bureaucratized cadres also play a Janus-faced role, and that incomplete bureaucratization may only be one factor that makes “compulsion without force” feasible and common. Bringing land taking in agricultural villages and also

large cities into the discussion points toward a broader research agenda that goes beyond evictions in urbanizing areas, and beyond China itself. Intermediaries exist throughout the world, as does gaining compliance with a mixture of inducements and costs. Getting difficult tasks done through brokers who exploit their perch between state and community deserves more attention from scholars interested in methods of control that involve manipulation, pressure and the lack of a practical right to refuse, but also some benefits for those who eventually go along.

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